

Connections: The Work of Charles and Ray Eames,  
Frederick S. Wight Art Gallery, University of California,  
UCLA Art Council, 1976.

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REMEMBERING NEW YORK

May 15, 2000

James A. Schiff

At last Ben had the boys asleep, though both were soaked from fever and would soon require dry shirts. For three days now, while Maggie was in Los Angeles prepping witnesses for depositions, Ben had been dispensing antibiotics and antihistamines, wiping vomit from Afghans and bathroom tile, massaging backs and chests. This was the first moment of calm all day. He had even flipped on the window unit air conditioner despite it being mid-December, anything to drown out street noise. Closing his eyes, he rubbed his temples - throbbing sinus pressure. Maybe he was allergic to the Christmas tree, a Scotch pine he had dragged five city blocks, then up three flights of stairs. If I can just sleep, he thought, but as soon as his body relaxed, the wailing saxophone cranked up again. "Christ," Ben muttered, looking at his watch. It was eleven. He switched the AC to high, then sunk into the couch.

Sixteen months in New York City had taken a toll on Ben. The pushing and shoving on the Sheridan Square subway platform, the painfully long lines at the post office and Korean deli, the all-night sirens that whined from St. Vincent's, the foul odors from the pet store below. Worst of all their apartment, which ran thirty-two hundred a month - a steal, according to Maggie's boss - had thin, moldy walls that shook with the subway, a ceiling that peeled and dripped into a black metal bucket, a bathroom crawling with cockroaches, and gated windows that made Ben feel he was living in Attica.

Ben and Maggie had left Cincinnati when her deep pocket client, a prestigious import/export firm, offered her a plum job at the home office in midtown: big bucks, a furnished flat in the West Village. The only stipulation was a two-year commitment. Maggie was always getting great offers. When Ben married her ten years ago, he knew she was capable. Smart, organized, and attractive, she had put herself through college with money earned as a jewelry maker and hamster breeder, then law school by working summers as a catalogue model (she was the willowy, Nordic blond in long skirts and wooly sweaters, not so much sexy as cool, detached). In recent years she had hit her stride, growing in confidence and possessing unlimited energy; Ben thought of her as Wonder Woman.

Ben, though, never liked cities much. As an athlete and one-time college soccer player, he was most comfortable with the feel of grass beneath his soles. His eyes were on Colorado, where younger brother James, a former ski bum, had surprised everyone by making a killing as a contractor, and now needed a partner. Ben wasn't comfortable with the idea of his wife supporting him, though in all their married years he had never made even half as much as she. It was as if Ben's life had peaked senior year of college when he captained Duke's soccer team and was occasionally recognized in Durham restaurants.

Yet the opportunity in New York was too good for them to pass on. They could postpone Colorado for a couple years. Meanwhile Ben could do whatever he wanted. Work, play, spend time with the kids. "Why don't you write that soccer novel you're always talking about," Maggie suggested.

So the first few months in Manhattan Ben sat from nine till one at an oak table by his window overlooking Cornelia Street, writing a kind of Bildungsroman about a Midwestern soccer player, much like himself only better, more daring, with a more interesting life - injuries, affairs, acclaim. To friends, Ben's situation was ideal: a beautiful, hard-working wife; a big apartment in the Village and time to write a novel. Yet on the very first morning Ben suspected he'd made a terrible mistake. He wasn't a writer, he didn't like

being alone, he had a world of doubts. Eventually he stopped writing at home and set up shop at Café Lucca on the busy corner of Bleecker and Carmine. There he would write to the staticky yet rousing strains of Rossini and Verdi, and the rushing, gargling whirl of the espresso machine. Then Estralita or one of the other white-bloused waitresses would take her cigarette break at his table and bitch of money, apartment, and man problems. Some mornings he would study the odd, beautiful, ugly, rugged faces that one finds in a city like New York. And other days he'd be on a roll and fill five or ten blank pages, though he'd realize the following morning that what he'd written was bad, even embarrassing.

Which was becoming Ben's biggest worry - that his entire life was embarrassing. In the years since college Ben had been unable to get a career going. He had tried law school, teaching high school English, coaching college soccer, designing computer software, and most recently writing press releases for a company that manufactured uniforms, but nothing felt right. Here was his wife with a hot shot job in a firm headed by a former Secretary of State, and Ben was going nowhere. A few weeks ago Jake had asked his father what he should say in his family oral report about his father's job. Ben had managed to duck the question during the usual busy bedtime rituals, and later, ashamed of himself, he cast his thoughts west and imagined building magnificent alpine homes in the remote Rollins Pass area above Denver.

Standing at the window now, Ben looked down on Cornelia Street, across to the recessed doorway of the darkened florist where Kenny G., his name for the large black man in the red beret, blew his tenor sax. The street was dark and closed up, though candles glowed through the windows, decorated with silver garlands and blue wreaths, of a nearby café. Kenny was playing "A Night in Tunisia," a piece Ben liked, though now it made his dry scalp itch. Ben could feel his psoriasis, triggered by stress and the onset of winter, flaring up. This was the musician's third performance in a week.

"Dad, I can't sleep," said Jake, appearing in the hall rubbing his eyes. "It's that guy again. Can't you stop him?"

Worried that Sammy, his four year old, would wake too, Ben went to the window, shoved it open, and shouted, "Hey, listen. We're trying to get some sleep up here. You mind cutting off the music."

But Ben got no response, only an eruption of crying from the bedroom where Sammy was awakened by his father's voice. Between heaving sobs Sammy cried out, "I gotta throw up again," and as Ben hustled to his aid he felt Jake's eyes upon him and wondered what his oldest, an increasingly keen witness, thought of his father's inability to maintain simple household calm.

"So how's the novel coming?" said Hagen, ridiculously dapper in an English cut pin-stripe suit with French cuffs and a bright Hermès tie. Rupert Hagen was a senior partner at Maggie's firm. Ben had been shocked to learn that this man with Saville Row suits, impeccable manners, and an oddly affected accent had grown up on an Indiana dairy farm no more than seventy-five miles from Ben's home in Cincinnati. New York, the place of human reinvention.

The two men were standing at the packed bar within the bow of a party cruise ship, the Big Apple I, that was circling an illuminated Manhattan. It was the firm's holiday party, spouses invited, and nearly 300 people had crammed onto a ship designed for half as many. You could barely free your arm to lift a drink, and Ben imagined the boat sinking into the dark, cold waters of the East River.

"Great," said Ben.

Like nearly everyone Ben met at these parties, Hagen liked to talk about himself: where he went to school, how much he made, who he knew, where his kids went to school. Ben looked for the stairs that led to an upper deck; he needed some air. Ever since he'd arrived in New York, he had needed some air.

"What's it about?"

Ben had learned this was not a question people truly wanted answered.

"Malfeasance in the import-export business."

"Touché," said Hagen, nodding and smiling as well-wishers made eye contact and tried to elbow past. The band, Ben wondered where they were, was playing a jazzy mambo version of "Santa Claus is Coming to Town" as Hagen touched his sleeve. "I have a very good friend at a publishing house, a good house. He owes me a favor. I could get him to look at your novel."

"It needs work," said Ben. "I'm not ready to show it to anyone yet."

"Well, when you are let me know. I could help."

Their conversation was interrupted by a tiny well-built woman in a red sequined dress and elf hat who threw her arms around Hagen, wished him a Merry Christmas, and whispered something in his ear.

On the ride home - Ben and Maggie had waited in line nearly forty minutes for a cab while the wind howled off the dark Hudson - Ben studied the cabbie's license on the front dash and recounted for Maggie his conversation with Hagen. The driver's name was Nezir, and Ben, who was sometimes surprised at how much he had learned in New York, guessed from his accent and profile that the man who shrugged at every remark was Croatian, maybe Albanian, surely Slavic. Such a distinction would have been impossible for Ben before he moved here - he couldn't have even found Albania on a map - but riding in taxis, walking the streets, sitting in cafes, reading and listening, playing chess in Washington Square Park - all these things had taught him a good deal.

"Rupe wants us to stay," said Maggie, hugging herself tightly in her sealskin coat. Her teeth were chattering, and she was rubbing her gloved hands for warmth. Ben still hadn't forgiven her for all the

hours she was working, but what could he say - it wasn't like he was bringing in any money.

"Are you serious?"

"He needs someone to keep things organized. I think he's going to offer me a promotion, more money."

Ben fidgeted, annoyed by Nezir's sudden stops and starts, the jolting ride. "You told him we're leaving at the end of the summer, right?" For the first time Ben wondered if Maggie could be having an affair - with Haggen, or with someone in L.A.?

"Yeah, but I don't know why it couldn't be a little longer."

Ben said nothing as the taxi maneuvered through the maze of West Village streets, at one point turning abruptly and throwing Maggie against his shoulder. When they screeched to a halt beside the pet store, the dimmed lights of their flat above where the children slept under the watch of a teenage boy babysitter, Ben failed to notice that Kenny G. had just wrapped up the night's performance and was walking toward him, sax case under his arm, heading home, wherever that was.

"So have you talked to Maggie about it?"

Ben was sitting at a small table beside Wollman Rink in Central Park talking to Louise, whose son Adam was a classmate of Jake's. It was President's Day weekend - Maggie was in L.A. again - and Ben and Louise had brought the kids to the park for skating. The air was cold. It felt like it could snow, though it hadn't all season. Staring at amorphous gray clouds, Ben felt the sky was about to break and sensed he would somehow feel better when it did.

"I haven't had a chance. She's been out of town so much."

Louise had proposed the two families share a summer beach house on the Jersey Shore. Spring Lake.

It would be great for the kids she said. Ben also suspected it would be good for Louise who, he was beginning to sense, liked him. For months now they had been sharing occasional coffee as well as hauling kids to museums and parks, the zoo and circus. A dentist with an office in Chelsea, Louise was probably his best friend in the city, though the balance of their friendship had recently tipped slightly so that there was more flirting and affection. Louise liked to touch him and just moments ago on the ice she had leaned her head on his chest as they watched Sammy, bundled like the Michelin Man in a bulging blue parka, attempt a lap on his own.

"You still seem miserable."

"I'm just tired," said Ben. "I'm not sleeping. Kenny G. again. The kids and Maggie, they're oblivious, they can sleep through anything now. But I keep hearing him. It drives me nuts."

"You should sleep at my place sometime. I mean if you want some quiet. I could take the kids and go to my Mom's in the country, and Marty's never in town, he's always traveling. You could catch up. On your sleep."

"Thanks. I might."

Louise asked Adam, a computer whiz who had helped Ben with a software problem, to stop kicking the table.

"No you won't. You always say that, that you might do something. But you don't. You're in limbo, Sweetie. You could change things. You might even like it here if you stopped worrying about accomplishing things or having a great job. Have some fun."

"You're right."

They sat in silence while Sammy played with pink and blue sugar packets and Adam and Jake locked onto a boy at the next table who had a deluxe GameBoy, one they'd never seen before.

"So how's the novel coming?" said Louise.

They laughed. "Better. I'm actually beginning to dream about my characters. That's a good sign, I think."

"I knew it. I knew you were good, Sweetie. You can do anything you want."

"Thanks mom."

Ben wondered what his mom would think of Louise and of their spending so much time together. Unlike tall, Nordic Maggie, Louise was dark and compact, with brown eyes and brilliant frizzy black hair that seemed electric. Louise burned with a good deal of internal heat, leading her to speak and move faster than anyone Ben knew. On Thanksgiving morning she had led them down side streets and past police barricades so that, just as Ben was ready to yield to the kids' complaints and turn around, they arrived at a prime spot on Central Park West where an inflatable Snoopy, the size of a small building, floated past. Stick with Louise and you'll get to the front.

"You're too hard on yourself. You're a wonderful man. I wish I'd met you ten years ago."

"You're just saying that, Lou."

Ben thought back a decade to when he and Maggie were in law school together in Chapel Hill. They had just returned from their honeymoon in liberated Prague where, stirred by dancing and singing in the streets, the sexually reticent Maggie had shed defenses and done things with her body she'd never done before, or since.

"No. I watch you with the kids. You're a great father. They worship you. And you're strong, you're good-looking. Have you been to a bar lately. Women'd be all over you."

"Thanks. You're doing wonders for my self-esteem," said Ben, recalling more clearly now that Eastern Europe had also been bleak with few good restaurants, and that he and Maggie had argued so much he had wondered how they'd ever stay together.

Louise reached for Ben's face and stroked his cheek. "You're a sweet man, Ben." Then she rose and slipped back onto the ice, where she made firm yet graceful scissoring strokes with her legs to build up speed. The kids all watched as she took several laps, skating lean and strong. She'd been a good skater in high school and after that, before dental school, had trained as a dancer. In black tights and long charcoal cable knit sweater, she glided across the ice. Ben tuned out Sammy's chattering questions and Jake and Adam's kicking. As Louise came around for yet another lap, she rotated her body and began skating backwards. Bent at the waist, she moved with terrific speed and intensity, and Ben simply watched. What a wonderful sight, this lovely dentist, who had just rested her head on his chest, propelling herself backwards on ice, her beautiful back side coasting toward him. This is a woman I could watch, Ben thought, looking up to the sky as the first snow of the season began to fall on the skaters.

Ben had spent the last hour reading a book called The Walls Around Us, which explained how houses are put together, while the pain in his tooth, a lower molar, spread and intensified. He probed and massaged it with his tongue but realized, unable to concentrate on the chapter titled "Electricity," that this was more than a minor ache. That afternoon he had mentioned it casually to his therapist, whom he had begun seeing three weeks ago, and Dr. Bob theorized it could be stress, that Ben could be grinding his teeth together at night unaware. But no, this was something more.

It was a few minutes past twelve. Maggie and the kids were asleep. He couldn't call a dentist at this hour, even Louise. He tried sucking on ice cubes but the pain grew worse. Eventually he found a half bottle of Maker's Mark in the kitchen cabinet and poured it over the ice, then returned to his book. But the pain was too distracting and he was sweating, so he removed his shirt. It occurred to him to look at the tooth, but he couldn't see anything at the poorly lit bathroom mirror except for some blood on his gums. His head was pounding and his sinuses, still inflamed from a recent

infection, pressed inward and down. He reached for Advil and tossed back three with the bourbon, watching himself in the mirror. What a mess he was. His eyes were bloodshot and swollen. He hadn't been sleeping and he looked thin.

Returning to the living room, he stretched out on the couch and flipped on the television. He considered rousing Maggie, but she had an early conference call, and besides, they'd probably wake the kids and then everything would be a bigger mess. So he sipped his bourbon, closed his eyes and mapped out a game plan for the morning: call Louise, have Maggie delay her meeting and drop off the kids, hail a cab, ask Louise for extra painkillers.

Didn't Maggie have some codeine or sleeping pills? Returning to the bathroom he rummaged through her cabinet and was surprised at all the prescriptions: Synthroid, Zyrtec, Entax, Ceftin, Zanax, Biaxin, Dexedreme, Histussin, Methylprednisolone. God, she was sicker than he thought, and a wave of remorse passed over him as he realized how little affection and care there had been between them lately. On the top shelf he spotted an orange phial dated a year prior with a drug name he didn't recognize. He pried it open, and in so doing spilled the tiny white pills across the floor. Stooping to clean the mess, he knocked Maggie's blow dryer off the counter and heard a moan from the bedroom. So clumsy. I'm drunk, thought Ben, who finished his clean-up, then took a pill. What the heck, he took two.

Twenty minutes later the pain had subsided and Ben relaxed. He had been trying to listen to the muffled voices in the apartment below, where the Gleitmans, a middle-aged couple, were arguing. The quarrel was over money, a big Visa bill. Eavesdropping demanded more concentration than he could manage though, and he was in the initial stages of nodding off when a loud, fast riff of jumbled notes startled him. The pain, raw and piercing white hot, returned instantly, as if a switch had been flipped.

Ben rose and went to the window, hardly noticing he had knocked a glass off the coffee table. "I'm going to kill him."

Maggie was standing in the bedroom doorway, shielding her eyes from the light. "What's going on? I heard something break."

"I can't take it anymore. He's playing again."

"Call the police."

"I have. Four times now. They don't do anything. They don't even come. My tooth is killing me."

Hugging herself tightly, Maggie crossed the cold wood floor in bare feet and felt her husband's cheek. "You're burning up. What's going on?"

"It's my tooth," he said, holding his mouth wide open.

"God, your breath. How much have you drunk?"

He looked at the bottle and judged he'd taken it down by three fingers. Maggie meanwhile wet a washrag and began patting his forehead cool. It was too late to call Louise about his tooth, but she dialed the local precinct dispatcher and told him about the musician. How they couldn't sleep, how she was an attorney, how they had made numerous complaints and nothing had been done. She asked for the officer's name, told him she would call back in half an hour if the noise didn't stop. Sure enough a few minutes later, a blue and white squad car pulled up and the music died. For Ben, the sequence of events was unclear though he recalled Maggie rubbing his temples and whispering "Why didn't you say something?" while he drifted in and out of sleep during the few remaining hours before daybreak.

"So what didn't you take?" said Louise, looking into his mouth while cheezy, fox trot version of "A Hard Day's Night" played from the ceiling. Hung over

and exhausted, Ben felt blinded by the overhead lamp, so turned to where he could focus on a poster, in which a row of sparkling teeth were being brushed by a grinning tube-like Crest man while purple monsters labeled plaque were retreating.

"I never found Maggie's codeine. It was still in her travel bag."

"Great, the pharmaceutical blender. You're lucky you didn't wind up at St. Vincent's on a stomach pump."

"I know, I know," Ben tried to say, though his mouth was filled with shiny instruments and Louise's warm fingers.

It was only 8 AM, Louise didn't open for another hour, but when Maggie called she flew down and met Ben on the sidewalk out front. She hadn't even had time to put in her contacts or slip on the white dental jacket that Ben had seen her in once when he dropped Adam there after school.

"Just close your eyes. Give me about twenty minutes, and I'll take away all your pain." It was the best offer Ben had had in months and he did as she instructed.

Later he recalled the thin prick of a needle, the grated buzzing of a drill, and a bloody gauze lying on the tray beside the used instruments. His clearest memory though was of opening his eyes and seeing Louise, her hand on his cheek, smiling.

Pain, they say, can clarify and illuminate. Following the bout with his abscessed tooth, Ben re-read the more than four hundred pages he had accumulated and while scrapping much of it, he salvaged the good scenes, then generated what he was convinced were his best twenty-five pages to date. He would keep trying. He would write his soccer novel.

Other aspects of his life, however, could not be reconceived so easily. He and Maggie continued as

strangers and avoided the question of what would happen come fall. Things were also unclear with Louise, who had drawn closer after repairing his molar. She later confessed, made him promise not to tell a soul, what a turn on it had been to have him in her chair, then she whispered something in his ear about a fantasy. Her confession aroused yet frightened Ben, as did the fact that Louise was now showing up at Café Lucca, sometimes with a small gift, most recently an envelope with a key. The key was to a friend's apartment in Soho. The friend was out of town for all of March. In a note penned on lavender stationary, Louise explained that she didn't want to push, but if he was ever interested she would meet him there. Ben kept the key in his pocket, and one afternoon he even walked south to Broome Street and stared up at the loft windows on the fourth floor, wondering what it would be like to be there with fiery little Louise, her warm competent hands that had shown such a flair for easing his pain.

Yet March turned to April and Ben didn't take Louise up on her offer. Their friendship tipped back to its prior state, except for the occasional breach. Such as one evening after the two couples met for dinner on McDougal Street. As they were saying their goodnights beneath the arch on Washington Square, Louise kissed Ben full on the lips - had Maggie noticed? - and inserted her tongue, still tasting of red wine and coffee and clam sauce, ever so slightly and quickly into his mouth.

With the break in the weather - red tulips were now blooming in a neighbor's garden, visible through his open albeit gated back window, and the scent of mint could be detected from clay pots on a nearby fire escape - Ben was thinking of ways to get out of New York. He convinced Maggie to take a weekend off so they could spend Easter at the beach.

Retrieving the kids from school at four on Good Friday, Ben finished packing their bags and pulled together snacks and activities for the car ride to Montauk. Though Maggie called to say she was running late, she was home by six and they hailed a cab to

drive them to their car, a wood-paneled Ford station wagon that they kept parked at a huge open lot beside the Hudson. In the cab, Ben and Jake played their identification game quietly, stretching to study the driver, whose name, above the meter, read Pieter van den Leyden. Jake looked to his father and shrugged.

"The Netherlands," Ben whispered, then to the driver, "You're from the Netherlands, right?"

"Yah, right," he said. "I'm the only Dutch driver in New York. Not Third World, Old World."

Anticipating their weekend on the beach, Ben smiled, then chatted with the driver who told them about klompen, the famous wooden shoes, as well as the dope market in Amsterdam. New York could be a learning experience. Ben thought back to the reading he had done in his early months here and vaguely recalled the island being settled by the Dutch and named, initially, New Amsterdam. As Pieter dropped them by the lot, Ben thanked him and gave him a hefty tip, though Pieter hadn't budged from his seat to help with the luggage.

Loaded with back packs and duffel bags, the family navigated through the ocean of parked cars, trying to remember where they'd left their wagon. Sammy was singing a song he'd heard on the street, "I want to live in America, Everything's great in America," while Ben, still in a good mood, began to worry about the tip. He'd given Pieter ten bucks for a \$7.35 fare. And the weekend, God, it would cost a thousand dollars, money earned by Maggie. He tried to push it all aside and watched Jake run ahead despite his mother's warning to be careful and to look out for cars.

When they got to the wagon, Ben opened the back and found several empty buckets of Kentucky Friend chicken, a spent bottle of Early Times, and assorted garbage befouling the blankets they kept folded on the seat. The car stunk. People had been living in their station wagon. "Good God," muttered Ben.

"Don't let this ruin the weekend," said Maggie.

Ben took a breath, pulled out the blankets, stray chicken bones and garbage, then wiped the seats with a t-shirt and told everyone to get in. "If we open the windows, it'll be fine. I know where there's a car wash."

So they got in reluctantly, and Ben started the car, except it didn't start. There was nothing. "What the hell?" Ben pulled the latch under the dash, got out and opened the hood. His family couldn't see him, but they could hear him cursing and could feel the car sway slightly as he smacked his hand against the fender. Their battery had been stolen.

They spent the next hour calling for a replacement battery. No luck, not for a few hours at least. Next they called for a rental car. Again no luck. It was Easter weekend, everything had been taken. They even checked the train schedule, but there was no way they could get to Montauk till tomorrow morning, and once there how would they get around without a car. So they settled on a weekend party in the city, heading to a brightly lit Italian restaurant on Bleecker owned by an actor who was once on the television show "The Munsters." Yet the service was slow, the kids were upset about not going to the beach, and the food was a disaster. Jake spit a mouthful of caldari onto his mother's suit, and Sammy, who wouldn't eat a thing, cleared the table of dishes and wine with an impulsive sweep of his arm. It was ugly and embarrassing, and Ben and Maggie, who fought during the walk home, were shouting by the time they entered their fourth floor apartment. Which is when Ben heard the loose, jazzy notes of Kenny G.

"I'm going to fucking kill him," cried Ben, grabbing a broom and heading out the door. Maggie tried to stop him but was too late, so ran to the window to watch.

Ben marched right across the street, then yanked the cord from the musician's small amp.

"What are you doing?" the man said in a husky smoker's voice that was grainy around the edges and maybe southern rural.

This was the closest Ben had been, and despite his adrenaline surge, he could see the man was older than he had thought, maybe seventy, and not black. His skin was chalky brown, like clay. He looked Hispanic. Yet his nose was wide and prominent, like a photo Ben had once seen of a famous Shawnee Indian chief. It was a face Ben normally would have wanted to study, but not here, not how.

"I want you to stop. I want you to stop right now and get out of here. If you don't, I swear to God I'll break your saxophone."

Ben was surprised to hear himself, his resolve and firmness, and to see the man, who mumbled something about this being his home, comply by undoing his clip and placing his instrument on a bed of loose coins and dollar bills in the open case. "Hold on, I said hold on a minute, pal."

Ben never imagined this could be so easy, and he felt he should somehow help the man. Reaching for stray change that had overshot the case, Ben couldn't see the tall kid in baggy pants on the skateboard who flew from the shadows of a nearby brownstone. It all happened so quickly. The kid bending to scoop up the sax, then catching his board on a rut in the sidewalk, losing his balance and plunging right into Ben. The two of them falling backwards to the ground and Ben cracking his head against a flight of concrete stairs. The sheer force of the contact shocked and enraged Ben, bringing to the surface all the inner turbulence he had been feeling the last two years. Lifting himself to the ground, Ben pushed the thief off his chest and began pummeling him, in the stomach and face before Maggie's shouts from the window across the street stopped his wild fists. The kid, who looked seventeen, was on the ground, not unconscious but groggy and holding his stomach. It was then that Ben noticed a knife on the sidewalk, a shiny blade with a worn leather handle. As he bent to retrieve it, dryness spread the length of his throat. He was shaking, and he felt as if he had just done something terrible.

"That was unfucking beautiful, mister. Like Kung Fu or TV or something. That sonofabitch punk's been

wanting to beat my brains and steal my horn all week, but you stopped him, Oh man did you ever. Pow."

Ben couldn't respond, but when the flashing police car arrived he calmed down enough to tell his story. One of the cops questioned how the teen, who was carried away in an ambulance had gotten hurt so badly. But Kenny G., whose name Ben never learned, kept repeating, "This man's a hero, like Lindbergh, and I'm going to write a song about him."

The next day a local news crew showed up at their apartment, wishing to do a story on "the man who wasn't afraid to get involved." Ben and his family sat on their couch, telling the story to a tightly wound blond reporter in a bright blue suit who held a microphone to their faces. The spot never aired, probably because that afternoon there was a major train derailment that released a toxic cloud over Staten Island for Easter. Everything about that weekend seemed surreal to Ben, though the tag of hero was something he hadn't heard since leading his high school soccer team to the district finals.

Ben never saw the saxophone player again, though he sometimes found himself at the window waiting. A few days after the altercation Ben telephoned James in Colorado and discussed a partnership arrangement, then he told Maggie that they were leaving the city as planned in August. Exhausted, overworked, and still frightened by the image of her husband beating a skinny kid in baggy pants, Maggie didn't argue. She felt relieved to see Ben take charge and to find a way off her treadmill. She also confessed one night that she'd been taking diet pills and occasional speed, and that she felt she was an awful mother, never having time for the kids.

They left New York in early August, when temperatures soared to one hundred, and they spent several weeks driving a northern route to Colorado, enjoying the sights along the way. On the first of September they moved into a rental house south of Boulder, and two days later Ben, who in recent weeks had risen to a new level of confidence, threw himself into long days and nights of learning the business of

homebuilding. The first year was difficult, but he was determined to do well.

Ben enjoyed the spaciousness of the West, and he liked his Jeep Cherokee that never got broken into. He and Maggie seemed more attentive to each other's needs than they had been in years, and the kids were adjusting well to school, seldom mentioning missed friends in New York. What Ben enjoyed most though was spending his day working with other people - a welcome departure from his many hours alone writing. Though Ben and James were not constructing alpine chalets as Ben had hoped - their time was spent on low-end tract houses in a new subdivision called Maplewood Estates - Ben took pride in his work.

On warm days Ben would time his lunches so that he could eat outside with the carpenters and subs. Once while they were sitting on stacks of sheet rock and two-by-fours eating take-out hamburgers, a ball rolled down the drive and Ben, before tossing it back to some kids, displayed deft footwork that surprised his friends, who began calling him Pele. It was good to be outside, in the Rockies, working with his hands and talking to other men.

One day Leo, a hippie carpenter from Black Hawk, told them about an old girlfriend Susanna, who a couple years back had nursed him through a bad winter of drinking. Leo was now convinced that Susanna, who had returned East to take care of her mom, was the love of his life and he was pumping Ben for information about New York. What should he expect if he went there in search of Susanna? Leo had never been anywhere larger than Denver. Ben was struck by his question and the images that came to mind - a woman skating backwards on ice while snow began to fall, the noble face of a man in a red beret shaking his hand calling him "the new Lindbergh" - shaped his answer. "It's not bad. It's really not bad. You'll like it. I did, mostly." As Ben spoke his eyes were calm, his mouth relaxed, and he was smiling, so that to those who watched him and had come to know him well in recent months, he appeared to be a man telling nothing but the truth.