

PEARLS AND KNOTS
(17 Short Stories)

BY

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A Thesis submitted to
The Faculty of Graduate Studies
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, Manitoba

Defense: August 8, 2005

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395 Wellington Street
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PEARLS AND KNOTS
(17 Short Stories)

BY

ALEXANDER MATTHEW LICKER

**A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University of
Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirement of the degree
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Master of Arts**

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Abstract:

PEARLS AND KNOTS - 17 short stories. Using light and dreams, these short stories seek to find ways by which to preserve the essential preciousness of memories and experiences. Highly influenced by Roth, Gogol and Gallant, and by film and renaissance art, "Pearls and Knots" is an exploration space and of time, of projection and of preservation. The stories function as a strange, but harmonious cycle, useful to partially-agnostic romantics and to skeptical believers alike. Above all, the stories in "Pearls and Knots" are a different and familiar sensation, and bookmark the transparency between dreaming and waking.

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Chloe from 7 to 9

1

I'm waiting. Still waiting. I'm waiting.

2

Chloe gets the call, changes and bounds from the house. It is July, full, humid, green and resonant with the muted, far-off noise of horns and sirens, then the sound of a dog barking metronomically. The sun is falling slowly, a long night, five hours between set and rise. A trio of sun-browned children are screaming and chasing each other. Two little boys pin a little girl and empty a bucket of water over her, and she, enraged and anointed, lashes out, and spins and slips into the mud she has made. The boys run down the block, laughing, "No-tits is covered with shit!" A portly woman in a flower print dress makes a threatening gesture with her fist, and the boys bow their heads, flushed, and solemnly march through the screen door she holds open. All this as Chloe, her step slowed, descends from the porch. The myopic professor across the street pushes his glasses up the bridge of his long nose, looks up, as he has done for a decade, and is sure he has never seen her so beautiful. He watches Chloe stare at the little girl, and as she turns her head, he lowers his eyes to the book, the words all divine nonsense.

3

Brushing herself off, swallowing a sob, the little girl follows Chloe with her eyes, memorizing her body, cataloging the exaggerated parts that will be, if not the next summer, then the one after, her own. She smiles, despite herself, and decides that she wants a teal-green tank top and a canvas skirt. "Maria!" her Aunt screams, holding one of her cousins expertly by the ear, "Maria! Come here now, these boys has something to say to you." Maria smiles again, wiser, and watches Chloe's figure disappear down the reddened, glassy street.

4

Reaching the corner of Palmerston and Harbord, the steady traffic saccharine-slow, the pavement warm beneath her flip-flops, she surveys the ramshackle apartment diagonal, and catches the eyes of a young man elegantly smoking, waving at her from his narrow third-floor window. She waves back. Whistles and a muffled proposition speed by her as an ancient Portuguese man, tanned and leathery, brings up phlegm and spits at the street. A ruffled, sun-dazed seagull swoops down, squawks, and flies off again. She rounds the corner and heads down Markham. On the steps of the schul, several teenage Jews in black suits and skull-caps fall silent as she passes, and she smiles at them. It occurs to her that instead of seeming overdressed and hot, the boys are calm and entitled. She loves it.

5

At Ulster Chloe turns left, crosses Bathurst, and contemplates getting a popsicle from the cornerstore. All the browns and whites of Toronto are livid, rose and glowing. Sunset picks out phosphorescents from otherwise dull brick houses, brings every land-locked street to the seaside. I could be in Cadiz, she thinks, but I'm not. She sits on the bench in front of the Laundromat, listens to the churning machines and feels summer lay heavily on her warm skin. A parade of couples, their hands entwined, pass by, walking in step. In their wake one of the guilty boys, dark head bowed, his fists clenched and face streaked with tears, violently sucking a popsicle, dragging his feet, walks by. Chloe can't keep herself from smiling and calling out, "Hey!" Suddenly revived, he smiles back, the protean intimation of a man, "Hey to you too!" and continues on his way, striding.

6

"Hello there"

"Hello"

"Where is your dog?"

"He passed away this winter"

"I'm sorry to hear that"

"We had him put down"

"How old was he?"

"30 years"

"No!?"

"No really, 30 years"

“That’s a very old dog”

“Yes he was”

“He was a very nice dog”

“He was”

“Where is your dog?”

“Hiding”

“I’m sorry to hear that”

7

The last flecks of red are turning to yellowish black and couple of brighter stars squint through. From behind the dark greenery that blinds the view, Chloe can still pick out some of the taller downtown buildings, idle, pulsating. A cavalcade of teenagers in their cars, bass rumbling, drive by, and a raccoon bursts from the hedge and scurries by her, making her jump and shiver. Chloe watches its loping, silverine body reach the edge of the park. The raccoon swings its head around, and stares at her with a pleadingly calm look of recognition. She turns down Wells Hill Road and there he is again. Chloe smiles at him and he bolts into the darkness, triumphant.

8

Gavin, taciturn and impossible when she arrives, is now invigorated and prosaic. And he does look good, Chloe thinks, annoying, but good.

“Botticelli's Venus was the first comic muse,” he suddenly announces, bending into

the violet streetlight that comes through the basement window.

“Garbage”

“Hmmm”

Cut down to size, he crawls back into bed, and they struggle for a moment to find who rests on whom.

“Your head is crushing me,” she giggles.

“Lots of brains”

He is an enormous baby, asleep within seconds.

“Gavin”

“Gavin!”

“What?”

“Look at me”

He turns over obediently.

“Chloe, I'm sleeping, what do you want?”

“If cats have nine lives, how many do dogs have?”

“Why are you asking me this?”

“Just answer”

“Millions. They are man's best friend,” he grumbles.

“Good, you may return to your loud snoring.”

He grunts, bites her, tosses twice, snorts and falls asleep. She watches the iodine leaves rustle, listens to the leaking tap and tickles Gavin, but he does not stir.

The following morning, as she approaches her house she sees a raccoon, truant from the night, crossing her yard, "Hey you there!" she calls, laughing. The raccoon rolls over, squints and then crawls underneath the porch. Exhausted and happy, Chloe makes coffee, sings to herself and changes. She checks the clock. 9. Christ.

10

The professor, squinting at the collection of long, vague words, sighs, slams the book shut and closes his eyes, listening for her. Watching Chloe descend the stairs, bathed in light, Maria, wearing a green tube top filled with water balloons, turns on her cousins, shaking her chest.

"That's disgusting"

"You've got nothing there"

"You are a sex pervert, I'm telling your mother"

Chloe smiles at Maria, who shrugs.

"What are you looking at, you dogs?!"

The boys laugh, embarrassed and delighted.

Pearls

Someone actually told Vera, hands on hers, "You are like a mother to all of us too," before the lights flicked on, and guests made excuses to go. Bleary eyed, they downed their drinks quickly and some shoved beer in their pockets and filled their hands with left-over hors d'oeuvres.

The girl got sick in the washroom, and the tips of her red hair fell in the bowl. There was a light knock on the door: "Sandra? Sandra?" Close, she thought. She stood up on weak legs and tumbled into a rack, tossing shaving equipment around the room. On the floor she closed her eyes. The rapping on the door was getting louder, and there was a pain in her palm that shot down her arm. She brought herself up, and supported her weight by placing her hands on either side of the shell-shaped sink.

"Sandra? Sandra, come out now, everyone has gone home."

Sandra? Who is Sandra?

"I'm Venus" she said, "Venus." She looked at her face in the mirror. Lipstick was all over her cheeks and now more as she tried to clean it off.

"Venus, I'm sorry, Venus, please unlock the door, everyone has gone home."

She heard a woman's voice ask, "Do you know this girl?"

Turning around and hoisting herself up she managed to get her rear into the sink. She stared at the little painting in front of her, made up of some streaks and splotches and cut-out words barricading a cluster of what looked like silver drops or pearls.

"Venus, please, unlock the door," the woman's voice pleaded.

"Can't she just stay in there if she wants to?" someone else asked.

"I can't leave her in there."

“Why not? We have two other washrooms!”

“Shh” Venus said, softly, “Shh.”

“What was that?”

“Just a second,” Venus answered, loosening the knob. The door opened and she saw three heads, two men who seemed to be the same person and a third woman who was not.

“Are you ok?” the men asked together, “Poor girl, god,” one said.

“I’m fine” she whispered, “I’m not poor.”

“We have to get her out of the sink,” the woman said. “She is really bleeding.”

“I’m going to be sick,” one of the men said, and then Venus, whose eyes were closed by then, smiled and thought: Why? Why would you be sick?

The girl didn't apologize, say how embarrassed she was or worry about getting blood on the seat. And why should she? It put them all at ease. Vera drove, Mike and Sohrab in the row behind, looking back on the girl, who lay across the third row of the van, underneath the slanted back window. She said softly: “I don't get it”

“Get what?”

“How it works”

“Oh” said Sohrab, “You mean us?”

“Yes” she whispered.

“Well, Mike and I are together, and Vera lives with us”

“But not *with* you?”

“No, not that way”

Vera smiled, looking in the rear view mirror. No one asked so pointedly. She wanted

to tell the girl how they had met, on what beach and why, but it seemed obvious. She didn't want the car ride to end. The men turned forward and looked out their windows, watched the inky leaves pass by. They rolled the windows down, let the hot night pour in, something they never did.

"Does it hurt, Venus?" Vera asked.

"No, I'm ok," said the small voice from the back.

They went over the Verrazano Narrows Bridge, past the Cloisters, Inwood, Washington Heights, then block after block of Harlem to their right. Looking up through the slanted back window, Venus counted two or three breaths to brick and one to black sky, quiet and full. The three adults were used to questioning everyone like potential clients. They even knew how to talk to children, but they said nothing to Venus.

Vera felt her heart drop as Mt. Sinai came into sight.

"Venus, we are here now, will you be able to walk or do you want help?"

Mike and Sohrab each took an arm at the elbow and shoulder, and lightly raised her from the van, gently bringing her to her feet. Mike's eyes were watering. Vera put her hand on the girl's lower back. The sound in the parking lot was hushed. They brought her through the automatic doors, into the harsh light. They lay Venus across three orange seats with her head on Vera's lap, and the men worked through the sheets together.

"I like your necklace," Venus said. Vera noticed a trail of tears running down either side of the girl's face. A tall man came by and laid his red jacket over her. "I'm going to be here for a while, I can get it back later on." Vera pushed a tear from her cheek,

and looked into her soft hazel eyes, her little nose and pink lips, and felt vastness, overwhelming preciousness.

“I’m sorry,” Vera said, stroking the girl’s reddish hair, seaside curly, “I’m sorry.”

“It’s ok, it’s what happens,” Venus winked, the other shining hazel eye opening wider.

She thought about the party and the painting and how she wanted to set it right, and how tired she was. Vera felt the girl’s tears warm on her legs, but her hands were cold.

“Its ok,” Venus whispered, closing her eyes. Then she thought about taking a deep breath and going beneath the water. One Mississippi. Two Mississippi. Three Mississippi.

“Doctor!”

They sit on a bench, huddled together. They are in the light and beyond is in darkness, except where a streetlight lights up a couple of cars, someone helping someone to or from or someone wandering around. There is a vast black space, then the lights of Long Island City and Queens. A strange thing, they are all holding hands, silent. Vera thinks about the dark river, a motionless estuary to the ocean, and all the mournful open shells, tormented and soothed by the waves. She kisses the men, mutters a blessing and suggests that it is time to go. On the way back to the car she snaps her necklace and the pearls dance away, back to sea.

“Julia Come Home”

Davis and Julia, separated as infants, upon reuniting in middle age found they had very little in common. For example, while Davis slept with the clock radio muffled underneath his pillow, his head arranged to catch the morning light, Julia had a morbid fear of electrical appliances and of the sun. Davis claimed to remember their mother’s face and for her part Julia had no memories before the age of 33, due to a losing run in with a plum-sized meteor, which came at her through a perfectly sunny sky. Though, when she woke up several months later, they wouldn’t let her keep the little, coaly stone, she was given a commemorative scrapbook with pictures of her body in various angles of sleep, accompanying articles with titles such as: “Miss Meteor Still Sleeps”, “She Will Not Wake” and her personal favorite: “Julia Come Home”, a strange, astrological opinion piece printed at the height of E.T. euphoria.

Their meeting got off to a particularly bad start when wool-clad Davis inadvertently administered Julia a nasty electric shock after shuffling across the carpet to hug her. Holding her rigid in his arms, he stared at her brooch, sealed with two golden clasps. Davis imagined the brooch empty, but when Julia, very rarely, split the clasps, she could study the tiny, sepia colored photograph of a smiling young woman, with green eyes, and an infant curled into either arm. The reunion between the twins took a turn for the worse when Julia, unused to friendly small talk, asked Davis, his skin covered with blisters and tumors, if he had any children. “Does it look like it?” he growled.

Two weeks later, Julia read over the obituary for her brother, and though the scrapbook was reserved for meteor related clippings alone, she snipped and pasted the

squat column to the last page, and carefully closed the book.

Several days later, after her brother's estate was settled, she bought a ticket, packed her meager belongings into an ancient blue-leather suitcase, and left Boston for the first time in 20 years.

Unfortunately, the Pacific Princess Hotel turned out to be a terrible dive, crawling with mice, its taps broken and its toilets belching brown water whenever it rained. The second night, woken by a loud crash upstairs, Julia heard a voice pleading: "Mama baby, if you can't tell I love you, I don't know what to do!"

By the third day she had gained enough confidence to begin looking, but she was dismayed to find that the address no longer existed, and that the name warranted 76 different entries in the phone book. If only I had some sort of intuition, she thought, flipping through a crumpled magazine. Eventually she narrowed the list down to the five most likely, crossing off hyphenated surnames, tree streets, and addresses with too many three's.

The following afternoon, suffering a door slam, a threat, and a half-naked pervert, with a boa constrictor slung over his shoulders, she became discouraged.

Brazenly relishing a lime and pineapple juice in the squalid hotel bar, she weighed her options. A: I use my last two and discover no-one, or, B: I am successful, and then what?

"Can I get you something else miss?"

"No, thank you."

"Sure." smiled the bored, aging waiter, stalling, looking her over.

"You want a talk to?" he ventured.

Never having been asked this before, she was at a loss for words.

"Let me tell you something," he said. "How old are you?"

"54" she answered, without thinking.

"Well then, you three times me - how old am I then? You don't know?"

Bewildered, but flattered, and soothed by his voice, she shrugged her shoulders.

"I'm 50! Hows that work then you ask? Well, I'm 18 the first time I walk in here and you 54 when you first step in. So what an 18 year old man do talking to a fine lady of 55? He know she step in somewhere too at 18 - that right?"

"Right."

"So you get me? We both but 18, and this the first time we anywhere together, and we so beautiful, and when we sit down everyone turn to look."

Scanning the empty room and raising her eyebrows, she laughed with him.

In the morning Julia felt her energy renewed, and decided to choose option C. The waiter by her side, carrying a fluorescent net-sack of sandcastle tools, she climbed, with some difficulty, to the highest ridge, the sun relentless, the dingy city wrapped in a yellow blanket of haze.

"Here?" the waiter asked, sweat pouring off his face.

"Here," she agreed.

She took a look inside the brooch for the last time, and thought, you were ten times me.

"The shovel, please," Julia smiled.

Handing her the little pink spade then watching as she dug an oval hole in the sandy

soil, the waiter saw his cue and raised a stiff leg onto a boulder. Wobbling slightly, he caught Julia's green eyes: "Did I ever tell you about Ray Dojer? Well, Ray tell me, 'If she don't love me, I don't know what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna put myself on top of the world so she always see me. So he take a plane over these hills, to the top of the sky, and he proclaim: 'You see me now, you always see me.' I don't need to tell you what happened next, but we all seen him."

Not sure whether or not to laugh, Julia turned away and pushed the dirt thickly over the brooch, and put a stone on top.

"That's it?" the waiter asked. "No bless, no hooky-pooky, just that? Thank god, it's hot as hell up here!"

Ms. Pacman

Most people assumed that they were drawn together because he had written about her somewhere, and that, at 37 and among the more popular off-Broadway playwrights, he was what she dreamed of as a fifteen year old Estonian, stripping in a half-empty Berlin club. A couple years on, and still no more familiar with English, she knew that what drew them together was that they quickly approached a mutual end to their careers. A week shy of 18, her iron curtain cheekbones were no longer hung on a childishly alluring face, and nor was he any longer the angry young man of the small stage, flatulent with politics and rage. Virtually incomprehensible to one another in any formal language, his tongue poisoned by the Ivy League and hers forever prodigally tied to the swirling, mournful notes of the violin, they developed a mute pigeon language, an easy understanding. Though two winters had passed since that fateful coke-infested reception in Milan, they had yet to make love. Impotence, ambivalence and homosexuality were the usual suspects for abstinence, but for the unlikely duo only moral and legal patience were to blame. So, in the days approaching her 18th birthday, there was palpable, if unvoiced excitement.

Business had brought them to Winnipeg, a city in the cold nexus between provincial Estonia and vampish New York. But, seduced by mid-western ease, by the end of their second evening each had made a private pledge to stay on.

The following morning he skipped out on his flight to LA and passed the afternoon in the concourse of the train station, leafing through the local papers. For her part, she slept past her noon plane to Paris and spent the next couple hours of sunlight walking along the frozen river. That evening they were surprised and pleased

to meet one another at a diner in the bus station, and they shared a heaping plate of fries on top of a Ms. Pacman table.

Aimlessly wandering the following morning, an unseasonably warm breeze floating through the streets, they fell upon a small, old house and bought it. The next day he occupied himself making a library while she bought drapes, dishcloths, towels and sheets. They lay down on the new bed, and, chaste as ever, smiled, wrestled and slept soundly.

On the sixth day, the last remnants of winter returned with a certain viciousness, whipping winds battering the house, its pathways and the street smothered under several feet of snow. The power cut, they burned the books, then the drapes, dishcloths and towels. But, just before she moved to drop the sheets in the inferno, the lights flickered on, and the furnace resumed its deep growl. He returned the sheets to the bed carefully, with solemn relief.

That evening, he reading the yellowed stove manual and she arranging the ceiling stipple into notes, they turned at the same moment to observe one another.

“Well” she said.

“Let’s go for a walk” he offered.

The door barricaded by snow and sealed with ice, they were forced to admit defeat.

And on the seventh evening, he fell into a dream: “Good morning,” she said to him, in the queen’s perfect English, “How are you today love?” “I’m illiterate,” he responded, “please forgive me.” Watching him sleep she thought: I wonder if he remembers.

And then he opened his eyes. “Oh my god, I’m so sorry, I’ve slept past it!”

“It's only midnight, you know!” she laughed. “Do you want to try another walk?”

A miracle: the door opened as if it had been waiting the entire time. She slipped her hand in his and they walked through the deep, moonlit snow, their fingers entwined, their paths splitting and merging.

“Libretto!” they yelled together, running down the street, laughing madly.

Let it Die

So said his mother: If you lose me, stay right where you are. And the winter that Natalia left he waited out January, February and March, acting the palsied convalescent before he was capable of discerning that she was not coming back to get him. I am a victim - he thought at the end of the three months, and not without some conceited guilt at the thought's long rehearsal - I am a victim of the liberal tradition that grants significance to everything and does not allow anything to end. Everyone else, he assumed, could opt-out of the constrictive teleology if they so desired, but not he. Julian Abramson, BFA, was fated to wait out eternity for bearded gods to flash him inspiration in public parks and for thwarting loves to once again drop their heavy skirts from his fingers.

"Let it die!" friends advised him, former lovers, co-workers, unfortunates caught in his periodic burst of insult, issuing as if from a frightened lap dog.

"Let it die!" said songs, one in particular, the words following incoherent.

"Let it die!" whispered teenage nymphets in faded-ass Brazilian jeans. "You are the only thing holding democracy together!" he is tempted to yell.

Ah, but Abramson doesn't let it die, he just kills it and digs it up again.

"But I already know what you look like! You're no surprise to me, for fuck's sake!" he said, before being roundly slapped, to his memory, at least twice.

But this was a different loss, entirely. Not quite pouting but certainly with a fashionably penitential air, he spent three long months feigning disease, cancers, arthritis, chronic flatulence, flattering sexual afflictions, laid up like a taxidermied street urchin on the tattered, variously stained, one-time red couch, under the single

light-giving window in the apartment.

Initial pity on the part of his random cast of roommates evolved into amusement, then conceited ignorance (forms of sordid love having been made underneath his squalid roost more than once) finally culminating in outright hostility and a popular decree insisting on his immediate removal.

"Mike, we've decided you need to get off the couch," said the chosen emissary, nervously pulling at his scarce beard.

"First of all, I'm Julian, and who the hell are you?" He inspected the young man, a student activist probably, queerly gussied up - a *soi disant* syntactical terrorist in washed-out blackface, weighed down by purple scarves, beads and greasy-looking hair extensions.

"Listen James, get off the couch, ok?"

"It's Julian, you fucking nitwit, go back to Scarborough Virginia Said!"

This struck off his last hour at this esteemed address, or of any address for quite some time, but he finally felt himself again.

Penniless, he doled out hand jobs to Montreal's more and less illustrious, finding for once that a lifetime of creative narcissism had dutifully equipped him with marketable skills well suited to Quebec's teeming unilingual. In this respect, competition was fierce, the grease-palmed street Arab of yesterday now being the slick wristed Syrian or Lebanese of today, in their spirit of steadfast self-advancement the New Jews of sorts, the Jews themselves the New Scots, and the Scotch cloned from the rotten genes of British poncery.

Abramson, one himself (a Jew in the British tradition, with Scotch pretensions and Arab acquaintance) was, of course, an abomination to his parents. But, for the time

being, pious Mohammad and he did the rounds in tandem, the other waiting underneath a filthy awning, soaking the chosen hand in a catchers mitt creamed with butter and vaseline. Eventually he saved up sufficiently and moved well past the West Island, directly over his parents heads, to a city they had only heard about in weatherly conjecture: Winnipeg.

And so, several years on, and comfortable enough to say of his adoptive home that it is “the place where god pissed, walked 50 miles south and wiped his ass,” Julian looked back at his strange winter interlude, when he waited for Natalia to return, and marveled at his old patience and its subsequently slithery coda with curiosity and something verging on pride.

Her Voice Instead of My Own

1

One evening in late February, walking west along Matthews, Julian Abramson, his ice-encrusted scarf wrapped tightly around his neck, noticed the way the elms seemed to cleverly bend away from the power lines. He thought: they are pruned like that, cut back, their limbs thrown back into an elegantly disheveled, backwards bow. Earlier in the evening, as he reached for an innocuous potluck bun, the thirty-something who had boldly seated himself at the head of the table announced, not a hint of irony or song in his voice: "There is a reason why the jokes don't seem funny anymore, but if we knew it, we wouldn't bother opening our mouths."

Julian gagged and nodded, took a bite of the bun and said, crumbs flying out his mouth, "You know the reason, comedian, close your mouth!" Sarah, her nails digging in to Julian's leg, flushed an unhealthy red and pulled him aside halfway through the disastrous second course: "Julian! For Christ's sake! I like you, a lot, but this is why we can't go anywhere!" Looking over his face Sarah asked: "What's wrong Julian? Tell me what's wrong." Julian remained dumb and silent. At that moment a dispassionate round of limbo began to proceed underneath a walking stick. Sarah smiled and whispered, shrugging her shoulders, "Sorry Julian, see you," and turned on her feet, walking away, bending below the stick. Her body gracefully contorted, Julian memorized her face, bowed to no-one in particular, and left.

2

Ah, evening walks! Evening walks in horrible February, when the birds are flown, frozen or cooked. A light on in every living room, and in every living room an execrably shoddy looking piece of modern art hanging a couple of feet above a tan chaise-couch, eclipsing the scars of framed Mary or Jesus prints, just as cheap and imprecise, that the Portuguese hung before they fled or renovated and moved on to further destinations and theologies North American. Plodding through the ice-flecked snow, he was reminded of an instance he had found humorous, if off-putting at the time. Several Februaries ago in Montreal he made the acquaintance of one Nathan Mainz, the single, swarthy child of wealthy Jewish parents, themselves escapees of the various European outrages. Still victim to continental practice, they raised young Nathan in a mock-Georgian mansion, gave him the best blue-blazer schools, elocution lessons, the instruments of his choice and free rein with the au-pairs. To their no small horror, even the pounds of fois-gras they forced on their son, even the blond playmates, even the Tolstoy, Celine, and the Woolf - anything they could slip between the covers of a crumpled Mad Magazine - all this still left him short, dark, rude, arrogantly introspective, enamored of comic books and slasher films.

Julian took an immediate dislike to Nathan, his swarthy misery a constant pain, and was certainly pleased to hear that while dragged on yet another European vacation he had finally tossed himself in front of a Swiss bus. He left behind a pretty girlfriend, Louise, trailing in her red-eyed wake Nathan's strangely calm, tiny parents, who quietly boxed up his things, leaving the large front room to Julian, who eagerly moved his meager possessions in.

Eager to ingratiate himself with Louise, and being the closest thing to a friend