

Tribal Rites of the New Saturday Night

By Nik Cohn
Paintings by James McMullan

“...The new generation takes few risks; it graduates, looks for a job, endures. And once a week, on Saturday night, it explodes...”

Over the past few months, much of my time has been spent in watching this new generation. Moving from neighborhood to neighborhood, from disco to disco, an explorer out of my depth, I have tried to learn the patterns, the old/new tribal rites. In the present article, I have focused on one club and one tight-knit group which seem to sum up the experience as a whole. Artist James McMullan also spent many hours observing this development, but his paintings, reproduced here, are less specific; although they deal with the same locations and group, they are generalized images of these Saturday night rituals.

Everything described in this article is factual and was either witnessed by me or told to me directly by the people involved. Only the names of the main characters have been changed.

Within the closed circuits of rock & roll fashion, it is assumed that New York means Manhattan. The center is everything, all the rest irrelevant. If the other boroughs exist at all, it is merely as a camp joke—Bronx-Brooklyn-Queens, monstrous urban limbo, filled with everyone who is no one.

In reality, however, almost the reverse is true. While Manhattan remains firmly rooted in the sixties, still caught up in faction and fad and the dreary games of decadence, a whole new generation has been growing up around it, virtually unrecognized. Kids of sixteen to twenty, full of energy, urgency, hunger. All the things, in fact, that the Manhattan circuit, in its smugness, has lost.

They are not so chic, these kids. They don't haunt press receptions or opening nights; they don't pose as street

punks in the style of Bruce Springsteen, or prate of rock & Rimbaud. Indeed, the cults of recent years seem to have passed them by entirely. They know nothing of flower power or meditation, pansexuality, or mind expansion. No waterbeds or Moroccan cushions, no hand-thrown pottery, for them. No hep jargon either, and no Pepsi revolutions. In many cases, they genuinely can't remember who Bob Dylan was, let alone Ken Kesey or Timothy Leary. Haight-Ashbury, Woodstock, Altamont—all of them draw a blank. Instead, this generation's real roots lie further back, in the fifties, the golden age of Saturday nights.

The cause of this reversion is not hard to spot. The sixties, unlike previous decades, seemed full of teenage money. No recession, no sense of danger. The young could run free, indulge themselves in whatever treats they wished. But now there is shortage once more, just as there was in the fifties. Attrition, continual pressure. So the new generation takes few risks. It goes through high school, obedient; graduates, looks for a job, saves and plans. Endures. And once a week, on Saturday night, its one great moment of release, it explodes.

Vincent was the very best dancer in Bay Ridge—the ultimate Face. He owned fourteen floral shirts, five suits, eight pairs of shoes, three overcoats, and had appeared on *American Bandstand*. Sometimes music people came out from Manhattan to watch him, and one man who owned a club on the East Side had even offered him a contract. A

hundred dollars a week. Just to dance.

Everybody knew him. When Saturday night came round and he walked into 2001 Odyssey, all the other Faces automatically fell back before him, cleared a space for him to float in, right at the very center of the dance floor. Gracious as a medieval seigneur accepting tributes, Vincent waved and nodded at random. Then his face grew stern, his body turned to the music. Solemn, he danced, and all the Faces followed.

In this sphere his rule was absolute. Only one thing bothered him, and that was the passing of time. Already he was eighteen, almost eighteen and a half. Soon enough he would be nineteen, twenty. Then this golden age would pass. By natural law someone new would arise to replace him. Then everything would be over.

The knowledge nagged him, poisoned his pleasure. One night in January, right in the middle of the Bus Stop, he suddenly broke off, stalked from the floor without a word, and went outside into the cold darkness, to be alone.

He slouched against a wall. He stuck his hands deep into his overcoat pockets. He sucked on an unlit cigarette. A few minutes passed. Then he was approached by a man in a tweed suit, a journalist from Manhattan.

They stood close together, side by side. The man in the tweed suit looked at Vincent, and Vincent stared at the ground or at the tips of his platform shoes. “What's wrong?” said the man in the suit, at last.

And Vincent said: “I'm old.”

Before Saturday night began, to clear his brain of cobwebs and get himself

“... When Vincent gazed into the mirror, it was always Pacino who gazed back. A killer, and a star. Heroic in reflection...”

sharp, fired up, he liked to think about killing.

During the week Vincent sold paint in a housewares store. All day, every day he stood behind a counter and grinned. He climbed up and down ladders, he made the coffee, he obeyed. Then came the weekend and he was cut loose.

The ritual never varied. Promptly at five the manager reversed the “Open” sign and Vincent would turn away, take off his grin. When the last of the customers had gone, he went out through the back, down the corridor, directly into the bathroom. He locked the door and took a deep breath. Here he was safe. So he turned toward the mirror and began to study his image.

Black hair and black eyes, olive skin, a slightly crooked mouth, and teeth so white, so dazzling, that they always seemed fake. Third-generation Brooklyn Italian, five-foot-nine in platform shoes. Small purplish birthmark beside the right eye. Thin white scar, about two inches long, underneath the chin, caused by a childhood fall from a bicycle. Otherwise, no distinguishing marks.

That was the flesh; but there was something else, much more important. One night two years before, he had traveled into Queens with some friends and they had ended up in some club, this real cheap scumhole; he couldn't remember the name. But he danced anyhow and did his numbers, all his latest routines, and everyone was just amazed. And then he danced with this girl. He'd never seen her before and he never saw her again. But her name was Petulia, Pet for short, and she was all right, nice hair, a good mover. And she kept staring right into his eyes. Staring and staring, as though she were hypnotized. He asked her why. “Kiss me,” said the girl. So he kissed her, and she went limp in his arms. “Oooh,” said the girl, sighing, almost swooning, “I just kissed Al Pacino.”

In his first surprise, assuming that she must be teasing, Vincent had only laughed and blushed. But later, thinking it over, he knew she had really meant it. Somehow or other she had seen beneath the surface, had cut through to bedrock, to his very soul. That was something incredible. It blew his mind. In fact, if anyone ever asked him and he tried to answer honestly, looking back, he would say that was the happiest, the very best, moment of his life.

Since then, whenever he gazed into the mirror, it was always Pacino who gazed back. A killer, and a star. Heroic

in reflection. Then Vincent would take another breath, the deepest he could manage; would make his face, his whole body, go still; would blink three times to free his imagination, and he would start to count.

Silently, as slowly as possible, he would go from one to a hundred. It was now, while he counted, that he thought about death.

Mostly he thought about guns. On certain occasions, if he felt that he was getting stale, he might also dwell on knives, on karate chops and flying kung fu kicks, even on laser beams. But always, in the last resort, he came back to bullets.

It felt just like a movie. For instance, he would see himself at the top of a high flight of stairs, back against a wall, while a swarm of attackers came surging up toward him to knock him down, destroy him. But Vincent stood his ground. Unflinching, he took aim and fired. One by one they went crashing backward, down into the pit.

When the battle ended and he had won, he stood alone. Far beneath him, he knew, there was blood and smoke, a chaotic heap of bodies, dead and dying. But that did not enter the physical vision. On the screen there was only Vincent, impassive, ice cold in triumph, who put his gun back into its holster, wiped away the sweat that blinded him, straightened his collar, and, finally, in close-up, smiled.

At one hundred, he let out his breath in a rush. The strain of holding back had turned him purple, and veins were popping all over his neck and arms. For some moments all he could do was gasp. But even as he suffered, his body felt weightless, free, almost as if he were floating. And when he got his breath back, and the roaring in his temples went away, it was true that he felt content.

That was the end; the movie was complete. Turning away from the glass, and away from Pacino, he would flush the toilet, wash his hands. He combed his hair. He checked his watch. Then he went out into the corridor, back into the store. The week behind the counter had been obliterated. No drudgery existed. He was released; Saturday night had begun.

Lisa was in love with Billy, and Billy was in love with Lisa. John James was in love with Lorraine. Lorraine loved Gus. Gus loved Donna. And Donna loved Vincent. But Vincent loved only his mother, and the way

it felt to dance. When he left the store he went home and prepared for 2001 Odyssey. He bathed, he shaved, he dressed. That took him four hours, and by the time he emerged, shortly after nine, he felt reborn.

He lived on the eleventh floor of a high-rise on Fourth Avenue and 66th Street, close beside the subway tracks, with the remnants of his family. He loved them, was proud that he supported them. But when he tried to describe their existence, he would begin to stammer and stumble, embarrassed, because everything came out so corny: “Just like a soap,” he said, “only true.”

His father, a thief, was in jail, and his oldest brother had been killed in Vietnam. His second brother was in the hospital, had been there almost a year, recovering from a car crash that had crushed his legs. His third brother had moved away to Manhattan, into the Village, because he said he needed to be free and find himself. So that left only Vincent, his mother, and his two younger sisters, Maria and Bea (short for Beata), who were still in school.

Between them they shared three rooms, high up in a block of buildings like a barracks. His windows looked out on nothing but walls, and there was the strangest, most disturbing smell, which no amount of cleaning could ever quite destroy.

Hard to describe it, this smell; hard to pin it down. Sometimes it seemed like drains, sometimes like a lack of oxygen, and sometimes just like death, the corpse of some decaying animal buried deep in the walls. Whichever, Vincent wanted out. He would have given anything. But there was no chance. How could there be? He could never abandon his mother. “You must understand,” he said. “I am the man.”

Here he paused. “I am her soul,” he said. Then he paused again, pursing his lips, and he cast down his eyes. He looked grave. “Understand,” he said, “my mother is me.”

It was the guts of winter, bitter cold. But he would not protect himself. Not on Saturday night, not on display at Odyssey. When he kissed his mother good-bye and came down onto Fourth, strutting loose, he wore an open-necked shirt, ablaze with reds and golds, and he moved through the night with shoulders hunched tight, his neck rammed deep between his shoulder blades in the manner of a miniature bull. A bull in Gucci-style loafers, complete with gilded buckle, and high black pants tight as sausage skins. Shuf-



fling, gliding, stepping out. On the corner, outside Najmy Bros. grocery, he passed a Puerto Rican, some dude in a floppy velour hat, and the dude laughed out loud. So Vincent stopped still, and he stared, a gaze like a harpoon, right between the eyes. "Later," he said.

"Later what?" said the dude, lolling slack, sneaking his hand back in his pants pocket, just in case, with a big dumb grin slapped clean across his face. "Later who? Later where? Later how?"

"Hombre," said Vincent, expressionless, "you will die."

It was not quite his own. To be perfectly truthful, he had borrowed the line from Lee Van Cleef, some Italian Western that he'd seen on late-night TV. But he drawled it out just right. A hint of slur, the slightest taste of spit. "Hombre, you will die." Just like that. And moved away. So slick and so sly that the dude never knew what hit him.

Two blocks farther on, Joey was waiting in the car. Joey and Gus in the front, Eugene and John James and now Vincent in the back, trundling through

the icy streets in a collapsing '65 Dodge. Nobody talked and nobody smiled. Each scrunched into his own private space; they all held their distance, conserved their strength, like prizefighters before a crucial bout. The Dodge groaned and rattled. The radio played Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes. Everything else was silence, and waiting.

John James and Eugene worked in a record store; Gus was a house painter. As for Joey, no one could be sure. In any case, it didn't matter. Not now. All that counted was the moment. And for the moment, riding out toward 2001 Odyssey, they existed only as Faces.

Faces. According to Vincent himself, they were simply the elite. All over Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx, even as far away as New Jersey, spread clear across America, there were millions and millions of kids who were nothing special. Just kids. Zombies. Professional dummies, going through the motions, following like sheep. School, jobs, routines. A vast faceless blob. And then there were the Faces. The Vincents and Eugenes and Joeyes. A tiny minority, maybe two in

every hundred, who knew how to dress and how to move, how to float, how to fly. Sharpness, grace, a certain distinction in every gesture. And some strange instinct for rightness, beyond words, deep down in their blood: "The way I feel," Vincent said, "it's like we have been chosen."

Odyssey was their home, their haven. It was *the* place, the only disco in all Bay Ridge that truly counted. Months ago there had been Revelation; six weeks, maybe two months, on, there would be somewhere else. Right now there was only Odyssey.

It was a true sanctuary. Once inside, the Faces were unreachable. Nothing could molest them. They were no longer the oppressed, wretched teen menials who must take orders, toe the line. Here they took command, they reigned.

The basic commandments were simple. To qualify as an Odyssey Face, an aspirant need only be Italian, between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one, with a minimum stock of six floral shirts, four pairs of tight trousers, two pairs of Gucci-style loafers, two pairs

“... Gus loved Donna. And Donna loved Vincent. But Vincent loved only his mother, and the way it felt to dance . . .”

of platforms, either a pendant or a ring, and one item in gold. In addition, he must know how to dance, how to drive, how to handle himself in a fight. He must have respect, even reverence, for Facehood, and contempt for everything else. He must also be fluent in obscenity, offhand in sex. Most important of all, he must play tough.

There was no overlapping. Italians were Italian, Latins were greaseballs, Jews were different, and blacks were born to lose. Each group had its own ideal, its own style of Face. But they never touched. If one member erred, ventured beyond his own allotted territory, he was beaten up. That was the law. There was no alternative.

Then there were girls. But they were not Faces, not truly. Sometimes, if a girl got lucky, a Face might choose her from the crowd and raise her to be his steady, whom he might one day even marry. But that was rare. In general, the female function was simply to be available. To decorate the doorways and booths, to fill up the dance floor. Speak when spoken to, put out as required, and then go away. In short, to obey, and not to fuss.

Fuss, in fact, was the one thing in life that Faces loathed most of all. Vincent, for example. The moment that anyone started to argue, to flush and wave his hands, he would simply turn his back and start walking. No matter what the circumstance, there could be no excuse for whining. It was not clean. It made him sick at his stomach.

That was why he loved to dance, not talk. In conversation, everything always came out wrong, confused. But out on the floor it all somehow fell into place. There was no muddle, nothing that could not be conveyed. Just so long as your feet made the right moves, kept hitting the right angles, you were fool-proof. There were certain rules, watertight. Only obey them, and nothing could go wrong.

Sometimes, it was true, people did not understand that. Some outsider would stumble in, blundering. A complete un-Face, who wore the wrong clothes and made the wrong moves, who danced last month's routines. And that could be ruinous. Absolutely disastrous. Because the whole magic of the night, and of Odyssey, was that everything, everyone, was immaculate. No detail was botched, not one motion unconsidered.

Purity. A sacrament. In their own style, the Faces were true ascetics: stern, devoted, incorruptible. “We may

be hard. But we're fair,” said Vincent. So they gathered in strict formation, each in his appointed place, his slot upon the floor. And they danced.

On the first night when the man in the tweed suit arrived from Manhattan, it was only nine o'clock and Odyssey was still half empty. He had come on the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway and when he descended into Bay Ridge itself, he found himself in a dead land. There were auto shops, locked and barred; transmission specialists, alignment centers. Then the Homestead Bar and Grill, and the Crazy Country Club, advertising “warm beer and lousy food.” But there were no people. Only railroads and junkyards, abandoned car seats, hubcaps, tires, scattered by the side of the road. A wasteland.

It was another frozen night and, when he climbed out of the car, the sidewalks were so icy that he slithered at every step. Guard dogs snapped and leaped in the darkness, and sleet whipped at his eyes. So he huddled deeper, tighter, into his overcoat, and set off toward a small red light at the farthest end of the street.

This was 2001 Odyssey. On the step outside, Vincent stood waiting, smoking, and did not seem to feel the cold at all. His hair was blow-waved just so, his toe caps gleaming. Brut behind his ears, Brut beneath his armpits. And a crucifix at his throat.

Inside, Odyssey was as vast and still as a Saturday-night cathedral. Music blared from the speakers, colored lights swirled back and forth across the dance floor. But no one answered their call. Perhaps a dozen girls sat waiting, on plastic seats, in scalloped booths. Four Faces in shiny suits stood at the bar, backs turned to the floor. The manager standing by the door scratched himself. That was all.

Then the music changed to *Baby Face*, and a boy in a red-patterned shirt began to dance alone. He came out of nowhere, down from the tiers of seats at the very back of the hall, the bleachers, which were completely shrouded in darkness. Skinny, shrimpish, he stood out in the very center of the floor, caught by the swirling lights, and did one half of the Rope Hustle. Only half, of course, because the Rope Hustle cannot really be performed without a partner. So he twirled in irregular circles, his arms twining and unfurling about his neck, vaguely as if he were trying to strangle himself. And the Faces at the bar, without even seeming to look, began to snigger.

Hearing mockery, the boy flushed and lowered his eyes, but he did not back down. For twenty minutes, half an hour, he kept on spinning, wheeling, in total isolation. “Later on, he'll have to leave,” said Vincent. “Now it doesn't matter. Not yet.”

“Who is he?” asked the man in the suit.

“His born name is Paul. But he calls himself Dean. A very weird guy.”

“How come?”

“He cries.”

When at last the boy came off the floor, he sat down at the bar and stared directly ahead, towards the mirror. His face was pale and pinched, his Adam's apple kept leaping in his throat, and he ordered lemonade. Over his heart there was a small tin button printed with black letters that said: “I believe.” He drank his lemonade in three clean gulps. Then he wiped his lips and went straight back on the floor, still all alone, as if to resume a vigil.

When the music turned to *Wake Up Everybody*, he spun too fast, lost control, stumbled. Then Vincent sighed and shook his head. “Funny guy,” he said. “When I was five, my father broke my arm. Twisted it until it snapped. Because he was drunk, and he hated me. But I didn't cry. Not one tear.”

Gradually, the floor began to fill; the night embarked in earnest. The girls emerged from their booths, formed ranks, and began to do the Bus Stop. A band appeared in blue denim suits embossed with silver studding. Blacks from Crown Heights, who played as loudly and as badly as anyone possibly could, grinning, sweating, stomping, while the dancers paraded beneath them, impassive.

One after another the stock favorites came churning out. *Bad Luck* and *Supernatural Thing*, *What a Difference a Day Made*, *Track of the Cat*, each reduced to the same automaton chugging, interchangeable. Nobody looked and no one ever applauded. Still, the band kept pounding away, kept right on grinning. “These guys. Those shines,” said Vincent. “We wind them up like clockwork. We pay, and they perform.”

Outside, his companions sat in the car, Joey and Gus in the front, Eugene and John James in the back, drinking whiskey from a bottle in a paper bag. They still made no conversation, did not relax. But as the alcohol hit, they started to mumble.

“Mother,” said Eugene.

“Eff,” said Gus.

“Mothereffing right,” said Joey.



“...The guard dogs went berserk; they hurled themselves full force against the gate...”

Sometime after ten, feeling ready, they stepped out on the sidewalk and moved toward Odyssey in a line, shoulder to shoulder, like gunslingers. Heads lowered, hands thrust deep in their pockets, they turned into the doorway. They paused for just an instant, right on the brink. Entered.

Vincent was already at work on the floor. By now the Faces had gathered in force, his troops, and he worked them like a quarterback, calling out plays. He set the formations, dictated every move. If a pattern grew ragged and disorder threatened, it was he who set things straight.

Under his command, they unfurled the Odyssey Walk, their own style of massed Hustle, for which they formed strict ranks. Sweeping back and forth across the floor in perfect unity, 50 bodies made one, while Vincent barked out orders, crying One, and Two, and One, and Tap. And Turn, and One, and Tap. And Turn. And Tap. And One.

They were like so many guardsmen on parade; a small battalion, uniformed in floral shirts and tight flared pants. No one smiled or showed the least expression. Above their heads, the black musicians honked and thrashed. But the Faces never wavered. Number after number, hour after hour, they carried out their routines, their drill. Absolute discipline, the most impeccable balance. On this one night, even Vincent, who was notoriously hard to please, could find no cause for complaint.

At last, content in a job well done, he took a break and went up into the bleachers, where he sat on a small terrace littered with empty tables and studied the scene at leisure, like a general reviewing a battlefield. From this distance, the action on the floor seemed oddly unreal, as though it had been staged. A young girl in green, with ash-blond hair to her shoulders, stood silhouetted in a half-darkened doorway, posed precisely in left profile, and blew a smoke ring. Two Faces started arguing at the bar, fists raised. The dancers chugged about the floor relentlessly, and the band played *Philadelphia Freedom*.

“How do you feel?” asked the man in the tweed suit.

“I’m thinking about my mother,” said Vincent.

“What of her?”

“She’s getting old. Sometimes she feels so bad. If I was rich, I could buy her a house, somewhere on the Island, and she could take it easy.”

“What kind of house?”

“Big windows. Lots of light,” Vincent said, and he spread his hands, describing a shape like a globe. “Space. Chickens in the yard. A grand piano. Grass,” he said. “My mother likes grass. And blue sky.”

Down below, without his presence to keep control, the order was beginning to fall apart. Around the fringes, some of the dancers had broken away from the mainstream and were dabbling in experiments, the Hustle Cha, the Renaissance Bump, even the Merengue. Vincent looked pained. But he did not intervene. “Chickens,” he said. “They lay their own eggs.”

A fight broke out. From outside, it was not possible to guess exactly how it started. But suddenly Gus was on his back, bleeding, and a Face in a bright-blue polka-dot shirt was banging his head against the floor. So Joey jumped on the Face’s back. Then someone else jumped in, and someone else. After that there was no way to make out anything beyond a mass of bodies, littered halfway across the floor.

Vincent made no move; it was all too far away. Remote in his darkness, he sipped at a Coca-Cola and watched. The band played *You Sexy Thing* and one girl kept screaming, only one.

“Is this the custom?” asked the man in the suit.

“It depends.”

“On what?”

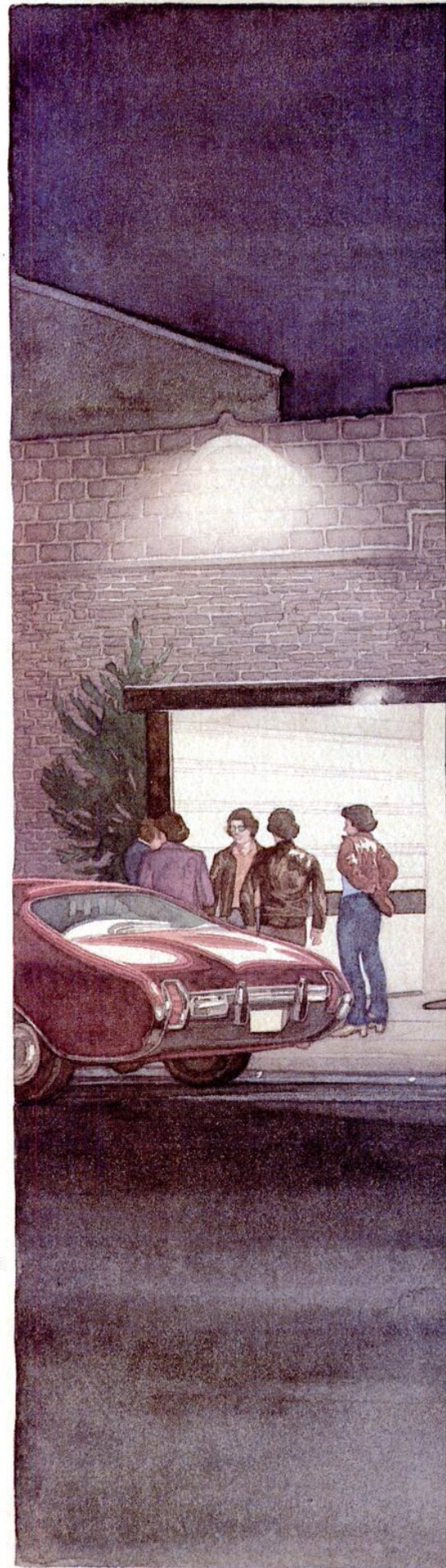
“Sometimes people don’t feel in the mood. Sometimes they do,” said Vincent. “It just depends.”

In time, the commotion subsided, the main participants were ushered outside to complete their negotiations in private. Those left behind went back to dancing as if nothing had happened, and the band played *Fly, Robin, Fly*.

John James, the Double J, appeared on the terrace, lean and gangling, with a chalky white face and many pimples. There was blood beneath his nose, blood on his purple crepe shirt. “Mother,” he said, sitting down at the table. “Eff,” said Vincent.

So the night moved on. The Double J talked about basketball, records, dances. Then he talked about other nights, other brawls. The music kept playing and the dancers kept on parading. From time to time a girl would stop and look up at the terrace, hoping to catch Vincent’s eye. But he did not respond. He was still thinking about his mother.

Somebody threw a glass which shattered on the floor. But the Faces just





ASCENSION

PRESENTS

DISCOLETTES -

FRI. SAT.

CROWN COMMISS. Next Wk.

DWS

McMullan



ASCENSION

PRESENTS

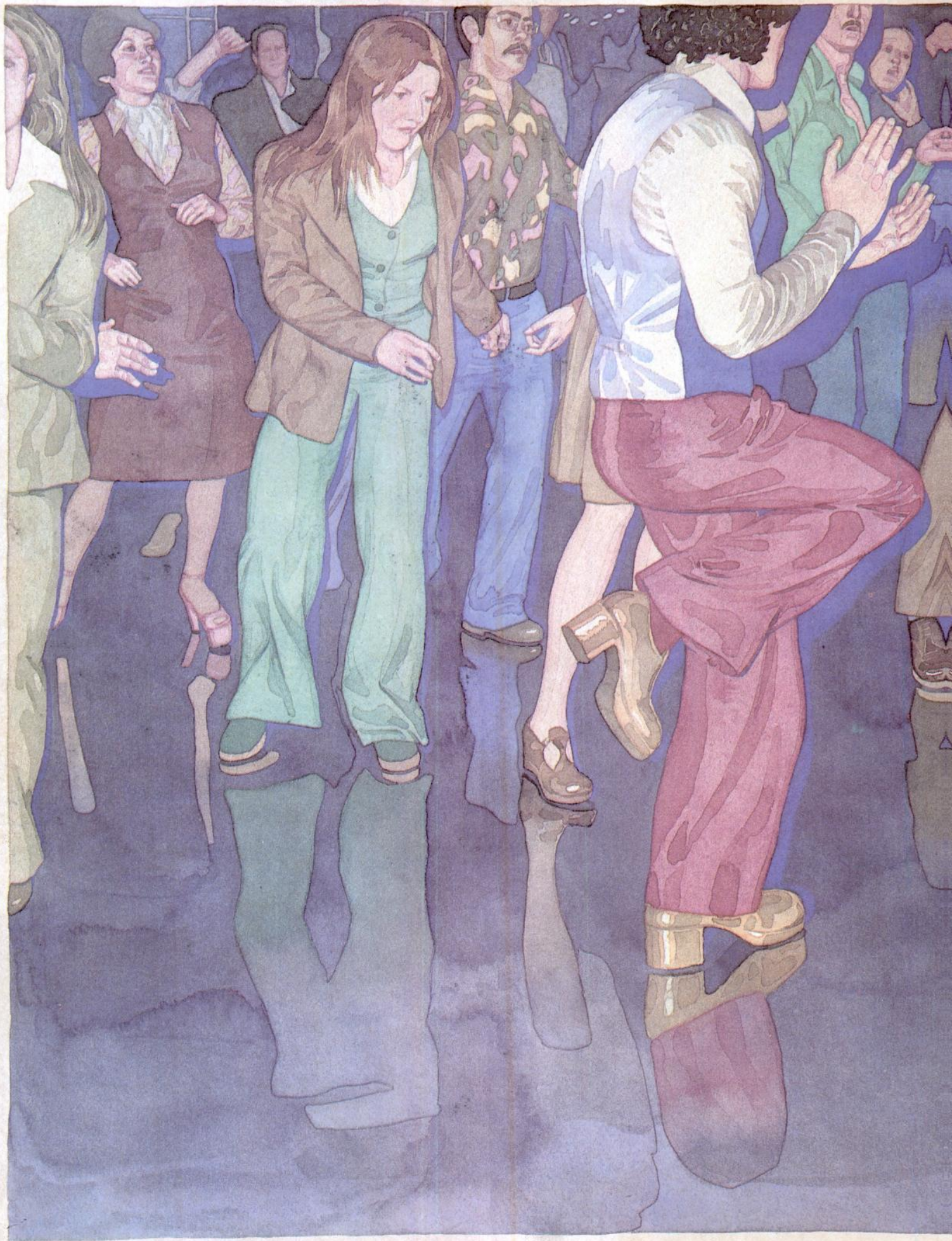
DISCOLETTES -

FRI. SAT.

CROWN COMMISS. Next Wk.

DWS

McMullan





went One, and Two, and Tap, and Turn. And Tap, and Turn, and Tap.

"I was in love once. At least I thought I was," said Vincent. "I was going to get engaged."

"What happened?"

"My sister got sick and I had to stay home, waiting for the doctor. So I didn't get to the club until midnight. Bojangles, I think it was. And by then I was too late."

"How come?"

"She danced with someone else."

"Only danced?"

"Of course," said Vincent, "and after that, I could never feel the same. I couldn't even go near her. I didn't hate her, you understand. Maybe I still loved her. But I couldn't stand to touch her. Not when I knew the truth."

Around two, the band stopped playing, the Faces grew weary, and the night broke up. Outside the door, as Vincent made his exit, trailed by his lieutenants, a boy and a girl were embracing, framed in the neon glow. And Vincent stopped; he stared. No more than two yards distant, he stood quite still and studied the kiss in closest detail, dispassionate, as though observing guinea pigs.

The couple did not look up and Vincent made no comment. Down the street, Joey was honking the car horn. "God gave his only son," said John James.

"What for?" said Vincent, absent-mindedly.

"Rent," replied the Double J.

It was then that something strange occurred. Across the street, in the darkness beyond a steel-mesh gate, the guard dogs still snarled and waited. Gus and Eugene stood on the curb directly outside the gate, laughing, stomping their feet. They were drunk and it was late. They felt flat, somehow dissatisfied. And suddenly they threw themselves at the steel wires, yelling.

The guard dogs went berserk. Howling, they reared back on their hind legs, and then they hurled themselves at their assailants, smashing full force into the gate. Gus and Eugene sprang backwards, safely out of reach. So the dogs caught only air. And the Faces hooted, hollered. They made barking noises, they whistled, they beckoned the dogs toward them. "Here, boys, here," they said, and the dogs hurled forward again and again, in great surging waves, half maddened with frustration.

Even from across the street, the man in the suit could hear the thud of their bodies, the clash of their teeth on the wires. Gus sat down on the sidewalk, and he laughed so much it hurt. He clasped his sides, he wiped away tears. And Eugene charged once more. He taunted, he leered, he stuck out his

“... He looked at her legs with a strange smile, a smile that made her want to run...”

tongue. Then he smacked right into the fence itself, and this time the dogs flung back with such frenzy, such total demonic fury, that even the steel bonds were shaken and the whole gate seemed to buckle and give.

That was enough. Somewhat chastened, though they continued to giggle and snicker, the Faces moved on. Behind them, the dogs still howled, still hurled themselves at the wires. But the Faces did not look back.

When they reached the car, they found Vincent already waiting, combing his hair. “Where were you?” asked Gus.

“Watching,” said Vincent, and he climbed into the back, out of sight. Inside 2001 Odyssey, there was no more music or movement, the dance floor was deserted. Saturday night had ended, and Vincent slouched far back in his corner. His eyes were closed, his hands hung limp. He felt complete.

Another Saturday night. Easing down on Fifth and Ovington, Joey parked the car and went into the pizza parlor, the Elegante. Vincent and Eugene were already waiting. So was Gus. But John James was missing. Two nights before he had been beaten up and knifed, and now he was in the hospital.

It was an old story. When the Double J got home from work on Thursday evening, his mother had sent him out for groceries, down to Marinello's Deli. He had bought pasta and salad, toilet paper, a six-pack of Bud, a package of frozen corn, gum, detergent, tomato sauce, and four TV dinners. Paid up. Combed his hair in the window. Then went out into the street, cradling his purchases in both arms.

As he emerged, three Latins—Puerto Ricans—moved across the sidewalk toward him and one of them walked straight through him. Caught unawares, he lost his balance and his bag was knocked out of his arms, splattering on the curb.

Produce scattered everywhere, rolling in the puddles and filth. The frozen corn spilled into the gutter, straight into some dog mess, and the Latins laughed. “Greaseballs,” said John James, not thinking. All that was on his mind was his groceries, the need to rescue what he'd lost. So he bent down and began to pick up the remnants. And the moment he did, of course, the Latins jumped all over him.

The rest was hazy. He could remem-

ber being beaten around the head, kicked in the sides and stomach, and he remembered a sudden sharp burn in his arm, almost as though he had been stung by an electric wasp. Then lots of shouting and scuffling, bodies tumbling all anyhow, enormous smothering weights on his face, a knee in the teeth. Then nothing.

In the final count, the damage was three cracked ribs, a splintered cheekbone, black eyes, four teeth lost, and a deep knife cut, right in the meat of his arm, just missing his left bicep.

“Three greaseballs at once,” said Gus. “He could have run. But he wouldn't.”

“He stuck,” said Vincent. “He hung tight.”

Judgment passed, the Faces finished their pizzas, wiped their lips, departed. Later on, of course, there would have to be vengeance, the Latins must be punished. For the moment, however, the feeling was of excitement, euphoria. As Eugene hit the street, he let out a whoop, one yelp of absolute glee. Saturday night, and everything was beginning, everything lay ahead of them once more.

But Vincent hung back, looked serious. Once again he had remembered a line, another gem from the screen. “Hung tight,” he said, gazing up along the bleak street. “He could have got away clean, no sweat. But he had his pride. And his pride was his law.”

Donna loved Vincent, had loved him for almost four months. Week after week she came to Odyssey just for him, to watch him dance, to wait. She sat in a booth by herself and didn't drink, didn't smile, didn't tap her foot or nod her head to the music. Though Vincent never danced with her, she would not dance with anyone else.

Her patience was infinite. Hands folded in her lap, knees pressed together, she watched from outside, and she did not pine. In her own style she was satisfied, for she knew she was in love, really, truly, once and for all, and that was the thing she had always dreamed of.

Donna was nineteen, and she worked as a cashier in a supermarket over toward Flatbush. As a child she had been much too fat. For years she was ashamed. But now she felt much better. If she held her breath, she stood five-foot-six and only weighed 140 pounds.

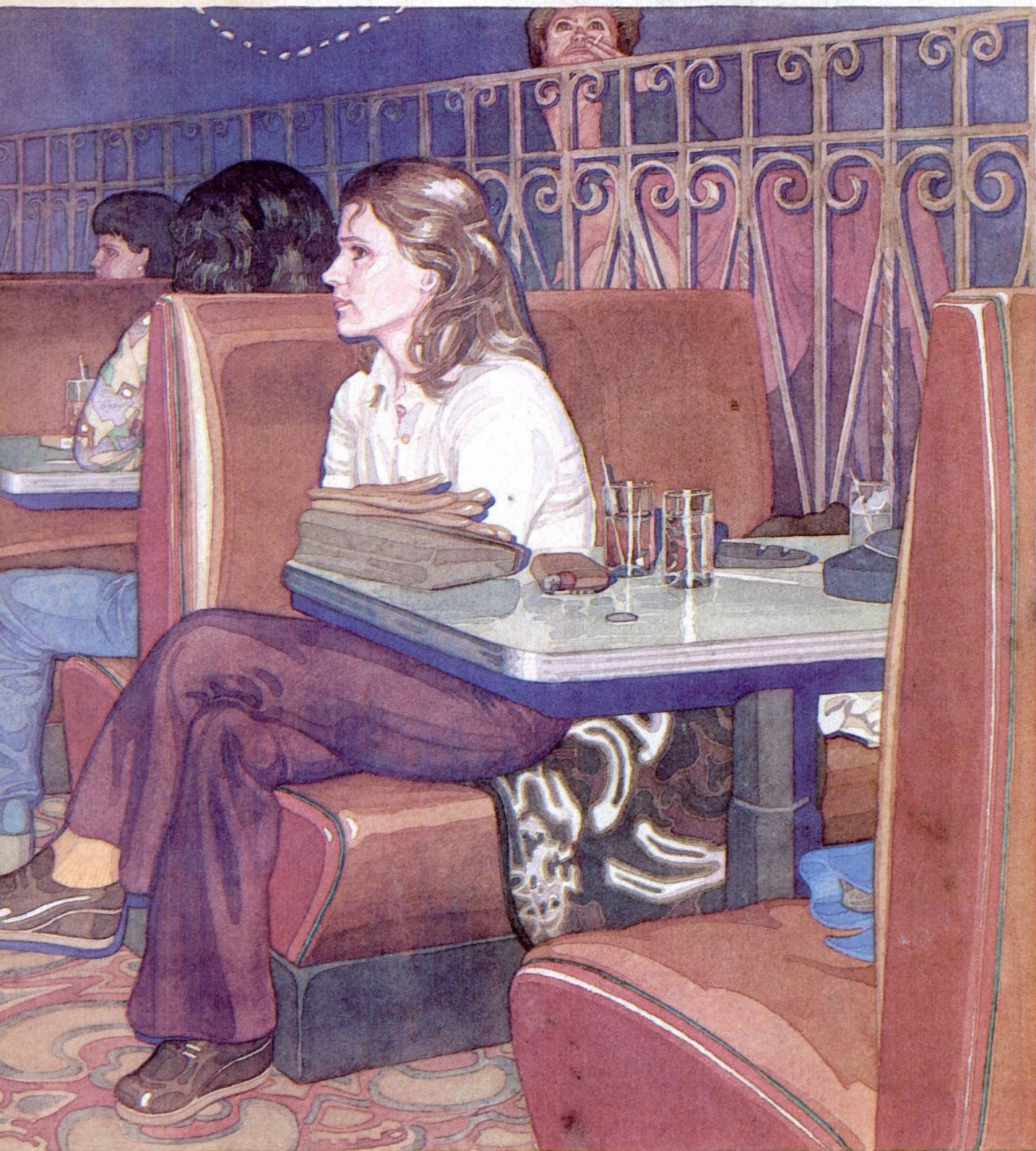
Secure in her love, she lived in the background. Vincent danced, and she took notes. He laughed, and she was glad. Other girls might chase him, touch



him, swarm all over him. Still she endured, and she trusted.

And one Saturday, without any warning, Vincent suddenly turned toward her and beckoned her onto the floor, right in the middle of the Odyssey Walk, where she took her place in the line, three rows behind him, one rank to the left.

She was not a natural dancer, never had been. Big-boned, soft-fleshed, her body just wasn't right. She had good



breasts, good hips, the most beautiful gray-green eyes. But her feet, her legs, were hopeless. Movement embarrassed her. There was no flow. Even in the dark, when she made love, or some boy used her for pleasure, she always wanted to hide.

Nonetheless, on this one night she went through the motions and nobody laughed. She kept her eyes on the floor; she hummed along with the songs. Three numbers went by without dis-

aster. Then the dancers changed, moved from the Walk to something else, something she didn't know, and Donna went back to her booth.

Obscurity. Safety. She sipped Fresca through a straw and fiddled with her hair. But just as she was feeling stronger, almost calm again, Vincent appeared above her, his shadow fell across her just like in the movies, and he put his hand on her arm.

His shirt was pink and scarlet and

yellow; her dress was pastel green. His boots were purple, and so were her painted lips. "I'm leaving," Vincent said, and she followed him outside.

His coat was creased at the back. He didn't know that, but Donna did; she could see it clearly as they walked out. And the thought of it, his secret weakness, made her dizzy with tenderness, the strangest sense of ownership.

"What's your name?" Vincent asked. "Maria," said Donna. "Maria Elena."

They sat in the back of Joey's car and Vincent pulled down her tights. There was no space, everything hurt. But Donna managed to separate her legs, and Vincent kissed her. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"I love you," said Donna.

"No, not that," said Vincent. "I mean, are you fixed?"

She wasn't, of course. She wasn't on the pill, or the coil, or anything. Somehow or other, she'd never got around to it. So Vincent went away. He simply took his body from hers, climbed out of the car. "Vincent," said Donna. But he was gone.

She didn't feel much, did not react in any way. For the next few minutes, she sat very still and tried not to breathe. Then she went home and she slept until noon the next day, a sleep of absolute immersion, so deep and so silent that, she said later on, it felt like Mass.

Another week went by; another Saturday night arrived. But this time it was different. On Thursday afternoon she had bought her first packet of condoms. Now they nestled in her purse, snug upon her lap. She was prepared.

Everything seemed changed in her, resolved. Tonight she didn't sit alone, felt no need to hide. She danced every number whether anyone asked her or not. She drank Bacardi and Coke, she laughed a lot, she flapped her false eyelashes. She wore a blue crepe blouse without any bra, and underneath her long black skirt, cut in the style of the forties, her legs were bare.

Even when Vincent danced near her, she hardly seemed to notice. It was as if she were weightless, floating free. But when the man in the tweed suit sat down beside her in her plastic booth, in between dances, and asked her how she felt, she could not speak, could only place her hand above her heart, to keep it from exploding.

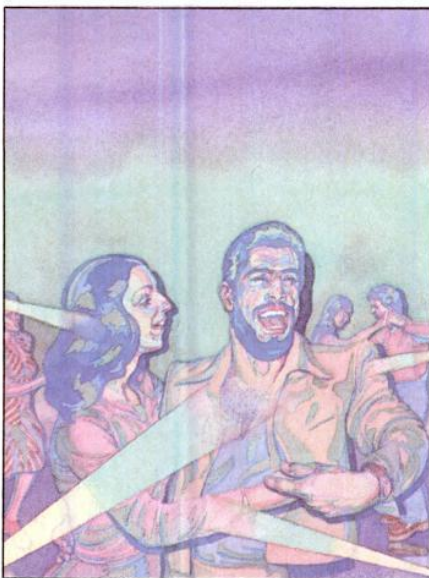
Finally, shortly after one o'clock, Vincent decided to leave. He disappeared toward the cloakroom to retrieve his coat, and while his back was turned, Donna slipped by, out onto the street, where she waited.

It was raining hard, had been raining all night. Turning up her collar, tightening the belt on her coat, which had once belonged to her older sister, Donna pressed back into the angle of the wall, right underneath the neon sign. And she began to talk. Normally she was cautious, very quiet. But now the words came out in a torrent, an uncontrollable flood, as though some dam had burst deep within her.

She talked about dances she had been to, clothes that her friends had bought, boys who had left her, a dog she had once owned. She talked about home and work, and the rain came

down in a steady stream. Ten minutes passed. She said she wanted three children.

At last the door opened and Vincent came out, ducking his head against the downpour. The light fell full on Donna's face; she tried to smile. Her hair was slicked flat against her skull and Vincent looked her over with a look of vague surprise, as if he couldn't quite place her. Her makeup was smudged; the tip of her nose was red. She was fat. Vincent walked straight past her.



He went off down the street, moved out of sight, and Donna remained behind, still standing on the sidewalk. "Oh," she said, and she brought her hand up out of her left coat pocket, loosely holding the packet of unused condoms.

She opened it. Gently, methodically, she took out the sheaths and dangled them, squeezed between her forefinger and thumb. One by one, not looking, she dropped them in the wet by her feet. Then she went home again, back to sleep.

Another Saturday night. The man in the tweed suit was sitting in the bleachers, around one o'clock, when Eugene approached him and sat down at his table. "Are you really going to write a story?" Eugene asked.

"I think so," replied the man.

"There are some things I want you to put in. As a favor," Eugene said. "Things I'd like to say."

He was lean and wiry, vaguely furtive, in the style of a human stoat, and his yellow shirt was emblazoned with scarlet fleurs-de-lis. His voice was high-pitched, squeaky; his left eye was forever squinting, half shut, as if warding off an invisible waft of cigarette smoke.

At first glance he might have passed for an overgrown jockey. But his real ambition was to become a disk jockey, or possibly a TV quizmaster: "Something daring. Anything. It doesn't matter what," he said.

Now he wanted to declare himself, to make a statement, his testament.

"Go ahead," the man said. "Tell me."

"First," said Eugene, "I want to mention my mother and father, my brothers, my uncle Tony, my grandmother. Also, Roy and Butch at Jones Beach, and Charlie D. in Paterson. And Alice, she knows why."

"Anyone else?"

"And everyone, as well."

The way he spoke, measured, remote, it was as though he addressed them from a very great distance, an alien world. From prison, perhaps, or an army camp. Or some secret underground, a Saturday-night cabal, known only to initiates. "Is that all?" asked the man in the suit.

"Just tell them hello," said Eugene, "and you can say I get by."

On Wednesday evening, to help time pass, Vincent went to see *The Man Who Would Be King*, and rather to his surprise, he liked it very much. On his own admission, he did not understand it, not entirely, for India and the Raj were too far away, much too unreal to make any practical sense. Still, he enjoyed the color and flash, the danger, the sense of everything being possible, all dreams of adventure coming true.

Afterwards, he sat on a low wall outside a basketball court, across the street from the high rise, and considered. The man in the suit was there again, asking more questions. So Vincent talked about living on the eleventh floor, his windows that looked out on nothing, the smell. And working in a housewares store, selling paint and climbing ladders, grinning for his living. "Stuck," he said. "They've got me by the balls."

"How about the future?" asked the man in the suit.

"What future?" Vincent said, and he looked askance, as though the man must be retarded to ask such a question. This was not the Raj; he was not floating in a film. There were dues to pay, people to support. That took money. And money, in this place, meant imprisonment.

Still the man persisted, asked him to imagine. Just conceive that he was set free, that every obstacle was suddenly removed and he could be whatever he pleased. What would he do then? What would give him the greatest pleasure of all, the ultimate fulfillment?

Vincent took his time. This was another dumb question, he knew that.

“... Gus banged his clenched fist into his palm. ‘Mother,’ he said, ‘I’ll kill him.’ ‘Tear his heart out,’ said Joey ...”

Yet the vision intrigued him, sucked him in almost despite himself. So he let his mind roam loose. Sitting on the wall, he bent his head, contemplated the cracks in the sidewalk. Pondered. Made up his mind. “I want to be a star,” he said.

“Such as?” asked the man in the suit.

“Well,” said Vincent, “someone like a hero.”

Six weeks passed. Six more weeks of drudgery, six more Saturdays. The Odyssey began to wind down, lose its novelty. It was time to move on. But no replacement had been found, not as yet. So there was a hiatus. The Faces kept in training, waiting for the next step. A fresh sensation, another explosion. Meanwhile, they marked time.

Sure enough, their patience paid off. Outside the pizza parlor, on another Saturday night, Joey, Vincent, the Double J, and Eugene sat waiting in the Dodge, raring to go. But Gus did not show up.

Twenty minutes passed, then 30, 40. They were almost ready to go on without him. Then suddenly he came out of the shadows, running, burning. His face was flushed; he was all out of breath. Too wild to make sense, he could only spew out obscenities, kick at the curb, pound his fists, impotent, on the body of the car.

At last he simmered down, choked out his explanations. And the news was indeed enormous. That afternoon, just three hours earlier, his younger sister, Gina, had been molested, debauched, as she crossed a children’s playground in the park.

Gus poured out the story. After his sister had finished her lunch, she went to the apartment of her best friend Arlene, who lived about ten blocks away. Both of them were eleven years old and together they spent the afternoon nibbling chocolate candies, trying out different makeups, sighing over photographs of Donny Osmond. Then Gina walked home in the dusk, alone, wrapped in her imitation-leather coat, which was short and showed off her legs. Soon she came to McKinley Park. To make a shortcut, she turned off the street and headed across the park playground.

It was getting dark and the playground was empty, spooky. Gina hastened. Halfway across, however, a man appeared, coming from the opposite direction. He had wispy hair and a wispy

beard, and he was talking to himself. When Gina came level with him, he stopped and stared. “Pretty. Pretty. Pretty,” he said. Just like that. And he looked at her legs, straight at her kneecaps, with a strange smile, a smile that made her want to run. So she did. She sped out of the playground, into the street, down the block.

Just as she reached the sanctuary of her own hallway, Gus was coming down the stairs. So she bumped straight into him, jumped into his arms. “What’s wrong?” he said. But she couldn’t say. She just dug her nails into his arms, and she sort of sighed. Then she burst into tears.

He carried her upstairs, cradled like an infant. In time, she was comforted, she calmed down. Finally she told her story, was put to bed, and soon fell asleep. Now all that remained was revenge.

Vengeance. When Gus completed his story, he laid his forehead against the roof of the Dodge in order to feel something cold against his skull, which seemed as though it were burning. There he rested for a moment, recovering. Then he straightened up, and he banged his clenched fist into the meat of his left palm, once, twice, three times, just like on TV. “Mother,” he said. “I’ll kill him.”

“Tear his heart out,” said Joey. “Eff him in the place he lives.”

“Cut off both his legs,” said Vincent. “Kill him. Yes.”

They all knew who it was. They didn’t even have to ask. In Vincent’s own building there was a man called Benny, a wimp who had wispy hair and a wispy beard, who shuffled, and he was really weird. He had these crazy staring eyes, this horrible fixed stare. Everyone steered clear of him. Nobody would talk to him or go close to him. Children threw stones to make him go away. Still he hung around, staring.

No question, he was diseased. One day a bunch of kids had waited for him in the park, jumped him, and tried to teach him a lesson. But he would not learn. The more they abused him, beat on him, the stranger he became. He talked to himself, he mumbled stuff that no one could understand. And often, late at night, blind drunk, he would stand outside people’s windows, yell and carry on and keep them from their sleep.

And now this. The final outrage. So the Faces drove back toward the high-rise, piled out of the car, descended

on the building in a wedge.

Enforcers. Vigilantes. In silence, they came to Benny’s door and Gus rang the bell, banged on the door. A minute passed and there was no answer. Gus banged again. Still no reply. Inside the apartment, everything seemed quiet, absolutely still. Gus banged a third time, a fourth, and then he lost patience. He started raging, kicking the door, barging into it with his shoulder. But nobody moved inside or made a sound, and the door would not give way.

Defeated, the Faces stood around in the hallway, feeling vaguely foolish. At first their instinct was simply to wait it out, keep a vigil till Benny came home. But within a few minutes, hanging about, doing nothing, that plan lost its attraction. The hall was deserted, there was no sign of action. Just standing there grew boring, and they started to fret.

Loitering outside the front doorway, aimless, it was Eugene who came up with the solution. “I don’t care. No sweat,” he said. “Somebody’s going to pay.”

“Mothereffing right,” said Gus, and he slammed his fist into his palm again; he threw a right cross into space. “Those greaseball bastards.”

“Mothers,” said the Double J.

“Those mothereffing freaks,” said Gus. “We’re going to rip them apart.” And the man in the tweed suit, who had been watching, was forgotten. The Faces looked past him, hardly seemed to recognize his shape. “We’re going,” said the Double J.

“Where to? Odyssey?” asked the man.

“Hunting,” said Gus.

They moved back to the car, they clambered inside. Of course, the man in the suit wanted to go along, wanted to watch, but they wouldn’t let him. They said that he didn’t belong, that this was no night for tourists, spectators. He tried to argue but they would not hear him. So he was left behind on the sidewalk, and they traveled alone.

But just before the Dodge moved off, Vincent rolled down his window, looked out into the dark. His face was immobile, frozen, in the best style of Al Pacino. “What is it?” asked the man in the suit.

Vincent laughed, exulted. “Hombre, you will die,” he said, to no one in particular. And the Faces drove away, off into Saturday night. Horsemen. A posse seeking retribution, which was their due, their right. ■