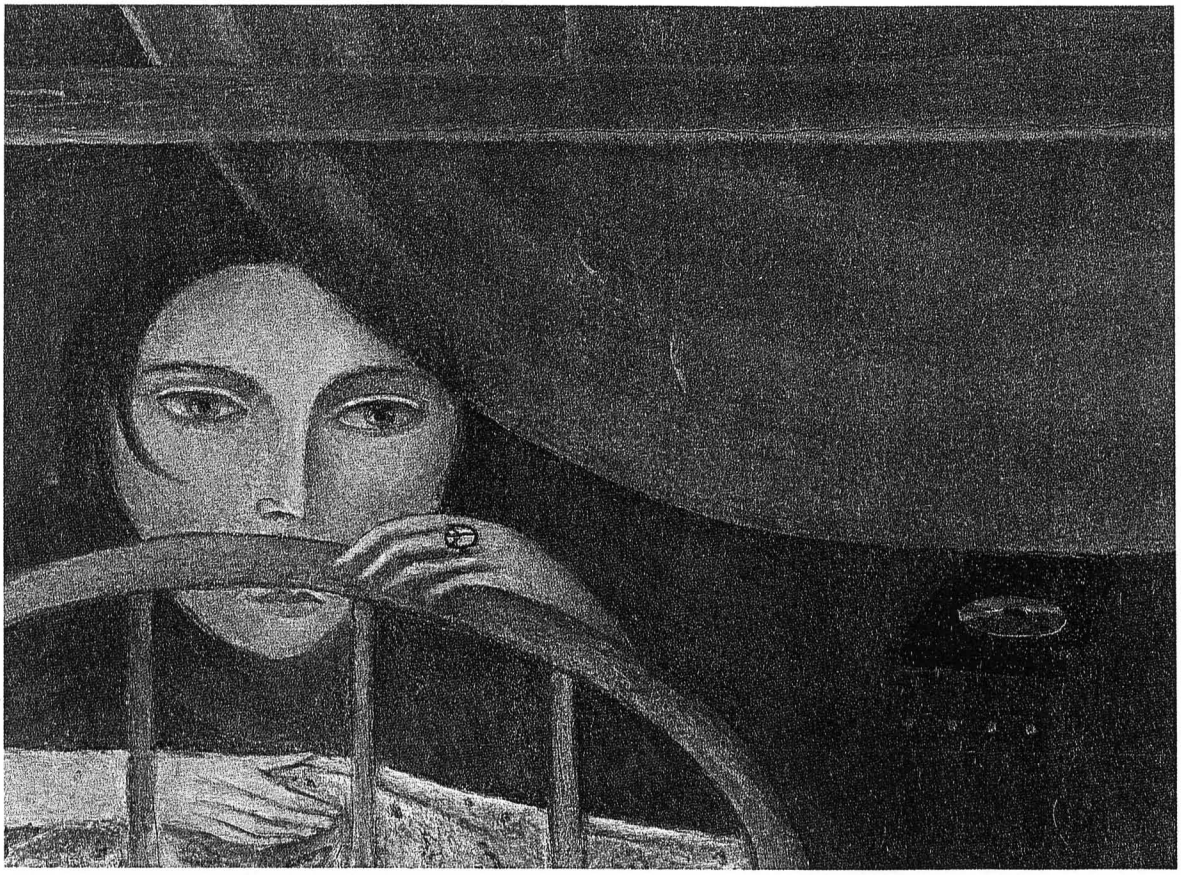
The BABY BOOM BLUES

How do we find happiness in the nineties? Notes on a generation that lost its way

THE FIRST NARAYEVER CONGREGATION WORSHIPS IN A SMALL, UNASSUMING SYNAGOGUE ON BRUNSWICK AVENUE. THE SANCTUARY IS INTIMATE, UNLIKE MOST I HAVE BEEN IN, WITH SEVERAL SOLID WOODEN pews semicircling the bimah, and a few large, unadorned windows through which light streams. The congregants, for the most part, live downtown. Many are left-liberals in their late thirties or early forties whose values were moulded by the sixties. Some had distanced themselves, for a time, from the formal practices and rituals of their faith; now, they are raising families and they want a place in which they can find community. In the forties, when mothers stayed home and the Annex was a cohesive Jewish enclave, a natural social kinship flourished. But those families have long since scattered, the neighborhood is mixed, and nobody is around much during the day any more. For the congregants, the synagogue is as much a place to connect with other Jews as it is a place to worship. There, in the sanctuary, they are able to rekindle, however briefly, a long-vanished but vital sense of belonging.

The service is conducted almost entirely in Hebrew. Because the congregation is egalitarian, the liturgy has been altered to reflect a modern sensibility. A bearded, middle-aged man named Chezi Zionce conducts the proceedings. His melodic voice reverberates gloriously throughout the sanctuary. Periodically, he stops to share a joke with the worshippers or to explain, in English, the passage he is about to read. At the bimah, the men and women who have an aliyah—the honor of reading from the Torah—huddle around him as he chants. Now and then, chattering children escape from their

By Wendy Dennis



seats to race down the aisle. No one seems to mind. The mood is cordial and relaxed. The congregants are enjoying themselves.

I AM HERE TO CELEBRATE A BAR mitzvah. The boy is the son of friends of mine. I think of them in this way, even though we haven't seen one another much over the past few years. We socialized as couples once, but when my marriage broke up, our work, our schedules and our kids intervened. We meant to stay in contact, but somehow we drifted apart. It was nobody's fault. It just happened. I am touched, though, to have been invited today. I am glad to be a part of this.

I glance around the sanctuary as the service continues. Many of the invited guests are bejewelled and smartly dressed; it is an affluent crowd. The congregants, on the other hand, have an earthier appearance. The men are dressed casually, several in jeans and T-shirts; some of the women wear sandals and swirling peasant skirts.

It has been a long time since I have been in a synagogue. I do not understand Hebrew, but I am thoroughly enjoying this service. There is something in the room—something in the elegiac prayers, the informality, the warm, familial atmosphere—that stirs me. A few rows away, my ex-husband is sitting with his new mate at his side; they are chatting amiably with a couple who shared our social set when we were married. We're used to these situations by now, my ex-husband and I. I think of them as the standard rituals of modern living; they're not even that awkward and strange any more. I watch as the four of them talk, and am struck by the fact that I do not feel anything except a vague detachment—from him, from them, from the woman I once was. How odd it feels, I think to myself, when the moorings that anchor you to your past give way. You meet someone, you fall in love, you make a life together. Then everything turns upside down and you find yourself far from where you expected. No matter how right the new course or how splendidly you fare, there is occasionally a sense of dislocation, for the familiar landmarks of your personal history have vanished. I look at this stranger who was once my husband, at the people beside him who were once my friends, and I think of that game I used to play as a child. You were given a page with several drawn objects and you had to find the one that didn't fit. At the top were always the words, "What is wrong with this picture?"

WHEN THE BAR MITZVAH BOY finishes his maftir, the sanctuary erupts in celebration. Everyone is cheering and clapping and singing "Mazel tov...mazel tov" as they pelt him playfully with candies. He ducks, grinning, behind the bimah and reemerges wearing a Blue Jay helmet he has hidden in anticipation of this moment. His parents and sister and aunts and uncles and cousins are smiling with joy as they join hands and dance around the bimah, and the music in their voices and their hearts cascades throughout the sanctuary. The tears well up in my eyes. I hardly know this young man, but there is a familiar feeling in the room, a sensation long forgotten. I am part of something rapturous and whole and comforting and connected—something larger, that I cannot explain.

I AM THIRTY-NINE YEARS OLD. I grew up in a generation that was headstrong, outspoken, arrogant, brazen, impatient, self-righteous and fiercely idealistic. It was a promising time: there were many

who expected us to transform the world, and I think in many ways we did. Looking backward from the perspective of twenty-odd years I see much to be proud of: the gunning down of conventional orthodoxies in the personal and political realms, the metamorphosis of the workplace and family, the irrevocable reshaping of the way people think about the rights and roles of fellow human beings. What we accomplished was astonishing and good. If, at times, we lacked a sense of balance, we more than compensated with passion.

I find myself gazing wistfully over my shoulder at the sixties a lot these days. My contemporaries were galvanized by the sense of purpose people feel when they embrace a collective vision, when they are inspired by touchstones outside themselves and have faith in the future. But I look around me now, and what I see troubles me: my generation has lost its moral bearings. Where once there was commitment, there is only disenchantment; where once there was community, there is only rootlessness. The irony of what many of us have become is overpowering. It is something we can only make brittle jokes about, but the fact is, a startling number of people who once tore up the cobblestones and manned the parapets are now buying half-million-dollar houses, voting Tory and complaining about what they have to pay the help.

I cannot have a conversation these days without feeling uneasy. My contemporaries are restless. Something is wrong. Far too many people, it seems to me, are disappointed. Everybody's looking for something, but no one is certain how to find it. This one is longing to have a child, but there is no one to have a child with. That one is tired of being sad, but there is no way to make the sadness go away. Parents grow sick and frail or crazy. Marriages rot, while the lawyers gnaw at the bones. Even the ones with the mega-incomes have a trapped look in their eyes. The malaise rolls in like a dense fog, and only the work or the money keep it at bay, and then only for a while. What does it mean, I wonder, when a generation launched with dazzling promise comes to a place such as this? It means, I think, that we have a few questions to ask.

I OWN A SMART LITTLE HOUSE IN the city. I also own a VCR, two computers, a gas barbecue, a compact-disc player and an anodized aluminum designer kettle. I have a career that is demanding, interesting, rewarding and, from time to time, even somewhat glamorous. My daughter, at nine, is blossoming into a person I can be proud of. I have skied in the Alps, slept in the Sahara and watched the sun set over a Balinese shore. I live a lifestyle of material comfort, opportunity and choice that my parents could only have dreamed of—and my grandparents would have found inconceivable. I grew up in a time of peace and plenty, a member of one of the most privileged sectors of one of the most privileged generations ever. And yet, I cannot say that I am satisfied.

The period that shaped me was one of the most invigorating, iconoclastic and magical of times to be growing up. I entered the charmed kingdom of the sixties, and emerged profoundly altered. The way I think, act, vote, dress, talk, raise my child and view the world, in one way or another, bear the stamp of that era.

I believed during that time that anything was possible. My life was suffused with an awesome clarity. There was nothing I could not have, or be. Everything, *everything* glowed with a halo of certitude. I believed that if I carried a placard, the power structures would alter and the world would change. I believed that if I spoke up loud enough and long enough, wars would stop and women would be set free. I believed in slogans such as "Power to the people," and concepts such as quality time. And I believed, in my innocence, that there would always be good music.

I came of age in a country that did not know a war, but knew social upheaval nonetheless, and it has exacted, in its aftermath, a terrible toll. Who could have foreseen, when the sexual revolution flowered, that we would come eventually to wander in a barren sexual wasteland? Who could have predicted, when the juggernaut of feminism rolled, that it would leave in its wake a yawning chasm? How were we to know, as we wantonly despoiled the sacred touchstones by which our parents had lived, that we might one day sit in a synagogue and ache for touchstones of our own?

I find myself retreating from the world more often than I care to admit these days. I feel numbed, exhausted, emotionally shell-shocked, so I go home, close the blinds, turn on my answering machine and sit in front of the television, zapping the channels on my remote control. Sometimes, because music has always been an elixir, I crank up the stereo. But the music rarely offers respite. Like this piece by Leonard Cohen, the songs are often litanies of sadness and loss: *Everybody knows that the boat is leaking. Everybody knows the captain lied. Everybody got this broken feeling. Like their father or their dog just died.*

When I turn off the answering machine, my phone rings too frequently with calls of distress. I think of one friend in particular. The burdens, that day, are overwhelming, she tells me. I hear, in her voice, a profound weariness. I want to help, but I cannot find the words. There is nothing, except to listen, that I can do. "Are you having a bad day?" I ask solicitously. "No," she sighs. Her voice gets small and cold and her words trail off into a thicket of irony. "I think I'm having a bad decade."

MY MOTHER IS SEVENTY-ONE YEARS old. She grew up the fifth child of a close Jewish family that lived on Markham Street. Her father went off to World War I before she was born. My mother never knew him. Several months after coming home he died of chlorine-gas poisoning in a military hospital in Hamilton. She and her brothers and sisters were raised by a mother who was widowed at thirty-eight. There was never enough money; she managed on a soldier's pension, paying the coal man off in dribs and drabs. When the boys finished high school, they went to work. University was out of the question.

I grew up listening to my mother reminisce about Markham Street, and her stories have never failed to move me. That modest home has taken on, for my generation, mythic dimensions. It is a tradition in my family for the children and grandchildren to make up schmaltzy songs about Markham Street and to sing them off-key at celebratory gatherings. A few years ago,

CONTINUED ON PAGE 64

I LOOK AROUND me now, and what I see troubles me: my generation has lost its moral bearings. Where once there was commitment, there is only disenchantment

when I was in the market for a house downtown, my uncle urged me to buy the home of his childhood memories back into the family; if I convinced the current owners to sell, he promised to give me a sweet deal on a mortgage. Whenever my mother talks about her days spent there, I detect always a sparkle in her eyes.

There was often a party going on. Someone would put the kettle on and my grandmother would bring out the honey cake and everyone would stay up long into the night playing cards or telling stories. Sometimes, in the morning, my mother would come downstairs to discover a guest who'd slept on the sofa the night before. She could always count on returning from school to find a visitor. "I remember a house filled with people," she often says. "It was nice."

After Grade 11, my mother took a job in a tobacco factory. She awakened at 5 a.m., then spent her days packaging and sorting. At twenty-one, she married my father, and, as her siblings before her had done, lived in her mother's home with her spouse. Some years later, when everybody was raising families and could afford places of their own, my grandmother moved up north. She was an invalid in a wheelchair by then, cared for by an endless stream of housekeepers. Often, my mother and aunts would convene at her house Friday afternoons to cook the Shabbas dinner. As a child I can remember the fragrant aroma of freshly baked strudel wafting through the house as I played with my cousins in the living room, and my grandmother watched over us with delight.

Friday nights were always special. We were not that religious, but rituals were important, so we'd dress up, and my relatives would gather, and somebody would say the blessing over the candles, and the women would scurry in and out of the kitchen setting and clearing courses, and my uncle Jack would tell one of his famous stories or express an outrageous view and someone would challenge him and the room would grow noisy with laughter and love.

It is difficult now for me to remember the last time I dropped in on my mother. I enjoy her company immensely, but there are precious few hours in my schedule for a casual visit. Although we do not speak about it, I know, of course, that she would like to drop in on me. But I am working, and she feels she cannot intrude. It is also hard to remember the last time I cooked a Friday night dinner. The weekend arrives, I am tired, and more often than not, the fridge is bare. So my daughter and I wind up in a restaurant where I guiltily instruct her to make the blessing over the salt and pepper shakers. That's on a night when I'm feeling energetic. On a bad night I order in. I do not feel good about this; I enjoy cooking, and I would like my daughter to know something more, but it is often hard to find the time or the inclination to make a proper meal.

Sometimes we are lucky enough to be invited to my aunt's or my mother's for Friday night dinner, and when I know we will be going there I look forward to it all day. For one thing, I can safely assume the meal will not have been ordered from David Wood. It cheers me up just to think there will not be a pesto or sun-dried tomato in sight. I walk in the door, give hugs and kisses all around, look at the table set with pretty linen napkins, smell the brisket cooking in the oven, and an unspeakable wave of comfort washes over me. Still, sometimes at these dinners the unsettling thought occurs that my aunt and mother are getting on. They have earned the right to pass this responsibility to the next generation, and soon they must. What, I think to myself, will happen then?

Recently I asked friends of mine, Sam and Deborah, what they did about Friday nights. "Sometimes we eat pizza," I confessed miserably, "and I feel like a heathen."

Sam tsk'ed disapprovingly. "Oh," he said, "you can't eat pizza. It's *Friday night.*"

"But what do you do?" I asked. I knew his family's life was just as busy.

"Well," he said dryly, "you've gotta eat chicken on Friday nights. So we order Swiss Chalet."

The mainstay of my mother's strength, her continuity and solace, has always been her family. She has not seen much of the world. Her world is circumscribed by her community, the close friends she has known for half a century, her children's and grandchildren's accomplishments, and the joys and sorrows of her loved ones. Her life has not been easy. She lives alone now, works as a salesperson in a shop, and manages cheerfully with very little of what my generation likes to call disposable income. She is at the stage where friends are sick and dying, and she has her own aches and pains; yet she is more content, in her way, than many of the people I know. Unlike my contemporaries, she did not pursue happiness recklessly, as an end in itself. As her mother before her had done, she poured her energies into family and community and had faith that fulfilment would flow from that wellspring.

My mother and I were having a heart-to-heart talk one day, and I asked her if she could say that she was happy.

"I don't know if 'happy' is the right word for it," she told me. "I guess you could say that I feel at peace."

I looked at her enviously. "Peace seems to have eluded my generation," I said sadly. "What happened to us?"

She thought for a moment, and then answered gently. "I think you kids expect too much," she said.

IT IS MOTHER'S DAY. I HAVE EATEN a congenial brunch with three generations of women in my family. Later that evening, I find myself at loose ends. My daughter has gone to her other home to be with her father; I have work to do, bills to pay, but I'm not in the mood. I want company, so I begin calling around. On the first three tries, I get answering machines. I listen glumly to the disembodied voices on the other end of the line, and then, without leaving a message, hang up.

I am about to give up when I remember Carolyn. Carolyn's marriage is going through a hiatus right now, and she recently moved into a place of her own. She loves her husband. She may just be weathering a rough patch or a mid-life crisis, she doesn't know, but she needs some time to think. This is Carolyn's second marriage. Once she told me she knew, as she walked down the aisle to meet her groom from college days, that the wedding would not be her last.

I dial Carolyn's number. She answers, we chat for a moment, and I ask if she's doing anything. "I'll call you back," she says. "I'm watching the last episode of *Family Ties.*" I put the phone down and stand in my kitchen pondering the absurd irony of what I have just heard, not knowing whether to laugh or cry.

She calls back a few minutes later to say that she has company but I'm welcome to come over. Her company turns out to be a man she's been seeing while she figures out what to do with her life. Carolyn pours us all a glass of wine. We begin talking. I find out that he, like she, has just left his second marriage. This relationship may just be, he acknowledges, "transitional."

He brings up the name of a man we all know, someone with whom a friend of mine had been briefly involved. "What happened there?" he wants to know.

"Oh, you know...the usual," I say sarcastically. "Boredom...contempt...hostility. Relationships are on fast-forward these days. She was infatuated for a while, but then she just found him self-centred, infantile and maladjusted."

"What did she expect?" he snickers. "That description would fit most of the people I know."

We shoot each other knowing looks. For a moment everybody lapses into an uneasy silence.

"What's *wrong* with our generation?" I

wonder aloud. "Why is everybody so screwed up?"

Carolyn sips her wine and stares a melancholy stare off into space. "Because we thought we could have it all," she says quietly, "and then we did have it all, and we found out it was nothing."

A PARTY. THERE ARE A LOT OF OLD FACES here, people I haven't seen for a while. I meet Laura's eye across the room. It's been ages, so we are catching up.

"What's doing?" I ask.

She rolls her eyes and her mouth curls in a snarl of mock disgust. "The nanny quit and my kids are driving me crazy."

"How's the new house?" I ask. A few years ago she moved to a spacious home in a choice area.

"We're thinking of moving. We fixed it up and we think we can make a killing if the market stays the way it's going."

"I thought you were happy there."

"We are, but we want security in our old age, and the only way we're going to get it is from real estate."

She asks what I've been up to. She has seen some of my articles, heard me on the radio. "Your life must be so *interesting*," she says.

I laugh sardonically. "Well, yeah, sometimes it is," I say. "But sometimes it's difficult. It's a life. Don't romanticize it."

"Are you seeing anyone?" she asks.

"No, not at the moment."

"I bet you don't even give a shit. I'll tell ya, if Mark and I ever split up, I wouldn't rush out to find a man. No way. I'd like to be on my own for a while." Suddenly, she blurts out, "You know, it's so damn hard to keep a marriage together."

I tell her that this is not news to me. But I sense that something is troubling her, something my presence has ignited. I ask if there are problems.

"Nah," she says. "Not really. It's just *marriage*. Being married is hard sometimes. No one told us."

"Well," I say, "being single is hard sometimes too. It's a trade-off. Nothing's perfect. Sometimes I get lonely. Sometimes I miss things."

"Like what? What do you miss?"

"Like the intimacy of marriage, the companionship...the sex."

She stares at me for a moment, and then casts her eyes downward. "Yeah," she says wistfully, "sometimes so do I."

ANOTHER PARTY. THE GUESTS THIS TIME are a mixed bag: gay men, single women and married or co-habiting couples. The gay men all show up with dates. The single women, well groomed and smartly dressed, stand around like wallflowers. I make my way over to a group of women who are yakking in a lively huddle. One is a lawyer with a prestigious firm, the second is a magazine editor, the third is a graphic designer. All of them have achieved a certain prominence in their fields. They are commiserating about the lack of men in their lives.

"I haven't had a serious relationship for four years," says the graphic designer.

"You want a relationship?" quips the lawyer. "Give me a break. I can't even get laid."

"Well, I can," chimes in the editor, "but not by anyone appropriate. I've got this sixty-year-old lech coming on to me, and a married guy at work who keeps mentioning the 'powerful attraction' he feels. But I haven't had a date in months."

"Well, at least somebody's hitting on you," moans the graphic designer. "I can't even think of anybody to fantasize about."

"Can't you conjure up a couple of young studs?" jokes the lawyer. "It always works for me."

Everybody hoots with laughter.

"Do you believe this?" I ask. "Did you ever think, when you were in your twenties, that you'd be having a conversation like this?"

"When I was in my twenties, I didn't have conversations," says the editor. "I was stoned half the time."

"What is going on?" I ask. "Why do so many women of our generation have such stellar careers and such dreadful personal lives?"

"I don't know," says the designer, "but I'm tired of exploring it. My shrink's got me on antidepressants. I'm just hoping it's something that can be fixed with narcotics."

PERIODICALLY THIS SUMMER, I SPENT some evenings with an old family friend who has kept in touch over the years. Tom is thirty-one now and works as an environmentalist, administering programs in the Third World. When he was fifteen, I knew him as a young man with big dreams. When others of his age were falling over themselves to get MBAs and make a killing, Tom went into environmental studies, hung out with a left-wing/Marxist crowd, became a vegetarian and listened to the music of singers such as Murray McLauchlan and Bruce Cockburn.

I have always had a soft spot for Tom, partly because he's such a thoughtful, generous and likable person, but also because he touches something in me, something long forgotten. He is not earnest or dogmatic about his work, or judgmental about others. He is just quietly committed. I

don't know people like Tom any more, although I used to know many like him once. He has always struck me, at least until recently, as the last idealist in a cynical age.

Last summer Tom came back from the Far East ready "to put down some roots" and "make a commitment" to the woman he'd been seeing on and off for nine years. When he returned, things did not turn out as he had hoped. In his absence his girlfriend had found someone else, and the town where he had been raised was a much-changed place. Everywhere he looked he saw the culture of greed and personal ambition. The prevailing ethos of the city depressed him, for it cast into high relief—and made seem futile—the work he was doing. He planned to return overseas in a year; meanwhile he was working in an office as an environmental organizer, trying to manage an exorbitant rent, mend a broken heart and find a woman.

Throughout the summer, when we'd meet, Tom would express a smouldering disenchantment with the way the world was turning. He was searching, questioning, and because I am older, I suppose, and have at different times played the role of mentor in his life, he turned to me for some answers. I had precious few to give him, however, and I often came away from our conversations feeling troubled. Tom was atypical of his peers in choosing to embrace ideals that captured the imagination of my own; yet he was only thirty-one years old, and something in him was turning sour. What guilt did my contemporaries have to bear for the legacy of his loss of faith? I wondered. And what shadowy future awaited if there were fewer and fewer of his ilk to carry the torch?

Sometimes, over a glass of wine, Tom would moan to me about the state of his romantic life. "I see all these attractive women on the street," he said, "and I practically crash my car looking at them, but I never meet anybody. It's so tough to make contact in this town."

"What about at the office where you work, or at parties?" I asked. "Don't you ever meet women there?"

"Yeah, sometimes, but the ones I meet can either smell that I'm on the rebound, and won't go near me with a ten-foot pole, or they just want to screw their brains out. I'm not interested in casual sex any more. I know what it's like to make love with someone you're intimate with, and that's what I want, but it's so hard to find."

One evening in July I was to meet Tom for dinner in a little outdoor restaurant on Baldwin Street. When I arrived, he was sitting having a beer with a pretty young woman he'd joined, I later found out, because there were no free tables. I sat down and, in a few moments, it became obvious to me by the way the woman was engaging with Tom, and the questions she was asking about his work, that she was interested in him. After a while our table became available, so he stood up, shook hands and said goodbye.

When we were safely out of earshot, I asked him whether he had asked for her number or given her his business card.

"No," he said, looking puzzled.

"But Tom," I said, impatiently, "you missed a golden opportunity. She gave you an opening. When she asked about doing volunteer work, you could have produced your card and told her to call you."

"Beautiful women intimidate me," he shrugged.

I had an urge to strangle him.

"She wasn't beautiful," I said. "She was pretty. And she was *flirting* with you. You already did the hard part. You sat down at her table. You chatted her up."

"That's the first time I've ever done that in my life," he said. "I just did it because there was nowhere else to sit. I'd never come on to a woman. Never. I always wait until they make the first move."

"Why?" I was shrieking at him by now in a hoarse whisper. "That woman was dying for you to ask for her number."

"Because if I make a move on a woman," he said testily, "I get pegged as some macho asshole. I'm not going to set myself up for that."

Later in the summer, when the Yankees were in town, Tom and I went to a game at the Dome. It was a splendid afternoon. We were basking in the sun, sipping our beers and enjoying the ball park ambience, when a giant ad for Loblaws Green products came up on the Jumbotron. Tom snickered.

"What's the matter?" I asked. "Just because the environment has become a trendy issue, you shouldn't sneer. You need support wherever you can get it. And if Dave Nichol is managing to guilt every yuppie in town—present company included, I might add—into buying biodegradable garbage bags, then you should be thankful for the help he's giving you."

"I know," he shrugged wearily. "It's just that so many people are slogging it out in the trenches, year after year, and nobody notices, and then some marketing genius comes along and, presto, the environment is suddenly a hot issue. It just gets discouraging sometimes."

"Well, I'm sure it does," I said, aware that I must sound annoyingly chipper. "But Dave Nichol is doing what he does best, and you're going back overseas to do what you do best. It all counts."

"I'm going back overseas," he replied, "but I can't help feeling, since I've come back, that I'm making a big mistake. I look around me and all my old friends here are starting to make good money now, they're moving up the ladder in their careers, buying houses and all these toys, and I can't help thinking that I missed the boat somewhere. I mean, who cares in the end? Is anything really going to change?"

SOMETIMES, WHEN I AM TUCKING MY daughter into bed, she begs me to tell her a story. "What would you like to hear a story about?" I ask. "Tell me about the sixties," she often says.

So I lie down beside her and draw her near and wax lyrical about what it was like to go to the Isle of Wight pop festival, sway back and forth in an open field with thousands of others, and connect through music. Or I tell her about bygone days in faraway places, everywhere meeting kindred spirits on the road. I describe the placard-waving and the demonstrations and do my best to convey what it felt like to stand up and be counted for a cause in which I fervently believed.

Whenever I tell these stories, I glance over and see a dreamy, entranced look in my daughter's eyes. It is the same look I remember seeing in my mother's eyes when she told me about growing up on Markham Street.

One day, at breakfast, she and I were playing a little game. "If you could go back in time," I asked, "what era would you choose to live in?" When she answered, "The sixties," I was thunderstruck.

"Of all the periods in history, why do you want to go back then?"

"Because," she said, "those *stories* you tell me. It sounded so *good*."

WHEN I WAS IN UNIVERSITY I CAN remember feeling that the world was changing, and it was changing because of my generation. Close friends became vegetarians and travelled to India in search of a higher consciousness. My cousin was arrested for staging a sit-in in the administration building at the University of Michigan. He refused his father's money for a hotshot lawyer because his father's company sold shock absorbers to the United States Army for its tanks; my cousin believed the money was tainted. I worked for a counterculture college newspaper called *The Seer* and wrote impassioned pieces in support of women's rights. Much of my time after classes was spent listening to a lot of hard-ass rock 'n' roll, supporting socially relevant causes and ingesting what I thought of then as mind-expanding drugs. At the end of third year I knapsacked my way through

Europe and Morocco, sneering at those who stayed at home leading unadventurous, "bourgeois" lives. I strategized with campus activists, believed it was perfectly acceptable to shout down speakers at rallies if I thought they spoke "lies," and sat around for hours in feminist collectives, feeling sometimes frustrated, often angry, but always vital, passionate and alive.

It's been years since I looked at any writing I did back then, but recently I was compelled to dig out the tattered file in which my clippings are stored. It was an unsettling experience. The writing is often embarrassingly florid, annoyingly dogmatic and hopelessly naive. But there is an enviable shit-kicking intensity in it, and vision, and hope.

I cannot read the papers or watch the news these days without the queasy feeling that I am in the middle of a bad dream. It is difficult to feel inspired, to get involved. The politicians seem smarmy and corrupt, the leaders bland, the causes hopeless.

One of the controversies I have been following with some interest is the abortion issue. I marched in college for pro-choice rights, and I have been involved in a minor way since then helping to raise funds for the cause. But I cannot help feeling these days that my efforts were pointless. Each day on the television the slogans grow uglier, the demonstrations more bizarre. I watch the clips with some ambivalence and discomfiture. The demonstrators seem so ineffectual. What's the use? I wonder. I thought we'd settled this. Yet, in my heart I know I should be marching—this is a critical time, my voice is needed. Still, I never do. Instead, I change the channel with a weary sense of déjà vu, and dream dreams of escaping to the country.

Not long ago, the magazine at which I work featured photographs of splendid summer homes. Brad, a colleague around my age, stopped by my desk to chat as I gazed longingly at the pictures, and within moments we were both daydreaming out loud. The city was getting us down, life had become a rat race. We needed a place to go. Wouldn't it be lovely, we both agreed, to own a secluded cottage with a veranda and a porch swing?

"You realize, of course," I told him, "that we've both manufactured some bucolic escape fantasy?"

"Yeah, and so has everybody else our age," he said, "which is why we'll never be able to afford anything."

"Doesn't this discussion make you feel old?" I asked. "Did you ever think, when you were younger, that you would feel so tired you'd have to run away?"

"Oh, Christ, no," he said. "All those demonstrations!" We laughed fondly, remembering the people we were.

"Which ones did you do?" I asked.

"Amchitka. I did Amchitka. Did you do Amchitka?"

"No, but I did California grapes."

"Oh, jeez, remember that one?" he said. It struck me that we must sound like a couple of old-timers trading war stories. "And we can't forget the hunger strike for Biafra. You know, I've never admitted this to anyone, but after the hunger strike my buddies and I climbed into somebody's Pontiac, drove to Kentucky Fried Chicken and ordered a family bucket."

We both smiled. "I guess we weren't such revolutionaries after all," I said. "Can you imagine doing any of that now?"

"Now?" said Brad. "Are you crazy? Now my wildest dream is to own property in Muskoka."

FOR SEVERAL MONTHS WHILE I WAS thinking about all this, I spent some time talking to people whose sensibilities had been shaped by the sixties. They were married or single, gay or straight, and all comfortably ensconced in careers. They lived—if viewed from a contemporary perspective—busy, stable, reasonably affluent and productive lives.

During our conversations, it became clear that many of them were beginning to wrestle with the inevitable burdens of middle age—youthful dreams had collided with reality, for instance, or loved ones were dying—but certain themes could not be explained by the dreary fact that everybody was simply getting older. I came to recognize common symptoms: the sad longing for connection, the desire to withdraw to a world with more simplicity, the quest for moral touchstones and the yearning to be inspired by some long-vanished collective wisdom. Through this malaise, like a river, ran a meandering ambivalence.

One of the men I talked to, Paul, was thirty-eight and had just left a high-profile job in the media to retreat to his farm, contemplate his future and "watch the birds for a while." He had, during the preceding year, lost two loved ones to cancer, and those losses had prompted some serious reflection. The decision to leave his job had been precipitated by the difficult feelings that any death inspires and the realization that his heart was simply not in it any more. He felt angry all the time and trapped by his earning power and possessions. He was no longer making decisions, he felt, that had any "intellectual courage."

Paul saw his disillusionment as more than merely personal. It was tied, he believed, to his generation's abandonment of faith in the "collective ideal." "We just gave up, you know," he told me. "After Watergate and the War Measures Act, we had the sense that the powers-that-be could and would do anything, and it soured us. Either you're on the side of power or you're a challenger. It's good to challenge authority, but when you become the authority, it's harder to do that. So you end up just thinking, What the hell's the point? and accepting it, or challenging yourself. But it turns out that life isn't so short after all, and what I'm realizing now is that this is going to go on for a long time, and I need some more direction in my life. I can't just go on randomly experiencing stuff."

When we spoke, he told me about an assignment he'd had in California, where he had spent five days visiting Wavy Gravy's Camp Winnarainbow. Wavy Gravy had been an icon during the sixties; he and the Hog Farmers had cooled out acid casualties at Woodstock, for instance, and the communal Hog Farm was still going strong.

The camp was hosting a meeting of the Seva organization, a charitable group that funds grassroots projects in the Third World. The guests slept in tepees and gathered in a circus tent; their meeting was as much a means to recharge themselves as a vehicle for taking care of business.

The experience had obviously affected him profoundly; nevertheless, he kept interjecting disclaimers as he talked, as if I might dismiss as ludicrous the notion of grown-ups sitting around and talking about their lives. "They sound like a bunch of hippie-dippies, I know, but they're not. One was an associate editor at *The New York Times*, another a former president of Sunkist. They're a bunch of people from the sixties who have simply maintained the ideal that one person *can* make a difference."

I asked him to tell me what had moved him so. "It had been a long time since I sat around with that many people who had a single purpose, and it was invigorating," he said. "I rediscovered the comfort from a group that I'd forgotten. By the time I left I had a sense of the good work people are doing and how much they get back doing that work of helping someone else.

"There was all this sharing of feelings, just like the old days, and some of the stories people told were quite moving. We all got wet eyes when the guy from Nepal told us what their funding of cataract operations had achieved, or when we learned how the purchasing of seeds had restored to the people of Guatemala some dignity in working their land.

"You know, initially, the thought of sleeping with eight other people in a tepee

horrified me. There was lots of touchy-feely stuff—a hug and a kiss every morning—and I was sort of jumping out of the way, thinking, Don't touch me! But I can't dismiss it. I realized how insular I'd become, how suspicious I'd grown of people and their motives since the sixties.

"Music was so much more important then, too. I can remember sitting around with a bunch of friends, tapping my foot to 'Midnight Rambler' and feeling exhilarated. But I don't go to rock concerts any more. I'm twice the age of anybody there. I hardly even turn on the stereo."

ALMOST EVERY LOVELY MEMORY I HAVE of the sixties is tied, in one way or another, to music. The summer I spent in Morocco, I can remember belting out The Band's haunting anthem "The Weight" as I rode by camel across moonlit desert sands. There were five of us whose voices chorused in glorious unison that night (*Take a load off Fanny, take a load for free*) and I remember not only the song but the joyful, reverential way we sang it. I felt wonderfully happy under that jewelled sky, and it is the kind of happiness that transpires when you feel a deep, spiritual connection to the people and the world around you. It was one of those moments when life is as good as you imagine it can be.

It was impossible, attending a rock concert back then, listening to Bob Dylan singing "Like a Rolling Stone" or the Stones singing "You Can't Always Get What You Want" not to feel that you were a part of something. Perhaps the music of one's youth is always the most sacred, but I think there is more to it than that. It has become a cliché, a joke, to see my generation clinging stubbornly to the songs of its past—like the moment in *The Big Chill* when Kevin Kline kisses his Temptations album or when he exclaims that there hasn't *been* any music since the sixties.

But, dammit, the music *was* better! The lyrics burned with righteous indignation and the driving backbeat rivetted right through you. To be together with so many people of the same consciousness was nothing less than intoxicating, and the rapture with which everyone welcomed the music made you feel powerful and alive.

I am tired of listening to the music of the sixties, partly because it has been so overplayed that the juice has gone out of it, but also because (thanks to Madison Avenue), it is getting harder to associate the songs with the halcyon days of my youth than to associate them with a soft drink or beer. I do follow the new artists, but often without much enthusiasm. The music I find most resonant right now is being written by musicians who came of age in the sixties and have progressed to another stage in their lives. Many of them are singing the blues these days, and whenever I listen to their songs I try to take comfort in the knowledge that people must sing the blues in order to get over them.

In recent months, Don Henley's *The End of the Innocence* is the album that has haunted me most. Henley, formerly of the Eagles, raises some bittersweet, provocative questions in these songs: how do worthy personal and political ideals become desecrated? What happens when "happily ever after fails" and people are left to gather up the shards of their dreams? Where do they go once the innocence ends?

One of the pieces that is most evocative for me is a lush, melancholy ballad called "The Heart of the Matter." The song is a succession of reflections on love, loss, community and their role in an individual's life. The singer realizes that "the more I know, the less I understand," and laments that "these times are so uncertain," with "a yearning undefined." "How can love survive," he wonders sadly, "in such a graceless age?" Searchingly, he reaches beyond his grasp to "get down to the heart of the matter," and understand the appropriate human response to the pain of loss and disillusionment. Even though his "will gets weak" and his "thoughts seem to scatter," by the song's end he concludes, tentatively, that the only response is "forgiveness." On the final fade-out, that word echoes poignantly. What Henley seems to be suggesting is that when a society falls from grace, it must look outward to find its path to godliness again. When innocence ends, compassion, moral responsibility and community begin.

My generation brought passion to both the personal and political. Our ideals were valid and worthy and true; and our banners were brilliant. But our direction has skewed, our issues have become puny, and now, politicized into stagnation, we mark time. We have rammed against the shoals of middle age and find ourselves foundering in still waters, our captains having deserted us, our maps having blurred, staring dazed and bewildered at an uncertain future. I do not know what lies in store. As an adult, passion is a trickier matter. I know now the price of lost purpose and it has been a dear one. But I think that to go forward we must first look backward; I sense that somewhere in our personal and collective history lie the talismans we must carry with us as we set out to invent our tomorrows. In the meantime, I stand here waiting, straining my ear to listen for the faint sound of some distant clarion call, hoping against hope for a signal to gladden me that the music will reverberate in our lives again.