



A Master Plan

For Rescue



A NOVEL

JANIS COOKE NEWMAN

ALSO BY JANIS COOKE NEWMAN

Mary: Mrs. A. Lincoln
The Russian Word for Snow



A
Master Plan
for
Rescue



JANIS COOKE NEWMAN

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Version_1

*To my father,
who told me his stories*

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One



This is the moment I spend the rest of my life trying to return to:

The three of us sitting around the table my father and I have painted red to match The Flash's cape. A shade, I now know, that doesn't belong in a kitchen, but it was my father who suggested bringing the comic book to the paint store on Dyckman Street.

It's early December, and the clanging of the radiator mixes with the violins that spill from the speakers of the Silvertone radio. I know the Silvertone is on, because it is always on. My grandfather, a man once known as the Gentleman Bootlegger, a man who is dead by this time, claimed that music during meals is what separates man from beast, and so my mother—his daughter—puts on music. But we never listen to it. Instead, we sit above bowls that smell of gravy and spices and talk over each other, sometimes banging our silverware on the red table for attention. The three of us—my father, mother, and me—in our small apartment at the northern tip of Manhattan.

In this moment, though, there is only the clanging of the radiator and the violins. We have stopped talking so my father and I can watch my mother add up numbers inside her head.

Because that is what she can do. Her ability.

Though to be more accurate, it's my father who is watching her. I am watching him. And I'm realizing, for the first time—and probably because I am so close to turning twelve—that it isn't the feat of her adding up those numbers he enjoys so much. It's the way she's sliding the tip of a No. 2 pencil into and out of the gap between her front teeth.

And now that I've noticed this, I cannot remember a single time my father has taken that pencil back and checked her answer. I can only remember him doing exactly what he's doing now. Gazing at her mouth, her eyes—the exact shade of green the Hudson River gets on a clear day—her long swoops of black hair.

In the pocket of the black Mass pants I have not yet had time to change out of is something rare I am waiting to show my father. This morning, during Father Barry's sermon, I found the stub of a Mass candle caught under my kneeler, and I've spent the past hour melting its wax into the hollow of a perfectly round beer bottle cap, creating an object I believe will make me unbeatable at the game of skully.

I'm, at best, a mediocre skully player. However, with this new skully cap—this Holy Skully Cap—it will be as if God Himself is directing my thumb every time I flick my cap across the chalked squares of the board. As if His Mighty Force is propelling my cap into that of another player, one filled merely with the wax of a

melted crayon.

As I wait, I imagine myself dropping the Holy Skully Cap into my father's hand, telling him the story of finding the candle, melting the wax. I know that when I've finished this story, my father will lift his eyes—brown like mine—and run them over me, reading me. I know, too, that he will understand all the powers I believe the Holy Skully Cap to possess without me having to say them aloud.

Because that is what he can do. His ability.

I do not yet have an ability. I am only an almost-twelve-year-old boy, small for my age, black-haired like my mother, wanting no more than for the life I have to keep going as it is.

All these things are held in that moment. Everything I am about to lose. My mother adding up numbers inside her head. My father watching as she slides the tip of a No. 2 pencil into and out of the gap between her teeth. Me with something rare I am waiting to show my father.

It has been a cold day, the temperature barely making it into the twenties. But the chill has thinned the air and the sky is clear. The last rays of sunlight slant through the front windows of our apartment, and though it is only mid-afternoon, there is a sense of the day ending. That nostalgic Sunday afternoon feeling of wishing to remain exactly where you are.

Those things, too, are held in that moment, the moment before the violins turn into words. Turn into

Surprise attack and Japanese bombs and Pearl Harbor.

It is my father's hand I'm looking at when my eyes go bad.

My father's hands are not like anyone else's. The skin in the creases has been bleached white by the chemicals he uses to develop his photographs. My father shoots portraits, and I think of these white marks as the ghosts of every picture he has ever taken.

It's these white marks that disappear first, blurring into nothingness, like ghosts vanishing. Then the hand itself. The edges melting away, dissolving into a table painted a red that doesn't belong in a kitchen.

My eyes dart around the room, but everything has turned into a mass of color, as if the outline of each object—the icebox, the stove, the window over the sink—has been erased, as if the boundaries that keep the color of one thing from invading another no longer exist. And what I think—what I can only think—is that it is the Japanese. That they, with their bombs, have knocked the entire world out of focus.

I search for my father, stare into the space where a second ago, he was sitting. But there's nothing there except the brownish-red smudge of the wallpaper, and it feels like those bombs have sucked all the air out of the room along with the outlines of things, because I cannot breathe, can only gasp.

I hurl my arm into the place where my father had been, stunned that the Japanese could have taken him from me, amazed at their evil magic. My hand collides with something, the bones of his chest, the worn fabric of his shirt. My father shifts in his chair, drops his hand over mine, and I realize that his reddish hair, the Sunday stubble on his face, his brown shirt have all merged with the wallpaper behind him, turning him invisible. I press the flat of my hand against his chest until I can feel his heart beating.

And that's better, but only a little. Because now Aunt May—my mother's sister—and Uncle Glenn are in our kitchen, which I know only by the sound of their voices. The two of them, up from their apartment one floor below. And I have the sense from the confident movement of their blurs—Uncle Glenn's pudgy and beer-colored, Aunt May's still in the navy blue suit she wore to Mass—that they do not see our kitchen as an unnavigable smudge of color. And I'm figuring out, by the way Aunt May is clattering what sounds like rosary beads on the table, and saying we should all go straight back to Good Shepherd and repeat a thousand Hail Marys for peace, saying to my father, "Yes, even you, Denis," my father having long declared that Ireland more than cured him of Catholicism; and by the way Uncle Glenn keeps repeating that first thing tomorrow morning he's going to Whitehall Street and joining up; and by how the black-haired blur of my mother is heading for the living room, shouting back that everybody needs to pipe down, because she can't hear the radio, that it is only me who is seeing the world this way.

And that is worse. Much worse.

I take my hand off my father's chest and press both palms into my eyes until I see sparks of light, and then I press harder, as if that light is a mechanism for fixing what has gone wrong. But when I open my eyes, nothing has changed. Or, I suppose, everything has.

I have to say something, I'm thinking. Tell somebody. But I can't pull enough air into my lungs for speech. And even if I could, everybody is talking. About the Japanese. And their bombs.

Except my father, who hasn't moved, hasn't spoken. Who, I believe, has been running his eyes over me, reading me.

"Jack," he says. "How many fingers?"

But I cannot tell he has raised his hand.

Two



The following day, my father took me to see Dr. Shaperstein, the optometrist on Broadway and 207th Street.

Dr. Shaperstein's office was nothing more than a brown blur, except for a model of an eyeball the size of a grapefruit that appeared to be floating in space and Dr. Shaperstein's white coat, which hovered over me.

"Tell me what you can read on the chart," Dr. Shaperstein said.

I squinted into the brownness.

Dr. Shaperstein dropped his hands on my shoulders and pushed me forward a foot.

"Better?"

I shook my head.

His hands fell onto my shoulders once more, and he pushed me again. Then he kept pushing me, asking every foot or so what I could see. Not until I was near enough to touch the chart, press my palms flat against it, did I finally say, "E. I can see E, the big letter at the top."

Dr. Shaperstein turned to my father. "Your son has the most remarkable case of myopia I have ever encountered."

He did not say *remarkable* as if I had developed a special skill like flying. He said it as if I might have wandered over from the Coney Island sideshow.

My father told him my eyes had been fine only a couple of days before, and Dr. Shaperstein said it wasn't uncommon for boys on the cusp of puberty to experience a sudden deterioration of vision. Then he moved me back and forth in front of the chart to see exactly what I could and couldn't read, and repeated *remarkable* a few more times, until my father said, in his voice that still contained enough Irish to push around the American, "How about you knock it off and see about making him some glasses."

After that, there was the noise of wooden drawers opening and shutting, and finally, Dr. Shaperstein said, "You're in luck. The luck of the Irish."

"I believe history has shown," my father said, "that the Irish have never been particularly lucky."

. . .

Dr. Shaperstein told us the glasses wouldn't be ready for a week. Because I couldn't go out without someone to guide me, I spent that week at home. Mostly, I listened to the radio, sitting on the green and brown checkerboard linoleum in front of our big cherrywood Silvertone, spinning the dial, searching for something familiar, some program that hadn't been preempted by war news. But like my eyes, everything that

poured out of the Silvertone's speakers seemed to have been altered by those Japanese bombs.

I tried to put my faith in Dr. Shaperstein and whatever he'd found in those wooden drawers. Told myself that the glasses he was making would restore the world to order, reinstate the boundaries between objects, send the colors back within their borders.

I decided, too, that the Holy Skully Cap was a kind of relic, as potent as Holy Water, or the Communion Host after Father Barry had blessed it. During the day, I kept it in my pocket, running my fingers over its scalloped edges. Each evening, I placed it—always with two hands—on my night table next to my luminous-face alarm clock. Then I prayed to it—this beer bottle cap filled with melted wax—asking it to grant my request for the gift of sight.

I did not want to believe that something fundamental might have shifted. That for me, much like for the rest of the world, nothing would be the same.

. . .

When we returned to Dr. Shaperstein's office, he again placed me in front of the eye chart, this time settling the glasses on my nose. The weight of them was like coming down with a head cold.

"Well?" he asked.

Without hesitation, I read the rows of letters, my eyes stopping smartly against each sharp, black line.

Then I turned to my father, sitting on the other side of the room, wanting to see his expression. But his features—his eyes, his slightly freckled skin, his mouth—had gone soft-edged and smeared, as if somebody had rubbed an eraser over them.

Starting to feel breathless again, I ran my eyes around Dr. Shaperstein's office. Some of the things were clear. The floating eyeball, three feet away, the fountain pen next to it. But when I looked across the room at my father, he remained blurred.

I pushed the glasses closer to my eyes, slid them down my nose. But my father stayed out of focus, and the room was starting to feel airless.

"Something's wrong," I gasped.

"With myopia this bad, there's a trade-off," Dr. Shaperstein said. "Correct for distance, and you lose what's close up. Correct for what's close up, and you lose the distance."

I walked across Dr. Shaperstein's office, keeping my eyes on my father's face, bringing his features back into sharpness, turning them recognizable. But when I got too close, close enough to touch him, they began to drift out of focus again.

"What if I want to see something up close?"

Dr. Shaperstein lifted the glasses from my face and rested them on the top of my head.

"Now I can't see anything."

"Get closer," he said.

I stepped closer to my father, close enough to smell the chemicals he used to develop his photographs—a smell that was both bitter and sweet, a smell that made me think of science. His face moved back into focus.

"What exactly did you correct him for?" my father said.

“The best I could,” Dr. Shaperstein told him. “Something in the middle.”

He pushed the glasses back in front of my eyes and handed me a mirror. I stretched out my arm to put myself into better focus.

The glasses he’d made for me had black frames and lenses as thick as the bottom of a Nehi soda bottle. They looked like the X-Ray Specs advertised in the back of comic books. The ones that claimed they would let you see through walls and ladies’ dresses. They took over my whole face.

I pushed the mirror back at Dr. Shaperstein.

“Any chance he’ll grow out of this?” my father said.

“Anything’s possible,” Dr. Shaperstein told him. “But probably not that.”

As my father and I walked back down Broadway, the people coming toward us—men in overcoats, women wearing hats—snapped into and out of focus without warning, as if they possessed the power to control how much of themselves they would allow the world to see.

I kept shutting my eyes, opening them again, willing everyone to stay still, stay in the three-foot distance where I could focus. But they kept moving, going from blurred to clear to blurred again.

“I’m thinking you’ll get used to that,” my father said.

“What about how they’re staring?”

“That might take some time.”

. . .

When we arrived home, my mother lifted the glasses off my face and held them in front of her own eyes.

It’s possible what happened next was the power of the lenses, possible their strength was more than she’d been expecting. But the moment my mother looked through them, her head startled back, as if those thick lenses had shown her something she didn’t want to see.

She took the glasses away from her face, set them back onto my nose.

“Your eyes won’t stay bad,” she told me.

“I suggested that same possibility to the doctor,” my father said.

“And?”

My father repeated what Dr. Shaperstein had told us.

“What does he know?” My mother shrugged.

And what did he know—this doctor who could only correct me for something in the middle—against a woman who had no belief in her own bad luck. A woman who had witnessed her father—that man known as the Gentleman Bootlegger—shot point-blank on three separate occasions. And on three separate occasions, had seen him rise unharmed.

It was a story my mother repeated often. I suspect because it was about signs—in which my mother placed a good deal of faith—and also because I think she liked talking about the time she and her father lived in the warehouse full of illegal alcohol on Tenth Avenue. When it had been only the two of them, Aunt May having gone off to the convent school in Poughkeepsie, believing she possessed a vocation.

The first shooting had occurred at mid-morning, not a time a man expects to be

shot. My grandfather had just finished his second cup of coffee and was about to head out the back door to the privy, when Red Nolan, a small-time nightclub owner, burst through the front door and shot him in the chest. My grandfather staggered back, exclaimed, “You should not have done that, sir,” then took out his gun and shot the stunned nightclub owner in the center of his forehead. Not until he and my mother, who was fourteen at the time, dragged Red’s lifeless body to the back of a saloon on West 37th Street did my grandfather show her the dented timepiece in his breast pocket.

The second shooting occurred in the early evening, while my mother and her father were setting out poison pellets for the rats that liked to nest in the straw that came packed around my grandfather’s Canadian whiskey. This time the would-be murderer was called Johnny Nack, though his reason for wanting to kill my grandfather was much the same as Red Nolan’s—a short shipment. On this occasion, my grandfather’s life was saved by his great fondness for the poetry of William Butler Yeats. Indeed, he read one of Mr. Yeats’s poems at Johnny Nack’s funeral, reciting from a volume that had a bullet hole in its cover.

The third shooting took place at night. My mother and her father were on their way home from the Saturday pushcart market under the Ninth Avenue El. My mother was carrying a bag of peaches, and my grandfather was carrying nothing because he believed that gentlemen did not walk in public with groceries in their hands. The two of them turned the corner at West 39th Street and Billy Cremore, another speakeasy owner who’d been shorted, stepped out of the dark and fired his gun. Billy Cremore aimed for my grandfather’s head, but it was dark and Billy Cremore wasn’t much of a marksman. The police never did figure out why Billy’s killer left a bruised peach perched on his chest.

“These shootings were a sign,” is how she would finish this story. “God had taken my mother and wanted to make the point that He was done. Nothing bad would ever happen to anyone I loved.”

“God sent Red Nolan, Johnny Nack, and Billy Cremore to shoot at your father to make a point?” my father would tease her.

But she’d only smile, showing him that gap between her teeth, and he’d have no further argument.

As for me, I would much rather believe my mother than Dr. Shaperstein. And that night, after I took off the glasses, I walked around my room, squinting at the objects there—the Holy Skully Cap on the night table, a model airplane on a shelf, the cowboys and Indians riding across my bedspread—attempting to pull the color of each thing back within its boundaries, trying to hurry along what my mother believed would happen. And it did seem after a while that the edges of things were growing more sharp.

But deep in the night, I woke to the sound of my glasses clinking against the lamp, and caught the scent of my mother—her unlikely smell of new cut grass. I sensed her standing beside my bed, looking at me, then I heard her bare feet crackle along the linoleum to the kitchen. After a moment there was the splashing of water, and I realized she was washing my glasses.

I lay there thinking about all the reasons my mother might have gotten up in the middle of the night to wash my glasses. Or perhaps I was thinking about all the

reasons that weren't what I already suspected, what I might have already figured out, that washing the glasses was a ritual—practiced alone and in the dark—for luck. That my mother—who put so much faith in signs—had made a connection between clearing the lenses and clearing my vision.

I can't say if it had been those Japanese bombs, or what she'd seen through the thick lenses of my glasses, but whatever it was, I feared that the belief my mother had in our own good luck had been knocked out of focus as surely as my sight.

My mother's footsteps moved back along the linoleum toward my room. I tried to slow my breath, make it sound as if I was still asleep. But I could feel it moving fast and shallow in my chest, and I could only hope my mother would think I was in the middle of a nightmare. And somehow, as she set the glasses back on my night table, she didn't notice my breath, so I can only assume she was in the middle of her own nightmare.

. . .

The moment I stepped through the chain-link fence that surrounded P.S. 52 wearing the glasses, people who had been throwing balls stopped and held them motionless in the air, people who had been shouting ceased and stood openmouthed in the cold. I focused on my feet as I moved across the macadam, heading for the overheated building. No one will notice me inside, I was thinking. It will be like I'm invisible.

I slid into my seat and kept my head down, staring at the pencil-carved initials on the top of my desk, initials that were now soft-edged and blurry from the glasses. As the rest of the class rumbled in, bringing with them the smell of wool coats and bologna sandwiches, I felt everybody's eyes on me, crawling over my face, over the glasses—exactly like the X-Ray Specs in the back of comic books—making me feel exposed, like the Visible Man. The man on the poster Miss Steinhardt unrolled when we studied biology, a man with his skin peeled back and all his colorful organs exposed—blue lungs, orange kidneys, purple spleen.

Even Miss Steinhardt was not immune to the power of the glasses. They revolved her from the chalkboard as if the thick lenses produced gravity, forcing a startled, "Well . . . Jack . . . glasses," from between her vermilion lips.

It was quiet for a moment, and then Miss Steinhardt asked me if I could see the board from where I was sitting.

"Yes," I told her, without lifting my head.

"Can you tell me what I've just written on it?"

I looked up and squinted. Miss Steinhardt's chalk marks resembled nothing except the snow clouds building up outside the window.

"The date?"

Miss Steinhardt used her piece of chalk to point to the front row.

"Why don't you bring your desk up here?" she said

Only the defective sat in the front row. Declan Moriarity, who could not bend his left leg all the way because of the polio brace buckled to it. Francis D'Amato, who had a lazy eye and was forced to wear a flesh-colored eye patch over the good one. And Rose LoPinto, who despite the complicated hearing aid she wore, still couldn't hear well enough to sit any farther back.

The legs of my desk made a horrible squealing sound as I pushed it up the aisle. Inside my head, I couldn't stop seeing the picture of Jesus from my *Child's First Catechism*, the one of him carrying his own cross up the dust-covered rise of Golgotha.

Miss Steinhardt pointed to an empty place next to Rose LoPinto. With more squealing, I pushed my desk into it.

"Rose," she said, "you can read for Jack anything he can't see. And Jack," she looked at me, "you can repeat for Rose anything she can't hear."

Then she turned back to the board.

This close, I could see what it was Miss Steinhardt had asked me to read.

Manifest Destiny.

I could also see Rose's hearing aid, which was called a RadioEar. It had three parts: a silver, lozenge-shaped receiver she wore pressed against the bone behind her ear on a metal headband; a microphone the size and shape of a box of matches, which she pinned to her collar; and a battery case the size of a pack of cigarettes she kept in a pocket. All of Rose's clothes, I guessed, had to have pockets.

The first thing I had to repeat for Rose was the *Annexation of Oregon*. I leaned over to whisper it into the lozenge-shaped receiver behind her ear, but Rose shook her head and pointed to the microphone box pinned at her collar.

I bent down and brought my mouth close to Rose's throat. The skin there was smooth and olive-colored, and smelled impossibly like chocolate and coconut. Like a candy bar.

It was a smell that stopped the *Annexation of Oregon* in my mouth.

"Are you talking?" Rose said, reaching into her pocket and shaking the battery case.

But I couldn't answer, too distracted by what felt like a cold stream that had started running just beneath the surface of my skin.

All that morning, I whispered important historical facts about the Monroe Doctrine and Mexican Cession into the microphone box pinned at the base of Rose's smooth, olive-colored throat. In return, she read various significant years off the chalkboard into my ear. And for the first time in more than a week, I didn't think about my eyes going bad.

Unless you count this. Listening to Rose, I noticed that none of her words had sharp edges. Her consonants were blurry, and her vowels out of focus. It was as if the way she spoke was the vocal equivalent of how I saw.

And also this. There was one piece of her black hair that kept breaking free of the metal headband, trying to curl itself around the silver lozenge of the RadioEar receiver. A piece of black hair I couldn't pull my eyes from.

That piece of black hair made me wish Dr. Shaperstein had corrected me better for things that were close up.

. . .

When the bell rang for lunch, I dashed out to the smooth stretch of playground where the skully boards were chalked. All morning, the Holy Skully Cap had sat in my pocket giving off emanations, assuring me I didn't belong in the front row with Declan Moriarity, whose polio brace prevented him from getting down on the ground low

enough to flick a skully cap. Or Francis D'Amato, whose eye patch so interfered with his depth perception, his caps went veering off in bizarre directions.

Bobby Devine and a pack of boys were already standing around the chalked squares, the steam from their breath hanging in the frigid air. All of the girls—and possibly some of the boys—were in love with Bobby Devine, with his black hair and his blue eyes, and his breath that always smelled of Juicy Fruit, even when he wasn't chewing any.

They were deciding the rules—or more accurately, Bobby Devine was deciding the rules, and everyone else was waiting. A pack of boys, flipping their skully caps over in their palms, eager to start playing, poised for Bobby Devine to give the word.

I joined them, the Holy Skully Cap already in my hand, the steam from my breath mingling with theirs before settling to the ground.

“Sorry, Quinlan.” Bobby Devine never called you by anything except your last name. “Too many players.”

I counted the boys breathing steam into the frigid air. But I am not sure why. There were never too many players. And also, I'd heard something in Bobby Devine's voice. A kind of undertone, a humming beneath the words that bumped up against them, shading their meaning.

They say that when one sense is damaged another takes over. Develops an ability it never had before. And I suppose that is what happened with me. Over time, I would become skilled at hearing this undertone, this hum that exists beneath a person's words, that colors—at times, even contradicts—their meaning.

But that first time, standing in front of those boys flipping their skully caps, I heard enough of it in Bobby Devine's voice to understand now that I'd been moved to the front row, there would always be too many players.

. . .

A strange man was sitting in my father's chair when I got home. It couldn't be my father, though I was still too far away to see him clearly, because the man was wearing a white shirt, and my father only ever wore brown shirts. My father had a closet full of brown shirts. Shirts that smelled of the chemicals he used to develop his photographs. Chemicals that would have left small colonies of brown spots on shirts of any other color.

But when I stepped into the room, put the man in my three-foot range, I saw that of course it was my father. Just my father in a white shirt. A white shirt, I realized when I came close, close enough to sit on the wide, flat arm of his chair, that didn't smell of anything, that hadn't yet taken on the bitter and sweet smell of the developing chemicals. The smell that, along with the scent of the Wildroot Cream-Oil he used to flatten his hair—spiky, like mine—was the smell of my father. A white shirt that left him smelling only like Wildroot Cream-Oil, which could have been the smell of anybody.

“Hey, kiddo,” my father said.

The words that would have told him to take off that white shirt, trade it for one of the brown ones hanging in his closet, crowded my throat, tried to scramble their way out of my mouth. But I couldn't stop thinking about how my father had figured out

that I saw better when things were in contrast. Couldn't stop picturing him buying that shirt, which would be ruined the first time he developed any photographs, and the thought of that squeezed at my chest, making it impossible for me to let those words out, those words telling my father to take off the shirt that made him look and smell like somebody else.

I felt my father's eyes studying me, as if I were a book written in a language to which only he had the key. I did not want him to read the words in my throat, and I knew there was no way I could stop him. Because that was what he could do. His ability.

I got up and forced out some other words—something about homework—turned and went to my room. Leaving my father alone, his white shirt contrasting with the green chair.

I had never—not once—stopped my father from reading me. He had been doing it all my life, and I took his ability for granted—this father who always seemed to know what you were thinking or how you felt without you ever having to say anything out loud. Once, when we'd gone to Coney Island and seen a man in a turban who claimed to read minds, I asked my father if that was what he did, read people's minds.

"No," he'd told me. "It's the rest of them I read."

He first noticed he was doing it back in Ireland, growing up in St. Brendan's Home for Boys in an ugly seaside town north of Dublin. He'd see how Eamonn Plunkett could not prevent his hands from jerking during morning Mass, and stay out of his way, knowing that this would be the day he'd be looking to lay them on another boy. He'd note when Brother Garrity's eyes had the glaze of migraine, and keep his head down in class, so as not to be struck on the knuckles with the large wooden crucifix the brother kept on a rope about his waist.

The ability had gotten my father his first job in America. He'd been twenty years old and three hours off the boat from Liverpool, his clothes still smelling of seawater and his legs unsteady on the thick carpeting of a bootlegger known as the Duke of the West Side.

"I read how comfortable the man was in his fourteen-dollar suit," my father said. "Too comfortable. Like he'd studied on it."

As the Duke of the West Side read my father's letter of introduction from a Dublin pub owner, my father read the Duke of the West Side. He read something Irish beneath the bootlegger's English accent, and—like my father's own raising—a childhood spent parentless.

It was less the letter of introduction and more what my father read that got him the job as bodyguard to the Duke's illegal alcohol. The job that eventually sent my father to a warehouse on Tenth Avenue belonging to one of the Duke's best customers, the Gentleman Bootlegger.

One stormy afternoon in November, my father stepped inside that warehouse to get out of the rain and was struck by the sight of the Gentleman Bootlegger's sixteen-year-old daughter, Lily. She was seated at a high wooden desk, her dark head bent over her father's ledger books.

"It was the oddest thing," my father told me. "I know it was raining, but there was this one beam of sun falling through the skylight of that warehouse. Falling right on the head of that black-haired girl. As if someone—God Almighty, probably—set her

there for me to look at.”

My father stood a long time watching that sixteen-year-old girl slide the tip of a No. 2 pencil into and out of the gap between her front teeth. Long after all the Gentleman Bootlegger’s illegal alcohol was unloaded.

When Prohibition ended, and my father needed to find legitimate employment, it was his ability, and the Gentleman Bootlegger—my grandfather by that time—that got him the job at Wasserman’s Listening Emporium.

“That knack you have of reading people,” my grandfather said, “that is going to make you the world’s greatest radio salesman.”

Wasserman’s Listening Emporium was located inside a long, narrow storefront on a Times Square side street, tucked between a shoe repair shop and a pool hall. Every inch of it was filled with radios. The shelves were crammed with Philcos stacked on top of Zeniths stacked on top of Crosleys. The floor was so jammed with Silvertones and RCAs and Atwater Kents, most people had to walk through sideways.

My father read that his first customer—a lady in a homemade hat with a large feather—wished to be shopping somewhere grander than Wasserman’s. He sold her a top-of-the-line Atwater Kent after telling her it was very much like the one Helena Rubinstein had in her Park Avenue apartment.

The fat man who came in after her had only entered the shop hoping for someone to talk to. My father sold him a Murphy tabletop model by implying that the constant sound of a radio left on was a good remedy for loneliness.

Shortly before closing, my father sold an enormous Philco to a middle-aged married couple, subtly suggesting it would allow them to spend their evenings listening to vaudeville comedians rather than each other.

This is much the way that first week went. Proving my grandfather right, my father’s talent for reading people did make him the world’s greatest radio salesman.

Over the weekend, Leo Wasserman took out a full-page ad in the *Mirror*. The following week, my father sold fifty-five radios. But that Friday evening, after Leo Wasserman locked up the store and said goodnight to my father, the stories of every person he had sold a radio to began pounding inside his head. It was as if all the radios in the Listening Emporium, every Zenith and Atwater Kent and Philco stacked on the shelves and crowded together on the floor, had been jammed into his skull and turned on at the same time. Each one tuned to a different station, each one broadcasting a different story of longing and desire and unfulfilled want.

And he couldn’t turn any of them off.

My father couldn’t bear to go down into the subway, couldn’t stand to be anyplace that was enclosed. He turned away from the Listening Emporium and started walking, heading uptown, walking all the way up Broadway from 43rd Street to Dyckman Street—one hundred and fifty blocks. And still, when he got there, his head was so full of other people’s stories—all those desires that had stuck there—he could barely tell my mother what was wrong, could only fall on the bed and think about desolate places. Places where there were no people wanting things. The moon. Antarctica.

He slept for thirty hours. When he woke, my mother was sitting on the edge of the mattress.

“Maybe you don’t have to be the world’s greatest radio salesman,” she told him.

He sat up. “I’m thinking I only need to get used to it.”

It was then he noticed the Speed Graphic camera in her lap.

“Where did you find that?”

“Remember Harry Jupiter?”

“The newspaper photographer?”

“Not anymore. Says he’s shot his last picture of a dead body. Says he’s giving up the newspaper business.”

“And you’re going into it?”

My mother shook her head. “You are taking up portraiture.”

My father took the camera into his hands. It was boxy, and could be folded nearly flat. A newspaperman’s camera.

“I’ve never taken a photograph in my life.”

My mother pointed to the camera. “I’m thinking you can put some of those stories inside there instead of your head.”

My father put the Speed Graphic up to his face, looked at my mother through the barrier of its lens.

“What if I’m not any good at it?”

“Just don’t be too good.”

But my father couldn’t help being too good.

Mr. Lingeman’s fiancée portrait for example.

I was there the day my father shot it, standing inside Lingeman’s News & Novelties, next to a rack of new *Superman* comics. Mr. Lingeman wanted to show his fiancée in Stockholm how handsome and prosperous he was, and he’d insisted on being shot behind the glass case of cigarettes and chewing gum, next to a display of *Movietone* magazines. His blond hair had been so full of pomade, it appeared to be glowing.

But a couple of days later, when my father showed me the final photograph, I saw something I hadn’t seen standing next to the *Superman* comics. I saw that Mr. Lingeman was wearing the smile he put on every time one of the young mothers in the neighborhood came into the News & Novelties. The smile that made it seem as if he wanted to eat them.

Mr. Lingeman’s fiancée portrait ended up on a shelf in my father’s closet, along with all the other portraits people had refused to pay him for, refused even to take.

But there were some photographs my father took that surprised all of us. Portraits of people we had always believed were unattractive—ugly, even—who looked radiant in his pictures. As if his lens had uncovered some hidden beauty in them, something the rest of us had overlooked.

I never thought of that stack of rejected portraits in the closet as failures, less impressive than the ones that had revealed some unexpected flash of radiance. All were equal displays of my father’s remarkable talent, his ability to capture something true about a person and reproduce it on film.

A talent that, to me, has always seemed as remarkable as flying.

Yet the night I came home and found my father wearing the white shirt—something he would do from then on, no matter how many he ruined—I stayed in my room with the door shut, for the first time, preventing my father from practicing his remarkable talent on me.