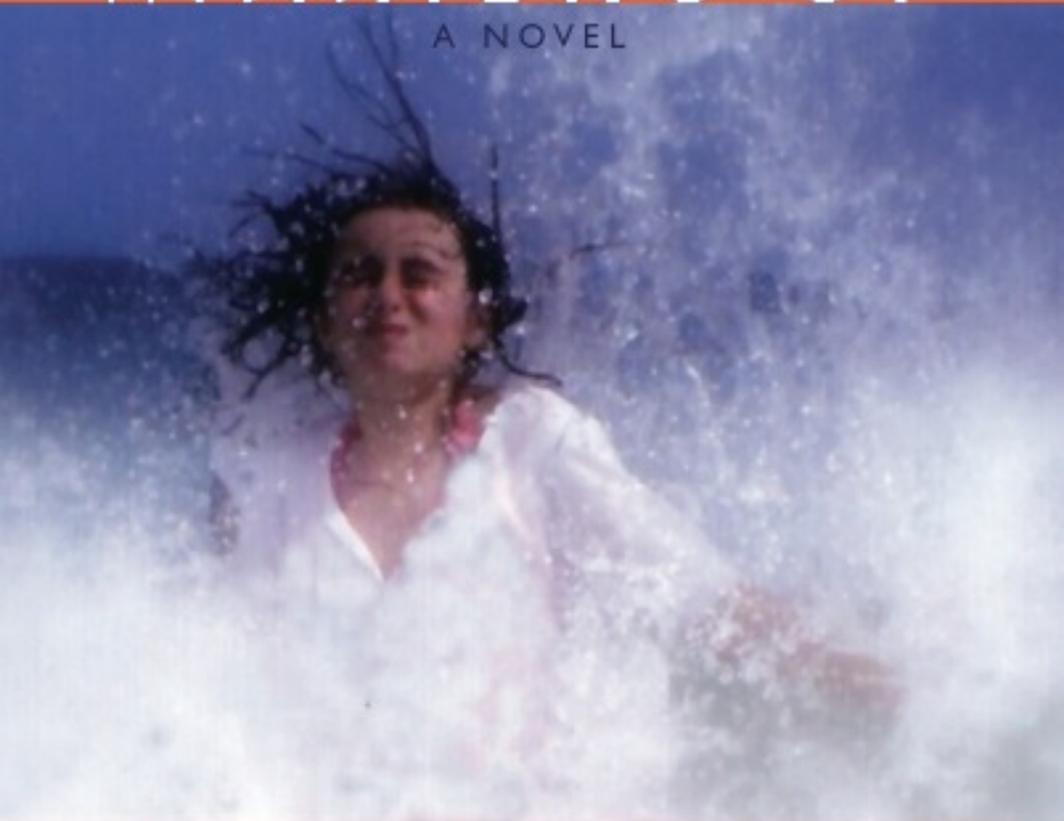
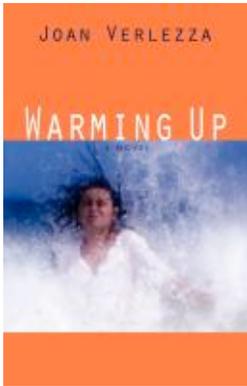


JOAN VERLEZZA

WARMING UP

A NOVEL





When a new-kid-on-the-block steals an heirloom harmonica from a beloved elderly neighbor, a group of friends plot to take matters into their own hands. All the kids on Second Avenue have grown up listening to Stan play his harmonica. Life in West Harbor has a rhythm and Stan's music is part of it. But this summer, the presence of a new family will change the tune forever.

Warming Up

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First Edition

One

It was the summer my friend died because Billy Canner was a thief. It was the summer I broke my leg while committing my first crime, and it was the first time I saw life and death in balance. I learned that life goes on, no matter what.

That summer was not my introduction to death. When I was four years old, my mother left for an evening with friends and never came home, but her absence was something I held at a distance. It was an empty space I avoided by averting my gaze. Like the condensation on a window that softens the view, I had my defenses in place. Of course, sooner or later, the hollow place where she once had been would be impossible to ignore, but the bigger the ship, the more slowly it turns. The reference points and landmarks we use to navigate ourselves change reluctantly and painfully.

The arrival of summer 1966 also marked the end of my time at Washington Elementary School. West Harbor was getting ready to open a new high school and the old one had been designated our first junior high. My brother Rich and his class would be the last to complete all eight grades at Washington and the first freshman class at the new high school. While Rich and his friends wore that knowledge as a badge, my classmates and I were just as certain of our own sophistication. We had already turned twelve, and we would be spending seventh and eighth grades at a bigger school, changing classes and eating in a cafeteria instead of going home for lunch every day.

Even now, those events are so clear that I can still see the sights, hear the sounds and feel the unfolding of everything that happened. The last day of school was hotter than usual for the third week in June. At noon dismissal, the front walk, the lawn and the sidewalks were full of chattering children. Boys pulled

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off ties and girls shed sweaters while handing report cards and award certificates to their waiting mothers. A breeze rustled the leaves of the maple trees along the front of the red brick building, and traffic on Brown Street slowed to a crawl for two blocks from the beginning of the schoolyard to the corner of Washington Avenue.

I was enjoying the scene when Susan Benson came prancing down the stone steps, her blonde hair in a thick braid adorned with a pink ribbon. She wore a dress of pink satin, crisp and perfect, with small roses in full bloom everywhere on the skirt. The white lace overlaid on the yoke of her dress completed her doll-like appearance. And there I stood in my navy blue and white cotton skirt and top, my cropped brown hair no match for her golden tresses. Her mother came down the steps next, and took hold of Susan's hand. She looked like a mannequin in Salley's Department Store in downtown New Harbor.

"Bye, Marcella. Have a nice summer," Susan said.

It was unusual that Miss Perfect bothered to talk to me, but whatever I thought of Susan and her clique, there was an adult present, so I answered, "Thanks. You, too. Hello, Mrs. Benson."

Mrs. Benson's light brown hair was tucked up into a French Twist and a wisp of bangs fell over her forehead. She wore a dark blue dress made of a shiny fabric that was tight over her shoulders and bosom, but full in the skirt. A purse and high heels of black patent leather made her look like someone's mother on television.

"Hello, Marcella," she said as she bent down to peer at my award for Highest Achievement in Reading. "Is Mrs..." Her eyes narrowed and her smile changed to a look of concentration.

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“Oh dear,” she said, forcing the smile back onto her lips. “Is it Vent-ee-mig-lee-a? And you have such pretty blue eyes. And look at those freckles. Isn’t that surprising?” She straightened up and let a small giggle escape. “Well, anyway, is your mother here? I’d love to say ‘hello’.”

“It’s Ventimiglia,” I said, correcting her pronunciation. “My father’s coming to pick me up.”

“Oh, well, he must have a special job to be able to do that. Mr. Benson could never get away in the middle of the day.”

“He works at night.”

“Oh. Isn’t that nice?” She lifted the braid from her daughter’s back and tugged on one side of the bow. “Well, you have a good summer, dear. We’ll see you next year.”

Susan pulled on her mother’s hand and, as they walked away, the lingering scent of Mrs. Benson’s perfume made me glad they were leaving. I felt better when I noticed the ribbon on Susan’s braid was coming loose.

The next person out the door was Kathleen O’Connor. We had been friends since Mrs. McDougal’s first-grade class, and I was always happy to see her because she made me laugh.

“Hey!” she said. “Why were you talking to Susie Benson?”

“She talked to me first. She was being nice because her mother was there.”

Kathleen launched into a pantomime of a girlie girl, as we referred to them. She stepped forward with her right foot and thrust her right shoulder out with her hands on her hips. When she threw her dark blonde hair over one shoulder, then over the other, it was dead on. My encounter with the Bensons began to fade.

“We filled the pool yesterday,” she said. “And my mother said to invite you to lunch. Are you coming home with me?”

Mrs. O’Connor didn’t wear patent leather shoes or shiny blue dresses. She would never remind anyone of a TV mom, but

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everyone was welcome at the O'Connor house. There were three boys in the family and three girls, and when you added the neighborhood kids who always gathered there, you could get happily lost in the crowd.

"Well that sounds good," I admitted. "But my father's supposed to pick me up."

"Your father? How can he do that? Isn't he sleeping?"

"Well, not today. He said he'd come to pick me up because it's Promotion Day."

"Oh, that's cool. So come over later and we'll go in the pool. Your brother will be there, I'm sure. I think my brother invited the whole crew." She lowered her voice a little. "Bobby Pal, too."

The sound of a familiar car horn interrupted us. He was there smiling, and waving, and inching along in his green '56 Buick.

"Oh there he is. I gotta go. I'll be over later."

"Ok. Come as soon as you can."

He was freshly shaved and ruddy, dressed in a jacket and tie, his red hair standing straight up from his forehead. The crisp white collar of his shirt made me wish Susan Benson and her mother could see us. At noon the blue of his eyes was surrounded by red from fighting sleep, but he was there, just like he promised he would be. And I thought, 'Who needs braids and pink ribbons and high-heeled shoes and perfume, anyway?'

When we got home, my grandmother was waiting, dressed the way I'll always remember her. Strands of gray hair escaped from the kerchief that was always tied around her head when she worked in the kitchen. Her yellow cotton dress was printed with green carriages drawn by a single horse, and the apron that covered her clothes from the waist down was damp where she had dried her hands.

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She made a fuss over my grades and my award but then got down to her real mission: getting me to eat. Vanda Battistti was raised in a time and place that expected women to be sturdy. She was sure my skinny legs were proof something was wrong. I ate the roasted chicken and vegetables from the night before, but one plate of anything wasn't enough for her.

"Have a little more," she urged. "*Ancora un po.*" She found it hard to believe a person could live on what I ate.

"Nonn, I can't eat too much. I'm going swimming later," I explained.

"Ok," she sighed, not satisfied at all. "It's just that you're so skinny. A girl should have something on her bones."

There was no use in arguing. You just had to leave the room. Upstairs in my room, I emptied the top drawer of my dresser but didn't find my bathing suit, so I stuffed the contents back in. The second drawer held no suit either, so I pushed the jumble of clothes in and forced it shut. I had the third drawer open and was throwing shorts and tops back over my shoulders onto the bed and floor, when she arrived in the doorway and gasped.

"What are you doing? Look what a mess you're making! *Guarda che disordine!* What are you looking for? *O Dio!*" She looked up at the ceiling and shook her head in disbelief.

I wondered what she was looking for up there and realized the situation called for some skill. You didn't want to get stuck cleaning your room when the O'Connor pool was waiting.

"Nonn, I gotta find my bathing suit. Kathleen is waiting for me. We're going swimming in her pool. Mrs. O'Connor wants me to be there."

"Fine, go swimming. But do you have to make a mess in the whole house?"

That was typical; a few clothes on the floor were 'a mess in the whole house'.

“*Ecco*,” she said. She reached up and plucked the suit from a pile of neatly folded clothes on the top shelf of my closet. When she turned around the corners of her mouth were twitching as she tried not to laugh.

I looked at the pile of clothes on the bed and the floor and looked up at her. “I’ll pick it all up. Don’t worry.”

She handed me the bathing suit and, gesturing toward the heap of fabric and color at her feet, her expression changed. Then came the sigh, the rapid Italian directed to no one in particular and that’s when you knew it was now or never. I stuffed everything into the drawer, slammed it shut and took off. Out on the sidewalk, I looked at the yellow-and white-striped suit and smiled. I had escaped.

I knew it was a good thing she and my grandfather had moved in with us. The problem was she was always insisting I learn to cook and clean and take care of other domestic tasks she was sure I would ‘need to know someday.’ My view of the future had nothing to do with housework. I was going to travel around the world and write stories about the people I met and the things I saw.

At Kathleen’s house I ran upstairs to her room and changed into my suit. The boys were already in the water playing basketball around a floating hoop. As usual, the game got more intense and physical as it went on. Kathleen, Rosie DiBiasi, and I sat on the back steps and watched. It looked like you would be taking your life in your hands if you got in the water with those guys. After a few minutes, Kathleen spoke up to her oldest brother.

“Hey Kevin, we would like to use the pool, too, you know.”

Kevin turned to her, red faced and breathing hard. His ruddy complexion was already looking sunburned, even from the early summer sun.

“What’s stopping you? Jump in.”

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“What’s stopping us is you and your wild friends. We can’t swim with you guys acting like that. The pool belongs to everybody. Mom says so.”

“Fine.” He turned to Rich, Bobby Palendrini, and Rosie’s brother Al. “We gotta stop and let them in, guys, or we’ll hear it from my mother.”

Things calmed down and we climbed in. Then it was really summer. The cool water against your skin, the hum of the filter, and the smell of chlorine; there was nothing like it. When Mrs. O’Connor leaned out the back door and announced it was dinnertime, it was hard to believe the afternoon had passed.

For dinner that night at our house we had a cookout at the big wooden table on the lawn behind the garage. My grandfather had built a fireplace made of a triangle of bricks that rose to a chimney above a fire-box. On both sides there was a two-foot high compartment made of three brick walls topped with a slab of concrete. In those nooks, he would store branches and twigs along with broken-up boxes that had arrived the fall before filled with the grapes he pressed and made into wine.

On crisp October days we arranged the fruit-soaked boxes into long tunnels the width of a single box that formed the roof. The best part about climbing inside was the sweet smell of wood and grapes; the worst part was swatting away the bees that gathered around the pieces of fruit still clinging to the boards. When we tired of our game and the weather got too cold, the crates were broken up and piled into the fireplace to wait for summer.

If you were in just the right spot when one of those boards caught fire, you could smell the grape juice that had lain dormant all winter. That night I caught a whiff of the fruity scent and thought of Mr. Cratsky, who lived in the corner

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house, and barbecued in a steel bowl full of charcoal briquettes. I was sure food cooked that way couldn't possibly taste as good.

Juicy hotdogs on crispy, toasted rolls were a sure sign of summer. So was the fact that Rich and I got to stay outside after dinner, even after dark. That evening, Kathleen and Kevin walked down three blocks from their house. From next door, Rosie and Al DiBiasi showed up. When Bobby Palandrini joined us, we girls thought it couldn't get much better.

We made fun of the older girls when they fawned over Bobby, but the truth was I was starting to understand why they did it. He was tall for fourteen, almost as tall as my father was. His black hair crowned an olive complexion, and when he smiled the corners of his dark eyes crinkled. The way he looked that summer was my first understanding of what 'handsome' meant. I wasn't completely comfortable feeling that way about my brother's best friend, but I felt happy whenever Bobby was around.

Rich, Kevin, Bobby and Al were in such a good mood they were willing to join in a game of hide-and-seek. It ran across front lawns, up and down driveways, and into and out of backyards. By the time darkness had fallen and the street lamps were shining I was actually ready for bed. It had been a good day, an exciting day. I fell asleep thinking it was going to be a wonderful summer.

Two

When I woke up the next morning, my father was in bed after a night's work and my brother was off already, probably at the O'Connor house. My grandfather left early every day to work at the site of a new office tower in New Harbor and, at just before nine o'clock, my grandmother was probably in the basement doing laundry. After a late night the warmth of the sheets was irresistible in the cool house. I stretched and yawned, listening to the voices of the neighborhood until the thought I might be missing something made me get up.

Summer was my favorite time of year. The sheer freedom of the long, hot days, with nowhere to go made you feel like you were at a carnival. What ride should we go on next? It was the mid-sixties; the baby boom was swelling schools and neighborhoods with an endless supply of children of every age. You just had to step out onto the sidewalk and look in either direction. Each house spilled out three or four kids every morning.

Down in the empty kitchen, the Frosted Flakes made a ringing sound as they landed in the glass bowl and the bottle of milk in the refrigerator had just enough left in it. I sat down to eat and read the back of the box.

I was crunching through my breakfast when I heard June DiBiasi, Rosie's mother call from across the driveway that separated our houses. The DiBiasi family had lived next door since before I started school. People like to say they grew up with so-and-so, but it wasn't just something to say where Rosie DiBiasi and I were concerned. We really did grow up in each other's lives.

June wanted to know where her youngest daughter was. Rosie's four-year-old sister Allison was always wandering off. You couldn't turn your back on her for a minute. One Saturday

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morning that May her absence had thrown the whole neighborhood into an uproar. After Mr. DiBiasi called the police to report her missing, my father and grandparents joined her anxious parents on the sidewalk and did their best to assure them their daughter would be found safe and sound. Mr. Cratsky ran over to see what was happening and offered to take his car to search for her.

In the middle of all of this, my grandmother suggested she might have been hungry and had wandered away looking for something to eat. Rosie and I turned to each other, our eyes locked, and we ran to our bicycles. The Food Basket, on the corner of Campbell and Brown, had a breakfast counter. Good behavior while your parents shopped was sometimes rewarded with a doughnut and a glass of milk.

We didn't say a word as we rode past DeMarco's Grocery Store and reached the part of Brown Street lined by three story houses with front porches reaching to the sky. We rode on past the schoolyard and the quiet, empty building. On the next block the light at Campbell Avenue was just changing and we pulled up to the Food Basket, dropped our bikes in front of the window, and pushed past two women carrying groceries, who tsked at us.

There she was, without a care in the world, sitting on the first stool by the window, swinging her feet, and putting the last bit of a jelly doughnut into her already full mouth.

"Allison! How did you get here?" Rosie demanded.

"I walked," she answered, some of the contents of her mouth spilling out.

"Everyone's looking for you. Mom and Dad are worried."

"I'm here. I'm having a doughnut."

"And how did you pay for it?"

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“She hasn’t.” The waitress was within earshot and joined the conversation. “She told me her mother would pay and I figured she must be somewhere in the store.”

Rosie and I stared at each other.

“It’s Ok. We can call this one a treat,” the waitress said, smiling at Alison. “But next time, make sure your mother is here with you, Ok?”

We rode home with Allison balanced on the back fender of Rosie’s bike and were the heroes of the day.

On that first morning of summer vacation, I wondered if Allison had gotten hungry again. Then Rosie called to her mother from out on the sidewalk.

“She’s right here. I found her sitting on the bench at the bus stop.”

“Oh, that’s great. Bring her over here,” June called back.

The neighborhood was up and running. It was time to go out and see what the day would bring. When I stepped out the back door the concrete steps were already warming up in the sun and the side lawn was buzzing. I sat on the steps and felt a thinking-too-much mood coming on. I knew that could be a mistake, but it was like falling down a hole, so I just gave in because it was a familiar place. I was comfortable with my solitary self even if some people thought I should act like I was happy all the time. Once I had heard Rosie’s Aunt Mary tell my father that I always looked sad. He said something too low for me to hear and they looked at me with serious eyes. I avoided Aunt Mary after that.

Rosie was always warning me that if I acted grumpy, I’d never have a boyfriend. Even though Bobby Palendrini’s face had come to my mind, I told her I couldn’t care less about having a boyfriend. For once I agreed with my grandmother: I had plenty of time for that. Having a boyfriend meant you

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would get married and settle down. Why would I want to be stuck in one place my whole life?

“What’s the matter?” my grandmother asked from behind the screen door.

“What makes you think there’s something the matter?” I asked, turning with a start.

A thin smile moved across her lips. “You look sad. *Cosa ce?*”

“Well I’m not sad. I’m fine. So leave me alone.”

Her eyebrows moved together and a furrow appeared in her forehead. “You shouldn’t talk to me like that. I’m only asking you how you are.”

“I don’t need anyone to ask me how I am.”

“Of course you do. Everyone needs somebody to care about them. I only want to know how you’re feeling, that’s all.”

“I don’t care what anybody wants to know. Go away and leave me alone.” I turned my back to her.

The old woman moved faster than anyone would expect of someone her age. Before I could get to my feet she had the door open and was stepping out onto the landing, whiskbroom in hand. I jumped up, ran around the corner of the house and down the driveway. The screen door slammed and I heard her call out, half in Italian and half in English. I turned to see if she was gaining on me, but she had stopped at the corner of the house and was slicing the air with the broom.

I took off down Brown Street, headed to Kathleen’s house. It was about ten o’clock and the day felt good on my arms. On a summer morning in West Harbor a light wind might come from the water and the air could be cool on your arms and legs, but that never lasted. The sun would climb in the sky, the day would heat up and, by noon, you were thinking about the beach or getting invited to someone’s pool.

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I found Rosie, Kathleen, and Betty Simpson, who lived across the street from Kathleen, sitting on the green metal furniture on the O'Connor front porch. They were playing checkers and arguing about whether *I Dream of Jeanie* or *Bewitched* was a better show. The younger O'Connor children and their friends were running over the lawn and side yard, engrossed in their own games. Rich, Kevin, Al and Bobby were in the street, throwing a baseball and assuring themselves they would have the best team in the Parks and Recreation League that year.

I joined the girls' discussion and we pretended not to watch the boys. With no help from me the talk turned to what kind of houses we would all live in when we were married.

"I'll need at least four bedrooms," Rosie told us. "I won't be able to do with less." She shook her head to ward off any disagreement and her thick, auburn hair, pulled back into a pony tail, swished over her shoulders.

"Four bedrooms!?" Betty couldn't believe her ears.

"Four bedrooms is a mansion," Kathleen said.

"Well, I need at least that many since I plan to have six or seven children," Rosie continued.

"You're gonna do nothing but cook and clean," I warned her. "Why don't you travel around the world with me? We could have a ball!"

"You don't need four bedrooms for six kids," Kathleen informed us. "There're six kids in our house and we only have three." She held up her hand to count. "You need one for the mother and father, one for the boys, and one for the girls. It works fine," she assured us as she swatted a bee away.

I was about to agree with Kathleen when I glanced down Marshall Street to see Billy Canner riding his bicycle in our direction. He didn't look happy. But then, he never did. His younger brother, Scott was riding a few feet behind him.

I elbowed Kathleen. "Uh oh. Look who's coming this way."

Kathleen looked up and gasped. "Kevin," she called to her brother. "Look who's coming!"

Kevin threw the ball to Al and turned to see what was up. "So what? This is a free country. He can ride by if he wants to." He turned back to his friend, his glove in the air and waited for the ball. The rest of the boys lowered their gloves and watched the Canner brothers as they approached.

In March the Canner family had moved into the gray shingle house on the corner of White Street and Second Avenue, across the street from us and next door to our friend, Stan. They had come to West Harbor so their father could take a job in the tire factory. Billy joined the eighth grade at Washington School and Scott was in the sixth grade with me. One morning, soon after they arrived, we were all waiting by the front door of the school for the bell to ring and the day to begin. Bobby and Kevin got into a friendly pushing match and Kevin stepped back into Scott, knocking him to the ground. Kevin apologized, helped the younger boy up, and when Scott assured him he was fine, Kevin brushed the dirt off him and sent him on his way. A few minutes later, Billy came around the corner of the school, dragging his brother by the arm, angry and demanding an explanation.

"Who pushed my brother down?" he wanted to know. He pulled Scott forward as if he were an exhibit. The younger boy kept his eyes on the ground.

"Nobody pushed your brother," Bobby Pal explained. "We were fooling around and we knocked into him by accident. He's not hurt. There's no problem."

"Don't tell me when there's a problem. I'll tell you. Somebody knocked my brother down and he's hurt," Billy insisted, pointing to a scrape on Scott's arm.

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Scott lifted his head. I thought he looked more afraid of his brother than anything else. Billy waited for an answer while the boys looked at each other, at a loss for what to say. The bell rang, but nobody paid any attention to it.

“Billy, I’m not really hurt,” Scott said. “It’s just a small scrape. I’ll go to the nurse’s office and get a band aid. It’s nothing.”

“It’s not ‘nothing’ when someone pushes you around. You should never let anyone push you around. Now, who was it that knocked you down?” Billy was getting angrier as he insisted on answers and got none.

Kevin walked up to him so they were eye to eye. “I’m the one who knocked into him, Canner, and it was an accident. Why don’t you calm down a little?”

A crowd had gathered, expecting a fight, when Vice-Principal McLean came out onto the steps. “What’s going on here?” he demanded to know. “Didn’t you all just hear the bell ring? It’s time for class. Let’s go! Now!”

He pointed to the door, taking the stance he always did when he gave orders. Billy and Kevin lingered in a stare, but the crowd had started to disperse. Pupils headed to their classrooms, and it all dissolved into murmuring and shuffling.

That morning, in front of the O’Connor house, it was clear Billy hadn’t let go of the idea that Kevin was out to get his little brother. I gathered with the girls at the porch railing and watched as the boys gathered slowly into a group. Billy pulled up, slid forward off the seat and stood straddling the bar of his bicycle. Scott rode up even with him and took the same stance, looking down at the road. Billy was wiry and thinner than the other fourteen year-olds. His dark hair was longer than most of the kids wore theirs, and it was usually disheveled and looked like it needed to be washed. Combined with an almost constant scowl, it gave him the look of someone who brought trouble

wherever he went. Scott, who was not yet twelve, had a heavier build, and a softer appearance. In spite of the fact that he outweighed Billy, he was clearly intimidated by his brother.

“Who took my brother’s glove?” Billy asked, his eyes narrowed and set on Kevin.

“Nobody took your brother’s glove,” Rich answered for everyone.

Billy ignored him and glared at Kevin. “I think it was you, O’Connor.”

“You’re crazy, man. What would I want with your brother’s glove?”

As usual, Bobby had the calm head and tried to reason with Billy. “He’s right, Canner. Look at the new glove he has. Why would he want Scott’s glove?”

“I don’t care what kind of glove he has,” Billy insisted. “He was the last one at the field last Tuesday and that’s the last time Scott saw his glove. So he has it, and if he doesn’t give it back right now, he’s gonna be very sorry.”

As he had been that day on the schoolyard, Kevin was annoyed at the false charges. “I didn’t steal your brother’s junky glove. Who would want it?”

“Then where is it?” Billy wanted to know.

“How should I know, stupid? Tell your brother to watch where he puts his things.”

Billy was sputtering, “We’ll call the police if you don’t give it back.”

“Yeah, sure,” Kevin taunted. “Tell your father to call the police. He doesn’t do anything else all day, anyway.” We all knew Mr. Canner’s job at the tire factory had disappeared after only two months when the firm announced it was moving south.

Kevin turned his back on Billy and nodded to his friends. They were laughing and moving off to resume their game of catch when Billy threw his bicycle to the ground and charged.

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In the next second, Billy and Kevin were rolling on the ground, arms and legs flailing, huffing and puffing, their faces getting redder and redder.

When it looked like Billy might actually win, Al pulled Kevin out and jumped in. Al was the youngest of the boys, but he was the heaviest. Sometimes just the sight of him was enough for a kid to back off, but it didn't work that time. By then, Billy was kicking and swinging for his life. Al outweighed him, but Billy fast and tough. Al was having a hard time with him.

Rosie yelled to her brother. "Get 'im, Al!"

Kathleen was coaching, too. "Watch his feet! He's a kicker!"

Betty knew exactly what to do. "Grab him by the ears!"

The boys were yelling and the girls were screaming when Mr. Marinsky, the old man who lived next door to the O'Connors, drove up. He got out of his car and hurried over to try to pull the boys apart. That was proving difficult until Betty's mother came out onto her porch and yelled from across the street.

"What's going on over there? You kids stop that fighting immediately! Betty, get over here! You kids better all go home. I'm going to call your mothers."

I thought of my grandmother answering the phone and trying to understand what Mrs. Simpson was saying, while my father slept through the whole thing. Mr. Marinsky's efforts and Mrs. Simpson's threats finally worked. Al and Billy got up and glared at each other, sweating and puffing. With nothing else left to do, Billy picked up his bike and, with a fierce look in Kevin's direction, he rode off with Scott trailing behind. The boys grumbled, but it was all over.

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Mr. Marinsky was breathing a little heavy and shaking a crooked index finger at all of us. "You children should know better than to fight. That's no way to solve anything."

There was some murmuring and head-hanging.

"Sorry, Mr. Marinsky. We didn't start it."

"Yeah, sorry."

"We were just watching," Rosie offered for the girls.

"You can find something better to do on such a nice day, can't you?" the old man asked.

"Yeah, sure we can."

"Maybe we should go down to the park and practice."

"Good. Do something constructive with your day." The old man turned and walked away to this house.

The boys picked up their gloves and took their positions again. It was as if the fight had never happened. We girls continued to plan our futures until Mrs. O'Connor called Kathleen and Kevin in to lunch. We broke up with a promise to meet at one o'clock for swimming.

I headed home for lunch wondering what had really happened to Scott's glove. As I rounded the corner onto Second Avenue I heard tones from a harmonica. Stan was warming up. The sound of the notes made me quicken my steps.

Stan had lived in the two-story white house in the middle of the block a lot longer than any of us kids had been alive. He was the same age as my grandparents as far as I could tell. That meant old. He wore glasses thick enough to make his eyes look twice as big as they were, and when he sat, he let out a sigh the way my grandfather did. But when Stan played the harmonica, you forgot he was old. His fingers moved over the metal effortlessly, something I could not imagine my grandfather's thick fingers doing. My grandmother felt sorry for Stan because his wife had died, so he was a frequent guest at our house.

Warming Up

All the neighborhood children liked to sit on his front porch, listening to him play his harmonica and tell his stories. Bobby and Al had both bought harmonicas and started to take lessons with Stan. Al quit after a while, but Bobby kept on, serious about learning to play. It was Stephen Monahan, one of the eighth graders, who thought of the name, and Stan never minded it. He smiled and waved whenever one of the guys rode by calling, “Stan, Stan the Harmonica Man! How’s it going?”

His prized possession was an antique Belle harmonica made by the Hohner Company. His father had taught him to play on it when he was a boy. It was pretty cool looking, too. Attached to the metal top were three miniature bells that reminded you of the bells on the handle bar of a bicycle.

Every day in the summer, rain or shine, he would sit on his front porch and play his harmonica. On most days, one or more of us would join him. I can’t think of that summer without hearing Stan’s music. It was the soundtrack to everything that happened.

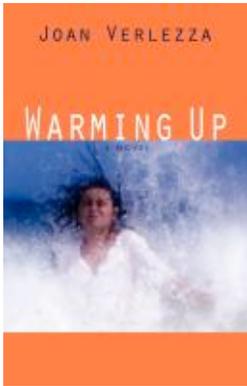
His favorite seat was a swinging sofa with a white metal frame and faded red vinyl cushions. The sofa was best avoided on hot days because the vinyl stuck to the back of your legs but across from the sofa, along the rail, were two wooden rockers and a rattan chair with a blue cotton pillow on the seat. I pulled one of the rockers out and sat down just as he nodded to say hello and launched into one of his “river songs”. I called them that because they flowed along. He had quite a repertoire, though, and we all had our favorites.

I put Billy Canner and the fight out of my mind and enjoyed the music. I tapped my feet, rocked in rhythm and marveled at how nimble his old fingers were. After three songs my hunger reminded me what time it was and I stood up to leave.

“Well, Stan, I’m hungry, so I’m gonna go eat lunch now. Can I bring you something? I could make you a sandwich.”

Joan Verlezza

“No,” he said taking the instrument from his lips. “I’m fine, thanks. Go have lunch. Your grandmother will be looking for you. Anyway, I’m coming to dinner tonight so I’ll see you then.”



When a new-kid-on-the-block steals an heirloom harmonica from a beloved elderly neighbor, a group of friends plot to take matters into their own hands. All the kids on Second Avenue have grown up listening to Stan play his harmonica. Life in West Harbor has a rhythm and Stan's music is part of it. But this summer, the presence of a new family will change the tune forever.

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