

## Store

*He knows nothing, and thinks he knows everything.* —George Bernard Shaw

In the fall of 1943, nearing sixteen and needing an after school job to put some money in my pocket, I followed a lead by a friend of my mother and presented myself at a haberdashery shop in my neighborhood. It was a very neat, conservative shop owned and run by Max Mandelstam, a silver-haired soft-spoken veteran of World War I, and his son-in-law, Henny.

I could see Max's store from the back porch of our third-floor Allston apartment on the Park Vale hill. It was exactly mid-way along Harvard Avenue, the town's single commercial street and bounded by Elizabeth's Bakery—my first awareness that a bakery needed no sign—next to the double store-front Woolworth's Five & Dime and Mr. Greer's radio and record shop where, in those early 'forties, I could take a new *Decca* record from the sales rack to a glassed-in play-back sampling room and hear it before I bought the music. Mr. Greer never lectured me about mishandling the records.

Although Allston town had been incorporated into Greater Boston just after the turn of the century, its scale and features still gave the impression that one was in a small town that happened to border outlying Boston.

My shop job was clean work and not difficult. In the basement stockroom, I would check-in merchandise arrivals against the bills of lading, and unpack. After Max gave me the schedules of pricing, I'd pin the tags to the clothing—always managing to pierce a finger, then worry that I would bloodstain the shirt.

The sales floor had to be maintained—constantly swept, the shelves stocked and displays dusted, and goods replaced as soon as sales had made spaces. It didn't take long to realize how many shirts or pants of only one style had to be stocked, in most of the size range.

Mr. Mandelstam, a gentle, old-school cultured person who spoke with a trace of eastern Europe in his accent, was unusually quiet, as if thinking about how to make things in his small world better. His son-in-law seemed to be an obviously bored part of the business, never speaking of other ambitions, of dreamed thoughts of a more interesting career. It became clear that Henny's poor attitude was one of his father-in-law's deep concerns affecting Max's daughter, Lillian.

Henny seemed to be a tethered pony. He'd restlessly move through the empty aisles, or pay no real attention to the proper, helpful attitude of a retail merchant seeking to build a loyal clientele. He drew a picture of

impatience, someone waiting for something to come along to release him from this too-easy prison walling him from his carefully concealed desires.

During a quiet, late afternoon, I told Max that I read that Eddie Rickenbacker, the World War I pilot, had returned from France an international hero to open a haberdashery store. I wondered if Max had been a wartime flyer. "No, not a flyer," he smiled, his voice quicker, more youthful. "They trained me as an aviation 'airframe & engine' mechanic. It's strange that you brought that up. I was stationed at Ypres, servicing Rickenbacker's squadron. He was all the hero and more—more than they say he was!" Max had ended speaking with more force and verve than I had heard since I had come to know him. It was the only time I saw any visible sense of pride.

Henny's wife—Max's daughter, Lillian, would often come by, sometimes with her mother, Edith. Lillian and I became friends. She was spirited, interested in any news or events, particularly neighborhood goings-on. She was open and easy to talk to, always asking about my welfare, my family life, plans for my future. Almost always she expressed deeply felt concerns about the horrendous war in Europe, the bloody news of the huge Pacific war. Each time she would thank God that Henny's eardrums had failed the Army's physical exam.

Occasionally, she would telephone Max to have me pick-up and deliver food orders too large or heavy for her. While Henny would be called small, pale and, to my mind not very good looking, Lillian was good looking, rather tall for a girl, with shoulder length solid black hair. Her frame was nicely proportioned—a narrow waist, sensual hips, well shaped legs and a bosom which always brimmed over low-cut blouses.

On a Monday school holiday, Henny and I, with Max's help pulled most of the store's display and shelf stock on one side of the store to finish the seasonal changeover. It was more up and down the stockroom's stairs than usual. After our lunch break, Max said that Lillian needed me to pick up her groceries and the vegetable-fruits she had left at old Mr. Barbos's fruit store.

"You have wonderful skin which, I bet, tans easily," Lillian said when she handed me an iced lemonade. "Sit down here and cool off. You really look like how hot it is. I've never had to use anything to keep me from sunburns. I guess I get it from my father. Max's skin makes him look younger than he really is. And, not many wrinkles, don't you think?"

Lillian began voicing concern about my eligibility for military service with the war so worldwide, and deepening. I told her that I was planning to apply for the Navy's pilot training program; that with the need for wartime pilots the Navy would take me when I turned seventeen—if my father would sign my enlistment papers. "I'm excited by aviation," I said. "I've always wanted to fly ever since as a child I watched a Piper Cub's bouncing take off from a grass field. The stories of Lindbergh's astounding

New York to Paris flight—in a cloth-covered, single engine plane—I just knew that I was born needing to fly."

"Oh, it's so scary to hear you say that", Lillian said. "I'm really frightened to death when even thinking about airplanes. I'm not very brave, y' know."

As we sat on her couch she began to talk about how she loved to get new things—nice furniture, a record player, kitchen stuff, clothes. "Do you like the way I look in this skirt and blouse? I found it on Saturday at Needle and Thread. On Brighton Avenue. They have really nice things." Lillian looked really attractive, her hair brushed bright, right down to her bare shoulders, her sheer white blouse showing no underwear, no brassiere.

"This ugly war," she started, with a hopeless tone, "it's so monstrous. So many have already been wounded, killed, just uprooted in ways their families don't want to know about. It's the wounded that, I think, are the worst."

"The killed ones, for them it's all over, except for their families . . . oh, how terrible . . . *terrible!* When a mine or a bomb . . . or *bullets* rip off arms or legs, or blinds a soldier's eyes . . . and then they 'survive' . . . don't you know that they will live with those nightmares, those terrible moments, for all the rest of their lives? And the newspapers, they only talk about the dead ones, as if that's the only . . . that's the most horror there is."

Lillian looked hard at my hand. "You have beautiful, long fingers . . . large hands," she said, almost to herself, discovering. "Look at your finger 'moons,' so clear, so big," she told me. Admiring, she picked up my left hand to see it closely. After quietly holding it, staring at it for some awkward time, she turned to me, looked up at my face, and with no change of expression placed my hand flat on her breast.

"I've really liked coming to the store, getting to know you," she told me in a small, soft voice. "I love the way you just go about the things you have to do. Daddy says you're bright, and do the work as if you care about it. He likes that he doesn't have to tell you much about how things should be, that you seem to want to do a good job, no matter what it is." I felt Lillian's thigh slowly move to touch my own. "He talked about you as a person that felt neatness was important. He was really surprised, when you said that you could letter all the window signs, how easy it was for you. Dad says that you have many talents, that you'll go far."

Lillian had not removed her hand from mine, and began to very slowly lightly move both of ours in small caressing circles, tracing the shape of her breast with my fingertips. My hand lost its surprised stiffness. It relaxed, with a nervous tremble to fit the shape of her breast, as a swell of feeling welled up from between my legs. I became aware of our breathing, her heat.

I had never touched a woman's breast until this moment, and in my head

all else was pushed aside by a mounting, rolling thrill. "I want you to like me," her words soft, barely audible, "because I realize that I've come to like you a lot." That last had a serious tone, to be believed.

She gently eased away the glass of lemonade my other hand was still stiffly holding and sliding her arm over my shoulders drew us a little closer together. "Have you ever had a girl touch you here?" Lillian asked, her hand lightly laid on my inner thigh startlingly close to my groin. Alarmed and somewhat frightened, I felt an erection grow and push out which suddenly made me feel my face and neck were burning red.

"Oh, that is really nothing to be shy about," she assured me. "It's something that is supposed to happen when girls and boys are close. It makes me feel good to know that you are feeling good. You are feeling that way, aren't you?"

What began to fight through to my awareness was a picture of Henny, right then working on the changeover in the store. I was sitting here with his wife, realizing that this was Henny's wife, a woman married to the guy I worked with, with her hand caressing me. And I was realizing this with the part of my head that could sense something wrong. All of the other parts of me—those places that never knew anything like what Lillian's hand or her breast felt like, those parts didn't want anything to change.

She saw thoughts clouding my face, and begin to grimace. "I know what's going on . . . you're thinking that you shouldn't be doing this here . . . that I'm Henny's wife . . . married . . . and how are y' going to face him now?"

As she softly talked, her lovely, girlish face gently serious, she had slowly moved my leg away and laid her hand on the shape pushing at my fly. The pulsing, pulsing beat at my crotch was crowding everything else from my consciousness but the touch of her hand. Her voice made slow, soft sounds, but I wasn't sure she was saying words. With the sounds, her hand moving with a rhythm slowly caressed the bulge, my prick twitching in response.

Her hand moved up, gently undid my zipper, unbuckled my belt, and lightly touching reached into my briefs. When her skin touched my skin, it felt as if I were drowning—unseeing, grateful, with an indescribable fullness of being. There had to be nothing . . . there was nothing else but the throbbing awareness of her fingers on my penis, the center of mind.

I was held lightly, moving, slowly moving in a rhythm, a laziness of moving as I became aware of her breasts, hair . . . naked breasts barely touching my face, my skin realizing, responding to the contours of softness, tracing endless curves until my slack mouth, my tongue dragged the stiffness of a nipple.

A ringing telephone suddenly piercing my ears shaped itself into stanzas of realization and my mindless dreaming began to dissolve . . . the edges of

acuity emerging. Still unseeing, I heard Lillian's voice float by, wavering. "Yes. Yes, he's just leaving here. Scared! They robbed him! Still, he's still pretty shaky, you know, confused. No, no."

"Well . . . he says they almost took the groceries . . . and everything else. I did that. Of course! Gave him some lemonade, yeh, and washed his face with cold . . . ." She sounded calm, assuring. "Well, he's much quieter. It's, it seems OK, now. Yes, it just happened, before . . . He said that if an older guy hadn't come by . . . they were starting to beat him . . . I will, yes, No, no, you needn't"

Slowly rousing, her hand on my shoulder, I started to put myself together, asking where her bathroom was. When I came out, Lillian talked slowly, in a lower voice, talking about what had happened, that I . . . "don't have to say anything about it at the store. Just say that you don't want to talk about it anymore. That's all. It's OK. Look, it's OK."

Max was quickly out of his office when I returned. My self-consciousness and sense of embarrassment he read as my closing down from the suddenness of the experience. "It's alright now," he said in a caring, fatherly tone. "You've just had a bad scare. Bandits! You should quit for the day and go home. That's alright."

About six weeks after that day, Henny, on a wild, drunken night ride with a friend's Harley bike, was killed, just like that, skidding on gravel and smashing into the side of a black panel newspaper truck. For some time after that, I never saw Lillian in the store when I was there.

During that summer, after high school graduation, Max encouraged me with a raise; learning to service his customers, and providing me a crisper wardrobe than I had known. My interactions with shoppers were lots more interesting than monitoring clothing stock in Max's stuffy, dry basement.

In late September, during my last week in the store, Lillian appeared in Max's office. She'd come by to say goodbye. I hadn't seen Lillian since our spring interlude in her apartment. Surprized, I realized she was wearing the same thin open blouse she'd worn during my afternoon on her couch. Max stood by, faintly smiling at his small "family."

Taking my hands in hers, and speaking very softly, her eyes beginning to fill up, she said, "You must take . . . good care of yourself, you know. I'll be thinking of you out there. A lot."

With September almost gone and Henny's dark grey absence was felt less in the store, Max asked if I'd, " . . . like to stay on, you know, full time, now you've finished high school?" "Max, last week—I'm sorry . . . I don't know why I didn't tell you." Max's face tightened with a sense of expectation. It began to look as it did when his son-in-law's accident crashed into his quiet orderly life.

"Last Friday down on Causeway Street I enlisted in the Navy's V-5 flight training program. They said I'm to go next month, just before I turn seventeen. My father finally said 'O.K.' He signed the Navy's papers. I have to get into the war, Max . . . and I need to fly."

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