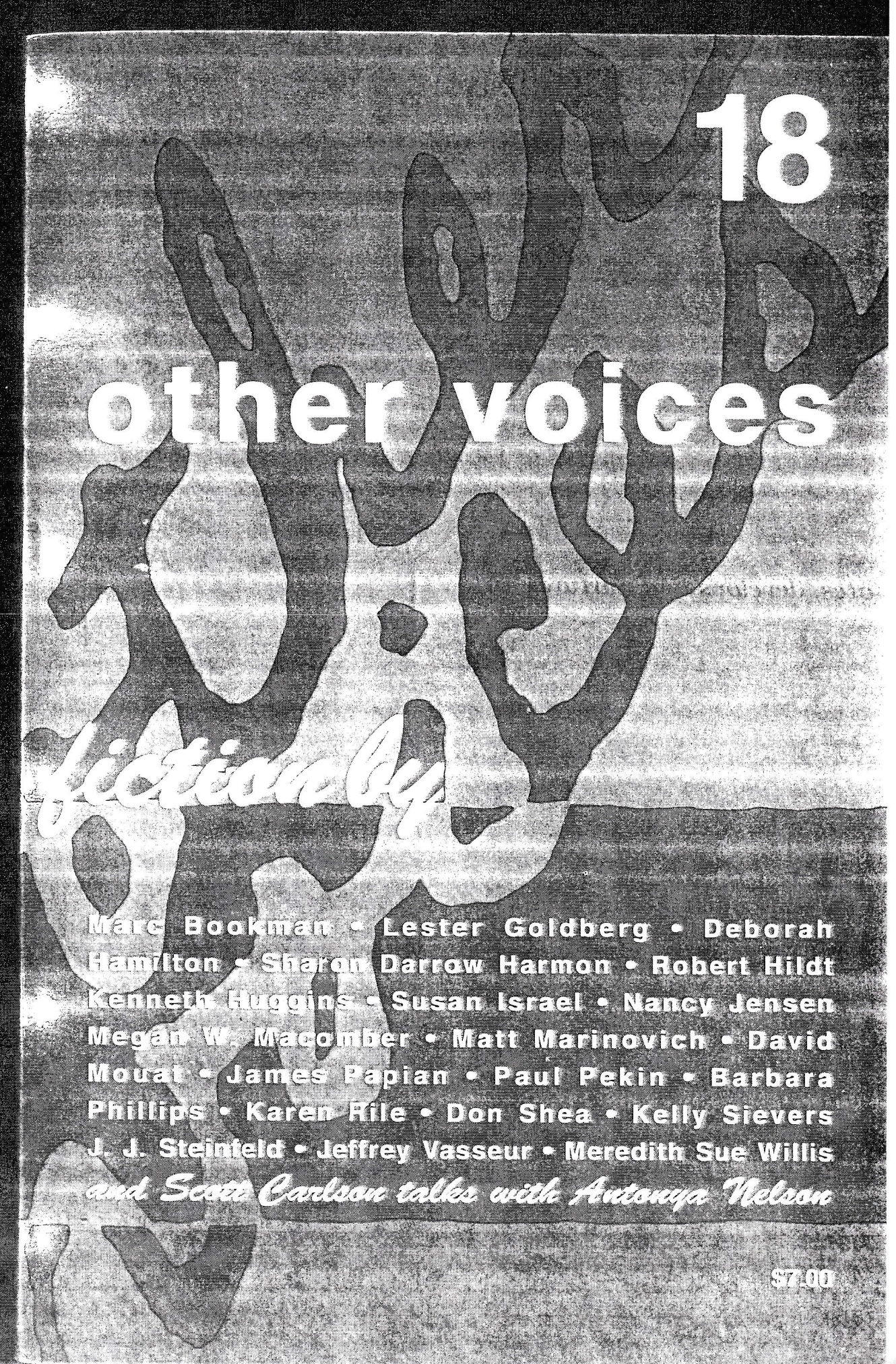

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Neighborhood Chores

Marc Bookman

for Bobby Weinstock and Cathy Traylor

Four months after my grandmother died at the age of seventy-three, my grandfather came to Thanksgiving dinner with another woman. This was the final straw for my mother, who practically tore my father's coat off dragging him into the kitchen when she saw Zolly walking in with a strange woman on his arm. A strange *young* woman.

"Forty-nine years he's married, and before his wife is cold in the ground he shows up for the biggest family gathering of the year with this cheap imitation of Barbara Stanwyck," my mother said, whispering at the top of her lungs, her head so deep into the refrigerator that you could almost hear an echo. When she finally came out, smashed cartons and bruised fruit in her wake, she held a chilled bottle of Finlandia by the neck, which my father, not so deftly, removed by prying her bloodless fingers free.

"I went out and bought it for him this afternoon, and now I'm going to kill the son of a bitch with it," she said. My father held the bottle out of her reach—he was used to this sort of thing from my mother—but, aside from trying to limit the violence around him, he was as neutral as Switzerland when it came to resolving family differences. Even after nineteen years of marriage, he felt that troubles on my mother's side of the family were none of his concern. His parents had owned a shoe store in Wynnefield, which was as close to the Main Line as a Jewish family could get, moving to the close suburbs when they could afford it and finally to Florida—as predictable a migratory pattern as a salmon and a hell of a lot more successful. He was a research doctor with an office only twelve blocks from where he went to high school; he had never grown up with controversy, and still he did not understand it after all the years spent with my mother's side of the family. One could conclude that he was an extremely slow learner, but actually he held a very narrow view of his own business, and he minded it fastidiously.

The racket in the kitchen brought the other two girls, my aunts Elaine and Elise, known outside my mother's range as Fussy and Mussy because one carried a can of Lysol in her pocketbook and the other a pair of sweat

socks. Forty-five, forty-six, forty-eight, and they still called themselves "the girls." Anyway, they convened a family meeting, sans patriarch, and agreed that Zolly had finally gone too far—for forty years (that they knew of) he had cheated on their mother, and now that she was gone they certainly didn't have to stand for it. But what were they going to do? I didn't stay in the kitchen to find out. I didn't want to know, because to know and not tell Zolly would have been a betrayal, and he was the only one at these gatherings with whom I exchanged anything more than pleasantries.

Zolly was a bastard. Unlike other bastards, though, who liked to tell people what bastards they were but didn't really believe it themselves, Zolly said it and meant it.

"The Committee of Three smells blood," he said to me when I sat down.

"They're not too pleased about your guest," I said.

"Her?" he said, jerking his shoulder in the woman's direction, loud enough to make me uncomfortable, but not loud enough, apparently, to get her attention away from a bowl of tiny egg rolls.

"She's for show, Jailbird, not for dough." My name is Keith, but Zolly has been calling me "Jailbird" since I was caught taking baseball cards at the age of ten. He said that "Keith" was an attempt by my parents to co-opt me for the bourgeoisie; before "Jailbird" I was "Alinsky," a nickname I had completely forgotten about until I picked up *Rules for Radicals* in my junior year of high school.

"Mom thinks she looks like a cheap Barbara Stanwyck," I said, without a trace of betrayal. Zolly glanced back over his shoulder to confirm this description, as if he couldn't remember which woman he had shown up with, then turned back to me without humor.

"Your mom voted for Nixon," he said. Then, a few seconds later: "You remember my brother Mose? You're him, you should know that, the spitting image. The family skipped a beat with that generation of bridge players sampling my blood in the kitchen. Mose, that crazy son, we went down to D.C. together in '49 for the Hiss protest. Just when the thing is breaking up, who shows but the head of the investigation, Richard M. Nixon. Your generation thinks he popped out of the sky at the '68 convention. There was something about the man that Mose didn't like even then. Well, Nixon, of course, was a big deal during the Hiss thing, and was being escorted by about ten Feds, one of whom pushed my brother back to make room. Mose, he didn't take it too well. 'Hey, Nixon,' he yelled, 'you're a goddamned mother fucker.'" Zolly shook his head, laughing to himself. "Anyway, this one Fed wasn't too happy with Mose, broke two of his ribs. Mose. You still remember him, don't you?"

"Sure," I said, not exactly sure what this story had to do with my mother voting for Nixon, or what her voting for Nixon had to do with her opinion of Zolly's guest. But in fact I did remember Mose: at one of my birthday parties

he had argued for two hours that Zolly was breaking the picket line by taking flying lessons during the air-controller strike. But what I really recalled about him, about the man everyone said I looked like and acted like, was his death in the hospital, the way Zolly dragged me to see him wasted away but waiting for us.

I had seen photos of Mose, old grainy brown and whites of him with his arm around his younger brother, his hair short and curly the way I wear mine now, his shirt rolled up to the elbows and looking as if he'd slept in it. But now his face was set in a grimace; mottled, liver-stained skin stretched over his cheeks. The fight had gone out of him.

"Zol, you been back?" the old man said. The last few days it was all he had talked about, the old neighborhood, Strawberry Mansion. Going back.

"No, Mose, I haven't gone back," Zolly said.

"Don't go back. There's no hope there."

"The old neighborhood is still there, it moved is all. You can't put boundaries on it, Mose, you know that." Mose nodded; he knew that, he had just forgotten. A floor nurse came in, told everyone to keep it down, but she was shooed out by Zolly, who told her that her only reason to live was to limit conversation. I remember the look that nurse gave me when she left: You've never been here before, you're not with these two, are you?

Together, hands clasped, they moved back for one last visit to Strawberry Mansion, a last reminisce about the bad old days. Who knew how much of it was true? Like when the women around 30th and Norris held back for two months after Sam Golden beat his wife, forcing a public apology not only from Sam but from all the boys at Cherry's who had laughed it off. (Consciousness they had ahead of time, said Zolly.) And how about the crap games outside Doc Kay's, when Mose covered with three naturals just one dollar before the both of them tapped. Money, always money. Planned unemployment was what it was, they kept you poor and kept reminding you there were no jobs, until you would kiss the boss's ass and accept slave wages, and be goddamned overjoyed about it. But there was always a quick buck to be made.

"Like the lost dog scam," Zolly said. "You remember that?" Mose repeated the words to himself; they sounded like "hot dog stand." Zolly angled his chair so I could hear better.

"What it was, I was eleven, Mose was thirteen. During the summer we would take the Paoli Local out as far as it went because we knew a conductor, an Italian fella by the name of Caramini, I think, his brother wrote numbers in North Philly. Anyway, he'd let us ride free, and we'd get out there when the sun was coming up, I mean the first train. Initiative is what it was, Mose had it. We'd run down the first dog we could catch with tags on him, then we'd call the owners and tell them we saw their dog at

some godforsaken place miles away, but that it got away from us. Mose figured, and goddamn if he wasn't right, that their money was too old for them to look for their own kids, let alone pets. We always tried to sound out of breath, like we'd been chasing the mutt for hours, and almost every time they offered us a reward to bring the dog back. Sometimes we'd call back in an hour and name some town even farther out just to drive up the price. Then we would go collect. I tell you, it was steady work."

Mose tried to laugh, but he was too weak. Instead he turned his head in my direction and asked me to see if the nurse was outside. Later, Zolly told me he was glad he'd brought me to see his dying brother. "When you're fifty," he had said, "it will be important to you to know your heritage. To know that your family tree extends beyond your mother and her trickle-down sisters."

Now here they were, Zolly's children, standing in front of him at the Thanksgiving table. "I want to talk to you," my mother said.

"First let me introduce you to Eleanor Wyatt. She couldn't make the rent and got evicted, so I told her she could get a good meal here. I hope you don't mind," Zolly said. Mom knew it was a lie, they all did, but what if it wasn't? What if, just this once, it wasn't? That was Zolly, backing them all down, squeezing his girl friend's leg under the table, stuffing turkey into himself like it was the last supper. And then, with the dinner almost over, asking Eleanor, loudly, whether she'd like to join us for Christmas. But like I said, he was that rare bastard who knew what he was. And if I was the spitting image of Mose, if in fact, the family had skipped a beat, then maybe it was time I learned the kind of bastard I was.

What Zolly's politics were no one really knew. He liked to say that politics was like religion: "Both give you a reason not to do what you should be doing." He was for progress, he said, and that meant steering clear of ideology. When I pressed him, he told me he was an anarcho-syndicalist. The next day I had questions about Sacco and Vanzetti and Alexander Berkman; did he know Emma Goldman?

"Emma, sure, she grew up in Strawberry Mansion, did you know that?" Zolly said.

"New York," I said grimly. I wanted him to know I was serious about this. I fancied myself a fifteen-year-old bomb thrower.

"Well, there too." But soon I knew about Thomas and La Follette, Victor Berger and even the perennial Gus Hall; I had read Alinsky to Zinn, and I pumped Zolly for more. Like the Washington protest in 1946 against the A-bomb: "The first anti-nukers, sixteen of us. I carried a sign, 'For a Good Tan, Go to Japan.' Went over big." Another day I asked him about the bottle scar over his left eye: "Woodlawn," he said. Other scars, other arrests evoked

more stories: the civil contempt before City Council, the line of limp bodies across the Blue Route, an eggshell that lodged in his eye during a mild disagreement over food prices. And it was still going on. I came to understand that Zolly was in demand, sought out by various and peripheral groups for advice and guidance, sometimes just for bodies. Zolly was available.

My father—a 10K runner, a vegetarian, a doctor—once made the mistake of suggesting, during a lull in one of our family dinners, that maybe Zolly shouldn't be so available. Or at least he could work in a more stable environment. He might live longer.

"That's where you're wrong, Doctor," Zolly said. He had never called my father anything else as long as I could remember. "I've lived longer than most people wanted me to already."

"Then maybe a job less physically demanding." Dad had just set Zolly's hand for the second time in a year.

"Something more befitting my stature in the community? No, Doctor, you've bought in hook, line, and sinker with the bullshit reactionary media that convinces people like you and your wife that everybody stops doing good work at the age of twenty-five and starts amassing a personal fortune. Like maybe you can recall the last time you went on a house call?"

"I work in research," my father said, calmly and evenly.

"For a pharmaceutical company," Zolly snorted, "but that's not my point. They pick out isolated cases like that little punk flower child, what's his name?"

"Rubin," I said. "Jerry Rubin."

"And they play it up big, they let you think that everybody wants into Wall Street. One person sells out and they make it sound like he's finally come to his senses. Look closely and you can see the Establishment nod its collective head: another one grows up, they're saying. They don't tell you about the good people who value integrity and human dignity more than a three-piece suit and high heels. It's in their own interest to take the heart out of people. It's to protect themselves, understand? Because if we're working to help the community, we won't have time to pay attention to their drivel, and they know that." Zolly could have rolled on like this for another hour, but my father interrupted. He had heard enough.

"At your age you could slow down a little. Why do you do it?" Dad asked, still not getting it.

"For sex," the old man said finally. "It keeps me vital."

Although Zolly's influence over me started in junior high school, I didn't actually begin working with him until my second year of college. I was always a decent student, but as my parents incessantly reminded me, I was not preparing myself for a career. Philosophy, sociology, political

science, none of it was pointing me in any direction except, as Zolly said, forward. I did not regularly attend class, but I paid close attention when I did. In truth, I was that rare student who was really interested in an education, but that not-so-rare one who wanted it on his own terms.

He took me to work with him the day after our first serious argument. As usual he was railing on about management and cops and yellow-dog contracts, and I had heard enough. For years the family had adopted a policy of silence towards him, figuring that if he were ignored he would finally stop his harangue, but I was itching to discuss it. It was either that or my aunt's bedspread pattern.

"It's not as black and white as that," I said.

"Oh, and how is it, Mr. Harvard man?" Suffice it to say I was not attending Harvard.

"I'm not sure how it is, but I know it's not always We and They. You're one of those guys, if a pay toilet doesn't work, I mean if you lose your lousy dime, you start screaming about monopoly capitalism and the raping of the proletariat. As if that dime flushes direct to the Rockefeller Foundation."

He didn't answer me, maybe he thought he didn't have to. But there was a look on his face, a gaping, unrestrained look you might see on a general's face after a sergeant pointed out to him the stupidity of his battle plan. And with that look the faintest flicker of a smile—we understood each other.

No one knew exactly what Zolly did for work, or perhaps everyone I asked was intentionally vague about it. His own wife, Edith, shrugged her shoulders when I once asked her directly. And I remember Zolly, sitting right next to her and referring to her in the third person: "What I like about Edith is that she doesn't ask too many questions." Which was clearly best. They always had enough to live on, and Zolly said the money came from neighborhood chores. I soon found out that this was not unreasonably far from the truth.

It turned out that Zolly was an organizer. Unions, retired people, tenants, any disparate collection of individuals who needed to bind might bring in Zolly for the purpose of "achieving community," as he always said. I accompanied him to meetings, to rallies, and finally, inexorably, to jail. I had been opposed to *that* protest, the one that led us to jail, as I had been opposed to several before that, because it had all started to seem like a waste of time to me. Three years after a prison is built, the neighbors decide they don't want it there. Not exactly a timely dissent, I said.

"More prisons aren't the answer," Zolly said.

"That isn't the point," I said. "Besides, most of these people think more prisons *are* the answer, just not more prisons in their backyards."

"We can close this one down."

"Then they can turn it into a mall with five hundred and thirty-two little storefronts," I said. But the decision, Zolly's decision, was to go.

They didn't have to arrest us, they could have just given us citations and told us when to appear in court, but it was not their goal to make it easy on us. Fingerprints, photographs, we signed for our own bail and headed home in silence, the kind of silence that threatens to explode at the drop of a word. This was for my benefit; Zolly, arrested innumerable times before, had never been a man of reflection.

"Get used to it," he said finally.

I said nothing. I had been staring vacantly at the subpoena handed to me as I left the courthouse, and suddenly I tore it into quarters and threw the pieces out the window of the car. From how many towns had Zolly's car taken him, alone, without a whine?

"Littering," he said. "Very constructive. What did you expect, Jailbird, may be they pin a medal on you?"

"What the hell kind of crime is that, blocking the sidewalks? In Schwenksville, no less. The whole town end to end couldn't form a decent line at Wanamaker's."

"It's called obstructing the highway," said Zolly. "It won't stick."

"The stupid pigs. You know what one of them said to me, the big fat one that looked like a southern sheriff? 'Tough luck, comrade, I guess the revolution will have to go on without you.' I mean, think of the level of analysis."

"You were hoping instead to conduct a Socratic dialogue with the officer?"

"It's not even the cop's reaction that really bugs me," I said. "Just more and more I've been thinking we're wasting our effort, half the time we blow it and the other half doesn't mean a thing, the changes are temporary and selfish, they don't last."

"They last," Zolly said, but it didn't sound as if he were entirely convinced himself. This couldn't have been the first time such thoughts crossed his mind, but it was the first time I had ever heard even a note of hesitation in his voice. Clearly I was not helping him do his job, but I couldn't stop myself.

"How can you say that? You grew up with the New Deal and watched Joe McCarthy on television, you saw the Free Speech Movement and Reagan's election. My god, we elected a president who didn't believe in the theory of evolution. I think if he had a third term he was going to repeal the law of gravity."

"You think progress is a straight line?"

"We take two steps back for every one forward is what I think," I said.

"So what should we do?" Zolly asked. It was impossible to say whether he wanted an answer or not.

"I don't know," I said, and I didn't. "Remember last week you were talking to the ninety-two employees of that paper mill? You were talking

unionism, brotherhood, sisterhood, the only thing they cared about was whether they would get a higher salary."

"And what about me?" Zolly said. "I was paid for what I did, I don't work for free."

"That's different. You have to eat."

"Yes," Zolly agreed. "You have to eat."

"The point is you're not intruding, you're doing a favor," Zolly said. "Explain yourself and then move on. Get ten to the first meeting and you've got it made." That first day I stayed back, practically clinging to the walls, while Zolly persuaded. Do you know how it is when someone especially good is working on you, when you know that an opinion is being bored into your skull? You're aware of what's happening, and you're conceding something, but you're not won over. This guy beats his fists into his sides, he paces in your living room, drinks your coffee, and soon you are agreeing with everything he says just to make it easier all around. But then, later, you realize that he was better than you thought, that the opinion you let into your head without a fight was really more than that; it was the way things should be. That was Zolly's method, and it paid.

"You see how easy it is," he said after the first few apartments. But I did not see at all; I plunged down murky hallways rehearsing my words, forcing my way into rooms like an insurance salesman. Time and again I violated the only rule: I was not one of them, I was an outsider. Slouching in door frames to seem smaller, less healthy even, I stammered out why I was there; that is, if I could get the tenants to even open their doors. One woman said she looked a fright, another that the neighborhood wasn't as safe as it used to be. Some doors, like the one with the mini-Jesus crucified on it, I didn't knock on at all. When I did gain occasional entrance, the initial success flustered me.

"We were hoping you'd come to a meeting this Monday night to discuss what might be done," I said to a man who had lived in the apartment for twenty-seven years.

"Who's 'We,' son?" Already it was going wrong, already I was out of my depth, and then I compounded the mistake.

"Well, my grandfather, Zolly, Zolly Seitel and me. We're working for the FHC, the Fair Housing Coalition. We're concerned about the impending conversion of the Walnut to condos." The tenant's name was Brookhaven, and he was the sort of man who didn't care about coalitions or advice from strangers.

"And you think something can be done about it?" said Mr. Brookhaven. Yes, I almost said, but in the knife-throw of a second before I responded, the missing piece fell into place for me, precipitated, again, by Zolly's advice: Just step aside.

"I don't know if anything can be done or not, Mr. Brookhaven. That's why we want to have a meeting, to see if we can come up with anything. Maybe the majority want condos, and if that's the case, we have no purpose here at all. We want to know what you think."

Thirty-eight people showed up at the Church of the Redeemed on Monday night. Zolly called up at the last minute to say he couldn't make it, but he would be there without question for the rally on Thursday. I was twenty years younger than the youngest tenant, and for fifteen minutes I sat alone in the room wondering if anyone was coming. They showed late, and in large groups, which I accepted as a good sign. I had worked hard to remember a few names, and most of the group at least appeared to recognize my face, but what it was we had all gathered for seemed to slip my mind for a moment. As you might after dialing a number and then forgetting who the call was placed to, I addressed them vaguely, searching their faces for a clue to proceed on. I didn't need one; Mr. Brookhaven cut me off right after I explained Zolly's absence. A Mr. and Mrs. Milsner had a few ideas, and a man named Tartaglione had spoken to a lawyer friend of his. They beat it around for a while—like a dead horse, said Tartaglione—and although everyone agreed on some legal avenues they might pursue, they thought they should first explain their predicament to the new buyer. Reason with him, Brookhaven said.

Like a stone in a pond the ripples spread. They would have to go public, radio spots, newspaper stories, this was the public interest stuff those slobs lapped up. But before all that, a show of solidarity. "How about Thursday," I said, remembering that Zolly had announced he would be there for the rally on Thursday before it had even been planned. "Let's say rush hour in front of the apartments." I caught myself almost thanking them, not for helping themselves but for not humiliating me; instead I reminded them to pass the word. I stayed around for a few minutes, talking to the stragglers, feeling good about myself, and then I thought I'd better call Zolly to confirm his prediction about the rally. That was no prediction, he would say, but I wanted to hear him say it, I wanted to hear him tell me that it was the logical outgrowth of a group problem. That organizers did not plan, they guided. I wanted to hear him say it all.

When I arrived, early, on Thursday afternoon, Zolly was already setting up a small amplification system that made his voice sound like Hendrix's guitar through a transistor radio, distorted but focused. "Don't worry, Jailbird, it'll sound better with a big crowd to deaden the sound. There shouldn't be too much talk anyway." And then he was off to speak to the media: a quick radio interview, a television spot. Only later, watching, did I learn that Zolly had credited me with organizing the protest. These things don't materialize spontaneously, he had said to a newsman.

I've since thought that protests should be planned not around the events that cause them, but around the weather. This day was brutal; heat rolled down Walnut Street in waves that gave shape to the air, bringing with it in dribs and drabs the tenants of the Walnut Apartments. When I spotted tenants I knew, I ran up and greeted them heartily, happy at least to give the appearance that I belonged; and when Brookhaven and Tartaglione arrived, I brought them over to meet Zolly.

"Good to see you again," Zolly said, shaking hands with both men. He explained to me that he had spoken to them yesterday to be sure they could count on serious attendance, but he did not go into how he knew which men to ask. "You don't call Cronkite unless you're sure you have a story for him," he said, and then, as an afterthought, "unless you don't plan to call him again."

At five o'clock, with the slightest nod of Zolly's head, the crowd formed around him; he stood on milk crates with a mike in his hands, he looked from side to side, he smiled, he raised the mike over his head in a fist. And when he finally spoke, the traffic noise dulled under his words. Despite the heat, no one fanned the air.

"So here we are," Zolly said. "I don't have to count, I know how many are here. Ninety-seven people. Mrs. Updike couldn't be here, she had to see family in Cleveland. She told me she'd nail her shoes to the floor if she had to. Everyone else is here. How do I know this? Where else would you be? You live here." He waited for applause and got it. Short and polite. Not the sort heard at a political rally or a rock concert; this was the applause usually reserved for union leaders reentering negotiations after a long strike. His tone reflected the serious edge of the crowd. They weren't here because some college administration picked the wrong speaker for graduation: they had to be here because they *couldn't* move. "So they decided to convert the Walnut to condos. Did anyone consult you in that decision?" And then softer, "Of course not. You would think the decision did not involve you at all. Oh, they tried to buy a few of you off, move some junkies into the vacant apartments to chase you out, periodically turn off the hot or cold water, the usual techniques of conversion. But no one ever asked what you thought, no one ever considered the impact some faraway decision might have on *people*. You are here because you have developed a community in the Walnut Apartments, a community that takes years to build and will not be disassembled by some faceless corporation that owns twenty such buildings but does not know the people in any of them. You are speaking out today and you will continue to speak out until you are treated fairly. As long as it takes."

Then Zolly stepped down and others gave brief speeches: a local lawyer talked about court challenges, a councilman pledged to seek out the new owner and reason with him, some of the braver tenants told of the offers they

had turned down to stay. The sun was setting behind the Walnut and the air cooled; it was that dusky period, just after rush hour, when the day seems to catch up to people, and those who stayed to the end moved away slowly, as if the new owner might suddenly appear to inform them that he had changed his mind. Tartaglione and Brookhaven were the last to go.

"So we wait?" Brookhaven said.

"We wait," said Zolly. "It won't be long. Act, react."

"That's the way these things are," Tartaglione said.

"We'll come back to see you tomorrow," said Zolly, and shook their hands. It was a dismissal. Sweat shook off his nose and forehead, hung on his eyelids, dripped down his neck, and for a moment I remembered how hot it had been only an hour before. Slumped and pale, he collapsed into the passenger seat and told me to drive.

"We should follow up with a news release tomorrow," he whispered. I looked over and saw something spilling out of him, a distillate of perspiration and tears leaking from his pores, draining the color from his face, his neck, his arms. I understood that I would have to return to the Walnut Apartments alone, that for the past ten years Zolly had told me what I needed to know and that I now knew it, just in time.

My parents didn't know most of the people who came to say good-bye to Zolly, so my mother passed a book around, urging everyone to sign. Not that she had really changed her mind about her father, but you never knew—revisionist history being what it was, perhaps Zolly was a great guy after all. The names in the book might ring a bell later, maybe his life would come back to her. As it was, one stranger after another stepped up to tell stories about this man whose own family didn't know him—tall stories by organizers and organized, about small battles, quixotic plans, jail and bail. Not so much about winning as trying to win.

Among the family it was agreed that I would give the eulogy. What did any of them expect me to say? That he wasn't a very good father or husband; married for almost half a century and with three daughters he lived his life unencumbered, and advised me to do the same? That talking to him was like raking leaves on a windy day—you tired yourself out, but never finished the job? That he wheedled, he cajoled, he made his point, that he had an agenda and met it head on every day of his life? What do you say about a man like this?

"Zolly was a bastard," I said, "but for the people." And in unison the gathered, strangers and family, nodded their heads.