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1

My name is Malcolm Pomerantz, and I'm an axe man, though not like those guys on that reality-TV show about loggers. Had I ever been *that* kind of axe man, I would long ago have cut off both feet or been crushed by a toppling tree. I've been clumsy all my life. I have managed not to stumble into an accidental death only because my profession—I'm a musician—doesn't require me to deal with power tools or treacherous terrain. Axe is musicians' slang for *instrument*, and my axe is a saxophone. I have been playing it since I was seven, when the sax and I were nearly the same size.

I'm fifty-nine now, two years older than Jonah, my best friend of half a century. I'm tall, and Jonah's not. I'm white; he's black. When I first met him in the summer of 1967, Jonah was ten and quick and graceful, a piano prodigy, and I was twelve and lumbered around like Lurch, the butler in *The Addams Family*, which had been big on TV the previous year. When I first heard him playing, he rocked the keyboard with Fats Domino's "I'm Gonna Be a Wheel Someday." In both our lives, 1967 proved to be ... unforgettable.

At my insistence, Jonah recently talked his life—or at least a strange and tumultuous portion of it—into a tape recorder, and his story became a book titled *The City*. There isn't any point in talking my life, because most of the interesting parts are what happened when I was hanging out with Jonah; he's already covered that territory. I do have one little experience to recount, however, a curious series of events that occurred a few weeks before I met him. Like his more engaging story, mine suggests that the world is a more mysterious place than it seems to be most of the time, when we're plodding along from breakfast to bedtime in a reassuringly familiar routine.

In those days, my sister, Amalia, was seventeen, five years older than I was, but we were as close as twins. Not that we looked alike. Blond hair in a ponytail, she was lithe and graceful, full of

such enthusiasm for life that both in sunshine and in shadow, she had a glow that I swear was not entirely a figment of her adoring little brother's imagination. On the other hand, I was a loose-limbed twelve-year-old with an Adam's apple that made me look as if I had swallowed a Granny Smith whole and had gotten it stuck in my throat. Although she didn't have The Neighbor (Short Story) (Kindle Single) much of a wardrobe, Amalia always wore the right thing for the occasion and looked as if she'd stepped out of a Sears catalog. With my round shoulders and arms as disproportionately long as those of an orangutan, I tried to disguise my awkward form by dressing as if I were an adult, though, being blind to fashion, I only called greater attention to my gangly nature: black wing tips but with white socks, dress pants hiked a couple of inches north of my navel, my short-sleeved spread-collar white shirt buttoned all the way to the throat.

At twelve, I didn't yet think much about girls. Considering my long, pale face and hound-dog eyes behind black-rimmed glasses with thick lenses, maybe I already knew that even through adulthood I'd never be a guy who had flocks of pretty girls in flight around him. I had the love of my sister and my saxophone, and that was enough.

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