The Mysteries of Pittsburgh

Michael Chabon

Published by Sceptre

Extract

ONE

ELEVATOR GOING UP

At the beginning of the summer I had lunch with my father, the gangster, who was in town for the weekend to transact some of his vague business. We'd just come to the end of a period of silence and ill will – a year I'd spent in love with and in the same apartment as an odd, fragile girl whom he had loathed, on sight, with a frankness and a fury that were not at all like him. But Claire had moved out the month before. Neither my father nor I knew what to do with our new freedom.

'I saw Lenny Stern this morning,' he said. 'He asked after you. You remember your Uncle Lenny.'

'Sure,' I said, and I thought for a second about Uncle Lenny, juggling three sandwich-halves in the back room of his five-and-dime in the Hill District a million years ago.

I was nervous and drank more than I ate; my father carefully dispatched his steak. Then he asked me what my plans were for the summer and in the flush of some strong emotion or other I said, more or less: it's the beginning of the summer and I'm standing in the lobby of a thousand-storey Grand Hotel, where a bank of elevators a mile long and an endless red row of monkey attendants in gold braid wait to carry me up, up, up, through the suites of moguls, of spies, and of starlets; to rush me straight to the zeppelin mooring at the art-deco summit where they keep the huge dirigible of August tied up and bobbing in the high winds. On the way to the shining needle at the top I will wear a lot of neckties, I will buy five or six works of genius on

45 rpm, and perhaps too many times I will find myself looking at the snapped spine of a lemon wedge at the bottom of a drink. I said, 'I anticipate a coming season of dilated time and of women all in disarray.'

My father told me that I was overwrought and that Claire had had an unfortunate influence on my speech, but something in his face said that he understood. That night he flew back to Washington, and the next day, for the first time in years, I looked in the newspaper for some lurid record of the effect of his visit, but of course there was none. He wasn't that kind of gangster.

Claire had moved out on the 13th April, taking with her all of the Joni Mitchell, and the complete soundtrack recording of the dialogue from Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet*, a four-record set, which she knew by heart. At some point towards the sexless and conversationless finale of *Art and Claire*, I had informed her that my father said she suffered from dementia praecox. My father's influence upon me was strong, and I believed this. I later told people that I had lived with a crazy woman, and also that I had had enough of *Romeo and Juliet*.

The last term in my last year of college sputtered out in a week-long fusillade of examinations and sentimental alcoholic conferences with professors whom I knew I would not really miss, even as I shook their hands and bought them beers. There was, however, a last paper on Freud's letters to Wilhelm Fliess for which I realised I would have to make one exasperating last visit to the library, the dead core of my education, the white, silent kernel of every empty Sunday I had spent trying to ravish the faint charms of the study of economics, my sad and cynical major.

So one day at the beginning of June I came around the concrete corner that gave way to the marbled steps of the library. Walking the length of brown ground-floor windows, I looked into them, at the reflection of my walk, my loafers, my mess of hair. Then I felt guilty, because at our lunch my father, the amateur psychologist, had called me a 'devout narcissist' and had said he worried that I might be 'doomed to terminal adolescence'. I looked away.

There were very few students using the building this late in the term, which was officially over. A few pink-eyed and unshaven pages loitered behind the big check-out counter, staring out at the brown sun through the huge tinted windows. I clicked loudly in my loafers across the tile floor. As I called for the elevator to the Freud section, a girl looked up. She was in a window; there was an aqua ribbon in her hair. The window was a kind of grille, as in a bank, at the far end of the corridor in which I stood waiting for the elevator, and the girl in the window held a book in one hand and a thin strip of wire in the other. We looked at one another for perhaps three seconds, then I turned back to face the suddenly illuminated red Up arrow, the muscles in my neck warming and tightening. As I stepped into the car I heard her say four distinct and strange words to someone with her, there behind the bars, whom I hadn't seen.

'That was him, Sandy,' she said.

I was sure of it.

Freud's letters to Fliess make much of the near-cosmic interaction of the human nose with matters of sexual health. Work on my paper, therefore, proved to be relatively entertaining, and I wrote for a long time, stopping rarely to drink from the humming fountain, or even simply to look up from my hilarious scholarship. Late in the long afternoon I saw a young man looking at me from behind his book. Its title was in Spanish and on its cover there was a bloody painting of a knife, a woman in a mantilla, and a half-undressed brown strongman. I smiled at him, and lifted an eyebrow in sceptical salute to what must be a pretty racy book. It looked as though he might keep his eyes on me a while longer, but I told myself that one of those kinds of exchanges a day, and that with a woman, was excitement enough, and I dropped back to the nose, nexus of all human desire.

When I put down my pencil it was almost eight o'clock. I stood up with a habitual silent 'Oy' and went over to one of the tall narrow windows that looked out over the plaza below. The sky was whitish brown in the twilight through the smoked glass. Small groups of kids called and ran on the concrete down below, obviously heading somewhere, in a way that made me think of

getting something to eat. At the far left, towards the front of the building, I saw a flashing light. I gathered up my books and papers and noticed that the Spanish Potboiler Guy had left. Where he'd been sitting there were a small empty can of pineapple juice and a little scrap of origami that was like a dog or a saxophone.

Going down in the elevator I thought about the Girl Behind Bars, but at the ground floor everything was closed up, and an articulated wooden shutter had been pulled down behind the grille. There was one dishevelled drama type slumped behind the check-out counter now, and as I went clicking through the theft-detectors he waved me away without looking up.

I stood feeling the air and smoking a nice cigarette for a little while, then heard the loud crack of police voices on radio, and saw again that flashing light, off to the left. Little bunches of people were there, balanced between walking and sticking around. I walked over and came through the outer ring of people.

In the centre of everything stood a young woman, her head slightly bowed, whispering. To her left a fallen cop with a cut on his face pulled himself to his knees, and then tried to stand, gesturing with unconvincing menace towards a huge boy. To the girl's right, across the impromptu arena we formed, stood another cop, his arms struggling to enlace those of another huge boy who swore at the policemen, at the girl, at his enraged twin who faced him, and at all of us who watched.

'Let me go, you fucker,' he said. 'You bitch, you fucker, you assholes, I'll kill you! Let me go!'

He was tremendous and fit, and he tore away from his captor with a short backwards wrench that dropped the tiny blue cop to the concrete. The two boys came closer to each other, until they both stood within arm's length of the woman. I looked at her again. She was slender and blonde, with a green-eyed, small-nosed, nondescript kind of hill-billy face and a flowery skirt. She looked down, at the sidewalk, at nothing. Her thin ankles wobbled on four-inch spikes and her lips moved soundlessly. The two cops were both on their feet now, billy clubs drawn. There was a strange momentary lull in the action, as though the police and the giants were waiting for some soft

command from the dazed woman before grabbing for the various difficult things they had assembled to grab. It was suddenly cool and almost night. A new siren threatened and grew from the distance. The girl looked up, listening, and then turned towards the boy who had just freed himself. She pushed against his great chest and clung.

'Larry,' she said.

The other boy undid his fists and looked at the two of them, then turned towards us, with tears in his eyes and an uncomprehending look on his face.

'Too bad, man,' someone said. 'She picked Larry.'

'Good going, Larry,' said another.

It was done; people clapped. The battered policemen rushed over, the reinforcements squealed up, Larry kissed his girl.

'One more Pittsburgh Heartbreak,' said a voice right beside me. It was Spanish Potboiler.

'Hey,' I said. 'Yes. Right. There's one for every kielbasa on Forbes Avenue.'

We moved off together in the general chattering retreat of those who weren't interested in seeing the actual arrests.

'When did you come in?' he asked. There certainly was sarcasm in his tone, yet at the same time I thought it seemed as though he'd been impressed or even shaken by what he'd seen. He had short, white-blond hair, pale eyes, and a day's growth of beard, which lent his boyish face a kind of grown-up decadence.

'At the good part,' I said.

He laughed, one perfect ha.

'It was crazy,' I continued. 'I mean, did you see that? I never understand how people can be perfectly frank all over the sidewalk like that, in public.'

'Some people,' he said, 'really know how to have a good time.'

Even the first time that I heard Arthur Lecomte employ this phrase, I already had the faint impression that it functioned for him as a slogan. There was a radio-announcer reverb to his voice as he pronounced it.

We exchanged names and shook hands over the fact that we

were both named Arthur; meeting a namesake is one of the most brief of surprises.

'But they call me Art,' I said.

'*They* call me Arthur,' he said.

At Forbes Avenue, Arthur started left, his head half turned to the right, towards me, his right shoulder lingering slightly behind him, as though it waited for me to catch up, or was reaching back to hook and carry me along. He wore a white evening shirt, still brilliant despite the weakening daylight, of an extravagant, baggy, vintage cut, that billowed out over the top of his blue jeans. He stopped, and seemed on the petulant point of tapping his foot impatiently.

I hadn't a doubt that he was gay, that he was taking advantage of our having crossed paths to make good his short initial attempt in the library, and that he probably supposed that I was as homosexual as he. People made this mistake.

'Which way were you going, anyway, before you ran into Jules and Jim back there?' he said.

'Jules and Larry,' I said. 'Um, I have to have dinner with a friend – my old girlfriend.' I bit it off hard at the 'girl' and spat it at him.

He came back to me, extending his hand, and we shook for the second time.

'Well,' he said. 'I work in the library. Acquisitions. I'd be glad if you'd stop by.' He spoke stiffly, with an odd courtesy.

'Sure,' I said. I thought momentarily of Claire, and the dinner she might be preparing for me, if only I hadn't invented it, and if only the mere sight of me didn't make her stomach collapse in distress.

'What time are you supposed to be at your friend's?' Arthur asked, as though we had not shaken hands at all and I were not yet free.

'Eight-thirty,' I lied.

'Does she live very far from here?'

'Near Carnegie-Mellon.'

'Ah, well, it's hardly eight o'clock. Why don't we have a beer? She won't care. She's your old girlfriend, anyway.' His emphasis lay on the syllable before 'girl'.

I had to choose between drinking with a fag and saying something inexpert, such as 'Uh – I mean eight-fifteen,' or 'Well, gee, I dunno.' He made me afraid of seeming clumsy or dull. It was not as though I had any firm or fearful objection to homosexuals; in certain books by gay writers I thought I had appreciated the weight and secret tremble of their thoughts; and I admired their fine clothes, and shrill hard wit, their weapon. It was only that I felt keen to avoid, as they say, a misunderstanding. And yet just that morning, while watching a procession of scar-faced, big-breasted, red-wrapped laughing African girls tap dance down Ward Street, hadn't I for the fiftieth time berated myself for my failure to encounter, to risk, to land myself in novel and incomprehensible situations – to misunderstand, in fact? And so, with a fatalistic shrug, I went to drink one beer.

TWO

A FREE ATOM

My father, solid, pink, handsome, used to say that he was a professional golfer and amateur painter. His actual career was knowledge I was not fully permitted until the age of thirteen, when it was conferred to me along with the right to read from the Torah. I had always liked his watercolours, orange, pale, reminiscent of Arizona, but not as much as I liked the cartoons he could draw – never if one asked or begged him to, not even if one cried, but when he was suddenly seized, magically, perversely, with the urge to draw a picture of a top-hatted clown on one's bedroom chalkboard, in seven colours.

His comings and goings in the house, accompanied always by the stink of cigars and the creaking of whatever piece of furniture he had chosen to receive the weight of his gangster body, were a great source of mystery and speculation for me on those nights when we'd both be up with insomnia, the family disease; I resented the fact that because he was old, he could roam around, painting, reading books, watching television, while I had to stay in bed brutally trying to make myself fall asleep. Some Sunday mornings I would come downstairs, very early, to find him, having already surmounted the titanic Sunday *Post*, doing his sit-ups on the back porch, awake for the twenty-ninth or thirtieth straight hour.

Since the day of my bar mitzvah I was certain that, with his incredible but rarely displayed powers of mind and body my father had a secret identity. I realised that the secret identity

would have to *be* my father. Hundreds of times I looked in his closets, in the basement, under furniture, in the trunk of the car, on a fruitless hunt for his multi-coloured superhero (or supervillain) costume. He suspected my suspicions, I think, and every couple of months would encourage them, by demonstrating that he could drive our car without touching the steering wheel, or by unerringly trapping, with three fingers, flies and even bumble bees in mid-flight, or by hammering nails into a wall with his bare fist.

He'd been on the point of telling me the truth about his work, he said much later, on the day of my mother's funeral, six months shy of my thirteenth birthday. But his half-brother, my uncle Sammy 'Red' Weiner, made him stick to his original plan to wait until I put on a tallis for the first time. So instead of telling me the truth about his job on that bright, empty Saturday morning, as we sat at the kitchen table with the sugar bowl between us, he told me, softly, that she had died in an automobile accident. I remember staring at the purple flowers painted on the sugar bowl. The funeral I hardly recall. The next morning, when I asked my father, as usual, for the funny papers and the sports page, an odd look crossed his face, and he looked away. 'The paper didn't come today,' he said. During the night Marty had moved in. He had often come to stay with us in the past, and I liked him – he knew a poem about Christy Mathewson which he would recite as often as I asked, and once, for an instant, I had seen the gun he wore inside his jacket, under his left arm. He was a thin little man who always wore a tie and a hat.

Marty never moved out. He would drive me to school in the morning or sometimes take me on sudden vacations to Ocean City, and I did not have to go to school at all. It was a long time before I knew the circumstances of the abrupt removal from the world of my singing mother, but I must have sensed that I had been lied to because I never asked about her or hardly even mentioned her, ever again.

When, on the afternoon of my bar mitzvah, my father first revealed to me his true profession, I enthusiastically declared that I wanted to follow in his glamorous footsteps. This made

him frown. He had long ago resolved to buy me college and 'unsoiled hands.' He had been the first Bechstein to get a degree, but had been drawn into the Family (the Maggios of Baltimore) by the death of a crucial uncle, and by the possibilities that had just begun to open up for a man with a business degree and a CPA. He lectured me sternly – almost angrily. I had, after years of searching, finally discovered the nature of my father's work, and he forbade me to admire him for it. I saw that it inspired in him an angry shame, so I came to associate it with shame, and with the advent of manhood which seemed to separate me, in two different ways, from both my parents. I never afterwards had the slightest desire to tell his secret to any of my friends; indeed, I ardently concealed it.

My first thirteen years, years of ecstatic, uncomfortable, and speechless curiosity, followed by six months of disaster and disappointment, convinced me somehow that every new friend came equipped with a terrific secret, which one day, deliberately, he would reveal; I need only maintain a discreet, adoring, and fearful silence. When I met Arthur Lecomte, I immediately settled in to await his revelation. I formulated a hundred questions about homosexuality that I didn't ask. I wanted to know how he'd decided that he was gay, and if he ever felt that this decision was a mistake. I would very much have liked to have known this. Instead I drank beers, quite a few of them, and I began my patient vigil.

Perhaps five seconds after I realised that we were standing on a loud streetcorner, surrounded by mohawks and black men with frankfurters, and were no longer in the bar with a strangling ashtray and a voided pitcher between us, a green Audi convertible with an Arab in it pulled up and honked at us.

'Mohammed, right?'

'Hey, Mohammed!' Arthur shouted running around to the passenger's seat and diving into the red splash of interior.

'Hey, Mohammed,' I said. I still stood on the sidewalk. I had drunk very much very quickly and wasn't following the action of the film too well. Everything seemed impossibly fast and lit and noisy.

'Come on!' shouted the blond head and the black head. I remembered that we were going to a party.

'Go on, asshole,' someone behind me said.

'Arthur!' I said, 'Did I have a backpack at some earlier point this evening?'

'What?' he shouted.

'My backpack!' I was already on my way back into the bar. Everything was darker, quieter; glancing at the Pirate game flashing silently, in awful colour, over the bald head of the bartender, I ran to our booth and grabbed my sack. It was better, there in the ill light, and I stopped; I felt as though I had forgotten to breathe for several minutes.

'My backpack,' I said to the ganged-up waitresses who chewed gum and drank coffee at a table by the dead jukebox.

'Uh huh,' they said, 'ha ha.' In Pittsburgh, perhaps more than anywhere else in our languid nation, a barmaid does not care.

On the way out again, I suddenly saw everything clearly. Sigmund Freud painting cocaine onto his septum, the rising uproar of the past hour and a half, the idling Audi full of rash behaviour that lay ahead; the detonating roar; and because it was a drunken perception, it was perfect, entire, and lasted about half a second.

I walked out to the car. They said to get in, get in. Between the backs of the bucket seats and the top of the trunk was a space the size of a toaster.

'Go and fit yourself there,' said Mohammed, craning around to shine his brown movie-star face into my eyes. 'Tell him, make the boot a seat, Arthur.' He spoke with a French accent.

'The boot?' I threw in my backpack. 'Now there's no room for me,' I said.

'The trunk. He calls it the boot,' said Arthur, smiling. Lecomte had a hard, sarcastic smile which made only rare appearances, chiefly when he meant to persuade or to ridicule, or both. Sometimes it surfaced only to give a kind of cruel warning, come far too late, of the plans that he had made for you, a genuine smile of false reassurance, the smile Montresor cast at Fortunato, hand on the trowel in his pocket. 'You have to sit on the edge of the trunk, where the roof folds up.'

And this, though I have always been easily terrified, I did.

We pulled into the heavy Saturday night traffic on Forbes Avenue, and, perhaps because of the incident I'd witnessed earlier, the welter of tail lights around me – so near and red! – reminded me of police sirens.

'Is this legal, what I'm doing?' I yelled into the overwhelming slipstream.

Arthur turned around. His hair blew across his face, and the cigarette he had lit threw bright ash, like a sparkler.

'No!' he shouted. 'So don't fall out! Mohammed has a lot of tickets already!'

The people in the cars that managed to pull alongside of the Audi gave me the same shake of the head and roll of the eyes that I myself had often given other young drunks in fast cars. I decided not to think about them, which proved to be a simple thing, and stared into the wind, and into the steady flow of streetlights. Gradually, lathed and smoothed by my five hasty drinks, I recognised only the speed Mohammed expertly gathered, and the whine of the tyres on the blacktop so fragrant and near my head. Then the wind died as we fell into a red light at Craig and stopped.

I took out my cigarettes and lit one in the momentary stillness. Arthur turned again, looking slightly surprised not to find me livid, sick, or half-unconscious.

'Hey Arthur,' I said.

'Hey what.'

'You work in the library, right?'

'Yes.'

'Who's the Girl Behind Bars?'

'Who?'

'By the elevators on the ground floor. A window. Bars. There's a girl in there.'

'You must mean Phlox.'

'Phlox? Her name is Phlox? There are girls named Phlox?'

'She is nuts,' said Arthur, with mingled scorn and enthusiasm. Then his eyes widened, as though something had occurred to him. 'A punk,' he said slowly. 'They call her Mau Mau.'

'Mau Mau,' I repeated.

When the light changed, Mohammed pulled left quickly, only signalling for the turn after he was halfway into it.

'What are you doing, Momo?' asked Arthur.

'Momo?' I asked.

'Ahshit! We go to Riri's!' said Mohammed. He seemed to have just recalled that we had an actual destination.

'Momo,' I said again. 'Riri's.'

'You should have kept going up Forbes, Momo,' said Arthur, laughing at me. 'Riri's house is straight up Forbes Avenue.'

'Okay, yes, I know, shut up,' shouted Mohammed. He made a U in the fortunately bare middle of Craig Street, and pulled, with a loud rumour of tyres, back out onto the avenue. Despite the sixty-mile-an-hour wind, his black hair lay flat and shiny and motionless on his head, like ersatz hair of papier mâché and varnish. Another happy cloud of dullness bloomed and settled over my senses. I tossed away my cigarette and took up my position once more, clenching the chrome luggage rack behind me and taking great swallows of air, like a jet engine.

Riri's house was a tudor hugeness off the campus of Chatham College, where her widowed father, Arthur told me as we climbed the driveway to the front door, taught Farsi, and from which he took many sabbaticals, as he now had; his house poured light all over its immense lawn and the neighbourhood rang with loud music.

'You are now glad that you came,' Mohammed said to me, rather irrelevantly shaking my hand. Then he barged into the pounding foyer.

'Gee, thanks,' I said.

'It's nice that your old girlfriend was so understanding,' Arthur said, nearly smiling.

I'd faked an apologetic telephone call to Claire, explaining to the dial tone that something had come up, I wouldn't be able to make dinner, and that I was sorry she had gone to so much trouble for me for nothing, which last, I'd reminded myself, was certainly true.

'Ha. Yes. Where is Momo from?'

'Lebanon,' said Arthur, and then a lovely brown woman in a

sarong approached, with a delighted look and arms spread, preparing a brace of wide hugs.

'Momo! Arthur!' she cried. He eyes were large and brown, made up with gold flecks and three mingled eye-shadows, and her hair was shot through with colourful objects, lacquered chopsticks and bits of feather and crepe. I stood by the open door, watching the traded embraces, keeping a patient, big, phony smile on my face. Momo cried out, cursed in French, and ran deep into the house, with a grim, insane look on his face, as if in pursuit of some prey he'd finally cornered after a million-year hunt. Our greeter, whom I took to be Riri, had splendid shoulders that fell, smoothly and unhindered by clothing, to the bouncing top of her flowered wrapper. Like many Persian women, she had an eagling kind of beauty, hooked and dark, and mean about the eyes. After she had kissed her two boys, she turned to me and held out a hostesslike cute hand.

'Riri, this is my friend, Art,' said Arthur.

'Delighted,' I said.

'Oh, delighted!' said Riri. 'So polite! All your friends are so polite, Arthur! Come in! Everyone is here! Everyone is drunk – but politely! You'll feel quite at home! Come into the parlour!'

She turned and walked into the parlour, a large red-curtained room which deserved its antique name. It was filled with vases, people drinking, and a grand piano.

'Is it really that obvious?' I whispered, close to Arthur's ear, but not too close.

'You mean that you're polite?' he laughed. 'Yes, it's embarrassingly obvious – you're making a well-mannered fool of yourself.'

'Well let's get rude, then,' I said. 'Is there a bar?'

'Wait,' he said, grabbing me by the elbow. 'I want you to meet someone.'

'Who?'

He led me through a web of kids, most of whom seemed to be foreign, holding a drink and smoking cigarettes of some kind or another. Some halted their loud conversations and turned to greet Arthur, who gave all an able, curt and rather arrogant 'Hi.' He seemed to be well-liked or at least to command respect.

Many of the small bundles of people tried to enclose him in their conversations as he passed.

'Where are you taking me?' I said. I tried to sound apprehensive.

'To meet Jane.'

'Oh, good. Who is she?'

'Cleveland's girlfriend. I think she's here – just a second. Stay here for a second, okay? I'm sorry. Be right back. I'm sorry about this, but I see someone, um –' said Arthur, and he unhooked me, and vanished.

I stayed, and surveyed, and wondered at all the handsome women of many lands. He had deposited me in a corner of the parlour with a towering piece of furniture that I leaned upon and cooled my cheek against. Many of those I saw had brown skins, every lovely grade of brown. Iranians, Saudis, Peruvians, Kuwaitis, Guatemalans, Indians, North Africans, Kurds – who knew? Caucasian women were draped about like bits of pale lace, and there were boys with interesting headgear and Lacoste shirts, or ill-fitting gabardine suits, laughing and eyeing the women. Arthur studied in that department of the university to which rich or very aggressively lucky foreign children are sent, to learn to administer great sums of international money and the ills of their homelands. Diplomacy, he'd said, when I'd asked him where his future lay.

'I go to these parties to practise,' he'd said. 'There are factions, alliances, secrets, debts, and a lot of messing around – I mean, of course, sexual messing around. And they all see themselves as Iranians, Brazilians, whatever, but I – I don't see myself as an American: I'm an atom, I bounce all over the place, like a mercenary: No, not a mercenary, a free agent – a free atom – isn't that something in chemistry? I'm always at the outside orbit of all the other, um, molecules?'

'I don't think that's it,' I'd said. 'I forget what a free atom is. I think you've made it up.'

The parlour was noisy, smoky, jammed and gorgeous. At the Shah's fall, Riri's father had smuggled out a modest plane-load of carpets and statuary, and these rather grimly gay furnishings made his daughter's party seem dark, ornate and somehow

villainous. I looked into the glass panels of the cabinet that held me up; it was filled with daggers and eggs. The eggs were large enough to have been laid by emus, and jewelled, painted. Delicate hinged doors, cut from the shells, opened onto miniature scenes of courtly, contortionist Persian love in 3-D. The artist had paid more attention to the figurines' limbs and genitalia than to their faces; the little twisted lovers wore that cowlike expression you see in Asian erotic art, which contrasts so oddly with the agonised knot of bodies. The daggers displayed their hilts, but hid their blades in fantastic sheaths of blue velvet and dyed leathers. Scattered here and there on the glass shelves of the cabinet were cunning, unidentifiable implements of silver.

'What do you think?' It was Arthur. Though his tone was light, he looked angry, or preoccupied, anyway.

'I think Riri's father is a white slaver. Say, this is some party.' I tried to get that tone of slogan in my voice. Then I chanced a slight indiscretion. 'Did you find "someone um?"'

He evaded the question, physically. He averted his eyes, and blushed, like a maiden, like Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park*. All at once I liked him, his firm grace with others, his unlikely modesty, the exotic parties he attended. The desire to befriend him came over me suddenly and certainly, and, as I debated and decided not to shake his hand yet again, I thought how suddenness and certainty had attended all my childhood friendships, until that long, miserable moment of puberty during which I'd been afraid to befriend boys and seemingly unable to befriend girls.

'No,' he said at last, '"someone um" has already been found and disposed of.' He looked off into the blare.

'I'm sorry,' I said.

'Forget it. Let us find the lovely Jane.'