

THE DREAM

To its surprise, the bullet sailed out of the gun my mother clutched unsteadily in both hands, and a moment later the big man's yellow hard hat leapt from his thick head, into the air.

1

When the hard hat had reached the exact height of the roof of Faggot's Hardware, it stopped. Its dull curve had been ruptured by a singed bullet hole just an inch from a jagged black insignia. It remained suspended far above our heads, and above the body of the big man who had slammed heavily to the sidewalk, like a piano falling ten floors.

We gazed up at the hard hat, then down at the man, then back up at the hard hat. From behind the plate-glass window of the hardware store, a stubby guy with a withered left arm and bushy

black eyebrows gazed with us. A pencil poked out from behind his ear. I wondered if he was the same guy with a pencil behind his ear from when I was a kid.

My mother slowly lowered her hands, chewing on her bottom lip, as if she were thinking really hard. Then she carefully placed the gun in the paper Dominion grocery bag by her feet, among the cartons of milk, the bananas, the celery, the cornflakes, the little boxes of powdered Jell-O, the packet of dry farfel, the length of Chicago 59 salami, and the kosher steaks wrapped in leaking brown paper. We had Worcestershire sauce in the fridge at home.

I glanced at my big brother, Jake. He was squinting quietly, in thought. His hand rested lightly on my shoulder. More people, some of them our neighbours, began to emerge from the shops to see what had happened. Toots Rosen, Marky Adler, Frieda Laba, the father from the Nefskys — Wallace, was it? Walter? — they stepped out of the shoe store, the cigar store, the Liquor Control Board of Ontario, and the bank. They stepped out of the Red Ruby Chinese Restaurant. Across the

street, in the park with the slides, the teeter-totter, and the incredible rocket-ship monkey bars, a few kids had run right up to the frost fence. Their noses poked through. Their hands were like claws on the criss-crossed metal.

On the sidewalk, the man neither spoke nor twitched. The shadow of a breeze rippled his thinning hair. His eyes were gently shut, a trickle of black blood leaking neatly from his blue temple. He lay motionless there, in front of the hardware store in Bathurst Manor Plaza, dreaming of a white, white world.

GEORGE CHUVALO'S SIGNATURE

4 I didn't mind ants or cotton boll weevils, and I sure didn't mind worms, undulating on hooks or sliding through moist soil, but anything with long and spindly legs scared the hell out of me: especially spiders, centipedes, and those really big mosquitoes that looked like they could lift a station wagon with their suction feet.

My friends and I were playing in the lake, floating around in our red, green, and blue rubber doughnuts, our butts hanging down through the holes into the cool water. We were splashing each other and debating who was better from *Man from U.N.C.L.E.* — Ira liked Napoleon Solo, because he always ended up with a girl, one with red lipstick and piled-up blond hair, but Sammy saw that as a

weakness and argued that Illya Kuryakin was way cooler: he was immune to girls and had a Russian accent. I tried to make a case for Maxwell Smart, but he was only a half-hour long, like Captain Nice and Mr. Terrific, so he didn't even count. As Sammy puckered up and made kissing noises into the air, mocking Napoleon Solo, my eyes caught a glint of purple, a lightning flash of black, and I saw that a giant dragonfly had perched on my knee. Its wingspan was that of a crow, and its body was made of a thousand horrible segments, a thousand thoraxes, a thousand anthraxes, each sprouting a terrible hairy leg. Its pointy metallic head jerked from side to side, its jaws clanging open and shut like an assembly-line contraption that crushes things flat, and its blank black eyes drilled right into me.

First Ira screamed, and then I screamed. I began to kick my little pink legs, my butt slipping deeper into the water, but the metal creature just wouldn't let go. I could feel its needle feet gripping my knee, clinging stubbornly as my heart banged and my limbs thrashed, and the rubber float that held me on the surface of the water rocked like a ship in a storm.

Then I saw my bare feet swoop into the clouds, my toes poking right into them, and everything got loud, and thick, and echoey, and slow-motion. Water punched up into my nostrils, and my eyes went blurry with brine.

That thing of knowing how to swim, I hadn't bothered with it yet, though I could dog-paddle, I could just about dog-paddle. Luckily, we were close to the shore, and when my feet found the gritty bottom — the moss, the stones, the warm sand shifting between my toes — I pushed myself straight, and the water came only to my shoulders. My whole body shuddered, and I slid my hands down to my knees, plunging my face again into the water. I swiped spastically at my legs, grabbing for the winged monster.

But somehow, in all the chaos, it had disappeared, just pulled up its spiny pincer feet and winged away, hitching a ride across the lake with the warm breeze, engorged with my blood and maybe even some of my brain, I really didn't know for sure.

When I straightened again and pulled my head from the water, I was coughing, and Ira was laughing, bobbing around in his squeaking

doughnut, and Sammy was laughing, too. They were cracking up, spluttering water all over the place. On the dock just a few metres away, Michelle was pointing and howling, and Naomi. They wore colourful two-piece swimsuits — the colour of dragonflies, in fact — and they laughed at me, these little girls with straight dark hair and dark eyes, because I had looked like I'd gone nuts. I had looked like something out of an Abbott and Costello movie you saw on TV on a Sunday afternoon, if your dad and brother weren't watching football, like that one when Costello got chased up the old church bell tower by a lumbering mummy.

That night, after we barbecued hot dogs for dinner, toasted some buns on the grill, and opened a can of Jolly Green Giant corn niblets, ho ho ho, we gathered around the boxing ring that had been set up in a clearing at the edge of the woods, not far from the beach. I noted that although it was called a boxing ring, it was square, and I imagined what it would be like if people wore square rings on their fingers. Or what if their fingers were actually square?

My brother had one hand on my shoulder, and he pointed up at the ring and said, “That guy’s George Chuvalo!” A big white man with watery red eyes, a flop of thick, sweaty hair, and a nose both puffy and flat was dancing around on the mat, springing on the soles of his feet, throwing his gloved fists at the enormous open palms of a thin black man who wore a pressed white shirt and a straw boater. I pushed forward and gripped the edge of the platform, peering up between the ropes at the two dancing men. I watched their feet and their hands, and I watched their faces all tensed up and concentrating. George Chuvalo had thick, knotted shoulders and a chest that was puffed up like his internal organs were all going to burst through.

We heard the *smack smack smack* of glove against flesh, the sharp grunts, the rhythmic tapping of the boxer’s feet against the mat. Everyone from our cluster of cottages was there, and from the cottages around the other side of the lake as well, whooping and cheering for George Chuvalo. His name made me think of “marshmallow,” that’s what it sounded like, so I thought of him as George Marshmallow, and I looked forward to nightfall, when we’d gather

around the fire and roast marshmallows on the ends of sticks we found in the woods. I liked when my marshmallow caught fire and I blew it out, then tasted its charcoal shell before getting to the sweet, sticky ooze. My mom always said I'd burn my tongue and I should wait till the marshmallow cooled off, but I never did, because you had to eat it right away to get the full effect.

On the far side of the ring, nailed to a tree, was a big corrugated-cardboard sign in crooked handwriting:

*George Chuvalo
Cottage Country Training Camp —
Welcome to Wapaska, George!*

I asked my brother if George was staying in one of the cottages, but Jake said no, he was just visiting here, because his trainer, the skinny black man, had a cottage down the highway. George was going to be the heavyweight champion of the world, my brother told me, and I should go and find something to get his autograph on after the training demonstration.

I picked through the forest of legs, burst free, then ran towards the cottage we rented for two weeks every summer. I was going to get the autograph of George Marshmallow, the famous boxer, the future heavyweight champion of earth. I'd never seen a boxer before, never seen their glistening, puffy faces. And maybe I'd get the autograph of the skinny black man, too. I'd never seen a black man before.

UP AGAIN, INTO THE BELL TOWER

At university, I did only the minimum required to get by, and sometimes even less. All my profs knew it, knew how lazy I was, that I wasn't trying, that I had brains I wasn't putting to use. What I mainly stayed in university for were the interventions I enjoyed perpetrating, and when I wasn't perpetrating interventions, I was scheming to perpetrate them. Actually, I didn't know these acts as interventions then, because interventions were still only things the CIA did in Latin America, like mining harbours in Nicaragua, invading Panama and Grenada, and assassinating populist Guatemalan presidents. The things I did, I saw as absurdist guerrilla art happenings.

For example, I ran a campaign to get the dead Dada poet and performer Hugo Ball elected student-council president, and a guy I knew who was involved in counting the ballots told me we'd got more votes than the goof in a suit from the business faculty who was reported to have won. In 1916, in Zurich, Hugo Ball and Emmy Hennings started up the Cabaret Voltaire, a home for artists, writers, and musicians. For one notorious performance, Ball wore a suit made primarily of cardboard tubes and cardboard wings. He droned non-existent words, and would someday become — if it weren't for a cover-up — the student president of a large Canadian university.

Another time, I sent terrorist letters to the campus newspaper. I threatened to spit into the open vats of ketchup, relish, and mustard in the student-building cafeteria if they didn't cover them up and install pump dispensers. It really bugged me when I lined up for ketchup for my turkey steakette only to find the ketchup tub swimming with plastic spoons, crumpled serviettes, speckles of mustard and relish, and maybe a pack of matches from the strip club, Shaky's, across the road. Then I began

another letter campaign claiming I was chipping one square inch every day from the huge, blobby Henry Moore sculpture in the foyer of the administration complex — they posted guards there for a few weeks and frisked anyone who didn't work in the offices. I signed my letters "James Osterberg," which was Iggy Pop's real name. My favourite Iggy Pop song was "The Passenger."

These interventions, plus the occasional girlfriend who couldn't get anyone better, were what kept me on campus, if not actually in lecture halls or biology labs. ("Stop the Nazi Delousing of Locusts!" was another of my happenings after I had to gas a live locust in a compulsory science class.) The truth was, I couldn't concentrate on anything in university, because I didn't care, so it made no difference whether or not I attended classes.

So I was cutting my politics seminar again — something about Herbert Marcuse, or maybe Herbert Hoover — and sitting a few rows from the back in the rep cinema on College Street. James Stewart was dragging Kim Novak up the steep, winding stone steps of a church tower. It was excruciating; it had never taken this long before. I hoped

that somehow this time it would turn out differently. Stewart would come to his senses, slump onto the steps and weep, pleading for forgiveness. Novak, tears glistening in her glorious dark eyes, would crouch down and comfort him, then kiss his eyelids, and his forehead, and his cheeks, and his lips, and she and Stewart would walk slowly down the narrow spiral staircase again, holding each other for support.

14 But, just as they had the last time, and the time before that, they reached the top of the tower, sweat glistening on James Stewart's clenched brow, sadness and terror waltzing in Kim Novak's eyes. And then the nun appeared out of nowhere — the nun always appears out of nowhere, always — and the bell clanged like thunder. And then a startled Kim Novak stumbled backwards a few steps, just one step too many, and flailed silently out the window, leaving behind only the resounding absence of Kim Novak.

So it was that I wound up weeping, just as I always had when I watched this film. I wept at the end, but I also wept at that part where James Stewart says to Kim Novak, "Your hair . . ." as, fastening a locket around her smooth pale neck

from behind, he transforms her into his dead lover, even though he actually has no dead lover, the whole thing's been faked, he's been duped.

And as the credits began rolling up the screen, the familiar strains of Bernard Herrmann's mournful "Vertigo Theme" welling again, to haunt me forever, I heard shouting behind me. I turned and saw two men, a couple of rows down, lunge for each other, swinging their fists. Their girlfriends struggled to hold them back, and then *they* began shouting, too, begging the men to stop, to just leave, to forget about it, to just forget the whole thing.

One guy had been whispering loudly to his girlfriend throughout the movie — even the part where James Stewart said to Kim Novak, "Your hair . . ." — and the other guy had been hissing at him to shut the fuck up, there was a movie on. And now they were going to kill each other, right here in this rep cinema on College Street.

The credits for one of the greatest works of Western art were rolling up the screen, and these two guys were going to rip each other's throats out.

I pulled myself to my feet and sidled along my row into the aisle. I felt tired and leaden. I was

despondent. As I walked towards the red exit sign, I heard thuds behind me, fists on chests and maybe jaws, and then screams. I looked down at my hand and saw that I was still clenching an empty soft-drink container. It was crumpled in my fist. I felt cold, sticky syrup between my fingers.

Out on the sidewalk, it was raining just enough to be called rain. A sunny, hot afternoon had turned into something dark, wet, and chilly while James Stewart had been trying to bring a dead woman back to life. Wear this, he said. Now wear this, now put this around your neck, that's it, and put your hair up, yes, like this. . . .

The warped wooden display tables outside the men's shoe stores along College Street were covered in clear plastic sheets, rain running in small rivulets along the folds. I ran my fingertips over the plastic as I walked on legs that felt like tree trunks. I peered through the window of Sherman Tailors. A small man with white hair and smiling eyes was folding dress pants, stacking them up on a table. Another table featured a disorganized heap of bargain *schmatas*. My mother used to look at what I

was wearing and say, “You’re going to school in those *schmatas*?”

A couple of blocks from the cinema, I slipped into a doughnut shop and asked for a black coffee. It was bright in there, the air buzzing with the hum of the coffee maker, the ticking of the clock, and the rustle of newspapers. In the far corner, beside a big plant, a bearded man in a turban was pounding on the side of a payphone — he looked like he’d been doing it for hours. My head was throbbing, and my legs were unsteady. I fell into a moulded plastic chair at the long, winding counter and sipped at my cup, letting my eyelids slide shut.

When I open my eyes, I thought, Kim Novak will be sitting in the seat next to mine. She’ll wear a grey dress and matching jacket, her smooth pale flesh visible in the vee of her collar. She’ll say, in that soft, deep voice of hers, always so tentative, as if she’s wondering whether she’s pronouncing her words correctly, “Don’t worry, Ben, I’m alive. I didn’t fall. I lead a quiet life now, and raise llamas on my ranch, and take long walks with my veterinarian husband, away from the cameras and the

bullying directors and the gossip columnists and the endless steps leading up into dark church towers.”

And then she reaches out a slender hand and says, “Your hair . . .”

I take a few steps back towards the window, and Kim Novak breaks into a huge smile. “I’m just kidding, Ben. Let me get you another coffee.”

On the sidewalk outside, a nun walks by.