

C. E. CHERRY

In Brooklyn

Henri Matisse.
Le jeune marin
[*Sailor Boy*].
Graphite on paper,
10 x 7¼ in.,
1906. Art Gallery
of Ontario, Toronto.
Gift of Sam and Ayala
Zacks, 1970.
Photograph AGO/
Sean Weaver.

IN BROOKLYN A BOY was measured by the distance in sewer plates he could hit a rubber ball, and only his very closest friend called him by his first name, and the saddest of sights was to see a building rising where once there had been a vacant lot.

To a boy in Brooklyn, too, the least esteemed of all things on earth was a girl. Frankie Keating believed sincerely that girls deserved the low regard in which they were held because, besides being crybabies and having little idea of what was fun, they were sneaky, two-faced,

and squealers, except for a few, like Elissa Mancini, who was as regular as any guy, and Isobel Sheerin who . . . well, that was one of the things about the whole business of girls that Frankie didn't understand at all.

First of all, despite the fact that every boy on Schaeffer Street would say he hated girls, each of them had a girlfriend. It did not mean the boy showed the least sign of interest in the girl or even ever spoke to her. In fact, likely neither of them had much to do with the choice. But some law dictated that every boy have a girl assigned to him and in some inscrutable way a pairing was decided and universally recognized. Why the system should exist, and how it could be active in the face of the general attitude towards girls, was beyond Frankie's comprehension.

Secondly, no matter how much other girls gave him a pain in the neck, however contrary it was to the way other guys felt, because none of them ever showed any sign of liking their appointed girls, Frankie knew that truly and with all his heart he liked Isobel Sheerin. He could make no sense out of it; he did not try. All he knew was that whenever he saw Isobel, or thought of her, with her skinny legs and blue dresses and a nose that was pointed and tiny, like a bird's beak really, but pretty, he was eaten up with longing for her.

Elissa Mancini was olive-skinned and had eyes like black agates and of all the kids on Schaeffer Street Frankie wished his personality was most like hers. Elissa was full of good spirits and open in every way and she never put on airs. When Elissa liked you she liked you without reservation, and she was as trustworthy as Lloyd himself. Frankie felt everyone in the world should be like Elissa. But it was Isobel he liked in a singular way, with her dainty walk and pointed nose and shades of blue.

Elissa called now to Frankie and Lloyd Keller, his best friend, as they came by her stoop before any others of the gang were in sight. She stood at the top of the steps with Isobel. Frankie would not look at Isobel, but he was aware she was wearing a crisply fresh dress with blue and white checks, and he could not help the tension she caused.

"Would you like to come over to my aunt's house on Decatur Street tonight?" Elissa said. "We can play Monopoly in the backyard and have soda and cookies. Just you two and Isobel and me."

In Brooklyn the early summer evenings, when it was cool and still light and the day was not yet done, were the most wonderful times of all. Baths had been taken after a hard day's play and newly laundered "good" clothes replaced play clothes. A boy relished the ring-a-levio soon to be played, and later maybe, when it was dark, there would be a gathering on a stoop and a game of Truth, Dare or Consequences (in which, in another of the anomalies of custom, girls were permit-

ted to participate). A boy, too, in the leisure before activities began, might indulge his dreams of playing for the Dodgers, or going on safari, or becoming a millionaire and building for all the kids baseball diamonds and curbs reserved for playing marbles, and none of the aspirations seemed unreasonable. He sensed the wonder of existence and all the world had to offer.

But never in all the summer evenings on Schaeffer Street had there been a prospect like the one now presented to Frankie. His bottled-up yearning for Isobel burst forth and swept him up in a torrent of desire to be with her in a little company of four under the arbor in Elissa's aunt's yard on Decatur Street.

Only . . .

Unbelievably . . .

Lloyd said to Elissa, "Nah! We got other things to do."

Frankie looked at Lloyd as if the words were incomprehensible.

"Come on," Elissa urged. "We'll have a nice time."

"Nah," Lloyd repeated. "We're going with the guys."

With the guys? To do what? Frankie raged. They had no special plans. And if they did, who cared about them? An evening with Isobel in privacy? More delighting joy was unimaginable. There'd be talk later, of course, but it did not concern him. Yet, as Lloyd moved on, Frankie fell in step. Even, incredibly, he said to Elissa:

"Yeah. We gotta go."

Frankie was certain he saw a flicker of disappointment in Elissa's Italian eyes. He felt he was wrapped like a mummy and wanted fiercely to burst the bandages and make Lloyd understand *he* wanted to go with Elissa and Isobel. But a force restrained him. He did not try to argue. Merely he strode along in silent fury, until, a way down the block, he blurted:

"Why didn't you want to go with them, Lloyd?"

Lloyd looked at him in astonishment. "You wanted to?"

Frankie held back for an instant, then spouted with a vehemence that laid open his anger, "Yes! I wanted to."

Lloyd stared. He said nothing, as if he were pondering a facet of his friend he had never seen before.

The two boys saw the gang gathered near the Irving Avenue corner.

"Oh, boy! Ring-a-leavio!" Lloyd said in anticipation.

It was Frankie's favorite evening-time game too, but instead of joining in savoring the prospect, he said to Lloyd:

"I gotta go. I just remembered I got something to do."

Lloyd looked at him in bafflement. Frankie hurried on ahead, past the knot of boys near the corner, hardly acknowledging them, and turned on Irving Avenue toward Decatur. It was a peculiar thing

for him to do in the eyes of the gang because none of them had any business that way. Out of their sight Frankie ran hard, up on his toes as he had heard champion sprinters did. The rest of the gang might not care about their girls, he asserted, but he was different. To circle the whole block and return to Elissa's stoop was a necessity. She and Isobel might no longer be there but he had to try. It was an affirmation that had to be made. Just before the turn into the opposite end of Schaeffer Street, he stopped running.

His walk, as he caught his breath, was grim. He could not see the girls when he was ten houses from Elissa's but they could be sitting on the doorstep hidden from view. He tried to appear not to be in a hurry, indeed to seem that he had no specific destination at all. It made no difference: when he came close enough he saw that Elissa and Isobel were gone.

He walked more and more slowly, staring at the red-painted stone steps as he passed, hoping still that in some way the girls were there, but the stoop and the doorway were deserted.

He thought now not of the mission to get to the stoop, but of the object. The sense of loss came upon him. It was as if, after all his longing, he could have had possession of Isobel, though he had no idea what possession might mean, and she had been ripped away from him. It hurt, truly and physically, and the nature of denied desire was so incomprehensible that, although boys in Brooklyn never cried, Frankie wanted to cry.

He saw Isobel in his mind, in the blue-and-white checked dress, laughing with Elissa and buying up property in Monopoly and, maybe, talking about him. Elissa's aunt would be bringing refreshments. But it was only Isobel he missed, and all he felt as he walked beyond Elissa's house was the misery and agony of deprivation.

Mechanically, he headed back to the gang. He became aware of the buildings and alleys of Schaeffer Street, and the wall of an apartment house where kingball was played, and a potsy court drawn on the sidewalk by the girls, but none of these came into focus. All of existence was remote. There was hardly thought even, until, out of a surging within him, Frankie said, almost aloud:

"I don't care about the rest of them. I like Isobel."

Saying it was the beginning of release. He took note of the score of a racket-ball game chalked on the asphalt. He glanced into the finished basement of the only single-family house on the block. Ache began to ease. For a moment he felt a kind of meanness, then a calm. The great protector of the young, the ability to forget, drew its mantle over him.

Minutes later the fastest and trickiest ring-a-leavio player on Schaeffer Street was speeding down an alley headed for the garages

behind the houses, oblivious of the arbor in a certain backyard, and unaware of the existence of Isobel Sheerin and skinny legs and a tiny nose and the color blue.

But on another summer evening, when all of the Schaeffer Street gang were at a birthday party and, though girls were never considered part of the gang, they were extended for the occasion temporary privilege of lower-grade membership, an extraordinary game called Post Office had been initiated, and Frankie found himself summoned to a bedroom where Isobel Sheerin waited for him.

He came into the dimly lit room, his heart accelerating. He made himself tough, to conceal his apprehension, but there was only tenderness in his disposition. It stunned him to see Isobel standing alone, only for him, skinny and extravagantly pretty in a blue satin dress. She averted her eyes, not in rejection of him, only in modesty.

He came close to her, slightly taller than she. He would have to bend to kiss her. To kiss Isobel.

He was intoxicated with the anticipation of it. It did not bother him that he did not know which way to tilt his head. At the last moment she looked at him, silent still. The pink of her face was excruciating, and the tiny nose, and her scent was fresh and flower-like and totally beyond his experience.

He touched with his lips *hers*, they were thin and cool and still, for only an instant. Thrill coursed in him. He was electrified. In a fleeting millisecond he sensed Paradise. There was unlocked to him for evermore, although he did not know it, entrance to the supreme area of life.

That was what it was, to kiss Isobel Sheerin, who wore a shiny blue dress and was quiet and birdlike and only for him, in a party game in Brooklyn when he was eleven.

Brought up in Brooklyn, CHARLES CHERRY served on a submarine in WWII before going on to Yale and Columbia. His output of fiction, articles, and longer nonfiction has been mixed with a business career that took him to many countries in Europe, Africa, and Asia. He lives now in Florida, where he is at work on his fourth novel.