1991

Catskill stories

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Catskill stories

by

Linda Morganstein

A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the
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MASTER OF ARTS

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Iowa State University
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MY MOSES STORY

I saw my old friend Moses in People magazine yesterday. He's leading Quincy Parker through a mob of reporters. Parker is wearing jail clothes and handcuffs, but he looks like a Chivas Regal ad. If anyone looks like the criminal, it's Moses, his disheveled attorney. Poor Moses. Almost sixteen years since I've seen him and he continues to resemble a disreputable stork, the way his skinny neck sticks out from his collar.

Moses defends the notorious and the reprehensible. Child pornographers, mass murderers, dope-selling politician's sons. Quincy Parker is the worst yet. Most people think Moses is in it for the publicity. Or the money. He's not. He's defending what he hates. It seems like some people need to encounter what they hate everyday of their lives.

I met Moses in the summer of 1972, at a summer job in the Catskills. At the beginning of June, I drove my parents to Kennedy Airport. My mother lit one cigarette after another, my father wiped his slick face with a handkerchief. The car smelled of nervous sweat despite the air-conditioning. Both of them were ridiculously overdressed, including heavy wool overcoats, so they looked more like deportees than people going on a vacation.

"I don't like you working among strangers and lowlife," my father said as we passed through a congested interchange somewhere in Queens. Charred and gutless cars littered the sides of the road.

"It's safe, Dad. It's just a job."

"I hate this drive," my mother muttered from the back seat as we sailed on elevated highway past crumbling buildings and filthy, garbage-covered streets. "How can people live like this?"
"Check the tickets again," my father said to my mother, turning to the back seat. My mother inspected the travel agent's packet and my father sighed heavily. Within fifteen minutes, he would ask again.

At JFK, I eased up to a curb and we lugged the mountain of overpacked bags over to the waiting porter.

"Make sure you get the receipts," my mother whispered to my father.

They both watched suspiciously as the porter wheeled their things away. Next to us on the sidewalk, a soldier in a wheelchair was arranging to get into a parked van. I could feel my father's attention change as he carefully inspected the pinned trousers of the soldier's amputated stubs. His hand slowly reached towards the pocket of his overcoat.

"No!" I cried out. My father used to hand out business cards to amputees. I remember as a kid, I used to bring girls from school to Dad's shop. I took them through the back rooms of hanging legs and racks of arms, repeating my father's stories of gruesome accidents, until they squealed at me to stop, then begged me to repeat it all.

My father stepped over to me and took my shoulders. I could smell the wooly sweat on the underarms of his thick coat. "You be very careful," he said. "If anything happens, your Uncle Morty has all the documents."


"Call your Uncle Morty once a week and let him know you're still all right."

"I will, I will. Have a good time," I said without much conviction. My parents knew very little about good times. As I pulled away, I saw them standing shoulder to shoulder on the curb, not moving, checking their tickets again.

The next day, I went into Manhattan and got a Shortline bus to the Catskills. At the depot in Old Falls, another bus marked OASIS HOTEL waited. A group of us piled out of the one bus and into the other. Kids in college t-shirts, men in Salvation Army suits
drinking from bottles in paper bags, gum-snapping girls in miniskirts eyeing the guys in the college t-shirts. We rolled out of town, down a winding road, past a huge lake, past the front gates and flower-lined drive of the main entrance of the Oasis Hotel, around to a back entry. The bus dumped us at the employee's quarters where a bored-looking security guard gave out room assignments.

A girl with jet black hair piled in a beehive on the top of her head sat on the front stairs of my bungalow, smoking a cigarette and polishing her nails. The name tag on her white uniform said ROXANNE. Blowing smoke from her nose, she squinted at me as I lugged my stuff over to the stairs.

"Hi, I'm Arlene."

Roxanne squashed her cigarette onto the cement step, then slammed through the bungalow door. "God Almighty!" I heard from inside. "A JAP! What the hell did I do to deserve this?"

I lugged my suitcase up the stairs, into the small, cluttered living room. Roxanne was sitting on a lumpy green couch, dialing the phone. She jerked her head in the direction of the hall. "Your room is down there." On the coffee table, there were a couple of vials of white powder, a mirror, and a razor. Roxanne sneered defiantly.

"Welcome to the Catskills, honey."

Well, it wasn't like I hadn't seen drugs before."Thanks," I said as casually as possible.

Roxanne spent the rest of the night on the phone, fighting with someone named Carlos. Occasionally, she slammed down the receiver. Ten minutes later the phone would ring.

In the morning I reported to the dining room. Ivan Kahn, the maitre d', called over a tall boy with a very long, skinny neck. His bushy brown hair was pulled back into a tiny ponytail. He was fairly ugly, I have to say, with a big hooked nose and a small chin and a wart on his left cheek, but he had a haughty, I-don't-care-how-ugly-I-am look that reminded me of those homely royal princes in Flemish paintings.

"Moses, this is Arlene Gold. Show her what to do."

At this point, who should breeze by but Roxanne, carrying a load of dishes in two

"Do your work and mind your own business, Roxanne," Ivan Kahn called after her.

Well, what could I say? Just that my Uncle Morty happened to be the hotel owner's accountant. "Arlene wants to work?" he had said, a couple of months ago. "A little phone call, that's all it takes. At least she'll be at a decent place."

When I was little, every single night I can remember, my father went from window to window, door to door, in our house, making sure everything was locked and secure. Even after all this checking, there was no peace. In the middle of the night, the creaking of our beds said we were all awake, listening for the intruders. This is the kind of Jewish-American Princess I was.

Moses picked up a pile of spoons. "Take the forks," he said. "Set the tables from here to here," he said, drawing an imaginary island with his finger. "This is our station."

Roxanne had the station next door. She was throwing down silverware, glaring over at us occasionally.

"Why is she so hostile?" I whispered to Moses.

"Is she?"

Maybe I'm crazy, but I don't think calling me a JAP is exactly friendly."

"Listen--uh, what was your name again?"

"Arlene," I sighed.

"Arlene, there are two types of people who get summer jobs here. Mostly there are those who really need the money. Then there are a few who really don't. So, there's a little resentment, you know what I mean? Come in the kitchen and learn how to order."

I followed Moses into the gigantic, noisy kitchen. "You have to fight your way into these lines," Moses shouted. "Entrees over there, salads there. Don't let them push you back. It's dog eat dog."
A cook in a dirty white coat dropped a raw chicken on the floor. He picked it up, wiped it on his coat, and threw it into a soup pot. When he saw me watching, he winked.

"It happens all the time," Moses said.

"Do you go to school?" I asked him as we headed back to the dining room.

"Scholarship to Columbia."

"Do you live in Manhattan?"

"What is this? Are you writing an article?" Moses swung a rack of water glasses onto a table so abruptly that they rattled in their slots.

"No--"

"I lived with my father in Brooklyn until last term, okay? In a flat over a dry cleaner. Then I moved into a dorm near school. Anything else you want to know?"

"I was just making conversation."

"Don't bother. I really don't care much for chitchat."

Before I could answer, Roxanne called over: "Moses, who's that cute guy that moved into you place last week?"

"Just your type," Moses called back. "A life guard. And he's at least thirty."

"Invite me over for coffee," Roxanne called. "I want to meet him."

In the next three days, I managed to drop three trays full of plates, dump a bowl of soup into a grandmother's lap, and cut my finger with a bread knife. By the end of the week, Ivan Kahn had called Ruth Sanger, who called Uncle Morty. I was demoted to room service.

Roxanne, who could carry a full tray on her shoulder and still wiggle her hips, was amused. She made constant references to my situation when we were around other people. It turns out she had come up to the Catskills to escape her boyfriend Carlos for the summer, which explained the constant screaming phone calls to the Bronx. In between calls, she sprawled on the couch and snorted coke. Then she started having Milt, the thirty-year old life guard, over and pretty soon they were up all night partying and Roxanne left the phone off the hook.
I've always had trouble sleeping through the night, but after two weeks of Milt and Roxanne scrambling from the living room to her bedroom and back again, I thought I was never going to sleep again. Then Roxanne approached me with a proposal. She and Milt wanted to shack up together in his bungalow. We would swap roommates. Which meant one problem—I would have to put up with Moses.

"Roxanne, I can't live with him. Besides, he'll never do it. He can't stand me."

"He hates living with Milt. He'll do it."

"But what if I don't want to live with him?"

"Just because you've always gotten what you wanted--" Roxanne cried. "But what if I don't want to live with him?" she mimicked. "You see how you don't fit in around here? You're just making it worse."

I thought about Moses and his arrogant stare.

"I'm sorry, Roxanne. I can't live with him."

"Shit!" Roxanne cried again and stomped from the room.

For the next couple of days, Milt and Roxanne pulled out the stops. They laughed and moaned all night long, until the sound of Roxanne's high-pitched giggle began to vibrate inside my skull. Maybe it was capitulation to torture tactics, but I soon began to figure anything would be better than Milt and Roxanne.

"Okay," I announced the next day. "Send Moses over."

That evening, Milt and Roxanne moved all her vials and paraphernalia and makeup and short skirts over to Milt's and Moses arrived on my doorstep, dragging a few pieces of cheap vinyl luggage.

"Which is my room?" he asked stiffly.

I was sunk in the lumpy green armchair which matched the couch. I pointed down the hall. "Roxanne got most of her stuff out."

"Got a broom?" Moses asked. He was inspecting the title of the book I was reading. Bernard Malamud. His voice softened a little. "A good writer." Immediately, his arrogant tone returned. "I don't like to be bothered. I like it quiet."
"Fine," I said. "I'm not looking for anything."

"Fine," he answered and started out of the room. At the doorway, he paused and cleared his throat. "Listen," he said, "I'm not used to living with women."

I shrugged. "Just lock the door when you use the bathroom and put the toilet seat down, okay?"

A red blush spread up his neck. "Okay."

I have to admit, I could feel a warm flush of red spreading on my own neck, but I refused to look up or acknowledge it.

Of course, Momma and Dad would of had a fit. But as far as I could tell, no one at the Oasis cared one bit who you lived with.

For the next week, whenever I came into the bungalow, Moses would get up and go into his room. Then, one Saturday at midnight, I came in from a long shift. Moses was on the phone.

"No! Don't come up. I'm busy. I'm working every day. No, I don't have any days off."

I thought that was peculiar, since all of us usually had at least one day off in the week. Moses glared at me. Well, hell, it was my bungalow too. I grabbed a magazine and flopped down in an armchair.

Moses turned his back and started to whisper. "Of course I love you. No, I am grateful."

I pretended to be absorbed in an article.

"I don't have any time to see you right now. I work all the time," he whispered.

There was a pause. Moses said in a very strained tone, "I don't want to hear this again, Poppa."

Then he was quiet. He held the receiver to his ear. Every once in awhile he wiped his eyes or scratched his neck, but mostly he just listened.

When he finally set the phone down, I was dozing in the arm chair with the magazine draped across my chest.

"So, did you get your thrills for the evening?" he asked.
Like his life was so important. "Not really."

"Oh, yeah?" He settled back in his chair and draped one leg over the armrest. "You don't know the half of it."

"I don't know anything! You've hardly said a word to me since you moved in, so how could I know anything?"

"I don't see why I should tell you."

"What makes you think I'm so dying to know?"

Well, the more I resisted, the more he wanted to talk. I was learning something about Moses. So, I got up and walked to the door. Slowly. I paused at the entryway to the hall.

"Wait. Sit down."

When I was sitting again, he inspected me with a frown. "You probably won't understand."

I made as if to stand up.

"Wait." Moses said quickly. "Sit down."

I sat.

"My father," Moses said, "was in Auschwitz for five years. His mother, sister, brothers, father, uncles, aunts, grandfather, grandmother, and all but one cousin, were exterminated. He has a bad liver. He has cheap false teeth that make his breath stink. He has this way of cornering people, with his bad breath close in their faces. I just can't stand to have him around, I can't stand watching him harass people with horror stories."

Moses paused and stared at me. I was sitting on the edge of the cushion.

"And," Moses added, "he tells very bad jokes."

"He what?"

"Bad jokes. He tells terrible jokes. Polish jokes. Mother-in-law jokes. Rabbi jokes." Moses shook his head. "Go figure. In the same man, a tortured soul and a frustrated Borscht Belt comedian."

I was thinking about my father. I can't remember him ever telling a single joke.
"Sometimes, here in the hotel dining room," Moses said, "I'm pouring coffee for some old woman and I get the shakes. I have this psychic thing for survivors."

Something stuck in my throat.

"The ones I can't stand," Moses said, "eat just like he does, ordering three main dishes because it comes with the bill, stuffing everything into their mouth like it's their last meal. Some of them have two Cadillacs in this country and they eat like someone is waiting on the other side of the lobby with a machine gun. I can't stand to see them, much less having my own father up here too."

I was thinking about Dad again. I always hated going with him to holiday parties. He would stand at the buffet table and shove smoked oysters and cocktail hot dogs into his mouth. In the evenings after work, he would stand in front of the open refrigerator and jam kosher bologna or turkey coldcuts into his mouth although supper was almost always only a few minutes away.

"Don't, Dad," I used to plead. "Leave him alone," my mother would whisper to me, pulling on my arm, "Go into the living room." And, as I turned my back, I would hear the sounds of his jaw cracking as he chewed.

While I was thinking these things, Moses had stopped talking. I believe he thought I was not interested in what he had to say. He jumped up and marched to the hallway, calling an abrupt "Goodnight" before he disappeared into his room.

I sat alone for awhile, then got up. I went down the hall and knocked on his door.

"What?" he called.

"Can I come in?"

There was a silence, then the squeak of bed springs. "Okay."

Moses was standing next to his bed, wearing a pair of waiter's pants he must have just pulled on. He had a pale white concave chest, almost hairless.

"Moses, my parents were in the camps."

"Where?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean?"

"Nobody ever talked about it if I was around."
Moses smiled—a funny, satisfied smile—and rubbed the middle of his sunken chest. "I wondered why you have insomnia."

My father had a saying. He used it the times my mother got up and sat all night in the kitchen. She sat in the dark at the formica table and chain-smoked until the room was cloudy and rank-smelling. First I would get out of my bed and find her. Not a minute later my father was in the room. "Try and live in the present, Marta," he would say, patting her shoulder. I must have heard that phrase a hundred thousand times when I was growing up.

"Try and live in the present."

"Arlene," Moses said, "Why are people like us always thrown together?"

"It's probably just a coincidence."

"Arlene?"

"What?"

"I don't want to talk about this all the time. You understand?"

"I didn't say I wanted to--"

Moses sank onto his bed, so the springs squeaked loudly. "Damn, it's like vomiting when you're hungover."

"I don't understand."

"We're just not going to talk about it all the time," he repeated and waved his hand for me to go.

At the doorway I said, "Goodnight, Moses," then I went to my room and lay awake for hours like I so often did.

After that night, I'd come back from room service and Moses stopped leaving the room. At first, we'd sit around together and read, not saying much. Sometimes I knew he was looking at me.

One night, he was in his chair and I was in mine, when he suddenly threw his book across the room. It flew past my nose and hit the screen of the window behind me.
"I hate it!" he shouted.

"What?"

"It's a ripoff. It's disgusting. I bet the writer never saw the inside of a camp."

"Moses, it's only a story."

Moses glared at me. "What do you know about it? It's a sickness. It's cheap thrills. Do you go for those kind of thrills?"

"No."

"Then, do you think they should be making all these holocaust stories and movies?"

I shrugged. "I don't know, Moses."

"You must have an opinion, Arlene."

I closed my book. "I guess I haven't thought about it much."

"Tell me what you think," Moses pressed.

"Maybe," I said haltingly, "it's not right to stop them."

"I didn't say anything about stopping them, I just said it's a rip-off."

"Things get ripped-off from the past all the time."

"Does that make it right?"

"I didn't say it was right."

"Then what do you think is right?"

I studied the floor. "Maybe people shouldn't live in the past."

"Arlene!" Moses cried, leaping up from the couch. "What the hell does that have to do with anything? Why can't we have a reasonable discussion about these things?"

I still couldn't meet his eyes. "I don't know," I repeated and got up to go to bed. Moses was still standing by the couch.

I could feel his eyes on my back as I left the room. "Goodnight, Arlene," he called after me. "And we're not going to talk about this anymore."

"Who brought it up this time? You did."

"No more after this, Arlene."

In bed that night, I thought of Dad in his shop on Southside Street. He sat like a
surgeon at a stainless steel table lined with sharp, shiny repair tools, a mangled plastic limb spread out in front of him. He would tell me whose part it was and how it broke, then how the person came to lose their hand or foot or leg or arm.

"This one," he would say, holding out an small plastic arm torn nearly in half, "belongs to a girl your age. She fell from a tree. Previously, she lost her actual arm in a freak accident at Coney Island. On the roller coaster." He shook his head sadly. "A terrible accident. The arm caught in the space between track and wheel."

Those were our daily conversations. What kinds of arms little boys and girls lost. How young men lost their legs on motorcycles.

I have never been on a roller coaster. I hate escalators, ski lifts, any type of power tool that saws, drills or cuts. You would be surprised at the number of ways people can become dismembered. Once I saw a 'living torso' at the sideshow of a carnival that came to town and I had nightmares until I was seventeen years old.

Moses's father called five nights a week. "He goes through phases," Moses explained. "He doesn't call for while, then it starts again. All this term at school, he'd go a couple of weeks, then start calling me at my dorm almost every night. He's not used to living alone. He's used to me being around all the time."

"Why don't you ask him to call at a normal time?"

"While I'm at it, why don't I ask him to be a normal father?"

"Why don't you not answer?"

"The ringing," Moses said. "He doesn't stop until I answer."

"Why doesn't he get some help?"

"He has. Shock treatments, antidepressants, mood elevators. I guess there isn't a cure for history."

When I think back to that summer, it's an insomniac dream, a sleep deprivation experiment, a hazy, yawning mishmash of pushing room service carts through halls that smelled of pine disinfectant and late night talks with Moses. We always skirted around the same subject. And I always wound up feeling a little ashamed and guilty.

Each time we talked, I made a strange promise to myself. I would allow myself this
talk with Moses. Then, the summer would end. I would go away and forget about it all. It was like a perversion, something you promise yourself you'll quit—after just one more time.

It would happen like this. We'd be sitting together after work, maybe telling stories about guests in the dining room or gossiping about someone in room service.

"I watched a guest today," Moses would say, "put a half-roast chicken, all the sugar packets from their bowl, and a basket of rolls in her purse. She saw me watching and the look she gave. Like if I would report her, she would be sent to the gas chamber. Of course, I just shrugged. Hell, I don't care what they take, I just don't see how they find the room to eat it all."

I could feel that urge starting to fill me. "A survivor?"

"I'm trying not to focus so much on whether they are or not. I told you that, Arlene."

"They're everywhere. Every time I see someone a certain age, I start wondering."

"I come up here to get away from my father. Now, what do I get? You."

"You brought it up."

"I was just telling a story."

"You knew—"

"Arlene, I'm going to leave this room if—"

"Okay, okay."

And the next night would be the same.

Sometimes I even have trouble reading the newspaper. Whenever anything about the War or the holocaust came on television, my father got up and changed the channel. We had no history books in my house, nothing that talked about the camps or what lead to them. Nothing that talked about what came after.

The first time I met Moses's father was eastbound on the George Washington Bridge. Moses and I had a day off from work and we were escaping into Manhattan on
a day so hot and muggy we could of been in Hell. We were dumb enough to be speeding with the top down in Moses' beatup Dodge Dart convertible, so the soot and toxic fumes were burning our eyes and stinging our noses, when we nearly collided into a creeping clump of cars in the middle of the bridge.

Way up in the distance, some idiot was weaving across lanes. You could hear the horns blasting from the cars ahead of us and the angry shouts. The air was so hazy it seemed like somebody might have set the state of New Jersey on fire. The scream of horns was spreading until nearly everyone had joined in, a full bridge of blasting impatience.

"It's probably my father," Moses said.

"Oh, come on."

"Didn't I tell you he's the worst driver in the entire City?"

"Moses, what are the chances? A million to one?"

Moses didn't say anything, but gunned the engine and started weaving through the gridlock like a maniac, like he didn't care if he got us killed. He jerked through narrow slits and leaned on the horn and like a miracle, the traffic parted.

We were fifteen cars away, then ten. I was hanging onto the dashboard with my mouth open, so the black exhaust was rushing down my throat and into my lungs. Up ahead was a midnight blue Dodge Dart convertible exactly like Moses's junker, just as beatup and rusted, with a frizzy-haired old man clutching the steering wheel. Moses nearly sideswiped a Chrysler station wagon full of singing Girl Scouts to get us closer.

Then we were even with the Dart, and the two beatup convertibles swayed back and forth across the lanes and Moses pressed on his horn and yelled, "Poppa!"

The old man refused to take his eyes off the road. He was hunched over the steering wheel, clutching it with white knuckles.

"Poppa!"

The old man's Dart swayed dangerously close to ours.

"Poppa, this is my friend Arlene!" Moses shouted.

"A pleasure!" Moses' father shouted, keeping his stiff gaze on the road ahead. Moses glanced at me with an "I-told-you-so" look and stepped on the gas and we
roared past his father and down the unblocked lane ahead.  

"He sticks out like a sore thumb," he said. His voice had that strange mixture of pride and exasperation he used whenever he talked about his father.  

"I want to meet him!"  
"You just did!"  
"Let's have lunch with him!"  
"We can't--"  
"Please?"  
"Arlene--"  
"Please, Moses."

He glanced at me quickly, then swerved to avoid a poultry truck that was veering into our lane.  

"Arlene, after everything I've told you?"

I nodded. I was thinking: Not after everything you've told me. Because of everything you've told me.

I remember watching my mother wash dishes, her hands dipping in the suds from the lemon Joy detergent, and I think back to the numbers tattooed on her arm. I knew there was something shameful about those numbers.

My mother talked to herself. She did it while she washed dishes, she did it during those all night vigils at the kitchen table. But she wasn't raving or complaining, nothing crazy or offensive. Call the hairdresser tomorrow. Buy three extra chickens. Milk, butter, remember the floor wax. The post office--send a card to the Levines. She was rehearsing her schedules, listing her plans, making sure her life had an order.

That day we went into Manhattan, we had lunch in a place called Harry's in the garment district, with boys pulling racks of evening gowns outside the greasy window.  

"Why didn't you call me?" were Moses's father's first words.  
"Poppa, we did call you."
Moses's father shrugged at me. "He's ashamed. He only called because he saw me on the bridge."

I wasn't about to tell him it was me who instigated the meeting. "Do you work near here?" I asked.

"Work? Young lady, I slave." He pointed to a leathergoods manufacturer across the street. "I sew and I slave. Are you a waitress with my son?"

"Room service," I said.

Moses's father's face lit up.

"There's an immigrant who's made it big in textiles. So, he goes to a fancy hotel and spends the night. He gets room service. He spends another night. In the morning, he picks up the phone.

*Room service?*

*Yes, sir.*

*I want breakfast, but I want you should listen to me.*

*Yes, sir.*

*Because I'm paying an arm and a leg for this room.*

*Of course, sir.*

*You ready? The eggs I want like rubber. The toast black as coal. And the potatoes undercooked and tasteless.*

*"I'm sorry, sir! We can't do that.*

*"The man shrugged," Moses father said, leaning towards me andshrugging. Why not? You did it yesterday?*

I laughed and Moses's father beamed with pleasure. Moses was playing with the salt shaker and ignoring us both.

Moses's father touched my sleeve. "He doesn't think my jokes are funny."

I looked from one to the other, not knowing what to say.

*I don't know what I did to make him so ungrateful.*

*I'm not ungrateful, I just don't like offensive Jew jokes.*

Moses's father squeezed my arm. "He prefers now fancy books of literature. Fine, fine."
I watched this happen. Moses's father's eyes turned in on themselves. It was like someone took a knife and cut away all the years before and all the years after, leaving the one nightmare time as the only thing alive, for always and ever.

"I died back then," Moses's father said. "I am a corpse now, except for my son. I live for him. I watched the others being chosen and taken away and I reasoned that I must live for something."

The rancid smell of the deep-fat fryers suddenly made me feel a little queasy.

"Poppa, if you start with this, we're leaving."

Moses's father's hand went from resting on my arm to gripping it with tight fingers. "I only live for him. Nothing else could keep me on this earth that has proven so sick with destruction."

"Poppa!"

"Did he tell you what my life was like?"

"Enough, Poppa!" Moses jumped up from the plastic booth seat.

Moses's father held my arm. The funny thing was, I don't think that was why I stayed seated. The funny thing was, I didn't want to leave.

"There are things, young lady, that you can never forget. Things that make you question what it is to be human."

"Arlene, come on!" Moses shouted.

The middle-aged waitress behind the cash register yelled: "No shouting in here!"

The adams apple in Moses's neck was rising and falling like a bouncing ball. I touched Moses's father's hand and his grip relaxed on my arm. I slid from the booth.

"Nice meeting you, Mr. Schlavinsky," I said feebly.

His head was slumped and his shoulders sagged. He wouldn't look up when Moses said: "This is your fault, not mine."

When we got to the sidewalk, I caught one last glimpse of him through the glass. I was hurrying to catch up with Moses. His father was talking to the waitress. I can't be sure, but from his gestures, I think he was telling her the room service joke.
Sometimes, if we had a day off together, Moses and I would sit for a couple of hours on the top of a huge rock that jutted out over the water at Lake Kowanga.

I found myself planning ways to bring up his father in the conversation. "I slept most of the night," I might say, "funny that your father didn't call."

"He's going through a new stage. He's threatening to commit suicide. He tells me this, then he doesn't call for two days, so I'm supposed to think he's done it."

"Moses, maybe you should call the psychiatrist again."

"No," Moses said with great seriousness. "Survivors rarely commit suicide. At least not any more than the average person." He shrugged and threw a tiny chip from the great rock we sat on into the lake water. "He won't go until he's seen me become President or the equivalent."

"What do you want to be?" I asked.

Moses shrugged. "I don't know. What would I be if his eyes didn't follow me everywhere? What if I wound up becoming the worst? Something we all hate?"

"I don't think you would."

"Sometimes I wonder."

In the middle of August—I remember the date so well because my parents sent me a birthday card from Florence two days before the incident—I wheeled a breakfast cart up the elevator to a room on the sixth floor of the Main Building.

A tall, grey-haired man in a thick dark bathrobe answered the door. "Wheel it over to the table by the window," he said. The room was a suite, actually. One of the most expensive, with a picture window overlooking the lake and a mirrored wall that reflected the outside view from the picture window, so the whole room seemed inside out. "Lay the plates out on the table," the man ordered. He shut the door.

That was okay. Every once in awhile, someone wanted the full treatment. Usually, the business executives, like this one. He kind of reminded me of my father. While I poured the coffee and imagined a nice, big tip, he seated himself at the table, brushing against me as he slipped down. I noticed the bathrobe parted slightly in his lap, so his bare knees showed.
"Where do you go to college?" he asked.
I told him.
"I have a daughter. She's a senior at Mount Holyoke."
I relaxed. This was a man with a daughter at Mount Holyoke.

When I set down the last thing, a basket of mixed rolls, something touched my thigh. My hand whipped out into the air, launching an egg bagel into the scrambled eggs. The arm drew around my waist suddenly. I was being pressed up against a soft expanse of expensive navy blue terry cloth, with a hand rubbing over the Oasis Hotel logo on the right breast.

Everything happened in total silence. I pushed away from the warm terry cloth. I ran across the plush carpet and slammed the door after me. The sound of the door slamming was more startling than anything else.

I was still sitting in the armchair in our living room when Moses came in from work. I'd been sitting there since eleven o'clock that morning.

Moses took one look at me. "What's the matter?"
"Nothing. A guest grabbed me."

Moses stood still. His skinny stork neck reddened. "What guest?"
"Just some guest. I don't know."
"What was his room number?"
I thought for a minute. "Main Building. Room 640."

Moses reached for the phone.
"Who are you calling?" I asked.

"Front desk--" Moses waved his hand at me as I started to protest. "Marty, what's the name of the man in Main Building, 640? Where does he sit in the dining room?"

"What are you going to do, Moses?" I asked, a small panic rising in my stomach.
"I don't know yet."
"Moses, you can't tell anyone."
"Why not? He can't get away with it."
A nameless terror was closing in on me. I was ashamed. I didn't want to upset anything. I just wanted everything to go back to normal.

"Don't do anything, it wasn't a big deal."

Moses smiled. "Don't worry," he said. "Sometimes, the best justice goes undetected in an unjust world."

"Moses, you don't mean that."

"Look, you're the one who told me not to tell anyone."

"Can't we pretend it didn't happen?"

Moses slapped his palm on the arm of the couch, raising ancient dust. "That's your solution to everything, isn't it?"

I started to cry.

He watched me cry with his hands twitching at his side. "You make me so mad sometimes, Arlene," he said softly.

I wiped my cheeks and glared at him. "You make me just as mad."

It turns out the next morning, Moses arranged to trade places with Jeff Goldbloom in the dining room. He served apple juice to the man who touched me and poured his coffee very politely. Only Moses pulled one of the oldest waiter tricks in the world. The apple juice was only half juice and the rest—ask a waiter sometime.

One night, near the end of the summer, I came back to the bungalow very late. I had been out on a date for a change. Some guy who was going to Brandeis. When I got in, the phone was buzzing off the hook and the chair next to it was knocked over.

"Moses?"

He wasn't in his room.

"Moses?"

He wasn't anywhere.

I ran down towards the lake, along the path, tripping over rubble and cans. I could see his stork-like, hunching shadow outlined on the top of the flat-topped boulder hanging over the water.

"Moses?"
I was panting from the scramble up the toeholds of the rock.

"Arlene, my father is dead."

"Oh, my God."

He was rubbing his hands against his cheeks. "I never let him come up here once".

"You listened to the same horror story for hours, five times a week on the phone."

"I don't know what it's going to be like without him. Arlene, I'm so used to him bothering me every minute of my life."

Although I am ashamed to admit it, what I was thinking was how glad I was that the summer was nearly over.

"C'mon," I said. "Let's go back to the bungalow, I'll make you some tea."

"I don't think so."

"You can't stay here all night."

"I can't get up."

"Sure you can."

Moses wrapped his arms stubbornly around his knees.

Well, I knew Moses's game. I turned and started back down the rock without him.

"All right," I said. "I'm leaving."

And, within moments, Moses stood.

I did go to the funeral with him. There we learned, from Moses's father's one surviving cousin, Sadie, that Moses' father hung himself with a plastic rope he bought in a hardware store on Flatbush Avenue. He hung the rope from a lamp fixture. He stood on a chair, then kicked it aside. The whole thing almost failed. The lamp fixture tore from the ceiling, so they found him on the floor with a shower of white plaster powder all over his swollen face.

In his room, in the apartment he and Moses shared, they found no note. Only two overflowing garbage bags. One was filled with newspaper clippings and magazine articles about the Holocaust. The other was filled with clipped-out jokes.
In late August, I drove to Kennedy airport to pick up my parents. I couldn't help thinking of Moses's father and his driving. This made me anxious. I was supposed to be back in my normal life. But I was still thinking of Moses and his father.

They were wearing the same overcoats, in spite of the fact that it was even hotter than when I'd left them off. I was late and caught up with them at the baggage claims. From a distance, I could see them clinging to one another and following the turn of the revolving platform, convinced their luggage had been hijacked or destroyed.

"How was your trip?" I asked in the car.

"Everything was so expensive. There is terrible tension. The hotels were nothing like the travel agent promised," my father said.

"I worried about terrorists," my mother said. "I never adjusted to such a different schedule."

They were glad to be home. Well, glad is not the word. They are never glad. Relieved is a better word.

"And how, Arlene, was your summer?"

I took a deep breath. "I made a friend whose father was in the camps. He was a nice man. But he committed suicide."

The air in the car thickened. They wouldn't speak. It was as if I hadn't said anything.

"Did you hear what I said?"

"I hope you saved your money," my father said.

"How's your Uncle Morty?" my mother asked. "Have you spoken to him since you got back?"

I gripped the wheel and sped into the passing lane, past four cars, my foot pushing harder and harder on the accelerator.

"Arlene," my mother cried from the back seat. "You're driving like a maniac. What's wrong with you?"


I was tempted to get worse, to start weaving across lanes, veering close to trucks,
maybe losing control--

"Arlene!" my mother screamed. In her voice was a very real and deep terror.

"Arlene, slow down!" my father roared.

I pushed on the brake, jerking us down to the speed limit. "Do you know how left out I feel?" I shouted.

They were both quiet, but it was a thick and studied silence. Then my father spoke in an angry, restrained voice. "I don't know what you've been doing this summer, young lady. But I would give my life rather than expose you to these things to which you so suddenly feel left out."

I felt very lonely then. But deeper still was a strange sort of relief--I was being told to stop pushing and maybe all along I wanted someone to tell me to leave it alone.

In September I went back to Douglass College and Moses took off for Columbia. I would have gone back to the Catskills for the next summer, except I landed a great job at the Modern Museum of Art, working for the curator. Moses wrote that he was studying for the law school exams. In August, he wrote that he had a girlfriend. I wrote him back, he wrote me, I wrote, it went on for awhile and then it was over and we fell out of each other's lives.

I have never talked to anyone about my past the way I talked to Moses. I live a pretty normal life. I work in a museum, I have two kids and a husband. Things seem good if it's eleven o'clock at night and my husband and kids are home and no one's been shot by a mugger, kidnapped, or run over by a bus. I am still terrified of lost limbs, except that now I worry too much for my children. I bite my nails and my heart races when they ride a ferris wheel.

Five years ago my mother died of lung cancer. My father was all right for awhile, but he couldn't adjust to being alone. He seems to be going through an early senility.

Just recently, he has started talking about the past. I'm afraid to have him around the children. I don't want them exposed to the horror tales. I don't know what to do.

And I can't stop thinking about Moses's father.

I have this funny image of the whole world sitting in cars on the George
Washington Bridge, in one hell of a traffic jam, with Moses's father up at the front, blocking the way, weaving across the lanes. The horns are the loudest symphony on earth. And there's no question that Moses's father is the worst driver in the entire universe. In spite of everything, I want to see him again. I want to hear one of his bad jokes.
QUEEN OF CUPS

Marlene only went to the psychic because of her friend Claire who got her right leg amputated but felt like it was still there.

At first no one knew about the phantom leg. Later Claire told Marlene that she used to lie in bed when no one was around and the leg seemed so real she felt like she could just get up and start dancing to Motown from the clock-radio. Then the leg started to ache. Claire said it was like someone was tearing hunks off a loaf of french bread, piece by piece.

When the phone rang at five a.m., Marlene was lying on the narrow bed of her Airstream trailer, staring at the curved ceiling. She'd just had another baby dream. This time the baby was a Valentine's Day cupid with blond curls and a tight naked round belly. Only this was no angel. In the dream, Marlene was running down a dirt road in the middle of nowhere and the baby was flapping after her, teeth bared, screeching for revenge.

"Marlene, can you come over?"
"What's the matter?"
"Nothing. Come over."

Marlene threw on a bathrobe and a pair of expensive running shoes which she bought last year. She remembered herself plodding and wheezing down the streets of Old Falls with her breasts jiggling under a sweaty t-shirt. Then a group of high school punks tried to run her down, screaming "Shake it, fatso," and she slid into a ditch. So much for jogging.

"You're not fat," Claire kept telling her. "Just out of shape."

Claire always had a million suggestions to improve Marlene.

"Do you know what smoking does to the life-span? Well-cared-for skin doesn't
have acne. Marlene, change is a necessity of life."

Marlene wanted to change. She just wished Claire wouldn't make it sound as simple as going to the beauty parlor for a makeover.

The sun was just coming up. Marlene stepped down the metal-grated stairs. Her trailer was parked in an old apple orchard behind the farmhouse Claire and Marty rented.

When she reached the back porch of the farmhouse, Marlene glanced back. In the cold blue early morning light, her bullet-shaped trailer looked like a dumpy space capsule dropped in the middle of a carpet of fallen apple blossoms.

A few months before, when Claire came home from the hospital, Marlene and Marty had taken turns nursing her around the clock. Marlene was having problems with Russell again so she bought the trailer. She hitched it to her pickup and towed it to Marty and Claire's orchard.

At first Marlene went in the farmhouse to use the phone or take a shower. Then she and Marty started hooking things up. First electricity and water. Then an antennae on the roof. Before you knew it she was getting her own phone, although everyone knew the whole thing was temporary.

Marlene opened the back door without knocking and walked blindly into the shadowy kitchen. "Ouch!" she cried, slamming her shin. "Where are you?"

"I'm in here!"

Claire was on the couch in the living room, pushing herself up to a sitting position. The blanket slipped, exposing her raw-looking stump. Claire quickly covered it up. Even this long into the recuperation, the house still smelled rancid, like greasy salves and medicines.

"Sorry to wake you up. I could've waited, I suppose. Marty'll be home soon."

Marlene was thinking she would never have called Claire to come over at five a.m. That was the difference between them.

Marlene had watched Claire all through high school, ever since they were paired in a science project in the ninth grade. For two weeks, they were together. They had made a large model of the human heart, cut in half so the valves and chambers were exposed.
When the project was over, Claire got drawn back to her crowd of friends and they didn't talk anymore, although for a few months Claire nodded when they passed in the hall.

Marlene left the model heart in a closet at her mother's house. Two years ago she saw it on a table at a garage sale her mother was having, selling for a dollar and a quarter. Somehow she didn't feel right asking for it back. The amazing thing was that it sold.

Marlene watched when Claire and Russell got together in the tenth grade. She watched them live out a stupid high school fairy tale. Prom royalty. The whole bit.

Even after they broke up and Claire went off to nursing school in Albany, Russell and Claire kept in touch. Everyone expected big things of Russell, but he crushed a vertebrae in his back in the last game of his high school career and he lost his athletic scholarship, then would up in the psychiatric technician program at the community college.

Marlene heard all about Claire from Russell. She heard how determined Claire was. How intelligent. How independent. Strong-willed. She heard how Claire was depressed in nursing school after a failed love affair. She heard how Claire graduated near the top of her class. She heard when Claire came back to town to take care of her father who had lymphoma.

One night Russell mentioned Claire had got the night nursing supervisor job on his ward at the psych hospital. Not long after, Claire took up with Russell's best friend, Marty, one of the eating disorder counselors.

And that's the story, Marlene thought, of how Russell, Marlene, Claire, and Marty became one big, happy family.

"I made an appointment with a psychic counselor," Claire said.

"What?"

"I can't take these pains anymore. The goddamned doctors are acting like I'm crazy. I don't care what those jerks say. It feels so real, Marlene. Something is still there."
Marlene shivered. She was thinking about the scraped-out place in her uterus. Sometimes she felt like the baby was still there.

"What do you think?" Claire asked.

Marlene shrugged. "My mother used to go to fortune-tellers. There were Jesus statues and candles--"

"Your mother was a nut. This is different. This is a psychic counselor. She said she could help me with the leg."

Sometimes she still envied Claire, even after the accident. Claire pushed her way ahead in everything she did. She had a positive attitude.

"Well, it can't hurt," Claire added firmly. "Russell got her name from one of the nurses at the hospital who swears the psychic helped her cure an ulcer."

When Marlene didn't answer, she added: "Marty told me Russell's been asking about you."

Here we go again, Marlene thought. "I don't want to talk about Russell."

"How long are you going to keep it all inside?"

"I don't know. Maybe forever."

"Don't you think if you tried? Believe me, I know Russell is no angel. But at least he's willing to process his feelings. We're all concerned about you, Marlene."

Sometimes she got so sick of how concerned everyone sounded. That's what she got for hanging around with three people who worked in a nut house. Total concern.

If she had told them about the baby, she could imagine how concerned they would sound. No one understood why she didn't want to "process" with Russell right now. And she wasn't going to explain it.

A car was speeding up the dirt drive that led from the main road, fast enough so its rattling and roaring traveled in through the closed windows, louder and louder, until it slammed to a halt in front of the house. How could Marty still drive so fast? At least he hadn't bought another motorcycle yet.

Marty and Claire used to spend most Sundays on Marty's Suzuki, racing up and down the winding country roads around Old Falls. Then one night they were coming
home from a party, climbing up over Frazier Road, and they hit an ice spot right near the ravine. Claire went over the guard rail and tumbled fifteen feet through trash and saplings, breaking her leg in five places.

Marlene stood up quickly as Marty came in.

"Hi, ladies," he said, struggling through the door with the Sunday paper and a lumpy brown paper bag smelling of warm bagels.

Marlene was already halfway to the kitchen.

"Hey, you don't have to go," Marty called. "I brought breakfast."

"Sorry." She left quickly through the back door. Claire and Marty were always trying to get her to stay. Since the accident, they seemed to be afraid to spend too much time alone together. Marlene sometimes wondered if that wasn't why they were so irritated about her breakup with Russell.

If she stayed they would bring him up again. She was getting sick of hearing about how lonely he was, which she doubted. Russell had sixteen nurses after him at any given time. All of them probably wondering why he lived with someone like Marlene.

What could you say about Russell?

The best psych tech at the Old Falls Psychiatric Hospital. Gigantic, handsome old Russell, six foot-five inches of charm and good will. Not fat, but bulky, with great big hands and thick shoulders. Whenever anyone had trouble getting a patient to take his meds, they called Russell over. The sight of him was enough to get results.

"Hey, Goliath! Dinner's ready," she used to call sometimes when they still lived together. Russell was the kind of guy who could find this funny.

"Fe, fi, fo fum!" he'd rumble in a deep bass, with his arms crooked out from his sides.

Russell used to arrive home as the sun came up and climb into bed. He'd take her in his arms and tell her nut case stories. The wife of a big hotel owner found drunk as a bum under a blanket of newspapers at the Court House Park. A parking attendant at the Mountainview Hotel who heard the voice of Danny Kaye—only this guy's Danny Kaye was an agent of Satan just pretending to be a humanitarian.
The stories reminded her of soap operas, only better, because she was lying curled up next to Russell, her ear pressed against his hairy chest so that the sounds he made echoed into her head through his sternum. And yet, she always had the strangest sense. As though she was hearing two voices, one from his mouth, one vibrating through his skin.

Russell said you had to be a little crazy to work in a psych hospital. He said he knew a few psych techs who had spent time in the wards themselves. Maybe that explained everything. When she went to staff parties at the hospital, everyone told her how great Russell was. She never said a word, but she would have liked to. Just once.

And now she was the bad guy. The one who broke up the happy family. The one who wouldn't process her feelings. Because every time she had ever tried talking to the three of them she wound up feeling like an idiot who didn't know the right terminology.

For three weeks, Claire went to the psychic on Monday afternoons. It was all she could talk about.

"You see, the pains are the unconscious holding onto the leg."

"Oh, please."

"Listen, don't give me the cynical shit, Marlene. The pains are going away."

And, in another two weeks, they were gone.

In those two weeks, Marlene dreamt about the baby six times. After the seventh time, she called and made an appointment. Then, in the three days she had to wait, she'd be sitting in her trailer doing nothing and her breath would start acting up. She'd run to the phone and start to dial the psychic's number, punch in three digits then slam the receiver down.

The evening before the appointment, Russell called.

"I miss you."

"I was on my way out the door."
"Wait! I'm sorry. I apologize."

She held the receiver away from her and shook it, like it was a body part. Then she shouted into it. "For what?"

"Does it matter?" Russell said. "I'm sorry. Whatever I did, I didn't mean it. I can't be responsible for what I say in my sleep. That's another Russell."

"Then let me talk to him. I want him to apologize."

"Don't be ridiculous--"

"Come on. Put him on the phone. Hello? Sleep Russell?"

"Marlene, stop it. I'm sorry. I take full responsibility, okay?"

Why was it, with Russell, she always heard two voices? Which one was she supposed to answer? "I have to go now."

"Why can't you be reasonable?"

"I'm on my way out the door."

She wasn't really going anywhere. Claire and Marty were at a movie. She had been sitting alone. After hanging up the phone, she sniffed the air. Something was bothering her. The trailer smelled strange. A mix of Old Spice and men's sweat and the dirt in the corners that men never clean. It wasn't that she hadn't kept house all this time, but she'd just done surface cleaning, the kind you did in a temporary arrangement.

She got out a pail and broom and mop, the Ajax and the Pine Sol, and she started scrubbing. She wiped at the grime in the corners where the thin paneling met the buckled linoleum. She went up the sloped walls with her sponge and around the low curved ceiling, moving methodically through the rounded hollow and she imagined for a moment she was inside a stomach, like Jonah in the whale.

It was almost midnight when she finished. Her fingertips were soggy and wrinkled. She smelled like a cleaning woman, but she was too tired to shower. She fell onto the bed. She dreamed she was having phantom uterine pains. That when they sucked out the baby, they sucked out her uterus too. But the empty place was convulsed with cramps as though the uterus was still there.
The next morning, when she rang the bell, she practically threw up right on the psychic's front stoop. She was about to turn and run when the door swung open.

She hadn't thought she was expecting any particular kind of person. Marlene could have been selling magazines door-to-door and this woman could have been a housewife in her blue wool dress and knotted scarf, that's how ordinary she looked. Maybe she wanted a fat gypsy woman in a shawl.

"Come in, dear," the psychic said.

All the shades were drawn so it could have been any time of day or night. The only light came from a shaded lamp on the side table next to the high-backed velvet chairs they were sitting in, face to face.

The psychic had looked so ordinary at the door. Now, in this strange, enclosed light, her eyes seemed piercing, like cat's eyes. The woman reached to the floor and picked up a tape recorder. "Testing, testing," she said, while Marlene watched in horror. She didn't want to be recorded.

"Before I start, I'd like to mention a few things," the psychic said.

The psychic began talking, something about no absolute predictions, no guarantees in life, something about the choosing the future. Marlene was busy feeling the sweat trickle down her arm pits, over her ribs, into the groove where her jeans cut against the fat of her middle. She was seeing the room in little sections, like a camera's eye. A crystal. A small green statue. A huge, hairy cat asleep on the shadowy couch near a shut door.

"Is there anything of particular concern?" the psychic asked.

"My boyfriend wants to leave me."

It wasn't exactly a lie, but she didn't know why she put it wrong, why she twisted it so that it came out simple and stupid, the kind of question everybody probably asked.

The psychic held out her hands. Marlene knew how cold her own fingertips would feel to those hands. Everything got very quiet except for the deep, measured breathing of the psychic. Her warm, papery-dry hands wrapped around Marlene's clammy fingers.
Then the psychic started talking. It seemed to go on forever. Her voice came quickly, like a trance voice. Marlene was trying very hard to listen, but she kept wondering if she was supposed to be doing something. Were her eyes supposed to be shut? She couldn't stop staring at the psychic's moving lips.

She caught bits and pieces. Things about improving her self-image. Things about her childhood. The psychic mentioned dark places and Marlene's heart beat faster. Although she could only half-listen, she knew she was waiting for something. Something very important.

A deep, sad pain was flowing through her stomach. She didn't know what she expected, but the psychic's words were not it. The psychic was telling her she had to do things. Just like Claire. The droning voice was making her dizzy.

"Marlene, dear, I just got the most wonderful image," the psychic said. "Inside you, I see a most radiant being."

Marlene's left foot had fallen asleep. She wiggled her toes and shifted in her chair. "There is a deck of mystical cards called Tarot. One of those cards is called the Queen of Cups. She is a woman of the imagination."

What crap, a creepy voice said inside Marlene's head.

The psychic opened her eyes and stared. 

"Sometimes these beings are so deep in us, we can't see them clearly. Energy follows thought. If you can start to see this lovely woman, so will others. There are ways I can tell you to begin."

She could feel a sneer forming on her face. What's more, she knew the psychic saw it and she didn't care. 

"Start by looking in the mirror for two minutes every day. While you look, think of the Queen of Cups and breath slowly and deeply, in and out, and with every breath draw out that being."

For no reason at all, Marlene remembered a story she read in high school English class where a very ugly college girl in a doctor's waiting room threw a fat book call Human Development at a prim, self-satisfied farm woman. It seemed like she did always have things happening in her mind. A woman of imagination. Or maybe she
just wanted to throw a fat book at the psychic.

"Do you have any questions?"

"No," Marlene said, reaching down to her purse and pulling out her checkbook.

"How much do I owe you?"

In the car, on the way home, things were quiet in her head. She knew now she had been waiting for something the whole session. Maybe that was why she twisted the truth. She was waiting to see if the psychic would mention the baby. And the woman hadn't said one word about it.

She was hardly back inside her trailer ten minutes when a loud thumping started on the door. It was Claire, banging her crutch tip on the aluminum.

"So, how was it?" Claire asked as she struggled up, swinging her foot onto the stairs and trying to catch the edge of the door with her hand.

Marlene reached down to grab her, but Claire grunted "No!," so Marlene just stepped back. Let her crawl and creep if she wanted to.

"Isn't she fantastic? What did she say?" Claire asked breathlessly, while she struggled.

"I can't remember."

"Didn't she give you a tape?"

"Yes."

"Play it."

"No!"

She realized she had said that awfully loud. "I'm not ready. Maybe tomorrow."

What she wanted was to be alone. But she could hardly stand the thought of asking Claire to stumble out so soon.

"I was just wondering," Claire said.

"Just because you told me every single word of every session doesn't mean...maybe I need to keep it private."

"You think I'd tell anyone?"

"That's not the point."

"Then what is?"
She should have told Claire to get off her foot, to rest on the bed. Instead, she shouted, "All right! She told me I have a lovely being inside or some crap like that. That I need to stand in front of the mirror every day and bring out this goddamned lovely queen!"

Claire smiled her cheerleader smile. "Makes sense."

"Oh, shit!" Marlene stomped a few steps in one direction then a few steps in the other. "I hate all this positive crap."

"Marlene, you live the rest of your life closed off from your inner self."

"Inner self?"

"Don't pretend you haven't heard that before. We've talked about this before. The enlightened part of your self."

Yes, Claire and Russell and Marty had talked about it before. Marlene had heard it all before.

"Look at where your enlightened self got you."

Claire drew up on her crutches. "That was a really shitty thing to say."

"I'm sorry," Marlene breathed out quickly.

Claire was already struggling out the door.

"You don't have to go."

"I know." The crutches were clicking down the steps.

Marlene waited until Claire was safely down, then she leaned out and called, "But she doesn't see everything, you know."

Claire didn't turn around or say anything. She just kept swinging along with a steady rhythm across the green lawn, stirring up apple blossoms with the tips of her crutches.

Marlene collapsed onto her bed. Now, not only did she feel disappointed, but she felt guilty too. Why didn't she keep her mouth shut? She had promised herself she would keep her mouth shut. After the abortion, she had promised herself she would keep it all to herself.
Why was it the baby bothered her so much? Was it she felt she couldn't tell anyone how much she didn't want it?

No, it was even worse. It was the idea that something could be growing inside her. Something real and alive and powerful multiplying at its own will, feeding off of her blood and energy, nestled in the warm, moist private hollow inside of her. A thing made out of a part of her and a part of Russell. The trouble was—which parts? There were some parts of her and some parts of Russell she would hate in a child. Things she could never let grow.

She didn't want to think about the baby anymore. She got up from the bed and wandered to the midget bathroom. She switched on the dim light and studied her face in the mirror through the toothpaste smatters and empty black worn spots.

Today she felt too tired to hate her looks as much as she sometimes did. She watched a sneer crawl across the mouth as she thought about the psychic's instructions. She began to imagine the face melting, like wax. Before she could tell whether a new face was coming or she'd be left with a molten horror show mask, the phone rang.

"Marlene! I'm paralyzed!"

Marlene dropped the phone receiver and raced across the orchard in a spray of blossoms. Claire was sprawled across the kitchen floor with the stump stuck straight up in the air, a fat pink thumb pointing straight towards Heaven. She reached her arms out towards Marlene like a terrified child, her shoulders arched up from the floor.

"Help me."

Marlene bent down and wrapped her arms around Claire's middle, then it struck her that she had no idea what to do next. Here she was with a full grown woman clinging to her chest, her wet breath steaming against her neck, too big to carry, although that's what she would have like to have done. Been so strong she could lift Claire in her arms and carry her to the couch in the living room.

She was stooped over on her knees with Claire clinging to her. She slowly bent down, lowering Claire carefully to the floor, so they were in a strangely intimate embrace, breast to breast, Marlene stooped over Claire, whose arms still clung tightly
around her torso.

"Try to put the leg down," she whispered.

"I can't."

"Yes you can. Imagine the phantom leg. Is it there?"

"Yes."

"Now put it down, Claire. Lay it on the floor."

She felt very warm where Claire's heaving chest pressed against hers. She reached with her hand and stroked Claire's beautiful brown hair.

"Just imagine it's there," she crooned. "Lay it down. See it relaxing. Let it go."

And for once she didn't feel ridiculous using their psychowords. Then Claire began to lower the phantom leg and she could almost feel it in her own body.

"Don't let go," Claire whispered into her neck.

"I won't." Marlene had a crick starting in her shoulders that was sending electric shocks down her spinal cord. She lowered her torso slowly onto the linoleum without letting go, until the two of them were lying together, curled up, Marlene pressed like a spoon against Claire's back.

"Sometimes, since the accident, I wake up in the middle of the night and I'm afraid of Marty. Why does he still drive so fast?" Claire whispered. "I know it doesn't make sense, but I'm afraid he's going to hurt me."

"I know," Marlene whispered back.

"I'm afraid," Claire repeated. "I don't want to be a cripple."

Marlene hesitated. She could feel Claire's back muscles pushing against her chest.

"Yes," she answered.

"I get so afraid sometimes. I don't understand why things happen the way they do."

"Yes," Marlene whispered. She pressed her cheek against Claire's back. She prayed Claire wouldn't say anything. That for a moment they would stay quiet and equal like Marlene had wanted ever since she could remember.

Later, after checking with the doctors and putting Claire to bed, she was slumped
on the built-in bed in the Airstream, feeling like the day had been a week and that nothing else could possibly happen, when someone started pounding on the door.

Of course it was Russell.

He had to duck his head and shoulders and twist through the narrow doorway and then he looked like a sideshow spectacle inside the tiny room. He had an overstuffed army duffle bag in his arms.

"I brought some of your things over."

She considered letting him stand like a bad child for the begging and apologies, but wound up moving over on the bed because she hated how huge he looked hovering over her. The trailer actually shook as he thumped over.

"Charley is back on the ward," Russell said. "Danny Kaye told him to steal a wallet out of a guest's Cadillac that he was parking."

It must be nice having someone to blame for all your crimes," she said.

Russell frowned. "It's been a busy coupla weeks. Some damned good stories, though." He perched on the edge of the bed and sprawled his legs out. "Man, I'm tired. I sleep even worse when you're not around."

"I'm very, very tired tonight, Russell."

"Let's order a pizza and rent a video machine," Russell suggested. "Then I'll go home if you want."

"Russell--"

"Please, Marlene. If nothing else, please be my friend."

Later, she let him roll on top of her. The bed was so small, Russell covered her like a tarp. Where their skin touched, a warm electric stream ran through to her inner thighs. Her mind could have a million doubts, but her body just wanted simple comfort and love. It arched up to his thrusts and let itself burst.

After that, he got up and grabbed his jeans from the floor and fished a vial out of its pocket.

"Why don't you try and sleep before you take anything?"

"Probability says don't count on it."
She hated the way he slept on pills. His body went flabby like his soul had left and she was lying next to dead-weight. It was the same this time. Russell downed his pills and soon she was lying next to what could have been a coma victim with gurgling breath. Usually, that was it for at least twelve hours. Marlene rolled over to the edge of the bed and curled up into herself. She started to doze, reminded at how nice it felt to have someone in bed.

Then, in the middle of the night, Russell started flailing.

"See?" he said. His voice came through the dark, shaky and afraid. "These pills don't work for shit anymore."

She lay on her back with her arms at her side. She was thinking, I can't. I don't want to take care of anybody else today. She heard herself say, "Russell, lie down quiet and shut your eyes. Take deep breaths."

"I'm gonna have to up the dose, Marlene."

She stroked his chest and felt it rise and fall under her palm. Slowly, the big hairy body next to her went flabby.

"I'm gonna have to take more and more. Shit, Marlene, I'm afraid."

Russell's breath came thickly now. When he spoke his words were slurred, almost impossible to understand. It was the other Russell. The sleep Russell.

"Marlene, let's face it. You're not the most desirable woman in the world. There's some damned cute little nurses working at the hospital, but I don't go after them because I like what we have. We understand each other."

She closed her eyes and felt a part of herself float away, out the trailer through the curved ceiling and up into the night.

"Marlene, sometimes I don't even like to touch you. It makes my skin crawl."

One part of her was floating about fifteen feet above the trailer, above the closest apple tree. The rest was stuck next to Russell.

"We're nobodies, Marlene. I used to be somebody. Now, it's you and me. Nobodies. Who would want us?"

He would go on like this in his unconscious self-hating voice and in the morning he wouldn't remember. He never did. If she told him in the morning, he would apologize,
but the words would be empty because he wanted no part of this other voice of his.

"You'll never leave me, Marlene. Never."

She was becoming a shell like she always did. Empty. Resigned. But something was happening inside. At first it felt like indigestion. Then like labor pains. After a minute she knew what it was.

She saw a tiny seed in the middle of the emptiness. And then it was multiplying, like a cell dividing, faster than any tumor, like a fetus rushing through time, until it grew and grew into a being. An angry, glowing being pushing against the walls of her organs so the skin around her middle stretched and pounded up in the bed.

She lay next to Russell, throbbing and sweating, waiting for a sign.

What to do?

When it came, she climbed out of bed and pulled on her jeans and t-shirt. She'd need a fork lift of course to lift him out of the bed, not that it would wake him. She went to the kitchen and found the kitchen shears.

She climbed down the stairs into the clear night and stood under a very full moon that lit the orchard almost as light as day and held the shears up so that they shined. She began to work her way methodically around the trailer, severing cords, starting with the phone wires and going on to the antennae. She pulled and cut every wire and cord.

She backed her pickup to the trailer hitch. She hitched the trailer and climbed back into the cab. She shoved the gear shift into low and bounced across the soft grass, through the dark trees, pulling her burden behind her. And then she was on blacktop and rolling smooth. She drove up and over Frazier Road, past the ravine where Claire descended, and she imagined sending the AirStream catapulting through the rocks and brush.

The trailer bumped along behind her. She might drop the trailer off in some r. v. park and pay a month's rent. Or leave it in a rest stop on the New York State Thruway. Or take it up to the courthouse and leave it next to the fountain. Or just keep driving it to the edge of the sea, sending it out into the waves where it would bounce on the surf like a bubble, shining in the sun, then sink to the bottom and settle into a watery grave.
There were as many possibilities as she could imagine.

She adjusted the rearview mirror so she could see her face. She took several deep breaths and imagined the lovely, angry Queen of Cups inside who had got her out of bed. At this moment she didn't care how stupid the picture was. At the moment she just wanted to imagine, the stupider the better.

In Old Falls, she turned left at the second traffic light and bumped down the familiar road. Just outside of the town, the old Psychiatric Hospital sat on a hill--heavy, red-bricked, with rounded turrets, like something from a Hitchcock movie. No one liked it, everyone thought it should be torn down, but the money never came for a new one.

She bumped through the gate and down the drive. It was quiet, too early for the wandering patients blocking the road with their halting, medicated shuffles. She meant to drive into the parking lot. To leave Russell parked outside his ugly green-walled ward, where he was so popular with everyone.

But she was thinking of Russell's twisted back which never stopped hurting. She was thinking of all the processing and the discussing and sympathizing with all the right words that she'd had to endure with Russell, Marty, and Claire.

At the last minute, she veered right and gunned the engine, bumping over the curb, onto a neat dirt strolling path. The trailer shimmied on its hitch as it climbed the curb. Marlene ducked her head out the window, but no one seemed to be watching. She drove slowly down the path, past a bend in the trees, to a small pond edged with cattails. This had always been her favorite spot. She climbed from the cab and watched the sun begin to rise over the hills in the distance.

She went around to the hitch and freed the trailer. Its little black wheels were already sinking in the soft mound of muddy grass at the edge of the pond. Just before she drove off, she reached on tiptoe and peeped through the fuzzy-screened window into the trailer.

"Sleep tight, Russell," she whispered.

Change, she thought as she drove from the psych hospital, was like a birth. Bloody, painful, and full of the most incredible doubts. She reached the main road and
paused, not quite sure of where to go next. But it really didn't matter. For awhile she would just drive. And so she drove, while the headlights blazed a path on the road in the blue-black dawn and the cab was surrounded with fat little dirty-blond cherubs with nicotine stains on their heavenly teeth and they were laughing and singing and egging her on.
PEARL STREET

Although I been with as many men as Wynette she looks mature maybe twenty-five while I don't even look eighteen except for my height although I am. I always get the johns that like tomboys. I don't care. I've seen all types and I know what they want. I'm mature in my mind.

I am leaning on a mailbox outside the bus station. It's at least a hundred degrees out here tonight. The metal of the mailbox is warm against my butt. It feels like the jungle out here tonight. Like the air is a tropical storm cloud. Sweat is running down my armpits. I don't care. I don't give a shit about anything right now if you want to know the truth. Wynette is up the street and she's ignoring me. We had a fight this morning. Now she's standing right up the block acting like if I got a heat stroke and dropped dead right here on Pearl Street she wouldn't even notice.

It must be around midnight. I don't know exactly because some bitch stole my watch last week out of the ladies room in the bus station. My Mom gave that watch to me for my birthday. I hardly ever took it off. But it's been so hot. I went in to wash all the way up to my shoulders and so this one time I take it off and look what happens. Turn your back for five seconds. That's what it's like around here. They might get three whole bucks for it at Murray's Pawn Shop on Broadway. It was only a Timex but I had it ever since I was eleven and it always worked. Let me see that watch on someone's wrist and I might tear her arm off.

It's so hot out here the whole world seems upside down. No one can sleep. It's in the newspaper everyday and on television too, this heat spell. People you usually wouldn't catch dead out here this time of night are staggering around like a crowd of zombies with dripping faces and dopey eyes. It's weird to see so many people out here this late at night. All these summer people. At least they're not giving us those looks they usually give us like we're scum of the earth. Tonight for once we're all in the same
Some guy in a convertible is cruising me. What a stud. Sunglasses in the dark, give me a break. Hair slicked back with modeling gel. Alpine stereo blaring out Bruce Springsteen. *Born in the U.S.A.* Like I'm supposed to be so impressed. Rich little hotel kid looking for a few kicks. Some girls like this type. Good-looking. Easy.

To me, they're all easy.

One time I'm sitting at the counter in the AllNite Diner minding my own business and drinking a cup of coffee when this dumb teenage waitress Rose with acne asks me how can I get in bed with ugly old men, their fat rolls squishing you, their cheesy smell, and she's going on and on and getting warmer by the minute until I think she's gonna drop the coffee pot and have an orgasm. Well, here I am having to leave her a tip, so forget the cheap thrills.

"You ever see a corpse?" I ask.

"What?"

"A corpse. You ever see one?"

"My g-grandmother," she stutters.

"The soul is gone, right?"

Rose starts looking around like she'd rather be organizing the donut tray all of a sudden.

"When I'm with these guys," I say to her, "they're paying for the body. That's all they get. A corpse. My soul is gone, you understand?"

Well, that shut her up.

I can see Wynette up the street adjusting her skirt. Wynette says she's West Indian. She says her grandparents came from Jamaica. She has this beautiful light brown skin and soft black hair that curls down around her shoulders. I can see her up the block right now tossing her hair. She has a great build. I'm telling you Wynette could be a model the way she's put together. She shouldn't be out here on the streets. She looks
too good to be out here. Besides, she doesn't have enough sense.

That girl worries about every little thing on earth. Mostly what people think and crap like that as if it matters. You work out on the streets and then you go worry about it. Stupid. As if you don't get enough shit from everyone else.

I love that girl but I wish she'd get her head on straight before it's too late. I'm always feeling like someone has to watch out for her. If you're gonna worry I tell her at least worry about the right things. Like what keeps you out of trouble out on the streets. Can't you stop worrying I say and pay more attention to what's really trouble? The last thing I want is to come out here some night and find you in a dumpster.

When she first landed on the streets no one would talk to Wynette. What the hell is she doing out here? That's what was in their minds. A lot of pretty little things come out here like this is some kind of party but they run home the first time some jerk fucks them harder than their boyfriend ever did. It hurts, they say. Big surprise.

When Wynette first came up here from Brooklyn, some guy pulled a plastic statue off his dash board and tried to stick it up her. She says she thinks it was some kind of saint or something. She didn't get too good a look because she was pulling down her skirt and grabbing for the door handle all at the same time. She says she almost took the next bus home except she knows her mother would have put her through so much shit she decided to give it one more day. That's how you get stuck up here. You give it one more day and it turns into a week.

Anyway you see what I mean about Wynette. Try and check 'em out better before you get in the car, honey, I always tell her. That's what we got intuition for. I think she's got this fantasy that someone is gonna come along and rescue her from this life. Tom Cruise takes a wrong turn on the highway and winds up on Pearl Street and drives her off into the sunset. Or to California.

I'd like to get my hands on that sicko with the statue that's what I'd like. I tell Wynette if you ever see that guy on Pearl Street again, you let me know.

Pearl Street is right off Broadway in Old Falls. Not much on it except the bus station, a row of junky old houses, and a vacant lot. Anyway the johns know to come here. Oh, and there's the Pearl Street Hotel. An old four-story hunk of red bricks next
to the bus station.

It's funny but I love that place. I think it must be the oldest building in town. Wynette and me share a room there. We go upstairs around dawn and usually sleep 'til late afternoon or at least we stay in bed that long.

Sometimes when we're climbing the stairs up to the top floor it smells so old. The wood is all worn on the staircase and the railing feels as smooth as glass. We could be different people in some whole other time. Wynette, I say, we could be on our honeymoon in the country. She doesn't like to hear things like that. Cut it out, Sherry, she always says.

Wynette gets uptight all the time. Each time after we do it she turns away from me. She has to roll away and face the wall and be inside herself for awhile. I just lie there like I'm invisible. I turn my insides to stone because I've learned it's the only way with her when she's like this. After awhile she rolls around and curls up in my arms. But I can see the look in her eyes. I know what she's thinking about us lying like that together.

Wynette, I say, don't be ashamed. But she has this idea that it's not normal. I guess somewhere in life she got some idea of what the hell that might be. I mean her mother worked for the Department of Motor Vehicles.

Me, I been on the edge forever. Carla--she's my mother-- worked at The TriCity Truck Stop outside of Scranton and if you ever go there--and I hope you never do--you'll see what kind of tips a steak-and-eggs breakfast for $2.99 gets. So Carla made up the rest by climbing in the cabs of trucks at night in the parking lot. She had this knack for finding the worst jerks and they would come and live with us for awhile.


God, I hate truckers. I've got what you could call a prejudice. I liked it when we were in between uncles. When we were alone together. But I think my Mom has a kind of sickness inside. It's like a hungry mouth and she needs those truckers to fill it.

One of them uncles I think it was Uncle Jake he used to slap Carla if she made too
much foam on his beer when she poured. Do you know what it's like to go to the store with your Mom and her face is a piece of meat? God, I hate that.

When you're young, I think these kinds of things rub off. They get inside you. Carla took off last year with a new one. He told her he had a big ranch in Arizona. I hope he does. I really do. I haven't talked to her yet.

I remember standing in the parking lot of the TriCity Truck Stop. There must have been twenty trucks with their engines rumbling. The fumes were so thick they rose like a wind and made you sick to your stomach. The whole world smelled like diesel. Uncle Danny was drumming his fingers on the steering wheel. Carla was leaning down from the passenger side. She had this big bag at her feet and she shouts to me she's paid the rent on our place for two months.

When I was little, Carla and I would laugh all the time about nothing. I can't explain it. After she left, I came up here and started working the streets.

What can I say? Like mother, like daughter.

I haven't called her yet although she sent me the number. I will someday but not yet.

At least I know how to take care of myself. Most of the time I can tell when some guy is trouble. Little things most people wouldn't notice.

Not like Wynette. That girl is out-of-it, I don't mind telling you. Her problem is that she wants the entire fucking world to love her. So get out of here and go to modeling school I tell her. Get out of here and make something of yourself because no one's going to love you this way.

Except me and I don't count.

This morning we were lying in bed. Our room is what used to be the attic. Usually I love this room. I don't care if the paper is peeling off the walls and the floor boards creak. I love the way the ceiling slants down and how the light shines in from these little windows stuck into the roof. This room isn't square. It's all different shapes. Besides I never had my own place before where no one can come in I don't want here.
Usually I love having this place to share with Wynette. But last night was different.

I never remember it being so hot. God, it was like hell in that place. It never cooled down all night. All the heat came up to our floor and stuck in our room so the sheets were soaked from us sweating all night and our fingers and toes were swelled up like hot dogs. It was the kind of heat where everything you touch is coated with something sticky like glue or tree sap. Not the kind of morning you want to be moving around on top of each other--at least that's what most regular people would feel. Me, I don't know. It seems like I need to be loved that way sometimes to feel okay. Like otherwise I might not make it through the day.

I reached over and put my hand on her thigh.

"Oh, God, honey" she moaned. "It's too hot."

Something inside me cracks when she says no.

It's too hot she said but I kept my hand on her thigh anyway. Goddamnit, it was too hot and my fingers felt all clammy on her skin.

"We wouldn't have to move around too much," I said.

"Why don't you go downstairs and take a shower?" she said. Our bathroom is on the hall the floor below.

I ran my finger along the inside of her leg. "We can take a shower together after."

I could feel her inching away from me on the bed. "I don't see how you can even *think* about it right now."

"I always think about it with you, honey."

She was way over now on her side, facing away from me.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Is that all you ever think about?"

"What?"

"You know."

"No, it isn't all I ever think about." I felt funny though. It did seem like I thought about it a lot. About the two of us anyway. But what the hell was wrong with that? I could feel her pulling away. I don't know. Maybe it isn't right. But it only makes me...
want her more. Like I said, something inside me cracks. A crater opens inside me and all I can think about is filling it up. I slid over closer and started rubbing her thigh again.

"Don't make me," she whispered.

"Try. Please."

"I can't." She sat up on the edge of the bed. "What would happen if I didn't want to do it anymore?"

My heart froze. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing. I just wonder if you'd like me if I didn't want to do it anymore?"

"Do you want to stop? If you do, then just go ahead and say it--" I could feel the blood running through my neck, up into my skull.

"I didn't say I wanted to stop. I just said what would you do if I did."

"It's the same thing, almost. Why do you bring it up? If you don't like me--"

"Sherry, I like you. I didn't say I didn't like you."

"Yeah, right," I said into my pillow. It was too late. I could feel the darkness coming over me.

Wynette put her hand on my shoulder.

I shrugged away from her touch. I was almost all darkness by now.

"I have to cool off somehow," she said. "I'm going down and take a shower."

I grabbed her arm. Not real hard but hard enough. Hard enough for us to see the red spots my grip was making and I could feel the dents in her flesh where my fingers were closing in.

"Let go," she whispered. But my fingers wouldn't let go. It was like they had a life of their own. Stupid fingers. Like they could hold onto something so it wouldn't leave. Or else squeeze that thing to death trying.

"Let go," she whispered. Wynette's pretty skin was getting bruised. A row of purple bruises.

"If you don't let go, I'll never--" I let go.

"Look at my arm," she said.
I rolled around on my side against the wall with my knees against my chest and my arms wrapped around them. I stayed that way for a long time. Wynette left. She never came back all day. Me, I stayed curled up. I never knew what time it was. I finally just got up and went out to my corner on Pearl Street.

Wynette has such long legs. Most beautiful I ever saw including magazines. That same rich kid that was cruising me has stopped in front of her. The way she leans, the muscles in her calves show. She selling herself good, bent over, blouse open. I get in me a feeling I wish I didn't have right now. Goddamn you Wynette.

Now she slides into the sheepskin bucket seat, ass first, swinging in those beautiful legs. The kid is smiling at Wynette. What a good-looking stud! Here's your movie star, Wynette honey. Only I don't think he's planning on taking you off into the sunset. That's not what he wants you for.

And then all of a sudden I am very afraid. I can't remember being this afraid. I don't want her to go with that kid. My stomach is a tight fist and a bell is going off in my head like a fire alarm.

"Wynette!" I yell. "Wynette!"

Every single person on the entire street turns my way like I've gone crazy. The summer people, the other girls, the johns, the bus drivers outside their Greyhounds. Everybody except Wynette. I start running up the sidewalk yelling Wynette, Wynette. She won't turn around. I reach the car as it pulls from the curb and I'm staggering to keep up, clutching the passenger door. I can see from the way her mouth is tight that Wynette is embarrassed 'cause the whole world is watching.

The guy is ignoring me. I believe he is taunting me, the bastard, because he is driving just fast enough so I can hang onto the car, panting and begging.

"Come out, honey," I say. "I want to talk to you."

She says "Cut it out, Sherry."

"Please," I say, but I can barely get it out from panting so hard. Sweat is running down my face, down my sides.
Now she turns to look me in the eye. She says "Leave me alone. I mean it. Just leave me alone."

"Look, I'm sorry," I start to say--

Then the jerk guns the engine and almost rips my arm off.

It could be a dream. The heat has made everything thicker and the world has gone into slow motion. I'm running in the middle of the street, down the yellow line that divides the blacktop. Cars are honking at me and someone yells for me to get out of the street but I don't care. I am lit in a flood of headlights.

Three blocks to the Sandman Motel. The car is in the parking lot. I know the room Wynette uses. I run into the courtyard. The curtain is shut but there is a crack of light.

I tiptoe over. I crouch down outside the door. I could break down the door but I won't. What if there's nothing wrong with the guy? Wynette would hate me for embarrassing her. She probably hates me already. I get a weird feeling like the entire goddamned world is on the other side of this door and here's me locked out. I feel like my whole life is here right now. Me, on the outside of this motel room door.

This whole place is made of cardboard. I can hear everything. Her laughing in that fake come-on way we use. His voice, so smooth. His voice, her voice, the creaking on the bed. I'll stay here as long as I have to. I'll listen to every goddamn moan and groan. And if I hear anything and I mean anything that sounds funny I'll kick in the door.

Wynette, wake up. This life ain't no fairy tale. And even if it was it'd be some kind of weird, screwed-up one and you'd never know what kind of package your hero would come in.
Two eggs sailed up from Steve's frying pan and backflipped in midair. Beautiful. Just right. He reached out easy, made a safety net for them, but at the last second his hand trembled and the eggs hit hard, folding up into themselves. The yolks held together briefly, quivering yellow sacks of skin, then burst and ran bloody in the hot fat.

Screw it. He wasn't meant to be awake this hour of the morning. A pancake-maker. He dumped the smashed eggs into a trash can, then reached up to the greasy portable radio above the stove and switched stations.

*Born under a bad sign*
*I've been down since I began to crawl*

"Hey Hector, what's your sign?" he called but the kid couldn't hear him. He shook his head with disgust. Each time the kid shoved a tray of dishes into the decrepit dishwashing machine the whole kitchen shook. Soap running all the hell over the cement floor so you could break your ass if you didn't watch out.

*If it wasn't for bad luck*
*I wouldn't have no luck at all*

Didn't that say it all? Steve had a theory of life. It was simple. Some guys were screwed from birth.

The second set of eggs came out over medium. He slid them onto the plate anyway. The bums that came in here this early in the morning were too old or hungover to notice the finer points of eggs anyway.
You take two cooks on the dinner line at the Oasis Hotel. One insults the other one's chicken breast right to his face. What else is there to do but belt the jerk? And after they pry the two of you apart, after you've rolled and beat at each other in all the shit stuck to the rubber matting between the stoves and the counter, who gets canned?

No, he thought, shaking his head, life is a mystery. He never meant to fight at work. What kind of asshole would risk a night shift at the best hotel in the Catskills because of a little temper? He wasn't thinking about fighting that day. He remembered for a fact having a great morning. Lay in bed until noon, drinking a warm beer left over from the night before, smoking cigarettes and watching the sun stream in through the slats of the blinds.

Who got fired for protecting their honor but black sheep and losers? He wasn't thinking about fighting that morning. If he was thinking at all, it was that there might not be anything better in the world than what he was doing right then except maybe having a woman next to him.

The last girl he had was almost two months ago, a desk clerk named Jolene he picked up at The Gold Nuggett. Right in the middle of screwing she started crying so the makeup on her face started melting. All of a sudden he almost stopped breathing and he wanted to run, like he was about to get eaten alive. He had to stop what he was doing and bury his face in the pillow.

"Hector!" He tossed a hunk of fried potato in the kid's direction and hit him in the ass.

Hector turned his ugly face around and grinned.

"You hear that song, Hector?" he shouted. "You know what it means? Born under a bad sign?" The kid couldn't hear a damned word."You believe in astrology, Hector? What's your sign?"

The dish machine cut out all of a sudden. Steve reached up and lowered the radio.

"You hear me, Hector? What's your sign?"

The kid shrugged.

"Don't you know anything about signs? You better learn, man." Steve threw
another potato at him. "I'll bet you're a Scorpio," he said.

He had picked up on astrology out in California when he was just a kid, wandering around the country until he wound up cleaning fish in some tourist dump in Monterey.

Now, it was a law of nature that all female cooks were wacky. He never met one that wasn't. The wackiest one of all worked the line next to him at that fish dump in Monterey. Had a name like Crystal. Couldn't stop talking. "You listening?" she said every five minutes, poking him in the arm.

"Mercury's retrograde," she'd say, "watch out with that knife."

Here he was, his hands covered with fish slime, hacking up flounders the size of babies. A pile of fish heads staring up at him with their gluey eyes. And this crazy chick Crystal predicting the future. He couldn't listen to those kinds of things. He didn't even read the horoscope in the paper. Life was bad enough. At least let it be a surprise.

"You know why I think you're a Scorpio?" he said to Hector.

"I don't know, man."

"It's the girls. Was it Betty last night? You look awful tired, man."

Hector pumped out his chest. The kid was built like a midget wrestler. And ugly as they come, with fat lips and a giant forehead. He wasn't more than nineteen, but he looked old. Still, he had this way of smiling that made him a little less ugly. Yell some order at him and the kid would grin and say, "REE-lax, my friend. I do it."

There were dishwashers and there were dishwashers. This one was a regular prize. Every lazy bum of a cook that had ever passed through this place gave the kid more work to do. The kid could mix the meatloaf, he could make tuna salad. If Steve had a question on anything, he asked Hector.

"How many cans of that lousy fake bouillon in the chicken soup, Chef Hector?"

"Two cans, my friend."

"You sure, my friend?"

"I'm sure, my friend."
"Okay, you're the expert."
Steve hauled a couple of cans of powdered chicken stock from the back shelf.
"Chef Hector, we should trade places," he said. "You make the soup. I'll wash the dishes."
Hector ducked his head. "No, my friend."
"Why not?" Steve held out the egg pan. "C'mon. Flip some eggs. Why not, man? You don't want to be a dishwasher your whole life, do you?"
The kid didn't answer. A minute or two passed.
"How was it last night?" Steve asked.
Every morning since he'd started working here, when things got too quiet, he and Hector had the same conversation.
"How was it last night?" Steve would start.
"Very good, my friend."
"Get enough?"
"Too much."
"What's her name? The new one?"
"Betty."
"That's right. Pretty blond Betty."
Steve was pretty sure there wasn't any blond anybody. The kid was too ugly. But he didn't care. Just something to bullshit about. He slipped the order tag under the plate of cooling eggs just as the swinging door flew open.
"Where the hell are my eggs? You waiting for the chickens to lay 'em?"
How come every waitress in the entire universe came out with the same lines? Another of life's mysteries. "Here's your eggs," he said, thrusting the plate out.
"This ain't over easy—" Charlotte started to say, but she quit when she saw the look on his face. She put up another tag. "For Mrs. Kauffman. These are the ones she sends back if you poach 'em too long—"
"I'll poach her—"
The old prune Kauffman sent back four orders last week. Just what you need at a new job. Not that he cared. Lousy luncheonette. It was only a matter of time before he
was out of here.

Charlotte looked at her watch. "Time for you to come out front and start cooking at
the grill."

There were a lot of things to hate about this job, but this he hated the most. Who
needed a bunch of brokendown old farts and unemployed bums watching as his egg
yolks broke? "I still got the soup to do," he said.

"You come out after that, you hear?" Charlotte said.

"Who the hell does that dame think she is? Queen Elizabeth?" he said as the door
swung closed. "Thinks she some kind of royalty because she danced in some nightclub
a hundred years ago?"

"REE-lax, my friend," Hector said. "She ain't so bad." He brought over a clean pot
and pointed to the poaching eggs. "Done."

Steve held out the slotted spoon. "Here, you're the expert. You take 'em out."

The kid turned tail like he always did and went back to the dish machine.

"No ambition—that's the trouble with you spics," he said. He slid the poached eggs
into a cup and stared at them. Damned things looked disgusting undercooked like that.
Little floating embryos. He ran the butter brush over some toast. Stay too long at this
job and he'd be a real nut case, some kind of egg loony. He took a deep breath and
carried the order out himself.

"It's the new hermit cook," Mrs. Kauffman announced. "Are those my poached?
Let me see. I hate to send them back."

Every seat at the counter was occupied and they were all watching him. The
damned place was a second home for every brokendown retired bus boy and waitress
and bookie in town. Not to mention every hasbeen saxophone player from every
crappy band that ever played in some hotel lounge.

Since she was practically blind he held the plate under Mrs. Kauffman's nose. She
poked her face into the cup. "Okay," she said. "Better than last week."

He grunted and set the plate down.
"Good boy," she announced and picked up a spoon.

"Hey!" she called as he strided toward the back kitchen. "Where are you going so fast?"

"Man," he said to Hector as the door swung shut, "I don't think I can face getting old. Hector, my friend, what are we living for? Do you wanna be one of those old farts with nothing to do? Better to be knocked off early."

"Time to put bouillon in the soup, my friend," Hector said.

Steve grabbed the can and opened it slowly. "Better to go early, that's what I say."

He sprinkled the yellow powder into the pot.

"Man, what we need is a war. Be a hero or die and get the whole damned thing over with."

Hector was about to set the dishwasher in action again. "Hang on," he said. "Come here." He waved a knife and pointed to the cutting board. "C'mon, I don't have all day."

He grabbed the kid's upper arm with his free hand. The muscles felt like rock.

"Chop up the celery for the tuna salad. Think you can do that?"

"Of course, my friend."

"You sure? You're only a dishwasher. I don't want it fucked up."

Hector smiled up at him sideways. "REE-lax, my friend," he said, taking a knife. "I do it." He started chopping so hard Steve could feel the vibrations through the prep table.

"Listen, kid, I got a theory. There are too many of us nobodies born. Why?"

"I don't know," the kid said.

"I don't know either."

From a crack in the cutting board, a fat shiny cockroach crept up through the wood and started creeping across the table, slow and nervy. In one easy move, quick as lightning, Steve slammed his knife through the roach, slicing it into two neat halves which wiggled on the wooden board until he flicked the pieces into the air with the knife point, then went on chopping his carrots.
"That's about it, man," he said to Hector. "Most of us assholes are worth about that much--" he jabbed the knife in the direction of the cockroach halves still wiggling and oozing on the filthy cement floor. "Ain't I right, man?"

The kid shrugged and wouldn't look up from his celery.

"You hear what I said?"

"You're right, my friend," the kid answered with a grin.

"Ah, don't bullshit me!" He knew when someone was bullshitting him. The kid was definitely bullshitting him.

Hector started whacking even harder at the celery, his head down.

"You know how guys like us ever get anywhere?" he shouted over the chopping.

"By blowing up enemy villages full of kids and dogs and pigs and pregnant women. Hell, it ain't right but that's life. Whaddya think car accidents are for? Earthquakes, floods, revolutions? There's too many guys like us and not enough of everything to go around. That's what war is all about. Otherwise there's too many of us hangin' around wondering what the hell we're here for."

He grabbed the kid's wrist and it was quiet.

"It's fucked, but that's life. You understand?"

The kid's face was a blank.

"Listen," he said urgently. "You have any better answers, you let me know, okay?"

The kid wouldn't answer. His eyes were all glazed over and he had a big knot in his jaw. Steve was still holding onto the kid's wrist.

"This ain't just my point of view. Life is not fair. I didn't make it that way. That's just how it is. You want to be a hero or you want to be a goddamned loser?"

The kid blinked a couple of times. Finally, he mumbled, "War ain't no good, man. I seen it when I was little."

"Oh, yeah? What did you see?"

"No good."

"What did you see?"

"I don't remember."
"Kid, you need to get your head on straight. Either you remember or you don't remember."

"War ain't no good."

"You know how many human beings there'd be crawling around on this planet without war?"

"War ain't no good."

"Oh yeah?" Steve said. "You tell me that in twenty years when you're still a fucking dishwasher and you want to know where your life went. I don't know why I try and talk to you."

"I seen it," the kid said again with a stubborn look.

"I don't know why I talk to you," he said. "Forget it. No more talking."

It was quiet for a minute.

"Hey, that Betty have a roommate?" he asked loudly and clapped Hector on the shoulder. "Talk to me. You're my buddy, man. Aren't you my buddy?"

"Sure, man," Hector said.

"Good. Then talk to me."

Then Charlotte was back and this time he didn't have any excuse, so he put on the chef hat that made him look like an idiot with a mushroom head.

"Here's the grill cook at last," Mrs. Kauffman said.

Every face at the counter turned. He got this feeling in the pit of his stomach like he was in a dropping elevator. What a jerk, he told himself. It was like this every morning. Knowing he couldn't get the eggs to flip. He went to the grill. His hands shook a little as he reached for the ticket. He let out a sigh. Just scrambled with ham.

"Remember—I like them soft," Mr. Soloman called.

"His teeth don't fit him right," Mr. Sarducci announced as if it was news to anyone.

Mr. Soloman shrugged. "Aaach, I went back to that con man of a dentist twice and he says it's in my head. I said, 'Sure, sure, but if it was in your head, I wonder how much harder you'd try to make a better fitting.' "

Everyone laughed except Steve who was shaking a steaming pile of wet egg onto a plate. The old man couldn't eat home fries or toast, so he scooped some cottage cheese from a plastic bucket and lay it on an iceberg lettuce leaf.

"This new cook—he's so quiet," Mr. Soloman said.

"Ah, give him a break," Charlotte said. "Reason why he's here is he got fired from the Oasis for fighting. From what he says it ain't his fault and I believe him. Everybody knows that executive chef Goldman thinks he's Mister God."

He froze at the grill. He couldn't believe Charlotte was telling the whole place.

"If I'd known," Mrs. Kauffman said, "I wouldn't have sent so many orders back last week."

"What did you do there?" asked Mr. Soloman.

"Saute cook," he mumbled, not looking up.

"What did he say?"

"You have to speak louder, sonny," Mrs. Kauffman called over. "Lift your head and speak up."

"Saute," he said.

"What?" Mr. Soloman shouted.

"SAUTE!" Mrs. Kauffman shouted at Mr. Soloman. "It's French for frying."

"How would I know from such fancy terms?" Mr. Soloman shouted back, "I drove a cab for forty-three years."

"Don't you worry, sonny," Mrs. Kauffman called to Steve. "That Chef Goldman is a big snob. He wouldn't set foot in here."

"Mr. God," Charlotte sniffed.

"Stick around here, sonny. Learn your eggs and we'll appreciate you."

It was time to flip the over easies. Come on, baby, he thought as they sailed from the pan—

It was very quiet.

"That's all right, sonny," Mr. Sarducci said. "Save me having to break 'em with a fork."
For the rest of the morning he tried to tune out the old farts yacking at the counter. The whole thing was pathetic.

Then it was lunch rush and he was almost himself again. Charlotte marched over, lining the tags up at eye level near his grill. Cheryl, the dizzy teenage waitress with the flat chest rushed in late and took over the back booths. He was frying and grilling, twisting and turning, doing two, three, four things at once.

Reading tags, grabbing plates, one eye on the grilling meats, another on the hissing deep fat fryer, so that nothing got burnt, each plate was perfect. Now he was in control. Man, it was what he loved about cooking. In your small square of space, sweating from the heat, you were in control. Blood pumping hard, muscles working, the feeling like every inch of your skin was on alert. Like a combat pilot, like an astronaut.

Then it was over. Just like that.

He was in the back kitchen, prepping for the next morning. Since he had time on his hands and no place to go, he decided to clean out the meat freezer which looked like some prehistoric ice pit. On the bottom shelf, he found a mouse carcass. He picked it up by the tail and it stuck straight out, hard as a popsicle. With a smooth swing he tossed it up in an arc. It landed in the trash, head first in a pool of curdled gravy. What a lousy dump. He was too good for this place and everyone knew it.

"Hey, kid, look!" he called to Hector. "Mouse a la king."

"Should I cook it?" Hector called back. "Blue plate special."

Steve laughed. "You're all right, Hector."

When it was time for his break, Hector pulled over an empty milk crate so it was near where Steve was working. The kid started shoving food into his face, head bent almost into the plate. "Go eat in the front like a human being!" Steve told him for the hundreth time. "Nobody says you have to eat back here." But that was the way it was with dishwashers. They always hid in the back, hunched over and shoveling food into their faces like it was their last meal. It was the same everywhere, you couldn't change
it. To tell the truth, Steve didn't care. He was glad for the company.

"Twenty-nine years old, my friend. When I was your age, I thought I'd be a chef by now in some fancy hotel."

Hector mopped up the last of some egg yolk with a piece of squashed-up white bread.

"Ah, maybe I should give up this hotel shit and go back to New Jersey. Live a normal life, be a plumber like my old man."

Steve inspected a bag of chicken livers, kind of green on the edges. "Not all the way bad," he said. For a minute, he had a crazy feeling of happiness, sitting on a milk crate, sorting freezer-burned, crusty grey lambchops and iced-over chickens, with this kid next to him. He glanced up at Hector.

"So what's this Betty's last name?"

The kid buried his face in his plate and shrugged.

"You gotta know her last name."

"No. I don't know."

"You're poking this girl and you don't know her last name?"

"I don't know."

"Aah, there ain't no--" he stopped. The kid's face was nearly dunked into his plate. "Shit," he said. He tossed a stinky t-bone back into the freezer. "You ever been in love, my friend?"

The kid grinned. "I don't know."

"If you ever were, you'd know."

"Then maybe I never been."

"Ah, me neither. Not since high school and that don't count." He threw the last package of breaded fish into the bottom of the freezer and stood.

"Listen, my friend. You want to go have a beer with me after work?"

Hector smiled shyly. "I can't, my friend."

"What's the matter? You too busy with that Betty?"

Hector started to open his mouth, but he cut him off. "Never mind. I was kidding, man. I got too much to do anyway. I got to start going around to the hotels and get
myself a good job so's I can get out of this lousy dump."

He didn't go to any hotels. He was too tired from getting up at fucking dawn. Now it was almost dark again and he could see his breath in the air. Soon it would snow. No use trying to get another job in the slow season. Better to wait until things picked up and they were begging for good cooks. Better to wait until this whole fight thing blew over. Chef Goldman had probably spread the word to all the other chefs everywhere.

He shivered in his sweat shirt and hugged his arms around himself. Maybe he'd skip this place altogether for the winter. Go down to Florida, maybe Arizona. Wasn't like he had anything holding him. Not one thing. He was free.

He thought about going over to the Oasis, but what for? Most of the guys would be working and it wasn't like he had any great buddies over there. Everyone of his so-called buddies had stood around with their traps shut the night of the fight while he got humiliated by that asshole Goldman.

Charlotte was right about that jerk.

Mister God.

He stopped at a liquor store, bought a six-pack and took it back to his room at the Pearl Street Hotel. He had a lousy little black-and-white television. He turned it on and fiddled with the dials until there was some kind of picture. Then he sat in a stuffed armchair that smelled like cat pee and drank all six cans of beer. Pretty soon the chair didn't smell so bad anymore. He crunched up a can and threw it at the wastepaper basket. It hit the rim and fell onto the crummy carpet.

"Ah, shit," he said.

He got out of the chair and stumbled to the bathroom down at the end of the dim hall. I have to get out of here, he thought. He unzipped his jeans, held onto himself and peed unsteadily, missing the edge of the toilet.

"How was it last night, my friend?"

"Very good, my friend."
"You get enough?"
"Too much."
"What's her name? The new one?"
"Betty. Her name is Betty."
"That's right. Pretty blond Betty."
"How 'bout you, my friend?" Hector asked.

Most days he would of made up a story. Today he said, "Hector, my friend, I drank a sixpack on an empty stomach and passed out on my lousy bed with my clothes on."

Hector shrugged and smiled at him sideways.
"Not much of a Romeo, huh, man?"

The kid shrugged again.

"Not like you. A real Romeo. A regular Don Juan." For some reason this conversation was bothering him today. He had a headache. He was yacking too much these days.

"What're you standing around for?" he yelled. "Come over here and help me with these vegetables."

Hector hustled over and picked up a carrot. He started peeling fast. "REE-lax, my friend," he said. "I do it."

"Shit, man," Steve said. His voice sounded too loud. "Who's the boss around here anyway?"

"You are, my friend."
"You remember that, okay?"
"Okay," Hector said.
"Okay." Steve grabbed Hector's arm and squeezed. "When you go home, you can be the boss with your girlfriend. Here I'm the boss. Okay?"
"Okay, my friend."

"I have to go out front. When I come back, I want all these carrots peeled. And the potatoes too."
"Okay, my friend."
"Okay." Steve picked up the chef's hat and started out the swinging door. He stopped midway and turned.

'You do what I say, you hear?'

The kid was peeling so hard the orange carrot rinds twisted in the air like flying serpents. "I do," he said.

"You better."

"I do," Hector repeated. He looked up with the usual grin but he had that clouded lizard look in his eyes.

"See you later, man," Steve said. When the kid didn't answer, he repeated it. "See you later, man."

The kid didn't answer again.

"Fuck," he muttered. He marched up to Hector and put his face so close he could smell the kid's breath. It was surprising, kind of sweet-smelling and warm. The kid looked startled and backed up a step.

"I said, see you later, man."

Hector was looking up at him with those sealed-over eyes, still gripping the peeler.

"Hey," he said. "I can't stand it when someone doesn't answer me."

The kid grinned again, but it still looked phony.

"See you later, my friend," Steve repeated. He gripped the kid's shoulder. "Look, I'm sorry. Okay?"

For a second, nothing. Then the veil raised up from the kid's eyes.

"Okay, man," Hector said. "I see you later, man."

"Okay," he mumbled and turned to the swinging door. "Okay," he repeated to no one in particular.

"WHAT'S THIS? ANOTHER NEW ONE?" a loud high-pitched voice screamed as he came into the room. "How many cooks do you go through here in a year?"

Sitting between Mrs. Kauffman and Mr. Sarducci were two female impersonators that he recognized them from The Oasis Hotel.
"I thought you worked at the Oasis, honey," the first impersonator called over. He was tall and dark-skinned with a five o'clock shadow that he covered with powder. He had a small chin that sank into his neck.

"Don't call me honey," he growled, not looking over at the impersonator.

"Oooooh, isn't he touchy?" the other impersonator said. That one was shorter and blond with plump hairless cheeks.

"Girls, don't bother my cook!" Charlotte said, coming up the aisle from the booths with a coffee pot in each hand, one regular, one decaf. "He's just getting to where he can make the eggs. I don't want him leaving now.

"Who's bothering anyone?" the dark impersonator asked. "We're just making conversation while we wait for our breakfast order to be taken."

"So what is it today?" Charlotte asked.

"Over easy," said the dark one.

"Over easy," said the blond.

Steve turned his back so no one could see his face. He closed his eyes and leaned his hands onto the edge of the grill.

"Two over easies," Charlotte said right up near his shoulder, so that he jumped.

"I forgot!" the chubby blond one called. "No potatoes or toast. I'm on a diet. I'll take a scoop of cottage cheese."

"No potatoes or--" Charlotte started to say.

"Whaddya think I'm deaf?" he interrupted.

"Who put a bug up your ass?" Charlotte snapped and turned away.

"Hey!" he called. "Sorry."

"Say," Charlotte said, turning to the counter, "What brings you two out so early in the morning? I never seen you here before eleven."

"We stayed up all night," the blond one said. "We sat in my room and gossiped for hours."

"Aah, shit!" Steve said. He was looking down at two broken yolks.

"I'll take it anyway, honey--I mean, cook," the blond one said. "I like them broken."
He broke the next set too.

"Don't worry, cook," the dark impersonator said. "You're among friends."

"Yeah, right," Steve muttered under his breath. He was feeling weak all over, in his muscles and all his joints, like he had a flu.

"Thank God for friends," said Mr. Sarducci, patting the blond impersonator on the arm.

"Isn't that the truth?" the blond impersonator answered. "Who can hold onto a man these days? So fickle, so afraid of commitment."

"And when you get old and lose your mate like I did," Mrs. Kauffman added, putting her hand on the hairy forearm of the dark impersonator, "You appreciate your friends. My God, life is lonely enough. Thank God for friends."

Everyone at the counter nodded.

"We live in a crazy world these days," Mr. Sarducci pronounced.

"Amen," said Mrs. Kauffman.

"In my old age, I see that everybody needs someone. What else is there?" Mr. Sarducci added.

"Amen," said Mrs. Kauffman.

"Speaking of friends," the blond impersonator asked, "Where's Kaminsky?"

"The hospital," Mrs. Kauffmann said in a very loud stage whisper.

"What for?"


"It doesn't look good," Mr. Solomon whispered.

Steve hated when old people did that. Like God was hard of hearing. Spent half the morning stage-whispering about sickness and death.

During the lunch rush he burnt two patty melts in a row and had a deepfried shrimp platter sent back. He was shaking all over by the time he got into the back kitchen for cleanup. He found Hector cubing a mound of peeled potatoes.

"I making the potato salad for you," the kid said.
"What a prince," he said. "I mean it, you're a prince, man." He picked up a knife.

"We'll make it together, my friend. You and me."

When he was settled in cubing spuds, he said, "Those old farts are obsessed, man. You know that? Can't get death off their minds."

"No, my friend," Hector said.

"Maybe I'll get the hell out of here," he announced. His voice sounded too loud. "What's keeping me here? Maybe I'll go to Phoenix. who would even know if I was gone?"

"Hey, man. I know."

"Don't bullshit, man," Steve said edgily.

"We buddies, right?"

"I mean it. Don't bullshit me."

"I ain't bullshitting."

"Okay!" he almost shouted. "No more talking for now. Let's get this fucking salad done." He grabbed a potato a threw it down in front of him and stared at it. He slowly started cubing it and from a distance watched the sharp blade knick a sliver of skin off his finger.

He'd almost forgotten where he was until he felt a hand reaching into his hand and he looked down to see Hector taking the potato cubes from him. They were mottled with red spots. He pulled his hand away quickly and the bloody potatoes fell onto the prep table.

"Watch it, man," he said.

"I get you a bandaid."

"I'll get my own bandaid!" This kid was getting on his nerves. "Go wash dishes!" Steve ordered, and for the rest of the afternoon he wouldn't say anything else.

When it was time to go he considered asking the kid to go out for a beer again but who wanted to be seen around with some Spic kid like that was all you could get for company? Besides, he'd asked two times already. Maybe there was a Betty, for all he knew, and who the hell cared anyway.
He never knew what to do at night. All he ever used to do at night was work. He was walking down the sidewalk of Old Falls with a cold wind blowing newspapers and trash against his legs and the hours stretched ahead like a big, empty void that he could never fill.

He stopped in the liquor store by the boarding house and bought a sixpack. The void followed him to his room. He sank into the cat pee chair and popped a can. He got up and turned on the t.v. but left off the sound.

He couldn't shake the feeling like he was in some kind of big void. "Ah shit," he said. And then his words seemed to dance in the void, the words ah and shit floating around in it, bouncing against its edges, trapped inside it. He grabbed another can and opened it nervously. Should of gotten a bottle of scotch.

How could there be a Betty? Where would Hector and some Betty go? Did they do it in a car? Maybe Betty had a place.

"Ah, there ain't no Betty," he said out loud and wished he hadn't because all his words seem to float trapped inside the void. He was afraid to turn up the volume on the t.v.

He held up the last beer can. "Here's to you, Chef Goldman," he said and finished it off. And then those words were floating around in the void too and that was it, he couldn't take it anymore. He pushed out of the chair, dropping the can onto the rug. "Screw it," he muttered, grabbing his sweat shirt. When he was almost out of the room, he turned and shouted:

"Go to Hell, Mister God!"

In the middle of town, on an empty bench, he shivered in the cold. From across the street, music floated out of The Gold Nugget. He was still thinking about Hector. He was wondering if the kid was pumping some blond in the backseat of a Chevy.

"Oooooh, honey, it is COLD!"

The two female impersonators were stepping out from the bar. The words rang out and echoed in the dark. The first feeling that came to him was disgust. The entire
fucking town was filled with weirdos and losers.

The impersonators must of been drinking all night at the Nuggett. They giggled and staggered off the curb, clutching onto each other, laughing and staggering into the street.

He wasn't any goddamned redneck. Live and let live. What difference did it make? When it came right down to it, everyone bled the same blood. But the phony girlish ring of their voices bothered him anyway. Hell, some days, the sound of anyone's voice bothered him.

His thoughts were interrupted by the roar of an engine. Then there was a car from nowhere, coming up fast, a heavy clunker, a lowslung sedan traveling too fast, radio blasting heavy metal from oversized speakers.

"Oh, man," Steve whispered. The car lunged and shuddered, weaving across both lanes. "Watch it," he whispered as the two queens froze and the car screeched on its brakes. A high-pitched scream.

A blond-haired body pitched over the hood of the car and clung to the windshield, then rolled over the right fender, away from Steve's view. The car vibrated, paused, backed up and peeled away, still thudding its heavy metal. The next thing Steve saw was one of the queens lying flat on the road with the other one bending over him.

"Help! Help!" the dark queen called.

Steve got up slowly. He felt his legs wouldn't carry him any faster, so that he was kind of floating reluctantly into the road, toward the prone body.

"Get an ambulance!" the dark queen shouted.

Steve stopped and glanced all around. The street was empty except for him and the queens. He started to turn to the pay phone, then turned back to the street. He didn't know which way to go.

Then an awful gut feeling hit him. What if this was a war? Here he'd be, almost wetting himself, not knowing what to do--sure to be one of the jerks who got his head blown off or who crept back to the base, knowing they were calling him--

He couldn't think the word. He felt his legs curling up, like the bones were
melting. He didn't want to see the body.

"Help me!" the dark queen called again.

Steve had to urge his jelly legs to jiggle down the street in the direction of the queens. God, he prayed, don't let me wet my pants.

He was almost to the prone body, when it suddenly sat up. The blond queen was shaking all over and held up a broken high heel. "Honey, it was a miracle. I'm cut from falling but it could have been—" The impersonator shuddered. "Thank God, I have years of dance training and gymnastics. I know how to relax into a fall."

Steve jerked to a halt and stared at them with his mouth open.

"No, really, I'm all right," the blond impersonator said. His soft lip was bleeding in thin red stream. "Honey, you're white as a ghost," he added in a concerned voice.

"It's a miracle," the dark queen said.

Steve was running down Broadway towards the cardboard motels at the edge of town. He needed to find Hector. He needed to tell him that he saw a miracle. He had just seen a short fat queen trick death with a gymnastics move.

And maybe he could find out finally about this damned Betty.

When he reached the first rundown motel at the edge of town, there was a group of spics standing near a lit doorway. They were passing a joint. The weedy burnt smell hit him as he jerked to a stop.

"Where's Hector?" he coughed out. The men ignored him.

"I'm looking for a kid named Hector."

"Ain't no Hector here, my friend," one of them said, giving a look to the others: What's this white guy doing on my territory? He was a wiry little guy with high cheeks and mean eyes.

"He's about nineteen." Steve said. "Short and ugly."

"What you want him for?" asked the sharp-faced man.

"None of your business."

The man spit out something in Spanish to his friends, then turned to Steve. "We don't know no Hector."
"Ah, c'mon. All you guys know each other."
"We don't know no Hector."
"Ah, screw you," he shouted. "All you spics know each other. He's somewhere. Where's Hector? Here? That place next door?"
"Watch your language, my friend," the wiry one said, while his friends stared.
"I ain't your friend," Steve said. "I'm looking for my dishwasher. I got something to tell him. Where's Hector?"
"I tell you, man. Ain't no Hector here," the man repeated. He turned to his friends.
"We know any Hector?"
"No," they answered together.
"Bullshit!" he roared. "Look, I'll get all you wetbacks fired. You want to have your green cards checked tomorrow?"
A faint rustle passed among the men. The wiry one with the mean eyes took a step forward. "You call up the feds, you better worry about your ass. Somebody find you in an alley some night."
"Fuck you, my friend," Steve said, pumping his chest out. "Where's Hector?"
The man took another step toward him. He waved a beer bottle. "Ain't no Hector here. Never was no Hector here. You better be on your way, my friend."
"Fuck you," Steve repeated. He stood up straight. His head felt almost empty.
"You pushin' you luck, man," said the wiry man.
"I ain't got no luck," Steve said. "And I don't need it with a bunch of spics."
"That's what you think," said the man and took a step closer.
"Fuck you all," he said to the whole group. "I'm calling the feds tomorrow. I'm calling the feds tomorrow."
His mouth was set and his back was straight as the beer bottle swung towards his head. He hardly felt a thing, only heard a thud that echoed inside his skull.
I did it, he thought.
He was sinking, something dripping down his forehead. The spics were laughing, then it was quiet. The door closed and it was dark everywhere. The blood from his forehead was running down into his eyes, so that they stung and the world was
blurred. But his mind was very much alive.
He was imagining Hector and Betty in a picture, like on a mantle, framed in gold.
Then the two merged together and he saw Hector smiling down at him, wearing a blond wig.

Hector, he thought. He reached up to touch the face but he couldn't reach anything.
His friend seemed worried, looking down at him, but Steve himself felt satisfied.

"I'm all right" he whispered sleepily. "I did it, my friend."

Not long after the light spread like a beacon from the opening door of the motel room. The wiry man stuck his head through the opening.

"Is he dead?" called a voice in Spanish from inside.

"No," said the wiry man. "See how he squirms in the dirt? If he's still there in an hour, we'll call the hospital." And then he slammed shut the door and it was dark again.
A few months after the death of her husband, the eminent surgeon Dr. Hermann J. Woolf, Lenora Woolf started eating her meals from a portable tray in the living room of her Riverside apartment, watching games shows on television. While people from Muncie and Des Moines and Tallahassie spun gigantic wheels of fortune, she ate canned chicken soup and saltines and felt deliciously guilty, the salt and crumbs from the crackers falling across her chest, down her lap, between the cushions of the overpriced leather armchair in which she sat, and onto the original oriental carpet underneath her feet.

Two weeks before, she had fired Hilda, the enormous hulking terror who had intimidated her with feather dusters and waxing rags and glass polish for the past fourteen years. And now dust was actually starting to build up everywhere. Cobwebs growing on the ceilings. Growing longer every day. Until she, Lenora, chose to clean. Which might be never.

The metal t.v. tray she had bought at a chaotic variety store on Amsterdam Avenue, elbowing her way through the thickly-packed aisles of chattering Hispanic women, wheeling her squealing shopping cart around the children with runny noses and dirty Sesame Street sweatshirts, her eyes searching hungrily up and down the aisles of cheap chatzkahs that seemed like forbidden treasures to her. Made in Taiwan. Made in Korea. TODAY ONLY. THREE FOR A DOLLAR.

So, she came out with not just the fold-out tray, but a set of multi-colored plastic dishes, a nightlight shaped like Fred Flintstone and two cassettes of latin salsa music. She gave the music to some teenage boys with a boombox on the streetcorner and the nightlight to a little black girl in pink coveralls and bunny slippers on the subway car, but she kept the tray and the dishware.

Oh, the subway! Lenora smelled the urine on the grimy stairs. She felt the grimy indoor wind blowing through her hair on the platform as the cars rolled past. The
rattling and shaking through dark tunnels with the insides roiling, the oily, metal smell of machines and the mysterious steamy underground smell. She had missed the terrible subway. She imagined Hermann watching from the Heavens, shaking his head sternly at the sight of her clinging to a strap as the lights blinked on and off and the hips and breasts of strangers pressed and rubbed against her body.

Lenora realized, standing on the platforms nowadays, intensely alert as all the old people were for addicts and nut cases, that she had missed the odd thrill. With Hermann, no risks had been taken that couldn't be avoided. Life was like the black appointment book in his Park Avenue clinic; it had its appointed hours.

Imagine the shock then of Hermann found to have an undetected tumor. Almost unimaginable—unscheduled and presumptuous, a slap in the face. Her husband died not scared, but hugely annoyed. And suddenly and unexpectedly, she was alone.

The Lenox china that was a wedding present, Lenora shoved back in the cupboards and she ate now from the plastic Amsterdam Avenue dishes. Takeout food from Chinese restaurants, frozen pizzas, Coney Island-style franks, ice cream for breakfast.

And when she passed through the dining room, quickly, sneakily—for this was the room where she most remembered Hermann, sitting straight-backed at the head of the shining mahogany table, the massive Hilda spooning his creamed onions from a serving dish—she relished the dust and vacant chairs.

An American dream. She spun the wheel of fortune. Met a nice young doctor and won fabulous prizes. Two polite, well-educated children who always sent cards on the right days. A beautiful co-op apartment. Until two weeks ago, even Hilda.

A museum of an apartment! She couldn't walk past the antiques anymore without feeling chill, like she was browsing in a store she couldn't afford.

She wasn't bitter. Just puzzled. Forty years gone like a shot. Sometimes she wondered if she had chosen a life the end result of which would not be rotting in the earth but shriveling and dehydrating instead like a mummy in a tomb.

She knew now museums and ancient relics, she knew sarcophoghi when she saw them. Symphonies too. Brahms, Mussorskgy, Copeland, Bach. Which was the salad
fork. The wives of the congressmen over for cocktails. But never did she feel at home.
Always, a yearning.
Nowadays, she just followed her nose whichever direction it was pointed.

Which was how she wound up at the West Side Jewish Community Center, where the old folks in the Senior's Activity Room called her "the doctor's widow" or "Mrs. Bigshot."

Lenora had passed the plate glass window of the Center hundreds of times when Hermann was alive, on her way to Li Chang's Corner Grocery. Watched the arguing and laughing, watched the way the hands moved, the way the lips moved through the glass, so she could imagine the conversations, everyone complaining and making jokes at the same time, everyone talking at the top of their lungs.

She remembered a long time ago, before the War, the dinners with her family in the old days, everyone talking at once, arguing, complaining. Lately, she was remembering quite a bit. That, too, would recently have seemed a deadly sin. The memories had been banished from her mind at Hermann's insistence, and from Hermann's mind too, and from the minds of the children, who--God forbid--should grow up knowing anything but this fine rich life.

The first one she noticed in the activities room of the Center was Pearl Glick. In a room of loud mouths, Pearl Glick had the loudest mouth of all. A defeat for Pearl Glick was another Iwo Jima, a cry of misery and undeserved suffering, hands raised up to God as though she was Job in the dust.

Lenora found herself drawn to Pearl Glick's table those first couple of times. In the beginning, Pearl Glick eyed her suspiciously, then raised her eyebrows at the rest of the table, as though to say: "Who is this?"

Lenora concentrated on the game, putting most of her attention on Pearl Glick and the cards that perched in Pearl Glick's hand. Pretty soon, the pile of pennies in front of Pearl began to grow. Now, Lenora became welcome by someone in the card room of the Center.

"Honey!" Pearl Glick would scream, waving a cigarette, as Lenora entered the room. "Come! Sit by me and give me luck. I'm down by two dollars and thirty-five
It was only a matter of a week, and Lenora took her place at the table. Her first hand, she got four-of-a-kind in a game of five-card draw. A warm glow of satisfaction filled her. Then she tossed out the fourth card and lost the hand to Pearl Glick, who crowed with victory.

Pearl Glick informed her of the variety store on Amsterdam Avenue, as well as what must have been every other outlet store for marked down-goods on the island of Manhattan. From Pearl she learned the life stories of everyone at the Center, including the staff and administrator.

And when Pearl Glick won a B'Nai Brith charity drawing for a free singles weekend in the Catskills, it was Lenora whom she invited to accompany her.

Because she was searching for god-knows what, Lenora was tempted. For a long time, she thought she might never see the Catskills again.

"Pearl," she said on the day of the invitation, "I'm ashamed to be seen at such an event at my age." They were sitting at the poker table.

"Honey, I've seen 'em with fifteen years over you, doing the cha-cha on the dance floor. And don't you think, winding up in each other's room, making a little--"

"Pearl!"

"It's the truth."

Hermann would not have been caught dead in the Catskills. He would never have gone back. A place for nouveau rich Jews with poodles and fat gold chains, he would have said, although he had certainly shortened the noses and tucked the fannies of any number of such people.

For her husband, she did have some love, God rest his soul. But how could you put your full heart in a man who refused to cha-cha or laugh at a mime on the sidewalk, for fear his house of cards would blow down?

"So?" said Pearl Glick. "Do I call and confirm the reservation?"

"I'm not interested in romance, Pearl."

Pearl Glick counted up her stack of pennies. She leaned over and lay her orange-painted nails on Lenora's arm. "But you're looking for something. Aren't you, honey?"
"I--"

"Tonight," Pearl interrupted, "I'll call and confirm the reservation."

Lenora, in her nervousness, allowed herself to win four hands in a row. She came out a dollar and seventy-three cents ahead and had to endure Pearl Glick's overenthusiastic, conflicted congratulations.

In the week before the singles holiday, Lenora took out subscriptions to People and T.V. Guide. She bought a tape of Mario Lanza singing popular Italian love songs. She watched reruns of "The Love Boat." She dreamt one night that she was in the Metropolitan Museum afterhours, alone in the cavernous rooms, apparently looking for something. As she approached the Egyptian chambers, her feet began to twitch. And then she was tapdancing, her shoes echoing on the polished marbled floors, tiptapping past caskets and urns golden and jeweled.

On the morning of their departure, Pearl Glick came down with a flu. Lenora was about to cancel. She reached for the phone and began to dial, but stopped before she reached the end of the number. She had to go.

So, Lenora packed her bags and went up to the Oasis Hotel. By herself.

Not used to driving after years in Manhattan, Lenora crept up the New York State Thruway in Hermann's Buick Regal and got ticketed by a smirking Highway Patrol officer for driving too slow. She nearly missed the exit at Harrison for Highway 17. By the time she reached the Oasis Hotel, her right foot was sore from jabbing between the brake and gas pedals, as she crept up the rising hills and soared down the passes. As she became used to the machine, she began to thrill at the downhill rushes, leaving her foot off the brake until she was soaring at twenty miles over the speed limit.

"Wheeee," she whispered to herself.

But all in all driving was just too much. What a relief to have the parking attendant whisk away in the huge monster of a car. Lenora waited on the veranda until a bellhop appeared with a rolling cart. Her jaw twitched with surprise.
The bellhop was a middle-aged midget. Or at least quite short, under five feet tall. Stocky and big-chested, square-jawed and trim in his red-jacketed uniform with brass buttons. He swung her baggage easily onto the cart, then took off through the glass door.

Lenora trailed after the disappearing cart, nearly stumbling on her sore right foot as she grabbed the heavy door before it slammed shut without her, sending her luggage who-knows-where.

The lobby smelled of perfume. A white-haired man in tight black running shorts called announcements from a microphone near a wide flight of stairs. He had the legs of a twenty-year old and leathery, lizardy, overtanned skin.

"Folks, I'm Marty Cohen, your activities director!" He slithered over to a small, wrinkled woman of seventy and pinched her cheek. "Hello, darling. Are you here with your boyfriend?"

Lenora stood in line at check-in. She had to explain to the front desk clerk, yes, she was alone.

"Arnie!" the front desk clerk called.

The bellhop took the key, then proceeded off in a hurry, so again she felt like she was chasing after him to the elevators. It wasn't until the doors swooshed shut and they were sailing up in the small mirrored car that she could take a full breath.

"This your first time?" the bellhop asked.

Lenora started as though someone had set off a firecracker, then she felt her face grow red. "Of course not," she answered.

And then they were rushing down the hall again, their heels crackling with static as they brushed across the thick carpeting. The bellhop let her into her room, where she stood uncertainly, inspecting the two enormous beds and ridiculous hanging lamps with gold chains, the small refrigerator and wet bar, the picture window view of mountains and lake and a rolling golf course.

The whole scene should have pleased her. But it did not.

"How are you, Lenora?" the bellhop asked.

"I knew you recognized me. I don't know how. I thought no one could, I'm such
an old lady."

"Well, I knew you recognized me, but how many midget bellhops do you see in a lifetime?"

"Not very many. Still putting yourself down, Arnie."

"No, Lenora. Now I just say the truth. I'm a midget. What else is there to say?"

Lenora sank into the chair by the picture window. "I wish I knew why I came back."

"Hermann?"

"Passed away. He died a few months ago."

"I'm sorry."

"He would hate me coming back. He hated working here. He loved the money, it got him through medical school—but do you remember how much he detested it all? Do you know how many people in my life know I was once a magician's assistant?"

Arnie smiled. "Not very many."

"Not even my children."

"How many?"

"Two. And you?"

"Nothing. A divorce."

"Now I should say I'm sorry."

"Don't."

"I won't. I'm not sure what any of it means to apologize for."

Arnie shifted from one foot to another. "I have to go."

"Hermann was a good man. I made a trade. No more magic, no more card tricks, no more lounge shows or crystal balls. Instead, we got it all through plastic surgery. We got everything anyone could need. Without magic or gambling of any kind."

"You had a great show, Lenora. You could have fooled anyone with your tricks."

Lenora smiled and picked up her purse. "They weren't tricks, Arnie."

Arnie backed away, waving his hand. "No tipping among friends."

"Don't be silly, I know that." Lenora pulled a pack of cards from her purse. "You used to like poker. Next time you play, use these cards."

Arnie tucked the pack into his jacket pocket. "Don't disappear without saying
goodbye. Have a good time."

"Wait! What do I do?"

Arnie blinked several times. "I don't know the future. That was your job."

Lenora sighed. "No, I meant what do I do next?"

"Oh. Cocktails at five in the Grecian room." At the door, Arnie bowed. "And thanks for the cards."

"Forty years," Lenora whispered as he closed the door.

For the social hour she wore pearls and a black dress and found herself among tennis frocks and designer sweatsuits. After fifteen minutes she snuck upstairs and changed to some Adidas sweats she had gotten in an outlet with Pearl Glick the week before.

Then she went from group to group until dinner, listening to conversations about kidney stones, divorced wives, gay sons and converted Christian daughters, prostrate problems, secretarial problems, arthritis, memory failure, what was beginning to seem like a litany of complaints, not a word of which she could not have heard at the Senior's Center. For free.

Much to her disappointment, dinner was the same. Lenora was seated in a party of six in the vast dining room buzzing with waiters and busboys, who were handing out huge heaping plates of roast chicken and steak and lamb chops and veal parmesan. Everyone grabbing, grabbing at dinner rolls from the baskets, grabbing sugars for coffee, grabbing the elbows of the waiters, asking for more, more, more.

Lenora was beginning to wonder why she had come. She knew that these were people who, for the most part, had known suffering. She recognized the yearning in their eyes as they surveyed the lavish table, grabbing everything they could get their hands on—because it was included in the bill, because it might disappear at any moment. She was beginning to remember why she had chosen stiff and polite Hermann. Hermann who was prepared to spend the whole of his life in a world of drained etiquette.

She passed up an evening of ventriloquism and comedy in the Swizzledrick
Lounge. The long drive and what seemed like an eternity of a day had taken a bigger
toll than she expected. It felt good to climb into her ocean-sized bed with the remote
control. Before she slipped off into sleep, she caught fifteen minutes of a Jeopardy
rerun which filled her head—as she dozed—with a multitude of answers to a host of
trivial questions.

The next day, after hours of rhumba lessons and simon sez and swimming pool
aerobics, Lenora finally discovered the card room. For a moment, her heart jumped.
She found a table with an empty spot and the warm itching began in her hands. Here,
she knew no one. Her eyes swept over the piles of shining coins on the green felt
surface. The familiar feeling of mysterious knowledge filled her.

She took a hand. Two Aces, the rest garbage. On the next round, Lenora kept the
Aces and threw down the rest. She picked up her new cards. Two more Aces. Four of
a kind. She glanced around the table, about to double her bet. Directly across from
Lenora was an ugly, tight-faced woman with a very small pile of coins in front of her.
The woman seemed to have been losing steadily all afternoon, Lenora gathered from
the remarks she overheard as she entered the game. Lenora knew, glancing across the
table, that the woman finally had a good hand. But not as good as Lenora's.

Then, on the woman's arm, Lenora saw the tattooed numbers of the camps. In the
woman's face, Lenora saw the importance of a small win in life, here and there. So,
she doubled her bet anyway and threw out two of her aces and let the woman win with
three of a kind. She played a little while longer until she had even money, then left
feeling a little disappointed.

At lunch, an overweight organ salesman from Hackensack named Sam Glassman
sent back three entrees, complaining as though he was in a four-star French restaurant,
then looking for approval around the table like he was Mr. Julia Child. Then a widow
named Hettie Pick related some story about a third cousin who was in Hollywood and
knew Steven Spielberg.

Lenora jumped up from the table, excused herself, and dashed through the lobby,
then out the glass door. At the far end of the stone-layered veranda, she saw Arnie the
bellhop, alone at the end of a row of empty carts, bent over a wheel with a screwdriver.

"I want to have dinner with you tonight. Can we go into town?"

Arnie set down the screwdriver and cleared his throat. "Yes, Lenora," he said.

"We can do that."

"Pick me up at my room at six," Lenora instructed.

Just like that. That simple. But, when you're sixty-five years old, who has time to waste?

Arnie came to her room dressed in a blue suit with a green-striped tie. They didn’t speak much in the descending elevator or in the Buick Regal as they swerved to Old Falls, Lenora yanking her foot between the gas and brake, so the Regal careened wildly around the twisting curves. She noticed, when they had jerked into a parking spot on Broadway, that Arnie's face had become somewhat pale and the muscles of his jaws bulged through his cheeks.

She was tired of t-bones and chicken breast and carved radish roses. She wanted a nice corned beef on rye with french fries and cole slaw. In the middle of the block was a simple-looking little place called Kaplan’s Luncheonette.

"Hey, Shorty," the waitress called from behind the cash register.

Arnie smiled. "Hi, Charlotte." He took Lenora's elbow. "Do you remember Lenora?"

Charlotte looked her up and down suspiciously, her eyes settling on the string of expensive pearls around Lenora’s neck. "I don’t remember anybody who can afford a necklace like that."

"Murray the Magnificent and his Magical Assistant, Lenora?" Arnie prompted.

"That was a hundred years ago!" Charlotte exclaimed.

"Forty," said Lenora.


"Of course," Lenora said, although she did not quite recall.

Arnie led them down an aisle to a booth near the back. While they walked, a couple of voices called "How's it goin' Shorty?"

"Is that your nickname these days?" she asked, after they had slid into the vinyl seats.

Arnie shrugged. "It's been for awhile. I'm used to it. I have a philosophy, Lenora. Life is what you make of it. Hatred and prejudice come from ignorance, so try and put a little happiness into the world instead?" He held up his hand as though she was about to protest, which in fact she wasn't. "All right, who cares if it sounds like a Hallmark card?"

"I was going to ask you how."

"How what?"

"How do you put a little happiness into the world?"

Two menus dropped onto the formica table. "It's a sad world where a woman with a necklace like that has to ask such a question," Charlotte said, standing over them with a coffee pot in each hand.

"Who," Lenora asked, "invited you into this conversation?"

"Coffee?" Charlotte asked, ignoring Lenora's comment. She poured for them both, then put the coffee pots onto the table and pulled out a tag. "Hey, I didn't mean any harm. Look, I'm all admiration. You did all right for yourself, honey. I remember you now. Sequinned leotard and white tights. You used to do card tricks in the crowd before the show."

"Corned beef on rye with fries and cole slaw," Lenora said.

"The same," Arnie said, and Charlotte took off down the aisle.

"They weren't tricks, you know," Lenora said.

"Excuse me?" asked Arnie.

"I knew exactly what I was doing. It really was magic."

"You mean--"

Lenora smiled and nodded. "I could win a million in Vegas."

"And so--"

"When Hermann was alive, I promised. No magic. He hated it. Hermann did not
approve of fortune. He hated it all—gambling, fortune-telling, even astrological signs in
the newspaper. He hated anything that seemed unreasonable, unexplainable. He
promised me everything I could ever want—without ever resorting to magic. And he
kept his promise."

"Lenora, if you'll pardon me. You sound a little bitter."

"Maybe so. I don't blame Hermann. He was a good man. He just didn't want to
believe in the irrational. In the War, in the camps, he saw too much of the unreasonable
side of man. When he came to America, he wanted clarity and reason."

"Still, if you'll pardon my saying, Lenora, he was drawn to you—a magician act in
a hotel lounge."

"Yes," Lenora sighed. "I believe I was a challenge. And Hermann, he was an
anchor for me. Already, then, I saw that the talent I had had no guarantees for a better
life."

"And now, Lenora?"

Before Lenora could answer, Charlotte arrived with the corned beef sandwiches.
This gave her the opportunity to change the subject.

"What about you, Arnie?"

"Not much. Forty years as a bellhop, on and off. And then there was the time in
prison, that was about five years."

A little spark ran up Lenora's spine. "Prison?"

"Lenora," Arnie said, "when I was fifteen, I was four-foot-seven. My mother took
me to doctors, specialists we couldn't afford, and always the same thing. Wait and see.
No serious physical signs or problems. Short, apparently, was not a problem. But tell
that to a little boy who couldn't go to school without picking fights to prove himself.
Well, you know, Lenora, one thing led to another. Finally, some bad checks and five
years to think about it in Warwarsick." Arnie shrugged. "Well, I got a lot of reading
done. History, philosophy, religion. Other things. I learned a lot. Ask me what I
learned."

"What did you learn?" Lenora asked.

"I learned every card game known to mankind. I learned Monopoly and Scrabble
and crossword puzzles."

"Games?"

"Yeah, games. Why do you think everybody plays them?"

Lenora smiled. She felt the tips of her fingers burning. "I like games too."

"You don't know what winning is like until you win while you're locked up. Then you know why we play 'em."

"Of course I always win," Lenora said. "If I want to."

"Maybe that's the problem."

"What do you mean?"

"That's about as much challenge as what you had with Hermann."

"Hmmm," Lenora said, taking a bite of her sandwich.

She insisted on paying for herself when they left.

"You two have fun," Charlotte called as they were leaving.

When they got to the sidewalk, they both stood awkwardly by the Buick.

"Arnie," Lenora began, "I'm not interested--"

Arnie waved his hand. "Not another word. Just friends."

A loud shout across the street distracted them.

"Out!" a large man in a black suit yelled, pushing a staggering drunk onto the sidewalk.

"Go to hell," yelled the drunk.

"What is that?" asked Lenora.


"Do you go there?" Lenora asked.

"Sometimes."

"Take me there," Lenora said impulsively.

"Aahh no, you don't wanna go there."

"Yes I do," Lenora said. "I most certainly do," she repeated firmly, and began marching across the street.

"Hey, Shorty!" was of course the first thing they heard walking into the smoky, noisy, beer-smelling room. Lenora felt at least fifty pairs of eyes sizing her up. Arnie
led them to a small sticky table in the middle of the room. They had just ordered two beers when a large hairy man with a round belly leaned over Arnie's chair.

"Shorty, there's a poker game in the back."

"I'm busy tonight," Arnie said, gesturing at Lenora.

Lenora, meanwhile, felt a sudden spark, a fleeting moment of excitement.

"Arnie," she announced, "Let's play." She turned to the fat man. "Is there room for two?"

The fat man shrugged. "We don't usually have women. You know how?"

"Yes."

The fat man scowled at her. "You have money?"

"Yes. A lot of money."

"Lenora," Arnie protested, taking her elbow.

Lenora patted the leather strap. " Plenty."

"Well, come on then. Shorty, you making us waste time." He took one of Lenora's shoulders in his bear hand and steered her towards the back. "You can call me Sammy," he said pleasantly.

"Nice to meet you Sammy," Lenora answered, and let herself be guided through the cloudy room. Arnie trailed behind, wearing a worried-looking face.

Sammy leaned closer to her and jabbed his thumb backwards at Arnie. He smelled of smoke and stale beer. "Shoulda been a rabbi. Has a saying for everything."

Now they turned abruptly down a dark hallway, past two doors labeled "Monsieurs" and "Mademoiselles" and a broken pay telephone with its receiver dangling from a metal cord. The dirty carpet smelled of mildew.

Lenora entered the backroom at the end of the corridor first, subject to the scrutiny of another host of eyes, this time belonging to a group of men circled around green felt table lit from above with a round halo glow of light.

Her heart pumped in her chest and she took in a quick breath. She stared at the hairy forearms exposed below rolled up sleeves. She followed the arms down to wrist, then palm, and each set of palms contained a hand of cards. And on the table were piles of cash. Not pennies, but stacks of paper, dollars and more dollars.
The light above the table lit only the fronts of the men, linking them in a tight circle of face, chest, hands, cards, and money--while their backs and the rest of the room were dark and obscure. Smoke curled up towards the exposed bulb of the lamp, winding snakelike around the whitish glow.

"Sammy," a beak-nosed man wearing wire-rimmed spectacles called out. "What's this? Who's the young lady?"

"She wants to play, she has cash and she says she knows how."

The man turned to the table. "Whaddya think, fellas? She has money."

A slightly younger man, maybe forty-five, with the handsome, square-jawed face of a movie actor, spoke up. "Forget it."

"Women!" the oldest man at the table spat out. "They want to come everywhere else these days. Why not here too?"

Lenora pulled out a billfold and opened its wedge, exposing a wad of bills. "I have cash," she said, for good measure.

The eyes of the men around the table lit up, despite themselves.

Someone pulled up a couple of chairs and Lenora took a seat. She glanced up at Arnie. "Aren't you going to play?"

Arnie shook his head, but did join her at the table. "I'll just babysit your winnings."

The oldest man, who introduced himself as Georgie Cohen, held out his hand:

"It's a hundred bucks to buy in."

Lenora pulled out her cash and threw a wad of bills onto the table. "Deal me in."

For a moment, she felt nothing but panic. Not the usual magic, but the dread feeling of a diver who might have descended too far. When she picked up her cards, she had nothing to speak of. She kept one in the next round, and her new cards were just as bad. She lost ten dollars to Isaac, the slightly younger man with the movie actor face, who crowed with delight.

"Lady, you can come every week from now on, as far as I'm concerned!"

"He hardly ever wins," Georgie Cohen explained. "The guy is a magician and does card tricks for a living, for God's sake. You tell me, how can he be such a lousy poker player?"
"My magic act is a bunch of tricks," Isaac said. "I have great hands and a big mouth so I keep 'em distracted. But it's all a business, like selling shoes." He turned to Lenora. "What do you think, lady?"

Before she had a chance to answer, Georgie Cohen interrupted. "Hey, I seen poker players who I swear used magic."

Now the glow was coming over Lenora. Her hands were growing warmer and the smoky air began to glisten with a kind of fairy tale light. She looked at her hand. Yes. She had the same two aces she had this afternoon. She threw down the rest of her cards, looked up, and smiled. "I had an aunt from the old country--Aunt Rosa. And she read tea leaves. Is that magic?"

"Superstition!" Georgie Cohen said.

"Four aces," said Lenora gently, laying down her cards. She swept the pile of dollars, with both hands, towards her chest, then nodded her head at the open-mouthed faces of the men around the table. "Is it my turn to deal?"

"Something funny's goin' on around here," muttered Georgie Cohen.

"A fortune teller once told me," Isaac the magician said, "that these Egyptian priests used to give out their sacred fortune-telling cards for the people to gamble with. See, they understood everybody has gambling inside 'em. It's human nature. Ain't that right, Shorty? You're the philosopher." Isaac looked at his hand and threw it down. "Damn. Another pile of garbage."

"Full house," Lenora said, and pulled yet more dollars to her growing stack.

"That's it!" groaned a man named Harry with not a chip in front of him. "I'm outa here. This is one weird game. I'm goin' home."

"The priests knew," said Arnie, "that even the most ignorant barbarians using the magic cards to gamble with would carry those cards into the future. They also knew that humans are always gonna have vices."

"What? You read about this somewhere, Shorty?" Georgie Cohen asked.


Georgie reached over and patted Lenora's arm. "This is some well-read guy. A real intellectual."
Lenora carefully laid down her cards for the whole table to see. "Royal straight flush," she said triumphantly. "What are the chances for that?"

"That's it for me too!" a man named Bernie cried. He stood and picked up his jacket. "Cash me in, Georgie. This is too weird."

"I'm out too," said the beak-nosed man, followed by two more, until only Georgie, Isaac, Arnie, and Lenora were sitting at the table.

Lenora looked down at her stack. "This must be about nine hundred and fifty dollars."

"Lady," Isaac said, "I don't get the feeling it would be a good idea to keep going with this game. I got the strange feeling this isn't a normal kind of game."

One by one the men threw down their cards.

"So?" Georgie Cohen said to Lenora. "You want play more?"

Lenora looked down again at her stack and then around to the men at the table. "I don't want the money."

"What?" said Georgie Cohen.

"I told you this was crazy," Isaac the magician said.

"I'll take back my hundred dollars," Lenora said firmly.

"But--" Georgie Cohen said.

"Georgie! Shut up and let the lady do what she wants," Harry said from the other side of the table. "I got a wife and kids at home."

Lenora collected her hundred, she turned to Arnie and said, "I guess it's time to go home."

In the Buick, on the winding road back to the Oasis, whipping past lines of dark trees outlined in the moonlight--she was really beginning to enjoy the speed of driving--Lenora said, "Was that true about the Egyptian priests giving their sacred cards to the barbarians?"

"Sure," said Arnie, "I read it in some book. Why?"

Lenora sighed. "Nothing. It just gave me a thought. Nothing special."

"You're an interesting lady," Arnie said.

Lenora smiled in the dark. "You're a nice man, Arnie. I'm glad we met again. It was the best part of my vacation."
She left him off at the employee quarters, called the Old Place, and watched his small figure disappear through the opening of the hedge that surrounded it.

In her king-sized hotel bed, Lenora felt at peace. She understood her gift. It was a way of transmission of the secrets of fortune. It wasn't the prizes, the winnings, it was the passing on of mystery, the movement of magic in the hands of vice.

As she drifted to sleep, she imagined herself a modern-day priestess--a game show hostess on a make-believe set, handing out prizes to hysterical housewives from the heartland and joyous engineers from the suburbs, passing on the symbols of the unknown in the form of twenty-seven inch televisions and five-day cruises to the Caribbean.