

***THE BOBS***  
by George Malko

"Enough asking," Johnny Luddin's father announced one day, pushed his chair back from the lunch table almost angrily, and took his ten-year-old son to ride on The Bobs, the gigantic roller-coaster located in Chicago's old amusement park, Riverview. Before the ride had even ended Pyotr Mikhailovitch suggested they do it again. After all Johnny's begging, it was truly an amazing offer. He could barely nod. It was during this next ride, wilder and more heart-pounding than the first, that his father introduced the subject of certain fundamental and immutable laws of physics.

Father and son rode five times. By their fourth trip neither held on to the retaining bar. Behind them the air was torn with people's shrieks and whoops of panicked hilarity. But in the first seat of the first car, Johnny and his father sat, hands free, Pyotr Mikhailovitch using his as he discoursed on the particular physical principles which kept them both securely in their seats. It was a calm dissertation, the calm informed by scholarship and not at all forced, Pyotr Mikhailovitch's eyes alive with a look of small diversion. This very calm, almost a defiance of everything, accompanied as it was by the specific details his father imparted, began to thrill Johnny far more than their ride even as they rose higher and higher and then, as they had before, suddenly dropped into an absolute abyss which Johnny still felt, in that moment of dropping, had no bottom. Sitting next to his father, he was almost unafraid.

In Chicago's cavernous air terminal waiting for his connecting flight to Tucson, Johnny suddenly experienced a piercing vision of the sheer majesty of his father's ability to survive, and its utter futility. Chicago was the only place Pyotr Mikhailovitch had been able to find work once the family was safely arrived in the U.S. "We all

teach," he would say, "all of us. To teach, thank the Lord, is something we are able to do. Temporarily ..." That he had never railed against the circumstance forced upon him hurt Johnny. He wanted Pyotr Mikhailovitch Ludinev's integrity and grace to illuminate him in a blaze of dazzling adulation. Instead, his father was not simply dismissed, he was ignored. Johnny Luddin truly hated Chicago.

When his flight was called Johnny hurried to get on, desperate to sit down, close his eyes and forget. The plane was still climbing when he felt himself sinking, heavy tendrils of sleep enveloping him, dragging him down, entangling him in murky webs of fantasy. And nightmare. He saw his father, and he was weeping. It was so unlike Pyotr Mikhailovitch. He must have been weeping because of something Johnny had done. Johnny cried out, but his cries, remorseful and anguished, were unheard. He saw himself appear, saw himself begging his father to tell him what he had done. Then he began to weep, too. He cried bitterly, so abjectly helpless that something stronger, an actual sense of himself in this place, began to tug at him. It hauled him up, from the deep, up and up, to a gray surface through which he burst with a gasp of pain.

It certainly had nothing to do with Shmulke, not Shmulke. Little Shmulke Steinman. Grown up now, Arizona's premier gynecologist. Shmulke, who had taught Johnny about Judaism and circle-jerks, who explained how to tell when a girl was wearing falsies, the first one in the crowd to pop his cherry, swaggering around the next day proclaiming, "The moment she touched my dick, actually touched it, I knew I had her." Shmulke, the son-of-a-gun, all decked out in nifty slacks and driving a 450S Mercedes. "I am speechless," Johnny said as the two stood at the arrival gate in Tucson and gripped each other's shoulders. "Shmulke, Sam, you look wonderful!"

"Feel wonderful," Shmul confirmed and stepped back to thump his prominent gut. "Hard as a rock. Come on, let's go by the hospital, you make rounds with me."

Johnny's laugh of disbelief protested before he did. "Are you kidding?"

"I'm already late. Don't worry about it, I'll tell them you're a specialist, out from New York."

"For Christ's sake," Johnny said, giddy with shock. "Look at the way I look!" He was wearing canvas work pants, a faded denim shirt, and scuffed Dunham hiking boots.

"What do they know?" Dr. Samuel Steinman observed with a gesture.

So Johnny tagged along bravely and watched Shmul examine healing cuts and incisions, running a finger along furrowed ridges of white scarred flesh as he offered positive, even jovial commentary to women who recently had, as Shmulke put it between rooms, "A lot of rusty plumbing overhauled." Johnny half-expected the good doctor to chuck them under their pendulous breasts and force coquettish blushes to their cheeks. They would adore it, Johnny was certain after watching the way his childhood pal handled himself.

"This is Dr. Luddin, from New York," Shmulke announced. "I've called him in to confirm my findings." A quick glance over at Johnny. "Positive, wouldn't you say, Doctor?"

"Very," Johnny said, nodding with what he hoped was proper solemnity.

"My son is in New York," the old woman in the bed croaked. "By Columbia there. He's a doctor, too. Not like this one, though." She clutched Shmul gratefully. "An angel of mercies, this one."

Back out in the hall Shmulke shook off the old woman's gratitude. "Her son's some kind of wheel back East. Neurology. My seeing her is, like, reciprocal."

"You mean if you have a brain tumor while you're in New York, he'll take care of you."

"If you want to look at it that way," Shmul said. "Christ, pray it doesn't happen. The guy's hopeless on diagnostics. A *putz*. You know, a prick."

"I know what a *putz* is, Shmulke. It wasn't me got us thrown out of Anshe Sholom for shooting baskets on Friday night."

Shmulke's professional gaze went soft with nostalgia. "Holy shit, remember? They even called the cops. Wow, I'd completely forgotten." They were walking across the baked parking lot to the Mercedes. "You're not married yet, are you?"

"Nope," Johnny said.

"Don't wait too long." Shmulke reached over to grip Johnny's arm with almost grim conviction. "A family is everything." Shmulke had married the Sweetheart of Gamma Kappa Gamma, a girls' sorority active at Chicago's Hyde Park High School. They already had three children, a boy and twin girls. Shmulke had recently bought a ranch in the Coronado foothills. "Without mine," he intoned, "I'd be nothing."

"I admire that," Johnny said sincerely.

"The support," Shmulke began. "You have no idea how they've stood by me. Debra is an extraordinary woman. Always has been. I mean, she was absolutely remarkable when this business with--" he stopped himself and glanced over at Johnny. "What the hell, you're family. You're a *goy*," he qualified with a small laugh for his own benefit, "but you are family."

"That's how I think of myself," Johnny said, curious to know what Shmulke had started to confess so solemnly. "I assumed that's why you invited me to stay at Rancho Steinman."

"Rancho La Mancha," Shmulke corrected. "There's a huge Spanish influence around here and it's our responsibility to perpetuate the heritage."

"You were saying something about how remarkable Debra is," Johnny prompted. He had never met her. In photographs she came across as a full-breasted, leggy woman, with a lot of fine teeth displayed beneath two tiny nostrils set in an architecturally flawless nose.

Shmulke sighed, burdened, contrite. "I got involved with a nurse." Johnny

looked over at him. "Don't even ask how it started. We had drinks one night, and I fucked her."

"That doesn't sound like much of an involvement." Johnny had expected, found himself hoping, for more.

"Well, it was terrific," Shmulke conceded, "so I fucked her again. But so what?" He was looking even more abject, his shoulders sagging.

"Debra found out," Johnny ventured.

"My family stood by me through the whole ugly mess," Shmulke announced with something bordering on proud defiance.

"Stood by you? Why would they have to 'stand' by you?"

"My luck, her father's Lieutenant Governor of the state. A very powerful Southwest family. Almost a dynasty."

"You always knew how to pick them." They both laughed, but something about Shmulke's post-coital reformation was annoying.

"And Catholic," Shmulke added. "My first one, as a matter of fact."

"First and only," Johnny said.

"Amen," Shmulke agreed.

"And your entire family knew about it?"

"Yep."

"Even the twins?"

"Be serious," Shmulke chided. "Hey, look, the main gate."

Johnny had not been paying much attention to where they were going and turned. There actually was a Main Gate, with a low red brick stockade stretching off in either direction. Before Johnny could react with unfeigned awe, Shmulke pressed a button below the steering wheel and the gate swung open and they drove through it, up a driveway that wound interminably past giant saguaro and cholla and mesquite. Something scurried across the road in front

of them and when Johnny pointed his friend, nodding, said, "Quail. All over the place. And road runners. The palm trees are imported. The prickly pear is local. Here's the house."

It was the biggest and reddest adobe-style house Johnny had ever seen. There was a mission bell hanging over the front door, and what looked like broken rocks laid out all over the roof. "It's a palace!" he exclaimed, genuinely shaken.

"Some guys, they join country clubs," Shmul declared so seriously that Johnny pulled his gaze away from the house to listen, "play tennis, sail big boats, collect things. For me—," he gestured at the mansion as if offering up a platter on which it sat, "this is my toy." He pressed another button and a garage door appeared magically, gliding up to disappear into the roof. Shmul rolled the car in next to a gleaming Jeep Cherokee. "Debra's," he said.

"The boy drive?" Johnny ventured, knowing full well his friend's son was only nine.

"An off-the-road Kawasaki." Shmul waved again, a good-bye pass of the hand indicating some land mass hidden beyond the house. "Back there."

"The south forty," Johnny could not help saying.

"West," Shmul corrected, then pointed. "South is that way. We came from there. You guys," he laughed heartily. "No sense of direction. All you live and breathe is Uptown, Downtown."

"No street," Johnny said with a hard grin, "compares with Mott Street in July, Shmul. Take my word for it."

"You can have it. New York, I mean."

"Thank you."

"You know what I mean. Come on in, wet the whistle."

Shmulke's Debra was austerely provocative in a haltered floor-length hostess gown, her bra-less breasts low but curving fully, her nipples dimpling out the fabric.

Schmul made the introductions. "Here he is. What did I tell you? Lookit the outfit, Deb'." Johnny was trying not to stare at her. "Canvas pants, yet. *Canvas*." Delighted with himself for having discovered an apparent allegory, Shmul thumped her on the back, knocking her towards Johnny, making her bend and forcing her free-hanging breasts into more marvelous profile. "Painters paint *on* canvas and this *shmugeig* wears it!" He abandoned the two of them to each other and skipped off the elevated foyer to the living room's shag-covered level. "What do you drink?"

"Tequila," Johnny said, casually easing his gaze away from Debra—Deb. "And lime. On the rocks."

"Why that is what we drink, too," she said brightening like a bulb.

"It's a small world," Johnny murmured, hoping his expression was semi-serious, with a suggestion of the brooding animation of an artist.

"Sam told me so much about you," she said and to Johnny's delight hospitably linked arms with him to walk down to where Shmul was cracking ice out of trays. "I hope you feel at home with us."

"Thank you," Johnny said as his elbow brushed against something firm yet giving. "I already do."

While Johnny and Shmul manfully knocked back their tequila, Debra made sherry out of hers, sipping cautiously, shot glass held prettily. "What do you chase with?" Shmul asked.

"Another," Johnny said.

"Tough talk," Shmul said, gestured recklessly, and refilled both their glasses. "What the hell, the Kalodny ovaries'll never know."

"Sam operates in the morning," Debra explained and made a pretty face. "Whoops, this *is* strong."

"Have some beer," Johnny suggested.

"Well, all right."

"What are you trying to do, get her loaded?" Shmul asked, already uncapping a bottle of beer.

"I'll drink it," Johnny said.

"I want it," Debra said and reached past Johnny for it.

"So what the hell *are* you doing here?" Shmul asked. "I sure as hell can't figure it out. Deb's been going through the paper every day looking for some sort of announcement and there's been nothing."

"There's no reason for there to be an announcement."

"But they brought you all this way to direct a play," Debra said.

Johnny shook his head. "I'm running a director's workshop for the Graduate School's M.F.A. program. That's all."

"Oh," Debra said. "Like teaching."

"I teach," Johnny said. "I direct, but I teach, too."

"I should teach," Shmul said thoughtfully. "I should teach, Deb. I should teach."

"When?" she said lightly. "You barely have time to yourself now." She went over and touched his arm. "Don't teach."

"All right, all right," Shmul said generously. "I won't. Is that all right with you, Johnny?"

They continued drinking while Asturia, the maid, prepared dinner for the children and guacamole for them. The children were brought in and introduced one at a time. "Roland, this is Johnny Luddin and Daddy knew him since before they were your age. And the twins! Felice and Tamar." The boy limply accepted Johnny's hand while the little girls watched in solemn silence.

"They're as different as night and day," Shmul declared after they left.

"Medically, I can tell you thousands of reasons why they're alike, but then that old imponderable sticks its nose into things and Bang! cold facts go out the window."

"Which imponderable is that, Doc?" Johnny asked.



"Human behavior," Shmul pronounced.

"You mean they behave differently even though they're twins, Doc?"

"You got it, kiddo."

"Why do they do that, Doc?"

"What do you keep calling me 'Doc' for?"

"I get a kick out of it," Johnny said. "It's so ... substantial. You, this palace, the pool out there by the stables, the kids ... Shmul, you're in The Big Time."

"I suppose you can say that," Shmul acknowledged with faint modesty. "You want me to call you 'Direct?'"

"Oh, that is funny," Debra said and began laughing. Affected by her gaiety, Johnny began to laugh, too.

"So, Direct, how come you're not famous yet?" Shmul asked pleasantly.

"Give me time."

"I'm famous," Shmul said. "In certain circles."

"The Big Time," Johnny agreed.

Shmul turned to his wife. "Johnny's father used to be famous in Russia."

She looked over at Johnny for confirmation. He stopped laughing. "Sort of famous."

"What was he doing in Russia?" she asked.

"He was living there. He was Russian."

"I told you, remember?" Shmul said to her. "He wrote movies. They used to call Johnny 'Vanny' or something. Can you believe it?"

"*Vanya*," Johnny said. "That's my name."

"Yeah," Shmul said with a wave of his hand and looked at his wife. "Johnny used to live in Hollywood."

"My," Debra said.

"You should get some of your dad's movies on video tape," Shmul said and

gestured towards another part of the house. "I've got the works in the den—laser, VCR. We could look at them. Christ, wouldn't that be great?"

Johnny nodded noncommittally.

"Remind me some of the ones he worked on," Shmul said.

"There were only a few," Johnny said.

"Come on, I remember you used to tell me he worked on tons." Shmul turned to Debra. "Even I remember some of the people who came to see his dad. Famous people—" his gaze swung back to Johnny. "Right?"

"Some of them."

"Who?" Debra asked eagerly. "Movie stars?"

"No."

"Who were they?" She was looking at her husband. "Did you recognize any of them?"

"Well, no."

"But you just said they were famous."

"Johnny kept telling me they were."

"Nobody was *famous*-famous," Johnny explained. "They were--" He was looking at Debra and stopped.

"Nobody I'd know, you mean." Her expression had gone flat. For a moment she looked drunk.

"That's not what I mean," Johnny said. "They were directors. A few writers. It was a long time ago."

"We were kids," Shmul said with inspired warmth.

Johnny stared at his old pal and remembered how much Shmul had hated Johnny's school. He had been jealous and Johnny revelled in it. Here he was going to this *exclusive* high school, shoulder to shoulder with fine lads who at fifteen played gin rummy with the elan of Miami poolside barracudas, and Shmulke Steinman was

at the district public high school, joining fraternities, black-balling people. Johnny had tried to imagine ceremonies replete with cans of paint, coarse brushes, and rudely exposed genitals. And a thick stubby paddle with a snubbed handle. "You hit them on the ass with this?" Johnny had once said with awe. "Jesus..."

"Sometimes," Shmul had answered and made himself look cunning and wise. He refused to reveal any of the initiation rites. Flatly. "Don't even mention it," he said with a final two-handed gesture that was tough, very worldly.

So naturally Johnny made his own school out to be much too mature to care about pounding some mottle-faced kid until tears squirted out of his eyes because being able to take it, or being blindfolded and then spoon-fed warm plaster while the other guys wondered aloud what Herbie Rapaport had done with the dehydrated shit his father used at work--all these antics were not for Johnny and his crowd.

Where were those guys now, what had happened to them? Johnny didn't know, he didn't care. Whereas Shmul— Shmul groaned and Johnny heard him mutter, "Water the succulents." He pushed himself to his feet and staggered past Johnny and Debra, out the door to the patio where he stood weaving side to side, getting his bearings.

"His hobby," Debra explained. "I'll bet you never thought of him with a green thumb."

"Nothing surprises me any more," Johnny said.

"He's a wonderful doctor," Debra said, eyes glowing with pride. "People fight to see him. He's absolutely ..." She trailed off, able only to add a gesture which was clearly inadequate.

"Exclusive?"

Debra considered the word, brightened, and then nodded. "Yes." She looked very satisfied and stood up decisively. "I am going to make us some dinner. What do you think about that?" She turned and went into the kitchen.

Remembering Chicago, high school, his father, was annoying, and painful. Johnny got up to get himself another drink and realized he needed to go to the bathroom. He found one upstairs and when he came back down to the kitchen Debra said, "Sam's sorry he missed you but he really had to go to bed. He has to operate in the morning. He'll see you later in the afternoon."

"How was he feeling?"

"He can get by on very little sleep." She slid a steak under the broiler. "I don't know how he manages."

"He was bombed."

"By six tomorrow morning he could cut a diamond, if he had to."

"I'm sure Mrs. Kalodny will be grateful."

"Who is Mrs. Kalodny?"

"Nobody important. Where's the tequila? Where's your glass?"

"I shouldn't," Debra said and handed both to him.

It was over the steak and a second cold beer that Johnny realized he was seriously considering making a pass at her. It wasn't that with Shmul gone they had practically nothing to talk about. It was something about Shmul's ludicrous confession in the car, his, "—it was terrific so I fucked her again." That was no confession. The son of a bitch was bragging. Still bragging. He did not want Johnny to commiserate, he wanted to be envied. The mansion, his forgiving brood and spouse, and the tragedy of his life was having bedded—*shutted* was the way Shmul would have put it if he hadn't established that mood of remorse—some sweet nurse. How terrible could it be, Johnny wondered as boozy logic took over, to put a sophisticated make on his pal's good-looking wife? The possibility inspired him to freshen the conversation in the hope it might enliven the situation, hot things up. What he did, convinced he was acting both in friendship and with a sudden insight that told him Debra would recognize his admirable sensitivity, was mention that Shmul had told

him all about his unfortunate dalliance.

Debra flushed, but said nothing.

"You do know what I'm talking about, don't you?" Johnny pressed. The look in her eyes only made him more determined to see what he could provoke.

"Of course I know what you're talking about."

"It wasn't that long ago," Johnny observed discreetly, watching her.

"I remember everything." Her tone was very polite. "And it hurt me. It still does, if I think about it. But the past is over," she added firmly.

"I wonder why he told me about it?" Johnny said. "He told me in detail."

"You said yourself it was to show you how close we all are."

"Do you really think so?" Johnny asked rhetorically, and shook his head. "I don't know."

"What do you mean?"

"Come on, Debra. We can be honest, you and I, with each other."

"We are," she said.

"Let's be even more honest."

Debra forced her eyes away from Johnny's gaze. "I'll just leave the dishes and go to bed," she said and got up from the table. "Don't feel you have to turn in. Make yourself at home."

Blithely undaunted at finding himself abruptly abandoned, Johnny wandered the house. He wanted to get some kind of a fix on the place, the sink-in-to-your-ankles carpets and the brute-heavy furniture. Nothing was making much sense so he went out onto the patio. This was much better. The night sky was clear, the stars everywhere. The air was warm. There was a dry smell on the wind. Johnny inhaled, giving it chest and shoulders and even a little spreading of the arms, and walked over to the swimming pool. He sat down and looked around. What did it feel like to command such a variety of possessions? They belonged to Shmul, but did he

*appreciate* them? Johnny was looking for doubts. Sure, they were both grown up now, but it was Johnny who had *evolved*, become someone clearly identifiable, quite cosmopolitan. What he felt he now possessed was that certain genuine, even practical advantage of being the son of a man whose means fell short of his tastes. Johnny had grown up surrounded by people damned to failure. They floated, truncated identities, dreaming in their mother tongue while mastering new languages with fluent, even reckless assurance. The French word—Johnny remembered hearing it pronounced with careless elegance—was better. *Depaysé*. Without a country. "But that is so precise!" an aging character actor had declared at their dinner table one evening during the war when Johnny was five. "*Ex-patria* is too Latin. The French see the figure as something which must wander, without a home. And," the actor had added quietly, "they understood that much of this wandering is aimless." What they also knew were the names of all that was usually just beyond reach--not brand names, but expressions of excellence: British woolens, Scottish tweeds, French silks, Egyptian lawn cotton, Swiss chronometers, sherry only *de la Frontera*. As if to prove the point, Johnny's attention was drawn to an oleander blossom, its color washed paler rose by the lights dancing back up from the pool. Who else could look at it right now, at this point, in this way? Only one of us, Johnny thought, took off his clothes, and dove noisily into the pool. The water was comfortably warm; it barely crossed his mind it was probably heated.

Debra's appearance was a surprise. Her fitting dressing gown cinched tightly about her waist even more so. Johnny was tempting himself to believe she had come to join him. "I would like to talk to you," she said.

Jesus, I was right, he thought, and said, "This water is wonderful. Come on in."

Debra coldly ignored the invitation. "My husband is an important member of the community."

What was she talking about? "Let me hop out there," Johnny offered and

reached for the edge of the pool. "We can talk more comfortably."

"Stay where you are. You haven't got a bathing suit on."

"I don't mind," Johnny said and moved closer.

"I do," she said and took a nervous step back.

"Don't go, don't go," Johnny said quickly, thinking, slow down, for Christ's sake. Shift into low, change the subject, just get past her reserve.

"I'm not," she replied. "I'll tell you what I wanted to say, then you can swim all you want."

Johnny gave her what he thought was his best conciliatory grin. "So what did you want to say?"

"You're taking advantage of his friendship."

"Shmul's?" Johnny said, thinking, what's the catch? because it felt like a trick question.

"You're playing on his loyalty."

Johnny's grin faded and he shook his head. "I don't get that, not at all."

"You are. Just because he told you something."

"What am I doing that's so wrong?" Johnny said, any thought of seduction evaporating like the soft steaming water around him.

"Don't call him Shmul," Debra said. "He hates it. He tolerates it, of course. It was cute. But even his mother calls him Samuel now."

"I see," Johnny said. He mulled this over, lifting his legs off the pool's bottom to tread water. He stopped for a moment and let himself sink slowly until the water bathed his face. He stood up, rose with water dripping off of him. "Well, Deb', why not I call him Dr. Steinman?"

Cool and polite, the good doctor's wife said, "Samuel is fine."

Early the next day, Johnny took a room at the local Ramada Inn and stayed

there until the workshop was finished. There was one message that Dr. Steinman had called but Johnny didn't return it. As he left for the airport he was handed a note. It was from Debra, hand-written on blue personal stationery with brown-burnt edging. She wrote to say Shmul was too upset to say anything but she felt it her duty to let Johnny know his callous behavior, snubbing someone with whom he grew up, was disgraceful. Maybe it was accepted in New York, but in Tucson, Arizona, friends were truly friends. Underlined. Johnny had not finished when the young desk clerk said, "Nice shot of you in the paper last night, Mr. Luddin."

Johnny looked over at the paper the clerk held. On the front page of the second section was a picture of Johnny shaking hands with the University's Chancellor. The caption said something about prominent New York theater director John Luddin being feted by community leaders to celebrate the remarkable success of his workshops at the Graduate School of the Arts. Behind Johnny stood a Dr. Lenson, his hand resting on Johnny's shoulder. The man had approached Johnny early on and asked if he had any friends in Tucson. "Not really," Johnny had answered. Lenson had smiled broadly and said, "We'll soon take care of that." During the luncheon he took it upon himself to introduce as many people as possible to Johnny.

Johnny looked back at Debra's note. "The fact that Maurice Lenson is a colleague of Samuel's only makes what you've done hurt more. You are a snob, you smug bastard."

At the airport, waiting for his flight home, Johnny dug around in his pockets and found the number he was looking for. When a secretary answered, Johnny said, "This is John Luddin. Is he in?" A moment later Shmul came on the line.

"Where are you?" he asked, suspicious.

"At the airport. Shmul, I'm sorry."



"There's nothing to be sorry about." From his voice Johnny knew there was.

"Sure there is," Johnny said. "Would you rather have me call you Sam? If you do, I will."

"It's up to you."

"No," Johnny insisted. "Tell me. Shmul is your name."

"So is Sam."

"No, it isn't. Do you know what my name is?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You said it yourself. At your place. What my parents used to call me."

"You mean 'Vanny'?"

"My full name is *Ivan Petrovitch Ludinev*."

Shmul laughed uneasily. "Where the hell did you get that?"

"It's who I am," Johnny said.

"It's some name," Shmul acknowledged.

"Shmul," Johnny said, "on the way to Arizona, I had to change planes in Chicago. Do you ever think of Chicago?"

"No."

"Do you ever think of Riverview? The Bobs?"

"The roller coaster?" Johnny heard his boyhood friend laugh with sudden recognition. "The Bobs—Jesus! Your dad used to take you on that. I went with you once."

"You did?" Johnny said, amazed.

"I was scared shitless and got the hell off after the first time. But you and your dad kept riding it, over and over." Shmul laughed again, more easily. "Jesus, The Bobs," he repeated and his voice softened with warmth. "The two of you, over and over."

"You remember that?" Johnny asked.

"Hey, I remember everything. This is Shmulke Steinman talking."