

STRAWBERRY SPRING

Springheel Jack.

I saw those two words in the paper this morning and my God, how they take me back. All that was eight years ago, almost to the day. Once, while it was going on, I saw myself on nationwide TV - the Walter Cronkite Report. Just a hurrying face in the general background behind the reporter, but my folks picked me out right away. They called long-distance. My dad wanted my analysis of the situation; he was all bluff and hearty and man-to-man. My mother just wanted me to come home. But I didn't want to come home. I was enchanted.

Enchanted by that dark and mist-blown strawberry spring, and by the shadow of violent death that walked through it on those nights eight years ago. The shadow of Springheel Jack.

In New England they call it a strawberry spring. No one knows why; it's just a phrase the old-timers use. They say it happens once every eight or ten years. What happened at New Sharon Teachers' College that particular strawberry spring. . . there may be a cycle for that, too, but if anyone has figured it out, they've never said.

At New Sharon, the strawberry spring began on 16 March 1968. The coldest winter in twenty years broke on that day. It rained and you could smell the sea twenty miles west of the beaches. The snow, which had been thirty-five inches deep in places, began to melt and the campus walks ran with slush. The Winter Carnival snow sculptures, which had been kept sharp and clear-cut for two months by the sub-zero temperatures, at last began to sag and slouch. The caricature of Lyndon Johnson in front of the Tep fraternity house cried melted tears. The dove in front of Prashner Hall lost its frozen feathers and its plywood skeleton showed sadly through in places.

And when night came the fog came with it, moving silent and white along the narrow college avenues and thoroughfares. The pines on the wall poked through it like counting fingers and it drifted, slow as cigarette smoke, under the little bridge down by the Civil War cannons. It made things seem out of joint, strange, magical. The unwary traveller would step out of the juke-thumping, brightly lit confusion of the Grinder, expecting the hard clear starriness of winter to clutch him . . . and instead he would suddenly find himself in a silent, muffled world of white drifting fog, the only sound his own footsteps and the soft drip of water from the ancient gutters. You half expected to see Gollum or Frodo and Sam go hurrying past, or to turn and see that the Grinder was gone, vanished, replaced by a foggy panorama of moors and yew trees and perhaps a Druid-circle or a sparkling fairy ring.

The jukebox played 'Love Is Blue' that year. It played 'Hey, Jude' endlessly, endlessly. It played 'Scarborough Fair'.

And at ten minutes after eleven on that night a junior named John Dancey on his way back to his dormitory began screaming into the fog, dropping books on and between the sprawled legs of the dead girl lying in a shadowy corner of the Animal Sciences parking lot, her throat cut from ear to ear but her eyes open and almost seeming to sparkle as if she had just successfully pulled off the funniest joke of her young life - Dancey, an education major and a speech minor, screamed and screamed and screamed.

The next day was overcast and sullen, and we went to classes with questions eager in our mouths - who? why? when do you think they'll get him? And always the final thrilled question: Did you know her? Did you know her?

Yes, I had an art class with her.

Yes, one of my room-mate 's friends dated her last term.

Yes, she asked me for a light once in the Grinder. She was at the next table.

Yes, Yes, I

Yes. . . yes. . . oh yes, I

We all knew her. Her name was Gale Cerman (pronounced Kerr-man), and she was an art major. She wore granny glasses and had a good figure. She was well liked but her room-mates had hated her. She had never gone out much even though she was one of the most promiscuous girls on campus. She was ugly but cute. She had been a vivacious girl who talked little and smiled seldom. She had been pregnant and she had had leukemia. She was a lesbian who had been murdered by her boy-friend. It was strawberry spring, and on the morning of 17 March we all knew Gale Cerman.

Half a dozen State Police cars crawled on to the campus, most of them parked in front of Judith Franklin Hall, where the Cerman girl had lived. On my way past there to my ten o'clock class I was asked to show my student ID. I was clever. I showed him the one without the fangs.

'Do you carry a knife?' the policeman asked cunningly.

'Is it about Gale Cerman?' I asked, after I told him that the most lethal thing on my person was a rabbit's-foot key chain.

'What makes you ask?' He pounced.

I was five minutes late to class.

It was strawberry spring and no one walked by themselves through the half-academical, half-fantastical campus that night. The fog had come again, smelling of the sea, quiet and deep.

Around nine o'clock my room-mate burst into our room, where I had been busting my brains on a Milton essay since seven. 'They caught him,' he said. 'I heard it over at the Grinder.'

'From who?'

'I don't know. Some guy. Her boy4riend did it. His name is Carl Amalara.'

I settled back, relieved and disappointed. With a name like that it had to be true. A lethal and sordid little crime of passion.

'Okay,' I said. 'That's good.'

He left the room to spread the news down the hall. I reread my Milton essay, couldn't figure out what I had been trying to say, tore it up and started again.

It was in the papers the next day. There was an incongruously neat picture of Amalara - probably a high-school graduation picture - and it showed a rather sad-looking boy with an olive complexion and dark eyes and pockmarks on his nose. The boy had not confessed yet, but the evidence against him was strong. He and Gale Cerman had argued a great deal in the last month or so, and had broken up the week before. Amalara's roomie said he had been 'despondent'. In a footlocker under his bed, police had found a seven-inch hunting knife from L. L. Bean's and a picture of the girl that had apparently been cut up with a pair of shears.

Beside Amalara's picture was one of Gale Cerman. It blurrily showed a dog, a peeling lawn flamingo, and a rather mousy blonde girl wearing spectacles. An uncomfortable smile had turned her lips up and her eyes were squinted. One hand was on the dog's head. It was true then. It had to be true.

The fog came again that night, not on little cat's feet but in an improper silent sprawl. I walked that night. I had a headache and I walked for air, smelling the wet, misty smell of the spring that was slowly wiping away the reluctant snow, leaving lifeless patches of last year's grass bare and uncovered, like the head of a sighing old grandmother.

For me, that was one of the most beautiful nights I can remember. The people I passed under the haloed streetlights were murmuring shadows, and all of them seemed to be lovers, walking with hands and eyes linked. The melting snow dripped and ran, dripped and ran, and from every dark storm drain the sound of the sea drifted up, a dark winter sea now strongly ebbing.

I walked until nearly midnight, until I was thoroughly mildewed, and I passed many shadows, heard many footfalls clicking dreamily off down the winding paths. Who is to say that one of those shadows was not the man or the thing that came to be known as Springheel Jack? Not I, for I passed many shadows but in the fog I saw no faces.

The next morning the clamour in the hall woke me. I blundered out to see who had been drafted, combing my hair with both hands and running the fuzzy caterpillar that had craftily replaced my tongue across the dry roof of my mouth.

'He got another one,' someone said to me, his face pallid with excitement. 'They had to let him go.'

'Who go?'

'Amalara!' someone else said gleefully. 'He was sitting in jail when it happened.'

When what happened?' I asked patiently. Sooner or later I would get it. I was sure of that.

'The guy killed somebody else last night. And now they're hunting all over for it.'

'For what?'

The pallid face wavered in front of me again. 'Her head. Whoever killed her took her head with him.'

New Sharon isn't a big school now, and was even smaller then - the kind of institution the public relations people chummily refer to as a 'community college'. And it really was like a small community, at least in those days; between you and your friends, you probably had at least a nodding acquaintance with everybody else and their friends. Gale

Cerman had been the type of girl you just nodded to, thinking vaguely that you had seen her around.

We all knew Ann Bray. She had been the first runner-up in the Miss New England pageant the year before, her talent performance consisting of twirling a flaming baton to the tune of 'Hey, Look Me Over'. She was brainy, too; until the time of her death she had been editor of the school newspaper (a once-weekly rag with a lot of political cartoons and bombastic letters), a member of the student dramatics society, and president of the National Service Sorority, New Sharon Branch. In the hot, fierce bubblings of my freshman youth I had submitted a column idea to the paper and asked for a date - turned down on both counts.

And now she was dead. . . worse than dead.

I walked to my afternoon classes like everyone else, nodding to people I knew and saying hi with a little more force than usual, as if that would make up for the close way I studied their faces. Which was the same way they were studying mine. There was someone dark among us, as dark as the paths which twisted across the mall or wound among the hundred-year-old oaks on the quad in back of the gymnasium. As dark as the hulking Civil War cannons seen through a drifting membrane of fog. We looked into each other's faces and tried to read the darkness behind one of them.

This time the police arrested no one. The blue beetles patrolled the campus ceaselessly on the foggy spring nights of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth, and spotlights stabbed in to dark nooks and crannies with erratic eagerness. The administration imposed a mandatory nine o'clock curfew. A foolhardy couple discovered necking in the landscaped bushes north of the Tate Alumni Building were taken to the New Sharon police station and grilled unmercifully for three hours.

There was a hysterical false alarm on the twentieth when a boy was found unconscious in the same parking lot where the body of Gale Cerman had been found. A gibbering campus cop loaded him into the back of his cruiser and put a map of the county over his face without bothering to hunt for a pulse and started towards the local hospital, siren wailing across the deserted campus like a seminar of banshees.

Halfway there the corpse in the back seat had risen and asked hollowly, 'Where the hell am I?' The cop shrieked and ran off the road. The corpse turned out to be an undergrad named Donald Morris who had been in bed the

last two days with a pretty lively case of flu - was it Asian last year? I can't remember. Anyway, he fainted in the parking lot on his way to the Grinder for a bowl of soup and some toast.

The days continued warm and overcast. People clustered in small groups that had a tendency to break up and reform with surprising speed. Looking at the same set of faces for too long gave you funny ideas about some of them. And the speed with which rumours swept from one end of the campus to the other began to approach the speed of light; a well-liked history professor had been overheard laughing and weeping down by the small bridge; Gale Cerman had left a cryptic two-word message written in her own blood on the blacktop of the Animal Sciences parking lot; both murders were actually political crimes, ritual murders that had been performed by an offshoot of the SDS to protest the war. This was really laughable. The New Sharon SDS had seven members. One fair-sized offshoot would have bankrupted the whole organization. This fact brought an even more sinister embellishment from the campus rightwingers: outside agitators. So during those queer, warm days we all kept our eyes peeled for them.

The press, always fickle, ignored the strong resemblance our murderer bore to Jack the Ripper and dug further back - all the way to 1819. Ann Bray had been found on a soggy path of ground some twelve feet from the nearest sidewalk, and yet there were no footprints, not even her own. An enterprising New Hampshire newsman with a passion for the arcane christened the killer Springheel Jack, after the infamous Dr John Hawkins of Bristol, who did five of his wives to death with odd pharmaceutical knick-knacks. And the name, probably because of that soggy yet unmarked ground, stuck.

On the twenty-first it rained again, and the mall and quadrangle became quagmires. The police announced that they were salting plainclothes detectives, men and women, about, and took half the police cars off duty.

The campus newspaper published a strongly indignant, if slightly incoherent, editorial protesting this. The upshot of it seemed to be that, with all sorts of cops masquerading as students, it would be impossible to tell a real outside agitator from a false one.

Twilight came and the fog with it, drifting up the tree-lined avenues slowly, almost thoughtfully, blotting out the buildings one by one. It was soft, insubstantial stuff, but somehow implacable and frightening. Springheel Jack was a man, no one seemed to doubt that, but the fog was his accomplice and it was female. . . or so it seemed to me. It was as if our little school was caught between them, squeezed in some crazy lover's embrace, part of a marriage that had been consummated in blood. I sat and smoked and watched the lights come on in the growing darkness and wondered if it was all over. My room-mate came in and shut the door quietly behind him.

'It's going to snow soon,' he said.

I turned around and looked at him. 'Does the radio say that?'

'No,' he said. 'Who needs a weatherman? Have you ever heard of strawberry spring?'

'Maybe,' I said. 'A long time ago. Something grandmothers talk about, isn't it?'

He stood beside me, looking out at the creeping dark.

'Strawberry spring is like Indian summer,' he said, 'only much more rare. You get a good Indian summer in this part of the country once every two or three years. A spell of weather like we've been having is supposed to come only every eight or ten. It's a false spring, a lying spring, like Indian summer is a false summer. My own grandmother used to say strawberry spring means the worst norther of the winter is still on the way - and the longer this lasts, the harder the storm.'

'Folk tales,' I said. 'Never believe a word.' I looked at him. But I'm nervous. Are you?'

He smiled benevolently and stole one of my cigarettes from the open pack on the window ledge. 'I suspect everyone but me. and thee,' he said, and then the smile faded a little. 'And sometimes I wonder about thee. Want to go over to the Union and shoot some eight-ball? I'll spot you ten.'

'Trig prelim next week. I'm going to settle down with a magic marker and a hot pile of notes.'

For a long time after he was gone, I could only look out the window. And even after I had opened my book and started in, part of me was still out there, walking in the shadows where something dark was now in charge.

That night Adelle Parkins was killed. Six police cars and seventeen collegiate-looking plain clothes men (eight of them were women imported all the way from Boston) patrolled the campus. But Springheel Jack killed her just the same, going unerringly for one of our own. The false spring, the lying spring, aided and abetted him - he killed her and left her propped behind the wheel of her 1964 Dodge to be found the next morning and they found part of her in the back seat and part of her in the trunk. And written in blood on the windshield - this time fact instead of rumour - were two words: HA! HA!

The campus went slightly mad after that; all of us and none of us had known Adelle Parkins. She was one of those nameless, harried women who worked the break-back shift in the Grinder from six to eleven at night, facing hordes of hamburger-happy students on study break from the library across the way. She must have had it relatively easy those last three foggy nights of her life; the curfew was 'being rigidly observed, and after nine the Grinder's only patrons were hungry cops and happy janitors - the empty buildings had improved their habitual bad temper considerably.

There is little left to tell. The police, as prone to hysteria as any of us and driven against the wall, arrested an innocuous homosexual sociology graduate student named Hanson Gray, who claimed he 'could not remember' where he had spent several of the lethal evenings. They charged him, arraigned him, and let him go to scamper hurriedly back to his native New Hampshire town after the last unspeakable night of strawberry spring when Marsha Curran was slaughtered on the mall.

Why she had been out and alone is forever beyond knowing - she was a fat, sadly pretty thing who lived in an apartment in town with three other girls. She had slipped on campus as silently and as easily as Springheel Jack himself. What brought her? Perhaps her need was as deep and as ungovernable as her killer's, and just as far beyond understanding. Maybe a need for one desperate and passionate romance with the warm night, the warm fog, the smell of the sea, and the cold knife.

That was on the twenty-third. On the twenty-fourth the president of the college announced that spring break

would be moved up a week, and we scattered, not joyfully but like frightened sheep before a storm, leaving the campus empty and haunted by the police and one dark spectre.

I had my own car on campus, and I took six people downstate with me, their luggage crammed in helter-skelter. It wasn't a pleasant ride. For all any of us knew, Springheel Jack might have been in the car with us.

That night the thermometer dropped fifteen degrees, and the whole northern New England area was belted by a shrieking norther that began in sleet and ended in a foot of snow. The usual number of old duffers had heart attacks shovelling it away - and then, like magic, it was April. Clean showers and starry nights.

They called it strawberry spring, God knows why, and it's an evil, lying time that only comes once every eight or ten years. Springheel Jack left with the fog, and by early June, campus conversation had turned to a series of draft protests and a sit-in at the building where a well-known napalm manufacturer was holding job interviews. By June, the subject of Springheel Jack was almost unanimously avoided - at least aloud. I suspect there were many who turned it over and over privately, looking for the one crack in the seamless egg of madness that would make sense of it all.

That was the year I graduated, and the next year was the year I married. A good job in a local publishing house. In 1971 we had a child, and now he's almost school age. A fine and questing boy with my eyes and her mouth.

Then, today's paper.

Of course I knew it was here. I knew it yesterday morning when I got up and heard the mysterious sound of snowmelt running down the gutters, and smelled the salt tang of the ocean from our front porch, nine miles from the nearest beach. I knew strawberry spring had come again when I started home from work last night and had to turn on my headlights against the mist that was already beginning to creep out of the fields and hollows, blurring the lines of the buildings and putting fairy haloes around the street lamps.

This morning's paper says a girl was killed on the New Sharon campus near the Civil War cannons. She was killed last night and found in a melting snowbank. She was not she was not all there.

My wife is upset. She wants to know where I was last night. I can't tell her because I don't remember. I remember starting home from work, and I remember putting my headlights on to search my way through the lovely creeping fog, but that's all I remember.

I've been thinking about that foggy night when I had a headache and walked for air and passed all the lovely shadows without shape or substance. And I've been thinking about the trunk of my car - such an ugly word, *trunk* -and wondering why in the world I should be afraid to open it.

I can hear my wife as I write this, in the next room, crying. She thinks I was with another woman last night.

And oh dear God, I think so too.