

Crashing into Sunrise portrays a rowdy youth's transition from teenage mayhem to the awareness of the larger world around him. It depicts the emotional and intellectual upheaval of a young man of the 1940s surrounded by his adventurous buddies and the girls who shine along his path. This is Jim Mahoney, a reckless teenager with an unfinished personality and flawed character who discovers the force and power of ideas, books, love and music in college. Crashing into Sunrise is one of several stand-alone novels about the lives of an Irish-American family in the 20th century.

## **Crashing into Sunrise**

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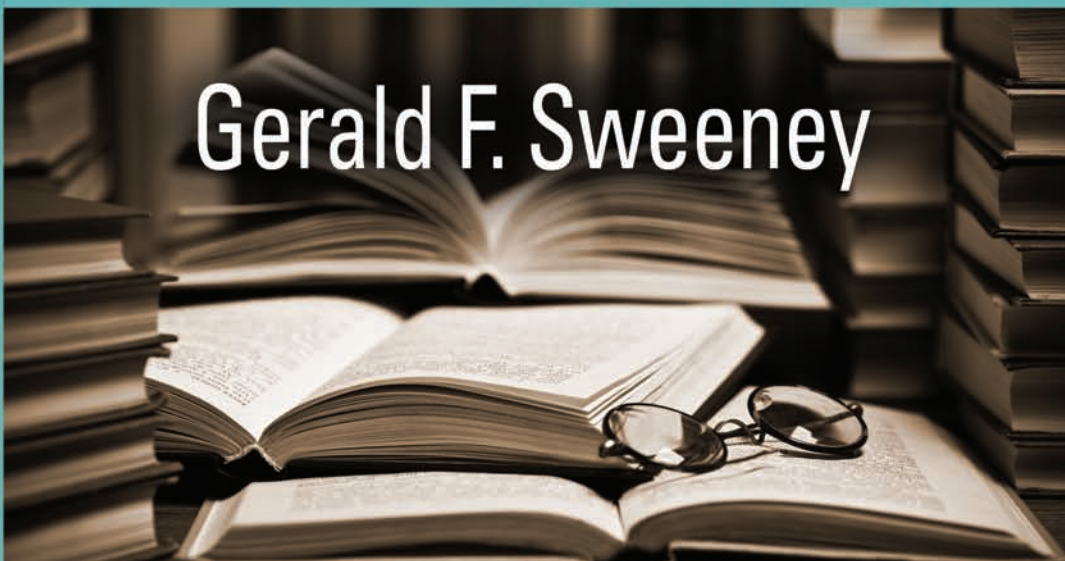
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# Crashing Into Sunrise

The Columbiad Book 3

Gerald F. Sweeney



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## **BOOK ONE**

### **Chapter 1**

Jim Mahoney sensed that he was passing a milestone when he first walked onto the lawn of his high school as if his life had just veered off the country road of childhood and began chugging along the highway of adolescence, where posted limits were often ignored. At the same time, he was accompanied by an uneasy, side-mirror feeling of having already reached a distant destination, that the near and far were closer than they appeared. As if this section of his trip had already been determined and he was merely catching up with his hitchhiked future. Whatever the journey, he realized it was time for him to accelerate, to raise his performance level. God knows he had the combustion. If he were only better able to control the unruly sparks that exploded within him and map out a path that would allow him to find the right way. And locate the switch that could help him snap on his headlights.

In the shadow of redbrick Manhasset High on Long Island, and amid the commotion of back-to-class week, he noticed his brother sitting on the grass with a dozen friends in an irregular circle under a spreading maple known to this generation simply as The Tree. He approached the group with no sense of inappropriateness about trespassing into Matt's social territory. His brother, shorter than Jim, but three years his senior, was decked out in casual scholastic attire: slacks in the wide style, a yellow sleeveless sweater over a white Oxford shirt. The girls, quizzical at the nerve of this freshman, looked crisp in their summer print dresses. The day was September perfect. The year 1943.

"You all know my 'big' brother," Matt said as Jim, a six-footer, stood by.

"Isn't he the kid that rides around town on a mini-bike?"

"I've seen him setting up pins in the bowling alley."

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The girls' plumpish, red-sticked mouths distracted Jim, who knew most of these upperclassmen as friends of his brother or from yearbook pictures and sports events. For Jim, these senior girls were flesh and moving icons, uncrated Venuses and catalyzed goddesses that moved among the lower species.

Bev, who was exceedingly blonde, greeted him, "We finally got little brother under The Tree."

"Freshman girls better watch out," said Ally, the beauty with a cameo face.

"Forget freshman. With what's left of the draft bait around here, maybe we could recruit him in an emergency."

"Can we make him the class mascot?"

"He's too big to be a mascot. We might leave him as a souvenir to later classes."

Jim, who hadn't said a word, smiled and lit a cigarette. He had never been very good at small talk. He had been bothered by a fairly severe stammer until he learned to kiss girls in the seventh grade.

"We should organize a pagan dance for freshmen. Have an initiation ceremony around The Tree," said Vince, the class clown. "Like a maypole."

"We could brand their foreheads."

"No need. They've already got plenty of zits."

Jim touched his face, but it was a good day.

"What's with The Tree?" Jim finally spoke.

"The Tree knows all," Bev added.

"Shouldn't it be an oak? Aren't they supposed to be sacred?" asked Vince.

The seniors appeared to be drafting in innocence behind the reality that the country was at war and that many of their friends were already overseas. Next June's yearbook would be dedicated to a classmate who died in service and would honor those military recruits who "left behind forever a few carefree years of their lives, the Saturday night dates, rattlin' jalopies, saddle shoes and all that falls into the pattern of joyous teenage life." The operative word was "forever"—the lost time that war sheared from their youth.

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Yet there was a lack of adult repose among them. Fingers twisted other fingers. Feet jiggled. Hair was pulled at, inspected and patted down. Abrupt facial changes reflected a lack of confidence; there was an awkwardness of expression, an unfocused yearning and frightened looks that couldn't disguise unknown fears.

When the seniors turned their attention to someone else, Jim felt uneasy standing there and moved on.

Watching him depart, Ally turned and whispered to Bev, "I think he skipped a couple lessons at charm school."

"Are you kidding? He missed the whole semester."

Jim, green to sarcasm, hadn't heard the jabs. Intrigued by the casualness of their manner, he sensed there must be an art to lounging, the languorous way kids strayed in and out of conversations, adding a put-down here and a friendly insult there. They had a way of looking comfortable while totally engaged, leaning back nonchalantly while their blood thumped with excitement.

"Did you notice how sleepy he looked?"

"Probably needs a lot of shuteye."

"That's because his hormones are burning a hole in his Boy Scout resolutions."

Bev spotted a boy sitting in a car in the adjacent parking lot, one who had recently made an unsuccessful raid on her virginity. "That Saylor guy thinks he's so hot with girls. He came up to me and said, 'Are you a real woman yet?' I said that's my business. So he says, 'What are you waiting for?' I looked him in the eye and said: 'My equal.'"

Jim too noticed the kids hanging around the parking lot, crammed into cars. Most were enjoying a post-breakfast smoke, the tastiest of the day, dramatically articulating the air with their weeds, as if the tiny white wands they waved through their inadequacies were directing their personalities. Owing to Jim's interest in high school matters, especially football—his brother Matt was a team starter—and because of his faithful attendance at the raucous bonfire rallies on the nights before the games, Jim was familiar with most of the cars, many of them Model A's. He was accustomed to

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seeing these kids squeezed into souped-up buggies filled with purloined gasoline that had been wheedled out of near-empty pumps at the local garages.

It was the year car owners spent a good deal of time rotating their balding tires. Gas station owners arrived some mornings to find their slashed hoses had been drained during the night—gas prime-pumped by mouth. Matt's car, overflowing with a group of his friends, sat in a row alongside the other tin cans. His was a '29 Chevy, complete with rumble seat, lacking a windshield and featuring a passenger door fastened by rope. In winter Matt would wear a fur hat and goggles while driving.

Jim was reminded that George Hellas, away in the Navy, had reconstructed half the old cars in the lot. He was rumored to have loved his supercharged cars so much that he slept in them at night. One day George and his buddy Ray put on a display in the school parking lot. They poured kerosene into the filter of George's engine, then raced the motor, and an immense smoke screen resulted. That alerted one of the secretaries in the school office who called the fire department, believing the car was alight. The hooter downtown began to wail, and minutes later the fire trucks came screaming onto school property. But, of course, by then the smoke had disappeared and George was sitting innocently in his car fiddling with the choke.

Everywhere Jim looked, there were lively circles of students re-establishing school ties after their summer recess. Some girls jiggled in place as though bouncing on springs, unable to control their enthusiasm. Confidant suburban girls, still tan, many dressed by Lord & Taylor, appeared soft and graceful, gentle looking with quiet voices, some sitting in groups on the grass under The Tree or along the low wooden fence that outlined the lawn between the school and the row of stripped-down cars. They were touched by a trace of aloofness; the more popular the girl, the more cloud born. There were notable exceptions among these princesses of the realm, found mainly in the more mature senior girls, among them the luscious Frenchified bombshell, Valerie Des Pres. So confidently sensuous, how could she not feel superior to average females, mostly sub-debs struggling with their sexual selves? All those

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faithful female grandchildren, offspring of the good daughters whose mothers were Edwardian ladies, all these Vickys, in dread and filled with ambivalence in the presence of their laced-up grandmothers, frightened girls who were seeking liberation in the Swing Age just as their mothers had in the Jazz Era. Mother and daughter often in collusion against outdated morals.

Schoolmates melded into comfortable cohesion, eager to share themselves with each other, alive with fresh pulsing hormones that confused them and nurtured them at the same time. Their wide-eyed focus streamed outbound where they hoped to engage with others in social bindings that might offer them love and an environment to exhibit their creativity. There was a robustness about everything they did. Their fleshy bodies burst with excitement. Many gestured extravagantly. Some had known one another since kindergarten and had watched their bodies and personalities double in size. There were old secrets rummaging around their bookbags along with unbroken trust in each other. Not to mention little jealousies and small wounds. There had been sleigh rides and dancing lessons and a World's Fair where they had expressed their friendship publicly, steadfastly maintaining loyalties locked in the inner springs of their unconscious. Now it was time for them to widen their circle. Cliques from the different grade schools would refresh the pool. Jim's class would become an entire society unto itself.

Newcomer Jim's shock of black hair had been elevated with a hand-pushed pompadour. He recognized he had the advantage of being a curiosity, the new boy, the incensed one from the Catholic elementary across town. Around his neck he wore his faith in the form of a cloth scapula that honored the Immaculate Conception, a fabric neckpiece that sailed over his hairy chest that he displayed by keeping a top button undone.

Jim reached down and picked up a twig off the grass that had escaped the sacred maple. He fingered its rough texture for a moment and snapped it in two. Then he walked toward the school building ahead of his friend Mardi Bobbette and overheard her talking to a friend.

*"Who's he?"*



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Mardi said, "Hi Jim," then, sotto voce, "New blood."

Jim figured that the teenage personalities that fascinated other youngsters were the ones that displayed breezy emotions in public—minor actors who didn't mind bleeding their feelings in front of a crowd. His cockiness aside, Jim couldn't understand why others moved out of his way as he walked toward school and didn't know that they might be laughing at him behind his back for his rooster walk. He only knew that he attracted people's gaze. When he peered out of his smallish hazel eyes, his imagination awoke to the prospect of two hundred and fifty new sweater sets. He had no conception that this was a seat of learning. To him, it was a venue where girls were designed to supply favors and theatrics.

Jim was actually a few days late attending school. He had been visiting his grandmother and his married Aunt Marge in Chicago and had misjudged the scholastic start date. The health and welfare of his Midwestern relatives, his second family, had been deteriorating and he had been instructed by his mother to report on their well being, but he proved to be no judge of others' problems. His maternal uncle and his uncle by marriage had both recently been scooped up in the military draft. As a consequence, money was tight and no one could foresee a favorable end to the war. Then news came that the Army had sent sickly Uncle Jack, his mother's brother, to a hospital for extended tests of an undiagnosed disease. Jim, visiting the women who had helped raise him in the years of the early Depression, chose to enjoy the holiday and ignore the family's signs of trouble. He preferred the less stressful home of his Aunt Mary Rose, who was bright and chipper and always managed to register her laughter in the mirth and foibles of everyday life. Mary and her pert and pretty daughter, his cousin, Tess, welcomed him in their rambling Victorian mansion, set in a middle-class neighborhood where mother and daughter like a team of good spirited vaudevillians, entertained. He enjoyed rambling through the city, attending a White Sox game and riding the Madison Avenue streetcar into the Loop to hear Charlie Barnet's band at the Oriental. He had even made a side trip to see family friends at a Wisconsin

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resort. He had smooched all his old girlfriends in Chicago. Up north in Delavan, he went out dancing one night to a lakeside ballroom.

He stood by the side entrance of the school and savored the moment. Appreciative looks were darting his way, glances that signaled that an interesting new specimen had arrived. Having spent the last eight years restricted by nuns, he felt a sense of freedom in his new environment, unweighted with church ritual and confessional guilt. He had a fleeting acquaintance with many of these public schoolers; it was a relatively small town of five thousand. Like himself, a pair of his parochial classmates had opted against Catholic high schools, so he knew his friends Frankie and Terri would be here. Scouting and sports interests ensured that he would know a few other tenderfoots and ball carriers. After he doused his cigarette, he walked through the door and made his secular debut.

Teenagers were scuffling along the halls. The worst offenders in this ricocheting contest for attention were kids like Jim who had the shoe repairman add metal taps to his heels. He sounded like Bojangles strutting on stage. As he trekked down the crowded corridor, he watched girls' eyes lift toward him.

After some effort, Jim found his homeroom and discovered Frankie wearing a sharp new outfit and Terri, conscientious as a librarian, in a floral-printed dress. Tall and clever Ben from Scouts was in the class. And Jim was happy to see his "Spin-the-bottle" partners Mardi Bobbette along with Bootsie Harding—Mardi with her perfect figure and smoldering eyes and Bootsie, blonde, thin and imperious. Satisfied that his entrance had been successful, Jim sat down next to Frankie.

"Watcha doing later? Working at the bowling alley?"

"Thinking about going up to the club before they drain the pool," Jim replied.

"You going for the record?"

Jim, with his swimmer's body, had an aggressive need to perform physically. He thought he could beat the pool record at the Village Bath Club, fifty-eight laps.

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Frankie and Jim had been friends since fifth grade, biking together, wind-sailing with open jackets down Leeds Pond on skates, active teammates in three sports as they grew out of boyhood. Like Jim, who had had a serious ear operation as a child, Frankie had some physical problems and perhaps these ailments made both of them more sensitive than others to various forms of pain. Frankie had a wiry, athletic body and had been competitive in schoolyard sports. Now, he would employ his grace of movement to slide out onto the dance floor. He and Mardi could have been a ballroom dance team.

Frankie introduced Jim to a roly-poly guy sitting next to him, named Rocky from the Plandome neighborhood.

"You related to Matt?" Rocky asked.

"Yeah, a senior."

"My sister, too. Name's Ally."

"She cheers, right?"

"She cheers, all right. Ought to see her practicing splits on the living room rug."

Jim was crazy about cheerleaders. Michele, from last year's squad, caught in a conflicting time between losing her boyfriends to the armed services and the kidnapping of a Japanese friend who had been swept up by the government and interned along with her alien family, discovered Jim in a time of need. Michele had lingered with him one stressful afternoon in a shaded garden and out of physical necessity, taught him how to soul kiss.

Rocky, with a sense of humor that he inherited from his sharp-tongued sister, would join Frankie and Jim to form an instant trio.

After the homeroom meeting, there was a general assembly. Five hundred students crowded into the auditorium to listen to the principal, Mr. Leslie, commonly known as "The Beak." His austere presence and stern visage were new to Jim. The headmaster reminded him of a male nun in a business suit.

The introduction to the program began with the new national anthem, the one that replaced "Hail Columbia." Piano accompaniment was provided by one of the school's more accomplished musicians, while the violinist, a flat-chested freshman

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named Lucy, wore a corsage surrounded by bushy ferns, greenery that became agitated when she fiddled. It was her debut performance and her parents had arranged with the florist to celebrate the occasion. The duo played as their music teacher, Mrs. Chance, conducted from the auditorium floor beneath the apron of the empty stage upon which the principal would speak. When the music paused, Mr. Leslie lectured his pupils about their solemn duty to be studious and civic-minded, what with the war on and all. Everyone was being asked to sacrifice, but he was lecturing to kids who possessed so many advantages that the small amount of wartime goods subtracted from their comforts caused little pain.

The short event ended with the singing of “God Bless America,” Kate Smith’s radio song. As the pianist began to play, there was movement. The bulky musical instrument appeared to be in motion. The piano started to slide along the floor. It skidded away from the piano player’s perch and he had to scramble along to keep up, watching nervously as the departing instrument stuttered along the floor. Some of the audio-visual guys had rigged a rope that ran along the floor to the piano legs. From their nest under the stage, two burly guys were hauling on the line, pulling the piano away from the performer, who was now missing notes and trying to drag his bench behind him with one hand while he faked a melody with the other. He was literally chasing the piano. Totally perplexed by what was happening, the piano player looked like a person who had lost his pants on the middle of a dance floor. Meanwhile, nervous Lucy the violinist, as she watched the piano lumber away, became so dismayed that her ferns shook violently.

The students were howling as Mrs. Chance, her back to the instruments, continued to conduct the audience while Principal Leslie boiled like a Maine lobster. Jim reveled in this rebellious behavior. Terri, a piano player, didn’t appreciate the joke.

“Dismissed,” Mr. Leslie shouted before the hymn came to an end. “Leave!”

The students went rolling into the corridor. Signs were propitious for a rowdy year even though the AV Department would have to get through the term with two fewer members.

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Jim's first class was with Senorita O'Hara, a frowlsed woman with a sly, dark humor, who commuted from Greenwich Village each weekday to rattle the complacency of her suburban charges. Jim spotted Frankie's friend Rocky and sat next to him.

"Who's that dark-haired girl over there?" Jim asked Rocky. "The one who looks like she's popping out of her dress?"

"Bonnie. How 'bout them bazookas?"

Bonnie was one of those small girls with a figure that was like a flashing light to fourteen-year-old boys, an illumination delineated in sculpted, voluptuous curves. Her breasts stood out prow-like and appeared to have a life of their own.

"OK. Pipe down. Looking over the roster here," said Senorita O'Hara interrupting their gawking. "I see a few familiar family names." Looking up, she asked, "Which one of you is *Señor* Southdown?"

"That's me," Rocky said.

"I hope you'll be as good a student as Ally."

"She's always been my role model," Rocky said mockingly.

O'Hara, arching her eyebrow, evaluated Rocky and mentally filed him in her instant classification system, arranged by years of teaching, as a potential wise guy.

"So, let's begin. *Hola!*"

No reaction.

"I said, *Hola*," the teacher said in a louder voice.

"*Hola*," they responded.

As they were separating at the end of class, Rocky said to Jim, "See you later, *Señor*."

"*Adios, amigo.*"

Jim wandered in and out of classes for a few hours and then spent a free period in the library. He spotted some guys from Scouts lined up on one side of a long study table and he noticed as well that one of the beauties from the senior class sat reading at the adjoining table. Jim tried to sit down opposite his friends, his back to the girl facing the line of guys on the other side of him.

"No, no. Don't sit there. Come over here," they insisted, so he rose and took an empty chair alongside his in-line companions.

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The girl opposite was near-sighted, wore a tailored shirt and a skirt many inches above her knees. Sitting, her skirt floated into dangerous territory.

“She’s not wearing any underpants,” the guy next to Jim said.

The six guys waited for her to cross her legs, uncross them, anything.

When she did, there was a lot of snuffling and snorting at their table. Jim was frozen with excitement and uneasy guilt.

Later, when it came time for gym class, he changed into shorts and sneakers and lined up on the football field for instruction. The small, burly athletic director announced that training this year would include close order military drill and the running of an obstacle course that had been built over the summer, designed to help students, some of whom were sluggards, prepare for military fitness. Off the boys went on a cross-country run that included rope climbs, wall scaling and trench jumping. Later in the month, the service recruiters would begin prowling the ranks of the senior boys, many of whom would be in uniform by Christmas. His brother Matt would leave for the Army Air Force in March.

After school, Jim revisited the gym area, picked up his football gear and deposited the pads and uniform in his assigned locker. Regular team practice would start the next day, giving Jim the chance to head downtown to the Greeks. There were at least fifty kids crowded into the Chocolate Shop’s booths ordering soft drinks and grilled cheese sandwiches. They demanded ashtrays from the owners’ two boys, classmates at school, who were frantically trying to keep up with the needs of their customers, jammed into sixteen booths. These were overflowing with teenagers sitting alongside large pocketbooks, texts strapped together by belts and sports equipment, mainly lacrosse sticks. Floating above the caramel-fudge smell hung a cloud of smoke and queening over the entire scene was the tall, slinky senior, Valerie Des Pres, whose sultry looks and droopy lids missed no sexual reference. Afternoons, she sat drinking black coffee, contemplating her moves. From the jukebox, Bunny Berrigan’s trumpet glorified “Sometimes I’m Happy,” a refrain that resounded in most of the kids.

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Jim stopped for a pack of cigarettes at the front counter but had to wait for Alex to serve him. Chesterfields, Lucky Strikes and Camels, the three leading brands, had already gone to war so Jim had to settle for a lesser, harsher-tasting offering. Meanwhile he surveyed the crowd and saw Mardi sitting with curvaceous Bonnie from his Spanish class along with other freshmen. Lighting up from a new pack, he threw a lustful glance at Valerie and then sauntered over to greet his classmates.

"Come on," Mardi said. "Squeeze in."

Luckily, he had to push in next to Bonnie, feeling her thighs next to his, which jump-started something in his pants. She was wearing a sailor's pea jacket, a wartime fashion statement, over her slight shoulders. Jim was always quick to notice details about the Navy, especially anything to do with its aircraft carrier fliers. Every kid had a special attachment to one of the military branches, particularly when older brothers were involved. Jim was particularly inspired by the aircraft carrier engagements of the *Yorktown*, the *Enterprise* and the *Hornet*. He had begun researching and even writing about the fliers who fought in the Pacific battles where sailors either conquered the enemy or burned to death.

"Who has a ride to the Farmingdale game?" Mardi asked.

Ben, like Jim, was trying out for football, said, "Not unless they make me the starting tackle and I get to ride the team bus."

"Wait your turn, freshman. Lucky if you carry the water pail."

"You gotta grow them muscles a little," Bootsie chimed in.

"You mean I have to actually exercise?" Ben said, striking a Charles Atlas pose.

Ben was tall, broad-shouldered, double bright and shared a shy vulnerability that was appealing. His cowlick was in keeping with his aw-shucks reticence. He had about him a sobriety and sincerity of expression that demanded honest and careful response. He came from serious people, European-serious, though he and his brother were teaching their parents to loosen up in the American style.

Ben and all the guys, in order to make more room in the booth, had their arms slung around the girls' shoulders.

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Jim's friend Mardi was mischievous and droll. A witty brother and sharp sister had helped instruct their sibling on the wiles and ways of scholastic life. Years more mature than her contemporaries, Mardi was ahead on their common journey to adulthood, as if she had prospected the way and knew the crash points and detours. Her perfect body was another siren call to the male population and her ability to role-play as one's sister made her one of the guys' favorites. In all her high school group pictures, Jim and Ben, feigning innocence, could be seen standing behind her in class photos, trying to goose her into a whoopsy-daisy look of surprise.

Frankie and Rocky were there, too. But it was Bonnie who was steaming up Jim's energetic libido. She had a popular older sister as well and knew the score. Small and dark, surely one of the most beautiful girls Jim had ever seen, she would become a fashion model in Manhattan before her junior year.

"Anybody going to the dance a week from Friday?" Ben asked.

"Whose band?"

"I heard the Club Packard Orchestra, with that guy Billy Baker on trumpet."

"What'll you wear if you go?"

"Think I better get a date first. Nudge. Nudge," said Mardi, poking Frankie.

"You don't need a date. Just show up."

"Are you kidding? My father won't let me out of the house by myself," said Maryjan, another attractive girl with soft blonde hair. Full-bodied and athletic, she was regularly forced to fend off jokes about her father, the kind of suburban handyman who actually painted his garage floor and was once spied mowing his lawn during a snow shower.

"Maryjan, I hear you need your dad's permission to go to the bathroom."

"You guys. Don't pick on my father. He means well," Maryjan added with a playful hurt look.

More than anyone else that Jim would know in his teenage years, Maryjan had the ability to extend her warmth to others. No one ever doubted her friendship. There was not a false note that ever



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rose out of her empathy. Jim wondered if the knack to embrace others was a feminine trait and concluded it was. Meanwhile, his attention focused on Bonnie.

They were all smoking except Maryjan and Ben.

"Pass me one of those coffin nails," Frankie said.

"Buy a pack of your own, moocher." was the reply.

"I called you last night but didn't get an answer," Mardi said to Boots, who had her own phone in the bedroom.

"I must have had the vacuum running." Everybody knew she was spoiled rotten and had a live-in maid to do her ironing and could barely turn on the radio.

Everything a joke.

Frankie noticed all of Ben's books.

"What are you? Some kind of budding genius?"

"Yeah. And if you're not nice to me, I'm going home to study."

Alex, the owner's son, came by wearing a long white apron, "You just sitting here or are you gonna order something?"

"Give us a break, Alex. How about a straw and glass of water? That way you'll look busy so your folks won't fire you."

"Wise guy."

"OK, Alex. I'll have a black and white soda. Will that get us more booth time? You know we all love you."

"You just saying that or you trying to tell me how deeply you care?"

After Alex had dumped the ashtrays and wiped away the debris off the black, marble-topped table with his smelly rag, he said, "Don't feel like you have to leave a big tip or anything. I can always skip college."

"I was going to leave you a nickel, Alex, but these guys told me I had to spend it on the jukebox."

When Alex moved on, Rocky said, "Bobby Dare's having a party Saturday night. Are you all going?"

"What'll we do? Dance? We're too old for Spin-the-Bottle."

"We could practice in case we do," Jim contributed.

"Let's hear it from Romeo," Mardi said. "Probably practices in front of a mirror."

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“Mine kisses me back,” Frankie added.

The conversation mainly dwelt on upcoming social events. The only time they thought about the war was when newsreels at the movies confronted them. Even then, they were so busy gabbing that they didn’t see the bloodshed and the sight of all those bodies lying in fields and ditches in who-knew-what country. Their callowness was forbidding. They distanced themselves from the conflict, even though Jim had a fascination with aircraft carriers.

*A year later in the far Pacific, his Navy mates were talking about George Hellas.*

*“You should have seen him when that rooster MacArthur came ashore at Leyte,” one gob said to another sailor in the hammock next to the one where his buddy Seaman Hellas was sleeping. “George was running a big landing barge and was beached up right alongside where they were shooting pictures of Mac wading through the surf, sucking on his corn cob pipe, retaking his empire. There’s George—all six foot five of him, thirty feet above the waterline at the controls of his beachwagon watching the brass come back to the Philippines. Standing up there like he was a prince of the sea. Now look at him. So frail he looks like covered bones. Lucky he’s not a skeleton seeing as how he took all that shrapnel. How many operations has he had by now? Six? Tore his head open, split his back, and left iron in his gut. I was next to him, so close that when I caught some shit, our blood mixed on the deck.”*

Curious about the new girl, Jim walked Mardi home instead of swimming.

“Where have you been hiding that Bonnie?” Jim asked.

“She’s been around forever. It’s just that her folks never let her out for parties.”

They talked about the kids they liked; the others they put down. The first were attractive on the surface; the others had mostly chosen a different path to grow. The popular kids tended to be gregarious, sassy and conventional within a confined code; the drones did squirrely things like study and think about their future.

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Footloose kids like Mardi and Jim were content to skip along through the storm of confetti manufactured in the glittering ballrooms of their juvenile imagination.

They all—popular or not—sought for guidance but had a hard time finding it. Some accepted their suburban traditions and others rejected them. Indeed the conservatives in most generations tended to be pliable and homebound, whereas the activists couldn't wait to stretch out into the larger world. Brother Matt often complained that their family was financially over their heads in this affluent suburb and consequently lived below the grade in what he called a money-mad town. Some searched behind the social façade and learned to play the game; others just rebelled against it, like Jim and Mardi.

They sat in her faux-Mediterranean home on Webster Avenue—red-tiled roofs, stucco arches that separated interior rooms that should have been painted white instead of a dull gray. A dark house that could have been Latin bright.

"Anybody else home?" Jim asked.

"No. My dad's out of town." She hesitated, "Thank god he's gone most of the time. I hate him."

"Same with my step-dad," Jim said. "I keep out of his way. Would be nice to have a father that said I did one thing right."

Mardi's anchors were her siblings. "But it's tough with Tom in the Navy and Gloria off at art school. I'm on my own for the first time. And my mom's no help."

"Mine either. She always sides with my old man."

Jim's commentary on his step-dad was conditioned on the fact that his natural father had died when he was an infant and his mother remarried a tough advertising exec named Bob Hill. The family conducted most of its activities at arm's length.

Mardi continued, "I'm tired of always scrimping. It's like a poorhouse around here. My mom never knows when she's going to get house money, so she had to go out and find a war job. My dad's always traveling. We never know where he is or what he's doing. Mom thinks he follows the horses."

She hesitated and said, "I keep looking for something that can unlock what I feel inside and sets me free."

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“Yeah. It’s like I’m filled with glue or something that keeps me choked up.”

“Only when I dance something clicks. Lets me sail away.”

“If I’m playing piano and listening to swing, I feel like that.”

“You’d think there would be a teacher or somebody that could help,” she said.

“Grown-ups don’t know how to help. You’d think they’d know stuff—they have jobs and all. But they’re so busy with their own bee’s wax, they could care less.”

“But it’s hard to get things straight by yourself.”

The two teenagers sitting on a fat-pillowed sofa were intermittently querulous and complaining. More perceptive adults would wonder if they were not intimidated by their environment and had to fortify themselves with defensive personalities and build an imaginary world to offset the reality surrounding them. A petulant pair, Mardi tended to wear a pout while Jim was showing signs of an unearned arrogance. The two were at their worst in her dark house. It took away their natural spark.

“So how do we make this a good year?”

Mardi said. “I’m just going to keep practicing dancing so I can audition for the Rockettes someday.”

“I just want to be a Navy flier.”

The unguided dreams of two hopefuls.

“And I have to figure out a way to make a mark at school,” Jim lamented.

“Do what I used to do,” she said. “I’d try out a different personality every day until I got one that worked.”

“What do you mean?”

“One day I’d be happy-go-lucky. Next I’d be mean. Then I’d be everybody’s friend. Next a snob.”

“Maybe I should try it.”

“After a while,” Mardi said. “You find the one that suits you.”

High school—an arena of wet egos and false allure, a tryout of personalities as well as hairdos.

There was to be between Mardi and Jim only the possibility of romance, never the actuality. They became each other’s personal

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advisor regarding the rites of growing up. They would learn together and heal each other's wounds. They remained bound-up friends who often stood in her doorway in a long embrace, taking strength from one another's arms.

Early fulfillment eluded them even though their bodily juices were boiling for answers. It wasn't that they were seeking some intellectual or spiritual completion. They couldn't even imagine such a journey. If they could only find a way forward that wasn't so complicated. Pinned down by ignorance and naiveté, maybe they could find a way to release themselves. Find the right path. They'd help each other try.

\* \* \*

Jim, whose head was filled with melodies, often launched songs into the air. He serenaded his neighborhood while walking home from school, as he did after leaving Mardi's house. He would whistle loudly, and the reverberations that rang around the hills in the small valley in which he lived echoed back. His mother often heard him twittering a block away as she sat at her upstairs desk, fingering invitations and writing notes in her perfect hand. Grace Mahoney Hill was learning to interact socially in an effort to help her husband succeed, joining a host of organizations and benefit committees since arriving on the East Coast four years ago.

Jim entered the house and plopped his books on the up stairs.

"That you, son?"

"Which one?"

"The one who whistles."

"That must be the younger one."

"I'll be down in a minute. I'm answering Uncle Francis's latest letter."

Jim's grandfather Martin had just died and Grace, keen to retain her sons' family connections back to the Midwest, was corresponding with her former brother-in-law, Jim's Uncle Francis. She was reaching back through the streets of Chicago and out past the Mississippi to the Iowa farms where the patronymic O'Mahoneys had settled in 1840. After a long sea voyage from Ireland to New Orleans, the pioneers followed the big river up to

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Dubuque. Jim knew nothing about these historical events. Neither knew nor cared about his father's family. The truth was that he could barely remember Grandfather Martin, who came by at Christmas with gifts of books. Though the boys' relations with the paternal side of the family were tenuous, Gracie had insisted, after her remarriage, that Matt and Jim keep their Mahoney surname and made sporadic attempts to keep up with their clan.

At dinner the five Hill-Mahoneys labored over Gracie's meatloaf, mashed potatoes and peas. The head of household, Bob Hill, was an account exec at a Manhattan advertising agency and spent overtime working and traveling the country when and if air flights, reserved mostly for the military, were available. Grace, nearly forty, had settled comfortably in Manhasset and was gaining respect in the community as an organizational volunteer. She was reliable and could maintain ledgers, owing to the business acumen she accumulated after her first husband's death. Grace Mahoney Hill had overcome the poverty of Chicago, the loss of a spouse and her oldest child, an emotional breakdown and an economic Depression and had emerged in feisty fashion living in one of the better places in America. She felt that she was now at the high point of her life. She had discovered the advantages of becoming a clubwoman and sharp bridge player, allowing her to interact with ladies resembling the big-hatted Hokinson women in the *New Yorker*. At the same time impelled to act like one of the "girls" in Claire Booth's movie, *The Women*.

Jim remembered some of the hard times and heard enough of the family history to know that there was a large amount of pain flowing through the generational narrative. What he had been able to do so far was resist the genetic hand-down of his parents' suffering. Jim either chose to ignore or blanked out the pain. He would not allow their problems to come down the chain and cripple his own growth. But, in compensation, of course, he lost his sense of compassion.

Also at the family table were brother Matt and his half sister Francy, age five.

"How'd it go at school today, Junior?" Pappy asked Jim.

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“Went all right.”

Mashed potatoes, clumps of banality, circulated around the table.

“Did you boys get the teachers you wanted?” asked Gracie.

“I guess one’s as good as another,” Matt replied.

“When’s your first game?” Bob Hill asked him.

“Two weeks from Saturday. Farmingdale.”

“I’ll try to make it,” Bob said. In the past few years, businessmen had stopped working Saturdays but Bob sometimes traveled into town to clear up the week’s workload. He did take an interest in the boys’ sports activities. Maybe his only interest in them. He had played both scholastic and college sports himself. Small but tough like Matt, Bob Hill had excelled at track and even played college football back in the Twenties when lightweights were not unknown.

“Does Farmingdale have a good team?” Bob asked, trying to keep up the conversation.

“Nobody knows.” Scouting wasn’t one of the Athletic Department’s strong points.

“Francy, eat your peas now.”

“Yick.”

“Never mind about ‘Yick.’ Just scoop them up.”

Bob looked adoringly at his only natural child. “Pretend it’s a game,” he said. “How many peas can you put on your spoon?”

Francy fell for the ploy and began counting.

Their dinner conversation never rose above the mundane. Aside from a few words about mutual friends, one would never know that literate New York was only eighteen miles away. Politics, ethics, art and ideas never weaved their way across the tablecloth and consequently the younger members were not aware of what they missed. As a result, Jim was never challenged by worldly issues, never grasped a wider view than the ones that interested his friends. In adult company, he was as boring as the potatoes. The parents couldn’t be blamed, though. The Depression had forced the nation into worrying about basic existence and little else. The family had survived that battle but retained the scars of deprivation. Jim had no

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substantial fidelity to the family's greater mission, which seemed to be making money.

There was little love in the home. Sure Pappy and Gracie loved Francy, and Gracie probably did love the boys. They had been through such hard times together that the intercession of grief and poverty had worn them down to passing pleasantries. There were fractures in all their personalities, though there appeared to be no need to call an ambulance just yet.

After dinner, Jim descended into the finished basement festooned in knotty pine, and went to his upright and played for nearly an hour, strolling through his inventory of ragtime, boogie-woogie and swing songs. He practiced regularly; there was at least one discipline he subscribed to. Music was a treasured release from tension, mostly sexual, as well as from the ennui born of a lack of an understanding of the larger world and its needs and realities.

Late that night, he turned on the radio as he lay in bed to listen to the bouncy swing rhythms originating from Manhattan's supper clubs. These melodies stimulated his unconscious, raised his emotions, and allowed him to broadcast his own yearnings back out into the atmosphere, giving him an opportunity to inter-connect the blue-black night and his longings. And Harry James played "You Made Me Love You" and Sinatra sang "All or Nothing at All." The lyrics were his psalms.

\* \* \*

Many kids had a good time growing up on Long Island during the War. Until Pearl Harbor changed the American temper, places like the North Shore spent the early years of the Hitler War in isolation. In 1941, when the suburbs ended at Roslyn, Garden City and Rockville Centre, each of the towns was a unique community with its own personality—all citadels of conservatism, bound together by their angst about FDR. Manhasset was new-rich and filled with advertising and radio people. Roslyn was both upscale and down-to-earth Polish. Miles of country separated each town, while somewhere to the east lay an unexplored never-land of potato farms and horse estates. Some families even had summer places twenty miles east in remote places like Huntington. Economically,



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the towns faced west toward the skyscrapers that were visible from the highest hills in town. Thanks to the Long Island Rail Road, Madison Avenue and Wall Street were less than an hour away. The Japanese attack solidified the communities by uniting them with patriotic zeal. Residents watched airplane factories spring up around them and soon saw a sky-full of fighter and bomber planes clouding-up their sky.

Food and gas rationing were the norm. Government-inspected horsemeat was now available for consumption (no coupons required). Other signs of war were the anti-aircraft balloons, like giant footballs, lofting over the defense factories. For Boy Scouts prowling in the woods in search of merit badges, the sudden overnight appearance of an anti-aircraft gun emplacement was always big news in the neighborhood.

Everywhere in America, Johnny got his gun. Older brothers joined the Army Air Force, or programs like the Navy's V-5. Two guys writing home from the tundra talked about the grueling conditions that faced them building the Alcan Highway. Others were sweating in the jungles. Once a kid reached sixteen, with his parents' permission, he could sign up as a seaman. One big hulk, who had been condemned to the eighth grade for three years in a row by the nuns, turned up at school one day in bell-bottoms on his way to Great Lakes. Younger guys joined the Civilian Air Patrol and practiced flying Link Trainers. Girls could join the Motor Corps and dress up like British ambulance drivers and learn how to strip engines. Volunteers collected "Victory" books to be shipped overseas; others sold War Stamps, or did Red Cross knitting or worked on the scrap salvage trucks. Everyone contributed.

Teenage fashions were also dictated by the war, although the first synthetic shirts that would melt near a radiator were still a few months off. Leather became scarce and one of the hallmarks of wartime civilian shoes were soles composed of a kind of cardboard substitute that tended to melt in the rain and crumble in layers.

The girls were bouncy balls of wool in plaid skirts and sweaters accented by bobby socks and loafers, their lipstick as red as a fire engine. Some shortages, like stockings, presented problems. With

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no silk or nylon versions available, girls began painting their legs with brown paste to imitate hose wear, but it also ran in the rain.

When girls' skirts rose above the knees, most boys deserted their scoutmaster. The fact that males turned so quickly from woodworking to juvenile misbehavior was startling. Scout troops turned into wolf packs, either barking at the cold-colored moon in pitiful sexual repression or howling through the double features at the local theater. Going to the movies proved to be a noisy match between cynical teenagers and the Hollywood dream machine, complete with rowdy outbursts and catcalls.

Teenagers, though enmeshed in the outer web of the global conflict, hardly moved beyond their own emotional cloisters to experience either the suffering or the disasters caused by the chaos of world war.

\* \* \*

On his second day of high school, Jim defied current fashion standards and appeared for classes in dungarees, a white button-down with shirttails hanging out, loafers and white sox. He stood out like a lighthouse. Nobody ever wore jeans except on Saturday mornings and the sight of him on school grounds in such a scruffy outfit illustrated his non-conformity. However, he could care less what other people thought about how he dressed. The beacon that guided him radiated from his needs, wants and desires. Others could light their own way.

The school paper nailed him in the next issue of the "IMPpressions" column—"Jim Mahoney, '47. Dreamy-eyed girls, 'He'd swim a mile for a Chesterfield,' dungarees, moonlight nights, 'Set 'em up in the next alley.'"

The day's excitement was augmented by news of the opening of a teen canteen downtown called the Juke Box. If that wasn't enough, there was a rumor that a movie crew from *March of Time* was on its way to film the event. The genesis of the place was prompted by parents concerned about the national rise in juvenile delinquency, a war-related increase in bad, often felonious, behavior. Riots had been fueled by the unrest of young people in L.A., Detroit and Harlem earlier that spring. The war unlocked

rooms in the American house where the cudgels and billy clubs had been stored, the ones that had come out for the old labor wars—the Homestead, Pullman and Haymarket Square riots. However, these 1943 uprisings were mostly race-based, more like the 1919 Chicago beach riot. Matronly suburban outrage had been stimulated by images in Manhattan’s newspapers of zoot suiters—tough-looking young males wearing outlandish outfits with elephant-leg-wide trousers, oversize jackets with enormous shoulder inserts, porkpie hats, tropical-flavored fabric and dangling, floor-length metal chains—portraits that had frightened Manhasset ladies to build a “dry night club” to ward off these borough intrusions.

Local funds were raised to renovate a storefront on the town’s main street, a haven designed to entice kids to come by and dance around a Wurlitzer stacked with recordings from the Miller, Goodman, Shaw and Dorseys’ orchestras. After classes on opening day, the social elite from school wended its way downtown. There was a smell of polished floors, painted walls and the pungent fragrance of leather—belts, shoes, elbow patches and pocketbooks. The guys wore sports coats or lumber jackets; the girls were in cashmere sweaters and pleated plaid skirts or milkmaid jumpers. Some wore penny loafers. Others romped around in saddle shoes.

Responding to the music, the crowded dance floor was soon heaving. When the teenagers started swinging out Lindy-style, bumping and knocking ensued. Frankie began dancing with Mardi but an upper classman named Kenny B., who was fond of younger girls, soon cut in. Kenny, both good-looking and a fine dancer, knew from experience that the younger girls were receptive to his advances. Alert, he had quickly noticed the careless rhythm of Mardi’s body as she swung recklessly out in twirling swift-steps to the rollicking beats of their favorite songs. They began “Stomping at the Savoy.” They hopped to the “One O’Clock Jump”, then the “Two O’Clock” and “Opus One.” They swung their shoulders through “Tuxedo Junction,” “Perfidia,” “Song of India” and “Sing Me a Swing Song and Let Me Dance.” Jive jumpers were called jitterbugs; slow dancers were snails.

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With their feet pounding to the music, the thudding made the floorboards creak. Swing tunes sang in their blood. Their psyches had been invaded by the music of their time so invasively that many of them would never be excited about popular music again in their lives. When youngsters feel that their music is the best ever crafted, what need for newer noise?

When the film camera crew arrived to memorialize the event, the school's royalty was in attendance. Bibs and Bev, Ally, Trudy, Melissa, blonde Pat, Stu (he had skipped football practice to attend) and Leo, combing his hair, as well as Suds, Glenn, Yosh, and Conkey not to mention Frankie and Rocky. When the celluloid personalities filmed that day appeared on the larger-than-life local screen, the movie showed them as upbeat, energetic youths. The remarkable thing was that they all looked so casually joyous.

Jim, his brother Matt, and the entire football team were absent. Coach wasn't an advocate of fraternization, dancing or carbonated beverages.

It was five-thirty by the time Jim entered the canteen. The crowd had thinned out leaving three dozen kids still huddled around the jukebox and coke bar. He saw Bonnie dancing with Kenny B., the latter relying on his reputation as an elder studsman who favored freshman girls. Jim aggressively cut in. He was stiff from practice and moved with greater awkwardness than usual. Bonnie perked up when he began to lead her around the floor. She had the confidence to know she could win over this new boy.

"I was hoping I'd see you," she said.

"I was busy getting this fat lip." The more experienced players had banged him around. "The team doctor has the same remedy for all injuries, to soak their wounds in Epsom salt. But I don't think that would work on this one." Then he asked, "These older guys bothering you?"

"More likely I'm bothering them," she said with a twinkle. She was pert and had a sassy reputation. And lovely. He had been close to attractive girls before and her beauty had not swept him away. Rearranged his hormones a little perhaps, but he was confident enough to maintain his emotional equilibrium.

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When they danced, he felt her breasts like fluffy balls of wool under her knobby-knit sweater. She could feel his wand rising.

"Did you get my note?" he asked.

"Yes. That's why I waited."

"I didn't want to come on too strong, but I wanted to see you."

"And, shazam, here I am."

"I figured you had some magic in you."

"Maybe the magic's between us."

"Where are all our girls?" he asked. In his conceit, he had already acquired them.

"Mardi, Boots and Maryjan were here and gone. 'Fraid they've deserted you, m'lord, but I've waited for His Worship."

The song on the jukebox was Sinatra's rendition of "People Will Say We're in Love" presented with a great deal of "wooing" and angelic harmonies. Recorded during the yearlong musician's strike that prevented band members from accepting studio work, backup singers had been called in to provide an "orchestral" sound for the crooner. There wasn't even a piano. Sinatra, taking time to unwind the lyrics, warbled at a slow sleepwalking speed.

The couple clung to one another, barely shifting their feet. The tempo required little effort.

"Slow motion Sinatra," Jim commented.

"That's the draggiest song I ever heard," Bonnie replied. "Any slower and they'd have to unpeel us."

"Maybe I'll get to walk you home," he said, before one of the other seniors cut in.

"So gal-lant. I'll even let you carry my books," she batted her eyelids, mocking every schoolgirl coquette.

"And you can carry my sweaty jersey," he responded.

"Too generous," she said as she slipped out of his arms and into another's.

He walked over and ordered a coke from one of the volunteer ladies behind the counter. Kenny B. and a guy named Saylor were observing Bonnie dance.

"Those freshman girls. They're a bumper crop," Kenny said.

"That one especially."

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“Yeah. She looks like a fine breeder.”

It was true that the freshmen girls ranked in beauty with the currently renowned line-up of senior girls. The sourness and stringy looks that had invaded women’s appearances during the Depression were evaporating as if the wrinkles of despair had been smoothed out in this loose money, war-exploited economy. It was true that something else was nourishing women’s complexions. Maybe it was the anticipated flashpoint encounters and sought-for sexual release stimulated by the war’s uncertainties. Or maybe they were simply picking up where their frisky sisters from the Twenties left off.

Kenny B. was sunny and light, with a boyish grin that warmed coeds’ hearts. Unkind words never struggled through his Ipana smile. A champion of womankind, he bolstered their self-esteem by attending to their comfort. A bon vivant who drove a spotless red convertible, he introduced many of these local girls to urban nightlife in Manhattan that opened up their prospects and vulnerability to more adult diversions. Jim was to learn a great deal from him about pleasing the other sex. Six months later, while he was on leave and wearing his naval officer’s training uniform, Kenny’s handsomeness would stun the girls. Bright white on white, with gold accents.

Saylor, on the other hand, was dismissive of most things, including females. He had a supercilious look that often imploded into a surly scowl. If he weren’t so nastily good-looking, his appearance would have been less inviting. Some girls swooned over him while others loathed him, mostly for his acid tongue. Saylor, an only child, took an immediate interest in Jim as if he might have located the brother he was always looking for. Maybe he could sense the conceit of the younger boy.

Standing next to them, a pretty girl overheard them talking about Bonnie.

“Good taste. She’s adorable,” said Rocky’s sister, Ally.

“Girls don’t want to be adored,” Kenny said. “They want to be listened to.”

“So says the seer. Did you hear that?” Ally remarked, as she turned away to talk to one of her other friends.

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Kenny continued, "Notice when some girls walk or dance? They have this confident look, heads high. It's because they feel good about themselves."

Jim said, "But a lot of girls walk around acting dumb."

Saylor said, "Just an act."

"Most of them are smarter than hell."

Saylor said, "They're mostly a bunch of Calamity Jane's."

Kenny said, "That's because they don't want guys to think they're smart. Here's the point. You have to keep their confidence up, then they don't have to play games."

An all-out jolly guy with a twinkly smile and personality joined them.

"Hey, Dumphy," Kenny said. "You know Jim?"

"This our brand new Lancelot?" Dumphy asked Jim. "Saw you at practice."

"If you mean freshman dollyrocker, yeah."

Jim smiled and wondered where the new arrival got his name.

Nicknames were a favorite way to humanize these uptight, inarticulate youngsters, who, like Jim, were in need of a social bridge to somewhere. Anywhere. Quite a few of these names came from the movies, some from Snow White's seven dwarves. There was Happy from Matt's class. An eighth dwarf could have been Dumphy Donovan, one of those guys, seemingly chubby, but a pillar of steel under a fleshy exterior. To match his physical strength, Dumphy displayed a masculine ebullience that bordered on brotherly love. One of the Alpha fraternity boys, he was an almost perfect member of any male club. There was a bright streak that ran through him enhancing the sharpness of his manliness, a readiness of mind that made his school counselors gasp. Last year, he had posted one of the highest Regents math scores ever recorded in the state. But one would have to be a diviner to comprehend such brilliance, because Dumphy never shared more than a broad smile and an easy disposition, holding in his ambitions and desires. Like nearly all his contemporaries, he was suffering some form of unrequited love. Sensuous Valerie Des Pres had dazzled him since the moment he laid eyes on her, and it was only in the last month

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that she had finally blown some smoke his way as a sign of recognition.

Dumphy said to Jim, "You know what you need? You need a nickname. I think I'm going to call the two of you," indicating Bonnie, "Duke and Duchess."

"Naw. They're more like Popeye and Olive Oyl," countered Saylor.

"You need glasses. Olive Oyl is a tube of toothpaste compared to her."

Kenny and Dumphy turned to talk to a bystander named Suds, while Saylor, evaluating Jim in his usual snide way, asked, "Any extra-curricular activity other than football, like the *Cub Reporter*?"—the high school paper.

"Hadn't thought much about it," Jim replied. "My home room class put me on the dance committee."

"Reason I bring it up is because I like to write stories," Saylor said. "This year they put me on sports."

"I'm writing a novel," Jim said.

"WHAT?"

"Yeah. About Navy fliers in the Pacific."

"That's weird. How did you get started on that?"

"I dug up stories about the Midway and Coral Sea battles, and got hooked."

"Funny subject, isn't it?"

Jim answered, "Who knows why? After a while, I felt like I was flying with those guys. I just wanted to be them."

Saylor watched the emotion rising in the new kid.

Jim continued, "Those dive bombers and fighter pilots went through a lot, like those guys from Torpedo Eight. I feel as if I'm pasted to them. Stuck to them."

"You got to let me read it." No one had ever asked Jim to read his writing before.

"Sure. I made a carbon."

In a while, Bonnie came up to Jim.

"Ready to go?" he asked.

"Just want you to know I turned down a ride from Kenny."



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“Good for your leg muscles to walk uphill.”

He didn’t know, but that was a low blow. Early illness had weakened her legs.

“Let me grab my things.”

He helped her into a pure white, perfectly tailored jacket.

Standing nearby, a neighbor of Bonnie’s had been watching them. Who better to bother than freshmen? “Where did you find him?” the older, freckled girl asked.

“He’s my new chum,” Bonnie replied.

“I’d watch him,” the upperclasswoman said. “He’s got beady eyes.”

Jim was stung by the remark. No one had ever insulted him before in public. He was more startled than anything.

Bonnie stood up to her, “What made you say such a thing?”

“Just warning you.”

“I don’t know where that came from,” Bonnie said as they stepped outside. She was feeling bad because she wanted everything to run smoothly with this new boy. “I’ll have to rethink liking her.”

Their conversation was easy, which was an accomplishment for him. It was almost as if they knew they were to be connected. Bang just like that on their second day of meeting one another—the frightening awareness that they would open to each other, accepting the idea that mutual vulnerability was sensitizing both. Their potential closeness surprised them.

Bonnie thrived on gossip, like most of her girlfriends. Her older sister had been stirring her curiosity about the school’s hi-jinx for years. Big Sis had warned Bonnie through cautionary tales—things like: Keep your mouth closed when you kiss and keep your knees together. Don’t have more than one drink when out on a date. No wrestling matches—Bonnie’s head was filled with shibboleths and juicy tidbits. Sharing stories about dating were part of her social education, not that she would ever remember which piece of slander she had, in turn, shared with others.

With Jim, she stuck to more familiar people and places. Did he like to ice-skate? (Yes) Did he play lacrosse? (No, baseball.) Would he be working during the school year? (Yes, at the bowling alley

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and at the Village Bath Club.) What was his favorite school subject? (He didn't have one.) Not even one? (Well, he liked to write.)

"Have you ever seen a Broadway stage show?" she asked.

"No, but I get into Times Square all the time to hear the big bands. I've seen about a dozen of them—Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey, Claude Thornhill. Even Cab Calloway."

"I wish my mom would let me take the train in."

Bonnie's mother, a former southern belle named May from Painted Rock, Alabama, kept a generous but firm grip on her two daughters' activities. But her hold was slipping. Her oldest, away at nursing school, had not even asked permission to join her beau for a college weekend.

Once home, Bonnie introduced Jim to Mrs. Cassidy.

"How come I haven't heard about you before?"

"I was at St. Mary's."

"A Catholic boy?"

"Yes."

The immediate linking up of their two personalities filled Bonnie and Jim with feelings of elation, as if they had both been victorious in their ability to extend their egos to one another. Both were a little reckless and eager to give away their affection. Actually, it was more like keeping score than uniting emotionally—their relationship to be read by others as a social match.

Bonnie was in the habit of spending hours on the phone every evening. When she reached Mardi that night, she confessed that she liked Jim.

Mardi said, "Just keep your eyes on him. He tends to waver. But when he hugs you, you'll know you've been hugged."

\* \* \*

A few days later, his mother asked Jim if he had written a note to his Uncle Francis expressing his condolences on the passing of his dead father's parent, Jim's natural grandfather. Of course he hadn't.

"That's plain thoughtless," his mother said to him.

It wasn't that he had been such a bad kid up to now but he was beginning to show some uncaring streaks. So what, he said to

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himself, that he didn't spread a blanket of goodwill across his family and friends. It wasn't rampant selfishness that kept him from connecting with others; he was simply lazy. He *was* careless. It wasn't a matter of forgetfulness either. He instinctively knew the right thing to do and was cognizant of his own neglect of good manners. He knew he evaded the closeness that could develop from good deeds and actions. In the old movies, sometimes the front plane was actually frozen in place though the subject appeared to be moving because the scenery in the back was shifting. The person was stationary, but the illusion produced by a whirling background implied motion in the foreground. Jim often let the back noise of his hubris cover up his failure to make upfront choices. If he could stir up things around him, maybe he could escape responsibility.

\* \* \*

At six-thirty on Saturday evening, he walked up Flower Hill to pick up Bonnie. They lied to her mother that they were going to the movies downtown but instead detoured to Bobby Dare's party. In Mrs. Cassidy's view, it was bad enough that Bonnie was going out on a date in her freshman year, but she had put her foot down when it came to parties where, heaven forbid, "feeling up girls" might be prevalent. However, she had succumbed to her husband's view that things had changed since 1925 in Dixie and that Bonnie was a sensible girl.

About sixty kids showed up at the party and the pair quickly mixed with the crowd, mostly freshmen and sophomores. For many it was their first party and their faces wore the flush of excited anticipation. Dancing had already begun in the dining room where the rug was rolled back. Upended, the carpet stood guard in the corner. A big pressed-board record player spun the latest hits. When it came time to Lindy the cutlery in the kitchen rattled in vibration.

Everyone was dressed up. The boys all wore checked jackets and cloth ties. The freshmen girls mostly wore dresses that celebrated the new fall fashions; they appeared crisp, blossoming into early maturity. Bootsie, the thin blonde, wore a red plaid jumper over a white blouse. Bonnie appeared in a flounced sleeveless black outfit; her overall look seemed slightly overblown,

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designed to match her exploding bust line. Mardi stayed with a skirt and sweater, indicating that in her reduced-income household, new clothes were an issue. Household financial problems often caused friction that showed up in her temper, which could heat with intensity. Maryjan wore a pleated tartan skirt and blue jacket. The girls, more developed and usually taller than the boys, wore flat shoes partially to compensate for their height, a problem that tiny Bonnie needn't bother with, especially with Jim. Their complexions, though sometimes bumpy, were shining.

Jim was proud to be with Bonnie. He wondered what they looked like together, what image they cast. He reminded himself to have a picture taken of the two of them standing close. He had already wheedled some photos of her modeling the dress she wore tonight. She and Maryjan had taken photos of themselves sitting on a boulder on Bonnie's front lawn—posing like magazine mannequins, unsmiling and aloof.

When tropical music emerged from the record player, the kids recognized the Conga rhythm and started jockeying for position. A line of dancers immediately took shape. Good-natured Frankie, dancer extraordinaire, was at the head of the line, and creative as always, he led the long, curving, single-file line out the front door and onto the street, in and around trees and bushes and finally into the backyard. A fifty-foot long line of high-steppers, each holding on to the waist of the person in front, twisted into the neighbors' yards as the song burst out of the open windows, a swaying string of kids, laughing and chanting *One, Two, Three, Kick* through the back gardens, celebrating their arrival into the social world. On parade.

It was a warm September evening and many of the guests sat outside. When the sun set and darkness spread across the lawn, the Dare boys wheeled out a half-keg of beer and tapped it. Most of the girls refrained from drinking while a majority of the boys indulged, Jim among them. During the uncorking ceremony and the first drawdowns, the guys stood in a circle around the keg telling sports stories. The girls chatted away under a trellis that ran along the back side of the property.

GERALD F. SWEENEY

"I don't know if it's because it's their first party or what, but some of these girls have overdone it with their falsies," Bonnie said to Mardi, both voluptuous.

"Did you see Lucy? Her bra inserts are the size of seat cushions."

In a country where the contours of a girl's chest were as important as her manners, boosting the content of one's figure was normal practice. The only thing a girl had to do was look at movie posters, the pin-ups in *Esquire* (currently banned by the post office for its Vargas drawings) and two-piece swimsuit ads to understand where her appeal to males lay. Though the boys might not know the exact terminology concerning alphabetically delineated brassiere cups, they were aware that "forty" signified magical mammaries that would in all likelihood reappear in their dreams. Padded or stuffed bras were part of the sweater enlargement campaign to snare a male's attention. With Jim, the maneuver always worked.

As the party moved into the ten o'clock hour, urges brought on a change in mood. Some couples were seen necking behind the bushes as the beer loosened their inhibitions. Other kids, sticky with hormones, clung to one another.

Jim and Bonnie didn't stay for the emotional fireworks. They were one of the first couples to leave. She had promised to be in by eleven. When they reached home, Bonnie took him by the hand around to her mother's garden. Bonnie had years before decided that was where she wanted to be kissed for the first time. Electricity shot through them when their lips met.

\* \* \*

Ken and Saylor from the upper classes were soon shepherding Jim around school, steering him through the gossip network and reputation-building process that stemmed from teenage competition. Ken, with his sunny disposition and slick manner, was known as a great flirt. His dancing abilities were celebrated every afternoon in the new teen canteen and to be chosen to dance with him was a signal honor that Mardi Bobbette, among others, enjoyed. Ken's knack for appearing at school dances with girls that no one had ever seen before had friends speculating on what beauty contest he

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would draw from next, choosing girls across Long Island and beyond. He was currently thinking about taking Jim on one of his ventures. Saylor, too, saw in Jim a kid with possibilities that needed polishing and planned to include him in the country club dance circuit that would soon begin, events that were the social highlights of the year. Saylor, smooth and egocentric, also intended to sweep Jim up into his fraternity's initiation process.

\* \* \*

Word from the Midwest continued to rattle Jim's family. The Chicago branch had pooled their money to live together: his grandmother, his Aunt Marge and her baby and for a while, Jim's Uncle Jack. First Margie's husband had been drafted, followed by Jack. Marge was forced back into the job market to make ends meet because Army pay was only \$21 a month plus a small living allowance for married GIs. Jim's grandmother had been enrolled as babysitter. Then disaster struck.

The bad news reached the East Coast. Jim came home one afternoon and found his mother crying. He couldn't remember the last time he had seen Gracie, who was at the zenith of her life's achievements, weep. Word had arrived about her brother.

"Jack's been diagnosed with TB. They've had him lying in that god-forsaken army hospital for months without figuring what was wrong with him. And now they say he's going to die. . ." She erupted in grief. "They can't get any of that new miracle drug to keep him alive."

Jim listened to her, embarrassed at her distress, but continued to build his barricade against pain.

\* \* \*

High school gymnasiums are remembered for their basketball games and tumbling mats splayed across brightly polished wooden floors, but even more warmly recalled because of the dances held there, times of closeness and mounting sexuality. At Manhasset High, the gym was the site of the Soph Hop, the Junior and Senior Proms and the graduating class's Senior Frolic that followed the distribution of diplomas. The hard-reflecting surfaces that

Crashing into Sunrise portrays a rowdy youth's transition from teenage mayhem to the awareness of the larger world around him. It depicts the emotional and intellectual upheaval of a young man of the 1940s surrounded by his adventurous buddies and the girls who shine along his path. This is Jim Mahoney, a reckless teenager with an unfinished personality and flawed character who discovers the force and power of ideas, books, love and music in college. Crashing into Sunrise is one of several stand-alone novels about the lives of an Irish-American family in the 20th century.

## **Crashing into Sunrise**

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