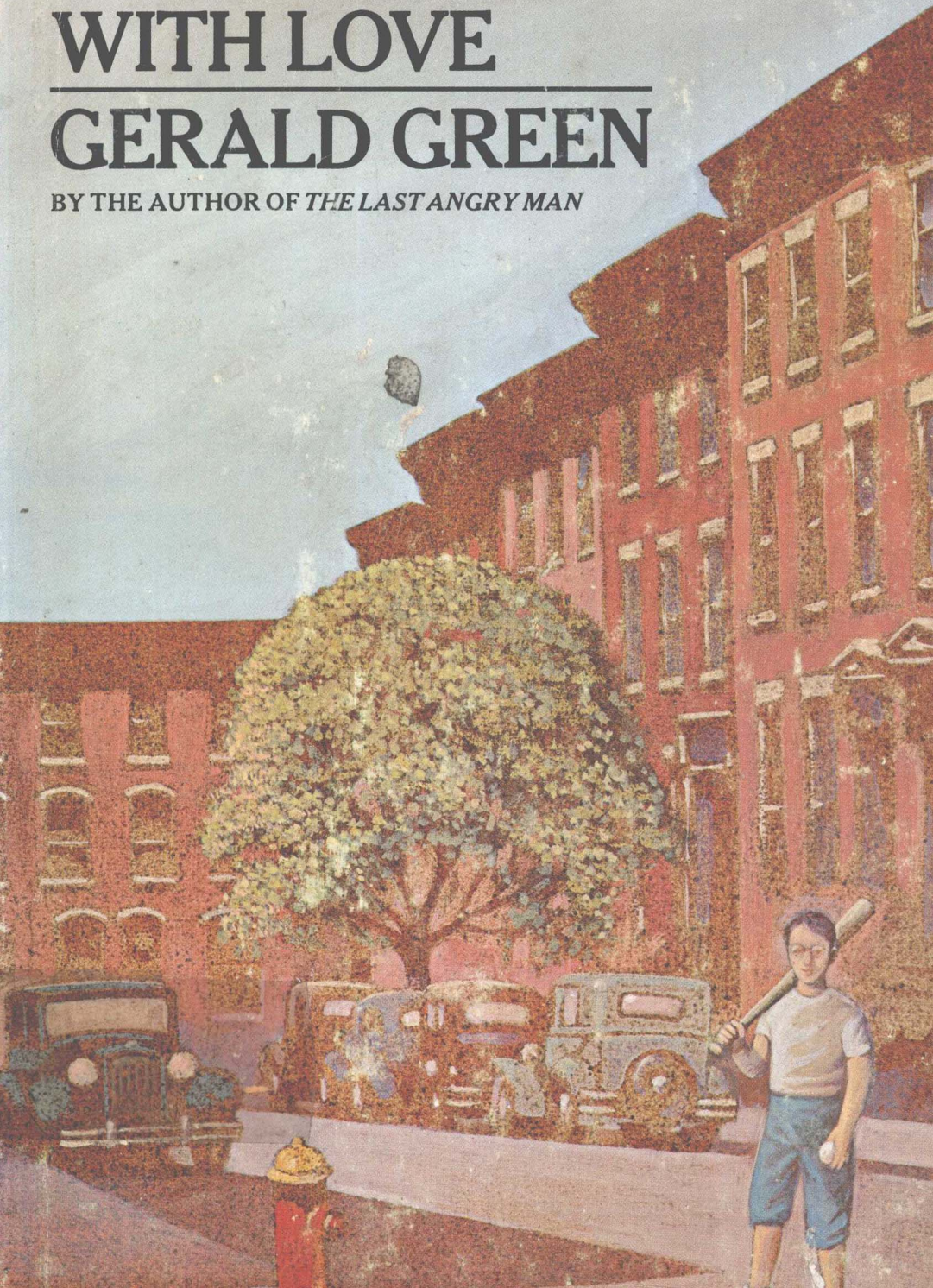


TO BROOKLYN WITH LOVE

GERALD GREEN

BY THE AUTHOR OF *THE LAST ANGRY MAN*



GERALD GREEN

**To Brooklyn
with Love**



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As Abrams and his children turned the corner and entered Longview Avenue, the street lights went on. The sudden discharge of light seemed to him overdramatic, a display he had staged, a trick prearranged with Consolidated Edison. Abrams had read somewhere that you could pay the City of Paris to light the Eiffel Tower or the Arc de Triomphe. Why not pay the Borough President of Brooklyn to illuminate his boyhood home?

The three of them—a small, neat man in his thirties, a girl of seven, a boy of five—walked cautiously down the cold, darkening street. Abrams appeared uncomfortable. He was fussily dressed in the manner of certain little men, affecting a pinkish overcoat of military cut (it suggested prior servitude as an envious enlisted man), clay-colored trousers and gleaming cordovan shoes.

Around them rose silvery lamp posts, flooding sidewalks and gutter with fluorescent brilliance, a presumed deterrent to muggers, thieves, the wicked poor.

“I knew something was wrong,” he said. “Public School 133 is still there, and the old schoolyard, and the synagogue around the corner, but the trees are gone.”

“Y’mean you had trees—in this place?” asked his daughter.

“A row on either side. Maples, catalpas, oaks. My father’s tree was the biggest. About halfway down. It was a Lombardy poplar—one of the tallest trees in Brownsville. But it’s gone.”

"It's crummy here," she said.

"Yes, I guess it isn't much to look at now." He longed to tell them about the schoolyard where they had played salugi, punchball, stickball, boxball, Chinese handball, stoopball, association, but he could not. They were suburban children, reared in station wagons.

"My goodness, there's the old house." He tried to sound proud of his discovery. But he was a poor actor. His voice wavered.

"It's little," his son said.

"And dirty," added his daughter. "How come you could live there?"

Explanations would not help. They lived on a woodland hill and played with the sons of market research directors from North Dakota, the daughters of media men from Georgia.

In front of the yellow brick house—two-storied, narrow, crowned with a chipped cornice—a lavender Pontiac was parked. A Negro in a pale blue windbreaker was peering into its opened jaws, groping at its entrails with a wrench. It was parked adjacent to where the tree had stood. When had it been chopped down? A dignified giant, its upper branches heavy with summer leafage had brushed the upstairs window screens. In the spring it bore red-brown catkins. It had offended no one except some City Hall flunky who claimed its roots were strangling a watermain. He remembered a violent argument between his father and the public servant. His father had probably lost the argument. He usually did.

Through layers of filth, he could see the flaking number on the door—1422. On the brick wall were visible four dark holes where the old man's brass sign had been bolted. Privet bushes had long vanished from the tiny front yard; the wrought-iron rails were rusted.

"There's a kid lookin' at us," Abrams' son said apprehensively.

A shade in what had been his father's waiting room lifted. A brown face studied them. It was the window that had displayed the small illuminated sign:

SOLOMON ABRAMS, M.D.

There are broken toys now, he thought, in the rooms where my father listened to thousands of pulses and hearts, read innumerable thermometers, EKG's, X-rays, laboratory reports. No one could read a pulse the way his father did: head lowered, eyes intent, lips slightly parted. His fingers on your wrist had a soft touch. The touch assured you you would recover; you could feel the power of the healer.

In those rooms the old man had counted out the hours of his life in unpaid bills and unfilled hopes. Desks opened and slammed shut in Abrams' mind. He heard distantly the probing buzz of the ancient X-ray, heard again his father's hard tread—odd in a small man, but his father was all muscle—and the muffled voice coming through the closed office door: Not a goddamn thing in the world wrong with you, go home and act like a mensch.

"Now there's a lady," his son said.

A stout Negro woman stood behind the child. Arms folded, she stared at the three interlopers on the sidewalk. Was her gaze unfriendly? Abrams envisioned peeling walls, buckling floors, an incessant television set humming, the woman sipping beer from cans. Once his mother had sat there placidly reading Gissing and Meredith and Hardy, while from an RCA Victrola a strained Caruso sang La Juive.

"We gonna go in to see your room, like you promised?" asked his daughter.

Abrams frowned. "I don't think so. I don't want to bother those people."

There was a July day in 1934. His father surprised him with a new softball, a genuine Spalding "indoor," whiter than an angel's robe, intoxicating with its odor of bleached polished cowhide. . . .

"Lookin' for somebody?" the owner of the lavender car asked.

"Ah, no. I used to know some people here." Abrams

cleared his throat. "Fellow named Pennington. You ever know a Lee Roy Pennington?"

"Nope. I new here."

Where was Lee Roy, Lee Roy of the great brown football head and bandy legs? Lee Roy: nemesis, shadow, persecutor.

They walked slowly toward the corner. As they approached the intersection Abrams imagined he saw his father coming toward them: overcoat flapping open even in December, ruined fedora pushed back on his head, carrying the scuffed black satchel and a white bakery box, a peace offering for his wife. Something to atone for the imminent tirade about the lousy deadbeat who just done him out of a two-dollar fee. But of course it was not his father. It was only a Negro workman with a lunchbox.

"Anyway the corner grocery's still in business," he told his unheeding children. But the sign read ALIMENTACION. "I guess Benny sold it. That man had the greatest pot cheese in the world."

Through dark and silent streets they trudged toward the subway. It had been a short visit, much shorter than he had planned.

HE awakened to the sounds of his parents' muffled conversation. Early risers, they spoke softly out of deference to him. Instantly his eyes found the softball. It rested on the chair beside his bed, a round white, shiny cowhide egg in the nest of his rumpled clothing.

"A Spalding," he whispered. He took it in his hands. Once again, his father had outdone himself. All he had asked for (nagged, his mother said) was the Reach, the cheap make. Secretly the old man had gone to Davega's and bought the best ball.

It had a life, a purpose, and he loved it. His small hands pressed the hard leather to his chest, fingers spread across the endless raised welts. How perfectly they wound about the surface, ingeniously duplicating the looped pattern! For a moment he regretted having to dirty it, scar its gleaming skin. Thrown to the cracked ceiling it fell magically. He was Len Koenecke patrolling the outer garden for the Brooklyn Dodgers.

"Ah, why not give up the whole damn thing, once and for all." His father's hoarse voice, filtered through the door, upset him for a moment. *Serves me right*, he thought, *lying here feeling so great*. His joy was almost unbearable—the promise of a July day, heat, sun, sports, friends, the new ball. Dressing, he listened to his parents, each word diluting his ecstasy, involving him in matters he didn't want to know about.

". . . last week or so, trouble getting out of bed," his

father was saying. "Me, who could wrestle all day fifteen years ago. It's psychic, what they call the psychopathology of everyday life, as if I need a professor to tell me what's eating me."

And his mother: "It's hard for everyone, Sol, not just you."

"To hell with all of them."

"Sol, must you start first thing in the morning?"

"Why do I have trouble breathing? Never been sick in my life."

"It's terribly hot."

Under no circumstances could his father get sick, the boy thought, as he laced his sneakers. Doctors didn't get sick, especially his father. The old man was indestructible, always there to tape an ankle, administer a spoonful of syrup cocillana compound, jab a hypodermic into his quivering butt. (And his father gave the softest shots of anyone—they hardly hurt.) A good part of his youth had been spent in illness; one of his sharpest memories of infancy was his father's large, Indian-looking head peering over his crib.

". . . damned mistake on my part, the whole thing. Can't keep a patient anymore."

"People have no money to spend these days. We'll economize like everyone else."

"Hah. They're all running to the free clinics, to the drugstores to prescribe for them."

"You turned down the chance to make relief calls. Why you had to get up on your high horse!"

"Because I stand on my own two feet!"

But didn't the old man give in later, and start making calls for the city welfare department? Of course he did. He hollered about them all the time—the endless paper work, delays in getting paid.

"The whole practice of medicine stinks," his father proclaimed. "Why didn't I realize that years ago?"

Adjusting amber-rimmed eyeglasses, patting the adhesive binding the nosepiece, the boy thought of entering their bedroom. But it would be wrong to intrude his happiness into his father's misery.

His parents' morning conversation droned on, and he

drifted toward the window. It seemed terribly unfair for his father to love him so much, lavish gifts on him, cure him, tape his sprained ankles, help him with homework, give him all this so willingly, and yet have no control over his own life. Love me less, the boy pleaded silently, and get the better of other people—patients, other doctors, storekeepers. . . . *I'll give you back the softball right now, if you'll stop getting sore all the time.*

In the garden below his window, summer flowers shouted their glory at him. The doctor grew dahlias, hollyhocks, phlox, in haphazard profusion. Earth, seeds, tubers responded to Dr. Abrams' touch; the people of the slum did not. *That's another thing while I'm at it, you don't have to be such a great gardener, if you could only learn to keep your patients and make them pay up the way other doctors do.*

"Four calls and six lousy dollars to show for it," the doctor was saying. "I'll bleed to death here in this vile heat climbing stairs, sweating for each dollar. I'm warning you, Hannah, one of these days it'll all be over. . . ."

"What are you warning me for? Am I part of this conspiracy against you?"

"Never mind."

His father's voice had taken on a strange high timbre. It frightened him; the softball was dust in his hand. He studied his narrow bespectacled face in the mirror to make sure he looked sufficiently casual, uninterested in their dispute, and knocked at the bedroom door.

Inside, his mother, in flannel bathrobe despite the July heat (she was always chilly), was making the double bed. His father was standing at the oval mirror on the dresser, knotting a frayed maroon tie under the lumpy collar of a green sports shirt—a collar never designed to accommodate a tie.

Seeing him in the mirror, his father said, smiling, "Hey, there's Lou Gehrig."

All because he sees my dopey face and sees me holding the ball. Before he was angry with the whole world, but I walk in and he's happy. It's not fair.

The doctor beamed. The Indian face—hooked nose, pro-

truding cheekbones, cleft chin, the shock of black-gray hair—was glowing. “Toss it here, Albert,” he said—and reached for it clumsily. Baseball was not his sport. Once he had been a gymnast, a teacher of calisthenics and other formal European sports. His muscles had been developed in a young manhood dedicated to giant swings and parallel bars.

“When did you buy *that* for him?” his mother asked.

“On my own time,” his father said. He winked at Albert—man-to-man. “I don’t tell you everything.”

“After all those complaints about how little you earned yesterday?”

“Why not?” the doctor cried. “Why the hell not? Let the kid play ball. That’s important too. He told me they couldn’t get a game going because nobody in this *fekokteh* neighborhood could afford a ball!”

“So Santa Claus bought one.”

“You bet I did!”

Did they take twelve-year-old boys in the French Foreign Legion? He would enlist tomorrow—anything to escape. Albert Abrams, twelve-year-old drummer boy, beating the advance on Sidi-bel-Abbès.

These arguments about his father’s generosity always summoned up a painful memory of a day when he was left alone with a Negro maid. He was five—a spindly, sickly kid. The colored woman was a black whale—silent as stone, reeking of perfumed grease. His father was out making calls. His mother was about to leave for an afternoon of bridge. He protested tearfully. She, never one to bribe or spoil him, agreed to buy him a present. But the old man had come home first and found him sniffing, convinced that his mother would forget. “Hah, I’ll fix her!” his father had cried. “I’ll get you a *real* present!” And he had escorted him through the snowy streets (it was dark, five o’clock of a January day) to Lieberson’s candy store, where he bought him an enormous paint set, a great red and yellow cardboard box studded with cunning colored disks of watercolor, little tubes of oils, trays, cutouts, brushes. (It had been gathering dust in Lieberson’s window for years; nobody on Longview Avenue could afford it.)

Later, his mother had returned with a small tin alligator from Woolworth's. You squeezed a handle, its legs moved. His selfishness, his mean distrust of his mother had earned him two presents. Surely he had humiliated her. (Although she, eternally poised and gentle, said nothing.) How could he compare that junky alligator with his father's lavish paint set? A show of loving the alligator was in order; he fussed with it and invented a game, hunting it under the radiator. But whenever he looked at it, it grieved him. After a while he stopped playing with it and conveniently lost it in the backyard. The paint set didn't last very long either. From lying around in Lieberman's sunlit window, the paints had cracked and lost pigment. A double disaster.

" . . . too much to spend, Sol, that's all I'm saying. It's not his birthday. A ball like that is a luxury. And knowing him, he'll go flying into the street chasing it and get hit by a car."

"We play Indoor in the schoolyard, Ma."

"Just as bad. That's where all the schwarzers hang out. They'll fix your game, good."

"When we go in a whole gang it's okay," he said weakly. "They'd never pick on the Raiders when we're together."

His father yanked his tie into place; it flipped over backward, revealing the split underside. Clothes confounded him—suits bagged, hats ruffled, shoes bulged and cracked.

"Go play where you want, Albert," the doctor said irritably. "Hannah, lay off the kid. He can't go on being a mollycoddle all his life. He can't be scared of his shadow."

She smoothed the yellow chenille coverlet on the bed, willing to suspend the dispute. "Albert," she said, going to the dresser, "here's a list for Benny's. And there are two empty milk bottles in the kitchen."

At least he wasn't a complete loss to them. Walking down the narrow stairs, he had a poignant longing for tough indifferent Polack parents, like Teddy Ochab's, ham-handed peasants who belted Teddy and his brothers around regularly. In *that* household, he reflected bitterly, kids don't sit around worrying about who gave the alligator and who gave the paint set.

His father had not given up. “. . . have to be a sissy, a fairy? Bad enough with weak eyes and underweight, you got to give him a complex yet. I should have given him boxing lessons, like I wanted to, only you wouldn't let me, so at least he could stand up to the galoots and the schwarzers, the way I did when I was his age.”

Albert spun around the bottom steps and trotted down the hallway of the lower floor to the kitchen. Briefly, he glanced at the sports page of last evening's *Journal*. It paid to be prepared. One never knew when an argument over a batting average would develop. He admired Hype Igoe's cartoon, picked up the bottles, and still carrying the softball, walked out into the July heat.

The hot day lay comfortably on Longview Avenue, like a fat woman's folded arms on a windowsill. Weather and street had negotiated a pact. They belonged to one another. Winter, on the other hand, was no friend of Longview Avenue. Snow remained unshoveled, garbage uncollected. The Abrams' neighbors exploded soggy refuse bags on the filthy drifts. People stayed indoors or walked the icy streets hesitantly, anticipating a fall or a lawsuit. But not in summer: everyone poured from the tenements across the street, from the two-story homes on Albert's side.

At the curb he spent a few seconds in imitation of his father, kicking junk into the gutter. At the base of the poplar a sardine tin, eggshells, a rotten half cantaloupe had blossomed during the night. Shaking his head, he booted them to the street. It was a gesture that affirmed their superiority over the neighbors. Most of the other inhabitants of Longview Avenue kicked garbage on to *other* people's sidewalks. You could keep score, Albert mused, two points for a tin can, one for potato peelings.

He paused a moment to survey the steamy street. Its mystery thrilled him. Each time he set foot on it, it revealed some new drama, some new horror, some joy, some subtlety. He was part of it—resident, member of the Raiders, student at P.S. 133—yet apart from it, observer, critic, outsider, *the doctor's*

son. He balanced himself on the curb, treading one rubber-rimmed Keds after another, using the ball and the bottles as counterweights. (It was lucky his mother had not seen the sneakers. She would have protested. "You have weak ankles, and those canvas things will ruin your feet. Your father and I spend all that money on Coward arch-supporters, and you don't wear them." As a child he had called his arch-supporters "Oscar-porches" and he was considered awfully cute. Oh, he was so cute!)

The morning's drama was not long in coming. Did the great stage of Longview Avenue ever let him down? Never! Across the gutter a fire was blazing at the curb, a foul-smelling, crackling fire. Never mind that it was July, a hot spell, early morning. *That's more like it. That's my crazy street.* He stopped to study it, and with a shivering sense of recognition, saw that a figure of some kind was sizzling in the blaze of old crates. A doll? A toy?

Three people were standing around the fire, studying it silently. One was the resident half-wit, Gorilla. How old was he? Fifteen? Twenty? Albert had no idea. As long as he could remember, he had seen Gorilla limping by, short-legged, curiously crippled, his huge head tilted to one side, his eyes flitting about suspiciously. Year in, year out, he wore a navy blue sweater with an orange V at the collar. (Years later, Albert Abrams would wonder where all the half-wits, hydrocephalics and cretins were being hidden. In his boyhood, each street had one or two of these sad mumbling creatures like Gorilla.)

Gorilla had a sawed-off broomstick in one hand. From time to time, he poked at the flaming form (which Albert deduced was a toy, an old Teddy bear or stuffed dog) and laughed. His attendants were a squat shaven-headed boy of about thirteen, known as Mockey, and Grubman, the neighborhood genius. Albert knew nothing about Mockey, except that he had moved into a tenement a few weeks ago, and spoke no English. The baldy wore peculiar European-looking shorts that came to his knees, and a collarless shirt, delicately gathered and stitched across the chest.

Genius Grubman paraded back and forth at the edge of the blaze, waving formless arms and proclaiming:

“Tiger, tiger, boining bright
In the forest of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?”

Grubman was a great brain. Everyone said so. He was sixteen, doomed to die at an early age. He had transparent white skin and a blurred unformed face. He wore ballooning gray knickerbockers, black socks and black orthopedic shoes that laced halfway up his calf. It was a miracle that his heart survived from day to day. He did his schoolwork at home, but still got straight A's in everything. A professor from Brooklyn College had once examined him. Even in the summer he studied, as if aware that time was running out.

Albert crossed the street, and approached the unholy three, the sizzling blaze. *Sizzling!* Why did it make all that crackling noise? The breeze shifted slightly and he caught the stench of hair, flesh.

“Holy smoke, that *stinks*,” Albert said. “What is it?”

“Aaah, aah,” Gorilla laughed. “He ast what it is. Doncha wanna nice roast dog?”

“Dog!” he cried. “Why you burning a dog?”

“He wuz dead,” Gorilla said. He rolled his eyes until they vanished. The whites horrified Albert.

Grubman, parading back and forth, addressed him. “Behold, the doctor's son! And pray tell, which doctor? Dr. Faustus? Dr. Johnson? He comes to observe our great annual sacrifice of the dog to the great God Moloch!” He tapped Gorilla on the shoulder. “Speak, Moloch!”

“Aaah, bullshid.”

“Words of wisdom!” cried Grubman. “All genuflect before Moloch, burner of dogs!”

Mockey stared happily into the fire. Grubman's declamation was lost on him. Albert averted his head, as the choking smoke struck him full force. Now he could see the scorched

carcass, the glistening fat, the caking blood and charred flesh. What a way to start the day!

"Whose dog is it?" Albie asked. "I mean, how did it get killed?"

"Yes," said Grubman. "It was the dog that died. A stray, a waif, flotsam and jetsam. But the great God Moloch"—he patted Gorilla's head again—"decreed a sacrifice." Genius took a wide stance on the sidewalk and proclaimed:

"Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies?
And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?"

"It sure stinks up the block," Albert said.

"Heretic, unbeliever!" Grubman orated. "Defiler of the temple! Go."

"Roast dog! Hot roast dog!" Gorilla called. "A nickel a shtickel!"

Mockey clapped his hands and danced toward the fire, kicking at the flaming crate. It collapsed in a cloud of hot embers. The burning corpse smothered under the debris. Maybe in the Ukraine or wherever the baldhead came from, Albert reflected, they burned dogs all the time.

"Oh shame!" Grubman wailed. His knickerbockers inflated as he spread his legs and raised his arms. "Oh shame—the sacrifice is dishonored, corrupted! We will have to drink libations to cleanse ourselves! All to the lustral bath!"

Gorilla chuckled and poked at the dog. Albert, eager to be rid of the stink yet fascinated by the drama, picked up his bottles and skipped off. But he was gratified: Grubman and company had gotten the day off to a good start.

In the alley of a tenement, Daisy, the local Negro handyman, slept off his nightly drunk. A polite booze-fat man of middle age, gentle as a puppy, he slept in a dusty heap at the foot of two brimming trash cans. His clothes were forever daubed with the paint with which he earned his living. Once Albert's father had engaged Daisy to paint his office. "Can't

stand his stink,” the old man said, “but he needs the dough.” It hadn’t worked out. Daisy botched the job, never showed up, cheated him on the price. But Dr. Abrams wouldn’t hurt his feelings—he kept him on the job and gave him a pint of his medical supply of Golden Wedding as a bonus. Daisy had adored his father ever since. “Ah a member of deh ’Merican Legion, Doc,” he assured Dr. Abrams, “and Ah puts in a good word for yo’ wit dem.”

Gusts of steam billowed from Kupperman’s tailoring shop. It was as though Mr. Kupperman was making the weather, creating heat in his cramped store, pumping out magic steam from his forge. Alongside Kupperman’s, in an unlabeled shop that sometimes housed sinister gypsies, three bearded gnomes in eastern European aprons and skullcaps, worked madly looming cheap sweaters. Another mystery. Albert stopped to watch them wrestle bales of yarn from a pushcart. Where had they come from? Who told them about the empty store? Who were these bandy-legged trolls and where did they learn to knit sweaters?

An odor of smoking dog drifted by. Pleasantly disgusted, he turned and saw Gorilla stoking his infernal blaze. Grubman raised his arms in benediction again.

He walked on. What storybook could match the heart-breaking saga of Jimmy Kravitz, lightweight contender, once ranked third in his division by *Ring* magazine, a scrapper who had gone ten rounds with Lew Tendler and knocked down Bat Battalino? There was Jimmy, outside Fleishacker’s poolroom, bobbing, sparring, muddled brain awash with memories of hot nights in the Coney Island Velodrome, the old Madison Square Garden, the Sunnyside Arena.

In this corner at one hundred and thirty-two pounds, the Brownsville Bad Boy, Jimmy Kravitz. . . .

Albert stopped to pay tribute to the old pug. Muttering, skipping rope, Jimmy was waiting for the poolroom to open. Fleishacker let him rack balls, sweep the floor, deliver bets. Cruel boys would call out to him: “Hey, Jimmy, what round is it?”

Kravitz would croak back at them: “Da last, an’ I’m ahead