

Chapter 1

Streetcars roared like lions. At Pasadena Junior College, students flocked in all directions as the latest car pulled up to the station. A pair of shoes bounded from the railing and crossed the street, heading down the tree-lined path.

“Hey, there’s Bill Livingstone – I like that guy.”

“Bill Livingstone? He’s the cat’s meow.”

“He’s the bee’s knees!”

“Actually, he’s kind of an idiot...”

“Come on now, he’s okay...”

“Well, then, go get him!”

“Get him?”

Hidden safely, the two girls peered at the distant figure. Bill had stopped and was talking to someone – another girl – at the steps of the Horace Mann Building for Upper Bulldogs. Kat peered at Mabel, and Mabel peered at Bill. Then she headed off, straight towards him, leaving Kat behind. And like the parting of the Red Sea, the girl he was talking to walked away. Then he turned, saw her, and smiled, beaming in his gabardine suit.

“Hi!”

“Hi!”

“Gee, haven’t seen you in awhile...”

“I was in Germany.”

“Did you say...Germany?”

“Yep,” she confirmed.

“Good gods – what were you doing there?”

“I don’t know...haven’t you ever felt like you wanted to live in Germany?”

“Yeah, I guess so. I mean sure...”

“It’s a long story...”

“Yeah?”

“Would you like to hear about it?”

“Oh, yeah!” he said. “Maybe we could have a, you know – a date?”

They babbled for several minutes more, knowing the deed was done.

“I’ll meet you at tree thirty-seven,” he said.

“Thirty-seven!” she called back.

Bill twirled his moustache, watching her go. Now how about that? That was a forward thinking woman. He felt grateful, as he was usually quite helpless around girls: completely in awe, he could sense, but never attain, their stellar, agonizing glory. But with Mabel, he had somehow retained the power of speech. In poetry class, her writing had been funny and strange. And she was a smart girl – beautiful too. Now walking up the tree-lined path, he watched the numbers beneath his feet – 22, 23, 24, set in little bronze circles before the trees – and his fingers crackled with energy, aching to form intricate chords. It was a beautiful day.

That night they gabbed all the way in the darkened car to the observatory. They passed through exhibits of gold and chromium armilaries, Jacob’s ladders and concrete planets – but the view outside was the real show: all Los Angeles, San Pedro and Long Beach, and beyond that the island, smoldering in darkness.

“See that?” Switching places, she peered through the giant green binoculars, mounted along the edge of the cliff.

“All I see is fog.”

“It’s out there,” he said.

“I’ve never been,” she said.

“Oh, I think you will,” he said. “Maybe we’ll go someday.”

“That would be nice,” she said.

He felt the truth of it. Then the time ran out and the lenses clunked shut.

“Gosh, it’s cold up here,” he said.

“Here, you can use my coat,” Mabel said, and opening up her big black and white checkered coat, drew him in. He didn’t kiss her yet, but knew he would, and he felt relaxed and good. Then they walked back to the parking lot, arm in arm.

“I don’t think I’m ready to go home,” she said in the car. “Can we go back to your place?”

Holy Cow! thought Bill. “Sure,” he said, trying to keep cool. Back through Pasadena, then into Villa Madre, they drove up a narrow road in a cul de sac so dark Mabel had no idea where she was. But Bill knew the way. Outside now, they could hear wind through leaves, feel the chill air, and, as their eyes slowly adjusted, see dark forests of bamboo along quietly running pools.

“Is this yours?” Mabel asked.

“Sure,” said Bill.

They approached a house on a hill with the lights out, then crept down steps to a blue door. Shutting it behind her, he clicked on a table lamp, showing a single room, set below the rest of the house, sparsely but romantically appointed, with a bed on one end and a piano on the other, facing picture windows.

“This is really nice,” said Mabel.

Bill struck a match and lit the small fireplace near the bed.

“It’s all right.”

Mabel approached the picture windows before the piano. The room was reflected back at them.

“What’s out there?” she asked.

“More gardens, ponds, the city reservoir, a baseball field,” he said, kneeling at the fireplace. “Every year they stock the pond for a contest...and...”

Mabel had noticed him struggling. “What’s wrong?”

“I can never get this started...”

She walked over and knelt beside him, and within moments had raised an enormous fire.

“How did you do that?” he asked.

“Magic,” she said.

And there it was: the thing without words. It shivered up his spine and down his fingers. Black and white keys formed a slowly twisting vortex, spinning music. They lay together along the darkening bed as the fire guttered. In the corner he could see the outlines of the piano, crouched like an animal.

“So what about Germany?” he asked.

“Hm?”

“We never talked about it.”

“Oh.” She sighed. “Well, you know...I had a friend from high school from there, and she went back after our senior year, so...they just do things differently out there,” she said.

“Yeah? Like how?” he asked.

“I dunno...they drink wine in the park. Old men walk around naked.”

“They...they do?”

“Yeah. No one cares.”

“Those are some crazy Germans.”

“You just get the feeling like all your life, you’ll be taken care of...”

“Yeah? That sounds nice,” he said.

“Do you feel that way?”

“Um...not really...”

“Well who else lives here?”

“My sister, my grandmother...my father, occasionally. But he’s been

spending more and more time on the island. He's almost never here at this point.”

“Your mother?”

He shook his head. “Gone...”

“Gone?”

“She comes back every couple years to take pop to court...”

“Oh, they're...?”

“Yeah,” said Bill.

“What does she want?”

“I don't know,” said Bill. He thought about it. “Everything,” he concluded.

“That's very un-German,” said Mabel.

They watched the flames break down and glow dark red. He closed his eyes and felt the warmth of the darkness, Mabel close by.

“A girl like that, taking her to the mountains? I know what kind of a girl that is!” shrieked Grandma the following day. He'd made the mistake of coming up to the kitchen, but a fellow had to eat, didn't he?

“Yeah!” Kitty cried.

Granny Annie was not his best pal these days, that much was certain. Gee, and she'd been so nice when he was a kid. Now every so often she'd come down to share her opinions. The blue door would rip open to reveal her, trembling and quaking with rage. “You imbecile! Can't you play a melody, or a tune? What in devil's name is that nonsense you're playing?” Then, slam! Back upstairs.

“The dancing rhinoceros,” he called it. “Light as a feather, able to balance on one foot like a flamingo...many a savage had barely the time to scream as the shadow of the rhinoceros pooled beneath him.” It propelled itself at breakneck speeds, and sometimes, well, it wasn't exactly melodic.

It had started in his dreams – he dreamt rhinos, African jungles, seascapes and killer whales, and all of it had music. Amazing, incredible music. Then at a certain point he'd realize he was dreaming, and think, “If only I could write music like that!” And then he'd realize that he *had* written it, because he was dreaming it. Something in him could, indeed, write that way. And then he would wake up.

For months, this had been going on. Presaged usually by nightly walks through the estate. He would be lying on his bed in the glass room, hearing the wind through trees, and feel something pulling him outdoors. When the pull grew too powerful, he went out, and the wind told him which way to go. Rambling among trees, following the commands of this inexorable voice, he'd feel a wild exaltation; his heart ached with exquisite and infinite desire. Where this would take him, he had no idea. But he sensed this was the answer to what everyone was searching for, and so it had to be pursued. He was pursuing it.

Two days after their first date, Bill was scheduled to play in Los Angeles.

Mabel had no idea what to expect; she and Kat were shocked to find that the club was packed. The red curtain came up and the band began to play. Down within the crowd, Mabel and Kat were first stunned, then broke into laughter. Bill did sit on his chair, but only occasionally – otherwise, he stood, danced around the piano, slid across and jumped over the piano, played with one hand, played with his hands behind his back, and, Mabel thought, would've played upside-down with his feet, if he'd only known how.

His hands were like spiders, she thought, but the group he was playing with was all wrong. Though technically proficient, it was fake: a put-on. The others were competent but too polite. Bill danced around them, leaped under them, swam back on his stomach, all without missing a beat.

Later they found each other in the crowd beneath the stage. "Wow!" Mabel said. "You're really good!"

"I...am?" he asked.

"Yeah! But who wrote that stuff?"

"George," said Bill.

"Well, to hell with George!" said Mabel. "Your band is terrible, spider-hands! But you're good! Why don't you start your own?"

"Maybe!" said Bill. "We were just thinking..."

Suddenly a zoot suit appeared with his diamond-studded date. "Hey, man, where'd you learn to play like that?"

"I don't know!" said Bill.

"It's something...It makes you wanna..." And he spun like a celestial top.

Well, it was true, he later thought, but in a sense that was the advantage: with George, he always knew what he was supposed to be doing, and he could press right up against it and take it just a little further. But on further reflection that was pointless. There was no room for starfish or rhinos, that much was certain. And so perhaps his time with George's band would be limited.

Mabel was renting a room at the house across the street from her grandmother and working as a waitress up the street. Bill came and sat at a table and she brought him a bowl of soup, crumbling crackers into it while waitresses threw cream pies at each other in the back, brushing back strands of cream-covered hair when they came through the door. Bill wrote Mabel a note on a napkin: "This coupon allows you, the bearer, to be universally accepted at all the finest hatteries, beauty salons and speakeasies!"

Then back to Mabel's insanely messy room, walls posterized with Theda Bara in harem dress, the floor a swamp of books and clothes. He was spending days at a time there, whenever possible. They'd made love all over the house, on the stairs, in the kitchen, in the hallway, blankets thrown down on the hardwood floors. Again and again in the room, looking down and seeing the heat between them, the sweat covering her stomach. One night while she slept he found upon a

notebook on her desk and read the open page: it was a description of being in love with him, written to re-experience and even accentuate the feeling. He realized now that her love was true, for she had written it for no one but herself.

Soon after, Kitty came down to his room and handed him a letter from the city university on the other side of town. Rejection being his default expectation, he was pleasantly shocked by its contents.

“I’ll go with you,” Mabel said later, when he told her about it. “Wherever you want to go.”

Two weeks later she’d found a studio apartment overlooking main street, about two miles from him. They spent the first night together, and Bill never went home.

It was a small room on the second floor, with a pair of windows overlooking the street. Traffic would go by all day, but nights were quiet. Their bed was a mat they threw on the floor. No kitchen, just a hot-plate in the corner on top of a miniature icebox. But the bathroom had a tub, and Bill spent long hours lounging in it. Their books commingled on the shelves. They lay in bed listening to the radio, watching the space heater glowing, and at night the silence was only occasionally broken by the gentle clipping of hooves.

At the beginning of Fall, he hopped the trolley for the trip across town. The campus was a dream city of enormous buildings and mysterious halls, his first class in a room holding five hundred students.

“Are you familiar with the Futurists?” the instructor ominously inquired. No one was, except for Bill. And he was too shy to speak. “The Futurists want to blow up the Times.”

“Why?” a lone voice cried.

He shrugged. “Why not?” he asked, to sounds of general uproar. “Why not blow it up?” he repeated, in dramatic provocation.

Bill had heard them down at Leimert Park with his friend David Bell: futurists, anarchists, and plenty else besides. He thought again about speaking, but class was soon distracted by a rogue squirrel, and then adjourned.

When he finally got home he came in to find she’d cooked dinner for them, candles on the icebox and paper plates on the floor – she was waiting for him, his beautiful, blonde-haired girl.

That winter they bought a tree and carried it home, and the room, small as it was, took on the character of that tree, and they lay together with the radio on, strolled through the town lit with ornaments, felt the chill of cold air, then returned home to sheets and sleep.

But he was not supposed to be staying there, and slowly, this became an issue. A manager was on duty, and so it became Bill’s duty to avoid encounters with this individual. This he did for a long time. But just before Christmas there was a knock on the door, and he made the mistake of answering it: the manager

with a gift, a demonstrator pen. All the tenants in the building were receiving them. “For Mabel,” he said. Bill took it. It was only when he closed the door that he noticed there'd been a peephole in it all this time. He peered through to check – yes, the hallway was clearly visible, warped like a fish bowl. He shook his head. Unbelievable.

And after that, Bill couldn't avoid the manager no matter how he tried; he began popping up at the most inopportune moments, scowling furiously. One day Bill walked in off the street to go up the staircase leading to their room carrying a giant box of Valentine's candy. The manager stood at the foot of the stairs like a sentinel, and Bill had no choice but to walk past, hastening and pulling his hat over his eyes.

But could they possibly deny this emissary of Valentine, this bearer of delicate gifts? Yes, of course. A week later, Mabel was called into the manager's apartment. The owner was there, a considerate woman, but not too considerate. “Now, we're very happy to have you here,” she told her. “But your boyfriend...well...” It was made clear: Bill would have to leave immediately.

They promptly ignored this request, but knew they were on borrowed time now. Fortunately, he wanted an apartment closer to campus anyway. Mabel just wanted a cat. There was a Sears catalog with a picture of an orange kitten she used to gaze at, laying in bed: “If we had one, it would walk all over us...it would sleep in the bed with us...”

It was mid-day and traffic was as heavy as it got in Villa Madre – he had to dodge cars running across the street, horns playing a cantata – but he made it across to the sandwich shop where he liked to eat. It was one of the less popular spots in town, but entering he found a good-sized crowd anyway. Bill ordered, then heard his name being called.

It was his old schoolmate, Tom Dahlgren. Tom had been one of the smartest kids in grade school, but he'd gone delinquent once they turned thirteen. Still boyish with blonde hair and blue eyes, he'd put on a few pounds. And yet the weight seemed to give him a slow, deliberate power. His blue eyes peered out at him from deep within his concrete face.

Bill sat. They spoke of school and Mabel. When he told him he was living with her, Tom was amazed.

“No one cares?”

“Who cares?” said Bill

“What about your apartment? A friend of mine lives in that building – not fit for rats!”

“Then I'm a rat,” said Bill.

This comment made Tom remember something. “Say, there, Mr. Rat...” he said, leaning forward. “Do you drink?”

“Drink?” repeated Bill, looking around. “Sure!”

That was a lie, and Tom eyed him suspiciously. “Well, it just so happens, I have certain products available at very desirable prices. Would you care for a sample?”

“Sure!” said Bill.

“Let me see your glass,” said Tom. He took the glass, put it down in his lap and started fumbling with his pants.

“I hope you’re not doing what I think you’re doing,” said Bill.

“Relax.” He put the glass back up the table. “Drink up, pal,” he said.

Bill took a sip. It seemed the same.

Tom watched him carefully, then looked at his watch. “I gotta go,” he said. “See you later?”

“Sure,” said Bill. “Where?”

“Oh, I’m always driving around...”

Bill ate his lunch, and finished his lemonade. When it was drained, he picked out an ice cube and sucked on it. Yowza. It was fantastic.

Then he looked up. The waitress, inconceivably gorgeous, was gliding from the register, slipping orders onto the grill; the big glass container of lemonade swam with orange slices in a beatific ocean; the cook was a white hat floating in smoky flames; and the people around him sat unknowing, unaware of this perfect single moment. Well, all in all, he thought, it was as it should be. It was an amazing secret. The people over their food, sleeves rolled to the elbows – none of them knew he was watching them. The commonplace quality of it was beautiful. *They* were beautiful, but didn’t know it. What would happen if they did? he wondered.

Then he remembered the outside world, and turned to the picture window and saw the street and town. His eyebrow lifted, taking in the scene; then he wiped his mouth with his napkin and got up. Infinite, complicated gears spun in the giant door. He stepped out.

Baldwin Ave. went up and down before him. He looked up to the San Gabriel mountains, mists swirling at the summit, distant orange trees waving in the sun. Closer by, the lattice of electric wires stretched in all directions, connecting Villa Madre to Los Angeles and the rest of the world.

He looked at his watch, and found it not yet noon. Mabel wouldn’t be home till six. Shocking, unbelievable. He strolled down the sidewalk. Here I am, he thought. Right now. And what will I do? He watched the sycamores bow before the Paper Palace, and a streetcar went past, bell ringing, leaving the barely perceptible sound of rustling trees.

Jimmy’s Market on the southeast corner, Standard Gasoline to the north. The Livingstone estate about a mile east, but town proceeded west; and that was the direction he followed. He walked under the room he shared with Mabel, past shops he hadn’t been in for years. It was warming up now. He looked up and saw

the same blue sky he used to see on the island. People swarmed all around him, and they were achingly beautiful. He longed to touch them, to bring them within himself. That was what he wanted. Some permanent change in connection. Some explosion. But not an explosion. A calm perception.

Park up ahead. He remembered running through the grass hunting for Easter eggs, sucking juice from an orange. The playhouse on his right as he crossed the fire station, engine gleaming, hoses looped and beautiful.

How could he be chased by apartment managers? How? Surely, this was not an encumbrance to be accepted. Decisive action would have to be taken.

Downtown. With the first school year ending and summer with Mabel beckoning, Bill passed through the green glass doors and walked along halls of vile, twisted carpet. Sick with dread but resolute, he strode to the elevator, and scaling the interior of the crystal palace, entered a world of crystalline glass. After a long, whirring ride, the elevator stopped with a funereal bell, and he stepped into the extravagant hallways of the top floor, banisters climbing along red maddened walls, curling to a halt before mahogany doors. He stopped to straighten his tie and took a deep breath. Oh, by the gods. He didn't want to go in. He didn't want to go in. He went in.

A big man behind a big desk sat with plans unfurled in all directions. Bill felt again the physical force of his intellect, pushing out into the walls. The old man looked up at him, and his eyebrow arched in tidal menace. Bill stood, waiting.

“Well...?” the voice said, with ancient graveness.

“Hi, Pop.”

The grey eye pierced him devastatingly. Momentarily panicked, he looked over his father's shoulder to behold a distant airship, drifting outside.

“I'm moving to Westwood,” he said finally. “To get closer to school.”

The eyebrow was almost on the top of his head now. With infinite, mocking irony, he asked: “Does your...grandmother know about this?”

“Yes,” said Bill. “But – ”

“She wouldn't give you any money.”

“No,” said Bill. “I mean, I didn't even...”

“Something about a girl.”

Bill nodded. “Yes.”

“Are you going to get married?”

Bill shrugged. “Eventually...”

His father looked at him. “Jesus, kid. Can I ask you something?”

“Sure,” Bill said.

He paused.

“How'd you get so stupid?”

“I don't know,” said Bill.

“Why don’t you take after your father’s side of the family? You know, salt of the earth types, knew the value of hard work?”

“I...guess...I work hard...” he said defiantly.

“Yeah? At what?”

“At...things...”

Bill felt soon as though he were watching the conversation from a distance – perhaps a bathysphere. He watched his father’s lips, his nostrils, the arching brow. Finally, it was over.

His father uttered an exasperated sigh. “How much do you want?” he asked.

Bill named his figure.

“Jesus, kid...why don’t you ask your mother?”

“Ha ha,” said Bill.

His father retrieved his leather book from his coat pocket, wrote it out, and then held it out to him. Bill took hold of it, but his father didn't let go. He looked his son straight in the eye:

“Grow up,” he said.

Bill took the check. He folded it and put it in his pocket. “Thanks,” he said.

But the ride down the elevator was a cascade of golden fire. He sighed, leaning back against the wall. Then the check began to glow radiantly in his pocket. He took it out to feast his eyes. Yes, he thought. It'd all been worth it. Now it was over. He was free. He could take Mabel, and they could go somewhere. The elevator floated gracefully to a stop and he leaped out upon the streets.