

From her bedroom window in the third floor apartment, Marita watched the massive roof of the Cranston Street Armory tremble.

"Mirage..." she whispered dreamily. She adored that word and the way her mouth had to move to say it. Picking up a hand mirror, she tilted it so she could see only her mouth. "Mi-raaaage..." she intoned gravely. If she had a horse, she would name him Mirage. She decided to go ride her bike.

The saddle was scorching so she rode standing up at first, her long black hair streaming, glistening in the sun that beat down through a cloudless sky. Big kids stripped to the waist were playing basketball on Sycamore Street and yelled at her to get out of the way. She thought basketball was a stupid sport. She parked her bike in front of the Hudson Street Market. She liked baseball best, but right now her mind was on an orange popsicle.

"Hi, Marita," said the man with long hair who sat in here on a milk crate reading the newspaper every morning.

"Hi," she said back and pushed up the freezer door. She dipped her face down extra low to breathe the frosty air as she reached in, wondering if the man was going to say, "You shouldn't eat that junk," the way he had the last time she'd bought one.

He didn't, and after paying for it she waved it in front of him. "It's not junk," she said adamantly. "It's good! And you shouldn't be smoking cigarettes--that's what's bad for you!"

"Your popsicle and my cigarettes are both bad," the man replied in a care-free way that irritated her.

"Then why do I like popsicles and you like cigarettes? We shouldn't like them if they're bad for us."

"Marita, you have just uncorked one of life's great mysteries, a riddle far too complex for me to address at such an early hour."

Her eyes widened. "Do you know what my favorite word is?" she asked him.

"Popsicle."

"Nope...Mirage. Do you know what that is?"

"It's when something gets so hot it looks like it's vaporizing."

"What's vaporizing?"

"It's what happens when something solid, like, say--my head--gets so hot it rises up into a ball of steam, then

at some point later drips back down to the floor like rain."

"Oh...Do you like basketball?"

"Not particularly."

"Neither do I. I think it's stupid. I like to play baseball."

"Of course. It's the superior of the two games."

"You don't have to be tall to play baseball," Marita explained, "plus, girls can play it too."

"Girls can play basketball too," the man replied. "Lots of girls do--but baseball is still better. You have more breathing room...and there's not all that pushing and shoving."

"And people don't yell as much. I mean, they yell some, but not as much."

"That's a big part of it right there, Marita. Baseball is a sport for people of taste and refinement, like you and I."

"I have to go now," Marita said, remembering her popsicle. Outside, she carefully peeled off the wrapper, making sure to remove all the paper, then let it flutter off her fingertips into the trash barrel. The popsicle burned her lips and stretched her mouth about as far sideways as it could go, and she sucked hard on the end of it to hurry the sweetness out.

"Good, huh?" the man said, leaning forward on the milk crate and looking out the doorway at her.

"Mmm..." she nodded and straddled her bike. "What's that word?" she asked him, pulling the popsicle out of her mouth.

"The uh--oh...vaporizing."

Marita pedaled off, at first back down Sycamore but turned around when she saw the boys playing basketball. Instead, she headed up Hudson Street, steering with one hand, pumping the popsicle in and out of her mouth with the other and keeping an eye out for mirages when, suddenly--the pitch came sizzling toward the plate and she swung. Smack! She nailed it, and the ball began rising high over Dexter Park, way over the heads of the outfielders, clearing the rooftops on Dexter Street, sailing on in its miraculous flight until over downtown Providence it began vaporizing, falling from the sky in sparkling streamers of blue, red and silver fireworks that showered down upon a fountain where she and her friends were riding swans the color of white roses, and the man with long hair was selling popsicles.