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Nemesis

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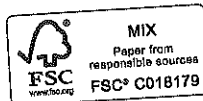
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For H. L.

Equatorial Newark

THE FIRST CASE of polio that summer came early in June, right after Memorial Day, in a poor Italian neighborhood crosstown from where we lived. Over in the city's southwestern corner, in the Jewish Weequahic section, we heard nothing about it, nor did we hear anything about the next dozen cases scattered singly throughout Newark in nearly every neighborhood but ours. Only by the Fourth of July, when there were already forty cases reported in the city, did an article appear on the front page of the evening paper, titled "Health Chief Puts Parents on Polio Alert," in which Dr. William Kittell, superintendent of the Board of Health, was quoted as cautioning parents to monitor their children closely and to contact a physician if a child exhibited symptoms such as headache,

sore throat, nausea, stiff neck, joint pain, or fever. Though Dr. Kittell acknowledged that forty polio cases was more than twice as many as normally reported this early in the polio season, he wanted it clearly understood that the city of 429,000 was by no means suffering from what could be characterized as an epidemic of poliomyelitis. This summer as every summer, there was reason for concern and for the proper hygienic precautions to be taken, but there was as yet no cause for the sort of alarm that had been displayed by parents, "justifiably enough," twenty-eight years earlier, during the largest outbreak of the disease ever reported—the 1916 polio epidemic in the northeastern United States, when there had been more than 27,000 cases, with 6,000 deaths. In Newark there had been 1,360 cases and 363 deaths.

Now even in a year with an average number of cases, when the chances of contracting polio were much reduced from what they'd been back in 1916, a paralytic disease that left a youngster permanently disabled and deformed or unable to breathe outside a cylindrical metal respirator tank known as an iron lung—or that could lead from paralysis of the respiratory muscles to death—caused the parents in

our neighborhood considerable apprehension and marred the peace of mind of children who were free of school for the summer months and able to play outdoors all day and into the long twilit evenings. Concern for the dire consequences of falling seriously ill from polio was compounded by the fact that no medicine existed to treat the disease and no vaccine to produce immunity. Polio—or infantile paralysis, as it was called when the disease was thought to infect mainly toddlers—could befall anyone, for no apparent reason. Though children up to sixteen were usually the sufferers, adults too could become severely infected, as had the current president of the United States.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, polio's most renowned victim, had contracted the disease as a vigorous man of thirty-nine and subsequently had to be supported when he walked and, even then, had to wear heavy steel-and-leather braces from his hips to his feet to enable him to stand. The charitable institution that FDR founded while he was in the White House, the March of Dimes, raised money for research and for financial assistance to the families of the stricken; though partial or even full recovery was possible, it was often only after

months or years of expensive hospital therapy and rehabilitation. During the annual fund drive, America's young donated their dimes at school to help in the fight against the disease, they dropped their dimes into collection cans passed around by ushers in movie theaters, and posters announcing "You Can Help, Too!" and "Help Fight Polio!" appeared on the walls of stores and offices and in the corridors of schools across the country, posters of children in wheelchairs—a pretty little girl wearing leg braces shyly sucking her thumb, a clean-cut little boy with leg braces heroically smiling with hope—posters that made the possibility of getting the disease seem all the more frighteningly real to otherwise healthy children.

Summers were steamy in low-lying Newark, and because the city was partially ringed by extensive wetlands—a major source of malaria back when that, too, was an unstoppable disease—there were swarms of mosquitoes to be swatted and slapped away whenever we sat on beach chairs in the alleys and driveways at night, seeking refuge out of doors from our sweltering flats, where there was nothing but a cold shower and ice water to mitigate the hellish heat. This was before the advent of

home air conditioning, when a small black electric fan, set on a table to stir up a breeze indoors, offered little relief once the temperature reached the high nineties, as it did repeatedly that summer for stretches of a week or ten days. Outdoors, people lit citronella candles and sprayed with cans of the insecticide Flit to keep at bay the mosquitoes and flies that were known to have carried malaria, yellow fever, and typhoid fever and were believed by many, beginning with Newark's Mayor Drummond, who launched a citywide "Swat the Fly" campaign, to carry polio. When a fly or a mosquito managed to penetrate the screens of a family's flat or fly in through an open door, the insect would be doggedly hunted down with fly swatter and Flit out of fear that by alighting with its germ-laden legs on one of the household's sleeping children it would infect the youngster with polio. Since nobody then knew the source of the contagion, it was possible to grow suspicious of almost anything, including the bony alley cats that invaded our backyard garbage cans and the haggard stray dogs that slinked hungrily around the houses and defecated all over the sidewalk and street and the pigeons that cooed in the gables of the houses and dirtied front stoops

with their chalky droppings. In the first month of the outbreak—before it was acknowledged as an epidemic by the Board of Health—the sanitation department set about systematically to exterminate the city's huge population of alley cats, even though no one knew whether they had any more to do with polio than domesticated house cats.

What people did know was that the disease was highly contagious and might be passed to the healthy by mere physical proximity to those already infected. For this reason, as the number of cases steadily mounted in the city—and communal fear with it—many children in our neighborhood found themselves prohibited by their parents from using the big public pool at Olympic Park in nearby Irvington, forbidden to go to the local “air-cooled” movie theaters, and forbidden to take the bus downtown or to travel Down Neck to Wilson Avenue to see our minor league team, the Newark Bears, play baseball at Ruppert Stadium. We were warned not to use public toilets or public drinking fountains or to swig a drink out of someone else's soda-pop bottle or to get a chill or to play with strangers or to borrow books from the public library or to talk on a public pay phone or to buy food from a street

vendor or to eat until we had cleaned our hands thoroughly with soap and water. We were to wash all fruit and vegetables before we ate them, and we were to keep our distance from anyone who looked sick or complained of any of polio's telltale symptoms.

Escaping the city's heat entirely and being sent off to a summer camp in the mountains or the countryside was considered a child's best protection against catching polio. So too was spending the summer some sixty miles away at the Jersey Shore. A family who could afford it rented a bedroom with kitchen privileges in a rooming house in Bradley Beach, a strip of sand, boardwalk, and cottages a mile long that had already been popular for several decades among North Jersey Jews. There the mother and the children would go to the beach to breathe in the fresh, fortifying ocean air all week long and be joined on weekends and vacations by the father. Of course, cases of polio were known to crop up in summer camps as they did in the shore's seaside towns, but because they were nothing like as numerous as those reported back in Newark, it was widely believed that, whereas city surroundings, with their unclean pavements and stagnant air,

facilitated contagion, settling within sight or sound of the sea or off in the country or up in the mountains afforded as good a guarantee as there was of evading the disease.

So the privileged lucky ones disappeared from the city for the summer while the rest of us remained behind to do exactly what we shouldn't, given that "overexertion" was suspected of being yet another possible cause of polio: we played inning after inning and game after game of softball on the baking asphalt of the school playground, running around all day in the extreme heat, drinking thirstily from the forbidden water fountain, between innings seated on a bench crushed up against one another, clutching in our laps the well-worn, grimy mitts we used out in the field to mop the sweat off our foreheads and to keep it from running into our eyes—clowning and carrying on in our soaking polo shirts and our smelly sneakers, unmindful of how our imprudence might be dooming any one of us to lifelong incarceration in an iron lung and the realization of the body's most dreadful fears.

Only a dozen or so girls ever appeared at the playground, mainly kids of eight or nine who could usually be seen jumping rope where far center field

dropped off into a narrow school street closed to traffic. When the girls weren't jumping rope they used the street for hopscotch and running-bases and playing jacks or for happily bouncing a pink rubber ball at their feet all day long. Sometimes when the girls jumping rope played double dutch, twirling two ropes in opposite directions, one of the boys would rush up unbidden and, elbowing aside the girl who was about to jump, leap in and mockingly start bellowing the girls' favorite jumping song while deliberately entangling himself in their flying ropes. "H, my name is Hippopotamus—!" The girls would holler at him "Stop it! Stop it!" and call out for help from the playground director, who had only to shout from wherever he was on the playground to the troublemaker (most days it was the same boy), "Cut it out, Myron! Leave the girls alone or you're going home!" With that, the uproar subsided. Soon the jump ropes were once again snappily turning in the air and the chanting taken up anew by one jumper after another:

A, my name is Agnes
 And my husband's name is Alphonse,
 We come from Alabama
 And we bring back apples!

B, my name is Bev
 And my husband's name is Bill,
 We come from Bermuda
 And we bring back beets!
 C, my name is . . .

With their childish voices, the girls encamped at the far edge of the playground improvised their way from A to Z and back again, alliterating the nouns at the end of the line, sometimes preposterously, each time around. Leaping and darting about with excitement—except when Myron Kopferman and his like would apishly interfere—they exhibited astounding energy; unless they were summoned by the playground director to retreat to the shade of the school because of the heat, they didn't vacate that street from the Friday in June when the spring term ended to the Tuesday after Labor Day when the fall term began and they could jump rope only after school and at recess.

The playground director that year was Bucky Cantor, who, because of poor vision that necessitated his wearing thick eyeglasses, was one of the few young men around who wasn't off fighting in the war. During the previous school year, Mr. Cantor had become the new phys ed teacher at Chan-

cellor Avenue School and so already knew many of us who habituated the playground from the gym classes he taught. He was twenty-three that summer, a graduate of South Side, Newark's mixed-race, mixed-religion high school, and Panzer College of Physical Education and Hygiene in East Orange. He stood slightly under five feet five inches tall, and though he was a superior athlete and strong competitor, his height, combined with his poor vision, had prevented him from playing college-level football, baseball, or basketball and restricted his intercollegiate sports activity to throwing the javelin and lifting weights. Atop his compact body was a good-sized head formed of emphatically slanting and sloping components: wide pronounced cheekbones, a steep forehead, an angular jaw, and a long straight nose with a prominent bridge that lent his profile the sharpness of a silhouette engraved on a coin. His full lips were as well defined as his muscles, and his complexion was tawny year-round. Since adolescence he had worn his hair in a military-style crewcut. You particularly noticed his ears with that haircut, not because they were unduly large, which they were not, not necessarily because they were joined so closely to his head,

but because, seen from the side, they were shaped much like the ace of spades in a pack of cards, or the wings on the winged feet of mythology, with top-most tips that weren't rounded off, as most ears are, but came nearly to a point. Before his grandfather dubbed him Bucky, he was known briefly as Ace to his childhood street pals, a nickname inspired not merely by his precocious excellence at sports but by the uncommon configuration of those ears.

Altogether the oblique planes of his face gave the smoky gray eyes back of his glasses—eyes long and narrow like an Asian's—a deeply pocketed look, as though they were not so much set as cratered in the skull. The voice emerging from this precisely delineated face was, unexpectedly, rather high-pitched, but that did not diminish the force of his appearance. His was the cast-iron, wear-resistant, strikingly bold face of a sturdy young man you could rely on.

ONE AFTERNOON early in July, two cars full of Italians from East Side High, boys anywhere from fifteen to eighteen, drove in and parked at the top of the residential street back of the school, where the playground was situated. East Side was in the

Ironbound section, the industrial slum that had reported the most cases of polio in the city so far. As soon as Mr. Cantor saw them pull up, he dropped his mitt on the field—he was playing third base in one of our pickup games—and trotted over to where the ten strangers had emptied out of the two cars. His athletic, pigeon-toed trot was already being imitated by the playground kids, as was his purposeful way of lightly lifting himself as he moved on the balls of his feet, and the slight sway, when he walked, of his substantial shoulders. For some of the boys his entire bearing had become theirs both on and off the playing field.

“What do you fellows want here?” Mr. Cantor said.

“We’re spreadin’ polio,” one of the Italians replied. He was the one who’d come swaggering out of the cars first. “Ain’t that right?” he said, turning to preen for the cohorts backing him up, who appeared right off to Mr. Cantor to be only too eager to begin a brawl.

“You look more like you’re spreadin’ trouble,” Mr. Cantor told him. “Why don’t you head out of here?”

“No, no,” the Italian guy insisted, “not till we

spread some polio. We got it and you don't, so we thought we'd drive up and spread a little around." All the while he talked, he rocked back and forth on his heels to indicate how tough he was. The brazen ease of his thumbs tucked into the front two loops of his trousers served no less than his gaze to register his contempt.

"I'm playground director here," Mr. Cantor said, pointing back over his shoulder toward us kids. "I'm asking you to leave the vicinity of the playground. You've got no business here and I'm asking you politely to go. What do you say?"

"Since when is there a law against spreadin' polio, Mr. Playground Director?"

"Look, polio is not a joke. And there's a law against being a public nuisance. I don't want to have to call the police. How about leaving on your own, before I get the cops to escort you out of here?"

With this, the leader of the pack, who was easily half a foot taller than Mr. Cantor, took a step forward and spat on the pavement. He left a gob of viscous sputum splattered there, only inches from the tip of Mr. Cantor's sneakers.

"What's that mean?" Mr. Cantor asked him. His voice was still calm and, with his arms crossed

tightly over his chest, he was the embodiment of immovability. No Ironbound roughnecks were going to get the better of him or come anywhere near his kids.

"I told you what it means. We're spreadin' polio. We don't want to leave you people out."

"Look, cut the 'you people' crap," Mr. Cantor said and took one quick, angry step forward, placing him only inches from the Italian's face. "I'll give you ten seconds to turn around and move everybody out of here."

The Italian smiled. He really hadn't stopped smiling since he'd gotten out of the car. "Then what?" he asked.

"I told you. I'm going to get the cops to get you out and keep you out."

Here the Italian guy spat again, this time just to the side of Mr. Cantor's sneakers, and Mr. Cantor called over to the boy who had been waiting to bat next in the game and who, like the rest of us, was silently watching Mr. Cantor face down the ten Italians. "Jerry," Mr. Cantor said, "run to my office. Telephone the police. Say you're calling for me. Tell them I need them."

"What are they going to do, lock me up?" the

chief Italian guy asked. "They gonna put me in the slammer for spitting on your precious Weequahic sidewalk? You own the sidewalk too, four eyes?"

Mr. Cantor didn't answer and just remained planted between the kids who'd been playing ball on the asphalt field behind him and the two carloads of Italian guys, still standing on the street at the edge of the playground as though each were about to drop the cigarette he was smoking and suddenly brandish a weapon. But by the time Jerry returned from Mr. Cantor's basement office—where, as instructed, he had telephoned the police—the two cars and their ominous occupants were gone. When the patrol car pulled up only minutes later, Mr. Cantor was able to give the cops the license plate numbers of both cars, which he'd memorized during the standoff. Only after the police had driven away did the kids back of the fence begin to ridicule the Italians.

It turned out that there was sputum spread over the wide area of pavement where the Italian guys had congregated, some twenty square feet of a wet, slimy, disgusting mess that certainly appeared to be an ideal breeding ground for disease. Mr. Cantor

had two of the boys go down in the school basement to find a couple of buckets and fill them with hot water and ammonia in the janitor's room and then slosh the water across the pavement until every inch of it was washed clean. The kids sloshing away the slime reminded Mr. Cantor of how he'd had to clean up after killing a rat at the back of his grandfather's grocery store when he was ten years old.

"Nothing to worry about," Mr. Cantor told the boys. "They won't be back. That's just life," he said, quoting a line favored by his grandfather, "there's always something funny going on," and he rejoined the game and play was resumed. The boys observing from the other side of the two-story-high chainlink fence that enclosed the playground were mightily impressed by Mr. Cantor's taking on the Italians as he did. His confident, decisive manner, his weightlifter's strength, his joining in every day to enthusiastically play ball right alongside the rest of us—all this had made him a favorite of the playground regulars from the day he'd arrived as director; but after the incident with the Italians he became an outright hero, an idolized, protective,

heroic older brother, particularly to those whose own older brothers were off in the war.

It was later in the week that two of the boys who'd been at the playground when the Italians had come around didn't show up for a few days to play ball. On the first morning, both had awakened with high fevers and stiff necks, and by the second evening—having begun to grow helplessly weak in their arms and legs and to have difficulty breathing—had to be rushed to the hospital by ambulance. One of the boys, Herbie Steinmark, was a chubby, clumsy, amiable eighth grader who, because of his athletic ineptness, was usually assigned to play right field and bat last, and the other, Alan Michaels, also an eighth grader, was among the two or three best athletes on the playground and the boy who'd grown closest to Mr. Cantor. Herbie's and Alan's constituted the first cases of polio in the neighborhood. Within forty-eight hours there were eleven additional cases, and though none were kids who'd been at the playground that day, word spread through the neighborhood that the disease had been carried to the Weequahic section by the Italians. Since so far their neighborhood had reported the most cases of polio in the city and ours had reported none, it

was believed that, true to their word, the Italians had driven across town that afternoon intending to infect the Jews with polio and that they had succeeded.

BUCKY CANTOR'S MOTHER had died in childbirth, and he had been raised by his maternal grandparents in a tenement housing twelve families on Barclay Street off lower Avon Avenue, in one of the poorer sections of the city. His father, from whom he'd inherited his bad eyesight, was a bookkeeper for a big downtown department store who had an inordinate fondness for betting on horses. Shortly after his wife's death and his son's birth he was convicted of larceny for stealing from his employer to cover his gambling debts—it turned out he'd been lining his pockets from the day he'd taken the job. He served two years in jail and, after his release, never returned to Newark. Instead of having a father, the boy, whose given name was Eugene, took his instruction in life from the big, bear-like, hard-working grandfather in whose Avon Avenue grocery store he worked after school and on Saturdays. He was five when his father married for a second time and hired a lawyer to get the boy to

come to live with him and his new wife down in Perth Amboy where he had a job in the shipyards. The grandfather, rather than going out to hire his own lawyer, drove straight to Perth Amboy, where there was a confrontation in which he was said to have threatened to break his one-time son-in-law's neck should he dare to try in any way to interfere in Eugene's life. After that, Eugene's father was never heard from again.

It was from heaving crates of produce around the store with his grandfather that he began to develop his chest and arms, and from running up and down the three flights to their flat innumerable times a day that he began to develop his legs. And it was from his grandfather's intrepidity that he learned how to pit himself against any obstacle, including having been born the son of a man his grandfather would describe for as long as he lived as "a very shady character." He wanted as a boy to be physically strong, just like his grandfather, and not to have to wear thick glasses. But his eyes were so bad that when he put the glasses away at night to get ready for bed, he could barely make out the shape of the few pieces of furniture in his room. His grandfather, who had never given a second thought to his

own disadvantages, instructed the unhappy child—when he'd first donned glasses at the age of eight—that his eyes were now as good as anyone else's. After that, there was nothing further to be said on the subject.

His grandmother was a warm, tenderhearted little woman, a good, sound parental counterweight to his grandfather. She bore hardship bravely, though teared up whenever mention was made of the twenty-year-old daughter who had died in childbirth. She was much loved by the customers in the store, and at home, where her hands were never still, she followed with half an ear *Life Can Be Beautiful* and the other soap operas she liked where the listener is always shuddering, always nervous, at the prospect of the next misfortune. In the few hours a day when she was not assisting in the grocery, she devoted herself wholeheartedly to Eugene's welfare, nursing him through measles, mumps, and chickenpox, seeing that his clothes were always clean and mended, that his homework was done, that his report cards were signed, that he was taken to the dentist regularly (as few poor children were in those days), that the food she cooked for him was hearty and plentiful, and that his fees were paid at the synagogue

where he went after school for Hebrew classes to prepare for his bar mitzvah. But for the trio of common infectious childhood diseases, the boy had unwavering good health, strong even teeth, an overall sense of physical well-being that must have had something to do with the way she had mothered him, trying to do everything that was thought, in those days, to be good for a growing child. Between her and her husband there was rarely squabbling—each knew the job to do and how best to do it, and each carried it off with an avidity whose example was not lost on young Eugene.

The grandfather saw to the boy's masculine development, always on the alert to eradicate any weakness that might have been bequeathed—along with the poor eyesight—by his natural father and to teach the boy that a man's every endeavor was imbued with responsibility. His grandfather's dominance wasn't always easy to abide, but when Eugene met his expectations, the praise was never grudging. There was the time, when he was just ten, that the boy came upon a large gray rat in the dim stockroom back of the store. It was already dark outside when he saw the rat scuttling in and out of a stack

of empty grocery cartons that he had helped his grandfather to unpack. His impulse was, of course, to run. Instead, knowing his grandfather was out front with a customer, he reached noiselessly into a corner for the deep, heavy coal shovel with which he was learning how to tend the furnace that heated the store.

Holding his breath, he advanced on tiptoe until he had stalked the panicked rat into a corner. When the boy lifted the shovel into the air, the rat rose on its hind legs and gnashed its frightening teeth, deploying itself to spring. But before it could leave the floor, he brought the underside of the shovel swiftly downward and, catching the rodent squarely on the skull, smashed its head open. Blood intermingled with bits of bone and brain drained into the cracks of the stockroom floorboards as—having failed to suppress completely a sudden impulse to vomit—he used the shovel blade to scoop up the dead animal. It was heavy, heavier than he could have imagined, and looked larger and longer resting in the shovel than it had up on its hind legs. Strangely, nothing—not even the lifeless strand of tail and the four motionless feet—looked quite as

dead as the pairs of needle-thin, bloodstained whiskers. With his weapon raised over his head, he had not registered the whiskers; he had not registered anything other than the words "Kill it!" as if they were being formulated in his brain by his grandfather. He waited until the customer had left with her grocery bag and then, holding the shovel straight out in front of him—and poker-faced to reveal how unfazed he was—he carried the dead rat through to the front of the store to display to his grandfather before continuing out the door. At the corner, jiggling the carcass free of the shovel, he poked it through the iron grate into the flowing sewer. He returned to the store and, with a scrub brush, brown soap, rags, and a bucket of water, cleaned the floor of his vomit and the traces of the rat and rinsed off the shovel.

It was following this triumph that his grandfather—because of the nickname's connotation of obstinacy and gutsy, spirited, strong-willed fortitude—took to calling the bespectacled ten-year-old Bucky.

The grandfather, Sam Cantor, had come alone to America in the 1880s as an immigrant child from

a Jewish village in Polish Galicia. His fearlessness had been learned in the Newark streets, where his nose had been broken more than once in fights with anti-Semitic gangs. The violent aggression against Jews that was commonplace in the city during his slum boyhood did much to form his view of life and his grandson's view in turn. He encouraged the grandson to stand up for himself as a man and to stand up for himself as a Jew, and to understand that one's battles were never over and that, in the relentless skirmish that living is, "when you have to pay the price, you pay it." The broken nose in the middle of his grandfather's face had always testified to the boy that though the world had tried, it could not crush him. The old man was dead of a heart attack by July 1944, when the ten Italians drove up to the playground and single-handedly Mr. Cantor turned them back, but that didn't mean he wasn't there throughout the confrontation.

A boy who'd lost a mother at birth and a father to jail, a boy whose parents figured not at all in his earliest recollections, couldn't have been more fortunate in the surrogates he'd inherited to make him strong in every way—he'd only rarely allow

the thought of his missing parents to torment him, even if his biography had been determined by their absence.

MR. CANTOR had been twenty and a college junior when the U.S. Pacific Fleet was bombed and nearly destroyed in the surprise Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on Sunday, December 7, 1941. On Monday the eighth he went off to the recruiting station outside City Hall to join the fight. But because of his eyes nobody would have him, not the army, the navy, the coast guard, or the marines. He was classified 4-F and sent back to Panzer College to continue preparing to be a phys ed teacher. His grandfather had only recently died, and however irrational the thought, Mr. Cantor felt as though he had let him down and failed to meet the expectations of his undeflectable mentor. What good were his muscular build and his athletic prowess if he couldn't exploit them as a soldier? He hadn't been lifting weights since early adolescence merely to be strong enough to hurl the javelin—he had made himself strong enough to be a marine.

After America entered the war, he was still walking the streets while all the able-bodied men his age

were off training to fight the Japs and the Germans, among them his two closest friends from Panzer, who'd lined up outside the recruiting station with him on the morning of December 8. His grandmother, with whom he still lived while commuting to Panzer, heard him weeping in his bedroom the night his buddies Dave and Jake went off to Fort Dix to begin basic training without him, heard him weeping as she'd never known Eugene to weep before. He was ashamed to be seen in civilian clothes, ashamed when he watched the newsreels of the war at the movies, ashamed when he took the bus home to Newark from East Orange at the end of the school day and sat beside someone reading in the evening paper the day's biggest story: "Bataan Falls," "Corregidor Falls," "Wake Island Falls." He felt the shame of someone who might by himself have made a difference as the U.S. forces in the Pacific suffered one colossal defeat after another.

Because of the war and the draft, jobs in the school system for male gym teachers were so numerous that even before he graduated from Panzer in June of 1943, he had nailed down a position at ten-year-old Chancellor Avenue School and signed on as the summertime playground director. His

goal was to teach phys ed and coach at Weequahic, the high school that had opened next door to Chancellor. It was because both schools had overwhelmingly Jewish student bodies and excellent scholastic credentials that Mr. Cantor was drawn to them. He wanted to teach these kids to excel in sports as well as in their studies and to value sportsmanship and what could be learned through competition on a playing field. He wanted to teach them what his grandfather had taught him: toughness and determination, to be physically brave and physically fit and never to allow themselves to be pushed around or, just because they knew how to use their brains, to be defamed as Jewish weaklings and sissies.

THE NEWS THAT SWEEPED the playground after Herbie Steinmark and Alan Michaels were transported by ambulance to the isolation ward at Beth Israel Hospital was that they were both completely paralyzed and, no longer able to breathe on their own, were being kept alive in iron lungs. Though not everybody had shown up at the playground that morning, there were still enough kids for four teams to be organized for their daylong round robin of five-inning games. Mr. Cantor estimated that alto-

gether, in addition to Herbie and Alan, some fifteen or twenty of the ninety or so playground regulars were missing—kept home, he assumed, by their parents because of the polio scare. Knowing as he did the protectiveness of the Jewish parents in the neighborhood and the maternal concern of the watchful mothers, he was in fact surprised that a good many more hadn't wound up staying away. Probably he had done some good by speaking to them as he had the day before.

"Boys," he had said, gathering them together on the field before they disbanded for dinner, "I don't want you to begin to panic. Polio is a disease that we have to live with every summer. It's a serious disease that's been around all my life. The best way to deal with the threat of polio is to stay healthy and strong. Try to wash yourself thoroughly every day and to eat right and to get eight hours of sleep and to drink eight glasses of water a day and not to give in to your worries and fears. We all want Herbie and Alan to get better as soon as possible. We all wish this hadn't happened to them. They're two terrific boys, and many of you are their close friends. Nevertheless, while they are recovering in the hospital, the rest of us have to go on living our

lives. That means coming here to the playground every day and participating in sports as you always do. If any of you feel ill, of course you must tell your parents and stay at home and look after yourself until you've seen a doctor and are well. But if you're feeling fine, there's no reason in the world why you can't be as active as you like all summer long."

From the kitchen phone that evening he tried several times to call the Steinmark and Michaels families to express his concern and the concern of the boys at the playground and to find out more about the condition of the two sick boys. But there was no answer at either house. Not a good sign. The families must still have been at the hospital at nine-fifteen at night.

Then the phone rang. It was Marcia, calling from the Poconos. She had heard about the two kids at his playground. "I spoke to my folks. They told me. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," he said, extending the cord of the phone so he could stand where it was a touch cooler, closer to the screen of the open window. "All the other boys are fine. I've been trying to reach the

families of the boys in the hospital to find out how they're doing."

"I miss you," Marcia said, "and I worry about you."

"I miss you too," he said, "but there's nothing to worry about."

"Now I'm sorry I came up here." She was working for the second summer as a head counselor at Indian Hill, a camp for Jewish boys and girls in Pennsylvania's Pocono Mountains seventy miles from the city; during the year she was a first-grade teacher at Chancellor—they'd met as new faculty members the previous fall. "It sounds awful," she said.

"It's awful for the two boys and their families," he said, "but the situation is far from out of hand. You shouldn't think it is."

"My mother said something about the Italians coming up to the playground to spread it."

"The Italians didn't spread anything. I was there. I know what happened. They were a bunch of wise-guys, that's all. They spit all over the street, and we washed it away. Polio is polio—nobody knows how it spreads. Summer comes and there it is, and there's nothing much you can do."

"I love you, Bucky. I think of you constantly."

Discreetly, so none of the neighbors could hear him through the open window, he lowered his voice and replied, "I love you too." It was difficult to tell her that because he had disciplined himself—sensibly, he thought—not to pine for her too much while she was away. It was also difficult because he'd never declared himself that openly to another girl and still found the words awkward to say.

"I have to get off the phone," Marcia said. "There's somebody waiting behind me. Please take care of yourself."

"I do. I will. But don't worry. Don't be frightened. There's nothing to be frightened about."

The next day, news raced through the community that within the Weequahic school district there were eleven new cases of polio—as many as had been reported there in the previous three years combined, and it was still only July, with a good two months to go before the polio season was over. Eleven new cases, and during the night Alan Michaels, Mr. Cantor's favorite, had died. The disease had finished him off in seventy-two hours.

The day following was Saturday, and the playground was open to organized activities only until

noon, when the rising and falling whine of the air-raid sirens sounded in their weekly test from utility poles across the city. Instead of going back to Barclay Street after closing up, to help his grandmother with the week's grocery shopping—the stock of their own grocery store had been sold for a pittance after his grandfather's death—he showered in the boys' locker room and put on a clean shirt and trousers and a pair of polished shoes that he'd brought with him in a paper bag. Then he walked the length of Chancellor Avenue, all the way down the hill to Fabyan Place, where Alan Michaels's family lived. Despite polio's striking in the neighborhood, the store-lined main street was full of people out doing their Saturday grocery shopping and picking up their dry-cleaning and their drug prescriptions and whatever they needed from the electrical shop and the ladies' wear shop and the optical shop and the hardware store. In Frenchy's barber shop every seat was occupied by one of the neighborhood men waiting to get a haircut or a shave; in the shoe repair shop next door, the Italian shopkeeper—the street's only non-Jewish shop owner, not excluding Frenchy—was busy finding people's finished shoes in a pile of them on his cluttered counter while the

Italian radio station blared through his open doorway. Already the stores had their front awnings rolled down to keep the sun from beaming hotly through the plate-glass window looking onto the street.

It was a bright, cloudless day and the temperature was rising by the hour. Boys from his gym classes and from the playground became excited when they spotted him out on Chancellor Avenue—since he lived not in the neighborhood but down in the South Side school district, they were used to seeing him only in his official capacities as gym teacher and playground director. He waved when they called “Mr. Cantor!” and he smiled and nodded at their parents, some of whom he recognized from PTA meetings. One of the fathers stopped to talk to him. “I want to shake your hand, young man,” he said to Mr. Cantor. “You told those dagos where to get off. Those dirty dogs. One against ten. You’re a brave young man.” “Thank you, sir.” “I’m Murray Rosenfield. I’m Joey’s father.” “Thank you, Mr. Rosenfield.” Next, a woman who was out shopping stopped to speak to him. She smiled politely and said, “I’m Mrs. Lewy. I’m Bernie’s mother. My son worships you, Mr. Cantor. But I have one thing

to ask you. With what’s going on in the city, do you think the boys should be running around in heat like this? Bernie comes home soaked to the skin. Is that a good idea? Look at what’s happened to Alan. How does a family recover from something like this? His two brothers away in the war, and now this.” “I don’t let the boys overexert themselves, Mrs. Lewy. I watch out for them.” “Bernie,” she said, “doesn’t know when to quit. He can run all day and all night if somebody doesn’t stop him.” “I’ll be sure to stop him if he gets too hot. I’ll keep my eye on him.” “Oh, thank you, thank you. Everybody is very happy that it’s you who’s looking after the boys.” “I hope I’m helping,” Mr. Cantor replied. A small crowd had gathered while he’d been talking to Bernie’s mother, and now a second woman approached and reached for his sleeve to get his attention. “And where’s the Board of Health in all this?” “Are you asking me?” Mr. Cantor said. “Yes, you. Eleven new cases in the Weequahic section overnight! One child dead! I want to know what the Board of Health is doing to protect our children.” “I don’t work for the Board of Health,” he replied. “I’m playground director at Chancellor.” “Somebody said you were with the Board of

Health," she charged him. "No, I'm not. I wish I could help you but I'm attached to the schools." "You dial the Board of Health," she said, "and you get a busy signal. I think they purposely leave the phone off the hook." "The Board of Health was here," another woman put in. "I saw them. They put a quarantine sign up on a house on my street." Her voice full of distress, she said, "There's a case of polio on my street!" "And the Board of Health does nothing!" someone else said angrily. "What is the city doing to stop this? Nothing!" "There's got to be something to do—but they're not doing it!" "They should inspect the milk that kids drink—polio comes from dirty cows and their infected milk." "No," said someone else, "it isn't the cows—it's the bottles. They don't sterilize those milk bottles right." "Why don't they fumigate?" another voice said. "Why don't they use disinfectant? Disinfect *everything*." "Why don't they do like they did when I was a child? They tied camphor balls around our necks. They had something that stunk bad they used to call asafetida—maybe that would work now." "Why don't they spread some kind of chemical on the streets and kill it that way?" "Forget about chemicals," someone else said. "The

most important thing is for the children to wash their hands. Constantly wash their hands. Cleanliness! Cleanliness is the only cure!" "And another important thing," Mr. Cantor put in, "is for all of you to calm down and not lose your self-control and panic. And not communicate panic to the children. The important thing is to keep everything in their lives as normal as possible and for you all, in what you say to them, to try to stay reasonable and calm." "Wouldn't it be better if they stayed home till this passes over?" another woman said to him. "Isn't home the safest place in a crisis like this? I'm Richie Tulin's mother. Richie is crazy about you, Mr. Cantor. All the boys are. But wouldn't Richie be better off, wouldn't all the boys be better off, if you closed down the playground and they stayed at home?" "Shutting down the playground isn't up to me, Mrs. Tulin. That would be up to the superintendent of schools." "Don't think I'm blaming you for what's happening," she said. "No, no, I know you're not. You're a mother. You're concerned. I understand everyone's concern." "Our Jewish children are our riches," someone said. "Why is it attacking our beautiful Jewish children?" "I'm not a doctor. I'm not a scientist. I don't know why it

attacks who it attacks. I don't believe that anyone does. That's why everybody tries to find who or what is guilty. They try to figure out what's responsible so they can eliminate it." "But what about the Italians? It had to be the Italians!" "No, no, I don't think so. I was there when the Italians came. They had no contact with the children. It was not the Italians. Look, you mustn't be eaten up with worry and you mustn't be eaten up with fear. What's important is not to infect the children with the germ of fear. We'll come through this, believe me. We'll all do our bit and stay calm and do everything we can to protect the children, and we'll all come through this together," he said. "Oh, thank you, young man. You're a splendid young man." "I have to be going, you'll have to excuse me," he told them all, looking one last time into their anxious eyes, beseeching him as though he were something far more powerful than a playground director twenty-three years old.

FABYAN PLACE was the last street in Newark before the railroad tracks and the lumberyards and the border with Irvington. Like the other residential streets that branched off Chancellor, it was lined

with two-and-a-half-story frame houses fronted by red-brick stoops and hedged-in tiny yards and separated from one another by narrow cement driveways and small garages. At the curb in front of each stoop was a young shade tree planted in the last decade by the city and looking parched now after weeks of torrid temperatures and no rain. Nothing about the clean and quiet street gave evidence of unhealthiness or infection. In every house on every floor either the shades were pulled or the drapes drawn to keep out the ferocious heat. There was no one to be seen anywhere, and Mr. Cantor wondered if it was because of the heat or because the neighbors were keeping their children indoors out of respect for the Michaels family—or perhaps out of terror of the Michaels family.

Then a figure emerged from around the Lyons Avenue corner, making its solitary way through the brilliant light burning down on Fabyan Place and already softening the asphalt street. Mr. Cantor recognized who it was, even from afar, by the peculiar walk. It was Horace. Every man, woman, and child in the Weequahic section recognized Horace, largely because it was always so disquieting to find him heading one's way. When the smaller children

saw him they ran to the other side of the street; when adults saw him they lowered their eyes. Horace was the neighborhood's "moron," a skinny man in his thirties or forties—no one knew his age for sure—whose mental development had stopped at around six and whom a psychologist would likely have categorized as an imbecile, or even an idiot, rather than the moron he'd been unclinically dubbed years before by the neighborhood youngsters. He dragged his feet beneath him, and his head, jutting forward from his neck like a turtle's, bobbed loosely with each step, so that altogether he appeared to be not so much walking as staggering forward. Spittle gathered at the corners of his mouth on the rare occasions when he spoke, and when he was silent he would sometimes drool. He had a thin, irregular face that looked as if it had been crushed and twisted in the vise of the birth canal, except for his nose, which was big and, given the narrowness of his face, oddly and grotesquely bulbous, and which inspired some of the kids to taunt him by shouting "Hey, bugle nose!" when he shuffled by the stoop or the driveway where they were congregated. His clothing gave off a sour

smell regardless of the season, and his face was dotted with blood spots, tiny nicks in his skin certifying that though Horace might have the mind of a baby, he also had the beard of a man and, however hazardingly, shaved himself, or was shaved by one of his parents, before he went out every day. Minutes earlier he must have left the little apartment back of the tailor shop around the corner where he lived with his parents, an aged couple who spoke Yiddish to each other and heavily accented English to the customers in the shop and were said to have other, normal children who were grown and lived elsewhere—amazingly enough, one of Horace's two brothers was said to be a doctor and the other a successful businessman. Horace was the family's youngest, and he was out walking the neighborhood streets every day of the year, in the worst of summer as in the worst of winter, when he wore an oversized mackinaw with its hood pulled up over his earmuffs and black galoshes with the toggles undone and mittens for his large hands that were attached to the cuffs of his sleeves with safety pins and that dangled there unused no matter what the temperature. It was an outfit in which, trudging

along, he looked even more outlandish than he did ordinarily making the rounds of the neighborhood alone.

Mr. Cantor found the Michaels house on the far side of the street, climbed the stoop steps, and, in the small hallway with the mailboxes, pushed the bell to their second-floor flat and heard it ringing upstairs. Slowly someone descended the interior stairs and opened the frosted glass door at the foot of the stairwell. The man who stood there was large and heavysset, and the buttons on his short-sleeved shirt pulled tightly across his belly. He had grainy dark patches under his eyes, and when he saw Mr. Cantor he was silent, as though grief had left him too stupefied to speak.

"I'm Bucky Cantor. I'm the playground director at Chancellor and a phys ed teacher there. Alan was in one of my gym classes. He was one of the boys who played ball up at the playground. I heard what happened and came to offer my condolences."

The man was a long time answering. "Alan talked about you," he finally said.

"Alan was a natural athlete. Alan was a very thoughtful boy. This is terrible, shocking news. It's

incomprehensible. I came to tell you how upset I am for all of you."

It was very hot in the hallway, and both the men were perspiring heavily.

"Come upstairs," Mr. Michaels said. "We'll give you something cold."

"I don't want to bother you," Mr. Cantor replied. "I wanted to express my condolences and tell you what a fine boy you had for a son. He was a grownup in every way."

"There's iced tea. My sister-in-law made some. We had to call the doctor for my wife. She's been in bed since it happened. They had to give her phenobarb. Come and have some iced tea."

"I don't want to intrude."

"Come. Alan told us all about Mr. Cantor and his muscles. He loved the playground." Then, his voice breaking, he said, "He loved life."

Mr. Cantor followed the large, grief-stricken man up the stairs and into the flat. All the shades were lowered and no lights were on. There was a console radio beside the sofa and two big soft club chairs opposite that. Mr. Cantor sat on the sofa while Mr. Michaels went to the kitchen and re-

turned with a glass of iced tea for the guest. He motioned for Mr. Cantor to sit closer to him in one of the club chairs and then, sighing audibly, painfully, he sat in the other chair, which had an ottoman at its foot. Once he was stretched out across the ottoman and the chair, he looked as though he too, like his wife, were in bed, drugged and incapable of moving. Shock had rendered his face expressionless. In the near darkness, the stained skin beneath his eyes looked black, as if it had been imprinted in ink with twin symbols of mourning. Ancient Jewish death rites call for the rending of one's garments on learning of the death of a loved one—Mr. Michaels had affixed two dark patches to his colorless face instead.

"We have sons in the army," he said, speaking softly so no one in another room could hear, and slowly, as if out of great fatigue. "Ever since they've been overseas, not a day has gone by when I haven't expected to hear the worst. So far they have survived the worst fighting, and yet their baby brother wakes up a few mornings back with a stiff neck and a high fever, and three days later he's gone. How are we going to tell his brothers? How are we going to write this to them in combat? A twelve-year-old

youngster, the best boy you could want, and he's gone. The first night he was so miserable that in the morning I thought that maybe the worst was over and the crisis had passed. But the worst had only begun. What a day that boy put in! The child was on fire. You read the thermometer and you couldn't believe it—a temperature of a hundred and six! As soon as the doctor came he immediately called the ambulance, and at the hospital they whisked him away from us—and that was it. We never saw our son alive again. He died all alone. No chance to say so much as goodbye. All we have of him is a closet with his clothes and his schoolbooks and his sports things, and there, over there, his fish."

For the first time, Mr. Cantor noticed the large glass aquarium up against the far wall, where not only were the shades drawn but dark drapes were pulled shut across a window that must have faced the driveway and the house next door. A neon light shone down on the tank, and inside he could see the population of tiny, many-hued fish, more than a dozen of them, either vanishing into a miniature grotto, green with miniature shrubbery, or sweeping the sandy bottom for food, or veering upward to suck at the surface, or just suspended stock-still

near a silver cylinder bubbling air in one corner of the tank. Alan's handiwork, Mr. Cantor thought, a neatly outfitted habitat fastidiously managed and cared for.

"This morning," Mr. Michaels said, gesturing back over his shoulder at the tank, "I remembered to feed them. I jumped up in bed and remembered."

"He was the best boy," Mr. Cantor said, leaning across the chair so he could be heard while keeping his voice low.

"Always did his schoolwork," Mr. Michaels said. "Always helped his mother. Not a selfish bone in his body. Was going to begin in September to prepare for his bar mitzvah. Polite. Neat. Wrote each of his brothers V-mail letters every single week, letters full of news that he read to us at the dinner table. Always cheering his mother up when she would get down in the dumps about the two older boys. Always making her laugh. Even when he was a small boy you could have a good time laughing with Alan. Our house was where all their friends came to have a good time. The place was always full of boys. Why did Alan get polio? Why did he have to get sick and die?"

Mr. Cantor clutched the cold glass of iced tea in his hand without drinking from it, without even realizing he was holding it.

"All his friends are terrified," Mr. Michaels said. "They're terrified that they caught it from him and now they are going to get polio too. Their parents are hysterical. Nobody knows what to do. What is there to do? What should we have done? I rack my brain. Can there be a cleaner household than this one? Can there be a woman who keeps a more spotless house than my wife? Could there be a mother more attentive to her children's welfare? Could there be a boy who looked after his room and his clothes and himself any better than Alan did? Everything he did, he did it right the first time. And always happy. Always with a joke. So why did he die? Where is the fairness in that?"

"There is none," Mr. Cantor said.

"You do only the right thing, the right thing and the right thing and the right thing, going back all the way. You try to be a thoughtful person, a reasonable person, an accommodating person, and then this happens. Where is the sense in life?"

"It doesn't seem to have any," Mr. Cantor answered.

"Where are the scales of justice?" the poor man asked.

"I don't know, Mr. Michaels."

"Why does tragedy always strike down the people who least deserve it?"

"I don't know the answer," Mr. Cantor replied.

"Why not me instead of him?"

Mr. Cantor had no response at all to such a question. He could only shrug.

"A boy—tragedy strikes a *boy*. The cruelty of it!" Mr. Michaels said, pounding the arm of his chair with his open hand. "The meaninglessness of it! A terrible disease drops from the sky and somebody is dead overnight. A child, no less!"

Mr. Cantor wished that he knew a single word to utter that would alleviate, if only for a moment, the father's anguished suffering. But all he could do was nod his head.

"The other evening we were sitting outside," Mr. Michaels said. "Alan was with us. He had come back from tending his plot in the victory garden. He did that religiously. Last year we actually ate Alan's vegetables that he raised all summer long. A breeze came up. Unexpectedly it got breezy. Do you

remember, the other night? Around eight o'clock, how refreshing it seemed?"

"Yes," Mr. Cantor said, but he hadn't been listening. He'd been looking across the room at the tropical fish swimming in the aquarium and thinking that without Alan to tend them, they would starve to death or be given away or, in time, be flushed down the toilet by somebody in tears.

"It seemed like a blessing after the broiling day we'd had. You wait and wait for a breeze. You think a breeze will bring some relief. But you know what I think it did instead?" Mr. Michaels asked. "I think that breeze blew the polio germs around in the air, around and around, the way you see leaves blow around in a flurry. I think Alan was sitting there and breathed in the germs from the breeze . . ." He couldn't continue; he had begun to cry, awkwardly, inexpertly, the way men cry who ordinarily like to think of themselves as a match for anything.

Here a woman came out of a back bedroom; it was the sister-in-law who was looking after Mrs. Michaels. She stepped gently with her shoes on the floor, as though inside the bedroom a restless child had finally fallen asleep.

Quietly she said, "She wants to know who you're talking to."

"This is Mr. Cantor," said Mr. Michaels, wiping his eyes. "He is a teacher from Alan's school. How is she?" he asked his sister-in-law.

"Not good," she reported in a low voice. "It's the same story. 'Not my baby, not my baby.'"

"I'll be right in," he said.

"I should be going," Mr. Cantor said and got up from his chair and set the untouched iced tea down on a side table. "I only wanted to pay my respects. May I ask when the funeral is?"

"Tomorrow at ten. Schley Street Synagogue. Alan was the rabbi's Hebrew school favorite. He was *everybody's* favorite. Rabbi Slavin himself came here and offered the shul as soon as he heard what had happened. As a special honor to Alan. Everybody in the world loved that boy. He was one in a million."

"What did you teach him?" the sister-in-law asked Mr. Cantor.

"Gym."

"Anything with sports in it, Alan loved," she said. "And what a student. The apple of everyone's eye."

"I know that," said Mr. Cantor. "I see that. I can't express to you how very sorry I am."

Downstairs, as he stepped out onto the stoop, a woman rushed out of the first-floor flat and, excitedly taking him by his arm, asked, "Where is the quarantine sign? People have been coming and going from upstairs, in and out, in and out, and why isn't there a quarantine sign? I have small children. Why isn't there a quarantine sign protecting my children? Are you a patrolman from the Sanitary Squad?"

"I don't know anything about the Sanitary Squad. I'm from the playground. I teach at the school."

"Who is in charge then?" A small, dark woman laden with fear, her face contorted with emotion, she looked as if her life had already been wrecked by polio rather than by her children's having to live precariously within its reach. She looked no better than Mr. Michaels did.

"I suppose the Board of Health is in charge," Mr. Cantor said.

"Where are they?" she pleaded. "Where is somebody who is in charge! People on the street won't even walk in front of our house—they walk deliber-

ately on the other side. The child is already dead," she added, incoherent now with desperation, "and still I'm waiting for a quarantine sign!" And here she let out a shriek. Mr. Cantor had never heard a shriek before, other than in a horror movie. It was different from a scream. It could have been generated by an electrical current. It was a high-pitched, protracted sound unlike any human noise he knew, and the eerie shock of it caused his skin to crawl.

HE'D HAD NO LUNCH, so he made his way to Syd's to get a hot dog. He was careful to walk on the shady side of the street, across from where nothing was sheltered from the glare of the sun and where he thought he could see heat waves shimmering above the sidewalk. Most of the shoppers had disappeared. It was one of those overpowering summer days when the thermometer registered an astonishing one hundred degrees and when, if the playground were open, he would have curtailed the softball games and encouraged the kids to use the chess- and checkerboards and the Ping-Pong tables set up in the shadow of the school. A lot of the boys took salt tablets that their mothers had given them for the heat, and wanted to go on play-

ing no matter how high the temperature soared, even when the field's asphalt surface began to feel spongy and to radiate heat under their sneakers and the sun was so hot that you would think that rather than darkening your bare skin it would bleach you of all color before cremating you on the spot. Fresh from hearing Alan's father's lamentation, Mr. Cantor wondered if for the rest of the summer he oughtn't to shut down all sports when the temperature hit ninety. That way, he'd at least be doing something, though whether it was something that would make any difference to the spread of polio, he had no idea.

Syd's was almost empty. Somebody was cursing at the pinball machine in the gloom at the back of the store, and two high school boys he did not know were goofing around by the jukebox, which was playing "I'll Be Seeing You," one of the summer's favorites. It was a song that Marcia liked to hear on the radio and that was as popular as it was because of all the wives and girlfriends left behind when their husbands and boyfriends went off for the duration of the war. He remembered now that he and Marcia had danced to the song on her back porch during the week before she'd left for Indian

Hill. Dancing slowly together in a shuffling embrace while listening to "I'll Be Seeing You" had made them start to long for each other even before Marcia was gone.

There was no one sitting in any of the booths and nobody on any of the counter stools when Bucky took a seat adjacent to the screen door and the long serving window that opened onto Chancellor Avenue, in the path of whatever air might drift in from the street. A big fan was going at either end of the counter, but they didn't seem to do much good. The place was hot and the smell pervasive of french fries deep-frying in fat.

He got a hot dog and a frosted root beer and began to eat at the counter by himself. Out the window, across the way, trudging slowly up the hill in the annihilating heat of equatorial Newark, there was Horace again, no doubt headed to the playground, not understanding that today was Saturday and that, in the summer, the playground closed on Saturdays at noon. (It was not clear whether he understood what "summer," "playground," "closed," or "noon" was either, just as his failure to cross to the other side of the street probably meant that he could not perform the rudimentary thinking to con-

ceptualize "shade" or even just seek it out instinctively, as any dog would on a day like this.) When Horace found none of the kids back of the school, what would he do next? Sit for hours on the bleachers waiting for them to turn up, or resume those neighborhood wanderings that made him look like someone out sleepwalking in the middle of the day? Yes, Alan was dead and polio a threat to the lives of all the city's children, and yet Mr. Cantor couldn't but find something dispiriting about watching Horace walk the streets by himself beneath the ferocity of that sun, isolated and brainless in a blazing world.

When the boys were playing ball Horace would either seat himself silently at the end of the bench where the team at bat was sitting or else get up and perambulate the field, stopping a foot or two away from one of the players in the field and remain there without moving. This went on all the time, and everybody knew that the only way a fielder could get rid of Horace—and get back to concentrating on the game—was to shake the moron's lifeless hand and say to him, "How ya doin', Horace?" Whereupon Horace would appear to be satisfied and head off to stand beside another of the players. All he

asked of life was that—to have his hand shaken. None of the playground boys ever laughed at him or teased him—at least not when Mr. Cantor was around—except for the uncontrollably energetic Kopfermans, Myron and Danny. They were strong, burly boys, good at sports, Myron the overexcitable, belligerent one and Danny the mischievous, secretive one. The older one especially, eleven-year-old Myron, had all the makings of a bully and had to be reined in when there was a disagreement among the boys on the field or when he interfered with the girls jumping rope. Mr. Cantor spent no small portion of his time trying to inculcate in untamed Myron the spirit of fair play and also to caution him to refrain from pestering Horace.

“Look,” Myron would say, “look, Horace. Look what I’m doing.” When Horace saw the tip of Myron’s sneaker beating rhythmically up and down on the bleacher step, his fingers would begin to twitch and his face would grow bright red and soon he would be waving his arms in the air as if he were fighting off a swarm of bees. More than once that summer Mr. Cantor had to tell Myron Kopferman to cut it out and not do it again. “Do what?”

Do what?” Myron asked, managing to mask none of his insolence with a wide grin. “I’m tapping my foot, Mr. Cantor—don’t I have a right to tap my foot?” “Knock it off, Myron,” Mr. Cantor replied. The ten-year-old Kopferman boy, Danny, had a cap gun made of metal and modeled to look like a real revolver which he carried in his pocket, even when he was in the field playing second base. The cap gun produced a small explosive sound and smoke when the trigger was pressed. Danny liked to come up behind the other boys and try to frighten them with it. Mr. Cantor tolerated these hijinks only because the other boys were never really frightened. But one day Danny took out the toy weapon and waved it at Horace and told him to stick his hands in the air, which Horace did not do, and so Danny gleefully fired off five rounds of caps. The noise and smoke set Horace to howling, and in his clumsy, splayfooted way, he went running from his playground tormentor. Mr. Cantor confiscated the gun, and after that kept it in a drawer in his office, along with the toy “sheriff’s” handcuffs that Danny had employed earlier in the summer to scare the playground’s younger kids. Not for the first time

he sent Danny Kopferman home for the day with a note telling his mother what her younger son had gotten up to. He doubted that she'd ever seen it.

Yushy, the guy in the mustard-smearred apron who'd been working for years behind the counter at Syd's, said to Mr. Cantor, "It's dead around here."

"It's hot," Mr. Cantor answered. "It's summer. It's the weekend. Everybody's down the shore or staying indoors."

"No, nobody's coming in because of that kid."

"Alan Michaels."

"Yeah," Yushy said. "He ate a hot dog here, and he went home and got polio and died, and now everybody's afraid to come in. It's bullshit. You don't get polio from a hot dog. We sell thousands of hot dogs and nobody gets polio. Then one kid gets polio and everybody says, 'It's the hot dogs at Syd's, it's the hot dogs at Syd's!' A boiled hot dog—how do you get polio from a boiled hot dog?"

"People are frightened," Mr. Cantor said. "They're scared to death, so they worry about everything."

"It's the wop bastards that brought it around," Yushy said.

"That's not likely," Mr. Cantor said.

"They did. They spit all over the place."

"I was there. We washed the spit away with ammonia."

"You washed the spit away but you didn't wash the polio away. You can't wash the polio away. You can't see it. It gets in the air and you open your mouth and breathe it in and next thing you got the polio. It's got nothing to do with hot dogs."

Mr. Cantor offered no response and, while listening to the end of the familiar song playing on the jukebox—and suddenly missing Marcia—finished up eating.

I'll be seeing you,
In every lovely summer's day,
In every thing that's light and gay,
I'll always think of you that way . . .

"Suppose the kid had had an ice cream sundae at Halem's," Yushy said. "Would nobody eat ice cream sundaes at Halem's? Suppose he had chow mein up at the chinks'—would nobody go up to the chinks for chow mein?"

"Probably," Mr. Cantor said.

"And what about the other kid that died?" Yushy asked.

"What other kid?"

"The kid that died this morning."

"What kid died? Herbie Steinmark died?"

"Yeah. He didn't eat no hot dogs here."

"Are you sure he died? Who told you Herbie Steinmark died?"

"Somebody. Somebody came in just before and told me. A couple of guys told me."

Mr. Cantor paid Yushy for the food and then, despite the tremendous heat—and unafraid of the heat—ran from Syd's across Chancellor and back to the playground, where he raced down the stairs to the basement door, unlocked it, and headed for his office. There he picked up the telephone and dialed the number of Beth Israel Hospital, one of a list of emergency numbers on a card that was thumb-tacked to the notice board over his phone. Directly above it was another card, bearing a quotation he had written out in pen from Joseph Lee, the father of the playground movement, whom he'd read about at Panzer; it had been up there since the first day he arrived on the job. "Play for the adult is recreation, the renewal of life; play for the child is growth, the gaining of life." Tacked up beside that was a notice that had arrived in the mail just the day

before from the head of the recreation department to all playground directors:

In view of the danger to Newark children in the present outbreak of polio, please give very strict attention to the following. If you have not sufficient washroom supplies on hand, order them at once. Go over wash bowls, toilet bowls, floors and walls daily with disinfectant, and see that everything is immaculately clean. Toilet facilities must be thoroughly scrubbed throughout the premises under your supervision. Give the above your personal and unremitting attention as long as the present outbreak menaces the community.

When he got through to the hospital, he asked the operator for patient information and then asked for the condition of Herbert Steinmark. He was told that the patient was no longer in the hospital. "But he's in an iron lung," Mr. Cantor protested. "The patient is deceased," said the operator.

Deceased? What could that word have to do with plump, round, smiling Herbie? He was the least coordinated of all the boys at the playground, and the most ingratiating. He was always among the boys who helped him put out the equipment first thing in the morning. In gym class at Chancellor, he was