

INDIAN SUMMER OF LOVE

by L. M. Levy

Chapter One --New York

It was a warm July afternoon in Manhattan. The year was 1967. Sam Cohen was wandering through the apartment he had lived in, on East 11th Street for the last eleven months, looking for something, anything to salvage. The place looked like it had been turned upside down. Books and papers littered the floor in the bedroom. Dirty clothes sat in piles in the corners and a few broken plates and pans sat in the kitchen sink. All the furniture was gone. The seven dollar formica and chrome kitchen table, with the wobbly leg, was gone along with the three crappy chairs. His box spring and mattress, the bureau he'd lived out of since he was ten. Gone. There was absolutely nothing worth saving, except perhaps the few books and his school papers.

He had moved back to his parents' new apartment in Riverdale two weeks before, after he came home one night and interrupted three men, as they were carrying his desk down the stairs. It had gotten too dangerous to stay there alone. He was being targeted. He was being warned.

Several weeks earlier, he had confronted the local heroin dealer, when one of his neighbors pointed him out in the street.

"He's the one that was in my apartment the other night," she said, trembling.

Feeling ridiculously macho, Sam called after him.

"Hey, you. My friend here says you were the one that was in her apartment. What the fuck, man?"

"Who's askin'?" Vigo sneered, cold as ice.

"Me, man," he said, straightening himself up to his full height.

"Well, it ain't what you think. I'm not a burglar. I got better ways to make my money."

"You're lucky I didn't catch you."

"What would you do, white boy?" His eyes were slits, the malice glowed in them.

"I'd kill you, motherfucker."

"You mean you'd try to kill me."

"No, man. They'd be carryin' your sorry ass out."

It was insane. A testosterone-fueled pissing contest with the meanest mother on the block. They glared at each other until Vigo turned away, continuing down towards Avenue C. Sam was shaking.

"I don't like him. He's really scary. What did you hope to accomplish, talking to him like that?" His friend seemed concerned.

"Just letting him know he can't push us around."

Well, it hadn't worked. Over the next two or three days, Sam's place was broken into several times while he was at work. Small items were missing, and the door had been left open. It was ominous. Sam decided to leave for a while and let things cool off.

This was a clear message. Get OUT. Now there was no reason to even consider living there any more. He'd come back later to get the few remaining things worth saving. He locked the door -a lot of good that'll do- and walked down to his motorcycle.

He was totally bummed. This had turned out to be one of the worst weeks he could remember. Margie with her new boyfriend. Two days earlier he had been fired from his job at the fruit market up in Washington Heights, in upper Manhattan, where he had been since taking a leave from school in late April. He'd gotten caught with his hand in the till, filching a bunch of quarters. Everybody had been taking something, and Sam figured a little here, a little there, nobody'd be the wiser. But old eagle eye Herb saw him and that was it. Sam revved up the bike and thought, What a schmuck. How stupid can you be?

Herb and his partner Sid were OK guys and working conditions were actually pretty good. Six days a week, twelve hours a day, breaks every three hours, all the fruit you could eat. The money wasn't great, but you made up for it with the long hours. But the best perk was that you had the freedom to yell at the old ladies with impunity.

"Hey lady, those peaches are 59 cents a pound. If you want the 39 cent ones, I pick 'em."

"But those have bruises on them."

"That's why they're 39 a pound."

"But I want nice ones."

"Then you'll have to pay 59."

"I'll take my trade to Broadway."

"Give me that bag and get the hell outta here. And don't you ever come back here, you old bitch."

"How dare you speak to me like that?"

"Take a fuckin' walk, lady."

Sam had been astounded the first time he'd seen Herb deal with a problem customer in this manner, but it soon became obvious that everybody was looking to get over and if you didn't stay tough with your customers, they'd steal you blind. They'd all have a good laugh when scenes like that went down.

As the motorcycle turned north onto First Avenue, Sam felt a wave of shame and anger filling his mind. Karma. You asshole. It was ridiculous, blowing a decent job where you could go around the corner and smoke a joint on your break, drink a beer with your lunch and Sid would just give you that old "Uncle Ernie" wink and all was OK. For a handful of chump change. He had been so embarrassed and the guilt rose up now to redden his face once again. The more he thought about his current situation, the more depressed he got.

He drove over the Third Avenue Bridge into the Bronx and decided to cruise the old neighborhood and see some familiar, perhaps comforting sights, maybe run into an old friend or something. He followed the route he used to take home from P.S. 31 at 141st Street and the Concourse, when he missed the bus. He turned west at 151st Street and passed Number 175. It was where his very first "girlfriend" from second grade had lived. A warm glow surged through his belly as he thought of her. He closed his eyes and pictured her. They hadn't seen each other for years. He rolled through the intersection, slowly letting out the clutch. The BMW gathered speed as he descended the gentle hill between Walton and Gerard avenues.

The soft throaty rumble of the exhaust distracted him momentarily. Rolling past the taxi garage, the front tire hit an oil slick. Cobblestones were treacherous even in the best of conditions and with all the grease on them, they were like ice. Suddenly wrenched from his reveries, he had the instantaneous and distinct impression that something was very wrong. Before he could react, the bike wobbled and pitched, and in the next nanosecond he found himself under the right side of the cumbersome beast. His lower leg screamed in pain. With some effort, he extracted himself and surveyed his situation. A small, but nasty gash was steadily saturating his Levis but there were no broken bones.

As he picked his bike up, a sickening sight slapped him like a rude right cross: the entire right cylinder was hanging by the piston rod. The BMW was history. He limped over to the curb, rolling the bike up onto the sidewalk and opening the kickstand. In pain and dejection, he sat with his head in his hands. He examined the cut on his calf. I'll live.

"Hey kid, are you all right?" One of the drivers from the garage had come over and was staring at the blood on his leg.

"Yeah, I think so."

"No broken bones?"

"Nah. Just a little blood."

"Do you want I should call an ambulance?"

"No. I just need to get my bearings. Thanks."

In his state of shock, disjointed thoughts raced through his mind. No bike. No job. No girl. No place of his own. All his worldly possessions gone. Man, I'm all screwed up! What the hell am I gonna do now? His head spun.

After ten minutes, his head cleared, he locked the bike and started walking up Gerard Avenue towards his old block. He'd try to get a ride if he could, or hop on the subway if all else failed. Finding a fat roach in his pocket, he fired it up and let the smoke-induced peace flow over him. He relaxed and let his present reality slip away.

He thought back to the Be-In that had taken place in Central Park earlier that year. Thousands of young people had gathered to listen to music, dance and celebrate in the Great Meadow. Allen Ginsberg chanted and OOOHHMM'ed and encouraged them to follow the lead of the people in San Francisco, who had celebrated their own Great Be-In at Golden Gate Park earlier that spring.

A new world was being born in the Haight-Ashbury district. People were getting together, breaking the shackles of the old world and its tired lame ideas. A community based on love and openness, art, music, creativity and spontaneity, was alive and thriving. The possibilities were infinite. We can re-create ourselves and the world. This new society of peace and love was going to spell the end of the old way of living, of seeing and of being.

If you're goin' to San Francisco, be sure to wear some flowers in your hair.

As he walked up the hill, high on the weed and excited by the thoughts floating around inside his head, he had visions of warm, wide beaches, coastal cliffs and canyons, bright sunshine, bikinied girls, bodies swaying to primal rhythms, multi-colored pennants fluttering in soft breezes, long haired leaping gnomes, bearded freaks, blond tressed angels in blue jeans. His mind danced with them on psychedelic strains, wafting on thermal currents, carrying him far away from the dismal grays and browns of the Bronx.

Just then he passed his childhood home at 731 Gerard Avenue. Libby. That was the name on the lintel above the entry. His thoughts were suddenly interrupted by a loud whistle.

"Hey, Sammy," he said. "Long time no see. The old block's not good enough for you anymore now that you're living in Riverdale?"

"No, it ain't like that, Bobby. I've been workin' six days a week, twelve hours a day." He said it half-apologetically. They slapped each other five and walked up the block to Podzieba's candy store.

"Well it's good to see ya."

"You, too, man. Seen Paulie around?"

"He should be home from work in a little bit, so hang here," Bobby said. "Maybe some of the other guys will show up and we can sing some tunes, like in the old days."

Sam remembered all the hours they had hung out in lobbies and doorways of apartment buildings, singing doo-wop tunes in three- and four-part harmony. They had actually gotten good enough to sing at a couple of church dances up in the north Bronx, where they made fifteen dollars apiece and all the soda they could drink. The kids liked them and brought them back for two encores. But it had gotten old. They hadn't added any new songs to their repertoire in a long while, and Sam never had time to practice with the guys anymore. He was not in the mood for squeaky falsetto singing and the same tired music.

"Yeah, maybe."

He sauntered into the store, sat on a stool and ordered an egg cream. Podzieba looked at him funny. He remarked that Sam looked tired.

"Yeah, not enough hours in the day, Hymie. They're working me to death. Plus, I just crashed my motorcycle, so I guess that's why I'm not my usual scintillating self."

He watched as the old man poured an inch of milk on top of the chocolate syrup. When the jet spray of seltzer foamed into the glass, he was salivating. A brisk stir, a proud smile and the old man passed this work of art to an expectant and eager Sam. It went down like satin and was gone in an instant.

"Again."

"You drink so fast, you'll give yourself stomach cramps."

"I'm a big boy, Hymie. I think I can take care of myself."

"I know that as skinny and tired as you look, you can't be taking very good care of yourself. You must not be living at your mother's house."

"My mother sent me here for one of your egg creams 'cause she knows I don't eat like a chozzer anymore, not being at home."

"Tell Sylvie I said hello."

"I will, thanks."

Paulie walked in and Podzieba tossed him a pack of Parliaments. He plunked two quarters on the nipped rubber Hava Tampa mat covering the counter. The old man jerked his head in Sam's direction. Paulie looked towards the back of the store and smiled. He and Sam were old friends. They knew each others' moods and expressions instinctively. He walked back and sat on the stool next to Sam. Putting his arm around his friend's shoulders, he feigned distress.

"What's up, Sam? You look fucked up. What's goin' on?"

"I dropped my bike and it munched my leg. It's totalled. And everything else in my life is a mess but this," he said, admiring the glass, "should help restore me."

"You and your egg creams."

"Let's go outside and have a smoke, whaddya say?"

They walked out into the softening light of the waning afternoon, sat on the fender of a car and lit up, watching the smoke curl and gently drift away. After a minute's silence, Sam pulled the roach from his shirt pocket and lit it from his cigarette. Paulie looked up towards his fifth floor window and motioned Sam to follow him into the alley. Years ago, they had played in these same alleys, out of sight of the street...and Paulie's mother.

"Your mom still doesn't know you get high?"

"Nope and I'm gonna keep it that way."

"Come on, you're twenty-one already."

"Jewish mothers don't give up until either you're dead or or they are. They hold on like bulldogs."

They both laughed.

"Good stuff, got any more?"

Sam pulled out a small manila envelope and put two joints' worth in the cellophane wrapper of Paulie's cigarette pack.

"So what now?"

"I got no job, no chick, no place to stay except at my folks' house, sharing a room with Richie.

I don't know, man. But I been thinkin'."

"Yeah, what?" Paulie's interest was piqued.

"I don't know. Maybe get outta here." He felt his stomach churning with excitement.

"Serious?"

"I don't know. I gotta think. Hey, you busy now?"

"Why?"

"I gotta get home. Can you give me a lift?"

"Sure."

Riding through the Bronx in silence, each lost in their own thoughts, the two old friends each sensed a change in the air. Paulie felt his old pal, Sam, mysteriously slipping away. Sam watched the familiar scenery with a vague sadness, he could not put his finger on. He ached for a feeling of security and solidity, but it was not to be had. He searched inside himself.

There is an exquisite sense of freedom that comes from having nothing and having nothing to lose. Sam Cohen found himself in this magical, free-floating state of mind for the first time in ages. Perhaps since his early years, when life had been so sweet and simple. An endless round of hide-and-seek, ringolevio, skelly and stick ball. Childhood games. Innocence and contentment. No cares, no self-consciousness, no anxieties to intrude on the automatic and natural interactions of a boy and his world. He found himself now, with nothing to impede him in a universe of options.

Fuck it! I'm goin' to California.

INDIAN SUMMER OF LOVE by L.M. Levy. All new first edition, softcover, 5 x 8, 609 pages, four-color cover. ISBN 0-7596-8444-8, \$25.95. Photographs of the book and/or author are available from LehaneDesign Promotions.

promos@LehaneDesign.com
<http://www.LMLevy.com>