

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Life on Stanton Street*

**T**HE *St. Paul* made a record run of less than seven days from Liverpool to New York. The trip was smooth and pleasant, though our quarters, which we shared with about two dozen other passengers, were somewhat cramped. This room, in which we could do little but sleep, was designed like a large egg crate, with three tiers of cubicles for bunks and with just enough room in the center to move about before climbing in and out of our beds. The ship featured a kosher kitchen for the orthodox Jewish passengers, but my father had doubts about its authenticity, and both he and my mother subsisted on oranges and the *kuchlech* my mother had baked in preparation for the journey. As a result of earnest representations by my mother, the children were permitted by paternal dispensation to eat the ship's food if they chose. But the dining-saloon was stuffy and airless, and the only food we

could keep down comfortably was raw herring and bread. Besides, our parents' show of super-orthodoxy gave us, notwithstanding their sanction, an uncomfortable feeling of guilt, and we debated among ourselves the possibility of being overtaken by divine retribution on the Day of Atonement. Although it was a good ten weeks to Yom Kippur, it was not to be supposed that God would fail to remember our semi-transgression on the day when He decides the fate of every living soul.

The voyage introduced us to an olfactory phenomenon known to all transatlantic travelers of those days as the smell of "ship." This pervasive, insidious odor, a distillation of bilge and a number of less identifiable putrescences, settled on one's person, clothes, and luggage and stayed there forever, impervious to changes of habitat, clothing, and the cleansing agents available to the poor. It was many years before I realized that only steerage passengers smelled of "ship." Until then I assumed that all persons, rich or poor, traveling on ships became, as a matter of course, victims of this affliction. And, like all afflictions that are protracted, it lost its terrors through familiarity. One *expected* arrivals from Europe to smell of "ship." So much so that on visits to the homes of neighbors, one could tell at once by the pervading smell of "ship" that they were entertaining guests from abroad.

Smells, in general, played an important part in our lives. Not an unpleasant part, I recall, but one that in its way made life a little easier, serving for identification of persons, their habits and social position, perhaps as clues to character and occupation. Everything and everybody had a smell. Some smells were generic and impersonal, others particular, like the leitmotifs in the music dramas of Richard Wagner. And just as the introduction of a leitmotiv warns the listener that the personage it represents is about to appear, so the insinuation of a smell in a room usually heralded the approach of the person who had become identified with it. Immigrants,

however, could not so be identified individually for at least a year or two after their arrival, as their own odors were overpowered by and absorbed into the more exigent smell of "ship."

Old people had, in general, an acrid smell, and old men invariably smelled of snuff. Young people and children merely smelled unwashed. We knew that we too would smell of snuff when we grew old. That was in the nature of things. Life was stern and realistic, and the conditions it imposed were not subject to question or criticism. After taking snuff it was quite proper for people to blow their noses without the interposition of a handkerchief. In rooms not graced with spittoons, what was more natural than to spit on the floor! It was natural, though not desirable, for children to have lice in their hair and for grown-ups to harbor them in the seams of their clothing and underwear. Beds and bedding and all overstuffed furniture were infested with bedbugs. The pests were periodically hunted and exterminated; but their presence was not considered a disgrace, and they shared with poverty and disease the status of divine visitation. "What brand of bedbug powder do you use?" was a natural query when housewives met on the street or entertained one another with tea and *kuchlech*. Presumably the question was also asked by housewives on the *West Side*. The world was most probably the same for everybody. We knew that rich people had more rooms, better food and clothing, and easier lives than the poor; but we had no reason to believe that their lot was otherwise different, or that they were exempt from what we believed to be universal afflictions. On the visible world, half of which we knew first-hand, and the other half of which we could only imagine, there were, for us, certain unchangeable phenomena: children were dirty and were obliged to scratch their heads; mothers were unkempt and slatternly; everybody, old and young, had teeth pulled regularly, so that middle-aged and old people had few if any teeth; a great

many children died young; everybody slept in underwear; parents always quarreled; mothers were generally indulgent to their children, but fathers either kept aloof or were brutal to them. And, of course, everyone over fourteen years of age was employed in gainful labor. Not before the age of fourteen could one obtain one's working papers. It took a considerable amount of experience in the realm of what is now called "the underprivileged" before I could collate these observations, draw my conclusions, and, by extension, relate the picture thus built up to that part of the world which lay outside my knowledge and beyond my reach.

When the *St. Paul* reached New York, we were met by my father's second cousin, the junk-dealer. This kinsman's name was Gold. It had been Goldstein, but on his arrival in America he had thus shortened it at the friendly suggestion of an immigration officer who was passing on the fitness of arriving aliens to enter the United States. Now, on the pier, our cousin urged my father to perform a similar operation on our own "useless" family name, as he termed it, suggesting "Chot" as a desirable abbreviation. My father rejected the idea on the ground that he failed to see the need for any alteration of any name. In an effort to convince him, Mr. Gold recalled how he, too, had resisted at first, but had been unable to deny the appositeness of the immigration officer's question: "What good is Stein to you?" He now demanded to be told what possible good the last two syllables of our name could be to us in a country so dynamic and so impatient of nonessentials as America. "For here," Mr. Gold said triumphantly—and we heard enunciated for the first time the then celebrated and popular slogan—"Time is money." My father, however, remained unconvinced, and, much to Mr. Gold's displeasure, we retained what he always regarded an impossible, noncommercial name. Many years later my three brothers arrived independently at the junk-dealer's philosophy of nomenclature. Indeed, they went farther than Mr. Gold by discarding al-

together our family name, each one adopting a terse, one-syllable, indigenous, respectable, and consequently absolutely commercial surname. Louis, the youngest of the three, chose White; Solomon, the next in age, adopted Chase; and Albert, the eldest, who all his life meticulously observed the entire ritual of Jewish orthodoxy, selected the name of Church.

Although Passaic fell short of being the Eden that Mr. Gold had promised in his letters to my father, it proved to be a lively town, with horse-cars, interesting shops, and sidewalks paved with tar, which had a pleasant smell, and became so soft on very hot days that one's heels sank into it. Our cousin lived on the outskirts of the city in an area inhabited only by Jews. He occupied one floor of a two-story frame house. On the second floor there were two vacant rooms, which, with one room in Mr. Gold's apartment, were assigned to us. I do not recall in what manner the ten of us were disposed in this arrangement, but not many days elapsed before Mrs. Gold's exuberant show of hospitality was replaced by an impatience with our presence which could not be lost on any of us. On the other hand, there was no visible alteration in Mr. Gold's interest in us and in his solicitude for our future, though it soon was evident that he was unable to fulfill his promises of work for my brothers and sisters and a teaching position in a cheder for my father. To the end of our stay he kept reiterating his faith in the commercial possibilities of "Birdie Kahndie," his exotic mispronunciation of Bergen County. His pride in this region was immense, and he would prophesy that in ten years' time "Birdie Kahndie" would outstrip in population and wealth any territory of its size in the United States.

He seemed oblivious of the rancid smells of the long stretches of milky swampland in the vicinity of his home, and impervious to the bite of the large mosquitoes that filled the air the moment the sun went down. But I was not. And soon after we settled in "Birdie Kahndie" I developed malaria and

walked about weakly, feeling queasy and running slight but uncomfortable temperatures. Mr. Gold took me to a dispensary in Passaic, where a doctor prescribed quinine and a change of climate. As there was nothing now to keep us in Passaic except Mr. Gold's unconvincing prognostications of a speedy change for the better in our fortunes, my health became a consideration of importance. And in a council held by the heads of both families it was decided—with Mr. Gold dissenting—that we should try the climate of New York as an antidote to my malaria, at the same time testing the reputation of the metropolis as a place of great opportunity for the enterprising alien.

Enthusiastically shepherded by Mrs. Gold, my mother journeyed to New York and rented a suitable apartment in Stanton Street, on the lower East Side, one block from the Bowery. Into this we moved one very hot morning in late August. Right in front of our house a large black horse lay dead in the gutter. He must have been there for some time, for the stench was dreadful, and flies, large and small, covered every inch of the carcass and hovered in swarms over it. Later in the day I looked out the window and saw several small boys astride the animal, engaged in skinning it with their pocket knives. Their sport was presently interrupted, however, by the arrival of a large van for the removal of the horse. This complicated operation attracted all the children in the neighborhood, who watched the departure of the beast with regret.

My health improved slowly in Stanton Street. Once a week I walked to a dispensary at Second Avenue and Fourteenth Street and received, gratis, a dose of quinine. My mother accompanied me there, for she, too, was unwell, frequently announcing in a dramatic tone of voice that her heart had stopped beating. I was not unduly alarmed, for I was at the time unaware of the crucial function of this organ. Nor did the doctor at the dispensary regard my mother's condition

with the seriousness she thought it demanded. He would laugh at her extravagant claims and prescribe Hoffmann's drops. A few drops of this magic liquid on a lump of sugar had the effect of instantly reviving my mother's dormant heart.

The public schools opened in September. I was to enter the second grade of the school nearest my home, a large red-brick building on Houston Street. Preparations for the fall term could be observed everywhere. The shops on Stanton Street were displaying every necessity for the resumption of learning. All manner of boys' clothing, including ravishing sailor suits with whistle attached and smart brown knee-length gabardine overcoats, were on view behind the plate-glass windows. The candy stores had the most interesting display of articles used in the classroom. The number and variety of pencil boxes alone took one's breath away. There seemed to be no limit to the complexity of pencil boxes. Beginning with the simple oblong box, plain or lacquered, they evolved into two- and three-storied structures with secret compartments. Prices ranged from seven cents to the fantastic sum of a dollar. The pencil box was, admittedly, a necessity; but a box costing more than ten cents became a symbol of social superiority. The very few who could afford dollar boxes became the acknowledged leaders of their classes. A highly prized peek into the lavish interiors of their pencil boxes was vouchsafed only as a reward for services promised or performed.

It was out of the question for me to begin school without a pencil box and some other less important "supplies" that beckoned through the window of the candy store on our block. Those others ranged from plain and colored blotters to school bags in the shape of knapsacks. Though I pleaded hard for a two-storied pencil box costing a quarter, my mother bought me a plain, oblong casket with a sliding top for ten cents. When our shopping was done, my supplies consisted

of the pencil box, four writing pads at a penny each, and a set of colored blotters costing a nickel, the last wrung from my reluctant parent after I had conjured up a classroom crisis in which the teacher would call for a show of blotters and I would be the only pupil unable to produce any. My mother had a horror of nonconformity, a failing I early spotted and often exploited.

On the first Monday in September my mother took me and my scanty supplies to school, where I was enrolled and given a desk and a seat in a large classroom. The teacher, a gray-haired, middle-aged lady, told us to call her Miss Murphy. I wondered if she meant to imply that this was to be her name in class and that at home she was called something else. The name sounded alien and therefore forbidding, and might have been chosen to emphasize the natural barrier between teacher and pupil. She was obviously a pagan—a *Chreestch*—our name for any non-Jew. Miss Murphy read out our last names from a long paper in front of her, and we raised our hands to signify our presence. She was severely distant, and her impersonal attitude, added to the formality of being called by our last names, cast a chill on the classroom. Soon one began to long for the sound of one's first name as for an endearment that would, at a stroke, establish a human relationship between oneself and Miss Murphy. But it was not to be. By the following morning Miss Murphy, having already memorized the surnames of her entire class, called the roll without once referring to her paper.

She then went to the blackboard and in beautiful script wrote "*Catt*" and, looking over the sea of heads in front of her, said: "Something is wrong with the spelling of this word. Katzenelenbogen, stand up and tell me what is wrong." A small, skinny boy rose in the back of the room and said something in an indistinct voice. "Speak up, Katzenelenbogen!" Miss Murphy sharply commanded. My heart went out to Katzenelenbogen in his ordeal. I was conscious of the

disparity between the long and important-sounding name and the frailty and insignificance of its possessor. Miss Murphy, however, could not be blamed for adhering to a long-established practice in all public schools. Even in kindergarten, I learned, four- and five-year-olds were called by their last names. The practice was inevitably adopted by the children among themselves in their out-of-school hours, of course with suitable abbreviations of the longer names, and often with prefatory, highly descriptive adjectives.

Notwithstanding Miss Murphy's frigidity, she soon commanded our interest and respect, and we made good progress in reading and spelling. For some mysterious reason, we were more interested in spelling outside the classroom than in it. In the classroom we were content to plod along with the elementary vocabulary of *McGuffey's Eclectic Second Reader*. But at recess time in the yard, and on the street on our way home, we challenged one another to spell long and complicated words whose meaning we didn't know and never dreamt to inquire. Words such as "combustible" and "Mississippi" were somehow in the air. How the craze got started I never knew. But walking home one afternoon, I accidentally collided with a boy I didn't know. Instead of the usual, belligerent "Hey! Can't you look where you're going?" I was peremptorily commanded to spell "combustible." I couldn't, never having heard the word before; whereupon the boy rattled off "comb-us-ti-bl-e" with incredible speed and triumphantly went on his way. It was not long before I, too, learned to spell the fascinating word and others equally difficult and provocative. Soon I could rattle off "M-i-double-ess-i-double-ess-i-double-p-i" as rapidly as any child in the neighborhood.

The words in *McGuffey's*, though simpler, lacked the lovely sibilance and long, musical line of those we challenged one another with on the streets. In consequence, they were more difficult to learn to spell. But they did have the advantage of intelligibility, and as strung together in *McGuffey's Reader*

they told connected, highly interesting stories. *McGuffey's* took the reader into town and country, but I was delighted to discover that, like myself, it had a strong bias for the latter. I was much taken with a story in the reader called "The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse," which presented a dialogue between two rodents residing respectively in a metropolis and on a farm. The city dweller, who spoke first, advanced apparently incontrovertible arguments on behalf of urban life, stressing especially the prevalence of food left carelessly lying around by humans and the plenitude of holes and crevices and other avenues of escape from cats and destructive agents in general. But when he confidently rested his case, the country mouse, a timid and gentle creature, spoke up, painting an idyllic picture of life in the open, gently emphasizing the delicious leftovers in the country kitchen, the sweet smell of hay in the barn, the coziness of attics in the winter, the feeling of space and freedom, and, above all, the security offered by fields and forests. The issue was settled after the country mouse had returned home, when the town mouse, overconfident of urban security, fell a prey to the machinations of a cat, who devoured him with the sophisticated relish peculiar to city felines. Miss Murphy, who read aloud to us, appeared neither interested in nor moved by the *McGuffey* stories. She read without nuances and exhibited no emotion. Completely indifferent to the music of poetry, she would recite a line like the exquisite. "How would I like to go up in a Swing, Up in the air so blue!" in a cold, earthbound voice, look up from her book, and say: "Plotkin, spell 'swing.'" Yet she was an excellent disciplinarian, and our class speedily gained a reputation for good spelling.

She also conceived and put into effect a new system for the handling of hats and overcoats which saved time and enabled us to begin our studies in the mornings a few minutes after nine and to be out on the street soon after the bell rang at three. The system was simplicity itself. As each boy entered

the class, he deposited his hat and coat on a designated spot on the floor on either side of the blackboard. At nine o'clock, at noon, at one, and at three, two boys selected for their strength and stamina would station themselves in front of the class to right and left of the room. Each of the two would pick up a hat and coat from the heap in front of him, hold it aloft for recognition. The owner would then announce his name and open wide his arms to receive the garments flung in his direction. For a few minutes the air would be filled with hurtling coats, scarves, hats, and, on rainy or snowy days, rubbers and rubber boots. But it offered the pleasures of a humorous game, what with the uncertain aim of the throwers and the possibility of being knocked over by a too speedily propelled overcoat. For this innovation and her general efficiency Miss Murphy was soon liked and even admired.

Miss Murphy lived in Brooklyn, an hour's journey by the Grand Street horse-car to the East River, the ferry to cross it, and another horse-car on the other side. She therefore always brought her lunch with her. This consisted, much to our surprise, of one sandwich of jam, the bread remarkably white and of the texture of cotton, and one thin slice of sponge cake, each wrapped in tissue paper, and both done up in brown wrapping paper and tied with cord. It seemed to all of us rather meager nourishment for a strong-minded, powerful woman. But I had heard it said that Christians in general ate sparingly, the women especially showing a marked distaste for food. The men, on the other hand, were partial to drink, as could be verified by visiting the Bowery around the corner from the street I lived on. When she dismissed her class at noon, Miss Murphy would ask one of her pupils to run out and buy her a bottle of milk, and we soon began to regard this errand as a privilege and a special mark of favor. Yet she was careful to rotate us, and by the end of the term every boy in the class had bought her a bottle of milk. She had a way of saying: "Would you hand me my *puhss*?" which we

thought elegant. When the pocketbook was handed to her, she would extract a coin from it delicately with her thumb and forefinger, the little finger stretched out as if she was about to bring forth something precious or highly dangerous. She ate her lunch privately, seated at her desk. Even with no one to see her, one could be sure that she ate her jam sandwich with the decorum of Chaucer's "Nonne, a Prioress," and "let no morsel from her lippes falle." Incidentally, the sandwich was responsible for my first demerit in class, the morning when Miss Murphy taught us to sing "Columbia, the jam of the ocean." I thought of Miss Murphy's sandwich and could not repress a giggle when we sang the opening line with its stress on the word "jam." Sometimes Miss Murphy would bring a bunch of violets, which she would place in a glass of water on her desk. She looked stylish at all times, her hair in a pompadour, a gold watch pinned on her blouse, a large, black patent-leather belt around her waist. She was immaculate. At least twice each day she would remove the flowers, dip the tips of her fingers in the glass of water, and wipe them with her handkerchief. So conscious did the class become of Miss Murphy's fastidiousness that for Christmas most of her pupils gave her a cake of soap.

Stanton Street was an exciting place in which to live. It was the shopping center of the neighborhood, and in men's clothing it rivaled Hester Street. Perhaps in volume of sales Hester Street stood supreme; but its garments were in the main second-hand, while Stanton Street's were quite new. Furthermore, samples of the clothes on Stanton Street could be seen in all their chic and splendor on marvelous, lifelike dummies in the shop windows. One window that held me spellbound displayed a father with an elaborate mustache, surrounded by his five sons, ranging in size from an infant to a young man almost as tall as his parent. Each child wore the clothes suited to his age. I yearned for the blue sailor suit with whistle attached on the fourth son, a child of about my

own age. It occupied my thoughts and even dreams for years.

Stanton Street had other attractions besides shop windows. Organ-grinders with monkeys would appear at all hours and play a varied assortment of music. Through them I learned many popular songs, but the only one I can now recall is *Sweet Rosie O'Grady*. I found it a sweet ballad and a tender declaration of love, notwithstanding its waltz-like rhythm. The organ-grinders played other tunes of a more serious character, which, through repetition, I learned to sing, though it was years before I discovered their identity. Among them were the "*Miserere*" from *Il Trovatore* and "*Addio del passato*" from *La Traviata*, both of which brought tears to my eyes. Often I would follow an organ-grinder through many streets and so hear the "*Miserere*" perhaps a dozen times over, never failing to respond to the somber, inexpressibly sad minor chords at the beginning and the noble but equally doleful melody in major which comes soon after. I have since wondered at Verdi's predilection for the major mode to convey sadness, and his success in doing the opposite of what all other composers before and after him did.

Stanton Street ended at the Bowery, a block away from the house in which I lived. The Bowery was in bad odor with all the parents of the neighborhood for a great many reasons, all of them concerned with the welfare of the children. The street was the habitat of drunks and criminals, the latter so bold and vicious that they were often more than a match for the policemen who attempted to restrain them. Nevertheless, the temptation to explore for oneself so infamous a street was too strong to resist. In company with a playmate or two for protection in case of assault, I frequently roamed the Bowery as far north as Eighth Street and south to Chatham Square. It is true that nothing noteworthy ever happened, but the din of the elevated trains passing overhead, their engines belching smoke and sending showers of sparks and cinders down on the wagons and pedestrians below, the noise coming through

the swinging doors of the many saloons, the spectacle of drunkards swaying and teetering and talking loudly to themselves, combined to give us a delicious feeling of daring and fear. Sometimes the Bowery invaded Stanton Street in the persons of derelict women we called "Mary Sugar Bums." The poor, dirty, ragged creatures would come reeling into our block, cursing and swearing, and we would run after them, calling out "Mary Sugar Bum! Mary Sugar Bum!" and they would threaten us grotesquely with their fists and lunge at us futilely when we came too close.

There was always excitement on Stanton Street from the time school let out until supper time, and for an hour or two between that meal and bedtime. Something was always happening, and our attention was continually being shifted from one excitement to another. "What's-a-matter?" was a perpetual query as we were attracted by a sudden frantic exodus from a tenement, the clang of an ambulance as it drew up in front of a house, a person desperately running, pursued by a crowd, a runaway horse and wagon, a policeman forcibly propelling a drunk and twisting his arm until the wretch screamed with pain, an altercation through open windows between next-door neighbors. Occasionally there was the excitement of a Western Union messenger trying to deliver a telegram and asking the children playing on the street on what floor its recipient might live, for there were no bells or letter boxes in the entrance corridors of the tenements on Stanton Street. The mailman blew a whistle in the downstairs hall and called out names in a voice loud enough to be heard even on the fifth floor, and people would come running downstairs to get their letters.

The arrival of a telegram was a most serious occurrence. Everybody knew that telegrams were dispatched only to announce the death of a relative or friend or, at the very least, a serious illness; and the appearance of the fateful, gray-clad messenger was sure to draw a crowd. On hearing the name

of the addressee, the people would speculate aloud on the identity of the deceased, and some neighbor might offer to precede the messenger and tactfully and mercifully prepare the bereaved for the tidings to follow. "Something *terrible* has happened—Mrs. Cohen just got a telegram!"

Every day after supper I would beg to be allowed to play for a while in front of the house, where I could be seen from our windows and, at the proper time, summoned to bed. Between sundown and evening, on fair days, Stanton Street had an enchantment of its own. The dying sun benevolently lacquered the garish red-brick buildings, softly highlighting a window, a cornice, or a doorway. We would play on the sidewalks and in the gutter until the air grew dark and we could barely tell who was who. Then the lamplighter would emerge from the Bowery, carrying his lighted stick in one hand and a small ladder in the other. In the light of the gas lamps we played leapfrog over the empty milk cans in front of the grocery store. Each of us would vault over a single can and then, if successful, augment the hazard by adding a can for the next leap. Some of us learned to vault over as many as seven cans! Or we would play hide-and-go-seek in the dim vestibules of the tenement houses. We very rarely left off our play to return home voluntarily. Those of us who were sought out and induced to go home by mothers or sisters were fortunate, for the appearance of one's father on the scene carried with it the certainty of punishment. Fathers, with few exceptions, were insensitive, brutal, and quick to resort to force in obtaining obedience.

Mothers, too, frequently resorted to force, but only after they had exhausted all peaceful means. I would sometimes try my mother's patience to a degree that drove her to the retaliatory use of what sounded like curse words. I suspected they were not actual words, though, spoken passionately, they sounded authentic enough. They must have been inventions that would have the force but not the connotation of

curse one could properly call down on persons one didn't love or wasn't related to, for no one else ever used them and I never discovered their meaning. "You can go tar-tar-ar-ee!" my mother would shout wildly at me, as if she were consigning me to the devil. The effect, for the moment, was the same. For the most part, however, my mother found relief in rhetorical queries addressed to the heavens, like "What does he want of me? Does he wish to shorten my life?" Or she would hurl an epithet and cannily negate it in the same breath, like "The cholera should seize him—not!" My father wasted no time with me when by chance he came into the room at such critical moments. "Let *me* handle him," he would say grimly as he placed himself between us. "Skinning *alive*, that's what he needs," and he would undo his belt preparatory to carrying out what he thought I needed. My mother would then interfere and make excuses for me and the half-withdrawn belt would be reluctantly returned to its place. But on one occasion the two acted in concert against me, thus bringing about the first great disillusionment of my life.

I had disobeyed strict orders not to go outdoors barefoot on a cold rainy afternoon. I returned several hours later with every expectation of being scolded by my mother or punished by my father if he happened to be home. I found both of them at home, but my apprehensions vanished when I saw no anger or resentment in their faces. On the contrary, my father asked me in a pleasant way if I had had a good time, the while he busied himself undoing the knots in a clothesline. I said I had and went to the window to signal my friends on the street that everything was all right, when suddenly I was seized from behind and felt my mother's arms hard around me. A second later my father had bound my legs and hands with the clothesline and dragged me with—shame to tell!—my mother's help into the kitchen, where he tied me fast to a leg of the sink. My father's deceptive behavior did not surprise me; I could expect it of him. But my mother's perfidy

shattered in one instant my previously unquestioned trust in her love for me. My refuge and security were gone. My world had toppled around me. If such things could be, my only wish was to die. An hour later I was released, but my freedom, while physically gratifying, could not restore the faith I had lost. It was weeks before I would permit my mother to touch me.

We lived in Stanton Street for about a year. My father, not having the capital to open a cheder of his own, taught Hebrew to a few boys in their homes. This brought in very little money. Besides, the inattention of the pupils, who could not keep their eyes on the Bible, but kept staring out of the window, brought on my father's old headaches. Furthermore, he came up against a newfangled idea among parents that teachers were not to administer corporal punishment. It had not been so in the old country. And my father would rather give up a pupil than relinquish so necessary and important a prerogative. My mother reminded him that beggars could not be choosers, but he insisted that they *could*; they could choose starvation! At any rate, *he* required nothing, or very little, for himself. All he needed, he said, was a piece of bread and herring and a roof over his head.

Nevertheless, he usually ate what we all did. Friday nights he would expect and plainly relish a full ceremonial dinner of several courses, beginning with a stuffed fish, the head of which was reserved for him, and of which he ate all but the eyes and the more resistant bones. There would then follow sweet and sour meat roasted to a point of delicious disintegration and flanked by roast potatoes saturated in gravy, and limp, candied carrots. Soup would come last, and my father would help himself to two brimful plates from the large bowl placed in the center of the table. He was inordinately fond of calf's-foot jelly, which my mother would cook on Fridays and put out on the fire escape to cool. On Saturday after *Minche* (late afternoon prayers) it would be served, preceded by a

little whisky, as a delicate collation for him and a fellow worshipper he generally brought home with him. All in all, he ate so very well that it was difficult to believe his declarations of austerity.

My oldest brother, Albert, had married and had gone to live in Waterbury, Connecticut, where he practiced carpentry and undertook small repair jobs. He had talked my brother Solomon, next to him in age, into going with him, with a view to their forming a partnership as builders and contractors. My brother Louis, aged fourteen, got himself a job as a presser's assistant in a tailor shop in the vicinity of Stanton Street. My three older sisters found work in a cigarette factory. My younger sister hadn't yet reached the kindergarten age. She played around the house and got in my mother's way, and when sent to play in the street, frequently fell down the stairs. Neighbors would pick her up and carry her upstairs, and my mother would have to drop her work and apply poultices and bandages and still her cries, thus defeating the purpose for which she had been relegated to the streets. After school hours I would help out my mother for an hour or so by "minding" the unstable child.

Though most of our family were employed, their aggregate earnings provided the barest subsistence for us. It is true that on Friday nights we invariably had a feast, but that repast was made possible only by economy and deprivation during the rest of the week. I was generally hungry, and I always invested the penny I infrequently got from my mother in "broken cake" at the grocery store. Sweet biscuits in that era were sold, on the East Side at any rate, from large barrels, and "broken cake" was the name for the bits and splinters of biscuits remaining in the bottom when all of the unfractured dainties had been removed. We longed, of course, for the biscuits in their original unharmed condition. Yet "broken cake" had a flavor of its own, owing to the very circumstance that caused its degradation. Lying crushed and chipped under

the weight of its unharmed fellows above, it assimilated a variety of aromas, so that the flavor of a piece of "broken cake" offered a concentration of all the flavors of *all* the biscuits in the barrel. I preferred "broken cake" to candy at "Cheap Charlie's," where one could buy ten chocolate-coated walnuts for a penny.

Every street had a "Cheap Charlie." I used to wonder at the singularity of the candy-store business being exclusively in the hands of men of the same name. These candy stores had an extraordinary attraction for children because of the personal attitude of Charlie to his young customers. This was an even more potent lure than the advertised cheapness of Charlie's wares, which we accepted on faith without inquiry or comparison. Charlie was human and understanding, and was not above entering into the problems of his patrons. Thus it was possible, when one did not happen to have a penny at the moment, to confide in Charlie and, on a promise to pay up at the first opportunity, to leave the store with the chocolate-covered walnuts in a paper bag. The groceryman was less understanding. I suspected that my mother was responsible for his insistence on prompt payment for "broken cake." Nor did I have the heart to blame her. Her own relations with the man were often delicate. I myself had witnessed humiliating scenes in which he categorically refused to give her further credit. But my mother always managed to persuade him to change his mind, alleging an imminent favorable turn of events for us which would promptly take care of all our financial indebtedness.

In school the time for promotion drew near and a great uneasiness swept the class. The fear of being "left back" gripped all but a very few boys who were obviously so brilliant that it was early conceded by the rest of us, as well as by themselves, that there would be no question about *their* promotion. Being "left back" was definitely a dishonor. But not because it was a reflection on one's scholarship. Scholar-

ship was, in fact, suspect, and the "smart" boys who got A's or "stars" became the objects of ribbing and were likely to suffer ostracism. Being "left back" doomed one to loneliness, the sudden disruption of friendships, and a separation from the intrigues, scandals, pleasantries, and feeling of solidarity of a long-established class. Long before the dreaded day arrived we could see Miss Murphy working on the "promotion list" during our study periods. We tried hard to guess at the names she so carefully wrote out by watching the movements of her pen. The crossing of a "t" or the dotting of an "i" could be a clue in that it ruled out a great many names that did not contain those letters. The boys who occupied desks in the first row were sometimes able to catch a name she was writing: a boy would raise his hand for permission to "leave the room," as our trips to the water closets were politely called, and in making for the door would sidle near Miss Murphy's desk and attempt a swift look at the promotion list. But Miss Murphy was aware of these stratagems and did what she could to defeat them. When she left the room, even for a moment, she would lock the list in her desk.

On promotion day the class arrived all scrubbed and neat, with hair combed and definitely parted, the labor of mothers who cherished a wild hope that in case of doubt an extra bit of cleanliness might tip the scales. Miss Murphy gave no indication that she was aware of anything unusual in our appearance. Neither by word nor by look did she indicate that she had sealed the fate of fifty boys in the document that now reposed in her desk. Tense, nervous, and dispirited, we went through our usual morning routine. At ten o'clock the monitors left their seats and opened the windows halfway with long poles while the class rose and exercised their arms and heads with Miss Murphy leading and commanding "Inspire!—Expire!" the class noisily breathing in and out in response. At a quarter to twelve the room suddenly became unaccountably still. Miss Murphy seated herself by her desk, opened it, and drew

out the promotion list. I could see the red line down the middle of the page, looking like a thin blood barrier, which separated the names on either side. Miss Murphy, before addressing herself to the list, was exasperatingly deliberate in tidying the top of her desk, arranging her pencils in a row, and moving the water glass with its little bouquet of flowers to one side. At last she was ready.

“I shall now read the promotion list,” she announced. “As your name is called, rise and stand in the aisle. Those whose names are not called will remain seated.” This seemed to foreshadow doom for many. Classes were known to have been promoted en masse. Clearly ours would not be one of these. The class held its breath as Miss Murphy again gave her attention to the list. “Abramowitz,” Miss Murphy intoned, and Abramowitz got to his feet precipitately and stood in the aisle. “Abrams, Abramson, Askenasy.” The B’s seemed endless, but at last Miss Murphy said: “Chasmanovitch.” There was a pause. “Chisel” followed “Chasmanovitch” in the daily roll call. What about Chisel? Chisel’s fate did not concern me. Ordinarily I would have wished him well. But if Chisel was not on the list my name should come next. Why did Miss Murphy pause? What could the hesitation portend for me? I waited for the blow. Should Miss Murphy now pronounce the name of Cohen, then both Chisel and I had been “left back.” My eyes isolated Miss Murphy’s lips as they began to form a name. “Chisel!” Miss Murphy pronounced, and the wretch (his desk was in front of mine), who had slumped down in his seat in despair, now looked about him incredulously, like a criminal who had received a last-minute reprieve. Slowly he got up and shifted over into the aisle. I continued to stare at Miss Murphy’s lips. There was another pause, and then I heard my name, clear and loud. I stepped into the aisle in a daze and stood there for a long time, experiencing no sensation of any kind. It was like the suspension of consciousness. Then all at once I was aware of

many boys standing in the aisles and Miss Murphy was calling out "Rabinowitz, Redin, Rickin, Sokolov, Spingold, Steinberg, Teitelbaum, Ulansky, Wissotzky, Yarmolovsky, Zeitlin." It was all over. Three wretched boys still sat: Katzenelenbogen, Gershowitz, and Vlacheck. Katzenelenbogen had covered his face with his hands and was crying softly. Gershowitz, his face white, stared straight in front of him. Vlacheck alone showed no signs of defeat. He had been "left back" twice before, and he smiled and leered as if he had expected nothing else and rather gloried in continuing to belong to a minority.

We promoted boys, at a command from Miss Murphy, closed ranks and were marched into an adjacent classroom, where we found four dejected boys, the leftovers of our new grade. Miss Murphy made us a formal farewell address and turned us over to Miss Applebaum, our new teacher. Then the bell rang and we marched into the street and scattered quickly to our homes, for once not loitering to talk and plan, in our eagerness to carry the good news to our families.

I was now a third-grader. My promotion had given me a new confidence in myself, and I looked forward to an interesting term with my old schoolmates under the tutelage of Miss Applebaum. But before a week had passed, my parents decided, most unaccountably, I thought, to leave Stanton Street and move to distant East Broadway, a neighborhood I had never even seen. In consequence, I obtained a transfer to P.S. No. 2 on Henry, between Rutgers and Market streets. Except for the fact that I was assigned to the third grade in the new school, I was in all other respects in the position of a Katzenelenbogen, Gershowitz, or Vlacheck, for my classmates were all new to me and I had to set about making new friends.

East Broadway was a wide thoroughfare. Our apartment on the third floor of a house on the corner of Rutgers Street overlooked a large square, or rather oblong, adorned by a large

black marble fountain, rising in several tiers. I could sense the possibilities of the neighborhood. For, besides the fountain, all the buildings on the west side of East Broadway, extending from Essex to Jefferson streets, had been razed for the eventual construction of a park, and the debris offered the very terrain for possible war games, with rival armies marching and counter-marching and striving to gain certain desirable heights. It would be at least a year before the place could be cleared and the park begun, and I foresaw many late afternoons and evenings, not to speak of Sundays, devoted to maneuvers, with myself in some kind of leading role, perhaps as captain of a powerful striking force. The potentialities of the place were innumerable. Looking up Rutgers Street toward the east, there was the river in the distance, with boats of every description plying up and down. Huge warehouses near the water's edge were forever discharging crates and barrels with mysterious contents, and at night one could sit on the large empty trucks parked on the wharves and watch the river and the lights from Brooklyn across it.

Within walking distance were splendors like Brooklyn Bridge, the City Hall, and the Post Office. The mysterious alleys of Chinatown were no more than half a mile away. Certainly East Broadway, at its meeting with Rutgers Square, was the center of the universe, and I looked forward to an exciting and fruitful existence on it. But the prospect of a strange school, a new teacher, and new schoolmates was unpleasant, and I would gladly have relinquished the future delights of East Broadway for the old routine and associations of Stanton Street.