



"Manhattan Street Map..." by Lawrence Bridges

The Shack

William Thompson

I met our paper boy on a September day after school. There he was, Terry, a sullen, bespectacled teenager, crouching at the corner of the street and using a pocketknife to cut open a bundle. I don't know what came over me, but I asked if he needed a helper – a bold move for me at the time.

Terry and I delivered papers every day after school, splitting the route between us. On collection night, the people who answered the door were older, some ancient and shuffling. Many barely spoke; some didn't speak English. I could often hear the hockey game in the background. Once, collecting in the apartment on the Avenue, I caught a glimpse of half-clad people sitting in a circle on the floor. They were passing a joint. I didn't know enough to recognize the heavy smell of pot, but I knew it wasn't cigarette or pipe smoke.

We always started our route by visiting the shack. It was always dark and smokey. Kids were dressed in jackets and boots, scarves and mitts, long hair fanning out beneath toques, cheeks reddened and noses snotty with cold. At one end of the crowded shack was a wood-burning stove. Kids stuffed it full of brown paper that came off the bundles delivered every day at 4:00. The flames in the stove jumped and spat, and the nylon string that tied the bundles melted and stank. Kids swore, wrestled, yelled, laughed uproariously, and smoked endless cigarettes.

I caught the attention of a girl once. She was thin, dressed in a short, bomber-style jacket, her mascara making her eyes look long and mysterious. She stood, leaning up against the shelf that ran around the inside of the building. She was smoking, delicately holding the cigarette between two fingers ending in pink, painted nails.

"You look too young to have a route," she said, looking at me appraisingly.

I explained I was Terry's helper.

She nodded, thoughtfully. She had a languid air, but mostly I was aware of her girliness. She couldn't have been more than fourteen, but she seemed older and somehow worldly.

"Want a drag?" She blew a perfect smoke ring, then held out her cigarette.

I couldn't possibly refuse. I carefully puffed on the cigarette, excruciatingly conscious of the saliva filling my mouth.

I was aware this girl's gaze was separating me, somehow, but I knew I was too young, too inexperienced, too much of a kid to be taken seriously. But I was drawn to her, one of the few girls amid this shouting, laughing, and swearing maleness. I wanted to be part of that ebullient crowd, but I didn't want to be part of the disdain with which she regarded it.

"Assholes," she commented, seeing me looking at three guys wrestling, half on the long wooden table, where other kids shove bundles into bags.

Something in her gaze was instructing me in maleness, forcing me to apprehend myself in a way that was separate from the rawness, the sheer loudness and awkwardness of this press of boys, of which I was a part. I carried this and many other encounters as I tramped our route during that long winter, while the days slowly gathered strength and the snow grew old and dirty underfoot.

Winter passed; spring came. Terry always made a show of paying me at the end of the week, jab-counting coins and a couple of bills into my palm.

After one such performance, Terry asked me over to his house. We weren't friends – I worked for him, and he was at least three years older than me. The invitation seemed more an implied threat, but I went anyway.

The house was empty, his parents at work. He led me to the kitchen, pulling open the fridge and holding up a bottle. He grinned, unscrewed the cap, then drank; he offered it to me. Another challenge. I took the bottle, drank in my turn – the wine fizzing at the back of my throat and making me cough. He laughed. I felt compliant, mechanically accepting each of his challenges.

He led the way into the basement. Along one wall stood a six-foot fish tank, set upon a decorative, wooden frame. I wanted to look at the fish, but Terry went to a shelf and began hauling down magazines. He spread them on the floor, opening one after another. They were Playboys. My dad had Playboys stashed in a box in the basement. I looked at them, sometimes, but I knew my mother didn't like it. Terry leered and prodded and cat called. These were women's bodies as I knew I shouldn't see them, but it was the expressions on their faces that held my attention.

School ended that year. I stopped delivering papers for Terry at some point. Maybe it was the afternoon at his house that seeded my unwillingness. My parents wondered, but I was stubborn, and later that summer, it stopped mattering.

I was visiting my cousins' farm in August. Three of us drove to the river for a swim. We hit another car at the top of a hill, just off the main highway. My youngest cousin was killed, and I lost my sight, slamming my face into the dashboard and breaking my left femur. I spent that fall in the hospital, recovering and coming to terms with the new life I never asked for.

It was maybe three years later when Terry came to see me. It was June – the long evenings filled with the mating calls of robins. He came in his own car. He must have been sixteen or seventeen by then. We sat in his car behind the garage, and he fiddled with the stereo as he talked.

"You ever tried pot?"

"No."

"Want to?"

"No, thanks."

He brushed it off, lighting a cigarette instead. He told me about his job and his girlfriend. He remembered the days of delivering papers up and down our street, putting all of it away with a laugh. I laughed, too, but I wondered if we were remembering the same things.

And somewhere in that conversation, he crossed a line – a line for me, not him. It was the line that separated that old me, the sighted me, from this new me, the blind kid who walked with a white cane, read books on tape, and didn't have friends. But Terry hadn't known me then, and he didn't know me now. This visit to talk and show off his car was a way of confirming a story he was telling himself, the story of a shared past that was motivated by something I didn't understand – maybe it was guilt. But sitting there, I knew that the boy who delivered those papers was still me but somehow split away and lost to me forever. I grieved. And even as I did, I could still see him, that other confused, lonely self who desperately wanted to understand the world, who tramped to the shack after school, and who warmed his hands at a spitting stove before carrying a heavy bag of papers out into the failing light of a winter's afternoon.

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