

*a novel by*

*BRUCE JAY FRIEDMAN*

STERN

**To My Darling Ginger**

## *Prologue*

ONE DAY in early summer it seemed, miraculously, that Stern would not have to sell his house and move away. Some small blossoms had appeared on one of the black and mottled trees of what Stern called his Cancer Garden, and there was talk of a child in the neighborhood for his son, a lonely boy who sat each day in the center of Stern's lawn and sucked on blankets. Stern had found a swift new shortcut across the estate which cut his walking time down ten minutes to and from the train, and the giant gray dogs which whistled nightly across a fence and took his wrists in their mouths had grown bored and preferred to hang back and howl coldly at him from a distance. A saintlike man in brown bowler had come to Stern with a plan for a new furnace whose efficient ducts would eliminate the giant froglike oil burner that squatted in Stern's basement, grunting away his dollars and his hopes. On an impulse, Stern had flung deep-blue drapes upon the windows of his cold, carpetless bedroom, frustrating the squadron of voyeurs he imagined clung silently outside from trees to watch him mount his wife. And Stern had begun to play "Billy One-Foot" again, a game in which he pretended his leg was a diabolical criminal. "I'll get that old Billy One-Foot this time," his son Donald would say, flinging his sucking blanket to the wind and attacking Stern's heavy leg. And Stern, whose leg for months had remained immobile, would lift and twirl it about once again, saying, "Oh no, you don't. No one can ever hope to defeat the powerful Billy One-Foot."

It was as though a great eraser had swept across Stern's mind, and he was ready to start fresh again, enjoying finally this strange house so far from the safety of his city.

After leaving the home-coming train on one of these new nights, Stern, a tall, round-shouldered man with pale, spreading hips, flew happily across the estate, the dogs howling him on, reached his house, and, kissing his fragrant, long-nosed wife deep in her neck, pulled off a panty thread that had been hanging from her shorts. He asked her if anything was new and she said she had taken their son Donald about a mile down the road to see the new boy she'd heard about. When the children ran together, the boy's father had stopped cutting his lawn, pushed her down, and picked up his child, saying, "No playing here for kikes."

"What do you mean he pushed you down?" Stern asked.

"He sort of pushed me. I can't remember. He shoved me and I fell in the gutter."

"Did he actually shove you?" asked Stern.

"I don't know. I don't remember. But he saw me."

"What do you mean he saw you?"

"I was wearing a skirt. I wasn't wearing anything underneath."

"And he saw you?"

"I think he probably did," Stern's wife said.

"How long were you down there?"

"Just a minute. I don't know. I don't want to talk about it any more. What difference does it make?"

"I didn't know you went around not wearing anything. You did that at college, but I thought you stopped doing that."

Stern knew who the man was without asking more about him and was not surprised at what he had said. The first Saturday after they moved in, Stern had driven around the sparsely populated neighborhood, smiling out the window at people and getting a few nods in return. He had then come to this man, who was standing in the middle of the road. The man had taken a long time getting out of the way, and when Stern had smiled at him, he had tilted his head incredulously, put his hands on his hips, and, with his shirt flopping madly in the wind, looked wetly in at Stern.

Stern had held the smile on his own face as he drove by, letting it get smaller and smaller and sitting very stiffly, as though he expected something to hit him on the back of the head. On one other occasion, Stern had driven by to check the man and had seen him standing on his lawn in a T-shirt, arms heavy and molded inside flapping sleeves, his head tilted once again. And then Stern had stopped driving past the man's house and, through everything that happened afterward, had blacked the man out of his mind. Yet he had waited nonetheless for the day his wife would say this to him.

There was half an hour of daylight remaining. Stern's son flew to the top of a living-room bookcase and said, "Get me down from this blazing fire," and Stern climbed after him, throwing imaginary pails of water on the boy, and then swept him down to administer artificial respiration. They saw Popeye together on television,

Stern's wife bringing them hamburgers while they watched the set. When he had eaten, Stern said he was going to see the man, and his wife for some reason said, "Be right back."

He did not take the car, wanting the walk so he could perhaps stop breathing hard. On the way over, he kept poking his fingers into his great belly, doing it harder and harder, making blotches in his white skin, to see if he could take body punches without losing his wind. He hit himself as hard as he could that way but decided that no matter how hard you did it to yourself, it wasn't the same as someone else. As he hit himself, a small temple of sweetness formed in his middle; he tried to press it aside, as though he could shove it along down to his legs, where it would be out of the way, but it would not move. The man's house was small and immaculately landscaped, but with a type of shrub Stern felt was much too commercial. It might have been considered beautiful at one time. A child's fire wagon stood outside. Stern walked past the house, near to the curb, and then walked on by it, stopping fifty yards or so away in a small wooded glade and ducking down to do some push-ups. He got up to nine, cheated another two, and when he arose, the sweetness was still there. He saw that he had gotten something on his hand, either manure or heavily fertilized earth. He wiped it on his olive-drab summer suit pants and kept wiping it as he walked back to the man's house again, past it, and on down the road to his own.

His wife was scrubbing some badly laid tile on the floor of the den, pretending the deep crevasses didn't exist. She was a long-nosed woman of twenty-nine with flaring buttocks and great eyes that seemed always on the edge of tears.

"Can you remember whether he actually shoved you down?" he asked her. "Whether there was physical contact?"

"I don't remember. Maybe he didn't."

"Because if there was physical contact, that's one thing. If he just said something, well, a man can say something. I just wish you had something on under there. I didn't know you go around that way. Don't do it any more."

"Did you see him?" his wife asked.

"No," said Stern.

"It doesn't make any difference," she said, continuing on the tile.

## *Part One*

IT WAS a lovely house, seated in the middle of what once had been a pear orchard, and yet it had seemed way out on a limb, a giddy place to live, so far from the protection of Stern's city. Mr. Iavone, the real-estate agent who had taken Stern and his wife to the house, said, "If you like this one, it's going to be a matter of kesh. Tell me how much kesh you can raise and I'll see what I can do." Mr. Iavone was a grim, short-tempered man who had been showing them selections all day, and when they finally drove up to this one, Stern felt under obligation to buy some house, any house, since Mr. Iavone had spent so much time with them. Golden children began to spill out of it, and the one that caught Stern's attention was a blinking woman-child with sunny face and plump body tumbling out of tight clothes. Stern, had his life depended on it, would not have been able to tell whether she was a woman or a child. Iavone, in an aside to Stern, told him that the girl-woman was the reason the Spensers were selling the house, that she had taken to doing uncontrollable things in cars with high-school boys, bringing shame to Mr. Spenser, her father, who was in data systems.

The house had many rooms, a dizzying number to Stern, for whom the number of rooms was all-important. As a child he had graded the wealth of people by the number of rooms in which they lived. He himself had been brought up in three in the city and fancied people who lived in four were so much more splendid than himself.

But now he was considering a house with a wild and guilty number of rooms, enough to put a triumphant and emphatic end to his three-room status. Perhaps, Stern thought, one should do this more



gradually. A three-room fellow should ease up to six, then eight, and, only at that point, up to the unlimited class. Perhaps when a three-roomer moved suddenly into an unlimited affair he would each day faint with delirium.

While Stern examined the house, Mr. Iavone sat at the piano and played selections from Chopin, gracefully swaying back and forth on the stool, his fingers, which had seemed to be real-estate ones, now suddenly full of stubby culture. (Later, Stern heard that Mr. Iavone always went to the piano for prospective buyers to show he did not drive a hard bargain. Actually, his favorite relaxation was boccie.)

Mr. Spenser, a man with purple lips and stiff neck, who seemed to Stern as though he belonged to a company that offered many benefits, walked around the house with Stern, clearing his throat a lot and talking about escrow. Stern listened, with a dignified look on his face, but did not really hear Mr. Spenser. Escrow was something that other people knew about, like stocks and bonds. "I don't want to hear about stocks," Stern's mother had once said. "It's not for our kind. Not with the way your father makes a living. There's blood on every dollar." Stern was sure now that if he stopped everything and took a fourteen-year course in escrow, he would still be unable to get the hang of it because it wasn't for his kind. Still, he felt very dignified walking around a house with a data systems man and talking about escrow. Mrs. Spenser invited Stern and his wife and child into the kitchen and brought out a jar of jam.

"Did you make that in this house?" Stern asked.

"Yes," said Mrs. Spenser, a skeletal woman Stern imagined had been worn down by her husband's dignified but fetishistic lovemaking requests.

"This is quite a house," said Stern.

The price was \$27,000. Someone had told Stern always to bid \$5,000 under the asking price, and, adding on \$1,000 to be nice, he said, "How about \$23,000?" Mr. Spenser muttered something about expediting the escrow and then said OK. Stern's heart sank. He had been willing to go to \$25,000, and his face got numb, and then he began to tingle the way he once had after taking a one-penny sharpener from the five-and-ten and then waiting by the counter, unable to move, to get his Dutch Rubbing from the store owner. Getting the house as low as he had, he felt a great tenderness for Mr. Spenser; he wanted to throw his arms around the stiff-necked man, who probably knew nothing of Broadway plays with Cyril Ritchard, and say, "You fool. I just got two thousand dollars from you. How much could you get paid by your company, which probably gives you plenty of benefits but only meek Protestant salaries? Don't you know that just because a man says one price doesn't mean that's all he'll pay? You've got to hold on to those two thousands, because even though you're a churchgoer you've got a glandular daughter who'll always be doing things in cars and forcing you to move to other neighborhoods, pretending you're moving because of oil burners or escrow."

Mr. Iavone left the piano and said to Stern, "I see we have nice people on both sides. Would you like to leave some kesh now?"

"I want someone to see the house," said Stern.

"But you've already talked price," said Mr. Iavone. He grabbed his coat and slammed the top of the piano. "You bring people out, you're a gentleman with them, you spend the day," he said, "and you wind up holding the bag. You think they're nice people.... I closed three million dollars' worth of homes last year."

"I've always lived in apartments and I want someone I know to look it over. Then I'll buy it," said Stern, but Iavone slammed shut the front door. Mr. Spenser cleared his throat, and Stern was certain that the next day he would tell the other data systems people in his company about the tall, soft man who had come out, talked price, and then left without buying, the first time this had ever happened in the history of American house-buying.

"I think I'm just going to take it without doing any inspecting," said Stern. "Sometimes it's better that way." Mr. Spenser called back Iavone, who came in and said, "I knew there were nice people on both sides. If we can get the kesh settled, we'll be on our way." There was much handshaking all around, and Iavone played a jubilant march on the piano.

The closing was held several weeks later in the office of Mr. Spenser's attorney, a polite man whose barren office had only one small file in it. Stern felt a wave of pity for this attorney whose entire law practice could be squeezed into that little file cabinet. He wanted to say to him, "Stop being so polite. Be more aggressive and you'll have larger cabinets." Stern's own attorney was Saul Fler, an immaculate man with clean fingers, who took out a little pad when he met Stern at the station and, writing, said, "The train was eighty-nine cents. I enter every penny right in here." Stern and Fler had cokes, Fler paying for his own and then writing "\$.05" on the pad.

At the closing, Mr. Spenser and his wife sat upright, close together, their arms locked as though they were about to defend a frontier home together. Their marriage was a serious one; this was a serious, adult matter; and at such times they locked arms, sat upright, and faced things together. They blended in with their polite lawyer, and Stern had the feeling they paid him in jellies.

Stern thought Flear drove too hard a bargain and cringed down in his seat each time Flear, pointing a clean finger at legal papers, shouted at the Spensers' attorney, "You can get away with this out here. If I had you back in the city, you wouldn't try anything like this." Stern wanted to tell Flear not to yell at the man, that he had only a small file.

On the matter of who should pay a certain fifty dollars, Flear said, "I'd like to see you try a trick like this in the city."

Iavone said, "You put a gun right to my head. I have three million dollars' worth of closings a year, and this is the first time I've ever had a gun put to my head."

He walked out of the room, and, after a while, the Spensers, arms still locked, rose grimly and followed him, as though their property had been erased by an Indian raid. Their attorney, smiling politely, walked out, too. Stern wanted to be with them on the side of politeness and marital arm-linking and not have an attorney who waved fingers at people and was from the city.

"Do I have the house?" he asked.

"You saw what happened," said Flear, stuffing papers into a briefcase, his face colored with anger. "They're strong out here. I'd like to get them in the city." Then Stern, because he didn't want

Iavone to fall under his yearly three million, because the polite lawyer's tiny file touched him, and because he felt vaguely un-American, whispered, "I'll pay the fifty." Fleer said, "Aagh," and threw up his hands in disgust. Stern went to the staircase and, in a cracked voice, hollered, "Mr. Iavone." The papers were signed, and immediately afterward Iavone began calling him "Stern" instead of "Mr. Stern." At the end of the closing Mr. Spenser handed over the key, and Stern, who had always lived in the city, suddenly became frightened about being away from it. He wondered with a chill whether he really did want to live "out here."

Later that afternoon, he drove to the house with his wife and child and, as if to certify his possession of it in his own nonlegal way, Stern, in suit and tie, rolled from one end of the wide lawn to the other while his wife and child shrieked with joy. The boy had large eyes and a strange, flaring nose, and his looks changed; in the bright sun he seemed pathetically ugly, but then, coming swiftly out of a sleep, or by lamplight, hearing stories, his face seemed tender and lovely. Stern, standing on the lawn now, made up a game right on the spot called "Up in the Sky" in which he took his child under the armpits and swung him first between his legs and then up in the sky as far as he would go. On the way down once, the boy said, "Throw me up high enough to see God."

"How does he know about God?" Stern asked, a little chilled because he wasn't sure yet what God things to tell the child and hadn't counted on it coming up so early.

"A little girl on Sapphire Street where we used to live," said Stern's wife.

"God can beat up a gorilla," said the little boy as Stern flung him skyward. Stern threw him up again and again, once with viciousness, as though he really did want to lose him in the sky so that he would not have to figure out what to tell him about God.

A stab got Stern in the bottom of his wide, soft back then and he dropped to his knees and said, "Everyone on the giraffe." His wife and child got on, Stern becoming excited by the heat of her crotch. He went across the lawn carrying them, but there was a strained frivolity about the game. He wanted someone to see him, and when a car drove by, he smiled thinly, as if to say, "We're home-owners. See how much fun we always have and how we fit in." But when the one car had passed, there was no one left to show off for; in the distance there was a bleak, lonely, deserted estate, where once a man named Bagby had each Sunday skidded through the snow in a horse-drawn sleigh, entertaining his grandchildren. Stern went inside his house and walked from room to room, giving each one a number and hollering it out aloud as he stood in the center of each. "I always wanted a lot of rooms," he said, clasping his long-nosed, great-eyed wife to him. "Now look how many I've got."

After moving in officially several days later, Stern hired a trio of Italian gardeners to prepare the elaborate shrubs for summer—two old, cackling, slow-moving ones and a fragrant and temperamental young man who spoke no English but had worked on the gardens of Italian nobility. The old men made straight borders along their flower beds, but the young man did his in curlicues, standing off after each twirl and making indications of roundness in the air with his hands. Their price was three dollars an hour, and as they moved along Stern began to worry that they weren't working fast enough. He saw the shrub preparation costing him \$800, leaving him no money for furniture. Stern wanted to tell the young man to stop

doing the time-consuming curlicued borders and to do straight ones like the old men to keep the bill down. But he was afraid to say anything to a handsome young man who had worked on the grounds of Italian nobility. Stern watched the gardeners from inside the house, ducking behind a curtain so they wouldn't see him. He hoped they would hurry and perspire as the dollars ticked away in multiples of three. The old men rested on their rakes now, poking each other and cackling obscenely at the handsome young man as he made his temperamental curlicues. Then Stern lost sight of the young man and imagined that his long-nosed, great-eyed wife had inhaled his fragrance and dragged him with a sudden frenzy into the garage, her fingers digging through his black and oily young Italian hair, loving it so much more than Stern's thinning affair, which fell out now at the touch of a comb.

But the young gardener was making tiny paths in the backyard rock garden, and when he and the two cacklers were paid and had left, Stern called his family together and said, "We've got paths. I'm a guy with paths." Even though they were narrow and largely decorative, Stern insisted his wife and child walk in and out of the paths with him, the whole child and half his wife not really fitting and spilling over onto the grass.

That night, Stern gathered his wife and son to him and they sat on the front steps of the house, Stern feeling the stone cold against his wide, soft legs, bare in Bermuda shorts. They watched it get dark, felt the air get dewy and unbalancing. "This is the best time," he said, as though he had lived ten thousand nights in houses, analyzing all the various hours of the day for quality before settling upon this one as the best. The night made him feel less jittery and isolated. Whatever bad was out there would wait until the next day. He had his boy on his lap and his wife's hips against him and he

was sitting on stone steps. He might have been in the city with a thousand families all around him, ten minutes from his mother's three rooms. As he sat on the stone, a fire truck screamed to a halt before his house and a man in a fireman's uniform raced across his lawn to the steps. The man was small and had low hips with powerfully thick legs. Stern, walking through meat sections at supermarkets, had always wondered who bought the pork butts and ham hocks, strange cuts of meat Stern would never consider. It seemed to Stern that this man was probably someone who ate them, and, instead of making him undernourished, their gristle and waste went to his legs and perversely made him wiry and powerful.

"We're having a firemen's ball," the man said. "Do you want to go? The twentieth of this month."

Stern smiled in what he thought was home-owning folksiness and said, "We can't make it that night. I'm sorry."

The fireman wheeled on his trunklike legs and ran apishly back to the truck.

"You were wrong," his wife said. "Everyone buys tickets. Nobody really goes. You just give them the money."

Stern, in Bermudas, ran across the lawn, shouting, "I'll take two after all," but the truck had already screamed off, and Stern heard a voice yell "Shit" into the night.

"My first thing in this town," said Stern, "and I've got an enemy." He put his great, soft body on the stoop against his wife's hips, not at all comforted by the night now, and imagined his house with all its rooms burning to the ground, his child's hair aflame, while



thick-legged firemen, deliberately sluggish, turned weak water jets on the roof, far short of the mark.

The Spensers had failed to tell Stern to spray the area, and, a month after he moved in, a caterpillar army came and attacked the grounds. When Stern first saw the insects, he said, "I'm going to get them," and went out to the lawn and began to flick them off the shrubs and then step on them when they were on the ground. But there were huge wet clumps of them on everything, and he called the spray company. "It's too early to get after them," the man said. "If you get at them too early, you just waste your spray. You've got to wait till they're sitting up perky." Stern waited a day and then called again; another voice answered and told him, "It's too late. You missed the right time. They're in there solid now."

"The other man in your place said to wait," Stern said.

"I'll rap you in the teeth you get smart," the voice screamed. "I'll come right over there and get you. You want to make trouble, I'll give you trouble all right."

Stern bought some chemicals in a store and said to his wife, "I know there are billions, but I'm going to get every one of them. This is our house." He went to work on a beautiful mountain ash tree first. There was little of it showing; the tree might as well have been one large wet caterpillar. Stern sprayed at it for an hour, until his hands were broken with blisters, but only a few caterpillars fell, not really from the potency of the chemical but simply because they lost their balance and got washed off. They were hardy when they touched the ground and Stern knew they would find their way back to the tree. He stopped spraying, and in a few days the caterpillars had left and Stern and his wife were able to see that

## Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

