

Martha King

Another Summer of Poverty

1966

G.R. Swenson burst into Gavin Douglas's apartment and announced breathlessly he'd just taken his very first tab of LSD. Gavin said, "Oh, you've been there before."

G.R. said, "You're right. I'm disappointed."

Baz and I were introduced to him.

G.R. and Gavin had met at the Yale Institute for Better Living. (The nut house. It may still have that silly name.) Thorazine had turned G.R.'s skin yellow and he had added to his personal decor by dyeing his hair bright orange. Naturally Gavin befriended him. G.R. was now a rising art critic, a major promoter of our old friend Jim Rosenquist.

G.R. glared at Baz. This was not a good hit. I gathered up our kids for a getaway. It was a sunny May afternoon and Gavin's apartment was not big. Baz and I had been taking a long walk with Mallory and Hetty packed in the stroller. We were in the West Village when a car stopped suddenly on the street beside us, and there was Gavin.

I'd heard about him. Baz met him in a Village bar years before. Bar talk. At some point Baz had said he was a student and Gavin had been rude about it. "What kind of school would a guy like you go to?" I guess Baz already liked his feel because he didn't punch him. Instead he described Black Mountain. A few weeks later,

Gavin appeared in the turnaround in front of the Studies Building asking for Baz. He was driving an English sports car and had one leg in a cast. He stayed around for several months. Black Mountain had always been permeable like that, easy about people of uncertain status.

“I live up there,” Gavin said, pointing to the fourth floor of the building we were in front of. Gavin was with a woman, a tawny blonde with a classic nose and thin ascetic lips. “We got married this spring,” he said. He introduced us. Up we all went to their apartment. Gavin and Athena were a different kind of others.

Gavin should have been handsome. He should have been perfect American Celtic even-featured, brown-hair, grey-eyes handsome. A crop of odd white hair on one side of his head was an accent not a disfigurement. I soon discovered he looked different every time I saw him. His face was like water, shifting, sly, wickedly clever, bored, tired, calculating, puffy with petulance, dazzling with sudden, manic glee.

Gavin was the child of Lord Douglas and Jeanne, a middle-class Scot with some major ambitions. She had come to London equipped to work as a secretary, and, as Gavin told it, with heavy plans to marry up. Which she did. Gavin was born in the early 1930s when his father was almost eighty; he was never quite sure if Uncle Eddie, his father’s silent partner, wasn’t his actual dad. The public and audible partner in their enterprise had been Lord Joe Duveen, and the business was an art gallery, the one that made a small fortune selling Quatracentro paintings to American millionaires in the twenties.

Father Douglas was an art historian, and Gavin’s great uncle Boysie had been the downfall of Oscar Wilde. He was from *that* Douglas family – which traced its way back, said Gavin, to Gavin Douglas, his namesake, the translator of the Aeneid, in the 16th century. Of course that Gavin was also a pre-Reformation bishop and so had no business having a family, not one he could give his name to, but I believe the tale just the same. When it came to name dropping, Gavin was always boss.

The family tradition was continuing nicely. Gavin had a little sister: Claire was the model for Phoebe in *The Catcher in the Rye*, and grew up to marry J. D. Salinger. If you’re a quick reader, you’ve just clicked on that crop of white hair on one side of Holden Caulfield’s head. Gavin and Salinger had met at prep school.

G.R. Swenson, on the other hand, was a gawky effeminate Midwestern schoolboy, a child of Topeka, Kansas. After our first bad meeting at Gavin’s, I ran into him on the street, again with the kids in the stroller. He lived just around the corner from our Second Avenue apartment. I asked him to come home for lunch with us. Baz came in from his studio in the Anderson Theater just across the street, and after eating, took G.R. back to

the Anderson with him. Suspicion changed to fascination. For both of them.

G.R. always looked the same. He was the kind of boy praised for handsomeness by all the women in his mother's church. Handsome being a code word for well-behaved. Too well-behaved. Handsome a code word for momma's boy, a code word for, well you know. He knew exactly who *his* father was: a gas station attendant, patient, quiet, almost inert in G.R.'s telling. A noble boob, whom G.R. adored. But after G.R.'s death, his father was full of rage. He publicly washed his hands of his son and railed at his friend Ann Wilson who had come out to Topeka for the two funerals. What we called suicide, G.R.'s father called murder. His son had taken his wife away and if G.R. hadn't died in the event, the dad would have moved to have him jailed. Hard to square this with G.R.'s tender picture of him. Hard to match it with what little I know about the woman in the middle. The mother G.R. killed.

Did his mother actually go to a church? I don't know. Was she as smart as he was? I don't know. Did she respond to art? Did she read him books? I do know she had chronic migraines and G.R. had to sit in the darkened bedroom with her, and massage her head and cut her toenails while she lay across the big brass bed, honey. And I do know she made his father find a new place for the family to live every two, three years in order to be in an ever better school district for the sake of her boy Gene.

G.R. had a brother, but I don't know his name, only that he existed, and that he was never in his mother's place of honor, never the focus of her ambition.

His brother was in the marines. He'd done well. He was a major or a colonel, and he did go to church. He had a wife and some children and was stationed in Viet Nam.

"He's queerer than I am," G.R. said. "War is his country. The crease in his britches is the proof of his worthiness," G.R. said. "A stone nut-case."

We were well met that summer, Gavin, us Kings, and G.R. but circumstance never again put us all together in the same spot. G.R. and Athena was expecting a baby in the fall. She and Gavin were looking for a larger apartment. She and Gavin were in redemption mode, both of them. He from chronic running away and nihilism and she from drugs and lack of place. She'd fled to New York City from a nomadic childhood with a mother as loony as G.R.'s. But she was not the focus of a mother's transferred ambition. She was accessory after the fact,

as her mother converted to a new religion every few years. Athena told charming but heartbreaking stories of child life under Theosophy, Ba'hai, Manichaeism, spiritual vegetarianism. Presently, mom was a Parsi, or some hybrid American approximation of it. Every conversion brought a new persona, new house rules, new diets, and a more precious and precarious way of living. Athena had ended up in the Village doing heroin.

Gavin got her out of it. And she in turn got Gavin settled, although Gavin had been married twice before and the baby to come wasn't his first child. Never mind. This was new. They were looking for a larger apartment, and Gavin was working more than full time for his mother in what was by then called the Duveen Brothers Gallery. It was housed in a large limestone townhouse on East 79th Street right off the park.

His mother had married Uncle Eddie after the death of Lord Douglas. Now Eddie, in his turn, was fragile, deaf, and in his eighties. Not unlike her first husband, when Gavin and Claire were children. The day-to-day gallery administration was up to Gavin; his mother was mostly in the country, at the house in Mt. Kisco which she and Eddie shared.

There was energy and purpose in Gavin's plans. Old Master trade is cutthroat, but he was inheriting from masters. He took the two of us on a tour of the building one day. When the gallery was finally, formally his, he would continue the old master business on the top floors, but the parlor floor, with its mahogany show easels and swags of dark drapery, would be focused on the new surrealism. I think he was the first to call Basil's work surrealism. And in the dark English basement, Gavin planned to sell books, fine rare editions, and small press poetry. The floor was a born literary haven, with fruitwood wainscoting, low ceilings and a slightly clandestine feel. Eventually, Gavin said, he'd add publishing to the mix.

There was a future after all. A Douglas art empire, in which Baz was promised a fiefdom. There was a way to live, a place where one might be safe from boredom and craziness, where one might hold high purposes while simultaneously profiting from intrigue and connections. One might not have to be ruined by the knowledge that corruption and duplicity are ubiquitous. Holden Caulfield -- at home at last.

Use corruption as knowledge and not sink in the swamp of it was Gavin's version. Use painless elevation in class to solve painful identity conflicts, was Athena's version. She too would be home: with certified gentility and a bloody big bank account. Her diction was elegant to the point of parody. She sometimes sounded as if she'd learned English at a snooty school in Switzerland.

It was not our children who made the bond with Gavin. It was us. He was mercurial, full of references,

mentally international. We were both cheerfully in love with him and he with us. We spent weekends the summer of 1966 going up to Connecticut with them. It was a ritual. Gavin had a dark green MG and a Saturday morning appointment at the Better Living Institute in New Haven. They'd swing by early and pick the four of us up out on Second Avenue. He and Athena sat in front. Barry, their dog, a black standard poodle with a doting disposition, crammed himself over Athena's feet and traveled with his head on her legs. Baz and I, knees to chins, fitted into the MG's half-size back seat. Mallory (aged three) and Hetty (two) were wedged into the storage hole right behind the back seat, along with all the beach bags and towels. We kept the breakable food and drink around our feet.

Not a helmet, not a safety belt among us. With the top down, our six heads were almost at the same level. Only Barry's was out of sight. Six heads in a little MG, like a circus act. I tied bandannas on the kids, tight as they could stand, to keep the road wind out of their ears. We were never once stopped by a cop or a toll-booth officer. We were fine.

And we were fine. Gavin had done everything, and rally racing was one of them. Gavin was an effortless speeder, never reckless, always in the moment. I never felt a shred of distress as we zipped up ugly I.S. 90, heads in the wind. Gavin cornered around the semis and slowed to an expert slow-roll through the toll booths. After his 50-minute hour in New Haven, we headed for a beach. Later, we'd eat suppers at roadside lobster pots, and then drive back into the hot, bright, dirty city, sunburned and windblown, very late. Two or three times, we stopped in Westchester County for an overnight with Gavin's mother.

Jeanne Douglas and Uncle Eddie lived one stop further north on the New York Central line than my parents had when I was ten. It was thirty stops higher on the social and electric scale. Their house, a rambling white frame farmhouse of corners, nooks, and many outbuildings, had a large swimming pool and an exquisite rose garden. The huge red-tile floored kitchen was deep in the middle of the house, and while Jeanne "had people," she liked the work of cooking and presentation and did almost everything herself. Tiny, wired, magically efficient.

Baz, who did not have to have her as his mother, adored her, and she, in turn, appraised us and our children like the skillful art dealer she was. She pronounced our children interesting, even formidable. She bought them chocolate cigarettes and showed them how to act like ladies when they smoked. Eddie kept to the garden. Most of the time while we were there Jeanne zoomed about tending him, so the presence of children, of

whom she approved but he did not, wouldn't upset him. Her relationship to Gavin was not benign.

That was how Gavin had grown up. Some old man and some devious high-level dealing always commanded his mother's focus while he and his sister were afterthoughts. He remembered his dad querulously demanding who let that little boy in the house and why didn't he go home. Meaning him. Even in good moods Gavin could occasionally project a perfect representation of invalid octogenarian full of whining self-pity. His bad moods, rarely seen that summer, could suck up all life energy nearby like a potboiler science-fiction alien.

In Mt. Kisco, depression seemed impossible. The cool tall rooms were filled with books to the ceiling. There were big leather sofas, beautiful old cabinets and sideboards, deep Persian rugs. There was a Bosch hanging in one of the living rooms; and a Stubbs in another. Not bad free digs. Another summer of poverty.