First aid and other stories

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First aid

and

other stories

by

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>THE THOUSAND SPOOLS</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRIME PREVENTION IN GINA, IOWA</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIVING IN A FAIRY TALE</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STATES</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FUNERAL PREPARATION</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLACES WE GO</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE AVIARY</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIRST AID</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
THE THOUSAND SPOOLS

The first apartment I look at, the old man searches my luggage while I'm examining the bathroom: pipes on the outside of the shower like at camp, a back brush dangling from the head, an old piece of pinkish, greying soap, an old yellow bristle toothbrush bent out of shape, a crisp towel, plenty of spiders. He's lived through two Halley's Comets, remembering clearly. I imagine he's looking for suspicious-looking things—a gun, a guitar, birth control pills. He coughs when I find him, says nothing. Then says, "Nice enough for you?"

Late Friday after classes, after studying, after eating—the scene: me and him yucking it up on his matching wing-backs, some old Jack Lemmon movie playing.

"It's nice enough for me," I say.

"I don't care who you bring back here; that's one of the pluses of having me for a landlord."

I study a sort of shrine on a flaking table: a hunting license, a stack of gun magazines, an elk plate propped up by a rootbeer can filled with sand, all on top of a flouncy navy blue Grizzly Bear Cave souvenir.

"That's Grizzly Bear Cave," he says. "In Colorado. Ever been there?"

"No."

He smiles. "Biggest grizzlies I've ever seen, I tell you what."

"I've driven through Colorado on the way home from California, but I haven't gotten out of the car to see much."
"You got to do it before you're too old," he muses, partially to himself.

I'm tempted to take this place for the simple reason I need a shower. I've been driving 15 hours. I was planning on camping at a motel.

I can wait. I shouldn't take the first thing I see. I'd probably pass up a mansion (a room in a mansion), a double canopy bed. His is a rickety twin in a cramped plywood room. The American flag hangs on one wall for decoration. No, I shouldn't be hasty.

He saunters to his goldfish and sprinkles their dinner on the roof of water.

"What's the price?"

The fish suction in the food, their mouths, little round O's.

"Eighty-five dollars a month, utilities included. Some of my old roomers have left tapes. Recommendations on tape, if you'd like to hear them. I've had about 15 Biology Fellows."

"That's all right. That's a great price."

Outside some neighbors barge out their back door to sit in the yard a while. They make a great deal of noise, squeaking open lawn chairs which have been resting on the side of the house. They are settling, as if it were the Fourth of July, and fireworks were appearing in the sky.

"May I have a glass of water?" I am stalling. My throat feels as though it's full of dust and road pebbles. I glance out to see if anyone's running off with my belongings. Is someone hauling a file
cabinet up the road? Someone must have my set of black Mikasa,
getting ready to exchange their own Corning for something new.

"Ice?"

"That would be nice."

He goes to the kitchen. From the back he reminds me of a beaver:
full rump, his body weight switching from side to side. He was probably
quite a man when he was young.

On a pie safe is a plastic business card holder with a few business
cards in it: "Zule's Hair Clip Joint." "Your Man Plumbers." "Walt's
Wall Washing."

"You can have one of those." He hands me a blue glass.

"Thanks."

"Walt. That's me."

I take one of the cards.

"That's my number."

"I'm going to look around. I just got in."

"Understandable. Don't wait too long. I'm about the cheapest."

He sits down and contemplates a cigarette pack. "I can give you some
numbers of other places."

He pulls a cigarette out, situates it in his mouth and lights it.

"Sweet," I mutter, nursing the precious ice water, running a hand
over my forehead, through my bangs, back the full length of my hair.

I'm alone. I've never really been alone. I packed the car up and
drove. I spent a night in a highway hotel and didn't sleep. I'm going
to spend another night, playing the TV, the sound down so low, the voices sound like flies. I'm out here to go to school.

The ice bucket runs over, cubes falling to the sidewalk, making a racket so loud a kid in Five yells, "Shut up!"

"Sorry," I say. The machine hacks off until everything is silent again. I feel like filling the bathtub with ice; it's so hot. I'd have to break in and earplug the kid in Five, it would be running so loud. Maybe, I could get him to help me cart ice--give him two dollars. How old from his voice could he be? I'd have to give him three dollars, maybe.

I empty the ice in the dirty tub. For once, I'll break my rule of scrubbing hotel tubs with Comet before sitting in them. I'm different; it doesn't matter. Off come my clothes. I smell my arms; they're salty and cool, like starfish arms. My breasts are heavy and blue veined; my skin is translucent. I fill the tub with cool water and lower my body in, shivering. This is no great idea. My teeth chatter. One hundred degrees in the air. Thirty-two degrees in water. I'll catch something. I sit on the edge of the tub, dangling my feet. This is much more sensible--my vulva smushed on the cold porcelain.

Above me, there is a vent and a window. I balance one foot on the soap holder and twist the window open by its little handle, the kind of handle I would find in a trailer. A crackling comes from outside--the bugs dying in the ultraviolet.
For once, I hear myself think. I am reminded of the stillness of gas station restrooms: the smell of petrol everywhere, the lack of tissue or towels, the sleaziness, the solitude.

I open the hot nozzle full force and melt the ice. I lower my body in and breathe so close to the edge, I make bubbles.

Another house I look at is nicer. The landlord is a woman, an enforcer of rules, but she has doilies, clean and pressed. The rent is $125, $175 with meals. But there's too much pressure. I'd be answering little notes that said: Put the potatoes in at 500 degrees, I'll be home at 6:50. The room is much nicer, though. Her daughter Sue's down quilt is in a footlocker at the end of the bed. Poor Sue. Sue has two children and a husband who is chronically late. He was late to his wedding. He's always late for work. A recent convert, he was late even for his own First Communion.

"I'll be calling you one way or the other," I tell her.

"I'm interviewing others," she says. "You'll be the first to know." If she served apple pie, she'd serve it with cheese. She's brimming, too draining.

Next, I go to a wild house of undergrads. This is tempting. I'd be the elder, the advice-giver. No, it's too noisy. Kids are already cranking up the stereos, and the semester hasn't even started.

I go back to my hotel room, which costs $24.39 a night, and imagine my feet on the ceiling—me walking around upside down. (This is
something I've done since I was a child. ) A maid comes in and says, "Still sleeping?"

I take Walt's room because I can't afford anything else. My tab at the no-tell hotel is about $75. I'm tired of it.

Walt responds by placing a nonexistent diamond needle on a record. "Three Cheers for the Red, White, and Blue," the Naval Academy sings. Walt's boy was a navy man who was killed at age 23, my age.

"No lease," Walt says.

Walt's lived here all his life. Everyone knows him. He comes down every night to the place where I'm dipping ice cream. I've gotten a job until school starts. Walt remembers when this place was built, the Tutti Fruiti, owned for a while by Mrs. William's brother, Steve. Steve sold it. Now, it's "Cones". My arms develop muscles from the strenuous scooping. Walt tips me a buck. We're friends.

"You know anything about Guadaloupe?" Walt asks. We're home in the living room, fanning ourselves from the heat. Walt makes it a practice to learn about the places that house our largest military boats.

"No."

He knows most about Norfolk, Virginia. He has a lot of friends at the Edgar Cayce Society and likes to ride the waves at Virginia Beach.

"I toured the largest aircraft carrier in the world. It's not even finished yet. It can hold 200 planes....How would you like it if your
son," Walt stares me in the eye, "was launched like a bead through the sky by mistake?"

"I wouldn't."

"Fuck, no." He pauses. He points to the Madame Butterfly fan in my hand. "That thing's from New York City. We've got a few destroyers there. You can have that fan if you like. Some lady's always bringing me presents. She's due here, any minute."

"Who?"

"My wife, Lindy."

"I've been using it. It seems like it is mine." I beat the fan like a bird wing.

"Well, it's yours."

I bring Walt some ice cream, my gift to him. I'm allowed to bring home as much as I want. In the freezer, the pints converge, huddling against the cold frost.

"Walt?"

"What?"

"This refrigerator needs defrosting. You've got so much ice, you can barely squeeze anything in."

"Strawberry's my favorite, today," Walt says, eating strawberry ice cream slowly. "My favorites are different on different days. Some days, it's peach. Some days, it's vanilla. Bring me a few chopped nuts, will you?"

I run hot water in a spaghetti pan and place it in the freezer.

"Unplug that refrigerator, or you'll kill all of us."
"Where are the nuts?"

"Cupboard."

The spiders view me on their hinged legs. I don’t kill them because it’s bad luck. "Peanuts, OK?"

"That’s it."

Walt holds out his hand, and I dump a small rivulet of nuts into his leathery palm.

Walt’s son was named Benjamin, Benny, after Ben Franklin. According to Walt, he was just as clever. He only went into the recruitment office out of curiosity. They saw a good man and wouldn’t let him go. He died this way: was caught on an aircraft carrier in the band that launches a plane. Flew so high, the impact on the water killed him instantly.

His belongings still remain: a chemistry set Walt goes to if he’s out of spices, a set of skis. Benny was fond of driving to Michigan on a minute’s notice and flying down the hills. A diploma from high school hangs on the wall and would whether Benny was dead or alive.

"It’s a damn shame," Walt says, chewing the nuts. "A damn shame. "Unplug that thing, or you’ll kill all of us," he says again.

Pans of water replace the old until I can see Walt’s refrigerator walls. They’re silver and cold.

Walt sorts through his tackle box; striped minnows fly through the air, held between his thumb and pointer finger by the silver fin. "This one’s a bass catcher." He holds up a bright, pink fish with a blue jewel eye.
"Pretty."

Some of the biggest tackle have fins as big as tablespoons.

"Take the hook off that one."

"You want me to ruin a bass catcher?"

"Not if you don't want to."

"Why, you want it?"

"It's pretty."

"I'll take the hook off and give it to you."

I scrape the ice, convinced I'm doing the right thing. Eighty-five dollars a month, and he's got maid service and a friend. I'm benefitting myself because I use the refrigerator.

Walt searches the drawer for a pair of needle-nose pliers.

"Don't impale that hook in your thumb," I warn. We sound like two old ladies.

He presents me with the fish. I wear the pink monstrosity on a chain around my neck.

We get Des Moines' news. National news announcers have the same urgent tone in their voices. It's the local ads that tell you you're in a different place. Local gimic announcers sound foreign on the ear.

And all the place names they push are unfamiliar: different amusement parks, different car lots. In time, maybe you'll know those places and run on out to them like they say to. One announcement that plays constantly pertains to a sanitorium of national repute. "A place to rest, come to Sullivan."
The TV button goes off as quickly as it goes on. Walt mutters a sigh; he can sleep now, without the noise.

After Ben died, Walt's wife, Lindy, moved out. She bought Walt his collection of souvenir plates. He has one for 39 states of the union. Rumor has it she doesn't travel, but picks them up at rummage sales. Mrs. Duncan, my manager's wife, gets a chuckle out of it. She tells me the gossip as I clean ice cream machines.

The plates line the hutch in the living room, garish, but they're unchipped.

He's allowed me to take Lindy's old sewing room with its firmer twin bed. I study the pink wicker thread box and its thousand spools. The colors look inky, like the colors of old ads: grey faces with a wash of bright pink for lips, turquoise for eyes, yellow for dress. How could she have left all this behind?

Lindy, Walt's wife, runs the projector at the movie house. She sleeps in a room above the coffee shop and helps with donut baking if there is a wedding or graduation. She seems quite happy. Sometimes, she takes tickets. Sometimes, I see her face pass between the dusty light of the movie hole, the one the movie comes through. You'd think she would want her sewing box, her thread which hugged Ben's knees when he had been out ripping up his pants again. She never sews. You'd think she'd want her sewing machine, a treadle one. You'd think she'd want the old manual presser, like the one they use at the dry cleaners. You'd think she'd want all these memories.
Her holy palms are still up all over the walls, woven into boats, long finger squeezers, braided bows. Her smell is an incensey one like one I would find in a confessional in a church.

I buy Walt a plaque at a rummage sale that says "Friends are the Flowers of life." It's corny, but it has a beautiful frame.

I give it to him.

He says, "You don't have to give me gifts."

I say, "I have no one else to give them to."

It's a big night at Cones. My arms get bitten up; I'm opening the service window so much that I have to plaster myself with Off. School's starting soon. People are restless. I've yet to tell them I'm a student. It doesn't matter. September's slow, and then, they'll close. My boss will enlist his daughter like he usually does, and her kids will eat macaroni for a month.

Walt comes down to see me, his hair still wet. He's been for a swim in the neighbor's pool, above-the-ground fun, floating around on a raft in the middle of a blue eye.

A men's baseball league invades Walt on the picnic table. They chew their ice cream, attacking the round mounds as if they were breasts. Walt digs into chocolate, today his favorite flavor.

"What do you think you're doing?" Walt asks.

Walt's wife, Lindy stands outside the screen, tapping insistently.
"What do you want? It's her, isn't it?" he asks.

"You could let me in. Don't bother." Lindy pushes the screen up in one corner, where a tack has come loose. She slips her hand inside and unhooks the lock. "Anybody could break in here." She stands in the middle of the braided rug.

She's about 45, with dark hair. On her feet are ballet flats, no stockings, her arms are thin, no match for him. "Nice to meet you," she says. "You're the first woman he's had."

"She's the first one who came to the door. Usually a boy rooms here," Walt clarifies.

From her purse, Lindy hands Walt a Cape Cod souvenir plate.

"Cape Cod," Walt says. "Look at this. National Seashore Lighthouse. That's a nice one, ain't it?"

I nod.

"Would you put this over in the hutch?"

I place the plate next to Alaska, The Last Frontier.

"Don't worry about alphabetizing them," Lindy says. "He never does."

I decide I'd better go to my room. "It's lovely here," I say over my shoulder. I shut the door.

Lindy's figurines, little porcelain angels, holding hearts which read, "January, February, March," decorate the window ledge. Maybe she's come back for these. I open the closet and rattle hangers. I can still hear them.

"You've got a lot of nerve, taking a young girl in."
"You're the one with nerve," Walt says.

"You want a divorce?"

"Do you?"

I can hear Lindy sit down on the couch, the newspapers crackling.

"Still covering everything with newspapers? I think this separation is fine."

"Fine, so do I."

Lindy leans back and howls. Only children cry like this. I put a pillow over my head, but she doesn't stop.

"Speak English to me," Walt shouts.

"You could at least introduce us," she yells, finally.

Walt and Lindy were too fine of parents. They produced too trusting a son. My parents were almost as fine as them.

Walt hands me a souvenir plate, Mammoth Cave, Virginia.

"Take it," he says. "She'll never know. And I want you to know, it's been nice having you."
On the envelope Monica wrote: Don't Bend. Photographs.

She was binding high school graduation photographs at the moment, so she didn't bother addressing each envelope. She wrote the graduate's name and threw the envelope into the large cardboard box which would eventually be shipped to Elyria High School. She studied the creamy white skin of the girls' shoulders. She had tied the drape to their goosepimple bodies—a black drape which could be adjusted to bosom-size, a little lower for nice cleavage, a little higher for none. All the girls wore a strand of pearls, and she could see which pearls were heirlooms not by the way they shot (pearls look like pearls whether they're real or plastic in a black and white photograph), but by the look of the girl. Creamy-complexioned girls with a stunning smile and soft hair wore a good grade of costume pearl, but costume, nevertheless. These girls might become airline stewardesses, or the lucky ones, Monica knew, might prosper in the business world. The tackier girls with an off-center part, no enhancement to the face, and, maybe, a pimple in the center of the forehead wore cheap pearls from Woolworths. One or two competent, mousier types with a chignon, clean faces, and freckles on their backs would possess the real pearls—a luminous strand with a gold safety clasp, heavy and unassuming. But as Monica has said before and will say, again to those who make comments about their pearl strand before posing: They all look the same in the picture, honey. That would bring a smile to their faces, and, FLASH, she'd capture it.
She did most of the retouching and oil painting of photographs in this two-person partnership, but when shooting graduation classes, both Monica and her husband, Lew, took pictures. Monica had learned the photography trade from her mother. She married Lew when she was 16 after having met him under an awning in downtown Akron in a rainstorm. Lew was also a photographer, having photographed planes in World War II. Monica was terrified of him at first; he was older, much older, by 12 years. He was dark. Monica thought he was a Jew, but he was only Catholic, and she converted. Monica grew to accept the Communion of Saints like she grew to accept nylons or plastic. She spoke of saints offhandedly, with a striking obedience. Catholicism was a way of loving Lew. Everything she did was a way of loving him. Even their dinners were partnerships. Monica was an excellent cook of rich foods—heavy on the butter, gravy, and pork—all the things Lew loved. Lew admired Monica's taste in just about everything, in silverware and in tablecloths. At Christmas, they'd take kooky pictures of themselves, cut off the heads, and place the heads above, say, two winter antelope or two individuals in a sleigh. "Christmas Greetings," from Monica and Lew the cards would say. Later when their daughter, Kay, was born, they would photograph by the fireplace on Exchange Street, a loving family—Mommy, Daddy, and Baby—and send that out.

But, Kay wasn't born yet, and their shop was on Main Street. Monica continued to bind the photographs in string and cardboard while Lew developed. The walls to the darkroom were thin, and Lew and Monica were holding a conversation. Lew had that late-Saturday-afternoon
feeling as he swished the photos in developer; he was lazy. He wanted some corn and, maybe, some porkchops. He was hungry, and he was tired, and he dreamed of pulling the green plastic window blind over the window and going home.

"Monica, why don't you close up, and we'll get out of here. We'll go square dancing."

Monica was staring at the only black girl at Elyria High. She thought that would be nice. They went square dancing every Saturday. It wasn't much, but it was something to do.

"Righto," she said. "What about Mrs. Tierney's granddaughter?"

"I've got her right here," Lew shouted out of the darkroom. Mrs. Tierney's granddaughter, a dimpled two-year-old with curl in the middle of her forehead like a jewel, lay developing in Lew's pan. At the precise moment, he snatched her out of the liquid and hung her up to dry.

"Oh, she's sweet," Lew said. Lew and Monica were good photographers. They could still be enchanted by a face after seeing thousands of them. They could still admire, truly admire, good taste in appearance. They could still decorate, arrange, and prompt a less pleasing subject so that he looked half-way decent, if not down-right unusual.

Monica pulled the brittle, green plastic over her storefront. She was kneeling in the window, reaching over the display of beautifully framed photographs. She knocked one over with her knee. A toothy
soldier who was fighting over in Vietnam lay tilted on the crushed velvet. Monica set him upright. She smiled at him.

Monica knew the feeling of someone watching her, a startling feeling as if her big toe had been dipped in ice water. She felt it then, the coldness down her spine. Before her, through the green plastic, through the glass, stood a man and a little boy. They stood still, posed, practically, hand in hand, smiling at her, wanting something from her. Leaves blew around their feet.

Steven Brewster was a fine-looking man, a man who would photograph well. He had extraordinarily high and pronounced cheekbones and a beautiful, sharp nose. If it weren't for his ordinary clothes, he'd look rich. Vincent Brewster, his little boy, stood silently next to him in a cowboy hat and a small, navy blue trenchcoat.

"Closed," Monica mouthed. "Closed," she said again, hearing her voice, knowing the man could not hear her. She climbed down from the display and opened the door, which she had locked. "I'm sorry, we open again at 10:00 on Monday."

Steven Brewster came to her, his son in hand.

"I'd like some photographs," he said. "Could you do them?"

"Certainly, but not now. We're closed." Monica noticed the boy's shoes. The cowboy boots looked new, shined with spit, purchased for the occasion.

"I need these pictures as soon as possible," he told her.

Monica studied the boy. His round face reminded her of her nephew, Pete's face.
"One minute," she said to the man.

"Lew? Lew?" She tapped on the darkroom door. "Feel like shooting? We've got a kid out here with a pushy father."

"Make porkchops for me tonight," Lew said, tasting the dinner as he hung up the last picture. Lew wanted some porkchops.

"Should I send them away?" Monica spoke to the door.

"Naw, don't send them away." Lew emerged. "I'll take them."

Lew loved the way his wife could lay out a meal. Everything was so nice in serving dishes. Picturesque is what it was. And she could screw. God, could she screw. This is what he whispered into her ear: I am hopelessly in love with you.

Monica ushered the little boy in. His father followed behind him.

"This is Vincent," she told her husband.

"Hi, Vincent." Lew smiled, as he pulled the blue background down to the floor.

Monica helped Vincent off with his coat.

"I'd like the hat on him," Steven Brewster said.

"Fine," Monica said, hanging the trenchcoat on a coat-tree.

"A real cowboy," Lew said. "All right. Stand up tall." And he began to pose him.

Monica eyed the man. He had declined the chair she offered and was standing near the portable lights. He was frowning, as if something was wrong.

"This is Steven Brewster," Monica said, wondering if it was the lack of an introduction which bothered him. "Vincent's father. This is
my husband, Lew." Monica motioned to Lew, who had set the boy's hands on his hips.

"Nice to meet you," Lew said.

"I'd like these photos to be nude," Steven Brewster said.

"Nude?" Lew stopped posing the boy and took a cigarette out of his pocket. Twenty years ago, he had illegally taken topless photos of wives for men in the trenches, but he'd never shot a child nude. "I'm sorry, we can't do that."

"I don't see why not," Steven Brewster said. He busied himself removing the boy's shirt. "He's only a child." He tugged off the boy's pants.

Vincent began to cry.

"Lew," Monica said. She had been asked to photograph a honeymoon: the party, the threshold, intercourse. She almost did, once, but a sense of propriety had kept her from it.

Vincent held his forearm to his face.

"What are you crying about?" Steven Brewster said. "If you cry, you won't get to wear your gun belt."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Brewster. We don't do nudes."

Steven Brewster strapped the shiny belt around the child. In the holsters of the belt were two toy guns. The boy was nude except for the belt, the hat, and the new pair of cowboy boots.

"Now, stop crying," Steven Brewster said.

Monica felt herself begin to sweat. She felt it damply all over her body.
Lew stood, rooted to the ground, smoking his cigarette.

"Lew," Monica whispered.

"What are you crying about?" the father asked.

Suddenly, the boy pulled the guns out of their holsters and shouted, "Bang!"

"That's a good boy," said Steven Brewster, diddling the child until his penis was a stiff, miniature rod. The boy was perfectly shaped, perfectly proportioned. His scrotum was as flawless as an albino peach.

"Now, take it," said Steven Brewster. "Take it."

And Lew took it.

At the square dance next week, Lew and Monica promenaded. They had, more or less, stopped talking about the Brewsters. Lew had gone ahead and developed the pictures and sent them the hell away. The boy looked like Howdy Doody.

Monica wore a large, swishy skirt. Her hair hung down in braids. She had beautiful color in her cheeks. She ponied with her husband, promenading and turning. But never before had she enjoyed dancing in strangers' arms as much as she did that night.
Nora imagined what the plainclothesman was wearing. For all Nora knew, it could be the woman, standing stark naked next to her, showering. It could be that girl who just passed her in the sweat pants, with the wool poncho over her head. It could be the woman tying her shoes on the bench in front of the lockers. Whoever it was, the locker room was definitely being patrolled because there was a sign on the bulletin board next to the swim schedule that said, "For Your Protection, Locker Room Now Being Patrolled by Plainclothesman."

According to the sign, the plainclothesman would be easy to spot because he would be a man, but Nora guessed the officials meant "plainclotheswoman" and had not yet adopted non-sexist language. Nora wondered if there had been any rapes or assaults lately, and if she just hadn't heard about it. Those kind of things can easily be hushed up, she knew. In her small town of Gina that often happened. According to Nora's friend, Lucy, who had lived in Gina a year longer than Nora, over 7.3 rapes occurred a year. Very few ever reached the newspaper. That was something they didn't like to publicize. "No need for everyone to go getting scared," Lucy would say.

Someone was protecting Nora. She didn't know who it was, but someone at that moment was looking out for her welfare—her guardian angel. Gina wasn't like Cleveland, Nora's hometown, where you had to pass through gates, show identification and have a special card to use the gym at the university. It wasn't even like Des Moines, Iowa. It
was completely open. Anything could happen. No one, not even the reporters, suspected a thing.

Nora soaped her body with the small bar of violet soap she had bought in a soap specialty shop. The soap was wearing down. Soon, it would be a thin sliver of violet color and smell, and she'd have to return to the soap shop to purchase a new bar. She often imagined that she was the envy of all the women in the shower room because she had such a lovely bar of soap and such lovely shampoo. The shampoo matched the soap; it was also violet; that's why she bought it. She used her special soap only at the gym. People probably believed she had a whole closet full of matching soaps and shampoos and creams and that her bathroom was done in a mauve color, with a gold, shell-shaped sink. Let them think that, Nora thought to herself. The soap made a rich lather. She encouraged this froth with a delicate, pink washcloth, exfoliating her dead skin.

The woman next to her was running her fingers through her pubic hair. Her lather was plain white, and she used no soap, but the suds from her shampoo. She mundanely rinsed the soap from her body. A woman walked by both of them in jockey shorts. They were men's jockey shorts with the flap. The girl in the shorts was rather free-spirited, Nora thought, because she did not shave her armpits. She also wore a permanent ankle bracelet made out of woven, multicolored threads. The plainclothesman was undoubtedly protecting her, too. Maybe, she was the plainclothesman.
Nora turned off the water, first the cold. She stood under the hot, steamy water for as long as she could, feeling her pores opening. Then she turned off the hot, when she couldn't stand it any longer.

Nora had moved to Gina over two months ago from Cleveland, Ohio, where she had worked teaching home economics at Cleveland State University. She now taught at Gina College in Gina, Iowa. She was Chairman of Home Economics Department. She, Nora Lewis, was Chairman of the Home Economics Department of Gina, Iowa. How had she done it? Every day, she asked herself this question as she taught students about textiles and family dynamics.

Gina wasn't like Cleveland. The biggest difference was the town's honesty. She had noticed that the first day she arrived. By accident, she left her wallet in a public bathroom with $52 in it. When she returned an hour later, after she realized it was gone, the wallet was still there with all the money in it. Nora could not believe anyone had not stolen the money. She called her mother and told her the story. Her mother couldn't believe it either. Everyone left their doors unlocked. Nora ran alone at night. She was safe. But Nora tried to remember Lucy's words of warning when she started to feel too safe; "It happens here, too, only you just don't hear about it."

Nora remembered how her great grandmother, Gram, used to call rape "insult." "Did you hear how that woman got insulted?" she used to say.

Nora slipped the shampoo, along with her violet soap in its little holder, into a plastic-lined pouch. She shook some of the water out of
her brown hair and pulled in her stomach. She compared it to another
woman's stomach that was being massaged with body cream.

Was that woman's stomach bigger than hers?

She walked carefully on the slick floor to the locker, where she
retrieved her towel and began to towel off.

Drying bathing suits hung from the lockers around her, but they
were less than perfect. Someone had taken a pair of scissors and
snipped them at the waist, cut the bottoms off. Ragged-edged bathing
suits hung, vandalized, from the lockers.

Who would do such a thing? Nora thought.

Nora fingered one, spreading it out evenly, turning it into a
little, stretchy top, so she could see exactly where the bottom had been
cut off. This suit had a pair of breast pads sewed into it, to flatter
this woman's figure. Nora felt like a voyeur. She looked around to see
if anyone was watching her. Perhaps, they would think she had cut the
suit.

She towelled her body hard, like the Japanese women who showered at
the pool did. Japanese women towelled hard, removing every dead skin
cell. Nora guessed that's what gave their skin such a beautiful
luminosity.

A woman was weighing herself. She moved around on the scale,
looking for the most opportune place to stand--the place where she would
weigh the least. She let both heels hang off the scale. Nora guessed
she was no more than 120 pounds.
Nora applied the cream the way she applied leather conditioner to her boots, imagining the little wrinkles filling up with cream, loosening and fattening, so they would soon go away.

A woman was wringing her bathing suit in the wringer which the locker room had installed because of the recent vandalism. The suits were to be wrung dry and slipped into the lockers, so they wouldn’t hang drying and vulnerable from the locks outside. The importance of following this procedure was stressed on the bulletin board, next to the plainclothesman sign. "Due to vandalism, please keep suits in lockers."

That had to be her, Nora said to herself. There she was. That was the plainclothesman. Nora slipped herself into her underwear. The suspect was wearing a windbreaker. She walked through the room briskly. She had short hair, and she looked as though she could be a security guard. The woman inspected Nora putting on her bra.

But the woman was only there to pick up a misplaced tennis shoe. Yes, on closer inspection, the woman was in sweats. She had been to the gym earlier to work out. The woman picked up her lost tennis shoe, which lay upside down in the corner of the locker room, and walked out. Maybe, this was an elaborate plot, Nora thought. Maybe, there was a chute though which they slid from upstairs spare tennis shoes which landed in the corner every hour. Nora looked up. There was no hole above her. There was no tiny rat hole underneath the lockers. The woman was legit. She had lost her tennis shoe.

People began looking up to see what Nora was looking at. "Leak," Nora said. "It was leaking the other night."
Nora took her time putting on her clothes. She towelled her feet neatly until they were perfectly dry. Then she sat for a moment, thinking about making her Home Economics Department interesting. She thought about instating cooking classes for one credit, taught by individual students who had a particular skill in a particular dish. Students would receive one credit for teaching and for taking the courses. Nora thought it was a good idea. Many of the girls had specialties. She also wanted to instate a wedding cake baking class.

Nora put her cotton socks on and slipped her shoes over her dry feet before she stood up in the puddle of water. Her khaki shorts hung above her knees. It was a cool, summer night. She slipped a cotton sweater over her head.

Nora could sense that she was alone. She could hear no echoing in the shower stall. No one was applying make-up at the mirror. The scale was empty. She was alone.

Perhaps, she would hear a toilet flush. She didn't.

She quickly put her earrings in, looking in the mirror at the world behind her. If someone came in the locker room, Nora could see him from behind.

Nora began to hum. She was dressed. All she had to do was roll up the towel, put her swimsuit in the plastic bag and throw everything into her backpack. She kind of liked the silence—no one coming in, no one going out.

Nora walked to the swimsuit with the breast pads and ripped the breast pads out. She left the room, glad to get out into the dark.
LIVING IN A FAIRY TALE

The students are covering themselves with sheets again. Martha sees them on her lunch hour. She wonders if any of them can somehow see through his sheet and up her dress as she steps over them. As she crosses the floor of bodies in the blue and white dress with the full skirt and anchor buttons, the dress she wears when she wants to look pretty, she looks at the clock and calculates: 53 minutes for lunch.

Martha has worked at the Career Office for eleven years, and every year, the students have staged a reaction to the appearance of the C.I.A. recruiters on campus. Her first year, they rolled an enormous log in front of the car of the head recruiter and surrounded him. They held him captive, foregoing Biology exams, English discussion groups, rat experiments in the Psych Lab, until he pushed back the crowd with his car door and shouted, "I have to go to the bathroom." Students accompanied him to the Men's Room where they stood watch over him for two more hours.

Johnathan Rice, who now walks the halls of the adjoining building, was one of those same, rebellious students. Johnathan Rice actually had his hand smashed in the C.I.A. officer's car. Who would have thought he'd be back at the institution where he broke all the rules, explaining new rules to a group of different students?

He is also preparing to go to lunch. He picks up his trench coat, gazing at four pet mice. He is a biologist, enjoying a year of lectureship at one of the finest liberal arts colleges in the country.
He slowly wraps a scarf around his neck, enjoying the tranquility of the sleeping mice. Mice sleep in a pile for warmth.

The students lie on the ground, some giggling, some barking commands from under the white sheets. They considered splashing red food coloring on the sheets, but, wanting to say something about the starkness of nuclear war, decided against it.

Many students want to talk, but the few who have designated themselves as leaders whisper, "No talking." They wait patiently for the head recruiter to adjourn his meeting with a handful of students and come out for lunch.

They want to make an impact on him. They lie under the sheets, and the great administrative hall grows as quiet as a morgue.

Johnathan Rice cuts across the campus in search of a good egg salad sandwich. He knows one can be found at Arnold's. Arnold's is a small, deli-type store which has been overcharging students for years.

Johnathan Rice purchases an egg salad and, while studying a sign placed above a display of Halvah which says this: Exotic Jewish Cheese, remembers he has forgotten the form for his Histology offering next semester. He knows one can be found at the Administration Building, so he hurries back, leaving a trail of egg salad behind him.

It's March, early spring--Johnathan Rice's favorite time. The Square lies buried under a crust of soon-to-melt snow. The melting process has already begun. Rivulets of water run under the snow at
intersections. The blue-grey announcement board at the corner is an antique. Constructed of copper and glass, this thing of beauty might have been unscrewed from the ground in a lesser part of the country, but here it has remained for a hundred years. In it, there are schedules of concerts and posters of upcoming events.

Johnathan passes a Co-op, remembering the smell of fresh baked bread that would fill the place every day. He lived in a Co-op for two years. An alternative to dorm living, they would illegally take in people who needed a place to stay. Anyone could eat at Co-ops for free. And they didn't bother with stuff like segregated bathrooms.

"It appears, MaryAnn," Bob Allison, the announcer on the local CBS news, whispers, "that this," the camera pans across the floor, "is a Die-In. Like a Sit-In."

"Yes. And what exactly are the students protesting?" MaryAnn Jerome, his co-anchor, asks.

A student pokes his head out from under the sheet to be on TV.

"It seems they're protesting two things. One, the C.I.A. on their campus. And two, nuclear war."

Martha wishes she were a student. She wishes she could afford it. She probably wouldn't be under a sheet, but she'd be talking about it. She'd be sitting in the cafeteria eating a pastrami and ham and telling her friends about it. She brushes the hair out of her eyes, wondering if she'll be on the news. She doesn't want to be. TV has a way of
making you look fatter than you really are. Martha was on TV once, for climbing a tree and saving a child too afraid to climb down.

The recruiters should be out by now and speeding to Preston's, the only decent restaurant in town. Maybe, they called the C.I.A. and asked them what to do, and the C.I.A. said, "Stay inside."

Martha sees an eye appear in the hole of the frosted sticky paper which covers the window of the Career Office. Like the eye above the dollar bill pyramid, it presides over the scene with authority.

Martha should probably leave. Who knows if her job is jeopardized for being on the scene of a demonstration?

She had attended the alternative C.I.A. Information Session last night. Maybe they even kept track of that. If she hadn't attended, she wouldn't have heard about the state-endorsed torture techniques and tips for assassinations. The investigators had said the main mission of the Central Intelligence Agency was not the welfare of U.S. citizens, but the welfare of U.S. dollars. After the lecture, there was a question and answer period. One student asked, first thing, "Has anyone found a ring?" He was scorned by his fellow students. They, with legitimate questions, were preempted by this asshole who lost some ring his father gave him.

"Does the C.I.A. gather information for the United States government?" a student asked.

"Yes, but it also acts against individuals and countries who offend."

"Does the C.I.A. stage assassinations?"
"Yes."

The ring was found under a chair.

Johnathan Rice finishes the first half of his egg salad sandwich by the time he reaches the Administration Building. The door slams shut behind him. He's about to take a step when he looks down at over 250 students lying on the floor. Johnathan takes a bite out of the second half of the sandwich. Sheets cover the students.

Martha can't help notice the man in the grey trenchcoat kneel down and lift the sheet on six of the students. Some of the students instantly sit up, thinking, "the gig is up." But some remain motionless. Across all their faces is a look of questioning: who are you? One student recognizes Dr. Rice.

It's Johnathan Rice, thinks Martha, a guy she remembers from when he was a student on campus. She and Johnathan were both 18 when she had started working at the college. If anyone had the authority to disturb the demonstration, he did. Martha had been attracted to Johnathan throughout his college days, but her position at the college never compared to his, and it still doesn't. Johnathan now places his legs under the sheet and sits, half in, half out of the demonstration.

"Don't you want to lie down?" one student asks.

Johnathan Rice lies back, like a mummy in a coffin.

Bob Allison and MaryAnn Jerome, sensing his age, hurry to interview him.
The recruitment officer emerges from the office. He reminds Martha of the County Treasurer, who takes her water and sewer money. The Treasurer wears white shoes even in winter. The recruitment officer wears black tie shoes with the little holes. He has a hungry look, as if he'd like nothing better than one of Preston's eight ounce steaks.

He notices the bodies on the floor and takes the path of least resistance around them. In his hurry, he steps on someone's hand. Martha witnesses one of the best apologies she's ever seen. He even stops for a moment to examine the hand.

The students pick their heads up one by one after the C.I.A. officers leave. Someone says, "Thank you very much. I think we've been effective."

Martha's boss, Lisa, waves at her.

"Is this a typical reaction?" Bob Allison asks a recruiter on the way out.

The recruitment officer says, "No comment."

Martha goes into a fast food restaurant. She stares at the menu and scratches her hand.

Does she want a ham and cheese?

She can't decide. The waitress waits impatiently, viewing the arriving lunch crowd, saying, "Yes?"

Martha can't decide. There's something about observing injustice which takes her breath away. Martha remembers watching the Vietnam War on TV. She remembers having to sit down to dinner after it. She didn't
want to eat because of the excitement of all of it. And then, there was that time Gail Rowen, a girl who'd been at Kent State when all hell broke loose, came to the house when Martha was a girl. Gail had kept them all captivated on the front porch late into the evening with her stories of the falling bodies.

Martha stares at the illuminated menu board. She views the variations on a ham and cheese: ham and cheese with peppers, ham and cheese with extra cheese.

"I think I'll go somewhere else," she says.

"Thank you and come again," the waitress says.

Johnathan picks up his form at the Ad Building and mumbles to the secretary that he will get it in on time. He watches the students gather their books which did not appear on TV because of the sheets. Johnathan glances down at his hand where the C.I.A. recruiter's car door broke his thumb years ago.

Martha wanders into another restaurant. She feels her heart racing. On the walls are white picture frames like miniature lattice, surrounding pictures of yellow flowers, two pictures and then a mirror. About 15 sets of these mirrors and pictures line the walls.

She opens the menu. She has her choice of green beans, corn, or coleslaw with the special.

She feels giddy, as though it were Christmas. Why can't she settle down?
Across from her is Johnathan Rice. He's come in for a piece of pie. As the waitress rushes to him first, Martha feels slighted. Like a queen, she thinks of all the things she like to have: a bottle of expensive cream to rub on her elbows, a child, fresh corn, jewelry, emeralds, rubies, and diamonds. Sapphires. A dog on a leash.

Instead of the items on the list, she says, "I'll have one of these." She points to a photograph of a green milkshake in the menu. When forsaking it all for one simple product, Martha thinks, it might as well be a new one. "New, sweet, creme de mint milkshake, vanilla ice cream, whole mint chocolate chips," she reads from the menu.

"They're good," the waitress says.

"Well, they're new," Martha says.

Johnathan Rice orders himself a piece of pie. He notices a very lovely woman. Her face is glowing. Her hair is curling. She is becoming the most beautiful woman in the world. He wouldn't know this, but it's all at the thought of the annihilation of the whole world.
For some reason, we're friends. She's not the most popular person here, and I don't like crowds. My roommate, Lucille, on the other hand, attracts crowds. No one bothers us. Mary is the complainer. I'm the listener.

Mary drinks three glasses of chocolate milk at every meal. She spends most of her meal stirring the powder into the milk while carrying on a conversation. She'll lick the spoon, glance at you, tell you a bit of gossip. All at once she'll jump up and make more chocolate milk. It's her secret recipe.

The food is not too bland. Mary is too nervous to eat because she keeps drinking too much chocolate milk. She's the only white South African at this peace school we're attending. She tells everyone that they almost didn't admit her because they're boycotting South Africa, but she just managed to squeeze by because someone didn't accept a scholarship.

Everyone has a story of discrimination here at the Peace School in Norway.

A typical Norwegian dinner, served by a blond woman, consists of white fish, cauliflower, and boiled potatoes. Often a soup made out of sour cream is served. Reindeer meat is a big item over here; they roll it into balls. Tubes are big over here. Mayonnaise comes in tubes, as does caviar, my favorite food, as does softened cheese.
Mary wears flowing, aristocratic pants from the 1930s and white tee-shirts buttoned to the neck. At the dinner table she sits with a chocolate milk, pulling the top of her shirt together, knowing she's beautiful. "No one in this world is going to smile for you," she says.

I met her through Juan. We were standing in line, waiting to sign up for a field trip to a Norwegian modern-day farm.

"What's wrong with you?" Juan asked.

"What do you mean?"

"You look so glum."

Mary came down to see what was taking Juan so long. She and Juan were going on the field trip together. Her mother was alone, and people were telling her to leave South Africa because the whole place was going to blow. "That's straight from the horse's mouth. But I'm so glad to be here."

I stare at her. She has wispy blond hair that falls around her face as if she were an angel. She's got an accent that sounds British. She seems to be talking sense.

I have never encountered so many people with so many grievances in one place.

The buildings of the Norwegian historic farm are laid out very close together—a kitchen building, a sleeping building, an eating building, barns. Connecting all of these is a walking space. The roofs are made out of grass. The long eating tables are like long
ships. Norwegians welcomed travellers even then. I remember the first week we got here; the Prime Minister welcomed us to Oslo. "We know that the summer is truly here when the international students arrive. We want you to step lightly in the dance."

The modern-day farm is exactly the same. A painted Norwegian cupboard sits against the wall. There is a fireplace in the corner and a small, three-legged stool next to it for the weary. Down at the far end of the room is another long table. The rest of the furnishings are different: a leather sofa, a VCR, one of those swivel leather chairs with the wooden back. The geraniums are so exquisite; I ask if they're real. These farmers rent their house out to tourists. Hundreds of tourists pass through a year, signing the records book, getting a glimpse of the olden days.

In the barn, the Argentinian farmhand explains in Spanish the machines that shock the milk cows. We've just heard the day before stories of machines that shock people. It's a rigorous program of questions and answers.

Mary and I walk back from a Norwegian folk night. We've just seen eight Norwegian folk dancers, a Norwegian folk singer, and a Norwegian violinist. Later we'll see slides of Sri Lanka, Israel, and El Salvador in the same auditorium. It just doesn't make sense. The folk dancers wore traditional costumes—blue and green jumpers with red and white embroidery around the neck, white blouses with puffy sleeves. The men wore knickers, white shirts. The leader of
the group was a short American of Norwegian descent. (We were at a picnic, and an American stood up on a picnic table and shouted, "Can I have your attention?" Actually, all he wanted to do was to get people to sign up for NATIVE FOOD NIGHT, but a Canadian said, "Oh, my God, we haven't been here for a week, and the Americans are taking over.") The American folk dance leader described the dances before they did them. Most of the dances involved hopping, clapping, and walking in a circle. Some had intricate hand movements in which the dancers changed partners until they had danced with everyone. Mary and I were sitting next to Michael, the Business Manager of the Peace School. His grievance is (seeing that he's the Business Manager) he lacks POLITICAL AWARENESS.

One couple, a red-head and a balding man, danced particularly well. The woman was obviously in love with him. She seemed preoccupied, as if she lived with him, and they had forgotten to pay the rent, or as if they had some engagement to get to after the gig.

The men put one foot in front of them, heel up, knee straight, and leaned back as if they were reclining. The bald man, who knew the secret, did this movement with his back perfectly straight, turning his head to the audience, intensifying his eyes.

Even at this wonderous sight, I am depressed. I've never been out of the country. My mother says I've got to do things in big ways. So I've placed myself in this miniature international country with no idea about politics.
We're walking back from the folk night. Michael says, "I have a
surprise. I have made a surprise for you."

"For who?" Mary asks.

"For you." He looks at me.

"Good." She doesn't want to study Norwegian. She's taking
Norwegian at the school as well as the Peace Course. The Peace
Course is listed as a sociology course. It's the study of violence
in the world in order to reduce violence in the world. I've never
even heard of some of the countries where these people are from.
Suriname?

"What is it?" I ask.

"It's orange juice."

Mary, the complainer, spent last night complaining that there is
no orange juice at the Peace School, only vegetable juice, which no
one drinks. "In all my life I have never heard of chopping up
vegetables and drinking them. It's disgusting. I hate tomatoes." I
feel guilty that she's quibbling about vegetable juice when we're
sitting across from Ethiopians. She was trying to convince Michael
to tell the houseparents to buy orange juice. Michael says, "You
must write a note to the houseparents and tell them your grievance."
He says it calmly, as if every grievance has equal weight. I will
miss the caviar once I leave here.

Michael, Mary, and I are walking along the cobblestone we'knay
which leads from the auditorium to the school dormitory. Apparently,
Michael knows where the surprise is because in no time, we reach the
top--a small roof, enclosed by a balcony. Many people sunbathe here in the daytime. It's deserted now. One Polish woman loves to lean off the balcony topless--a ship woman.

I think Michael likes me. He either likes me or Mary. He hasn't made up his mind. Mary pays no attention to him. I like him because he's not involved. I can avoid political debates by eating with him. At lunch time, we talk about chocolates.

The Norwegian sky is dark blue that night. In a glass of water, there is a tiny candle. Michael has made us this dinner: thin slices of bread spread with caviar, wine poured into glasses, cherries on a beautiful plate. He has taken so much care in the presentation. All the stems have been plucked out.

"This is the kind of wine my sister likes," Michael says.

Michael still lives with his Hungarian parents.

"Your sister," Mary says. Bawdily, she throws her head back and laughs. I try not to call attention to myself, eating quietly the lovely food he has prepared--the appreciative guest.

Michael opens another bottle of wine and then another, pouring another glass. He slightly twists the bottle as the wine fills the globes.

"You're a gypsy," Mary tells him. "A gypsy." Michael's family fled Hungary before he was born. He's a strange mix of East and West--pure black hair, pure white skin, red cheeks. Mary and Michael would make beautiful children.
It's good to eat with no debate, no life and death, just food: pure, salty fish eggs, the wine. I am relaxing.

Mary begins eating cherries by popping them in her mouth, removing the pits with her fingers. She puts handfuls of them into the wine, marinating them, sucking them. She is teasing us.

Mary lifts her glass. "What is the purpose of this?"

"To enjoy."

"With millions dying?"

I lean back in the chair which he's dragged up here, letting the wine overtake me. All grievances do not have equal weight; I must remember this. Showering becomes difficult when you're weighted down by the weight of the world. Like a switch--on and off--I step out of myself, forgetting for a minute who I am. I am the American who listens too hard, who will collect stories.

Below in the compound, a group of people sit under a tree. Only their shapes can be seen. One woman wears a turban. Someone is walking across the gravel with a laundry basket on her head. Two people are kissing in a doorway. The night watchman is looking in a window and saying, "Can I help you, friend?" He's from Yugoslavia. He attended the first Peace School over 50 years ago. Every year he comes back as the night watchman. He hands out aspirin, patrols the grounds, gives people clean sheets.

I don't know why I have come on this trip. Maybe, it was for a new way to see things.
Mary slips off her shoes and puts her feet on the table. "I think I have lovely feet. Does anyone have a cigarette?"

If coming on this trip was for nothing else I have to think it was for this. What the heck? It's the only way to survive in this battle zone, this peace conference: moment by moment.

Michael apologizes. "There are no cigarettes." He squares himself in the chair, pouring more wine. "There are cigarettes at the station." This is Michael's authoritative voice.

I wonder who else has been up here? Who has walked out the double doors and observed from above? Who has slept on the roof? What banners and streamers have hung from this sky? Our dormitory used to house the Nazis. Funny, the irony in it. They've turned the whole place into a Peace School.

"I'm going to find a cigarette." Mary puts her feet into the air, as if she were doing a V-sit, plopping them down on the ground.

"Good luck," I tell her, watching her walk away. It's hard to focus.

Mary goes to the bathroom. The odds of her walking to the station are about zero. Michael asks me how I am now that we're alone.

"I can hardly blink."

"I'm doing this for you."

"Thank you."

"I couldn't not ask Mary to come along because she was with you."
"That's fine."

"Here." He's offering me a plate of goat's cheese.

"No thank you."

"COMRADES." Mary has found Thomas in the hall. She's smoking one of his cigarettes. Thomas has a squinty little face and a goatee. His big belly reminds me of my big brother's belly. "Having a little party, and you didn't invite me, COMRADES?" Thomas is South African, too.

"We're inviting you now," Michael says.

"Here's your queen." He releases Mary's arm, as if she were a bitch in plaid pants.

"Have some caviar." I'm speaking.

"Of course, caviar." Thomas takes a slice of bread. "So this is where you go at night. Very bourgeois." Thomas has been trying to get me to join the African National Congress. The closest he's got has been to get me to negotiate an article, but I can't stand his intensity. He sends me notes every day, follows me around. In America, we'd call it "harassment." He's eating the bread. "I have those posters for you." He's been trying to give me posters of Norwegian--South African peace rallies for days. "They're yours if you promise not to destroy them."

"I wouldn't do that."

"She's a good American." I shouldn't let him bother me. All he's after is a box of subversive American materials my friend, Rod, collected. My friend pretended he was Elmer Fudd. He sent away for
neo-nazi material using the name, "Elmer Fudd." Literature from over 300 American fascist groups poured in. Thomas wants this stuff. He wants to do a documentary on corrupt American life. I should never have told him about it. How would I get it to him? I might get thrown in jail if I send it through the mail.

Michael is pouring Thomas another glass of wine.

What he really wants is my story. My father, the great American, committed suicide just like the salesman in Death of a Salesman. If only I can interview her for my paper, is what he's thinking. All we have of each other are images. I've tried to keep this family secret a secret. But the other day, it slipped out. Ninzi was telling stories of how she's seen so much pain. She hasn't lived in Africa for 16 years. I had to have a place to put this. I deposited it with them—the 12 members of the Peace School.

"I never drink when I'm on duty." He waves his hand. "No, thank you."

Mary leans over the balcony, flicking her cigarette to the ground. "Hello." She's waving to the night watchman.

"Hello, friend."

Thomas is always on duty; "mobilizing," he calls it.

"Would you like to see something?" Thomas asks. Mary reaches into his pocket, like a monkey, and pulls out a pack of cigarettes.

"What is it?"

"It's very interesting."
I've learned that "interesting" is a derogatory term, a put down. If a non-American says "it's very interesting," he's referring to your lack of interest. Thomas grabs the glass and throws it back. "I'm sure Michael knows what it is."

"What is it?"

"The old cells. Good year." He's referring to the wine.

"It's dirty down there. I don't want to go." Michael is so forceful when he's drunk. "...and it's too cold." He takes out a heap of cherries, piles them on the plate and leaves the stems on.

Mary suggests, "ping pong." Ping pong is the national game of this temporary international country. There are over 400 of us from 65 different countries. We all play ping pong.

"Do you know this girl asked me if I flew out of South Africa?" Thomas ruffles my hair. "She asked me if I fucking flew out of South Africa. Did I fucking charter a plane and fly out? I ran out on foot. If you would have smelled me after 14 days, you would have said get this dog away from me." He's plucking the stem out of a cherry. "America is the most insular society I know of."

"I want to play ping pong," Mary reports.

Thomas laughs. He loves a good joke. "Cheap joke," he calls it.

We're walking through the dormitory, the one which used to house the Nazis during WWII. Rented by the Peace School in the summer, the walls are scrubbed every day by blond maids, who then go lie naked in
the sun. Along the walls are signs of upcoming events—talks and movies, slide presentations on various trouble spots in the world. Somewhere, someone plays the piano, as if he didn't have a care in the world. In a lounge, a man from Nepal is lecturing on the exchange program he runs for American students. In a parlor, a Philippino man is orating. "Our gift to the world...."

But I know where I'm going. In the basement, people are passing with laundry baskets. The laundry room is packed again. It is only here, in the laundry room, that I feel safe. I want to sit down with the black women, the very traditional ladies, and enjoy life as a washer woman. It's the only image I can understand. But the sign-up book for washers and dryers is full. The ping pong room is also full. Someone is organizing a tournament.

"Go. Go for it." They play around the world ping pong—where you run around the table and hit the ball.

We walk down the steps, four quiet investigators, to the lower basement. We walk to the holding cells where they used to put prisoners who committed minor crimes. A man who teaches art here was a Norwegian war resister. He, along with 15 other ship builders, had procrastinated in building a German ship and then had sunk it by unloosening the bolts. He had spent some time in this very cell. "The whole ship just fell apart," he told me.

The cell we look at is no more than six feet wide. Thomas goes in first, then Mary, then Michael, then me. Already I have claustrophobia. The ceiling is so low we have to duck. My head is
smashed into Michael's side. Mary leans her elbow on my back. "What is this place?"

Thomas sits down first, then Michael, then me, then Mary. "What are we going to do, have an orgy?" Mary asks.

I feel as if I'm a rabbit in a hutch. A moment ago, we were looking at stars. Now, it's so dark, I can't see two feet in front of me.

"Pretend we've never been born," Thomas says. "This is what it's like. This is where we go."

"So this is what it's like to die," Michael says.

"Gloomy," I say.

"OK. Now everyone take off your clothes," Mary says.

"What if someone locks us in here?"

"Does anyone have a guitar?" Thomas asks.

Eventually, we're quiet. No one makes a sound. I listen somewhere to the sound of a washing machine, washing away the sweat of the day: swish, swish, swish.

Then, boom, Thomas strikes a match.

No our canary hasn't died, yet.

Thomas puts the dazzling light in front of Mary. "Blow."

"Blow it out yourself."
A man who'd been watching Myra all night (as she shimmied in his face, as she lifted a leg over his head, as she made him so hard he wanted to burst) said, "thank you," instead of leaving a tip in her brassiere. Myra responded by pointing to her beaded tits, repeating the thank you.

"Thank you," she said.

I don't know where that man comes from, but he doesn't have any class. You don't watch a stripper all night and not tip her. It's like making love to someone all night and not bringing them a piece of pie if they order it. It's like sitting down to dinner, eating, and leaving.

Myra's better than that. She didn't say a word. Not a word. Sometimes the other strippers jump in and say something like, "Aren't you going to tip her?" They didn't tonight.

Myra's so new. She thinks what they say is true. She thinks the heat is keeping the people away. If it rains, she believes what they say. They tell her the customers stay home when it rains. She doesn't make more than $20.00 a night in tips. She doesn't see she's never going to make more than $20.00. This place is a dive.

Myra's only been dancing for a month, but she's been practicing for probably a few years. She's got real routines. She could go anywhere.
She does these knee circles that make me go wild. I think I'm the only man who likes them. Her legs aren't spread. (It's the bent ones that get me going.) The knee circles are suggestive, not spread poker legs.

Myra's the best. The other strippers don't look at you when they dance. Myra stares you down. It's not mean. It's her big eyes looking at you, not anyone else, you. She takes care with what she does. She also markets herself. She wears this pink shorty nightgown and lacy underwear. She markets herself as a baby doll. She learned that from the public relations specialist who put her up for a few months between jobs. As much as Myra hates to admit it, he taught her something. He ran a lodge and had the ugliest blond bedroom furniture she ever saw. Myra likes good wood. She never sees any of it. She never sees any mahogany wood. Myra wants to be buried in a mahogany coffin if they make them. She also wants a good comedian to do her eulogy. A good one. She wants flowers. Lots of them. I know all this because I take Myra's course on "Funerals." I'm the only one in the whole bar who knows Myra's real identity. Her name is Sue Sawyers, and she's been teaching a course on Planning Your Own Funeral in Ellet on Monday nights. I wear sunglasses, so she doesn't recognize me.

How I came to hear of the class was through my neighbor, Mrs. Potts. Since I'm alone, never married, Mrs. Potts has me to dinner on Saturday evening. I usually go to a movie after the roast chicken, so it's not like Mrs. Potts is the main event. Mrs. Potts
has had heart trouble for years, and one evening said, "I'm going to be planning my funeral, care to join me?" She said it like, "care for a piece of pie," so I decided what the heck? It was presented to me in such a big way. (Just joking.) She was so calm about it. I decided I shouldn't be afraid. I'm nowhere close to dying, but I'm all for education.

Myra's got the class broke into segments. "Wake" is next week. We had a class on "Will and Testament." We also had a class on "Lot and Tombstone."

My will wasn't hard to write. Most of my stuff's going to my brother. He's got children. They can always use a new couch. They go through a couch a year. My money's going to Myra because I love her.

Everything else I have they can have a sale and take the money and use it for whatever they want. My parents have been dead for more than six years.

They died together. Drowned. You always hear about cars going into rivers, and people not being able to get the window open. That happened to them. At least they were happy. They had been coming home from a picnic somewhere and veered off into a lake.

This may come as a suprise to you, but Myra looks a lot like my mother.

Mrs. Potts wonders why I'm alone. I tell her it's the same as my not reading. I don't read because I can't find anything I like.
I'm picky, I guess. Mrs. Potts says I should try the Classics. "Try Charles Dickens," she says.

We talked about "Eulogy" tonight. Myra said, "Make sure someone who likes you does it." Someone who likes you can take all your bad points and make them seem not so bad. She said most eulogies if done by people who hardly know you will only list your work experience and, maybe, your affiliated clubs, but if just the right person speaks in your honor, he can make you seem like you were at least worthy of something--something unexplainable, not just average. She said designate a person. I guess I'll have my brother do it. He's got so many kids--he's good at standing up in front of a crowd and making an impact.

I asked Sue if she was Myra tonight. "Are you Myra?" I said. I couldn't help it; I just had to know. At first, she denied it. She said she didn't know what I was talking about. Then she thanked me for having the decency to wait until everyone had left the classroom.

When I was young my father was as old as my grandfather, if I would have had one. My father had me late in life. People were always saying I was such a nice kid to spend a Sunday with my grandpa. My mother was old, too. She was one of those miracle cases. Got pregnant when she was 50. Had a normal child. Made the papers.
Myra recognized me through my sunglasses at the bar.

She wouldn't look at me. She directed most of her charm at the bartender, who ignored her. She was throwing all talent away on someone who wasn't obligated to look at her, both of them in the same boat, stuck in some dark bar on the opposite side of the fence, the unenjoyable side, only Myra enjoys herself—usually.

Myra was doubly nervous tonight because a creep was out to get her. I spotted it a mile away. The silent ones who don't let off some steam with a few shouts are the ones to be afraid of. He sat there all night not saying a word, smoking. I knew he was going to try something. Jeremy O'Brien was his name. He was standing behind her car after the show, and if I hadn't have been there, she would have maybe had some trouble. He came up behind her and snipped off a piece of her hair.

I told Myra, we went to a coffee shop, she had nothing to be ashamed of. She said she didn't like mixing the two worlds. She said it was an odd enough mix already and that she really wanted to be a full-time teacher, but didn't have a degree and had to settle for something she had a lot of experience in. She's planned over five funerals, and when the p.r. specialist asked her what she knew, she said funerals.

My father didn't die in a lake. He died in his sleep. So did my mother. It sneaks up on you in your sleep. As soon as you know it, it's upon you, and you want it to be over, and boom you're dead.

Death is a neighbor you've been avoiding.
The p.r. specialist told her how to market herself as a teacher, how to hook up with an evening school, how to make an outline. All in the confines of that blond bed. Never taking her in his bed, only in hers. She loves that creep.

He's short and round and ugly, according to Myra. The worst-looking man she's ever loved.

Myra has some things she needs fixed, some light fixtures. I've seen her in both places now, so I'm the likely candidate. She trusts me.

My funeral's looking like this:

Beatles's song.

Lilacs, if available.

Me, in a suit.

Casket model T291, white metal, white interior, brass handles.

Brother will be saying the eulogy.

Oakwood cemetery.

Tombstone: Here he lies.

Applaud him.

We're the youngest in the class. Myra's 36. I'm 31. Sometimes I wonder what I'm doing taking it. Mrs. Potts, who's suffered a quadruple bypass, knows what she's doing there.

Myra says in her syllabus, "This class is for relieving some of the pressures your loved ones will face when you're gone. This party was your idea; you do the planning."
Myra's so sweet. She has the most delicate stomach muscles I've ever seen. Sometimes I ask her if she'd like to give up stripping. She says no, but I think if she could teach, she would. Maybe she could teach stripping or be some kind of acting coach.

A lady by the name of Grandmother Glen is the most vocal one of the class. I think she's going to start teaching a class and be Myra's competition.

I tell Myra I love her no matter what she does. "Everyone loves me," Myra says.

We're trying to figure out how to get her back to the p.r. specialist cause she misses him. She really does.
"She commanded the space as if it were her own. Her movements were broad as she swooped through space, flicking on pizza flatteners and dousing dough in flour. She lived in the space, not like an employed laborer, but like a proprietress. Her footsteps were heavy. The pizza parlor was her bedroom, and it was as if she had a small icebucket in the corner and was going to fix herself a drink. She was really going to the flattener to rescue a flat pizza as it lay in the bin of pizzas, waiting to be topped. She took the dough and ladled sauce on top, grabbing huge handfuls of cheese and splattering it over the top. She spread it out evenly, plopping an extra handful in the middle.

This woman was the proprietress. A woman came in and asked, 'How's business?' She replied, 'Pretty good.' I knew it for sure when she said to a pizza deliverer, 'Say hi to Louis's mother.' Louis was her main pizza deliverer. She had that ability to command respect and make sure things ran smoothly.

There was a boy sitting at one of the tables, writing a paper. He kept reading and re-reading. I had this desire to go over to him and say, 'You're writing a paper, aren't you?'

I was in town to visit my daughter (I'm 33) who's been accepted to college. I always knew I was going to have a brilliant child. I didn't want a baby. My husband left me for a Quick Shop worker. He liked their conversations whenever he went into Quick Shop. He liked
the intimacy of Quick Shop. Quick Shop was deserted. She and he are still married. She doesn’t work there, anymore, of course. He said whenever he went into Quick Shop to see her, they gave away free drinks and free foodstuffs. He said generosity just overcame them, and Quick Shop became like their home.

I’m alone, now, eating my pizza. The proprietress is not doing too well. She might be doing pretty well, but she’s certainly not doing too well. She has furrows in her face. She keeps making pizzas for students in dormitories. She’s got me, eating a slice, and the boy, writing the paper, drinking her bottomless cup of soda.

Julia, my daughter, doesn’t know I’m here.

I’ve been spying on her. I watch her at orientation. They do these crazy games these days to get to know each other in the middle of a field, games like grabbing each other by the elbows, back to back, so they face the world, and walking until they see someone they want to meet. They have to lock elbows with that person. It looks like some kind of strange mating. Maybe, I shouldn’t have pushed her. She skipped two grades.

Is higher education going to become her parent? She only has one parent, really. She sees her father occasionally. I didn’t need school. I got married.

This place is kind of quaint. I wouldn’t mind owning a place like this. What do I do now?"
"Mom's here. I can tell. I keep seeing this lady who looks like her only she has red hair, but I think Mom is wearing a wig. I'm so sure! She doesn't trust me. First, she tells me to go to college, and then she follows me. She's immature. I'm going to ignore her. My roommate, Tracy, is from Pennsylvania. She helped me carry my bags. I didn't even ask her. I think on the horse farm they pitch in. She's into horses. My other roommate is Risa. She's from Princeton. She sounds like she's from England. Risa has manners. She plays the violin. My other roommate (I live in a quad; that's four in three rooms) is from Germany. Her name is Lori. She has blond hair and is very tall. I like her the best. All the time she says, 'No, you're kidding!' She went to high school in Georgia where they make their eyes real big and act coy."

"I'm in a bagel shop. If I keep this up, I'll hit all the restaurants in this town, and then I'll be able to go back to my motel room and fall asleep and not have to try to guess what channels equal what New Jersey channels.

I order a terrific bagel and a cup of tea.

Two people are having a conversation in very low voices, as if they're discussing a relative in the hospital. They're picking at the plastic lids of their coffee cups, decidingly leaning back in their chairs. They're contemplating an operation, I think.

I can't help but be happy that I come from a healthy group. My daughter, Julia's never been sick a day in her life. These people
look like farmers. I don't know what farmers look like, but they'd look like this. Who would put a great liberal arts college in the middle of farm country? The man has low black boots and jeans that could stand to be washed. His wife's face is ageless. She has the expression of a young girl; it's in the eyes--big eyes behind myopic glasses. She's nearing 40 but has tried to remain young. Maybe, she's not done a thing to herself since she was 16. I can't tell. Her lips are puckered. She has the stare of a youth. I am so lucky to have cosmetics.

They murmur. What are they murmuring about? Maybe they had crop failure. Maybe, farmers have dignity and talk low in public places. I think it's her mother; that's the problem.

I watch her catch a glimpse of herself.

What if someone they know is dying?"

"Mom's staying at the inn, room 116. I called. I would think she would have changed her name. She was wearing a black wig yesterday. I went into this discount drugstore, and she went into this discount drugstore. While I was pricing lipgloss, she was fiddling with these rubber sharks. God, she's so studid!

There's this guy, the head of a youth league on campus, who is the cutest guy I have ever seen. Everybody calls each other 'men' and 'women' around here. Yes, I am a woman."

"A skinny kid twiddles his fingers."
He's the Night Manager. This place is a Burger Place. I've ordered a bacon burger. My daughter's dorm is directly across from this place.

The Night Manager leans to one side like a bird. He wears a tie. He's trained to say, 'May I help you?'

He brings a burger out to me. 'Bacon Burger?' he asks. He's so thorough; I'm the only one in the restaurant.

'If I said no, would you leave it anyway?'

He laughs. He's a lonely kid.

'You want it or what?'

'I couldn't eat that if you forced me.'

He takes it back.

'I'm only kidding. You eat it.' I put two dollars on the table.

I remember my mother told a story of how when she was a girl, her mother gave her a whole loaf of bread and a stick of butter to make sandwiches for the kids who didn't bring sandwiches for a field trip. Everyone had sandwiches. She accidentally dropped the bread as she was getting off the bus. She couldn't stand carrying it around. I am through providing.

I study a bulletin board. How did I get pregnant in the first place? I remember. It was the boy with the big nose. I married him. Johnny, I think.

'My daughter's in college,' I say.
"The youth league guy's name is Collin. He's from New York City. He says his parents used to rent his room out to this family, so he spent a lot of time on the street. He slept on the couch most of the time, but once, this old bum came up to him and said, 'Can I help you, sir?' Collin said the bum was a retired store clerk, and this line had kind of stuck in his head. He was asking everyone on the streets if they had been helped. Collin's got all kinds of stories like that. He's into social injustice. 'There's plenty of it,' he says."

"I want to remember back. I don't usually. I'm in a motel bed, and the sheets are scratchy. This is not a nice motel room. It's an average motel room. I like a nice motel room, with little bottles of shampoo and conditioner.

A preacher is on the TV, but I have the sound down, so I don't hear him. I just watch his expressions. He's a contortionist. The last thing we need is a contortionist for President.

I remember back to the night Julia was conceived. John and I were lying on the floor in front of John's parents' fake fireplace. The logs were spinning. It was warm. I remember the warmth of my own blood. Yes, I was a virgin. I remember telling John I wanted to go to college. It was as if I had known what we had done. We were producing a child, and I wasn't going to school.

In the middle of the night, the vibrating bed starts. I think I'm having the shakes or being shook, but it's a short in the bed."
It won't shut off. I sleep on the floor next to it until it runs its course.

I sleep in the tub."

"Collin says I'm the most beautiful kid he's ever seen. He calls me a kid because I'm only 16. He's 19. He's serving food at Dascomb cafeteria; that's why he's back here so early for school. He lets me in for free. He noticed my mother. He said, 'Some lady has been following us.'

'Could be an undercover agent; maybe, they're after you.'

I don't want him to know it's my mother. He'd drop me like a hot potato."

"I take it back. All of it. I do remember. I remember how we made love. I remember how it wasn't bad for the first time. How things do have a way of working out. Don't they?

They're showing 'Jaws' at the pool, another orientation device. I contemplate disguising myself in goggles and a cap and spying on Julia. She'd recognize my body. I'm tall, over six feet. She'd know her mother was in the pool, a big shark. I go over in a floppy hat and look down on her through the observation window. I see her floating on a raft, screaming when she sees the shark. There's a long haired guy with her. I'll kill him. She's wearing that bathing suit I got her when we were in Detroit. Oh, Julia.

I feel like I'm leaving home.
When I worked at MacMillan, the secretaries potted plants whenever the urge struck them. They transplanted the plants into bigger pots when they didn't have much else to do. Every secretary had her own bag of potting soil under her desk. Sometimes, I'd walk on to the floor and rows and rows of secretaries would be repotting plants. I'm repotting her in a bigger pot, I guess."

"Collin says he wants to do it. 'I just got here,' I tell him. I swear, sometimes boys are more stupid than girls. Risa says do it. Risa's a virgin. So is Tracy. So is Lori. I'm so sure."

"I'm at the pizza parlor again. My daughter and that long-haired boy are having sex, I know it. God, that little creep. I imagine the proprietress smelling smoke. I imagine her nose expanding with the shocking smell. In her oven, I imagine, a large pizza is burning up. Flames are leaping out at her. Her own creation is burning.

I've got to get out of here."

"The kids are crowded together in a field by month of birth, another orientation gimmick. All the Februarys are in one corner. The Mays are by the telephone pole. The Decembers are under the double tree. The point of all this is that kids with the same birthday will meet each other when the caller calls their birthday out."
"Mommy is watching us. She's standing right over there. Red wig, blue pants. Sure, mom, you're the oldest college student here. 'February 19,' the man calls. 'That's my birthday,' I tell Collin. 'Where are you going? You're supposed to go into the middle.' 'That's my mother.'

Mom takes off her sunglasses. She hugs me as if I were going away on a long trip. 'You write me,' she says. 'Who's that boy?' 'Collin.'

Her red wig is falling off. Beneath the disguise lies the beautiful brown hair of my mother.

'Stay away from him.'"
Marie had seen the storm approach. She had watched the sky turn purple and the clotheslines with their whites whip around. Slips filled with air and blew. Brassieres, freshly bleached, lifted silently to 45 degree angles, unembarrassed. Spare leaves blew around for effect. The air dropped in temperature just a few degrees, and the woodwork of the house took on a damp smell.

In ten years, Marie's property (she rented) would be blown up for the expressway extension which would pass, formally, through her living room but, now, the property was intact, and the wind was rattling the windows.

Marie, as stocky as she was, bounded up the staircase. She reached the closet and told the dog to move over. Except for her fear of thunderstorms, she was the bravest woman in every way. The dog refused to move. He did everything but snap at her. She had to climb in around him and fasten her arms around his neck. She held him, listening to the wind running through the house. Marie tried to imagine the green of the wet leaves, but all she could see were huge drummers pounding away in the sky.

Marie had been mating birds when the storm approached. She simply put a small box lined with cotton in the bottom of two partner's cage, covered the cage, and they did the rest. Sometimes, she had to encourage a bird off its perch with her finger, giving it a little push, but she had a 100% success rate. In years past, it
had provided an income, but now it was a hobby, something for Marie to do during the day while her daughter-in-law was away at work at a privately owned food store in Lorain, Ohio. Marie wondered, "at what point had she become old?" She fingered the crepe dresses.

On a whim, she switched closets to her deceased son's clothes closet, so she could be with him and the coverings of his body. She had to pull Booser by the collar, but eventually, she had him where she wanted him.

Her son had a vague smell of peanut butter and clean sweat. She could smell it as she huddled in the corner, tossing her head back to the wool. Marie remembered molding the peanut butter balls for peanut butter cookies, the child howling around her feet. She had been a good mother. She had paraded around the house in thongs and leggings, her husband, Jack's old tee shirt covering her breasts. She supervised the three-year old and baked Jack's favorite food.

Her son had had the run of the house. He had hooted, barreling around the kitchen on a scooter. Fritz had been a dexterous child from the start. He had rarely yelled when Marie stretched him into his bunting. His dexterity would lead him to build the Flat Iron Building in New York, climbing around on poles and metal beams.

Marie grabbed the dog by the head and rattled his ears. Her hand went searching in the pockets of the suits, but they had been cleaned out. They were empty. She remembered emptying them. She had put everything—matches, pens, string, rocks—in a box, which now sat in an old, broken-bar bird cage on a shelf above. She continued
digging, digging for something she had missed, hand in and out of the pocket, as if she were packing a lunch with invisible food. The house shuddered. The wind must have been 50 MPH. "Hear that?" she said to herself. "There's no one in here but us chickens. Knock. Knock. Who's there? Chicken. Chicken who?" Then, she heard a real knock. "Who could it be?" she said.

She pushed the door open and adjusted her eyes. The lace tablecloths, cut to fit the windows, let in only a little light. On her dresser, statues of the saints waited, facing the world and not themselves. Marie sometimes found the saints facing each other, gabbing, a trick of her granddaughter who came to visit. Marie hurried down the stairs.

She gave the birds a tap on the head before she opened the door, tapping the turquoise bird and then the magenta one, partners from long back. The magenta one clung to a mirrored perch, staring at itself. The turquoise flew up to the giant seed ball which twirled from the middle of the ceiling like a non-reflective dance ball.

"Hello?" Marie could hear a voice outside. "Hello?"

Marie had been hiding in the closet from the storm, and, now, there was a man outside wanting in.

"Who is it?" Marie asked. She stared blankly at the wooden door in her thongs, curling her toes up. What if it were him? Fritz's ghost?

She cracked the door and swung it open.

The first thing Marie could see was a large vacuum cleaner.
"May I come in?" a voice beneath the contraption said.

"Are you selling something?" Marie asked, letting him inch into the vestibule, out of the rain.

"I'm selling the next best thing to a broom."

"I use a broom." Marie could feel the cold air on her arms. She rubbed them, warming them.

This man had perfect sales posture because he waited until Marie took in the whole picture: his smiling face, his bright, clinging, sea-green suit and his vacuum cleaner, before he threw it down, saying, "damn rain."

It was the boy Marie had seen following his mother around the grocery store. He had peered at the cake mixes while his mother had stopped to ponder a coupon. He had stared out of the corner of his eye the whole way. He seemed touched in some way. Perhaps, Marie was all washed up, and it was the mother who needed assistance. Marie had imagined it this way—the boy was unemployable for some reason and was under the care of his mother. He was 28-years-old. Now, the boy in the green suit was standing in her living room. She slapped him lightly on the back.

"Beg your pardon," the boy said, as if he'd become unglued. He flashed her a smile, as if some trainer had told him to.

"That's no way to sell a sweeper," she said. Marie believed in being hard on boys. She had pushed Fritz too hard and felt as if it were she who had pushed him off the skyscraper.
The boy began contemplating her stocky body and her opaque nylons and shoes. She was not a hostile woman.

"Good day," he launched into his spiel.

"Good day," he said again.

"Good day." She was thinking of her own son, Fritz, who had also taken so long to blossom.

"Go on," Marie said.

The thunder rumbled. "This is a Lowery Vacuum Cleaner, offering you complete sweepage."

"What do you mean by 'complete'?" She unwrapped a stick of chewing gum, offering the boy a stick, but he declined. She raised her eyebrows.

"I'd demonstrate, but I forgot my box of dirt."

"They supply you with dirt?"

"It's official dirt."

"I could go outside and get some." Marie laughed at her own joke.

"It's pouring. Not necessary. This sweeper is absolutely noiseless." He flicked it on, but Marie couldn't hear a thing due to the rain on the house.

"I see it's got a light on the brush to sweep in the dark."

"It's the only canister sweeper with a light. It's $79.00."

"That's cheap enough." Marie was not going to buy a vacuum, but she thought she might show him some birds. "Would you like to hold a bird?"
The boy, who was nameless, who stood out only for the crystal, sea-green suit he always wore, said, "They told me people would want me to socialize with them." He held the vacuum tube in his hand, waiting to see what she would do next.

"Would you like to?"

"I suppose I would," the boy said, surprising himself.

"What's your name?" Marie asked.

"Pete." His face lit up at the sound of his name, as if it had been whispered to him.

Marie stared at the vacuum cleaner which lay sprawled on the wooden floor. In a few hours, her daughter-in-law, Suzanne, might become entangled in the thing if she did not watch out. She gave it a kick out of the way.

"Don't damage the merchandise," Pete said.

"What do you say to this?" Marie lifted the sheet on two birds in the act.

Pete stared at the twittering feathers. "Cute."

"It's a hobby." She pulled the door open so that the birds could flutter around the room when they were done. "Do you have any hobbies?" She eased herself down on the floor, sitting side-saddle, her legs curled up, as if she were on a picnic. The magenta bird, presumably, the male (in the missionary position of birds) flew down and perched on her shoulder.

"Selling vacuums," he said.
Marie considered buying a vacuum. This put a log in the conversation and made him fidget. She put a bird on the boy's shoulder, just pulled it from the air and placed it on his shoulder. "That's Clipper."

He bobbed his shoulder up and down, watching the bird rise and fall. "Damn bird." He laughed.

"That thing is indestructible. My granddaughter practically does gymnastics with it."

"I've never been this close to a bird before."

Marie studied his suit. It looked like a foreign suit, the green cotton almost shiny. Marie had seen suits like these on Korean men. "What size are you?"

"Size?"

"I'd say you're about a 38 long."

Marie caught a glimpse of the vacuum cleaner again, which seemed to be relaxing from the demonstrations by the inexperienced salesman. She made her finger a perch and took the bird named "Clipper" off his shoulder.

"It wasn't bothering me."

"Try this one," Marie said, uncurling her legs to place another bird on Pete's shoulder. She grabbed a parakeet, again, from midair.

The dining room was like a small airport for birds. Birds were taking off and landing left and right.

Pete twisted his neck to look at the blue bird. He slowly reached his hand up to capture it.
"I hope I'm not keeping you," Marie said.

"Heck, no. I'm not selling anything."

"Just a minute," Marie said, getting up.

His eyes followed her. Was she leaving? She ran up to the stairs to her son's closet, pausing at the window to take in the violence of the electrical storm. She missed the closet, but could not run there. Slashes of lightning shocked the earth, turning for instances the whole world into a prehistoric place. She was going to dress him up. Marie was going to get rid of these suits once and for all. He would need suits in his day to day life.

In one swoop, she unhooked all of the pinstriped and gabardines from the rod, running through the house as if she were a madwoman. The suit arms and legs trailed in the wind.

She stood at the top of the stairs, wondering if her plan were useless. She could not bring her son back. She could not create a new son. Marie imagined her beloved son cartwheeling through the air.

The boy came to the bottom of the stairway. He looked like a pirate, with the bird on his shoulder.

"Here." She threw the coats.

The bird, to miss a suitcoat, took off into the air and hovered above the boy's head.

"Thanks." He held the suit jackets to his chest.

Marie, with a suit still in her arms, walked past Pete, past Booser, who was howling. Her eyes barely reached the bevelled glass
at the top of the door, but if she stood on tiptoe, she could view
the storm.

"What's out there?" Pete asked.

"Come see," Marie said, as if he were a child and so were she.
Cannon Schiller was a musician by night, who played around the Lorain area. Cannon sang. That was his instrument.

He often did temporary work to supplement his income. There was a little grocery store called "Jean-Cola Grocery Store" on the corner of Route 10, where Cannon Schiller also supplemented his income. Cannon worked at Jean-Cola's from 5:30 in the morning to noon. Here, he ran the cash register. People were usually just bringing bottles in at that hour. Those who collected bottles knew he would take them and give them cash. That's how Cannon made business for Jean-Cola's. The bottle people could go to Pick-and-Pay to collect those little merchandise stamps, but they always came to Jean Cola's. Sometimes, they threw huge parties. Cannon could tell they were parties because two bottle people, Mick and Swinger, came in and bought eight six-packs and two bags of Frito Lay's. Swinger bought his customary beef jerky sticks—six of them. Cannon imagined Swinger gnawing on those continuously throughout the party. They both bought cigarettes. Sometimes they'd buy bean dip and sour cream. Cannon sold all of this to Mick and Swinger stoically, as if he had his own social circle that just may one day hook up with theirs. He'd say, "be rapping with you," when they left. And while they were looking around the store with that late-night look in their eye, Cannon would lean against the cigarettes, looking cool, his head tossed back as if he were a sailor on one of those old iron ships that docked out in
Lake Erie, looking as if he had somehow come into the store by accident and just started ringing the cash register. Certain few knew Cannon's talent. They knew he could sing. Mick and Swinger would probably appreciate it if they knew, but Cannon wasn't one to go tooting his own horn, so when they came in, he pretended he was a sailor.

Mick and Swinger would peel away in their car, a pink car, a convertible, no less.

Cannon sometimes worked malls in the day, when he could assemble WIN all together. Between jobs, it was tough, but, occasionally, WIN got together and gave a lecture-demonstration on Jazz at malls for children.

Cannon would sing Skat and explain them that this stuff that wasn't words was called "Skat." This "be-bop stuff." The other members of the band--Helena, a pianist, Senior, an acoustic guitar player from way back, Shoe, a bass player, and Ron, a drummer--would play a little bit, and then tell how they got started in the business. The kids loved this stuff. It gave them hope that maybe they wouldn't have to do a nine-to-five job, and maybe they could sleep in and work late.

Cannon had a social circle. He lived at the Lake Shore Apartments on Lake Erie with a fun-loving, wild and crazy group. Cannon had a one-bedroom-efficiency apartment. It wasn't big, but it had beautiful, red carpeting and a fantastic view of the Lake. Cannon loved it.
Cannon wondered why the brothers, Mick and Swinger, didn't say, "hey, stop by, man, come to our party," when they came in, but, deep down in the bottom of his heart, Cannon knew that it wasn't his cool, nonchalant I'll-show-up-there-anyhow attitude that put them off. It was the fact that he had never had them over. Sure, he'd had people in to watch Johnny Carson, but he'd never had an all out bash.

Cortez, Cannon's neighbor, would have a bash every Friday. What would happen is that Cortez would fall asleep with his record player on and the door unlocked, and Marne Stevens would wander in and shut it off. Then, without Trini Lopez singing to him, Cortez would wake up and start shouting at Marne. The Boys above would hear the record player click off and the shouting and would run downstairs. Cannon, who lived across from Cortez, would wander over with his bottle of Pepsi and imitate Trini Lopez to try and smooth the peace. The Captain, from down the hall, who'd by then had too much to drink, would swagger in, and everyone would end up sitting on Cortez's furniture—even his phone stand—and complain how there was nothing to do.

The apartment did have its excitement. Once Captain got it in his mind to burn his collection of Playboy magazines; he was real drunk (on a real stink) then. Marne and her girlfriends found them in the incinerator before they went up in flames and took them in and put them in Marne's closet. Marne's ten grandchildren found them (they often came to visit), and the kids went dashing along the hill that led down to Lake Erie, spewing the pictures of naked women into
the air. It was the oddest thing. Cannon thinks it was Hank's idea. He's the third to the oldest. At that time, he was about eight. These kids had those magazines, and they were ripping them to shreds and running up and down the hill like butterfly catchers, waving these nude women. It was a real kind of pollination, like when you blow on a dandelion, and the fuzzy things fly away.

There was also the time the group burned their names on their respective deck chairs around the pool with the Boys' woodburning kit. The Boys, who lived upstairs above Cortez, were a group of guys who worked temporary exclusively. Cannon would see them occasionally at the toy factory that used temps, if he was by chance there. The Boys had this woodburning kit, and it was their idea for everyone to burn his name on his particular deck chair. The deck chairs, by the way, were the Captain's idea. (The Captain was called "Captain" because, once, he used to be one.) Everyone sat by the pool burning up while the woodburning tool was passed from person to person. The Boys went out and spent $5.75 on a 100-foot long extension cord, so that the crowd could sit in the sun by the pool and brand their names into the chairs. One of Marne's grandkids (Marne was real young then, about 45, but she had these 10 grandchildren) tripped on the extension cord that ran from The Boys' apartment to the pool and cut open her lip which had to be sewn back together at the emergency room.

Oh yes, Lakeshore apartments did have its share of excitement. But WIN had never played. WIN had never performed for the group.
WIN was something Cortez and Captain and Marne and the Boys had to see at the Holiday Inn because the band practiced at the Italian Club on Saturday nights before the spaghetti dinner and not in Cannon's apartment. Cannon thought it would be so easy if they did practice in his apartment because the group could wander in and listen to the music if they wanted, and then the beer would be passed around, or one of Cannon's bottles of Pepsi. It would be a real party. But Cannon practiced at the Italian Club.

MaryJane and Mac, who worked at the Italian Club on Spaghetti Night, lived next door to Cannon. Mac was in real estate, and MaryJane basically wandered around doing a little waitressing and trying to give up smoking. MaryJane had a husky voice and husky, tanned skin because she spent so much time by the pool. She and Cannon had once gotten together while Mac was away at a real estate convention in Cleveland, but that was over. It was an "isolated occurrence," the Captain had told Cannon when Cannon was feeling the pain of guilt, "an isolated occurrence. It'll never happen again," the Captain had said. Cannon knew it wouldn't. He loved MaryJane, with her orange skin, but he also loved Mac and let Mac use the phone in compensation for what had happened. Cannon knew it wasn't much, but it was something. It was sure something. Mac came in day and night and dialed up his clients to see if they hadn't decided against the blue house or the gray house. It was an inconvenience. Mac would sit in Cannon's chair. He would pull the phone cord and put his hand on Louise's head. Louise was Cannon's bust of a woman.
Cannon might be asleep, but he never said a word. Actually, Mac had used Cannon's phone for years before the "isolated occurrence."

Cannon didn't think Mac would mind if he knew about what happened. Mac was constantly broke and running around in an old raincoat like a little mole, barely making ends meet. Mac realized this was no life for MaryJane. Maybe, if MaryJane got a few moments of carefree time, well then, maybe she deserved them. MaryJane was actually a very happy woman who loved Mac passionately, in her weary way.

Anyhow, MaryJane knew of Cannon's problem. He came up to the spaghetti dinner on Fridays and drank out of the plastic glasses (plastic, throwaway glasses were new in the 1960s and a big deal then) and told MaryJane how much he wanted to have a concert. MaryJane would run around with big plates of spaghetti in her hands and a cigarette in her mouth and say, "Have a concert, I'll come. Baby, you've been talking about having a concert for years." She'd stroke his head with her orange finger, mindful of Mac, who bartended, mindful that he was watching her.

Cannon would sit down and eat some spaghetti and forget all about the concert. He'd dream of doing his lecture-demonstrations all over the country and being a star and getting out of this god-damn-Lorain-town, leaving his friends, leaving them, not having to love them and care about their welfare. He dreamed that the kids loved him and wanted his autograph. He dreamed about having his picture taken with a bunch of kids standing in front of him like big fish he had caught.
Cannon decided one day he was going to do it. He was going to have a bash. It was the day Jean-Cola's had installed a cold-water fishtank to keep crabs in.

Mick and Swinger had come in and were purchasing beer. Mick was staring at the bubbles in the fishtank as they rose from the aerator to the top.

"Excuse me," Cannon said.

Mick leapt up as if he'd been caught shoplifting. He looked around, knocking over a display of Nabisco saltless saltines.

"Sorry, man," he said. "Sorry." He stacked the saltines back up. He gave the fishtank a backward glance. For some reason, the dude at the cash register didn't want him eyeing the tank. Well, fine. No Loitering, was what he guessed. He gave Swinger a let's-get-out-of-here-tap.

Swinger grabbed a tube of Cheese Whiz this time, for variety. No one who came to their parties was going to say that Swinger and Mick didn't have food.

"Excuse me," Cannon said. He thought about singing it, he was so happy; he was gonna do it. He did. He said, "Ech, Ech, Ech, cusame."

Mick and Swinger looked at each other. They had a sense of humor because they didn't pull a knife on him. They laughed.

"Hi," Cannon said, having gotten their attention.

"What's new?" Mick said. He pulled out a cigarette. Swinger was holding a grocery bag of bottles.
"The thing is I'm having a little party on Friday, this Friday, and you're invited."

"Good," Swinger said.

"What's the address?" Mick asked.

"Lakeshore Apartments, #5."

"You got that?" Swinger said to Mick.

Mick nodded.

"We'll be there," they said together.

Cannon sure was going places fast. But maybe the band members weren't. Maybe they already had obligations for Friday. Maybe he should have made it two weeks from Friday. They'd all have to work, Cannon knew it. Here were Mick and Swinger coming to his concert, and he hadn't even secured the band.

He called up Helena, the pianist.

"Listen, Helena. This means a lot to me. It really does."

"It means a lot to my aunt, too, this is her first kid," Helena said. Helena's aunt was having a baby, and they were going to the mall on Friday to go crib shopping. "We haven't practiced in weeks, Cannon."

"These are friends, Helena. Friends. Friends don't care how you sound. Why don't you bring your aunt along?"

"Sorry." She hung up.

"That's it." Cannon was going to have to contact Mick and Swinger. He was going to have to tell them there would be no party. He couldn't have them showing up at his apartment or, worse yet,
showing up at Cortez's apartment, with everyone sitting around bored on the furniture—including the phone stand.

Helena called back.

"All right. I'm in. My aunt says we can go crib shopping some other time."

"Great," Cannon said. "I love you, Helena."

"Spare it," Helena said.

Senior, the acoustic guitar player, was easy. He was 76-years-old. Senior had few obligations, except to his cat. "Yah, I'll come."

Shoe, who played the bass, had a bowling league he had to get out of. "Will there be any chicks there?"

"Any chicks? This place is crawling with them."

"Yah, man. Good," Shoe said.

Cannon dialed Ron, his drummer.

"At what price we playing for?" Ron said. (Ron was studying the English language at night.)

"I was thinking all the beer you could drink and a personal favor from me to you when you need one."

"Maybe we can pass the hat," Ron said.

"Maybe we can," Cannon said, democratically. "Now, look. I want you to bring your mother."

Ron lived with his mother, Lucille, a great drummer in her own right, who had chronic asthma. Ron's face lit up; Cannon could tell it was lit up over the phone because his voice got higher.
"Oh, shit," he said. "I just remembered, Cannon. I've got to work."

"Work where?"

"Pizza flipping. It's my new job. That's my second night."

"Your second night?" Cannon said. He didn't want Ron to lose his new job, knowing how hard jobs were to come by. "All right, we'll play without you. How about Lucille?" Cannon was taking a stab in the dark.

"I don't know. She's pretty sick. She's got asthma, you know. Just a minute."

Cannon held his breath.

"Mom?"

He could hear Ron inquiring about the gig.

Mrs. Rodrequis was coughing.

Ron returned to the phone. "She says she'll try."


"She can't come to the phone right now, but she'll try."

Cannon asked Elaine, the cleaning woman, if she'd cook some of her tortillas up because he was having a concert.

"You're having a concert!" Elaine said.

"Yes."

"How many you need?"

"I figure a hundred would be fine."

Elaine calculated on the back of a cleaning label. "That will be $22. When is it?" She turned her sweeper back on.
"Friday."

"The what?" she shouted. "Friday, the what?"

"This Friday."

Elaine shut the sweeper off. "You think I've got nothing better to do?"

"No, I know you're a busy woman. Please, Elaine, please."

Cortez said when told, "You're what?"

Cannon repeated himself. "I'm having a concert."

Cortez laughed. Cortez laughed and laughed. "Well, that's fine. But you know what I do on Fridays. I sleep after my long week's work. Some of us hold down real jobs, you know. Some of us go to work day in and day out." Cortez was a clerk. "I'm going to be sleeping. Don't you know who gives the parties around here?"

Cortez shut the door on Cannon.

When Friday came, Cannon split his temporary job at the soap factory promptly at noon. He bought the liquor. The Captain was bringing two bottles of tequila and six lemons. Cannon figured on eight six-packs like Mick and Swinger always bought. If it was enough for Mick and Swinger--48 beers--it was enough for him. He had told people BYOB. He also got a fifth of vodka and two pints of whiskey. The Boys were bringing orange juice and potato chips. They were bringing their wastebasket special--gin alcohol and grenadine. They wanted to know if Cannon had a wastebasket.

The night finally arrived. Lucille came four hours early. She said she needed to practice. She set up her drums, breathing the
oxygen which hung around her neck. Her feet dangled from the round drum stool. She had to jump down when she wanted to smack the foot peddle. "Wanna meet my daughter?" she asked.

Cannon was polishing his used furniture. "Sure."

"She plays drums, too. Everyone in my family plays drums. Know where I learned?"

"Where?"

"My mother. You just got to pass some things down the line, you know? What's a nice boy like you doing alone?"

Even though Lucille Rodriguez's practicing got on his nerves, he didn't say anything. He was learning to exercise patience. What did it matter if Lucille made a lot of racket? Cortez, his neighbor who usually had the parties, would even wander over and stand in the doorway, smiling as if he had been duped.

Shoe arrived, and he began to set up. He strummed along with Mrs. Rodriquez. Then, Helena got there. She took her time plugging in her Fender Rhodes portable piano. She played a few arpeggios. Pretty soon, Senior came, and then they were all there, playing and singing.

"I want to thank you all for coming tonight," Cannon said. He knew he had them.

Mick and Swinger were making cat calls. Cannon was singing again.

Poor Mrs. Rodriguez hopped off her stool, pounding away at the bass, gasping for air from the poor oxygen bottle.
She picked me. She picked me out of a crowd. Me, Denny Moreno. Miss Louise Swenson, my first aid instructor, could have had Hank Swander, a cool-looking guy with big hands that pressed on the CPR dummy's chest to bring her back to life. She could have had Earnie Swartz, the Jewish guy with good gold rings (the real stuff), who laughed nervously when he breathed into the blond doll. He would have showed her a good time, nice dinners, weekends at ski resorts, extra large boxes of buttery popcorn, dinner every week at his grandmother's, who he had enrolled in that course for. We had heard all about her—Shira Swartz, a young gal going on 86. He was over there every Sunday; he wanted to be prepared if she swallowed some veal wrong. Earnie was the kind of guy who would keep them all singing in a bus accident. Say, a bus turned over. He'd keep morale up by humming a tune. Soon he'd have everyone singing "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" upside-down. Earnie excelled in limb bracing. He could wrap a bandage so that it was seamless. Earnie was the only thing that kept me from flunking limb bracing. Of course, I helped him out with pulse reading. I could invariably, invariably find the carotid artery on anybody, anybody. Even on Kay Williams, who was, I would guess, 275 pounds. Kay loved my cool hands pressing against her chicken fat flesh. I clocked Kay's heart racing at 150.

She could have had anyone, but she had me. She gave me my first taste of non-stop love, three months of it, every night. Every night of
blissful banging, the headboard rattling and sometimes her figurines tipping over. I did not love Louise Swenson, and she did not love me. Sometimes, I regret that because if I had loved her, I would have lied. I would have told her her artwork was fascinating and upbeat. I would have told her I liked the colors, at least. Instead, I said nothing one night when she unveiled a painting, and that was the only night out of the ninety nights that we didn't make love.

Louise Swenson taught first aid at the Y. I had enrolled in the course because I had bought into a restaurant and was pretending I was a maitre'd. One night a week, I put on a monkey suit and ushered people into our Supper Club, "Beelers." The other nights, I did odd jobs: kept the dishwasher moving, handled parking when we got packed, bartended, loaded trash into the dumpster. It was a state law in the state of Idaho; restauranteers had to be learned in the field of life-saving.

We loved Beelers. It was a dive, but we modeled ourselves on a small place in Vegas, so we had validity. Our sister restaurant was "Beelers I." We were "Beelers II." The band that played, "The Mankatoes," traveled back and forth between Vegas and Lime, Idaho. Our motto was, "A good time is not an accident." People seemed to manage to have an excellent time at our place. We sold steaks, and we had a policy of no ties. We'd cut a guy's tie off if he came in with one on. That set the mood. The ties hung above the diners' heads like long, colored grass.
The only time I had to use that life-saving training was on a man who was attempting to eat one of our five pound steaks. We sold a five pound steak with a promise. "If you could eat the whole thing, you could have it for free." It sold for $30.00 regularly. That man was choking on a piece of that steak, but he had gotten through about half of it. How I noticed him was Billy Lamone, of the Mankatoes, the acoustic guitar player, snapped one of his strings when he noticed the five-pound-steak-man turning a shade of purple. Billy's A-string twanged real loud into the microphone, and, of course, the whole restaurant stopped eating their dinner salads, their potato skins or their scampies and followed Billy Lamone's eyes to the purple man's face. That's when I, versed in the ancient art of the Heimlich Maneuver, raced over (I was still carrying a Shirley Temple I was making at the bar) and burped that lousy piece of steak out of him. His name was Dexter Morse. I still remember. He gave me unlimited car washes for a year, and I gave him the five pound steak for free on good faith that he would have finished it if he had not been so unfortunate.

I remember how Louise taught me the Heimlich Maneuver. She had had her eye on me even before her fiance had left her. That's how the whole thing started in the first place. Her fiance took home a blond woman who had sold him a pair of tennis shoes. He had made love to her all night, then confessed it to Louise, who grew so angry that she vowed to sleep with someone quickly. That was me.

Before any of this commotion happened, Louise had always liked me. I liked her, too. I like the way she kind of bounced around from
station to station. We had ten first aid stations, where we learned various skills such as pressure application to stop bleeding. I think maybe she even taught exercise before our class because she came in a leotard with a skirt over it. She had beautiful hands. Her long fingers were like bones, pure white. She herself was nothing but a rack of skin and bones, a beautiful skeleton with a mass of tangled, brown hair. I remember when she demonstrated the Heimlich Maneuver on me. I was overweight at the time because I was eating so well at Beelers every night. I wore these bulky sweaters to cover up my beer belly. Louise made me take off my shirt, and her cool hands buried themselves into my stomach. I remember feeling the outline of her skeleton against my back. We were wedged up against each other like two twins in a womb. I remember the piece of imaginary food was not the only thing that popped up when Louise squeezed, and I had to hunch back to my desk in semi-shame.

Even for those demonstrations, she could have picked anyone but me, but she picked me, Denny Moreno, ex-high school wrestling champion, now, the owner of Beelers. She picked me to vent her anger on her fiance, Lawrence Burkhardt, who had run out on her. The marriage was still on according to him.

The first night of the three month, 90-day love escapade is forever etched into my mind. I had only had sex six times before Louise. I knew all the moves, but they weren’t down solid until she was finished with me. Nothing was out of order those three months for us. It was one calendar day flying out the window after another, flying out the
Actually, now it's all a blur of intense pleasure and heartache, only then, when I was twenty, did it have a logic—the logic of Louise's daily vitamins popped quickly into her mouth, her head tipping back to down them, the orange juice she would drink.

The first night began with her telling me she wanted some rootbeer. "I'm thirsty for some rootbeer," she said. Her eyes were puffy, as if she had been crying before the class, but I could see where she had applied her make-up base and where it had creased into the small wrinkles around her eyes.

"Can you take me for some rootbeer?"

"I guess so," I said. I knew I had to work hauling trash that night, but I called the then owner of Beelers, Beeler himself, and said I wouldn't be in.

Beeler said, "I put up with so much from you."

Louise hopped into my car, pulling her own door shut. "I'm just dying for a rootbeer."

We went to the year round rootbeer stand with the automatic door mechanisms.

There was a carload of kids next to us. Some busy father was handing baby rootbeers back to his youngsters. Those baby rootbeers were five cents each. I wondered about getting twenty-five of them.

Louise ordered herself a foot-long hotdog with chili sauce. She said, "God, I'm so glad I'm not a waitress here—people shining lights on me all the time. That would be bad for my eyes."
People shine lights when they want service at a rootbeer stand. I imagine that's customary all over the country. This rootbeer stand reminded me of a small airport. It was those big sliding doors. The waitresses lined up inside, looking out the glass windows, as if they were travelers, or the loved ones waiting for the travelers.

Louise said, "And don't forget to bring me a large rootbeer."

The waitress wrote it all down and went to get it.

"Ever been dumped by love?" Louise said. "Ever want something so bad that you can taste it?"

Louise took off her engagement ring and put it in my station wagon ashtray.

"What happened?" I asked.

She slid the little lid shut.

"Lawrence fucked a shoe saleslady, only she ain't no lady. I've seen her at the mall, hustling." Louise leaned her head back on the headrest. If I would have had a camera, I would have taken her picture. She looked so sad, but so beautiful all at the same time. One of the youngsters in the car next door dumped a chocolate icecream cone out on the concrete. "Jesus H. Christ," his father said. "Donny!" His mother said, "Please don't swear, Harry." She flicked the headlights on.

"No," Harry said, flicking them off.

What Louise said next, she had to practically scream over that kid, Donny's tears and screams.

"YOU WANT TO COME OVER TO MY HOUSE?"

"WHAT FOR?"
"Keep me company."

"Are you going to marry him?"

"I don't know. He's been instructed not to call me for a year. Maybe, he found her. Maybe, he found the woman of his dreams. She'll keep him in tennis shoes for the rest of his life. She's a sleaze."

I wanted to give Louise mouth-to-mouth. She looked so pale, as if she had stopped breathing. I wanted to quietly lift her chin, pinch her nose and breath my love into her. Yes, I admit it. I was in love with her. Maybe, she could sense it. Maybe, it was the shakiness and bliss of the moment. Maybe, it was the kids screaming and a carload of domesticity, a miniature world, next to us. Maybe, it was the flashing auto lights, but my heart was racing, and if I would have clocked it, I know I would have been shocked at its speed.

Those waitresses standing at the window weren't going anywhere, and they weren't loved ones, waiting for relatives to return. They were hired hands, waiting only for us to flick on our headlights so that they could jump at the chance to serve us. They didn't even make much in tips. Although I knew I was just an impulse in Louise's mind, I jumped at the chance to serve her.

Louise's hotdog came. I've never seen anyone eat so fast. She finished that foot-long in five, quick, two-and-a-half-inch bites.

"More," she said. We ordered her a Papa burger. At the rootbeer stand, they advertise their burgers as "Momma," "Papa," "Baby" and "Teenager." Papa was big.
You got to remember, I was twenty at the time and honored to be buying a beautiful woman (my first aid instructor, who was in her thirties) food, even if it was fastfood. Louise was now rubbing her temples. "Stress Relief," she called it.

"Headache?" I asked.

"Boy, do I ever." Louise captivated me. As she guzzled the large rootbeer, I allowed my eyes to examine her body. Louise's full breasts bulged from underneath the white sweatshirt. She wore a pair of bermuda shorts and costly tennis shoes. Everything matched. I felt embarrassed in my old clothes, which were nothing to speak of—a windbreaker (a pull-over-the-head kind) and a pair of Lees. I remember I was wearing a pair of leather sandals my friend had brought me back from Jamaica. That was the only thing that saved me.

"How could such a beautiful woman have allowed herself to hitch up with such a no-good slob?" I couldn't believe it was me talking. Forty-five minutes in a car with Louise, and I was sophisticated.

"He ran into me on the street. I suffered a broken arm because of him. His Toyota knocked me down in '64. I've known him for years."

I laughed. Sophistically, I laughed because it was a good joke. Beeler was probably wishing I was there to cart trash and scraps, but I was with Louise Swenson, handing her a Papa burger.

"If you can't finish it, I'll eat it," I said. I don't know who was taking care of who. Louise said thank you after every one of my concessions. I longed for the kind of non-verbal stuff that existed in
the other cars. People passing each other salt and French fries without a word. Grandmas eating cones with napkins wrapped around them.

"Want another rootbeer?"

Louise kissed me with mustard on her face. "Can you help me? Larry has left me."

We drove silently to her house. Both of us knew what was coming. Louise's house was exactly what I had imagined it would be. She had a blood red sofa. She had taken cellophane pictures of the human internal systems out of old encyclopedias and framed them: the reproductive system, the respiratory system, the pulmonary system. She had charts of Columbus's travel routes. (Columbus picked America by mistake. That's no joke.) If I would have known at the time, I would have said the house was "artistic," but at the time, I just called it a "nice arrangement."

She had a lot of pictures of lamps on the wall. Lamps were her subject matter. She drew all kinds of lamps. She was an artist. Later in our relationship, I would make the greatest mistake of my life--not complimenting her new subject matter--squiggly lines. But she should have stuck to her old subject matter--lamps. She had pictures of all kinds of lamps--Persian Aladdin lamps, family room lamps on poles, ballerina lamps, nightlights, spotlights, streetlights, search lights.

Oh, Louise.
Louise showed me her wedding dress. In fact, she tried it on for me. Those exercise classes paid off cause Louise had shapely arms. She was all together healthy.

By that time, I couldn't hide the bulge in my pants. Louise showed me Lawrence's picture out of respect for Lawrence before she grabbed it. He wasn't much. I considered myself more attractive, even with my extra weight and all. What did it matter? I had his fiance, and he had a whore. A shoe saleslady whore.

Louise undid herself out of her wedding gown. We had hooked up all 67 buttons, so we had to undo them. When we got to the last one, she tried to get out of it so quickly. Her nipples shot out a full half inch. She had a small pot belly that suited her real nicely. Below that was an incredible mound of black, curly hair. Louise whisked the windbreaker over my head. She unzipped my jeans. Slide. That's the only word I can use. Slide, slide, slide. I slid so quickly into Louise, I thought my head would spin. The wedding dress hung around her neck, framing her face in lace. Louise and I locked each other up--what I mean to say is, we locked arms and legs on her queen-size bed and jolted ourselves to heaven. Louise taught me rhythm. I remember when I took swim conditioning in high school, the coach said, "I'm not going to try to give you any advice on how to swim. After swimming 1.5 miles each time, you'll learn the easiest, most efficient way to go." That's what happened with Louise. A boy could get tired out real quickly if he only did it once a week, but we did it all the time, so I developed grace and agility. Louise made me feel like some fine-tuned animal, a
lynx, or something--slinky, all-powerful, and quick. Ka-bam! All of
her figurines landed behind the bed.

Day 37 was a nice day I'll never forget. She had seen Lawrence and
the shoe saleslady together. They had been walking arm and arm down
town on the mall. The mall was some guy's business venture that didn't
work out. He had built a beautiful open mall in downtown Kossuth Falls,
but had neglected to upgrade the businesses. He had a porn shop, a
coffee shop, where the elderly came to jaw, and an outdated men's
clothing store. While I'm on the subject of business, let me just say,
'Beelers was taking off. I was happy, so I got up on stage on Tuesday
and Thursday nights and did warm-up for the Mankatoes. I played the
banjo. I developed a real crowd. People came in just to see me. They
looked like third shift people--a whole factory of them seemed to like
me. They'd come in before they went to work. All was bliss.
Especially day 37, when Louise had seen Lawrence and the shoe saleslady,
who I believe was called Bev, but was called by Louise, "The Slut."

Louise had by this time taught me all the first aid moves I needed
to know at home on our off hours, so I wasn't going to class. She
arrived home from class that day with a splint on her arm.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Earnie Swartz did such a good job, I left it on. Isn't it
lovely?" She held it up to me.

"Yes, lovely."

"It's part of a little experiment of mine. I'm watching how people
react to accident victims. They treat you with a lot of tender-loving
care. They look at you with compassion. They count out your change--fix me a drink."

Accident victim, or no, I knew what Louise drank. She drank Scotch, neat, but rarely had she asked me to fix it. That was her job. I had given up alcohol, so she didn't want me to be around it. Little did it matter that I bartended every night; if I was near liquor, I might start up again. Day 37 was the first time Louise Swenson viewed me as a man. My heart leapt. I poured the Scotch expertly into her short, translucent tumbler. I didn't add ice. "Here," I said.

"Much obliged," Louise said. Although Louise and I shared all of our nights together, dancing horizontally in each other's arms (and many of our days) I, up until that point, had been a 20-year-old restaurant kid who had taken her class out of necessity and happened to be there when she needed someone.

That night, the 37th night, had been more passionate than it had ever been before. Louise and I got drunk together; she went ahead and let me drink, realizing that I could handle it, and if I couldn't, "tough cookies." Then, she said she wanted to paint my body. This was a compliment because Louise was an artist. So, I took off all my clothes. Louise said, "I'm going to use magic markers." She took that vein diagram off the wall, the plastic one from the encyclopedia. She traced the major veins and arteries on my body--the red, the blue. I was honored to be her art. The magic
markers tickled my skin. The whole room began to smell like cheap ink. I think we both got a little high from it. As each magic marker glided over my body, my prick got harder and harder. Of course, she drew the big red and blue veins onto that part of my anatomy as well.

Each marker felt like a tiny lick. The bad thing is that they were permanent markers and took about two weeks to wash off. I did very little maitre'ding that first week. By the second week, the lines had faded and didn't look so strange.

I became vein man that night--an encyclopedic model, climbing on top of her alive flesh--entering and exiting, living and dying.

That day, after I had become her equal, things were never the same. Oh, they were still good, but they were never the same. She began applying make-up first thing in the morning. Up until that point, she never applied a streak unless she was going out. After day 37, she put on blusher and eye shadow and a touch of lipstick. She didn't need make-up, mind you, but it's just something you notice looking back. I admit, I changed, too. I stopped rubbing her shoulders when I was tired. Up until that point, I had massaged sometimes until 4:00 in the morning. We both had strange hours. Sometimes, it was until 5:00 P.M. But, see, I was seeing myself more as a human being with needs of my own, not just somebody there to pacify her. Oh, I admit, I like to think of myself during that time as a lean-mean-fucking-machine, but I was also waking up and smelling the roses. I didn't have to massage her back all night to keep her happy. She was fuming. As long as she could fume over Lawrence Burkhardt, she was happy. She still missed him.
That's the thing about love. It never goes away. On the night we received our first aid certificates, Louise cried, saying that she hadn't had a certification ceremony in eight years without Lawrence.

Earnie Swartz brought his grandmother, Shira Swartz, to the ceremony. She offered the advice, "Good riddance." Hank Swander, the CPR expert, smiled to his adoring crowd (Louise) and said, "You are a great teacher. You've taught us how to save lives. What do you need him for?" I helped her pack up the dummies and bring them home. We ate lunch for five days with two blond, CPR dummies at the dining room table. I tell you, sometimes, Louise was weird.

Then, I knew that eventually Lawrence and the shoe saleslady's relationship would blow over, but around day 75, I didn't know it had already done so. Louise had managed to get word of the breakup. She had spies everywhere, spying for her. Lawrence was a paramedic, and Louise's cousin, Susan's husband was also a paramedic, so he had heard the scoop. God, if only I would have known, I would have never made a wrong move. She was only looking for something, one wrong move, to give me the axe. I'm not saying what I did was right. It was wrong. If ever someone shows you a creation they've made, whether it's a fallen cake, or a papier-mâché angel, tell them it's nice. Many people would disagree with me on that. They'd say lying is no good, but what can it hurt? Someone thinking he's better than he really is? Isn't that the fate of all of us?

Day 80, Louise painted her 21st squiggly line painting. To tell you the truth, I was getting tired of them. They were all the
same--colorful and squiggly. She did have a flair. She set the painting on an easel in front of me, and, I tell you, I just didn't have it in me to give it to her. I had to let a busboy go that day for accidentally dropping twenty pounds of napkins into a grease fire, causing the fire department to interrupt the Mankatoes' anniversary concert, so I wasn't in the mood for chitchat. I wasn't in the mood for anything. I hate firing people. I still do, now that I own Beelers. I get my own peon to do it.

"What do you think?" Louise asked. The paint was still wet on her fingernails.

I stared blankly at it for a minute, then, I closed my eyes. Louise didn't say anything. She just walked away. I heard her singing to her record player later on. That night when I climbed into bed, Louise put an invisible forcefield around her with the use of grunts whenever I tried to touch her. She could make the ugliest noises.

"Ugg," she said.

Even though I now know it was awful of me, after 81 straight days of uninterrupted bliss, I was pissed to say the least. It was like candy, sweet candy, taken away from me.

I spent 20 minutes watching Louise's giant goldfish swim around before I started to scare them by darting toward them--an unidentified flying object. They flitted away. I was dangerous.

I met the first girl in an all night grocery store. After yelling goodbye to Louise, and her grunting at me, I walked the streets. It had just rained, and the air was cool and fresh. Worms lay on the sidewalk,
breathing the only way they knew how. I felt like a worm, but I wanted
to be a snake. I wanted to prowl through the grass, looking for the
dinner I thought I deserved.

The girl in the store was buying cheese. She had that thick,
little girl hair, only she wasn't a little girl. I bought a pack of
Marlboros and watched her walk away before I began to follow her. I
followed that girl, who was beautiful, to 16th and Center Street. The
girl climbed the stairs to the apartment building. I climbed behind
her.

"Do you live in this building?" I asked, pretending I was on my way
to unlock my apartment.

"Yes," the girl said. I've done some pretty sleazy things in my
life, but this was the sleaziest. I said, "Let me come in," when we got
to her apartment.

The girl said, "What?" She jammed the door shut on my face. I
could feel her locking all the locks—snapping, clicking, bolting
herself in. As quickly as Louise and I had locked ourselves together,
this girl was locking me out. She was only about 17. She struck me as
one of those smart girls, from some private school. She said, "If you
don't go away, I'm going to call the police." She was alone in the
house.

I could not believe the menace I had become. I blamed Louise. If
Louise would not give me what I needed, I would take it from a stranger,
as she had taken it from me.
Louise had left me for higher principles. My life, so it seemed, was one big squiggly line painting that I had no idea the meaning of. In one corner sat Louise, pale and disenchanted. In another corner, I sat, my head leaning against the nice wallpaper of the ritzy apartment building where I was holding the girl hostage. I examined the chandelier, looking at how pretty things could become. In another corner, the pretty, little girl sat, about to dial the phone to talk to the police.

"I can save your life," I shouted, knowing I had to get out of there before the officers came or the neighbors woke up. "You need me."

She didn't.

I finally did manage to find someone to take me home. She was a 23-year-old virgin from Pennsylvania. I found her sitting in a bar, sipping an amaretto fizz. She did this every night, in hopes of finding the someone she rightly deserved. I didn't even know her name. She was willing, so willing, unlike the girl who I had been harrassing. I could think of nothing else as I was doing it with the girl from Pennsylvania but the beautiful girl and the sound of her whimpering inside her apartment.

This girl, this girl from Pennsylvania, had waited for this moment all her life. I could smell her handcream, her perfume, her hairspray, her nail polish.

"Be gentle," she said.

I was.
All I can say is it wasn't rape. It could have been if things had worked out differently. If that beauty hadn't slammed the door on my face when she did, I might be in jail today. I should be.

I moved out of Louise Swensons' house on July 26, the 90th day. We did part friends. She told me that she and Lawrence were going to try it again. She gave me a snapshot she had taken, with the pulmonary system drawn on my body. Her last words were, "You've got some pulmonary system, but no taste in art." Then, she opened her purse, took out her wallet and gave me a card that said, "Denny Moreno is certified to save lives." She had forgotten to give it to me.