

KATHY MCCLELLAN HOUFF

Majestic: A Novel

(Under the Direction of JUDITH ORTIZ COFER)

Majestic is an original novel set in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Its framing chapters tell the story of Cassie Calendar, a disaffected young woman who lives in a boarding house and becomes friendly with Leon the dumpster diver. The central chapters of the novel are in the form of a fictional diary, and fictional letters, recovered from a dumpster by Leon and read by Cassie. These chapters describe the destruction of a small town theater, the Majestic, as well as the emotional struggles of the large diner waitress and the angry theater employee who write them.

INDEX WORDS: Majestic, Novel, Dumpster, Fictional diary, Fictional letters,
Theater, Diner

MAJESTIC: A NOVEL

by

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DEDICATION

for my parents, my husband, and my daughter

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INTRODUCTION

1. Learning to Love the Page: A Writing History

I have an old boyfriend who loved to write. I say loved because we haven't been close in a good many years – certainly not close enough for me to know his daily habits and his daily joys. I imagine, though, that he loves writing still. During the years we were together, he filled pages and pages. He wrote poetry and essays, had completed two novels, and was working on a third by the time we broke up.

I was oh so jealous of that man.

My own relationship with the craft of writing was always more conflicted than the apparently blissful love affair he had with it.

It began with those fat blue pencils. (I assume that's still what beginning writers learn with. I haven't checked into a grade school recently, so I don't know for sure.) Stern Mrs. Fox, she'd been Miss Black years before when she'd taught and terrified my mother, looked on disapprovingly while I tried to learn how to wield one. She told my friend Anne she was holding hers all wrong and made her cry. I gripped mine too tightly and made letters backwards, and by the time I had all the letters facing in the right direction, printing was no longer acceptable. We were in the second grade, and we were ready to learn how to write cursive. My cursive script was uneven at best, and after a few years of struggling for neatness, it and I turned mutinous. "C"s in penmanship kept me off the honor roll during most of grade school. At the most basic level, the technology of writing was not one I mastered with ease.

Despite my difficulties in forming beautiful letters, however, I was intrigued by the things those strung-together letters might say. The first thing I wrote with any consuming passion was haiku. My third grade teacher, Dorcas Baugher, introduced us

to the form in an attempt to broaden our cultural horizons, perhaps, or to make us more attentive to syllabics. Whatever her motivation, in me she hit a chord. I wrote haiku for weeks, until my mother surely could not bear to read or hear another one. Although there must have been dozens and may well have been hundreds of my haiku, littering the floor of my bedroom and stuffed into the compartment underneath my desk at school, thankfully none of them have survived. What has survived is my memory of the joy I took in them, tight and tiny on the page, compact and contained. I doubt I recognized at the age of eight the effort that ought to go into each of those seventeen syllables, but I suspect I gravitated to them because being small they appeared to me manageable. Just as I preferred throughout my childhood to hide in the smallest possible nook or corner, so too, my first playground on the page was the littlest form I could find. Some part of me has always been afraid of the wilderness that writing can be. I have long been frightened of the chaos of creativity.

During my remaining grade school years, I wrote mostly plays because that was what my good friend Ronnie Lee Cook liked to write, and he was older and bigger than I was and a boy. Having someone who wanted to call the shots and tell me what to write was fine with me. I have always performed better when given a specific task to do. Collaboration was more fun than writing alone, and plays, although they took up a lot of space on a page, didn't consist of too many words. They were, to my mind, another fairly manageable form. Plus, we could pressure my younger brother and his younger sister into performing the things we wrote down. (Typically, Ronnie Lee literally wrote the plays, since Kurt and Lisa claimed they couldn't read my scrawl.)

The onset of adolescence brought a lull in my writing life. My seventh grade teacher, Mrs. Via, discouraged my attempts at science fiction, my best friend scoffed when I said that, maybe someday, I'd like to be a writer, and I received my first lesson in the dangers of the written word. When a supposed friend forged a love letter to Andrew Scott Hersey — the tallest and most crush-worthy boy in the seventh grade class — and signed my name, I concluded that writing was potentially embarrassing and troublesome.

Given all these negative experiences, I probably would have given it up for good except that we moved after my eighth grade year.

In her essay “Still Just Writing,” novelist Anne Tyler remarks, “I know a poet who said in order to be a writer you have to have had rheumatic fever in your childhood” (13). She then goes on to say she believes “that any kind of setting apart situation will do as well” (13). She’s right, I think. For me, moving from my home town in Virginia, when I was on the brink of adolescent self-consciousness, was the catalyst for that reflective and writerly turn. And so, instead of making friends, joining clubs, and taking part in other normal teenaged pursuits (such as sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll) I filled notebooks. I wrote obsessively though, I imagine, not particularly well, becoming the sort of writer Joan Didion describes in “On Keeping a Notebook.” “Keepers of private notebooks,” she writes, “are a different breed altogether, lonely and resistant rearrangers of things, anxious malcontents” (266) Didion claims that such notebook keepers are born not made. She says, “I suppose that it begins or does not begin in the cradle” (266). While I agree that “The impulse to write things down is a peculiarly compulsive one, inexplicable to those who do not share it, useful only accidentally, only secondarily, in the way that any compulsion fires to justify itself” (266), I take exception to her ideas about the origins of the impulse. Some people are, I suppose, born “lonely . . . resistant . . . [and] anxious,” but others are surely made that way by circumstance.

As I entered high school, my odd scribbling habits caught the attention of my English teachers. They pointed me toward books and authors — Hesse, Salinger, Hemingway, Steinbeck, Fitzgerald, and Faulkner — and let me spend my study halls in their lounge, absorbing their smoke (I am an old woman. I went to high school at a time when teachers still smoked inside their building’s lounges) and their conversations. The head of the department, a transplant from the South who may have heard in my accent a particular brand of bewildered loneliness, arranged for a former student of hers, a senior at the university, to come and tutor me in poetry. These tutorials didn’t last very long and what little I may have learned from them has long since faded from memory.

Meeting Devon Miller did, however, make me feel that I wasn't so very along in my strange scribbling habits. That, in itself, was a lesson worth learning.

I wrote, up until then, primarily for my own pleasure. Although I turned in themes on *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Hamlet*, and *The Great Gatsby*, and devoted attention and care to them, the bulk of what I wrote was not being produced for anyone to read or to hear. When someone nominated me to speak at graduation, this changed. Then I had to write a speech and deliver it. Then I had an audience. Then I agonized in a way that I hadn't before and revised in ways I never had before. Decisions and revisions, indeed. I was as anxious and self-conscious as Prufrock before a party. There were some satisfactions in having a larger audience for what I wrote, I suppose, and it certainly made my parents, who were privately afraid that I might never be able to function in polite or impolite society, very proud. But that experience marked the beginning of an inexorable change in the relationship I had with writing. The din in my head when I wrote got louder. There were more voices there, waiting to approve or disapprove of what I said.

After I entered The University of Delaware as an English major, writing became less and less pleasurable and ultimately less and less do-able. In *Writing Without Teachers*, Peter Elbow relates the difficulties he had in writing once he got to college. Every time I read these words, I remember what it was like to be an undergraduate English major. "Whether or not I succeeded in getting something written seemed related only to whether I screwed myself up into some state of frantic emotional intensity . . . usually about how overdue the paper was and how frightened I was of turning in nothing at all" (16). When Elbow decided that writing was what he most wanted to do (his other option was skiing), he "finally reached the point where [he] could not write at all" (17). I almost got there. During my last two years as an undergraduate, my writing process was painful and peculiar. Often, the only way I could complete papers or stories was by having my then boyfriend lock me in a room — usually in Smith Hall, the political science building on campus, a large, cold, inhospitable, modern structure. He wouldn't

let me take a break and come out of the room until I had slid a page under the door. I wrote in desperation because I was thirsty, hungry, tired. I wrote because I had a very small bladder and I was locked in a room without a toilet. Elbow writes, “Anxiety keeps you from writing . . . You get worried and your mind begins to cloud” (27). My mind was clouded alright, and my anxiety was literally locking me in.

One might wonder why I even persisted. The boyfriend who wrote so copiously and so blissfully — he followed the one entrusted with locking me into a writing room — suggested that, although I did not like writing, I liked having written. If I could get things completed, and I managed to one way or another, I was sometimes, at least briefly, pleased with the results. I did well enough on most of my papers, and one of my stories was accepted into the school literary magazine and even awarded. It was a story about (among other things) detachable penises. My mother said, “Oh great. You get a story in your college literary magazine, but I can’t show it to anyone because it’s about penises. You couldn’t write something nice, could you?”

I took a hiatus from all things academic and worked as a waitress and a bartender for several years. During this time I continued to scribble in notebooks, but I was living with the guy who wrote so profusely at the time, and I was cowed. When I returned to school, it wasn’t with the intention of writing. I went back to prepare myself to teach high school. In the process I wrote, of course. There’s little chance that someone taking three or four English courses a semester won’t write. But the writing this time didn’t come at such a cost. Perhaps I had matured some. Perhaps I’d begun to accept some of the difficulties of the process. Or maybe, just maybe, I was able to write because I no longer had grandiose expectations about what I was going to produce, what I thought I was supposed to produce. Maybe it was easier for me to write because I’d started to think of myself less as a writer — although by Joan Didion’s definition, “. . . a writer . . . [is] a person whose most absorbed and passionate hours are spent arranging words on pieces of paper” (Why, 20), I arguably was one — and more as a teacher in training.

The turn my teaching career took compelled me to continue writing. Instead of getting a high school job, despite many interviews that summer, I ended up teaching a couple of sections of freshman composition at the University of Delaware. They desperately needed instructors, and I'd taken the required pedagogy course and done well in it, so they hired me without any advanced degree. That semester I discovered I wanted to teach writing to college students, but in order to do that I was going to have to go on to get a graduate degree either in literature or in writing.

It was hard for me to admit that I wanted to write fiction. When I applied to masters programs, I applied to ones both in creative writing and in literature. My first two acceptances were to literature programs, and I was pleased. My next two acceptances were to writing programs. When one of them called me and told me they'd really like me to come there, I danced a very uncoordinated jig in my kitchen. Still, I debated.

"Which acceptance made you dance?" my then-boyfriend asked. "Don't you know what you really want to do? It's obvious to everyone but you."

2. A Strange Ambition: Some Thoughts on Writing a Novel

During my time as an MA student at the University of New Hampshire, I encountered many writers who were working on novels, and all but one of the five writers I studied with at UNH were primarily novelists. One of them even forced us — It was for a course entitled "The Contemporary Novel" so I shouldn't have been surprised — to outline a novel we thought we might someday like to write. I'm sure I have the outline somewhere. It's ten pages. Writing it wasn't too scary, but writing it was sufficient. Having outlined the theoretical novel, I had no desire to write the actual one.

The sprawl and sweep of larger fictions frightened me — not as a reader — as a reader I liked novels of all sizes. I enjoyed reading them as much as or more than I enjoyed any other kind of reading. I just couldn't imagine ever, ever writing one. People who wrote novels must have, I imagined, the stamina of marathon runners. I was

exhausted by a ten-page short story. When I completed one, just one, of over twenty-five pages, I thought I had used up all the words I had in me. My master's thesis was a group of five short stories, totaling about eighty pages. I doubted when I finished it that I'd ever attempt anything longer than that.

There are a great many reasons, I have discovered, not to write a novel. In *Writing Fiction* R.V. Cassill delineates a few of them. He writes, "A novel's length makes it a project in which one must make a major investment of time and effort. More is lost when the project bogs down or goes astray" (271). Cassill also discusses potential problems that arise when a person writes something that evolves over months or years. Often the novel writer, when reviewing a manuscript that has been constructed over the course of a year or years "finds — of course— that it is full of impossible inconsistencies. . . He sees that his intention changed about four times" (277). The metaphors associated with writing — particularly the book-length manuscript— should have been enough to dissuade me from ever making the attempt. A common female metaphor for writing a book is birthing a baby, no small task from gestation to labor. Novelist Michael Chabon likens the process to "war; always begun in the highest enthusiasm, with full confidence of right, and the certainty of it all being over by Christmas. Two years later you're in the trenches and the mud, with defeat a real possibility . . ." (99).

In certain company, the desire to write a novel may be seen as a very strange ambition. It's not the sort of pursuit that's liable to make a body famous or rich, not unless you're very good at it and very lucky as well. The easy money to be made in words is more liable to be in advertising or in public relations or maybe in writing screenplays, not in writing novels (unless they can be adapted into screenplays, and even then the sum the writer will get is a laughable fraction of the monies paid to the actors, actresses, and even the directors involved with in a film). In addition, writing in general isn't good for the figure. Sedentary pursuits never are. And writing, in general, is uncertain and difficult work. In *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*,

Anne Lamott admits as much: “Very few writers really know what they are doing until they’ve done it. Nor do they go about their business feeling dewy and thrilled” (22).

And yet, despite all these good reasons not to, people continue to write novels, for a range of reasons, one supposes. And when I applied to doctoral programs, despite my enormous fears about producing a book-length work of fiction, I did so with the thought that I would choose one where I would write a novel as my dissertation. I was certain of two things. I needed the structure of a graduate program to help me complete such an ambitious and difficult undertaking, and if I managed to write a novel I would learn important things about myself and the craft of writing. As I am someone who teaches and hopes to continue to teach others how to write, finding these things out is important to me.

Some of the most important lessons I have learned while writing *Majestic* are purely practical. I’ve learned that I can write with a small child wailing in the background because lately she prefers my company to that of her father. (I know I ought to revel in this adoration while it lasts. Soon enough he’ll be her idol and I’ll merely be the woman who cooks the soup.) This is not, I’ve discovered, the optimum way to write, but it can be done. I’ve learned that no amount of writing time is too small. I leave chapters and pencils all over my house — out of reach of my toddler, of course. She likes to eat paper and pencils are sharp and dangerous — so that if I find myself with ten minutes, I can hammer on a few sentences or try to revisit a paragraph. As I am blessed with a child who adheres to a regular bedtime, though she does not nap on as regular a schedule as one might hope, I have learned the value of a regular writing time. Anne Lamott writes, “You try to sit down at approximately the same time every day. This is how you train your unconscious to kick in for you creatively” (6). I would not have heeded this wise and excellent advice with such dedication if not for the size of my writing project coupled with the habits of my daughter. I’ve dispelled the myth of inspiration entirely and absolutely. It isn’t that I no longer believe in it, but I flat refuse to wait for it.

Writing this book has transformed the nature of my writing anxiety, for the better I believe. I still worry, fret, sweat, mutter, and freeze, but I am no longer so apt to fill a wastebasket with failed first lines. After teaching Peter Elbow's works for over a decade, I have completely taken his advice to heart. And I will now endorse him with renewed zeal, no doubt to my students' chagrin. (They don't seem to get him completely. I think you have to be writing something long and daunting to really appreciate Peter Elbow.)

I have learned I enjoy research, in the service of fiction. This new-found joy of mine drives my husband crazy. "Who's going to know the difference?" he asks when he finds me, eyes agleam, searching for facts and factoids, dates of movie releases, and the origins of the dumpster. "I will," I say.

One of the most important things I have learned is that fear of the page is a perfectly ordinary condition. I have had reason to reread a range of writers on the subject. As a mighty chorus, they concur. Writing is scary business. I have learned that writing every day helps to quell anxiety. There are good writing days and bad writing days, but the important thing is to write on as many of them as is humanly possible. I have also learned a certain measure of patience and more discipline than I imagined I was capable of.

3. From *The Queens of the Delaware Diner* to *Dumpster Love* to *Majestic*

As will any longer project, written over a number of years, *Majestic* has grown, evolved, or perhaps mutated over time. Its generation has been so protracted, its genesis seems all but lost now. David Lodge writes, "For the reader . . . the novel always begins with that opening sentence" (4). For the writer, however, it is much more difficult to determine when a novel begins. According to Lodge, "The question is almost as difficult to answer as the question, when does the human embryo become a person" (4). I feel no particular shame then in not knowing exactly when I started this project. I do know that several of the characters have been with me for quite some time, longer, perhaps than I

ought to admit given their moments of less than perfect realization on the page. But even before the characters, I knew the setting.

One of my impulses as a writer is to preserve. Small town theaters are an architectural endangered species. As Michael Putnam so eloquently writes in the preface to his collection of photographs, *Silent Screens*, “The testimony I have collected will have to stand in place of the void loss is creating. The small-town and neighborhood movie theater is almost gone” (ix). The small town diners that proliferated in my parents’ time are dwindling in number and are being replaced by kitschy constructions that barely hint at their predecessors’ greasy and comforting charms. Hamburger Frank’s, my parents’ former haunt, is nothing but a photograph now. In *If You Want to Write*, Brenda Ueland states “the creative impulse . . . is a feeling of love and enthusiasm for something” (19). I have that love, that enthusiasm, for old theaters and diners, and I knew I wanted to somehow celebrate them and write about how they are disappearing, taking with them a way of life and an old-fashioned sense of community. (I knew I was revisiting the territory of *The Last Picture Show* but in a different location, thirty years later.) One of the first clear images I had of this book is the wrecking ball cracking the old theater open like an egg. Cassie Calendar and her abortion came later. The various failed or missing mothers (and fathers) came later. The image of the great big dream mother, the movie palace, being demolished was central to what I was feeling my way toward.

Looking back at my prospectus, I see that, in some ways, I remained true to my original intentions for this novel. I am still writing about most of the characters I proposed to write about. Stick and Ardis, Putty and Draper, Draper’s father, Lionel, and Stick’s sister, Renata, all survived what I think of as “the summer of slaughter.” (During that summer I edited Draper’s girlfriend from the manuscript entirely and relegated Draper and Putty to space in other people’s narrative accounts.)

I always intended to try to tell the story through the diary, letters, videotapes, and other documents of the characters. I probably gravitated to this form for a range of

reasons. Certainly, it was a way for me to get to know my characters and reveal them more fully. “One cannot read a diary and feel unacquainted with its writer. No form of expression more emphatically embodies the expresser: diaries are the flesh made word” (Mallon, xvii). The more I wrote, the more I realized that one of my obsessions was the way the story gets told — through movies, television programs, diary entries, letters, videotapes, and post-its. Once this became clear to me, the book expanded for a while and included both a scrapbook of newspaper clippings, kept by Draper’s then extant girlfriend, and fairytales and postcards written by Draper. During the summer of slaughter I axed everything but the diary, letters, and videotapes. Stick and Ardis were, to my mind, the strongest voices and the characters I was most interested in, and childish, videotaping Renata was central to the plot. Draper, whom I initially saw as the beautiful, shadowy leader of his troop of misfit friends and who I knew was going to disappear entirely, receded further into his projection booth. What we know of him, we know second-hand, mostly through Stick.

Another of my emerging obsessions was time. In *A Book of One’s Own*, Thomas Mallon writes, “time is the strongest thing of all, and the diarist is always fleeing it. He know he will eventually be run to earth, but his hope is that his book will let each day live beyond its midnight” (xv). Rightly or wrongly, this concern with time would lead me to frame the story of the theater eventually, so that fifteen years could pass between the time the diary and letters were written and the time when they were read. Fifteen years isn’t long at all, in the great scheme of things, but to adolescents and young adults, the people who populate this book, fifteen years is a lifetime. In addition, because of unprecedented technological advances, the world inhabited by Stick, Putty, and the fat girl is a very different one from that of Cassie Calendar. How these advances might affect the ways we communicate is an underlying question I hope the novel raises.

I didn’t intend for all my characters to be without at least one parent, but the parents kept disappearing anyway. At one point I started calling the book “All My Abandoned Children” since so many of the parents in the book had gone missing one

way or another. (Vestiges of the edited-out fairytales remain in this semi-parentless pattern I suppose, since so many fairy tale characters are orphans.) When their family histories became clear to me, I began understand why I had a journal writer, a letter writer, and a person who video-taped things obsessively as characters. Writing (or, in a related way, taping) is a way to negotiate loss and a way to handle isolation. It's also a way to keep from disappearing yourself. "Writing can be a pretty desperate endeavor, because it is about some of our deepest needs: our need to be visible, to be heard, to wake up and grow and belong" (Lamott, 19).

Ardis (the fat girl) wrote because she wanted to construct a life for herself. One of the sadnesses of her life is that there isn't all that much to construct a life out of. Some of her early diary entries, most of which were edited out of the manuscripts, were merely summaries of the tv shows she watched; then these became summaries (or at least lists) of the movies she saw. Although she has moments when she reflects on her own life experiences, she fills much of her diary with observations about the people and the things around her. She ultimately gets focused on Putty and spends considerable time speculating about what goes on with him.

Stick's letters have, at their root, the element of confession. When his best friend disappears, just as his mother did, he feels compelled to confess the central lie he told to Draper (that his own mother was dead, just as Draper's was.) Some of the rage and anxiety Stick was never able to feel or discuss when his mother left finds its release in his letters to Draper. He literally tells the story of his mother's departure for the first time, but also allows himself to experience, through words, the loss of Draper in a way that he didn't experience the loss of his mother. In some of the same ways that Ardis (the fat girl) becomes obsessed with Putty, Stick becomes obsessed with his sister and her videotapes. According to Mallon, this behavior is perfectly natural. He writes, "No one likes anything to be kept from him; and certainly no one likes to be talked about without the chance to reply" (210). Mallon writes here of more traditional diaries and

the motivations young men have to steal their sisters', but I believe the same impulse, to know his sibling's business, applies in the case of Stick and his sister's tapes.

At the time I first conceived of Renata — I will use the childbirth metaphor although having had a baby and written this dissertation I can attest to their differences as well as their similarities — God forbid the period of gestation for a human child should be so many years, or that the child should emerge so peculiar — video-diarists had not yet begun to proliferate in popular culture. There was no *Felicity* and no *American Beauty* yet. The events of Renata's life have helped to make her into someone who needs to chronicle and preserve things she sees, but as she is younger, she gravitates toward a different technology than writing. She could have been a more coherent and cohesive diarist — and perhaps she was. We only “view” three of her tapes in Leon's shop — but I imagined her as taping for her own reasons, inexplicable to those who might later view her work. As Didion writes, “your notebooks will never help me, nor mine you” (On Keeping, 272). Unlike Stick, who was writing to Draper and Ardis who was writing to her future self, Renata was not taping with any audience in mind. She was keeping a visual notebook for herself and herself alone.

Of course, although many of my intentions remained essentially the same during the process of writing this dissertation, some of them certainly changed. (If they hadn't, I don't imagine I'd have a string of potential titles. The three that head up this section are examples of the ones that stuck the longest.) I would have been disappointed if the novel hadn't evolved in ways I didn't fully expect. One of the primary criticisms my undergraduate writing instructor had about my writing was that it was too neat, too pat, and contained no surprises. I wanted to write a novel because I hoped that it would surprise me. I figured it would since I knew I couldn't think through several hundred pages and know what was going to happen on all of them.

I didn't initially intend for the novel to be framed as it is, nor did I originally anticipate much of anything that occurs in the frame story. There's no mention of framing in the prospectus, and I'm reasonably sure I didn't start searching for a frame

until the summer when I began to prune the middle of the book. As much as I admire novels with frames, *Wuthering Heights* is one of my favorite novels, I didn't set out to write one. Finding the right frame (which meant, ultimately, finding the right reader and the right occasion for this reading) proved very difficult. I wrote part way into several different frames before abandoning them. In one, Putty had become the curator of the group artifacts, having "inherited" them in various ways. In this version, he took the letters, diary, scrapbook, and videotapes out of a paper bag in his closet and reflected on them. I abandoned this potential strategy when the book started to get too sentimental.

Then I began a frame wherein a nice suburban couple and their daughter dig up an old trunk, filled with the various narrative bits, that has been buried in their back yard. In this version, the mother of the family is the reader of the artifacts. While there were things I liked about the perspective of an older, yet uninvolved, person looking at the written remnants of someone else's youth, I couldn't keep my suburban mother interested in the story. With a small child, a career, and a husband, she was too busy to become really involved. She kept worrying about whether or not her daughter was going to fall off the swing set in the back yard. When she read the diary and the letters, she did so with less than full attention.

"Where are they?" I would ask myself, thinking about the diary, letters, and tapes. "Who finds them?" When I finally found the character who would read the documents I had amassed, I sighed with relief.

Cassie Calendar is an admittedly static character. She ends up more or less where she begins. I like to see a bit of hope in the fact that she is headed home at the end of *Majestic* — although I realize she's headed in that direction not so much because, as essentially optimistic Dorothy Gale would tell you "There's no place like [it]," but because, in the words of Robert Frost, "when you have to go there, / They have to take you in." I see her as a victim of the losses brought about by electronic postmodernity that Sven Birkerts discusses in *The Gutenberg Elegies*. Although Cassie reads desperately she still has the "fragmented sense of time . . . estrangement from

geographic place and community . . . [and] absence of any strong vision of a personal or collective future” (27) that Birkerts delineates. She clings, rather desperately I think, to her “faith in institutions and in the explanatory narratives that formerly gave shape to subjective experience” (27). She tries to believe in the mythic journey and the Greyhound bus, and she reads like a drowning man clinging to a raft. I worry about her, as I worry about so many of the things that are being demolished or thrown away. I’m sorry I couldn’t make her story end more happily. I tried to force her to pick up a notebook in the Drug World and start writing in it, which would have been a step in the right direction as far as I’m concerned, but she wouldn’t.

4. Somewhere Different

When you write, “You should expect yourself to end up somewhere different from where you started” (15), or so says Peter Elbow. After fighting with framing devices, crashing against the limits of first person point of view, and digging in dumpsters, this much I know I have done. I am grateful for the opportunity to have done so.

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CHAPTER ONE

After Tyler Adams broke up with her, Cassie Calendar aborted the embryo that could have been their child, moved out of the apartment they'd been sharing for eleven months, and moved back to her parents' house. This entire sequence of events took less than ten days, leaving Cassie to marvel over how rapidly things could change once they started changing.

There was never any question about her having the baby. She shook so hard when she saw the two little pink lines on the one-step pregnancy test, she dropped the plastic, pee-upon wand. She didn't know if she ever wanted to be anyone's mother. She didn't know if she would ever be ready to be anyone's mother. She imagined all the hundreds of ways she could ruin a baby. She threw up, and then she shook some more.

She'd been waiting to tell Tyler, reluctant to make the reality of her condition more real by speaking of it. Even though he'd never shown any signs of wanting to be a father, he might surprise her and try to convince her to have the baby. She wasn't entirely sure she knew what his views on abortion were. It wasn't a subject that had ever come up between them.

And then, before she had a chance to tell him, he told her he thought he was in love with someone else, and he wanted to break up.

Cassie was neither startled nor surprised when Tyler told her he wanted to end their relationship. Moving in together had been a huge mistake. They had discovered that they didn't share many interests. According to Tyler, that was Cassie's fault. "You don't want to do anything anymore," he said. "All you ever do is read. I know reading is supposed to be great, but if you don't want to do anything else, then it's fucked up. When I try to talk to you, you don't even hear me. It's like you disappear."

Back when they started dating, and later, when they'd moved in together, Cassie did what Tyler wanted, which mostly was drink and have sex. But she grew tired of waking up with a hangover and returned to books, for her a much older form of escapism. Books helped her tune out reality even more effectively than drinking did. And while reading certainly wasn't social the way drinking was, Cassie wasn't, at heart, a very social person. In addition, books, the second and third hand paperbacks she preferred, were cheaper than beer, and reading didn't give her a hangover or make her feel bloated.

Tyler was both startled and surprised when Cassie told him she was pregnant.

"We haven't even been doing it much," he said.

"I know," she replied. "And now I know why."

"I haven't had sex with her yet," he said.

"But you want to," she said.

"But I haven't," he said.

"It doesn't matter now," she said.

"You're on the pill," he said.

"I know."

"And you took the pill every day?"

"Every day. Which means we're in the .3 percent of people who get pregnant while using oral contraceptives. I looked it up."

"I didn't plan for this to happen," he said.

"Duh," she said.

"Not the pregnancy part. The falling in love with someone else."

She nodded. "Yeah, well," she said.

"Yeah," he replied.

He insisted on paying for the procedure he always referred to as a pronoun. "I hope it doesn't hurt," he said. "It isn't supposed to." He made the arrangements for the abortion and offered to accompany her to the clinic. "I'll go with you when you have it

done, if you'd like," he said, at least a half dozen times. But Cassie went by herself. "I'd feel weird," she said. "It'd be like you were my parent or something."

She took a book, *Sunset Dalliances*, with her to the clinic. She stopped reading to fill out her information form and she stopped reading to get undressed. The nurse took the book from her hand before they started the procedure. But as soon as it was over, when the nurse was having her lay still for a while and drink a cup of juice, as if she'd given blood, Cassie asked to have the book returned. The nurse gave her a dirty look when she handed the book over. Cassie supposed afterward that the cover, which showed a sweaty, glistening man who was undressed to the waist and a woman whose breasts were falling out of her low-cut dress, offended her. It wasn't an appropriate book for an abortion clinic.

When she got back to the apartment she still shared with Tyler, she rested for a day. He brought her iced tea and sat at the end of the sofa. He cried. She didn't. Then she told him, "I think I'll go back to my parents for a while."

Fortunately the school semester had already ended. She hadn't done as well on her final exams as she might have. She was distracted and nauseated. But at least she'd finished the term. "Our lease is almost up," she said. "And I'm sure you didn't expect me to keep being your roommate after you broke up with me, so I might as well leave now."

Although she hadn't lived with her parents since she'd started college three years earlier, she didn't suppose they'd mind having her home for a while. Home was, as some famous poet supposedly said, the place where they always had to take you in. Going home was also the path of least resistance. Sort of.

She allowed Tyler to help her move her things, in part because he seemed to want to so badly, but mostly because she didn't know anyone else with a truck. Most of the furniture in the apartment they shared belonged to her parents. She didn't much care if he kept it, but he said he'd feel funny about that, and he thought her parents might want it back. Rather than go to the trouble of asking them, she'd allowed him to haul the

sofa, chairs, coffee table, and dinette set the sixty miles to her parents' house. Because of his work schedule, they made this trip in the middle of the night. They reached her parents' suburban neighborhood at three in the morning. No lights were on in the house. None were on in any of the neighboring houses.

Tyler backed the truck into her parents' empty driveway. Then he and his cousin Ronnie, brought along for the heavy lifting, unloaded the furniture into the side yard. "Good thing it's not raining," Ronnie whispered. Tyler nodded, picked up a pair of dinette chairs, and followed Cassie around to the back of the house, where she let them in to the basement. As she watched them quietly returning the furniture to the dark basement, she thought it looked and felt like a robbery in reverse.

When she appeared in the kitchen the following evening, after having slept all day, her mother, who was washing a plate, didn't seem surprised to see her. "How long have you been here?" she asked.

"Since the middle of last night," Cassie told her. "Tyler and I broke up. He thought we should return the furniture, and I came too. I'm surprised no one woke up."

Her mother nodded, as if arriving in the middle of the night with the furniture made perfect sense to her, dried the plate she had washed, and put it away. "The pills I'm on now knock me out," she said. "You sleep in the guest room?" she asked. "Well of course you did. Where else could you have slept? I'm glad I keep fresh sheets on that bed."

The other bedrooms in the house were filled with her mother's collections. The room that had once been Cassie's contained ten years' worth of magazines. The room that had belonged to her older brother Duane housed several thousand plastic containers.

"It was very comfortable," Cassie said.

"We got a new mattress. You're only the second person to sleep on it. Are you hungry?"

“A little.” The morning sickness she’d been feeling for the past several weeks hadn’t abated after the abortion. She hadn’t been hungry in a long time.

“There’s tuna salad in the refrigerator. I just had a sandwich. Your Dad’s out of town until Thursday. I have a meeting, but I’ll be home in a couple of hours.” She paused and looked at Cassie, as if checking her for damage, “Unless you need me to stay?”

“No, you go to your meeting. I’m fine. I’ll make myself a sandwich.”

Her mother attended a support group, Obsessive Compulsives Anonymous. She’d been attending these meetings, where she prayed and shared and tried to return her obsessions and compulsions to the God of her understanding, since before Cassie went away to college. And her behavior had improved. She no longer washed her hands until they were cracked and bleeding, and she no longer cut herself. She still had her collections and she still counted compulsively at times. She could, for example, tell you there were currently 167 tubes of lipstick on display at the cosmetics counter where she worked, but the hoarding and the counting were preferable to the other manifestations of her disorder. They were spiritually draining, but at least they weren’t physically damaging.

Cassie’s father drove a truck and was often away from home for days at a stretch. A small, quiet man who read voraciously, he didn’t fit the stereotypical profile of a truck-driving man. It was a profession he’d taken up five years earlier, after trying many other things, and it seemed to suit him. Cassie briefly considered telling him about her abortion when he returned from his trip. This one had been to Houston, hauling paint on the way out and plastic bottles on the way back. He was the parent she confided in, when she did such a thing, which was seldom. She knew talking about the abortion wasn’t going to change anything, and that he’d be happier not knowing about it, so instead of having that conversation, when he returned they watched a couple of late night Charlie Chan movies together. She always found Chan and number one son very soothing. The round-faced, inscrutable Chan dispensed fortune cookie wisdom like

“Small things sometimes tell big story,” and “Hasty conclusion like hole in water, easy to make.” In the space of ninety minutes, he was always able to solve life’s mysteries, and he was low-key and quietly black and white.

She’d been home for three weeks, watching old movies, sleeping, and, mostly, reading, when she saw the ad in the newspaper and decided to give Greyhound a call. “The North America Discovery Pass” was available at reduced rates through the fourth of July. “Travel anywhere in North America, in a comfortable, climate-controlled cabin. Leave the driving to us, and see America today. Unlimited travel for up to 60 days.” After a reasonably short conversation with a ticket agent, she found she could purchase a twenty-one day pass good for travel anywhere in the continental U.S. for three hundred and sixty dollars. For some reason, this seemed like a tremendous bargain to her. She didn’t feel like doing much of anything, but riding on a bus wasn’t doing much of anything — and perhaps the excitement of travel would generate the desire to do something again. Perhaps she’d stop to see people she knew along the way. Or maybe some of the sights would tempt her to explore them.

Instead of sharing her plans with her parents, Cassie told them, during the only meal they ate together as a family while she was home, that she was going to the beach to work for the rest of the summer.

“That’s better than sitting in a room,” her father said.

“What kind of work?” her mother asked. “Do you know you’ll be able to get a job?”

“I know someone who’s working at a water park,” Cassie said. “She says they need more help. No one wants to swim in the ocean, so they’re really busy.”

Her father squinted at her, and for a moment Cassie thought he was going to call her bluff, but instead he just asked her, “Are you sure that’s something you want to do?”

“It’ll be different,” she said.

“Probably do her good,” her mother added. And that was that.

Cassie boarded the bus at 8:00 a.m. on a Tuesday. No one had been at the bus station to see her off, of course. Her father was on the road doing a coast-to-coast haul. He'd been gone four days and wouldn't be back for another week. And her mother was still in bed. This was just as well. Her mother was not a morning person, and goodbyes made her mean. She left an envelope with money and a note in it on the table. "For Emergencies," the note read, and "I love you. Have fun at the beach." Everything in the short note had been underlined for emphasis, as if her mother were yelling at her from across a crowded and noisy room. Cassie didn't think she minded leaving without fanfare. It was much easier to take a taxi really, much easier to say goodbye the night before.

For the first week and a half, she rather enjoyed her bus ride. The seats were comfortable enough. They might not have been for a larger person, but Cassie wasn't big and she could curl up in a modest space. The motion of the bus relaxed her. She often dozed off and always got a great, inexplicable pleasure from falling asleep in one state and waking up in another. She often arranged things so she didn't have a seat-mate, and when she did have one she was generally able to avoid being pulled into conversation because she was always reading.

But then, things changed. She found herself less than happy in her travels. She considered getting off the bus for a few days and visiting someone, and she began looking at the route maps, thinking about who she knew where and wondering how likely it was they'd be at home and happy to see her. Unfortunately, most of her few friends were back in or near one of the two towns she'd recently left. She had some relatives scattered across the country, but she hadn't seen most of them in years. When she imagined their responses if she should show up on their doorsteps unannounced, the idea of visiting them quickly lost its appeal. "Are you in some kind of trouble?" they'd ask her. And although she'd say, "No," they'd still think she was. And they'd probably

call her parents. And her parents might be concerned. So, she stayed on the bus for a few more days, wondering what she would do when her pass ran out.

Cassie, the bus, and all the other people on the bus, were somewhere in the middle of the country. It was dark outside and according to her watch, 2:23 a.m. The easy, frequent napping she'd enjoyed earlier in her journey had given way to sleeplessness. The words on the pages of the book in front of her had blurred to meaninglessness, and she closed her eyes to rest them. She remembered someone singing to her, "The wheels on the bus go round and round, round and round, round and round. The wheels on the bus go round and round, all through the town." When had that been and who? Not Gram or Gramp, and not her Dad. She shifted in her seat, stared out at the nondescript, night time, interstate scenery, passing by at 70 mph, and tried to conjure up a clear memory. Her Dad didn't sing. She was reasonably sure he never had. So, it might have been her mother. Somehow, she couldn't envision her mother singing to her either. Maybe it had been a baby-sitter, some long ago, dateless on a Friday night, sixteen-year-old, trying to make a few dollars. That seemed more likely. That seemed right. The singing in her head came from someone whose name she'd never remember, someone she'd never see again.

Cassie had no idea how many times the wheels on this bus had gone round. The trip, so far, had taken three hundred and sixty seven hours. Not all of this had been road time, of course. The bus stopped, on average, every four hours, although the stretches between stops at night were sometimes a bit longer. During brief stops, the bus pulled up to hotels, restaurants, or gas stations to let passengers off or on, and to pick up or drop off packages. The smokers on the bus would jump off for a quick nicotine fix, and a few people would run into an adjacent "Stop-N-Go" or "Road-Mart" for snacks and sodas. Then they were back on the highway, usually in about thirty minutes. The time spent in bus stations was considerably longer. On average, these stops took about two hours each.

Cassie supposed beautiful things might be done with cinder block, plastic, glass and metal, but the bus stations she'd been in did nothing to support this supposition. Some of them were cleaner than others. This was the primary distinction she'd seen between different bus stations. She'd only strayed from them a few times, however, usually to visit used book stores, which had, in most cases, been visible from the stations she'd left. Twice, she'd wandered around towns until she'd found parks, both of which had duck ponds. During bus station stops she ate, usually hot dogs and snacks from vending machines, and attended to matters of personal hygiene. She'd gotten quite good at washing her hair in bathroom sinks.

As much as she did not like being on the bus — and she was suddenly quite tired of being on the bus, surrounded by close, sticky, over-breathed air, asthmatic old people and sniffing children — she liked being in bus stations even less. While she was on the bus, she was on the go, on the move, theoretically headed somewhere. In bus stations, she was headed nowhere. Worse still, she was stuck there. A bus station in the middle of America, at three in the morning, was about as stuck nowhere as a person could get. She was beginning to be ready, after close to four hundred hours in transit, to be somewhere again.

When the bus and its mostly sleeping occupants crossed over into the eastern time zone, Cassie was awake and so was her seat mate, Loretta. In fact, Loretta had been the one to remark when they crossed into eastern time. Cassie hadn't noticed. By the dimming light (she needed a new battery) of a cheap clip-on book light, she'd been reading *Destiny and Dust*. For her it had been bright, high noon, the time of day when the sheriff has to walk down Main Street with his guns ready to blaze. The dust beneath him was waiting to catch someone's blood. His, or Jeb Waters's. Then Loretta had poked her and said, "It's 5:35. We just lost an hour. I thought you might like to know." Cassie would rather not know about lost hours, but she didn't know how to tell Loretta this politely, so she just nodded.

Cassie had been sitting in the aisle seat to discourage people from sitting with her, when Loretta boarded in Wichita, Kansas. She'd asked very nicely if the window seat beside Cassie was taken, but hadn't waited for an answer before crawling over her and settling in. She was sixtyish, single, and claimed she'd been named for Loretta Young, the film actress. Cassie knew who Loretta Young was, which surprised Loretta. "Not too many people your age know from Loretta Young," she remarked. Cassie allowed that she'd watched a lot of late, late night TV in her life, and that she was fond of black and white movies.

She didn't usually tell people much about herself, her likes, dislikes, thoughts, feelings, and so forth, not that many people had ever seemed very interested, but after a couple of weeks of not saying much of anything to anyone, Cassie was beginning to get a little lonely, and Loretta seemed okay. Cassie had also realized that talking to a stranger on a bus was about as safe as communication ever got, except maybe for confession (if you were Catholic, which she wasn't) or seeing a psychiatrist (which she had, without any particular results, because her high school guidance counselor had told her parents that she should.) Talking to someone on a cross country bus was probably even safer than talking to a priest or a shrink, since they'd probably forget all about you in the space of days, or maybe even a couple of hours.

"The year I was born was a wonderful year for movies," Loretta said. "*The Wizard of Oz*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, another classic. *Gone with the Wind*, and *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*, *Stagecoach*, and the Laurence Olivier version of *Wuthering Heights*. Such variety. And such good stories. What about you? Do you know what films were released the year you were born?"

Cassie shrugged. When it came to movies, she knew more about the old ones. The ones released in her birth year were probably mostly junk, disco-inflected disaster movies. *Jaws* was before her time, but maybe *Jaws 2* or *Jaws 3* had been made the year she was born — not even a fresh disaster, just a rehash of an old one.

“You’d think movies would be better now with what all it costs to make them. Last thing I saw was that *Spy Who Shagged Me*. I didn’t think it was funny, and I didn’t think much of that strange-looking fella who was in it.” The last movie Cassie had seen was *The Blair Witch Project*. She and Tyler had gone to see it, but they had walked out halfway through. He said it was a piece of crap and was giving him a headache.

“I’ve noticed you’re a big reader,” Loretta said, poking Cassie’s bag of books, on the floor between them. “Good for you. No one takes the time to read books these days.” She waved a magazine. “I should talk,” she said.

Loretta was mostly an insomniac, she claimed, although she’d dozed off a few times during the night. She’d helped fill her sleepless hours talking to Cassie about whatever happened to be on her mind: movies, her ex-husbands, her job. Whenever Cassie put down the book she was reading, to stretch or rest her eyes, Loretta would start talking. Mostly, she’d talk about her sister, the sister she was planning to move in with. This sister was old, wealthy, and crazy, and moving in with her sounded to Cassie like an old-fashioned, domestic, horror story. *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* sprang to mind. But even though it meant giving up her job and leaving a man she’d been seeing for the past year, Loretta was moving in with Claudette, “named after Claudette Colbert.” After all, she told Cassie, “The job was lousy, the man is married, and blood is thicker than water. I don’t have any other family. I buried two husbands. Both were ex-husbands before they died, and I never had any kids. I thought I wanted some, but my first husband was sterile, and he wasn’t interested in adopting. We traveled. My second husband had grown children from his first marriage by the time I met him. I was almost forty when I married him. He died playing cards and left all his money, what he hadn’t gambled away, to his kids. Not that I blame him, although I thought he might leave me a little something in remembrance. We were divorced, but friendly.”

Fortunately for Cassie, though not for Greyhound bus lines, she’d been able to have a double seat to herself for more than half of this cross country trip. In the three days before Loretta had filled the space next to her, she’d sat beside a girl with a

Discman, a teenaged guy with a laptop, a man in his early twenties with a bible, and a geezer with false teeth.

The girl hadn't taken the Discman off during her entire tenure in the seat beside Cassie, although she changed cd's a couple of times. She looked about twelve, but was wearing lipstick and gloss, eyeliner, mascara, three shades of eye shadow, foundation make-up, blush, and body glitter. Her midriff was bare, and her shorts were short. She had on bangle bracelets, an anklet, and a toe ring. Her musical taste ran to bubblegum pop made by stylish girls who pierced their navels and sang through their noses about love-n-sex-n-heartbreak or by stylish boys who had fabulous up-to-the-minute hair and sang in four and five part harmony about love-n-sex-n-heartbreak. Cassie imagined the girl was going to visit her grandparents in Kansas, and sure enough, she de-bussed in Topeka and was met by an older man who looked grandfatherly to Cassie. Of course, he could have been some guy the girl had met in an Internet chat room, some guy who'd claimed to be a twenty-something, N'Sync kind of guy for all Cassie knew. The girl looked mildly horrified to see him, but the look she gave him could have been merely an adolescent response to everything. It was the kind of look a barely teenaged girl could give her Grandpa or some geezer who was supposed to be Lance Bass.

The teenaged guy started his time as her seat-mate by trying to hit on her. At least Cassie thought that was what he was trying to do. He poked her in the arm and asked, "You ever have sex on a bus?" When she just stared at him in reply, he flipped open his laptop and started playing a game called *Doom*. Cassie noticed the name and the opening graphics before turning back to her book. The laptop surprised her a little. She'd expected her fellow travelers on the bus to be of a lower socio-economic class, but she'd seen quite a few laptops and dozens of cell phones, not exactly the toys of the working poor, on her journey. Although some of the people on the bus looked far from affluent, most of them looked average. She thought someone who could afford a laptop could afford to fly. Of course, she could afford to fly. Bus travel wasn't all about the cost, she realized. It was about spontaneity; buses leave going all kinds of places all the

time, and you don't need a reservation or tickets in advance to ride. It was also about stability; except in action movie scenarios, buses never leave the ground. She supposed there were still plenty of people who were afraid to fly. She wondered if anyone else on the bus had been seduced by the Ameripass? She wondered if anyone else was taking a trip similar to her own? She didn't think so. Most of the people she encountered seemed to have clear destinations.

She'd pegged the twenty-something male as military, but he'd turned out to be a crusader for the Lord.

The old man had stumbled, and he almost sat on Cassie while trying to take his seat. Once he was settled he'd taken out his dentures, put them in a plastic bag, tucked them in his breast pocket, and promptly fallen asleep. When he woke up, several hours later, he started talking to Cassie without putting his teeth back in, and that, coupled with the fact that he was only halfway conscious, had made him impossible to understand.

Most of these had been one- or two-stoppers, as Cassie had taken to calling them, people who got on the bus and then got off a few hours later, although "Crusader Jim" had been with her for ten hours, or a total of four stops. She'd managed to keep him from saving her by keeping her nose in a book — in several, actually. During the time he sat beside her she finished *A Halo for the Devil* and *The Angel and The Rake*, and she had almost finished *The Hidden Heart* as well.

She started her trip with a backpack full of books, and she hadn't brought them along just as a prophylactic against obnoxious potential seat-mates. To say that books were her friends would be misrepresenting the relationship she had with them. She couldn't get by without a book. This wasn't about improving her mind, this was about escape, her daily dose of unreality.

Cassie finished *Destiny and Dust*. She turned off her portable reading light and returned it to her backpack. Then she tucked the book into the space between the seat and the window, for someone else to find. Although she usually traded in her books at

the second-hand shops where she'd bought them, she'd been leaving a trail of them on this trip, gifts to the strangers who might find them. She liked to imagine someone finding *A Frame of Dreams* or *Apocalypse of the Heart* and reading it, grateful for the respite it provided. But in the back of her mind, she knew that most of her books were probably found by custodians who threw them away. Still, leaving them was preferable to carrying a heavy backpack full of cheap books everywhere, and, perhaps, in her version of the fairytale, paperbacks, not breadcrumbs, were supposed to lead her back through the forest.

Loretta, who'd been quietly reorganizing her mammoth handbag, flipping through *Better Homes and Gardens*, and filing her nails for the last fifty or so miles, took the stashing of the book as a conversational cue.

"You wouldn't believe some of the junk people store," she said, picking up the conversation, more or less, where she'd left off, talking about her job at the U-STORE-IT in Wichita. "I don't generally watch clients when they bring their stuff in, of course. I'm not what you'd call a nosy person, but sometimes I happen to be out checking the grounds when they're loading a unit. And when they get behind on the payments we cut the locks off and auction the contents. That happens four or five times a year. And people leave stuff too, after paying to store it for months sometimes. I guess they realize they can live without it."

"Like what kind of stuff?" Cassie asked. Her eyes were tired, and listening was better than being alone with her thoughts, and Loretta did have a pleasant voice, a voice that reminded Cassie of the slightly flat ginger ale her father used to give her when she had an upset stomach.

"I saw this woman one time, just throwing in piles of winter clothes. Didn't have them in trash bags or anything. You'd think she'd wrap them in something to keep them clean. A lot of our clients store clothes. I figure they must live in trailers or places like that, without too many closets. No room for seasonal wardrobes. That can go in a smaller unit. We've got them as small as four by six, like a closet only wider. The mid-

sized units get household effects. When couples get married and they don't know whose dining room set to keep or they can't part with the second set of pots and pans, they end up with the mid-sized. Divorces work that way too sometimes. Combined households, split households. Or when someone dies. Surviving relatives put stuff in storage then, till they feel up to going through it. A lot of people store baby furniture and toys. Like they're afraid they'll get pregnant again if they give the stuff up, making sure they don't tempt fate.

“Small contractors, plumbers, roofers, people like that, store equipment. Of course they're usually looking at the bigger units. We've got them 12 by 36 and 14 by 18. That's room enough for a boat, a car, an RV. Had one guy stored twelve junked Barracudas. He'd come in a couple of times a month, driving a mint green 1960's Barracuda in showroom condition and look them over. If he'd taken the working parts out of them all he might have put together another working car,” Loretta said. “He wasn't a bad looking man, although I think he might have been a queer. He was a little fussy.” She paused — almost as if she was waiting for Cassie to register an opinion on the fussiness of homosexuals — but when she didn't say anything, Loretta continued. “And the thing of it is, they worry about this junk. As if anyone else wants it. The number one question I get asked is ‘How secure are your storage units?’ I tell them ‘Very secure.’ I say, ‘State of the art security,’ which sounds better than we have a gate around the place and it's locked at night, with a security alarm, provided the last person out in the afternoon remembers to activate it. I don't tell them that last part. But we don't get break-ins. Although I suppose we could. Most of the things in most of the units aren't worth trying to steal, but a person might hit the jackpot and find the one filled with stolen televisions and car stereos. I know that kind of thing goes on. Heard of a fellow who was fencing power tools out of an ‘A to Z’ storage about five miles from where I work. He burned half the facility down trying to destroy evidence. Nothing like that's happened at the U-STORE-IT since I've been working there, though. At least not

that I know of. I suppose we could have drug labs and dead bodies in there some where, but I doubt it. The people who rent space from us seem like decent, normal people.”

“You can tell just by looking at them?” Cassie asked.

“Not everyone could,” she said. “But I’ve got a sense.” She nodded as she said this. “That’s why I decided to sit here. There were other open seats on the bus, you know.”

Cassie knew at least one of those open seats was beside a middle-aged woman with overwhelming body odor who was talking to herself, so Loretta’s comment didn’t make her feel too special.

“I know you’re going to see your boyfriend. Am I right? And your parents don’t approve of him.”

Cassie kept a poker face, and Loretta continued.

“He’s black, isn’t he?”

Suddenly interested in the story of her life Loretta was spinning, Cassie nodded, very slightly, giving the tiniest of affirmations. Like someone from the Psychic Friends Network, Loretta plucked ideas from the air. “But he’s a good man, and he loves you. And your parents will come around eventually.”

“You think so?” Cassie asked.

Loretta nodded emphatically. “Oh, yes. They’re just afraid for you, that’s all. They’ll come to see he’s a good man. The break-up of his first marriage wasn’t his fault.”

Bored with the game, Cassie switched the subject back to storage. “So, what’s the strangest thing you’ve ever found in a unit?” she asked.

“We had a guy who was building pipe bombs. The police came and opened that one up. It was on the news. But that was the most famous. The giant turtle would have to be the strangest. I don’t know if he was a pet that got real big, or if someone put him in there that size. We don’t know what he ate. If there was turtle food in there he ate it all, up to and including the packaging. He must have been eating something though.

We found plenty of turtle poop. We thought he was dead at first, and when he poked his head out we like to wet ourselves, not that we should have been so shocked with a turtle. They look dead most of the time anyway. Then we called the SPCA, and I think they gave him to the zoo. Thank god I've never found a body. The turtle scared me enough."

Loretta paused, long enough for Cassie to think that maybe she'd dozed off, then she said, "I imagine a person storing a body would be more careful than that. I imagine she'd keep the rent on the unit paid up, probably be very prompt about it. The turtle was in a default, a unit we had to cut the locks off. A person who'd leave a body in a default would have to be pretty damn cocky or maybe have a memory like a sieve. I heard once about a woman who let her payments lapse. After they auctioned the contents of her unit, without going through them very closely, the person who bought the stuff found the woman's husband in a dresser. In pieces of course. Apparently, the woman forgot she had stored him in there.

Cassie wondered how much the person had paid for the dead husband, but she didn't ask.

Loretta stood up in front of her seat. She had the window and Cassie the aisle. "Would you mind, dear? I was hoping I'd be able to hold it until our next stop, but I'm going to have to brave the bathroom."

Cassie stepped out into the aisle, holding on to the top of her seat for balance. Loretta wiggled around her and stumbled toward the back of the bus. Cassie decided to remain standing until she returned. Her legs were falling asleep even if the rest of her wasn't. Although she'd slept well for the first ten days of her trip, she was relatively sure she hadn't slept at all during the previous forty-eight hours.

Her lack of sleep was beginning to do funny things to her. She felt giddy, fragile, and peculiar. The only way she knew to describe the feeling was with an image from *Star Trek* and the transporter room. She felt like she was in the process of being beamed up or down, but since she wasn't either place yet, she was a stream of particulate matter, dust and cells and molecules and atoms, stretched thin, from one point to the other. As

she had criss-crossed the country several times, she envisioned herself as a shimmering mass, spread from sea to shining sea. She was halfway afraid that she might catch a glimpse of the shiny trail of herself if she turned her head too quickly. She was going to tell Loretta about this, but she supposed that, to a veteran insomniac, these symptoms of sleeplessness, no matter how strange they seemed to her, would be nothing worth talking about.

When she returned from the bathroom, Loretta pulled a bus schedule out of her bag and studied it with the help of her key chain flashlight, shaped like an ice-cream cone. "Not much longer for me now. Only two more stops." And then Loretta switched off her flashlight and they both settled back into the relative darkness of the bus.

The gentle snoring of a passenger somewhere behind her, the warm, close atmosphere of the bus itself, and her own exhaustion had almost lulled Cassie to sleep, when she felt Loretta's hand on her arm. "We should be arriving in Aberdeen in a few minutes, and I just wanted to let you know," she said quietly, "that you've been a very nice person to sit beside. And I was wondering," she pulled her phone from her purse, "if you'd like to call your boyfriend, to let him know how you're doing? I have lots of minutes I haven't used. And it might make you feel better."

"Thanks," she said. "But he lives with his mother, and she doesn't like me much."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Loretta said, patting Cassie on the arm and tucking her phone back into her purse. Cassie realized that it hadn't rung once during the nearly fourteen hours they'd been together. A few other cell phones had rung on the bus but Loretta's had not. Not once. What a lonely woman, Cassie thought, surprised to realize that she hadn't thought of Loretta as lonely until just then.

Loretta got off the bus in Aberdeen. Before she left the station, in a taxi since she didn't want to put her sister to the trouble of coming to pick her up, she scribbled her

cell phone number on a piece of paper and handed it to Cassie. “Just in case you really get into a predicament,” she said. “It’s nice to know you can call someone.”

As she waited to reboard the bus, Cassie found herself standing beside a man in a dirty grey coat. The coat, streaked and smeared, with dark, charred patches, looked as if it had been rescued from a burning room. Cassie sniffed, discreetly she hoped. The coat and the man inside it didn’t smell of smoke. Although his coat was dirty, the man looked pleasant enough, elderly and plump, with smooth, pink, skin, like a grandfather in a storybook. Unlike any storybook grandfather Cassie was familiar with, he had a wicked cough, and as she watched, he hacked, pulled out a handkerchief, spat a wad of phlegm into it, and then stuffed it back into one of his pockets.

Cassie knew the man who invented Kleenex had the right idea. She had never understood why anyone would carry a rag full of snot around in his or her pocket. She had never understood how anyone could reuse a soiled handkerchief. While she watched, the man hacked again, pulled the handkerchief out again, spat into it, and then stuffed it back in his pocket. She hoped she wouldn’t have to sit next to him on the Greyhound. The line of people waiting to board the bus wasn’t long. She’d take an aisle seat and put her bag on the seat by the window, as if she was saving it for someone special.

CHAPTER TWO

The Greyhound stopped on Main Street, in front of a Drug World drug store, to dispatch and pick up passengers. Cassie stared at the sign — bright orange letters against a glowing white background, with a teal green and navy blue globe doing duty as the “O” in World. Although she had several days of travel left on her pass, she’d reached, quite suddenly and emphatically, the limits of her tolerance for bus travel. So, she picked up her almost-empty bag of books and staggered down the aisle. Her legs felt gelatinous, and her head hummed. She briefly wondered if there might not be something inside Drug World that would help her.

Once outside, she waited for the driver to retrieve her small, plaid suitcase from underneath the bus, where it had been bouncing around for days. It was the time of evening when the lights start coming on. Looking up and down Main Street, from her vantage point in front of the drugstore, she saw the familiar golden arches and signs announcing bars and restaurants and shoe stores and coffee shops. Except for McDonald’s, these businesses were housed in quaint, mock Tudor buildings. The sidewalks, she noticed, were brick instead of cement. She’d landed in the middle of a purposefully quaint college town. Several dozen pedestrians, most of them around her age, sauntered up and down the street in pairs and clusters. In the twilight they all looked beautiful, as if all their little imperfections had been airbrushed away.

Cassie looked up and down the street, as far as she could see, for the welcoming sign of a Days Inn, a Holiday Inn, or a Super 8. Where was Howard Johnson? Why hadn’t someone at Motel 6 left a light on for her? With no motel in sight, she began a search for a phone book, hoping to find the address of the nearest motel and the number for a taxi service.

Although there was a phone beside the drugstore, it had, of course, been stripped of its phone book. She wondered why people always stole the phone books from public phones. She could understand someone being too lazy to copy down an address or number and ripping out a page or two, but what use did someone just passing by have for the whole book? Her Gram used to make vaguely Christmas-tree-shaped door stops from old phone books and from the Sears catalog by folding down each page and then spray-painting the whole thing, usually silver or gold, but she didn't believe anyone had a cottage industry somewhere making doorstops. She wondered briefly about all the strange old-fashioned things, like those doorstops and crocheted toilet paper covers shaped like poodle dogs, that she never saw anymore. She wondered when phone booths would become completely obsolete. There weren't very many of them, and those she'd seen weren't really booths. This phone, for example, wasn't enclosed or sheltered at all. It was just a phone attached to a wall.

She stepped into the drugstore, her backpack over one shoulder, pulling her suitcase behind her like a more grown up version of a little red wagon.

"Yes," the girl behind the counter said.

"Can I borrow your phone book," Cassie asked.

"There's one outside."

"No. There isn't." The girl looked skeptical, so Cassie added. "I just came from out there."

"Oh."

"So, can I borrow yours?"

"I don't think we have one."

During this brief and non-informative conversation, a substantial line had formed behind Cassie. Sometimes lines form *so* fast, as if all the shoppers in the world materialize at once looking to pay for their combs, perfume, chewing gum, bubble bath, breath mints, odor eaters, snack crackers, scotch tape, notebook paper, lollipops, pencil sharpeners, votive candles, razor blades, hair spray, toothpaste, toothpicks, potato chips,

tampons, envelopes, condoms, tweezers, shampoo, shaving cream, snack cakes, appetite suppressants, mascara, shoe laces, light bulbs, paper towels, disposable diapers, shoe polish, cotton balls, playing cards, greeting cards, picture frames, analgesics, mothballs, mouthwash, spray starch, cheese puffs, batteries, window cleaner, pregnancy tests, lubricants, panty hose, astringents, nail polish, postcards, motor oil, magazines, cigarettes, candy bars, and toilet paper.

The girl behind the drugstore counter pulled her lips into a tight expression Cassie's father called "asshole" mouth and glared at her. Cassie figured she better get out of the way and let the line start buying. But she didn't give up without one last try.

"Do you know where I could find a phone book?"

"No," the girl said, gesturing for the person behind Cassie to come around her.

"I might have one in my pocket," someone behind Cassie murmured, at least she thought he did.

She turned. The person directly behind her was a middle-aged man, probably close to forty, holding a bottle of diet soda, some dish soap, a box of sanitary napkins and an economy-size candy bar. He didn't look like the kind of person who'd make unproductive, smart-ass remarks to complete strangers.

"Did you say something?" she asked him.

His head jerked to the side when she spoke to him, as if he'd been about to doze off and she'd startled him. "Pardon me?" he said.

Cassie figured she must be hearing voices. Although she'd never had auditory hallucinations before, she took it in stride. It had only been a small voice. It had only said a few words. She was sure a good night of stationary sleep would make it go away.

She looked up and down the line of people waiting to pay for their drugstore purchases. Maybe one of them knew where the nearest motel was. Maybe all of them did, but she was reluctant to ask. Unlike the beautiful pedestrians, walking about in the dusky air outside, these people, probably because of the fluorescent lighting, looked ugly and rather mean. They could all be as unhelpful as the counter girl, and that would make

her sad. So, she let the mighty line of commerce proceed, and walked out of the store. She felt ruffled and suspect, like the kind of person strangers on the street wouldn't be inclined to give directions or tell the time to. She was certain the drugstore girl would have been much nicer to her if she'd been more deodorized and minty-fresh. As she hadn't properly bathed in days and had been sitting in a bus for several weeks, she was sure she didn't present a particularly pretty picture to the world. She headed to the McDonald's, hoping to splash a little water on her face in the bathroom and run a comb through her hair.

She always entered McDonald's with such a hopeful heart. She couldn't help it. She was hungry for what their advertisements promised, not burgers and fries, for these were incidental. She wanted the joy, the togetherness, the graciousness, and the affection that the ads portrayed as an essential part of the McDonald's dining experience. Inside this McDonald's, instead of love she found a sullen white boy pushing a mop, a sullen black girl leaning on the service counter, and a sullen old couple masticating fries. Even the bathroom, despite the mopping boy, wasn't all that clean. There were long, strangely-colored hairs clinging to the sink, and ample evidence that someone had gotten sick around one of the toilets.

She ran a comb through her hair and washed her face, although she knew from recent experience that the liquid soap in the dispenser wasn't going to do her complexion any good. She realized, too late, that this was yet another blow dryer bathroom. Given her options — sticking her face under the blow dryer, drying her face with toilet tissue, or leaving with a wet face — she left with streaming cheeks, looking like she'd just had a good cry.

After exiting the McDonald's, she looked down the street in both directions, and in the darkening sky she saw it, small but clear in the distance, Travelodge. Looking to it, as to her own private Polaris, she set out with a renewed sense of purpose and direction. She was surprised at how long the walk took her. She'd grown accustomed to

moving at the speed of a bus. The world no longer slid smoothly by. She stumbled several times over the brick paved streets, cursing their irregularity.

The Travelodge, not that she was in a position to be choosy, was shabby. The shrubbery surrounding its rather cloudy pool was half-dead and one of the glass doors in front was cracked and patched with duct tape. She could imagine it being used for cut-rate drug deals and sleazy rendezvous. This impression was enhanced by the desk clerk, a shy Asian man who spoke very poor English. He, himself, didn't look sleazy, but he looked like the sort of person sleazy people would employ. Cassie figured he wouldn't be able to tell about various, possibly nefarious, illicit, or clandestine, goings on, even if he wanted to. He gave her a room at the back, and up on the second floor. "More peace," he said, handing her the key. At least she thought he'd said "more peace." Whether or not he had, this kind gesture made her tear up. Kindness had that effect on her sometimes.

Once she got inside the room, she stripped off her clothes and took a shower. Her mother always said "the whole world looks different after a long, hot shower." Cassie had often wondered about this phrase and thought how frightening it would be if it were really true. She could imagine stepping from a shower, emerging from the steam into a strange and unfamiliar world, into a *Twilight Zone* moment, complete with the Rod Serling voice-over.

Although the water stayed hot, the pipes began to knock after she'd been in the shower for about ten minutes, so she turned it off. When she dried herself, her skin pilled up and rolled off her body. She felt like she must be leaving a pound of flesh, clinging to the cheap motel towels. She noticed that her legs and armpits were hairy, but she hadn't packed a razor and she discovered she didn't much care. If she found a job where she had to wear a skirt or shorts, she'd shave. Until then, she didn't see much reason to. Her naked body looked and felt strange to her. She hadn't been completely undressed since her journey began. In addition to being hairier than she had been, she

was also paler and thinner, as if the bus trip or some unnamed other thing had suctioned off parts of her.

After she was dry, she quickly put on clean underwear and then took *The Spirit of the Border* from her backpack. She fell asleep on the third page, on top of the bed, with the bedside lamp still on.

She was dreaming about buying a baby from a market where they were piled like wiggling melons on stands, when the maid woke her, banging on the door. She stopped pinching dream babies, checking them for ripeness, and called out, "I'm here," wondering in a half-asleep way where that was. The maid said something she didn't understand in reply, and then went away.

The Asian man who'd checked her in wasn't at the front desk when she went to check out. She hadn't really expected him to be. His replacement, a young woman with wildly teased hair, was having an animated phone conversation with someone. She took Cassie's key and handed her a receipt without ever looking at her.

Cassie poured some coffee from the pot at the front desk into a foam cup, bought a local paper from a machine in the motel lobby, and sat down on a bench in front of the Travelodge to look through the want ads for a job. Being on the bus had been, in many ways, like hiding behind the sofa when she was a child. It had been a small, safe, albeit moving, space. She hadn't felt worried on the bus. Now, sitting outside the motel, with a cup of weak coffee and a fifty-cent newspaper, she had reason to worry again.

At twenty, she didn't have much work experience. She'd babysat, of course, all teenaged girls were expected to it seemed, but not as frequently as some girls did. She was responsible and steady enough, but children didn't like her. She wasn't a sparkly, dynamic, Mary Poppins kind of person with a valise full of tricks. She sometimes read to children, but even the ones who liked stories only enjoyed this up to a point. She couldn't draw, tell jokes, or play video games. She wasn't much good at baking cookies, and she was hopeless at sports.

She'd worked in a fast food restaurant, one specializing in fish. Because she was so punctual and efficient, she'd been promoted to assistant manager there, but she hated trying to tell other people what to do even worse than she hated smelling like grease and cod. She'd quit a month after her promotion.

She'd waited tables briefly at the restaurant where Tyler worked as a bar back. He'd helped her get the job and was pissed at her when she proved so bad at it. Instead of getting better with time, she'd gotten worse, and during her final week she dropped three trays of cocktails and an entire food order for a family of four.

The job she'd liked best had been her most recent one, finishing donuts. It was primarily night time work, and this suited her. While much of the world slept, she'd jelly, glaze, powder, frost, and sprinkle. As the sun was coming up, she'd walk home, smelling of batter, sweet oil, and confectioners' sugar. She imagined that people liked her better when she was working there. She smelled like a donut, and who doesn't like donuts? Tyler had liked her better, she thought. They sometimes had sex when she got home from work. He said it was almost like eating and having sex at the same time. The only problem with the donut job had been Neal. Neal was a baker, a fryer really since donuts were fried not baked, and a total pothead. He didn't like her much, for reasons he never disclosed. Neal didn't appear to like much of anyone, so she tried not to take it personally when he took to battering and deep-frying the books she'd read between finishing trays. If he'd done this once, she'd have seen it as an experiment or maybe a joke. They were cheap paperbacks and already rather sticky from her job. But Neil made a habit of it. Even so, she'd outlasted him. He'd burned his hand in a fry vat and had quit weeks before she did.

There were no donut jobs advertised in the paper. She imagined she'd enjoy shelving books in a library, but there were no listings for this kind of work either. Available work for people who had a pulse but no particular qualifications included selling things (either in person or over the phone), handling food (either cooking it or carrying it to tables — although many of these jobs preferred applicants to have some

experience), or cleaning things. Of these, cleaning things looked most promising to Cassie. This work would probably require minimal contact with other people, and this was appealing to her. Her time on the bus had provided her with more than enough humanity, up close and personal. She was ready to do a Greta Garbo for a while. The Holiday Inn was looking for chambermaids, four different restaurants needed bus help or dishwashers badly enough to run ads in the paper, and Rent-A-Maid was trying to find some “motivated neatniks” to join their “clean team.”

She had passed a Donut Hut a block from the Travelodge, and, on the off chance they needed a finisher, she started her job search there. They weren't hiring, but she got the next job she applied for, washing dishes in a fast-paced restaurant/bar. The manager hadn't wanted to hire “a girl” because the work was hot and heavy, but he had no other applicants and he needed a dishwasher NOW, as in one had quit that morning, and the lunch rush would be starting soon.

Cassie knew enough about food service to know that dishwashers were the bottom of the restaurant food chain. They were generally alcoholics in training, although some had other substance abuse problems. Any dish dog over the age of twenty-five was a drunk, a pothead, an illegal alien, mentally deficient, or someone with a criminal record. Or they were just plain desperate. She had hoped that by setting her goals low, she'd get a job pretty fast. Still, getting a job on her second try exceeded her expectations.

The manager handed her an apron, a rubber band to pull her hair back with, and a pair of rubber gloves. He also gave her a chef's hat to put over her hair. “You'll want to wear your own hat tomorrow,” he said. “These are for the cooks.” Then he showed her how to operate the industrial sized washing machine. The spray hose was suspended from the ceiling, and had a nozzle about the size of her head. It blasted water out almost hard enough to peel paint off a wall. He showed her where to stack the racks of glasses and plates, where to load detergent and sanitizer, and where the scouring pads for scrubbing pots and pans were. Most importantly, he showed her the drains. “Always

clear the drains," he said. "I had a backed up sink last week, and a waitress slipped and knocked herself unconscious. The last thing you want is a puddle of greasy water on the floor."

She worked that day from 10:30 in the morning, when she was hired, until 3:00. She could have stayed longer. There was plenty of shit work to do, even after a second dish washer came in. But she told the manager she had to leave, to look for a place to stay. During her lunch break, they gave her half an hour and a dried-out chicken sandwich. The prep cook, a genial middle-aged woman with bad teeth, had played twenty questions with her. When she found out Cassie was new in town, she told her about a couple of places she might try.

Two of the places the prep cook mentioned involved roommates, both of them women, one in her twenties, and one in her thirties with two children. Cassie didn't rule out these possibilities immediately, but she went first to the home of an elderly lady, Mrs. Schreiber, who let rooms. The house was only a couple of blocks west of the seedier part of the downtown business district, in a neighborhood that had once been affluent, judging from the size of most of the houses, but was now run down. Many of the old houses were in need of paint and structural repairs. Some had been divided into apartments. One had been converted into a travel agency, and another housed a day care center. Mrs. Schreiber's house was on a corner lot. The yard surrounding it was neatly cut, but the flower beds in front lay fallow. An obviously hand-lettered, and deeply weathered sign, about a foot square, was all that bloomed in one of them. It advertised rooms for rent.

After Cassie rang the bell, it took several minutes for Mrs. Schreiber to answer. However, the thump of her walker, as she made her way to the front door, assured Cassie that she was on her way. Cassie hoped this would be as easy as getting a job had been. She had reason to expect that it would. It was always easier to buy things than to sell them, and in this case she was the customer. Unless Mrs. Schreiber had no more

vacancies, despite her sign, or she didn't like Cassie's looks, or she was charging too much, Cassie imagined this would go pretty smoothly.

The door opened suddenly, and Cassie got a look at what, or who, had been making all the thumping in the hall. Mrs. Schreiber was swollen all over, from her incredibly inflated feet, to her puffy, pink face. She was dressed entirely in purple and appeared pleasant enough, for someone who looked like she could pop at any minute. She put Cassie in mind of the balloons in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade. This cheerful image was ruined by Cassie's recollection that one of those balloons had pulled away from its handlers during last year's parade. It had knocked over a lamp post and had almost killed a woman. There's nothing safe in this world, Cassie thought, not even cartoon balloon figures.

"Yes," Mrs. Schreiber said, staring at Cassie's suitcase. "You looking for a room?" Cassie nodded and Mrs. Schreiber took a laborious step back away from the door. "Come in then," she said.

The entrance foyer of the boarding house was spacious and sparsely furnished. The walls might have been white at one time. Sizable framed pictures of both JFK and Bobby Kennedy hung on the walls. A large vase of impossibly dusty, plastic daffodils provided the only other decoration.

"You see the sign?" she asked, but before Cassie could mention that she'd been referred, Mrs. Schreiber continued. "I don't advertise," she said. "Except for that sign. I've been using it for years. Years and years. My husband's been dead since 1988 and he made the sign. It's still perfectly good. Does what it was designed to do."

Cassie glanced around the foyer. Three closed doors, one to her left, one to her right, and one in front of her, as well as a staircase to the left of the central door, presumably led to the rest of the house. "How many people live here?" she asked. Not that she really cared, but she supposed there must be other roomers.

“Right now there’s me, plus five. A couple in the attic, living in sin, in case that bothers you. Two on the second floor, and Lewis downstairs. That leaves two rooms unoccupied, so you have your pick.”

“It’s a big house,” Cassie remarked.

“Too big for just me. After my daughter Bunny moved out, Mister and I started renting them. Then he died of a heart attack. Surprised us both. I’m the one with the weak heart. Never had any problem keeping the rooms filled,” she said. “Of course I don’t worry too much if one goes unfilled for a week or two. It’ll fill back up. Sign’s been out this time for a few days.” She shuffled her feet and groaned. “Why don’t you come in for a minute? I can’t stand for too long.”

The doorway on the lefthand side of the foyer led to Mrs. Schreiber’s living room. After she and Cassie were settled into large wingback chairs, Mrs. Schreiber picked up a magazine and handed it to her. On the cover, a smiling woman held a bunch of daisies and a small, pristine trowel. Her hairstyle made Cassie look for the date in the magazine’s corner. It was twenty years old.

“That’s my Bunny,” Mrs. Schreiber said. She was a model in New York City. Now she’s a housewife upstate. She had some big covers before she quit. I have a *Ladies Home Journal* here somewhere.” After a few minutes Mrs. Schreiber gave up the search. “She calls but she doesn’t visit,” she said. “You have any questions for me?”

Cassie wondered if she was supposed to ask something about the daughter’s modeling career, or if Mrs. Schreiber had grandchildren. She shook her head.

“You don’t even want to know how much the rooms cost?” Mrs. Schreiber asked. She smiled. “Eighty a week for the small and a hundred a week for the large. A hotel would cost you that a night, am I right?”

Cassie nodded, although she’d only paid thirty-five ninety-five at the Travelodge.

“I like to know who’s living here with me, under my roof. So, I hope you don’t mind if I ask you a few questions. I’ll try not to pry into your business. You new in town?”

Cassie nodded.

“Going to the college?”

She shook her head.

“You have a job?”

“At O’Leary’s Restaurant.”

“With a name like that, run by a bunch of Indians,” Mrs. Schreiber said. “I hear the food there is terrible. But people eat it. You’ll eat anything after you drink enough beer. Am I right?” Mrs. Schreiber asked. “Do you know how long you’re planning to stay?”

Cassie shook her head again.

“Most don’t,” said Mrs. Schreiber. “Lewis, he’s one of my renters, has been with me seven years, and he didn’t know if he was going to stay more than a week. Of course, he’s the only one to stay quite that long. Mostly I get break-ups. Boyfriend and girlfriend living together and decide they can’t stand the sight of each other. Or roommates, people who suddenly can’t get along. Sometime I get business people. I’m not too far from the business section, and I think that’s how they find me. But not so much anymore. I’m a lot cheaper than a motel. I’m sure that’s the main reason, and the place has more personality.”

At first Cassie thought she might have stumbled into an actual boarding house. She hadn’t believed such places existed anymore, but something about the way Mrs. Schreiber had invited her into the parlor encouraged her imagination. She could see Mrs. Schreiber presiding over the dining room table, where her houseful of assorted boarders gathered at mealtime. But, as she quickly discovered, there was no boarding going on in this establishment, just rooming.

“What you do for meals is your own business. Since you’re working at a restaurant, I expect you’ll be eating there a good bit. I don’t allow hotplates in my rooms. I used to, but then we had a fire. Lewis smelled it and got it out before it did too much damage, but since then, no more hotplates. There’s a refrigerator on the second

floor you can use. I've never heard any complaints from anyone about their food being messed with, but that doesn't mean much. No one around here talks to me. If you want to have a coffee pot, I guess that's alright. The girl in the attic tried to tell me that a hotplate isn't any more dangerous than a coffee pot, and so I ought to allow both if I'm going to allow either. But I told her I never had any trouble with any coffee pots."

Cassie nodded. She wasn't much of a coffee drinker.

"I don't have a phone for the boarders to use, and the phone company won't install one in your room, no matter how long you're here, because of the nature of the establishment. I tried to get them to install a pay phone in the foyer years ago, but they wouldn't go for that either. Nowadays most people who really care about it have a cell phone. The closest pay phone you can get at all hours is the Sunoco at the end of the street."

Mrs. Schreiber's lengthy spiel was practiced. Cassie wondered how many times she'd described the house to potential boarders. Dozens? Hundreds? Surely not thousands. Not even if she'd been renting rooms for twenty years.

"There's two full bathrooms up there. One on the second floor and one on the third. I used to say to use the bathroom on the floor where you live, but no one pays attention to what I say. I'd give you the tour, but my legs won't make it. Lewis can probably walk you around, if you want. He's been long enough to know everything about the place."

Mrs. Schreiber hoisted herself out of her chair, and grabbed hold of her walker.

"I don't want to put you to any trouble," Cassie said. "I can go upstairs and look at the rooms myself."

"Oh, no," said Mrs. Schreiber. "I always like Lewis to meet the female boarders. He doesn't have a girlfriend, and I'm trying to fix him up." She winked at Cassie. "He's a graduate student. Very smart."

Lewis lived behind the door on the right-hand side of the foyer. He was tall, but stoop-shouldered, and balding. His room, the part of it that was visible through his half-

opened door, was covered with books and papers. He gave off the smell of cigarettes, coffee, and disinfectant.

“Lewis, can you show her the empty rooms?” Mrs. Schreiber asked.

“Of course,” he said, but not enthusiastically.

Cassie followed him up the stairs. He gestured to a room on her left, and she went in.

“That’s the bigger one,” he said. “I used to live in it, before I moved down to the old parlor. I built the desk.”

A rough, L-shaped desk was built into one corner of the room. The remaining furniture included a bureau, a double bed, a bedside table, and a rocking chair. Cassie walked to the room’s single window and looked out. Beneath her small children teetered and tottered, slid, swung, ran, jumped, and threw sand at one another.

“The children are sometimes noisy in the daytime,” Lewis said.

The other room was across the hall. It was indeed smaller than the first and contained only a single bed, a dresser, and a chair. Its only window looked out on Mrs. Schreiber’s back yard, a sizeable but empty plot of grass.

“I’ll take this one,” Cassie said.

“It’s cheaper,” Lewis said.

After she had paid Mrs. Schreiber the first week’s rent, along with a deposit for bed linens, Lewis brought her some furniture polish, cleaning rags, and a broom. “In case you want to freshen up the room,” he said.

“If you need anything and I’m not answering my door, ask Lewis. He knows where everything is,” added Mrs. Schreiber. “Of course, we’re both of us here all the time. But sometimes I don’t get to the door so fast. Usually, it’s quicker to just ask him.” She winked again. “He can be very helpful, Lewis can.”

Cassie pocketed the keys Mrs. Schreiber gave her, one for the front door and one for her room, and picked up the pile of bed linens. She left the cleaning supplies at the

foot of the stairs. When she returned for them, both Mrs. Schreiber's and Lewis's doors were shut. The foyer was silent.

As she made up her bed, she wondered how many other people had slept in it. The mattress seemed to be in reasonably good shape, but she sprayed it with Lysol before putting the sheets on. Part of the reason she hadn't taken the other room was because Lewis had slept in that bed. It didn't bother her so much, knowing that other people had slept in the bed she was sleeping in, but she didn't necessarily want to know who any of them were. Besides, she had no use for a double bed.

Before unpacking her suitcase, she sprayed the dresser drawers with Lysol as well. All of her clothes would have fit into one drawer, but she put her socks and underwear in the top, her t-shirts in the second, and her jeans in the third. The only things she had left to put in the bottom drawer were a pair of flip-flops, and her canvas bag containing her wallet and four unread paperback books. She took the books out of the bag and put them on top of the dresser. Then she made sure her door was locked, and lay down on top of the bed she'd just made.

She didn't know why she was here, in this boarding house, in a town she'd never been to and had never even thought of visiting, but not knowing why she was someplace wasn't an unusual feeling for her. It was, in fact, the feeling she had most of the time.

CHAPTER THREE

The Salvage and Resale was small. Lamps and plastic dinnerware dominated its display window, but the sign out front made a compelling promise: “Hard to Find Here.” Cassie passed the shop, a rectangular shoebox of a building, located at the edge of the business district, on her walk to work. She had some time to kill, so, in spite of the dim interior lights, she tried the door. When she found it locked, she peered in through the front window. Back behind the Tupperware and lighting fixtures, bicycles, television sets, vinyl furniture, electric fans, and toasters she saw several shelves of paperback books. She checked the business hours posted on the door — the shop should have been open — and planned to return on her way home from work.

J. Leon Smith, the shop’s “soul proprietor” according to the sign out front, sat in the back room, staring at a monumental stack of beer cans. He was going to make something out of those cans, but he didn’t know exactly what just yet. Mostly he made lighting fixtures and clocks, the kind of things some people put in their rec rooms, or their basement bars for a touch of kitsch, but he’d made other things: a coffee table, trash cans (ironic recycling he called it, trash cans made from trash), magazine racks, even nativity scenes, both large and small, during the Christmas season. He’d once made a knight in shining armor entirely out of imports, Heineken cans primarily. The knight had been with him for almost a year, then an older woman bought him for her son’s birthday. She said, “He likes to play those fantasy games, and he likes to drink beer, and that’s about all he likes. He never did grow up, and that’s probably my fault. Maybe he can use it for a hat rack or something.”

Leon couldn’t believe people bought some of the things he made. He was often astounded by the bad taste of his customers. His shop was a cluttered testament to the

power of that bad taste and the relative durability of inexpensive, mass-produced wares. He would never buy some of the things he sold. He had much better taste than that, but he'd sacrificed it to his sense of humor and his need to make a buck.

Despite a bit of a drinking problem, he was a master at retooling, refurbishing, and embellishing throwaways. He was part handy-man, part "salvage expert," part artist. Although he frequently worked in cans — beer, tuna-fish, Coca-Cola, whatever — he was open to a range of mediums. He used whatever he found.

He finally decided to make bird houses with the beer cans. First, he cut off their tops and bottoms. Then, he flattened the can sides to make decorative sheets. He wondered if birds would have a brand preference? Would the red and white of Budweiser cans be more attractive to them? Or would they prefer the silvery sides of Coors Light? He was halfway through his first house, the prototype, when he realized he hadn't opened the shop yet.

When Cassie returned that afternoon, the shop doors were unlocked. She passed by major and minor appliances, upholstered and wooden furniture, and racks of clothes for all seasons. She passed functional items and broken ones and stopped in front of a row of books. She briefly fingered their dusty, crumpled spines before pulling a half dozen paperbacks, a real bargain at six for a dollar, from the shelves.

Leon was behind the front counter, invisible for all practical purposes, repairing a purple Schwinn bicycle. The bike had a banana seat and a basket covered with day-glo plastic flowers. It was missing a chain, but was otherwise in mint condition. Leon wondered if anyone had ever even ridden it. He had just finished repairing the bike chain when Cassie appeared at the counter with her books.

She was an unfamiliar face, a dull looking girl wearing saggy, soggy clothes. Judging from the merchandise she was waiting to pay for, she was a reader, the kind of girl who liked to lose herself in someone else's page. Although she was young, and didn't have a bad body, she wasn't very pretty, nothing special, nothing worth taking

note of. But Leon took note of her anyway. He couldn't help it. She was giving off a smell he recognized, the unmistakable smell of discouragement. Usually heartbreak gave women that smell, but sometimes it was other things.

He didn't know why he found the smell so compelling, but he did. When women had that smell about them, he wanted to befriend them. Sometimes he took them to bed. Women who smelled like that were generally easy to get into bed. In fact, he often took them to bed. But not always. He wasn't consciously trying to get this girl into bed. He knew that much. He just wanted to see if he could make a connection, make her smile. For now that seemed challenge enough.

She was looking at him blankly. She was holding money out toward him.

"Can I interest you in a bike?" he asked. "Newly repaired, and I'll give you a real bargain."

"No thank you," she said. She could feel the muscles in her neck and back tightening up. She never responded to male interest very well. When a guy acted interested in her, she usually figured he was making a joke at her expense. Often this had been the case. Tyler had been an exception, although she'd never understood what he saw in her either. This had made their sudden break-up easier than it might have been. She wasn't surprised when he suddenly lost interest in her. She had always expected him to.

"I'll keep it for you. You might change your mind," he said.

She shook her head and took her books.

"Have a great afternoon," he called after her. "And enjoy your reading."

Later that evening while she was reading *Temptations of the Moon*, actually when she got up to go to the bathroom and get a drink of water, she found herself trying to remember what the salvage man had looked like. She couldn't conjure up a clear picture of him. He was older, not quite old enough to be her father, but probably closer to her father's age than to hers. He'd had longish hair she thought, shaved on the sides perhaps, and sparkling with . . . glitter? No, maybe his hair was just greying and caught

the light in a way that made it twinkle. Maybe he was bald on top and that's what made her think his hair was shaved on the sides. Something was missing somewhere in his hair. She was sure he hadn't worn a hat. He'd had a kind face she thought, and glasses. Or maybe he hadn't had glasses. Maybe he squinted and that made her think he needed glasses. He wasn't very big, neither tall, nor bulky. She was sure of that. Middle-sized, middle-aged, middle brown hair, hazel eyes. But she soon forgot all about him when she returned to her reading.

She saw the salvage man two days later when she stopped in for more books. She brought back the ones she'd purchased before, to see if he'd buy them back. Most stores would.

He gave her back fifty cents on the dollar. When she paid for her newly selected paperbacks, he called her attention to the purple Schwinn again. It was still behind the counter. "Ready to buy your bike?" he asked. He didn't seem surprised or disappointed when she shook her head. He just smiled at her. "Maybe next time," he said.

After that she visited the shop every few days. She returned the books she'd read to the shelf and took different ones, no more than six at a time. Leon thought about just letting her exchange the books, at no charge. But he figured she'd bolt, like a semi-feral cat, if he tried to give her something for nothing.

In a couple of weeks, he managed to pry a bit of information out of her. He knew her first name, where she worked, and where she lived. He knew she was new in town. This wasn't very much knowledge, but it was some. It was enough to work with.

He continued to try to sell her the purple bicycle. He tried to sell her other things as well, rubber aprons for work (once he found out she was a dishwasher), a nice reading lamp for her room.

She ended up buying the lamp, after he assured her that it had been safely rewired. She didn't want to replicate the horrible hot plate incident of 1994, or whenever

it had been, and become a flammable addition to the lore of Mrs. Schreiber's boarding house.

Although he kept her supplied with cheap paperbacks, Leon found Cassie's taste in reading material distasteful. "You really read this stuff?" he asked, when she made her eighth or ninth visit to his shop for books.

"Why else would I buy them? Of course, I read them," she said.

"But aren't they all the same book, really?" He picked up two romances and read their back covers aloud to prove his point.

"Mostly the same," she conceded. She didn't quite know how to explain the pleasure she took from the predictability of the plots and the reliability of the outcomes. "It doesn't bother me," she said. "They help me sleep."

Since she'd left her parents' house, Cassie had called them several times, at least once a week, pretending to be at the beach every time she called. She'd called them from bus stations in Omaha, Tallahassee, and Salt Lake City. When she called, she tried to talk as little as possible, to avoid telling a quantity of lies. She thought about the image she wanted to give to her parents: her getting a tan, playing volleyball in the sand, selling tickets at a beach-side amusement park. Her parents were gullible she thought, or maybe they just wanted to believe she was more normal and happy than she was.

Fortunately, neither of them were great telephone conversationalists. They didn't ask involved questions or demand detailed descriptions, although her father expressed some concern over not being able to reach her by phone. "What will we do if we need to reach you? Send a telegram?" he'd asked. She'd ended that conversation as quickly as she could, and, so far, he hadn't brought up getting in touch with her again.

Since she'd settled in town, she'd been calling from the phone outside of the Drug World where the Greyhound had first deposited her. She'd picked this location because the pedestrian traffic walking by sounded like people walking along a boardwalk she thought. At least half of the time when she called, she got her parents'

answering machine. Her mother had recorded the out-going message, "Well, I guess we're not around, but we'll try to return your call." A television was playing loudly in the background, the opening voice-over for *Unsolved Mysteries*.

After talking to the machine one evening, Cassie decided to take a walk around town. She wanted, she realized, to talk to someone. She had been disappointed when the machine picked up.

She walked from one end of Main Street to the other. Then she walked up and down the streets that ran parallel to Main. All of these were named for trees: Spruce, Gum, Poplar, Cherry, Walnut, Pine, Maple, Willow, Oak, Hickory, and Elm. Although she was no arboriculturist, she recognized a type of tree or two. She found it a bit odd that the trees for which the streets had been named were seldom represented on them.

She walked for several hours, through twilight and into full evening. She heard children being called home from play, loud music from a number of passing cars, an argument or two, and then she heard someone calling to her from a van.

"Need a ride?" Leon leaned out of a van that was barely moving in the street beside her.

"No thank you," she said.

"It's late," he replied. "You shouldn't be out walking alone."

"I'm almost home," she said, forgetting that she'd told Leon where she lived.

"You live over two miles from here," he said. "Really."

"I'm fine," she said.

But Leon had pulled the van over to the curb. "Please let me give you a ride," he said. "I'll worry about you."

The funny thing was, she believed him, and, funnier still, she didn't want him to worry. She also suddenly realized she was tired. And after this encounter, their conversations at Leon's shop became more friendly.

She'd been coming into his shop for almost three weeks when Leon asked her if she'd like to go to an auction with him. He began his invitation by asking if she'd ever been to an auction.

"No" Cassie said.

"I'm going Friday night. I pretty much always do . . ."

"I think I'm working Friday," she said. She'd increased her hours and was working both lunch and dinner shifts three or four days a week. This wasn't about the money. It was about staying busy.

"Well, if you're not working some Friday," he said, "let me know."

"Why?" she asked.

"It's fun. Fast talking, old furniture, and a lot of queers. It's worth going just to watch them."

She couldn't tell if he was joking or not, although she thought he was.

"They'll probably have lots of paperbacks for cheap," he said. "They usually do."

Cassie thought about going some place with Leon. She didn't know him very well. He could be planning to drive her off into the woods and dismember her. She thought about being in a room full of other people's junk with a bunch of gay men and Leon. "Maybe," she said.

When it turned out that she wasn't scheduled to work that Friday night, she took it as a sign and told Leon she'd go with him to the auction.

Even though he said he liked to get there early to look things over, he was late picking her up. She was waiting for him on the front steps, but she had almost decided to go back into the boarding house when he drove up. Climbing into his van, she realized it was the only vehicle of any kind she'd been in since she'd stepped off the bus weeks before. She didn't miss it, except sometimes at night when she couldn't sleep. For the first two weeks, bus travel had been an effective soporific.

“Sorry I’m late,” he said. “I’m glad you decided to come.” He smiled at her, so she smiled back. Leon was the closest thing she’d had to a friend in a while.

“I go to this auction almost every week,” he said. “Mostly, they clear out estates when people retire or die, so it’s like two or three estate sales all at once. Some higher class, some middle class, some lower. A veritable smorgasbord of stuff.”

In a few minutes they’d passed outside the town limits. In the early evening light, there wasn’t much to see on the route they were traveling except for the occasional house set back from the road. Cassie liked looking at these and speculating about the people who lived in them. Since the houses were of a moderate size and well maintained, she envisioned traditional families, clearing away supper dishes and doing jigsaw puzzles together. If the houses had been ramshackled and small she would have envisioned snotty-nosed children and abused women. If the houses had been sumptuous, but then the truly sumptuous homes weren’t ever visible from the road, so she didn’t ever have to worry about imagining what went on inside of them.

Leon pointed out a pair of concrete cows, signaling the entrance to a dairy farm, and an auto salvage place. She had expected him to talk her ears off, but for most of the drive he was remarkably, though not unpleasantly, quiet. The quality of the silence surprised and pleased her. It was the kind of silence she had with her father sometimes, when they were both in a room reading, the kind of silence she’d occasionally had with Tyler after Saturday breakfast.

The radio in his van didn’t work, so the only sounds were the drone of the van’s tires, the air rushing past the half-open windows, and insects making their weird insect music in the distance. The sun was going down, and the hush of evening settling in was satisfying. She dozed off. When she awoke, it was nearly dark, and they were surrounded by fields, no houses, no businesses, just fields.

For a moment, she frightened herself. What if Leon was dragging her off to the middle of nowhere to do terrible things to her? Of course she’d been perfectly vulnerable while she slept, and he’d done nothing, but prior benevolence was no promise

of future actions. She supposed that a good many rapists and murderers had seemed perfectly benign up to a point. Weren't people always being surprised on the news by quiet, seemingly nice people who had basements full of bones?

Then she saw the building, brightly lit, looking like a cross between a warehouse and a barn, surrounded by cars, trucks, and vans, but otherwise stranded in an expanse of field.

Parking close to it was out of the question. Leon pulled in beside a battered truck. He was coming around to open her door, but she beat him to it. Then the two of them headed in the direction of the building and the light. She began to have second thoughts about her decision to accompany Leon to the auction. As they walked, she steeled herself for the experience of being around a lot of people, not her idea of a good time exactly and probably one reason she worked as a dishwasher. Despite its other drawbacks, dishwashing was fairly solitary work. Except for waitresses sometimes asking her to hurry up with the glasses, they left her pretty much to herself. It got crowded in the kitchen sometimes, of course. But crowded didn't bother her as much as crowds did. Being around too many people all at once made her feel like she was drowning. She wondered how there could be so many people in the world. The worst part of her travels had been the bus stations, but bus stations, she noted, were generally less populous than train stations and airports.

A humming noise that she couldn't identify at first grew louder as they approached the building. By the time she figured out what she was hearing, they were within feet of an entrance door.

The sound was coming through a partially opened window. A human voice, amplified over what sounded like an ancient public address system, rapidly elided most of the vowels and consonants that made up actual words. She hoped that visual cues made it easier to understand the auctioneer.

The room they entered was large she knew, but it didn't seem to be. Rows of furniture, tables full of dishes and knickknacks, and cardboard boxes full of assorted

junk, lined the walls. Most of the available wall space was covered with paintings and mirrors. An island of folding chairs, most of them filled, at first glance, with fat old women and unhappy children, seemed to float in the center of the room. She noticed one little girl with mustard smeared from one side of her face to the other and concluded that there must be a concession stand somewhere.

“I need to go get a number, in case I want to bid,” Leon told her. “Do you want to come with me, or wait here?”

She decided to stay put, rather than fight through the crowd over near the sign-in station. When she first lost sight of Leon, her heart beat fast. What if he'd brought her all this way just to leave her? Maybe it was a test to see if she could find her way back to town. After a moment of exciting panic, she convinced herself she was being ridiculous and started looking around.

Although the entire place was crowded, the largest clot of people was at the far end of the room. In its center, the auctioneer stood on a platform/ladder. Beside him, a couple of muscle-bound young men hoisted items for sale above their heads so the crowd could get a good look at what they were bidding on. They were holding up an old vacuum cleaner. One of them had the heavier job of holding the cannister, while the other waved the hose attachment like a snake. Try as she might, Cassie couldn't figure out what the price of the vacuum was, but she soon knew who was bidding on it. An elderly man in front of the auctioneer was raising his index finger purposefully and a middle-aged woman to the auctioneer's left was flashing a scrap of white paper at regular intervals. Apparently the index finger man made the closing bid, because the young men toted the vacuum cleaner over to him and set it at his feet. The old fellow seemed happy with his purchase; he picked up the hose and fondled it.

“Fifty dollars,” a voice beside her said. “Fifty dollars. You could almost buy a new one for that, and get a warranty. Who knows if that old thing even works?”

Cassie turned slightly to see who the voice was talking to, and then realized he was either talking to himself or to her.

“Tonight the small appliances are all going for much more than they’re worth. I really don’t understand it.”

She nodded, since she didn’t want to appear rude.

“I hope you’re not here looking for a sewing machine or a television or something like that,” he said.

She shook her head, and the man smiled.

“I’d never buy a television at an auction,” he said. “Or any appliance really. I sometimes wonder what these people are thinking.”

One of the burly young men took hold of the auctioneer’s ladder and pushed it about three feet in Cassie’s direction. On wheels, she realized. And in the space behind the auctioneer she saw Leon. He was holding a hotdog and a half, and he was watching the auctioneer and his assistants who held some gardening tools over their heads.

She divided her attention between Leon and the auctioneer. Leon’s expression was rapt. The tools the assistants displayed didn’t look so great to her; the shovel and rake were obviously rusted. The hoe looked to be in decent shape, but she couldn’t even identify the other thing, so she felt ill-equipped to judge its condition. Cassie realized the man who’d told her appliances were going for too much was bidding and, as it turned out, outbid a grey-haired man with a handlebar mustache. She thought she’d heard the auctioneer say a hundred and fifty dollars. After the tools had been handed over, the assistants raised what looked like matching chamber pots above their heads. She saw Leon moving toward her.

“Hey, “ Leon said, offering her a hot dog. “Hard to believe those tools went for a hundred and ninety dollars. ”

“The rake and the shovel were rusted,” she replied.

“Only surface rust,” Leon said.

“Why would someone pay a hundred and ninety dollars for some garden tools?” she asked.

“One of the mysteries of stuff,” he said. “Maybe they belonged to someone famous. Maybe they were made by someone famous. We could try to find the guy who bought them and ask.”

“That’s okay,” Cassie said. “He told me the man payed too much for the vacuum cleaner.”

The chamber pots, or whatever they were, ended up in the hands of a severe-looking, middle-aged woman who didn’t smile when they were handed to her. She passed them to the woman standing beside her — possibly her assistant, possibly her daughter, possibly both — who wrapped them in newspaper and put them in a cardboard box at her feet. The severe woman then took out a small notepad and wrote something in it before putting it back in her jacket pocket. Cassie stopped looking at the women when she realized that Leon had stopped watching the auctioneer and was watching her instead.

“This is interesting,” she said.

“Excellent free entertainment,” Leon agreed, “Provided you don’t bid and buy.”

“Are you going to buy anything?” she asked.

“Don’t know yet,” he said. “There’s nothing in particular I’m looking for. I’ll have to wait and see if anything calls to me.”

The auctioneer had just finished selling something, an air-conditioner perhaps. Cassie hadn’t been paying attention, so she wasn’t sure. And bidding had just begun on a painting.

The picture was obviously the work of some weekend amateur, probably a portrait of his wife or girlfriend since no one but a wife or girlfriend could have been expected to strike and hold a pose like the one in the painting. In it the woman was wearing a fluffy butter-yellow dress and a string of pearls. Her hair was piled up on her head in a beehive, with a butter-yellow bow, to match the dress, tied around its base. It was a hairdo that hadn’t been popular for thirty or forty years. She was smiling, the woman in the painting was, a tipsy cockeyed smile. But the most interesting thing about

the picture was its perspective. The woman was seated in the crotch of a tree. It seemed fairly clear that the tree was a tall one and that the painter had positioned himself at its base. The painting's subject looked for all the world like she was going to fall out of the tree on top of the painter at any minute. Despite the precariousness of her perch, however, the subject of the painting looked happy, really happy, ready to burst with joy.

Bidding on this item was brief, and Cassie was able to make out the auctioneer's words as he cajoled someone, anyone, to pay him more than a dollar for the painting. One of the muscle boys, the one who wasn't holding the large framed canvas above his head, shouted. "The frame's worth more than that," by way of encouragement. "Paint over it," the auctioneer said, "You could do better." And it wasn't entirely clear if he was referring to the bid or the painting or both. But no one took the bait, and the auctioneer concluded, "Going once, going twice, sold," before pointing to Leon. Cassie hadn't seen him place the opening bid. She'd been too busy staring at the painting.

The auctioneer's assistant who brought it to Leon rolled his eyes as he handed it over. "Anything for a buck," he said, "Right?" But Leon didn't seem to take any offense. He just smiled at the guy.

On closer inspection, the painting was, in many ways, truly dreadful.

"She doesn't have any hands," Leon noted.

"Well, I guess he didn't know how to paint hands," Cassie said. She walked toward and away from the painting a few times and admired it from all angles. Then she gently leaned it forward, so she could take a look at the back. There the artist had claimed and named his work. She read aloud to Leon, "The Fruit of Love, by Edgar Miller."

"She does look kind of like a great big giddy grapefruit," Leon said. "Or a gigantic happy lemon."

"Grapefruits are paler than that," Cassie replied. "So are lemons. She's more of a daffodil or buttercup yellow."

“I wonder what old Edgar was drinking while he was painting her?” Leon asked.

“I wonder how he got her up in that tree?” Cassie imagined the woman in her frothy dress climbing up, up, up and Edgar down below, when she’d finally reached the notch she settled in, calling up to her, “That’s beautiful dear. Just beautiful.” Of course old Edgar might just have been imagining the lady in the tree or painting her from a memory.

“I think you should take it,” Leon said. “My gift to you.”

“Where will I put it?” Cassie asked.

“In your room,” he said. “I can tell you like it.”

“She doesn’t have any hands,” she said. But this didn’t really bother her, and she did like the painting. There was something compelling about the tree woman’s smile.

When she got back to the boarding house, she propped the painting against a wall at the foot of her bed instead of trying to nail and hang her, because she didn’t want to do further damage to the walls, and she didn’t have a hammer. It was a large canvas, and when Cassie put her head on her pillow, the smiling woman’s face was level with her own.

After her first auction experience, if she wasn’t working, Cassie went with Leon on Fridays. She didn’t bid or buy. She watched. If a bid was stalling out at a dollar or two, Leon could be depended on to raise his hand, and sometimes he got amazing things for a few bucks. He bought a sofa, a tricycle, and a pair of skates. These didn’t fit him but almost fit Cassie, if she wore three pairs of socks. And one night he bought a stuffed squirrel band.

The dead squirrels were a labor of love for some taxidermist, who must have devoted considerable man or woman hours to preserving the rodents and positioning them with their tiny instruments. One squirrel held a little fiddle, and another strummed on a banjo. One plucked at an upright bass, and another held a flat-top guitar. The fifth held a squirrel-sized washboard, and the last squirrel clutched a miniature mandolin.

They looked like seasoned professionals, ready to strike up the “Wabash Cannonball,” “The Orange Blossom Special,” or “Foggy Mountain Breakdown.”

“You’d think some collector would be interested in the instruments,” Cassie said. After only a few trips to the auction, she was beginning to talk the talk. “There’s usually a market for miniatures. And the workmanship here is fine.”

“Roger isn’t here tonight,” Leon said, referring to a collector who dealt exclusively in tiny items. “And maybe everyone else was put off by the squirrels.”

Dusty and covered with cobwebs, the squirrel band looked a little rough. Cassie bent to sniff them. They’d been nicely stuffed, and their pelts had been treated with preservatives. They smelled like someone’s attic.

Leon stroked the fiddle player squirrel with a fingertip. The rodent’s little eyes were bright, but his fur was gritty and patchy in spots.

“I wonder how old they are?” Cassie asked.

“Older than you, I’ll bet. Maybe even older than me. Old enough to have met and played with Bill Monroe and his original Blue Grass Boys: Chubby Wise, Cedric Rainwater, Clyde Moody. Old enough to have known Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs in their prime.”

“They’re probably full of bugs,” she said.

“So I’ll set them out on the porch to air for a day or two,” Leon replied.

“You better watch out. Some cat’s liable to get them.”

They were taking a break, sitting in the island of folding chairs, with the squirrels in a box between their feet, when a man approached Leon and offered to buy them. “I was in the bathroom during the bidding,” he said. “I’ll give you thirty bucks for the lot.” But Leon wouldn’t sell. Not even when the man raised his offer to fifty.

“What are you gonna do with those squirrels?” Cassie asked, but she could see them on display already, assembled on Leon’s mantel, forever playing some silent tune.

Leon shrugged. The things he held dear were peculiar — an Eiffel tower made out of toothpicks, a four hundred foot gum wrapper chain, several elaborate ships in

bottles, and an antique armoire entirely covered with hundreds of marbles — but they had one thing in common, apart from their oddity. They were all items that had taken considerable time, and in some cases considerable skill, to fashion — despite their lack of obvious utility. Each of them had been made for mysterious purposes, but each must have been made, in part, for the sheer love of making.

One night, Leon decided Cassie should try her hand at bidding. She had never bid for him before, and though she was initially reluctant, she decided she wanted to try. Leon gave her explicit instructions and exact dollar amounts that she was not, under any circumstances, to bid beyond. He hoped to teach her the value of the subtle bid — the nod, the wink, the barely twitching finger — but although she had no trouble adhering to the financial boundaries he set, her bidding technique was disastrous. She waved her arms and bounced, “like a damn cheerleader.” He reminded her that such display only provoked other buyers, sparked their enthusiasm for the item being auctioned, and defeated their purpose — to get the goods for next to nothing — but she couldn’t help herself. The act of bidding made her adrenalin surge. She failed to successfully buy any of the items Leon told her to bid on.

“I’m ready to take a break,” he said after watching her bid for an hour. “Do you want anything to eat?”

She shook her head.

The auctioneer was heading into a row of oak and mahogany furniture. This stuff never went for cheap, and consequently Leon wasn’t very interested in it. Most of the dealers, who ran antique shoppes or bed and breakfasts or both, knew what the furniture was worth and were willing to bid it up beyond the means of the casual buyer. Leon didn’t mind. He was more interested in the one of a kind stuff, the peculiarities, and of course the things that were being sold for next to nothing. He told Cassie to keep an eye on some lamps that were sitting on one of the mahogany tables, before he headed in the direction of the hot dogs. “If they go low, bid in,” he told her.

When he returned, he found Cassie sitting on the floor beside a pile of boxes.

“No lamps?” he asked.

“Two hundred for the big one,” she looked up at him. “And another eighty-five for the matched pair. But I got this.” She patted a large cardboard box.

Leon surprised her by laughing. “How’d that happen?” he asked.

“This was down on the floor underneath the table. It was too heavy to lift for display maybe. All I could see was the auctioneer pointing, I thought toward the lamps, and by the time I realized what I was bidding on, he called out ‘sold’.”

“How much?” he asked.

“Eight dollars,” she said.

“Probably worth that,” he said, lifting a skillet from the box.

“Pans,” Cassie said. “Some place mats.”

“Video tapes,” Leon said, picking one up out of the box. “Could be home movies. Could be triple X. Could be episodes of Mayberry RFD. I loved that show.”

Cassie looked at the box. She felt strangely proprietary toward it. For just a moment, she’d forgotten that it was Leon’s purchase really. She’d merely been the bidder. For just a moment, she’d forgotten that she had no place for pots and pans, for place mats, for doilies, cream pitchers, and video tapes. She didn’t have a television, let alone a VCR. She didn’t have a stove, refrigerator, sofa, or even a toilet that was all her own. What she had was a dusty room with a bed, dresser, chair, and lamp. She had a closet, a window, a small stack of books, and a great big picture of a smiling lady without hands. For now, this was all. Sometimes, it was more than she wanted.

The auction had moved beyond them. The auctioneer on his wheeled platform and the throng of people who gathered around him were at least twenty feet away, so Cassie and Leon sat where they were, on the cold, concrete floor, and sorted through the things she’d accidentally purchased.

In one pile, they put dishware: pans, tumblers, plastic bowls, shot glasses, and measuring spoons. In another they put clothing, mostly men’s shirts and work pants, for

a man who must have died of congestive heart failure or something like it: waist 56, inseam 30. The shirts were all XXXXXL's. All but a few of these were still packaged, tagged, and priced. The plastic wrap surprised Cassie, as did the department store labels on the pants. These clothes had never been worn. Maybe the man who was supposed to have worn them died before he got around to it. Or maybe he got too big for his britches, she shuddered to think, or some miracle diet had worked for him and he'd become suddenly too small, she hoped. In another pile they put the video tapes, a few record albums (*E Pluribus Funk* by Grand Funk Railroad, *The Best of the Guess Who*, *Killing Me Softly* by Roberta Flack, and Foghat's *Fool for the City*), some books, written in German and therefore of no use to her, a photo album, and a slim packet of post cards held together with a piece of wire.

"Not bad for eight dollars," Leon said. "Is there anything here you can use?"

Cassie considered the piles of stuff. None of it was useful, but she picked up the photo album and the postcards. "These," she said.

"If there are any presidents or famous people in there, I want to know," Leon replied.

Cassie knew without looking that there weren't any famous people in the postcards or pictures. She'd taken them because they made her wistful. In this mood, the remnants and residue of other people's lives, the household clutter of anonymous others, suddenly loosed and lotted and sold to the highest bidder, made her melancholy. There was something decidedly sad about old highschool yearbooks and scrapbooks, letters and postcards, the discarded paper trails of other peoples' lives. These things had no value to collectors, not unless they'd belonged to someone famous or historically significant, but they'd once been important to someone.

CHAPTER FOUR

While there is no doubt that what he did evolved from what was once called trash picking, Leon did not “pick.” That dainty, fastidious, parsimonious, mincing verb had been replaced with a vigorous, athletic, Olympic-sized, exuberant one. Leon dove, and he did not dive in trash. Trash was litter, scrap, and useless. The things Leon found while diving had value and utility. They were often whole, intact, undamaged, and were sometimes even in their original packaging.

Moreover, trash came in cans and cans, though of variable size, from bathroom and office paper receptacles, on up to ones designed for industrial wastes, tended to be on the small side. Leon had, in his time, rummaged through a can or two, but he gravitated, as only made sense in a century and country of unprecedented excess, toward something grander. Leon acquired almost all of the raw materials for his projects and a good bit of a his merchandise, though certainly not all of it, by diving in dumpsters.

The dumpster, a truck mounted hoisting unit capable of picking up, transporting, and dumping detachable containers of a variety of types and capacities, was patented in 1935. It was originally designed by the Dempster Company for use in construction and quarry work, but in 1938 Dempster Brothers got the idea to use its equipment for the removal of trash, rubbish and so forth. Although the Dempster Company also manufactured bailing presses and pontoons, it was most famous for the dumpster and in 1975 changed its name from Dempster Brothers to Dempster Dumpster Systems. While the dumpster proper is an entire system of equipment, most significantly the truck mounted hoisting unit, most people, including Leon, referred only to the detachable containers as dumpsters. In addition to knowing a bit about the Dempster company history, Leon was generally an expert when it came to dumpsters, especially local ones.

He and Cassie sat on his two-dollar auction sofa, under a lighting fixture made from beer cans and chicken wire, listening to an old, scratchy jazz record he'd rescued from a residential dumpster. He'd been telling Cassie tales of the things he'd found.

Outside a mortuary he'd found a coffin, which he'd slept in very comfortably for about a year. Outside of Shear Bliss, sadly gone completely out of business, he'd found three hair dryers and a sizeable bag of hair. He was going to sell the hair but finding a buyer had proved difficult, so he donated it to Locks of Love instead and accrued a little good karma instead of hard cash. He'd found someone's entire Star Wars collection, which he'd reluctantly sold when he needed to have a molar root canaled. He'd found comic books, posters, a top hat, a fox carcass, a paintball gun, and a brand new Sony 8mm camcorder still in the box. He'd found fishing equipment, maternity clothes, CB radios, and six packs. He'd found two saddles, which had puzzled him mightily since they weren't in horse country. Of course, the fact they weren't in horse country might have explained why the saddles had been discarded. He'd found toasters and sculptures and fully decorated Christmas trees. He'd also found a few things he didn't think he ought to bring up.

He couldn't tell if Cassie was paying much attention to him or not. She was sitting at the end of the sofa with her eyes closed, in her usual listening posture, but he suspected she might be falling asleep. When he reached across the sofa and tapped her on the arm, her eyes flew open.

"I need to go out," he said.

"Okay," she said, standing up before he did, and taking a step toward the door.

"You could come with me," he said.

"You're going to look in dumpsters?" she asked.

"Yeah" he said. "It's fun. Kind of like the auction, only free."

Cassie didn't know about digging around in other people's trash. She was afraid it would be a damp and smelly experience, like the trips to the city dump she'd taken with her dad, back when she was a child and too small to protest effectively.

“Don’t people find dead things in dumpsters?” she asked. The record they were listening to, John Coltrane’s *A Love Supreme*, had been skipping for about a minute. Hiss thump whine hiss thump whine. Listening to jazz made her feel like she was connected to someone else’s nervous system. She wasn’t entirely sure she liked the feeling. She stood up, debating whether to go or not and leaning toward heading back to the boarding house.

Leon got up to move the needle of the stereo, one of those old cabinet jobs that reminded Cassie of her grandparents’ house. “There won’t be any bodies,” he said. He felt reasonably confident in saying this. He’d been diving for years and had never found a body. Of course it would be just his luck to find one on a night when he had a novice diver along. He sometimes wondered if he’d stop diving if he found a body. He doubted that he would, but he wasn’t sure. A friend of his, a man who’d been diving even longer than he had, stopped after he found a dead baby. Leon had thought, yeah, well, a baby. That might do it. That might definitely stop you.

“If you don’t want to come, I’ll drop you off,” he said.

“I just live a couple blocks away,” she said.

“It’s dark out. You’re a female person.”

She thought about telling him of all the hundreds of times she’d walked dark streets without mishap, but she knew he wouldn’t listen. He was fanatical about making sure she got home safe, so she followed him out to his van.

His van, several tons of rusted, dented metal, ran beautifully, except that it wouldn’t always go in reverse. Leon accepted this loss of reverse with equanimity. “She forces me to pay attention, to plot my course. If she were a horse I wouldn’t shoot her.” Cassie sat on a blanket that covered the passenger side seat and kept the seat’s interior from spilling onto her or poking her in the butt. “I should fix that seat,” Leon said. But she didn’t care. She was watching the night time streets. She liked being a passenger, being able to watch the world in a way that the driver never could. She tried to remember the last time she’d been anything but a passenger. Had it really been years

since she'd been behind the wheel of a car? Tyler always drove when they were together. And before that she walked or took the bus.

You could stare at things when you weren't driving. You could pay attention to details that had nothing to do with staying on the road, or maintaining the speed limit, or being wary of other drivers' stupidities.

"So am I dropping you?" Leon asked when they were almost in front of her house.

She thought about her quiet, dusty, cell of a room, the too firm bed that smelled of the Lysol she'd sprayed on it, and the books that waited there. She took her hand from the door handle and told him to keep on driving.

As he drove, she enjoyed the glimpses she had into other people's houses. Many of the houses were dark, and most that weren't had their shades down or their drapes drawn, so all she could see was the glow of light through them, or the cracks of light that seeped out around them. But some people either forgot to draw their drapes or wanted the world to see what they were up to. She saw a woman bent over a sewing machine in one window, and an older couple dancing what looked to her like a polka in another.

Of course, most of the unshaded windows were family rooms where the only light came from the television sets that had been left on. In the blue glow of those windows it was hard to tell if anyone was watching the tv or napping on a sofa in front of it. "Lord save us all from the eleven o'clock news," she thought, as they passed by the glowing windows. "And from professional wrestling and dating shows and the home shopping channels. Amen."

The hour was late and the few pedestrians she saw were purposeful. A man and a woman were out walking dogs. His was small, a dachshund, and hers was large, an English sheepdog. They walked together and might have been a couple, Cassie thought, although they seemed to be concentrating on their animals instead of each other. A few blocks later, she noticed three young women dressed in tight shiny clothes and platform sandals. They were walking, a bit unsteadily, toward a parking lot. Their unhappy

expressions, momentarily clear in the streetlight they passed under, suggested that their evening hadn't been much fun. Cassie was tempted to call out to them and tell them it could be worse. They could be looking in people's garbage for entertainment.

Leon stopped first behind a middle-sized apartment complex. "I like this place," he said, "But I'd hate it if I lived here." Cassie thought he might be less than enchanted with the architecture or the neighborhood, but instead it was all about the garbage. "If you'll notice, you have a row of dumpsters right here. The people with apartments in the front have to walk all the way around. But it gives me a central location for the whole complex. One stop shopping, so to speak." He glanced around before opening his door and sliding out. "Stay put if you'd like. This won't take long."

Cassie looked at the four metal boxes in front of her. Each of them was about as big as a mid-sized storage shed. They were painted a dark brown or green, she couldn't tell in the light, and most of them were filled to capacity it seemed, since there were boxes and various household items stacked around them. She watched for a minute as Leon poked through the stuff in front of one of them, and then, glancing around just as he had, she got out of the van.

He was shaking a kitchen chair, which he then started turning over in his hands. "Wood glue," he said, before picking the chair up and setting it down behind the van. Cassie noticed that he was wearing rubber gloves. "Keeps out germs and splinters," Leon said, when he noticed that she was staring at them. "I have extras in the van if you want to borrow some. Courtesy of my old man."

During their time together, Leon had offered up various pieces of his personal history, including mini-biographies, or capsule reviews, of both his parents. His broker mother he described in mechanical terms, "A thoroughly modern invention. Part calculator, part incubator, better with numbers than people." His father, a proctologist, was "an ass man, a professional ass man, and an ass." Cassie wasn't judgmental by nature, but she did wonder, fleetingly, what would make a person take up proctology as an occupation. She couldn't imagine inspecting assholes as her life work, although she

supposed someone had to do it. Leon claimed to have little affection for either of his parents. But his philandering father, he conceded, “combated hemorrhoids and rectal itch, and that should count for something.” Cassie also knew that Leon had been married once and was divorced. She didn’t remember ever asking him anything about himself, so he must have volunteered these pieces of information, while he was trying to sell her things she didn’t need. She didn’t mind listening to his stories, so long as he didn’t try to get her to open up to him and share her life with him. “I’m a good listener,” he’d said once, “If you ever feel like talking.” He’d left it at that.

“Thanks anyway,” she said, declining his offer of gloves and maintaining her distance, a few feet away from Leon, but following after him. First he looked through the things stacked outside the dumpsters, netting another chair like the first one and a lamp shaped like a ceramic panther. “This is probably a relationship casualty,” Leon said. “The girl moves in and says she won’t have something like that in *her* living room, so the guy has to throw away his lamp. I suspect that’s where a lot of my “unusual and collectable stuff” comes from.”

“How come you think it’s always the woman throwing stuff out?” Cassie asked. She thought of her own parents, and her mother’s collections. The couple of times her father had tried to get rid of some of the junk, horrific fights had ensued. He’d finally given up and resigned himself to a house that filled with strange and useless stuff. He had one room, the middle-sized bedroom on the second floor. This was his sanctuary and her mother couldn’t store anything there.

“Because women like things to match,” he said. “And men don’t care.”

“My stuff doesn’t match.”

“I don’t think you have any stuff. You live in a furnished room and you never buy anything.”

“Well, that should count. And what about the queer guys at the auction? They’re into matching.”

“Forget I said anything,” he said.

After making a full circuit of the dumpster exteriors, Leon poked his head into two of them, ones that had sliding doors that were at least partially opened, and then opened the doors of the other two and repeated the procedure. He did this rapidly. "Garbage disposals take care of most of the wet trash these days, but sometimes you come across disposable diapers. And they get ripe fast. Of course that's mostly just a problem in residential dumpsters. And really not so much with college students."

He banged his gloved hands together to clean them, perhaps, or to signal the end of the dive. "Not bad," he said, heading to the van and then stowing the chairs and the lamp.

After they were on the road again he spoke, as if she'd asked him a question, as if they were in the middle of a conversation, although they'd been silent since he'd restarted the van. She decided she somehow provoked this behavior in people. She'd noticed it on the bus. If you sat quietly for a while, the people around you would usually start talking to you.

"Frequency," he said. "That's the most important thing. You have to go all the time if you're going to find something good." He paused, as if to give her time to absorb this important information. "Then, you need to know which dumpsters to avoid. Tell me," he asked, "What dumpsters would you avoid? What does your gut tell you?"

She was briefly tempted to say, "All of them," but she looked at Leon and realized something. The expression on his face made it clear that they were discussing his most important thing. He might like going to the auction, running his shop, and making things, but his favorite part of his job and the best part of his day was digging around in the things other people had thrown away.

"I wouldn't go to a hospital," she said.

"Why not?"

"Well, hospital trash comes from sick people," she said.

"This is true," he said. "But you can get good stuff from sick people. One of the best hauls I ever had was a hospital that was going under: linens, furniture, and a hot dog

cart. But I don't make a habit of doing hospital dumpsters. I'm paranoid. Most of the time, the best you're going to find there is some dead flowers, and the worst will make you sick," he laughed. "Hazardous waste control my ass. What else?"

"Motels," she said. She remembered hearing about the dead baby, discovered in a dumpster out behind the Rose Lawn Motel, near the college she attended. That had been over two years ago, at the end of her freshman year, but bad news has a way of lingering, like the last drunken guest at a party. There had been no avoiding that story. For weeks, it was all people talked about. The girl who'd had the baby had lived in her dormitory. Media people, from students working for their highschool papers all the way to reporters from *The Today Show* and CNN, had been all over the place, talking to the girl's roommate and to other people who knew her. Cassie didn't. The girl was just another girl she passed in the hall on her way to brush her teeth. She'd looked exactly like everyone else, not like someone who'd put a baby in a dumpster.

A picture of a baby, "newborn, blue, and bloody, wrapped in a recyclable plastic bag, like cat turds and coffee grounds," appeared to her, the very picture some newspaper journalist had painted for her. The news was full of horrors. That's why she avoided it the best she could. And although she hadn't stamped out pain and misery by giving up on TV and refusing to read anything but the comics and the classified ads in a newspaper, she had stopped entertaining it, or letting it entertain her.

"Yes," Leon said. "Motel dumpsters suck. You find the worst kind of trash. Absolute disposables. Of course, for a celebrity dig you might try hotels and motels. But I wouldn't recommend it myself."

People dug or dove, Leon explained, for a range of reasons. "Like that guy, years ago, who was going through Bob Dylan's trash," he said. "Sometimes you have obsessed fans and sometimes you have experts in resale, the kinds who sell off the used toothpaste tubes and toe-nail clippings of the rich and famous." The best way to get this kind of debris was to set up a specialty dig as close to the house of the famous person as

possible. But that wasn't easy, given the security the famous surrounded themselves with in these celebrity-crazed, stalker-ridden times.

The next best thing was hotels. "When I was a kid, I had a friend, Tommy LaRoche, his mother, Wendy, was a major Beatles fan, back when they played Shea Stadium and went on Ed Sullivan. She had a twenty-year-old ham sandwich in her freezer, half a sandwich really, with two bites taken out of it. She got it by bribing a room service guy at the hotel where the Fab Four were staying. Ringo Starr started to eat that sandwich, so the story goes, but he got full. Mrs. LaRoche really liked Paul best, but it seems that he ate all his lunch that day. Paul always struck me as a hearty eater."

Cassie imagined Wendy LaRoche, in pedal pushers and a sleeveless blouse, opening up her freezer and showing Tommy and Leon the frozen sandwich. The lettuce around the edges was withered and brown with freezer burn, and in the background John Lennon was singing, "All You Need is Love."

"I never went in for celebrity digging myself," Leon said. "It's too narrow. Too specialized. I mean autographs are one thing. I have a few of those."

"I got Tiffany's autograph when I was ten," Cassie said.

"Did you see her at the mall?"

Her mother had taken her to see Tiffany, at the Bergen Mall in Paramus. She hadn't remembered that until Leon asked. "Yeah, I did."

"Whoever thought that one up was brilliant," he said. "The tour even had a name like 'Have a Beautiful Time at the Mall Tour' or 'Be Your Most Beautiful Self at the Mall Tour.'" He paused. "So you were a Tiffany fan?"

"I was only ten," she said.

Leon nodded and smiled sympathetically, as if forgiving her for her terrible pre-adolescent taste in music, before starting on another tangent.

"Only one thing worse than a celebrity dig, far as I'm concerned," he said.

"What's that?" She hoped he wasn't going to bring up a dead baby or anything else dead, but she couldn't imagine anyone who would go looking for that on purpose,

except, of course, for police detectives, who'd been trained to deal with the trauma of death and human ugliness. "People who have to eat out of them?"

"Nah. Eating out of dumpsters is okay, if you know what you're doing."

She looked at him like he was crazy. "I'd never eat anything they threw out in our dumpster," she said.

"Hell no," he said. "That place has a nasty-ass dumpster. I can tell you that much without ever having been near it. But you *can* get decent food from dumpsters. Bakeries throw out perfectly edible stuff, and pizza places. Almost all fast food places throw out burgers and chicken fingers at the end of the night, safe in their little cardboard nests. It's all about timing. Grocery store dumpsters can be good too, but you never know what you'll get there. And you have to be willing to sort through it. Not usually my scene. But I certainly don't look down on anyone who does it. When you're hungry it's good to be able to eat."

Still, the thought of people digging through the stuff she'd seen thrown away at the place where she was working made her nauseous. She couldn't imagine much worse than having to look for food that way "So, what's worse?" she asked.

"Digging around in the trash of someone you know," Leon said. He shook his head. "I only did it once, and it made me feel dirty. I tried to think of it as playing detective, like I was some kind of Sam Spade, but that was bullshit."

Cassie turned her attention back out to the street. It was after midnight now she guessed, and they were approaching a strip mall. It was about ten stores long and appeared to be made primarily of cinder block, plate glass, and aluminum siding. "Five years ago, we only had a couple of these," Leon said. "Now I can't even keep up with them all." He pulled up in the service alley behind a row of businesses, a stationers shop, a record store, a book store, a party supply store, and a florist. Cassie looked around, realizing that the backs of things looked a lot different from the fronts. The fronts were inviting, with window displays, neon signs — the architectural and decorative equivalent of the come hither glance. The backs were plain, flat, and

institutional. They looked like prisons or suburban high schools with their unadorned, square, windowless, cinder block walls and metal doors. The one thing that differentiated these buildings from those were the loading docks behind some of them. Each of the businesses had its own dumpster, again a dark brown, or green, or gray. She really couldn't tell. They were smaller than the ones outside the apartment complexes, and only one of them had stuff piled around it.

Leon didn't make any immediate move to get out of the van. He continued talking. "I helped a friend of mine dig through his ex-girlfriend's stuff. Kept it up for a while. She was a bitch."

"Why was she a bitch?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said. "All I know is she treated him like shit. She was like something from the Jerry Springer show. She slept with his best friend and his brother. So we started digging through her trash. But that was a bad idea. I mean, it didn't help."

Cassie thought about digging through specific garbage, the garbage of someone, anyone, she knew. She couldn't imagine doing it, not even for a couple of days. "So how long did you look through her trash?" she asked.

"About a month," he said.

"A month?"

"Yeah," said Leon. "He was almost as sick as she was, looking through things she'd touched or used, trying to find clues about what she was doing, what she was thinking. It was filthy. "

"So he was sick. Why'd you do it?"

"Don't know. " He paused. "Haven't you ever been sucked into anything stupid?"

She didn't answer. She figured keeping silent was as good as saying yes. Hadn't everyone been sucked into something stupid?

“So,” Leon continued, “I helped him get the stuff, and then I’d listen to him talk about what he thought it meant. Every time he’d sort through a load of her trash he’d come up with a detailed analysis of what was happening in her life. What a psycho.”

“So what happened?” she asked.

“I stopped going through her garbage, even if she was a bitch, because it was giving me the creeps,” he said. “And he joined the Navy. I’m not a big fan of the military, but sometimes it’s the right choice.”

Leon stopped talking and got out of the van. Cassie followed. In the record store dumpster, which was the first one they came to, he found a couple of stand-up cardboard cut-outs of some band she’d never heard of. “Might become a collectible,” Leon said. “Kind of funky.” He briefly struck a pose, like one of the leather-clad band guys.

Cassie wondered what it would be like to have an almost life-size stand-up cardboard representation of herself. She could put it in front of her window when she wasn’t home, to maybe scare away would-be burglars, like a scarecrow was supposed to intimidate crows, although she doubted it would work. Leon leaned his treasure against the back of the van and headed to the next dumpster, behind the stationery store.

Cassie noticed that he merely poked around on the top of the stuff. As far as she could tell, Leon wasn’t doing any real digging around.

“Don’t you sort through it?” she asked. “There might something on the bottom layers.”

“That’s part of my system,” Leon said. “I come by often enough so that I only have to do the top. Before the system, I found some nasty surprises.”

Thoughts of the dead baby flickered through her head again, but if she remembered the story correctly, the newspapers said that the baby was right on top of a pile of stuff. That was part of the pity. No shame. Whoever was dumping it didn’t even care.

“Yeah,” Leon continued, “It means I check most of the dumpsters daily, which is more time consuming but much better in the long run.” The bookstore dumpster didn’t

have anything. "That's too bad," Leon said. "I was hoping we'd find some cover-less books."

Cassie had read a few cover-less books, but she honestly preferred them covered. Paperbacks were fragile enough. They didn't need to have their fronts torn off.

When they reached the next dumpster in the row, one belonging to a party supply store, Leon surveyed the area carefully before hoisting himself into the big metal box. "I'll just be a minute or two," he said. Cassie stood in the moonlight, listening to the gentle rustling of cardboard and paper coming from inside the dumpster. She had a momentary pang of homesickness and was wondering what each of her parents might be doing just then, when Leon emerged, empty-handed. "I think someone might have been through this one already," he said.

As they approached the last dumpster in the row, the one behind the flower shop, Cassie heard something moving around on its far side. She pictured a racoon for some reason, although she knew a rat was a more likely suspect. A racoon killed her cat when she was a little girl. Poor old Mr. Grumpy, declawed and arthritic, didn't have a chance. She pulled back instinctively; she had no use for raccoons.

"You hear that?" she whispered to Leon, grabbing his arm to stop him.

"Hear what?" He stopped. "Doesn't sound dangerous," he said, in response to the continued rustling.

They approached slowly, with Leon leading the way. As he turned the corner around the dumpster to its open side, he said, "Hey," in a tone of voice that suggested he was addressing a human. Cassie turned the corner a second later and saw him, a smallish elderly man, wearing a dark blue windbreaker. The man said nothing in reply. He was standing on his toes, peering into the opening of the dumpster. He reached his hand in, picked up something without withdrawing it, shook his head and let it drop.

"Anything?" Leon asked.

"Nothing," he replied. He took a few steps toward them and smiled. He was wearing a statue of liberty headpiece made of foam, and was missing one of his front

teeth, but he was otherwise attractive. He looked like a little boy who, on his way to a fourth of July party, had suddenly gone gray haired. His smile was rather sweet, Cassie thought.

“Someone inside is taking the old stuff home to his wife or something,” Leon said.

The old man shrugged. Then he turned to leave.

“Better luck next time,” Leon said to his retreating form. The man disappeared from view, walking briskly away from the dumpsters into the dark.

“You shouldn’t talk to them normally,” Leon said. “Some of them are crazy.”

Standing in the shadow of the dumpster, Cassie smiled. This was something she knew without being told.

“I’ve seen him around though,” Leon said. “Just back here, behind this strip-mall. Every time he’s been looking for flowers.”

“Flowers?” Cassie asked.

“Yeah, or potted plants. There’s an old folks home a couple blocks away. I think he takes them to his wife or girlfriend.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Something was tapping at her window. She closed *Cunning of the Mountain Man*, and looked at her alarm clock. It was almost two in the morning. She listened for a minute. Ping. Ping. Ping. And then she got up from the bed.

When she peeked out from behind her window shade, she saw Leon standing in the back yard of Mrs. Schreiber's house. She waved. He waved back and then gestured for her to come join him. He pointed to a bag at his feet and then back up at her.

He was sitting on the front porch steps by the time she made it downstairs. "I was on my way home, and your light was on," he said.

She sat down on the steps beside him. "So you threw rocks at my window?"

"Gravel. How else was I supposed to let you know I was here?" He handed her a paper grocery sack, double bagged for extra strength. It was filled with books. "I brought you a present. I thought, why go to the trouble of taking these back to the store?"

"These came out of someone's dumpster." she said.

He nodded. "About an hour ago."

For some reason she felt better about accepting the books, knowing where they'd come from. She felt funny about getting presents from people; she always had. People who gave presents always seemed to expect something. But a present fresh from a dumpster seemed different to her, less threatening. Besides, she'd already accepted a present — the lady with no hands — from Leon, without any serious repercussions. She looked through the books on top of the bag: *Cryptozoic*, *The Rituals of Infinity*, *Exiles of the Stars*, *Gorgon Child*. "Thank you," she said.

"You're very welcome," he replied.

It was the sort of night she often read about in the Harlequin, Silhouette, or LoveSpell books. A moon waxing full hung overhead, the air was gorgeous with the scent of mimosa, the young woman, far from home and running from her past, sat inches from the more experienced and somewhat mysterious older man, a man who'd shown every indication that he was willing to be her friend, her mentor, her confidant, and, perhaps, more. Of course she had no feelings for Leon.

And even if she had, Lewis stepped out onto the front porch just then to smoke a cigarette. He squinted disparagingly in their direction. "I thought I heard someone out here. Kind of late for company, isn't it?" He pressed his wrist and peered at the green glowing that appeared there. "Two twelve," he said, before walking to the other side of the porch and lighting up.

"I was just getting ready to leave," Leon said, standing up. "Enjoy the books."

They weren't her usual fare. She was less interested in the speculative futures of science fiction than in the distorted pasts of westerns and historical romances. She wasn't sure she believed there would be a world of any kind come the twenty-second or twenty-third century. Her favorite western authors were the classics — Max Brand, Zane Grey, and Louis L'Amour. She'd started reading these because her father read them, but she wasn't particular. Anything in the genre would do. Romances became her second choice. They were cheap and plentiful and delivered satisfactions similar to those she experienced when she read horse operas. Her favorite romance writers were Johanna Lindsey and Janet Dailey, but again, within the genre she'd read almost anything.

Reading these was like reading the Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys mysteries of her childhood. She typically alternated between romances and westerns, and on a bad night could finish one of each before finally falling to sleep. Sometimes in her dreams, when sleep finally came, these stories ran together or cross-pollinated, producing evanescent technicolor sagas of tough range riding women and tender-hearted men who wanted

nothing more than to find their dashing female soul-mates and settle into true, passionate, and lasting love.

The books Leon had brought for her that night were mostly science fiction: *Robot Blues*, *The Great Stone of Sardis*, *Startide Rising*. She'd probably read them, some desperate insomniac night, and it was the thought that counted. As she was taking them out of the bag, she discovered something else in it: A notebook—one someone had apparently used as a diary.

Although Cassie had grown up at a time when the mysteries of the human heart and mind were laid bare, in an age when people eagerly discussed their hopes and dreams, sexual preferences, addictions, joys, embarrassments, disappointments, and sorrows on television talk shows, the prospect of reading someone's diary held a special appeal for her. It was true that she had seen mothers confess to sleeping with their daughters' husbands, husbands confess to wives of twenty years that they were gay, and teenaged girls come clean to their grandmothers about their jobs as strippers and hookers. "I thought she had an awful lot of spending money for a girl her age," one tearful granny said. She'd seen grandmothers share similar shocking revelations with children and grandchildren. "I didn't know anyone would pay to have sex with an old lady," remarked one grandson. "I guess that's cool. I mean, it's kind of nasty, but it's a free country. If she can find someone who wants to buy it from her, then it's her business." She'd seen the seemingly endless parade of paternity testers on Maury, Ricki, Sally, Jenny, and Jerry, people who'd bring up to half a dozen sexual partners onto some TV show in order to determine which one had fathered a child — a child who sat, according to the caption, safely backstage out of earshot, oblivious to the cussing and castigation associated with DNA results being made public in such a forum.

But even after seeing every possible type of dirty laundry aired on many different channels, she was still excited at the prospect of reading someone's diary. Diary writers didn't necessarily intend to share their thoughts with the world. It was quite possible they sometimes wrote to and for themselves. Reading a diary was a bit more like being

a peeping tom, looking at someone when he or she didn't know you were looking. It was like watching someone on a surveillance camera, and this was thrilling in a way that watching someone do a calculated strip-tease could never be.

She wondered about the impulse some people had to keep diaries and journals. She'd never been the sort to keep one. She believed that anything written down could be used against her, and that most of what she wrote would prove that she was an idiot. The thought of reading her own words, things she'd been foolish enough to write down, years later made her more than slightly nauseous.

She'd made a habit, since the end of the second grade, of burning all of her notebooks from the previous school year. It was her older brother Duane's ritual to begin with, but he'd seemed flattered when she started copying him. Some years she'd toasted marshmallows over the blaze and some years she'd just watched the pile of paper burn down to ashes. She'd amended this practice when she started college, but she was very selective in what she kept. Only notes for courses in her major escaped the yearly flames. Everything else was thrown on the grill. She suddenly realized that she hadn't burned her notebooks from the previous semester at school. She wasn't even sure she'd packed them when she'd left Tyler and their apartment. If she'd left them, Tyler would probably return them to her parents, she thought. She would burn them when she returned.

The notebook-diary from the bag Leon had brought her was dark blue, spiral bound, and contained college-ruled paper. It was a big book, with room for five different subjects. Leafing through it, Cassie saw that the writer had used various pens and pencils when making entries. Just glancing through them, she noted blue, black, and red ball point pen, both hard and soft leaded pencil, and a scattering of entries in felt tip pen, several of which had been damaged by moisture. These had bled until the words were swollen and, in places, an indecipherable, marbled blur on the page. Toward the middle of the notebook, there were pages littered with post-it notes.

The writer, she decided even before reading the first lines, was female. She had difficulty imagining a man keeping a diary unless he was a ship captain or something, and then it would be a log. Her father kept a log. All truckers were supposed to. She'd seen his open on the kitchen table, when she was at home, and had looked through it. But it was about fuel and freight weight and miles traveled. Although it presented some kind of record of how her father spent his days, it was nothing like a diary.

The handwriting in the diary was feminine and very neat in most places. Its first entry was dated 1985. Cassie couldn't remember much of anything about 1985. She knew she had started kindergarten that year, but when she tried to recall her teacher's name or the names of any of her classmates, she drew a blank. 1985 seemed rather far away, but not compellingly so. She was vaguely disappointed that the diary wasn't older and wasn't set in a more historically interesting time, but she started reading it anyway.

September 25, 1985

Last summer when I was helping Granny clean out the attic, I found my Momma's diaries. When I asked if I could read them, she said she couldn't see the harm in my looking at those old things. After I read them, I knew her some better, but not a lot.

In her diaries she and Granny went to town and ate lunch on Saturdays. Except for Granny, and Uncle Earl sometimes, my Momma never wrote much about the people that she knew. She didn't describe them except to write down what they gave her. People were always giving her presents — candy, handkerchiefs, writing paper, perfume, flowers, and lots of other things.

She went to dances with many different boys. One boy, she noted, was "very handsome." She wrote that twice about him, on two separate pages. But later she wrote, "I need to remember that just because people act nice doesn't mean they are nice."

She worked at a soda fountain and in the lingerie department at J. J. Southern's. She also took stenography classes so she could be a court secretary some day. And I know all about her clothes, how she'd put down two dollars on a dress and pay the rest a dollar a week until the dress was hers.

One page I remember was wrinkled and smeared to where I could barely read it. My Momma wrote with a fountain pen, with dark blue ink. Her middle-sized, Palmer method script was perfect, except on this one unusual page. I took that one to her, to see if she could decipher it for me.

She looked at her diary like she didn't remember it very well. I wonder what it must be like to get so old you forget the things you've done. She flipped the book open to the front and read to herself.

"Here I was sixteen," she said, smiling, and then she started to laugh and called to Granny who was watching T.V. in the front room. "Do you remember Eddie Randolph?" she asked. Granny called back, "Little fella with pop-eyes. Used to follow you around like you were a planet and he was your moon. Clove stick candy." Momma explained that every time she turned around Eddie Randolph was giving her clove stick candy because she told him once that she liked it.

When I asked her about the blurry page she told me she must have spilled a glass of water on it. I told her I thought maybe she'd been crying, but she said that she only used her diary to write down the good things that happened because they were the things she wanted to remember.

I hope I will use this notebook to remember the good things too. So someday, I can read it and smile like Momma did.

September 27, 1985

The one thing I promised myself I wouldn't write about is food. In my last diary, the only other one I ever kept, all I wrote about was food. I wrote what I ate for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I wrote what I had for snacks. This was supposed to be a

diet aid. Momma said the first step in changing my eating habits was becoming conscious of them. She said the way to do this was to write down everything I ate. I think she expected me to cheat and not write everything down, but I didn't cheat. I liked writing about the things I ate. It was almost as good as sitting down to eat it again. Although usually, by the time I'd finished writing I was hungry.

I let Momma and Granny read my diary sometimes, Momma because she was trying to help me with my eating, and Granny just because. Momma didn't tell me I needed to describe the food I ate, but she didn't tell me I shouldn't, and so I did. Granny liked some of my descriptions. She told me I ought to write for the newspapers about recipes and restaurants, or get a job describing food on menus. I hadn't thought about those things as jobs, but I guess there are a great many things that people get paid to do that I've never thought about.

Uncle Earl read part of my diary, but he wasn't supposed to. You aren't supposed to read someone's diary unless she allows you. A diary is supposed to be personal, even a diary about food. The worst part was he read from it aloud at the dinner table. I didn't know words could sound so stupid until he read them out loud.

He came home drunk that evening and ready to light into anyone I guess. But I still don't know why he decided to pick on me and my diary. I always locked it, so for Uncle Earl to read it, he had to bust it open. Not that breaking it would have been hard to do. The lock and key were just made of tin.

He said we were about the most pathetic women he'd ever seen. We just finished the blessing and were starting to pass plates around when he joined us. None of us said anything. That's what we usually did when he showed up yelling. Sometimes he'd shut up pretty quick and sometimes he wouldn't, but talking back to him, or even just asking him to lower his voice or show a little basic human decency only made him get madder. He just watched us pass supper around the table, until everyone had taken a helping of everything and all the food was down at his end of the table, waiting for him to fill his empty plate.

"Is somebody going to explain this?" he asked, holding up my little, pink, leatherette book.

We all tried to ignore him, although I know I turned several shades pinker than the diary. But he started waving it, like a pulpit preacher. Until Granny finally said, "Now Earl, put the girl's diary down."

But he didn't. He started reading instead. I hoped that he would start eating and maybe choke on his sweet potatoes, or that God would set the kitchen table on fire to shut him up. But neither of those things happened. I can still remember what I wrote, almost every word, even after all these years. Probably because it made me feel so bad when he read it out loud.

"Had cream of wheat for breakfast. Momma says it's fattening with all the butter and syrup I put on it, but Granny tells her to stop picking on me, that I'm just big boned. Granny made hush puppies and greens fried with fat back for lunch. And we would have had a cake too, for dessert, except that we got to eating the batter right out of the bowl. Granny and I share almost everything. Except she always has to have the last bite. She says the last bite of anything means you'll be an old maid, and she doesn't want that to happen to me."

"What the hell kind of diary is this?" he yelled. "Talking about buttered fresh peas and peaches with cream and marshmallow cookies and candy bars. Ain't it bad enough you all are raising her to be a fat freak? Now you got her writing about it?"

"She's trying to manage her weight Earl," Momma said. "Keeping track of what she eats is supposed to help."

"How's writing about food supposed to help?" he hollered. "Another idea from one of those damned ladies magazines I suppose."

Momma did have a weakness for the helpful hints in magazines, it's true. But some of their ideas weren't half bad, I didn't think, and the recipes were good.

"Doesn't anyone in this house have a life but me?" he asked. "This here . . . it just takes the cake, after it eats the cake, licks the crumbs off the plate, and tells you how delicious it was."

Granny stood up from her chair and told him to hush his mouth or leave the table. So he stood up. I don't think he was aiming at me, or at anything in particular, when he threw the diary. It missed my head and hit the wall behind me instead. Then he left the house, slamming the door behind him.

When he came back in a couple of days, he was in a much better mood. He must have found a new girlfriend, because that's usually what it took to smooth him out. He didn't ever apologize to me exactly, but when we were sitting on the front porch one evening, not too long after that, he told me, "I just hate to seeing you going to waste." Uncle Earl's idea of going to waste is something that I've never really understood. It wasn't like he had any room to talk. He just lived off the settlement he got from suing the grocery store after he slipped in the frozen foods aisle and threw out his back. But I do know he liked for females to look pretty and be sweet to him. And I was a big disappointment to him because I wasn't very good at either of those things.

Cassie felt a little bad when she got to the line about diaries being private, and she briefly considered putting the notebook down. But then she told herself that she was being ridiculous. Anything that ended up in a dumpster was fair game.

As she read on, she was very glad that the girl didn't write about food. To Cassie, food was something singularly uninteresting, something to be scraped off of plates. She'd be perfectly happy, she sometimes thought, if she could just take a pill in the morning, like a vitamin, and be done with the problem of nourishment for the day.

September 30, 1985

I told my Momma I would be fine, and I will be. I just didn't know that being by myself would be quite so hard. I thought I was getting used to people going away, after

Uncle Earl left, and then Granny died. I thought I was gradually getting used to being more and more alone, and it wouldn't be so different, being all alone. But it is.

The cable man isn't due to come by until tomorrow, I can't get any channels, and I'm lonely. There are some people outside in the parking lot hollering. At first I thought they were on the television, turned up loud in someone else's apartment, but it's real people, at least two women and a man. Maybe more than one man. I wonder if they're my neighbors? I don't know any of my neighbors yet.

Of course, I could be in Kansas. Frederick and Momma are going to be away for a long time on their honeymoon, and he said I was more than welcome to stay in his house while they're away. But he was only saying that for Momma's benefit. I could tell he didn't mean it. Before she died, he was very sympathetic about Granny, and said he understood how Momma felt obligated to look after her, but when it came to me he told Momma, "She's a big, healthy girl, and she ought to have a life of her own, learn how to take care of herself." I think he knew I was eavesdropping when he said that, and it made me feel ashamed. Momma said I'd never really been on my own for very long, but he said all his children had managed to survive it.

He's more than happy to give me money, as long as I don't live with them. He offered to send me to the Bible college, or to secretarial school, or whatever I wanted. Then Momma told him about what happened last year, how I didn't do so well when I tried to go to school. So he helped me to get a job instead.

If Granny had lived, I probably would have gone to Kansas, to help take care of her. But two weeks before she was supposed to move, she died in her sleep. After that, I really didn't see the point in moving. Granny didn't want to go to Kansas. I almost think she died to avoid it. So, why would I want to go there?

I wish they'd left me in the house. It was the only place I'd ever lived. But Frederick said it was too much house for an eighteen-year-old girl to take care of, and too far out of the way. So instead, I'm here. Frederick and Momma helped me to find this apartment and a job. Frederick was going to buy me a car too, but Momma told

him I didn't know how to drive, and I told him I wasn't ready to learn just yet. He thought that was crazy. I could see it in his eyes, but I don't need his car. I can walk where ever I need to, or take a taxi or a bus.

Maybe when they get back from their honeymoon I'll go to Kansas. Momma would be happy to have me there, and maybe Frederick will come around. I thought I'd like having everything new and clean and belonging just to me, but I don't. It's more friendly if things move around. Like the dish towel. When I go to find it, it's right where I hung it up. I guess that's convenient, but it makes me feel lonely.

Oct 1, 1985

Tonight on "The Waltons" John Boy entered a dance marathon, even though his mother, Olivia, thought it was a bad idea. Fortunately, she and John Sr. came to rescue him, so he didn't have to finish it. He looked exhausted.

I'm glad they're rerunning all the old shows. I remember watching them with Granny. I remember watching the ones with the new John Boy too, but I like the old ones better, even if Richard Thomas does have that mole on his face. Granny always said she found it very distracting because she kept thinking he had a bug on his cheek. She kept waiting for him to reach up and flick it off. But I think, most of the time, it wasn't so noticeable.

October 4, 1985

A letter today from Momma. She and Frederick are leaving on their cruise, and she wanted to remind me not to worry. They'll be back in a month and she said she's going to send me lots of postcards. She sent along some pages from a catalog. "Thank goodness they're finally trying to make something attractive in sizes for larger women," she wrote. And she circled one outfit, and wrote beside it, "Cute on you!" I imagine that's what I'm getting for my birthday. It's a bright paisley two-piece dress, cut loose. The catalog describes it as "flowing and glowing." Well, maybe so. Even though it isn't

much use, Momma still worries about what I wear. She thinks it's important for a woman to "keep herself up," like she's a wall, or a picture hanging on a wall. I try sometimes, but it doesn't seem to matter if I do. I look in the mirror and I can see that I'm always going to be way too big to fit inside anyone's idea of pretty. I'll never be little and delicate like my Momma, not even if I lost a hundred and fifty pounds.

When I was younger, I used to watch her when she was getting ready for a date. I liked being inside the steam-filled bathroom. It was like being inside a big, warm cloud.

First she'd have her bath, in water so hot I could hardly stand it. When I dipped the washcloth into it, to wash her back, I'd bite my lip. And then she'd shave her legs. This scared me because no matter how slow and careful she was while she was shaving, she almost always cut herself. The hot water made the blood just pour out of those little cuts, and I swore I'd never shave myself because I didn't think smooth legs were worth bleeding over.

Then she'd rise up out of the tub, soft and pink, with blood running down her calves toward her ankles. As she toweled herself dry, she tore bits of toilet paper from the roll and stuck them to the cuts to help stop the bleeding. She looked a sight with a towel wrapped around her, a towel knotted into a turban around her wet hair, and the dots of toilet paper clinging to her legs.

But when she was done, she was beautiful. She'd pile her hair high on her head, line her eyes, color her lips, put on a tight, shiny dress, and shoes with sequins and tiny heels. After she'd leave I'd sometimes pull the Kleenex out of the trash can, to look at how the lipstick marks stayed there, in the shape of her mouth making a kiss.

October 6, 1985

Sometimes it bothers me that I never really knew my father. All I have are the memories from before I was three and what my Momma told me. She said he was handsome, and I guess he must have been to her. She said he was big, and that much I

sincerely believe, since I'm supposed to resemble him. Granny said, "Ain't no doubt. Dan Rapture was a big man. Six foot nine if he was an inch." More than him I'm supposed to resemble his sisters, Edythe Rapture Brown and Alice Rapture Smiley, the Rapture aunts, who looked a whole lot like their brother, only female. They were both a good six feet in their stockings. In a certain mood, Momma talked a lot about the Raptures. Not just about my Daddy, but about the family he'd come from. I don't remember the Aunts at all, but Momma said that Aunt Alice was the more sensible of the two. "She married someone her own size anyway." Supposedly her husband, Hampten Smiley, was almost as tall as Alice and a whole lot wider. Momma said they busted up one of those heart shaped beds at a hotel in the Poconos on their honeymoon, and she seemed to think that people that big ought not have honeymoons, let alone romp around while having them. Aunt Edythe married little bitty Wallace Brown, and they died tragically on a canoe trip. Momma seemed to think that this wasn't surprising. "A woman that size, going on a canoe trip, with a man that small was asking for trouble."

I don't think my Momma was asking for trouble when she married big, handsome Dan Rapture, but she got it anyway. First he gave her a big, old baby, and then he went away. I was born twelve pounds, seven ounces. Bald as a cue ball and cross-eyed in the bargain. Of course, both of those conditions corrected themselves with time.

Momma said she could feel her body separating down a center seam when she was giving birth to me. And that was with all the drugs they could give her without killing her. The way she told it, it must have hurt so bad, I don't ever ever want to have a baby. Not that it seems likely to happen.

Sometimes I wonder if I resemble my Dad and his people as much as I've been told. I wonder if he's still alive, and what would happen if I ran into him somewhere. I don't imagine any of those tearful reunions like they write about in "The Ladies Home Journal" or "Woman's Day." I just wonder what it would be like.

The last time I saw him he handed me a toy dump truck and told me to go play in the sandbox. I sometimes wish I still had that truck. It was his birthday present to me

that year, the last thing he ever gave me. When I was a child, it was my favorite toy. I had such faith in that truck. I almost dropped it out of a three story window onto the concrete stoop below, when I was seven, just to watch it bounce. I knew it wouldn't break. It was built to last, out of tempered metal, with smooth, moving parts and real rubber wheels. My mother caught me just as I was about to let it go. "What if Uncle Earl or your Granny came around the corner, when you let loose of that truck?" she asked. "You could knock them dead." It was a heavy truck and would have taken on considerable momentum dropping through the thin air. I didn't think of anyone being underneath though. I just wanted to drop it.

Fifteen years is a long time and I don't suppose he'd know what to say if we ever happened to meet. I'm sure I wouldn't. But I'd have to recognize him, if I favor him as much as they say, except that I'm fat and soft with breasts. It would probably scare him into a heart seizure, to see a fat, young, female version of himself walking down the street toward him.

CHAPTER SIX

October 7, 1985

Grace, who sits next to me at work, changes her job description, depending on what we're trying to sell. When we were selling funeral plots, she called herself a real estate agent. She said, "I'm selling land, aren't I? The last piece of land anyone's ever going to own." Sometimes she just says she's a dream merchant. Her ambition, she told me, is to work on a home shopping channel. She says she knows her looks aren't exactly right for TV, but she's certainly willing to have some plastic surgery. Even if she never gets a television job, she told me she'd like to have a few things done.

Grace scares me a little bit, but she is good at the job. I don't know how she manages to talk without pausing for air, but she does. I can't talk nearly so fast, and I need to breathe. She says another problem I have is that I apologize too much. "People like to buy things," she says. "And if they don't, they can just hang up the phone. Or let the machine pick it up." We sell all kinds of things. Insurance and coffee makers and children's books, magazines, and knives, and hair removal cream. And sometimes we do surveys. I like those best. I think I'm better at asking questions than I am at getting people to buy things.

October 10, 1985

As much as I don't like my job, I didn't expect to apply for a new one. Especially not one waiting on tables. You don't see too many big, fat waitresses. Maybe because it might scare the customers into eating less. Or maybe because a waitress has to rush around and most fat people don't move too fast. I'm pretty quick for someone my size, though, and when I saw the sign, I figured I might as well try. The sign was propped up

in the front display window between two plastic pineapples, and it said "Waitress Needed." Need cuts deeper than want, and I figured if they really need someone they might just hire me. I'm just so sick of calling up people who hang up on me, and I've always wanted to be a waitress.

I must have walked past that diner dozens of times before without noticing it or the sign. The front of the building is flush with the sidewalk and its outside is painted a bright sky blue, so I should have seen it, but I didn't. Something about it seems kind of shy, if a building can be called shy. It reminds me of a person who wants to smile and shake hands but who stutters and can't quite manage to. It has a beautiful, big front window though, and maybe, sometimes, I'll get to sit on a stool at the end of the counter and look out. I'm sure there's always something interesting to see on Main Street. And even if I don't, there will be people coming in. And they'll already know they're hungry, so I won't have to try to sell them something they don't want. I'll just have to hand them a menu and let them choose

When I went in to apply, the waitress on duty was sitting on a stool at the lunch counter. The diner was almost empty and she looked bored. She just stared at me when I didn't sit down, and then asked, like she was annoyed, "Can I help you?" I pointed back toward the front window and the sign, waiting for my voice to follow. I finally managed to ask her if they needed a waitress.

She looked at me and then looked toward the back of the restaurant at a closed door, and then she laughed. "Sure as hell do," she said. "Do you have any experience?" I shook my head and was ready to start explaining how I was a quick learner, but she stopped me.

"It doesn't matter," she said. "Show up in the morning. He won't be happy but you're better than nothing."

October 11, 1989

Too tired to write much, but I got the job. The other waitress quit and there was no one to take her place so Mr. Cosimo hired me. He didn't take the sign out of the window though, which kind of hurt my feelings.

My first day didn't go so well, starting with the apron. We had to safety pin it on me since there wasn't enough sash to tie. But then, before I was leaving for the day, the other waitress found a bigger one. Mr. Cosimo who hired me yells a lot. Not just at me. He yells at Martha the other waitress, and he yells at Mr. Otis who helps to cook. The only people he doesn't yell at are the customers, but I think he would like to yell at them too.

I called in sick tonight to PHONEUSA. I was too tired to go in to work there, after working all day. I didn't used to have any jobs, and now I have two!

October 13

Every Saturday when I was younger, Granny and I used to go into town. She'd get her hair done and we'd go out to lunch at the restaurant in the Newberry's. She'd order BLT's and iced tea for both of us. Sometimes Momma would come too.

I couldn't stay in Leola's Beauty parlor with Granny because the fumes from the permanent wave solution gave me allergic reactions. So, I'd wait for her in the restaurant. I had a lot of time to watch the waitresses there. Their movements were fast and smooth, and they called everyone "Honey," or "Sweetie." I wanted to be like them. When they were good at their job they were always quick and kind and helpful. Some of them seemed to know what we needed before we even had the chance to ask. I thought they were wonderful. I wanted a name tag and an order pad with carbon paper. I wanted to stick ball point pens behind my ears and in my hair.

My Momma would say it wasn't a proper ambition, not like wanting to be a teacher or a fireman or a data entry specialist, a medical technician, a mechanic, or an

insurance salesman. People don't want to wait tables, it's just something they do while they're trying to become what they really want to be. But I wanted to be a waitress, and now I am.

Cassie could barely imagine anyone really wanting a waitress job. She'd hated being a waitress, for the short time that she'd been one. She'd hated saying hello to all the customers, hated having to introduce herself over and over again during a shift. Even though she wore a name tag, which she also hated, her manager insisted that the pat little speech be given at every table. "Hi. My name is Cassie and I'll be your server today." She'd have preferred being a telemarketer, if those were her only two choices. The idea of being a disembodied voice appealed to her. She'd even thought, briefly, of trying to become one of those women who talk dirty on the 800 numbers. She imagined such people made good money and learned a lot of secrets about human behavior. But she didn't know who to contact about getting a job like that, and then Tyler told her she'd probably have to do sick things, like pretend she was an eight-year-old girl, or even an eight-year-old boy. What she really wanted to do was be a night watchman. Since she couldn't sleep very well at night and didn't deal with people very well, she thought it would be a perfect job for her, but Tyler had told her no one was going to hire a skinny little girl to protect their property.

October 18, 1985

If it wasn't for Mr. Otis, I'd have had to quit the diner. Mr. Cosimo doesn't ever explain how to do anything. He just waves a spatula, gives me the evil eye, and calls me a stupid girl. Mr. Otis tells me how to write up an order and what the food abbreviations are supposed to look like. An entire breakfast can be written as "3 O.M. WW s/o Bac lg. OJ cof. An entire lunch, if it's one of the menu standards, can be written as a single number. 4, for example, is two hotdogs (served with mustard, onions, and relish on the side), french fries, and slaw. There are no substitutions!! I can write 4, no

slaw, but if I put in a ticket with 4, no slaw sub. bb, that's baked beans, Mr. Cosimo will turn bright red and wave the spatula. Margaret, the other waitress, says I will get used to him, or else I won't and I'll quit like everyone else does. She's not very friendly so far, but she does help carry my orders to the tables for me when I'm not moving them fast enough.

I'm still working at PHONEUSA, but only for a little while. I gave notice tonight and my supervisor just shrugged. Grace said, "At least you were decent and said something. Most people just get fed up and don't show up, except to pick up that final paycheck." I can't believe that people would do that.

Cassie had her doubts about the Fat Girl lasting as a waitress. Big women had to have a harder time working tables. Their feet must hurt them terribly, carrying all that weight around. When she waited tables, Cassie's feet had swollen and she'd had to soak them every night in Epsom salts, and she was a normal-sized person. She didn't weigh three hundred pounds. Which was, for some reason, what she'd started to imagine the fat girl weighed.

Cassie also hoped that the customers hadn't been too mean. At the restaurant where she'd worked, she'd seen this big old high school girl reduced to tears by a customer. He'd bellowed at her, loud enough for the whole restaurant to hear, "I ordered this rare, you fat cow, now take it back!" The poor girl just stood there blubbering with a cream pitcher in one hand and a bowl of those little butter patties in the other.

October 23, 1985

In the afternoons, when things are slow, I watch Main Street through the front window of the diner. I have a pretty good view from my stool at the end of the counter near the snack cracker display rack. There aren't any crackers in the rack. Mr. Otis told me that one day, fifteen or twenty years ago, Mr. Cosimo realized that people eating cheap snacks weren't buying as much menu food. So he stopped stocking snack

crackers. But he never took the rack down, and on rainy days people stack their umbrellas against it and hang their hats on it to dry. The smell reminds me of the coat rooms in my grade school. Wet wool and galoshes. I like looking out the window on rainy days the best. The street becomes my aquarium then, and all the people are my strange fish. I hope it will snow this winter. The view from the window will be like looking out of a snow globe.

October 24, 1985

Momma called today to say hello and to see how I'm doing. I told her everything is okay, that I like being a waitress. She said she wished I would reconsider about going to school and that Frederick said hello. I'll bet that's about all he said, if he even said that much.

I wonder what would be happening now if Momma had never answered that personal ad. We'd still be living back at home I guess. Or maybe she would have met someone else. Granny said, when she met Frederick, she was about due. She met him from an ad in a magazine. I thought it was the one in the "Sun" in Sheela Woods' "Have-A-Friend" section, the one that said, "King looking for his Queen. I'm a hound dog living in heartbreak hotel without the wonder of you. If you're 35-50, ladylike and petite and are looking for a hunka hunka burnin' love, please reply. No fatties or hard drugs." But Granny told me it was a different ad, from some other magazine. I never saw what it said, but he was the first and only magazine man Momma ever dated, and she ended up marrying him. Granny and I weren't surprised that she answered the ad, but I, for one, was surprised by the marrying part.

Momma did always like to take a chance. She enters contests all the time and plays the lottery every week. Or at least she used to, before she married Frederick. I expect she still does, if he lets her. Of course the only thing she ever won that amounted to anything was a big fiberglass cow the size of our living room sofa and a lifetime supply of sweetened condensed milk. I'm sure Frederick made her leave it with the

house. There's just no way he'd want to move something like that all the way to Kansas. Still there are worse things to win than that. At least you can make something out of it. With that much milk, you could make about a thousand pounds of fudge.

October 26, 1985

Tonight I went to the movies. There's a movie theater next door to the diner, the Majestic Theater. It might have been majestic once, but now it looks run down. Although it's right next door to the diner, I haven't been to the movies until tonight. I've been too tired from work. Or maybe I've just been afraid to go out to someplace where I didn't have to go. I don't feel that way about work, because work is someplace where they expect you, but going some place apart from work is different.

The marquee was lit up and drawing people, the way a light bulb draws moths. When I looked up and saw that the movies playing were "Coal Miner's Daughter" and "Sweet Dreams," the movie about Patsy Cline, I decided to go myself.

Granny and I used to go to the show sometimes on a Friday or Saturday night when Momma had a date. And sometimes I'd stay home from school, and we'd go to the bargain matinee. We didn't go as much as we would have liked to because neither of us could drive, and it got expensive taking the taxi, but when we went we always had fun.

The ticket seller was nice to me. He said, "How's Mr. Cosimo treating you?" I recognized him too. He's come into the diner several times. He usually orders the number five (cheese steak and fries) with a large cherry coke. "I'm Putty," he said, sticking his hand through the ticket booth. It barely fit and I couldn't really shake it, just tap his fingers with mine. And then he told me that I could go to the movie for free. I thought he was kidding, but he said, "Waitress special. On the house," and waved me in.

I recognized the guy at the concession stand too. He comes in with the ticket seller, but he doesn't eat. He just drinks diet sodas and chews on his straw until the plastic shreds. He didn't say hello to me, just handed me my Junior Mints and my change. I don't think he's a very happy person.

After the show I stopped by the ticket booth, to thank Putty for letting me in for free, but the shade was drawn in the ticket booth and I didn't want to bother him. I think I'd like to have that job. The view from that booth must be wonderful. It's small, but I think I'd fit.

October 30, 1985

I went to the movies again tonight. They were showing "The Tinger" and "The Hand," two horror pictures. Neither one of them was very believable, so I'm not afraid. It's only movies where I think it could really happen that keep me up at night, like "The China Syndrome." That was a scary movie.

This time a long-haired boy was selling the tickets. He comes into the diner with Putty and the angry looking one who runs the concession stand, but I don't know his name. He said, "You work next door," when I paid for my ticket, and "Enjoy the show," when he handed it to me. I wanted to ask where Putty was but I didn't.

November 1, 1985

Yesterday was Halloween. Mr. Cosimo and Martha didn't dress, but Mr. Otis wore a pair of those dark framed glasses with the nose and mustache attached. He looked pretty silly standing over the grill, giggling about his costume. I didn't dress up. I haven't dressed up for Halloween since I was five years old. For once being almost perfectly round worked to my advantage because I went as a pumpkin, but I ended up in the emergency room after I bit into an apple with a razor blade in it. Mouth cuts bleed something terrible, and I still have a scar on my tongue. After that, Momma didn't want for me to go out on Halloween, and I've never liked apples much since. They caught the boy who did it and put him in the juvenile home. He'd only put a razor in one apple apparently, so it was like I won the lottery in reverse by getting it. No one ever thought he put it in the apple for me in particular since I didn't know him. It wasn't a grudge or anything. It was just random.

I don't remember too much about it anymore, but I still don't dress up for Halloween. But when I was on my way home from work someone hollered at me from a car window and asked if I was supposed to be an elephant or a blimp. People who holler out of cars are low.

I think I've accepted who I am, and I don't mind my size so much really, except when it comes to looking for clothes. I've been working in the clothes I have until now, but Mr. Cosimo told me that I need to get a proper uniform, that it doesn't look right not to have one. So, today I went looking, right after I got off work. I don't think they expect really big people to work as waitresses. When she came over, the sales-lady at the uniform shop was nice enough, but she said, "Honey, I just don't think I can help you." She suggested that I might have to special order, and that it would take a while. But I thought to go to the Salvation Army store, and I found a peach colored polyester dress and a nice black apron with pockets. There must have been another big waitress around here somewhere.

Looking at the small, pretty handwriting on the pages of the notebooks, Cassie had difficulty picturing the diary writer as big and fat. However, the details she included left little room for doubt. She wondered if someone trained in handwriting analysis could tell that kind of thing from looking at a writing sample, but she doubted it. She'd had her handwriting analyzed once, at a university activities fair. He'd told her she was impulsive, and he said Tyler was going to be a millionaire.

The fact that she had no name for the girl bothered her. She didn't like thinking of her as just "the fat girl," but since the writer didn't give her name or any other remarkable details about herself Cassie didn't know what else to call her. It would have been weird, she supposed, for the writer to refer to herself by name, although in books characters did that sometimes. Even though she'd never read it, she knew *Moby Dick* started with "Call me Ishmael," and on the first page of *David Copperfield*, it was clearly stated: "The personal history and experience of David Copperfield the younger." She looked the notebook over carefully, searching the margins for doodles where the girl

might have inadvertently identified herself, but the writer had protected her anonymity, if not her privacy, by refusing to write her name anywhere obvious.

Cassie did find the name "Todd" in the margins of several pages near the end of the notebook. This couldn't be the girl's name though, not unless it was her last name. Where ever it appeared "Todd" was written in tiny perfect letters, so small and delicate that Cassie had to strain to read them.

The only time Cassie had ever written a name so carefully and minutely was when she was in the seventh grade, back when she'd had her first serious crush, on a boy named Robert Ross. While other girls scrawled the names of the boys they were "going with," whatever that might have meant in the seventh grade, all over their school binders and notebooks, using gaudy markers, in lurid colors like fuschia and lime green, she'd contented herself with minute, almost unreadable letters, painstakingly inscribed on almost every page she wrote. Bobby Ross was her first boyfriend and her first secret. She wondered where Bobby Ross was now. His family had moved away at the end of eighth grade year, and although she'd heard rumors about his brother ending up in jail, she had no idea what had happened to Bobby.

November 3, 1985

Now that I've gone to the movies next door, Putty talks to me when he comes into the diner. He usually comes in first and then the other two. The one who works at the concession stand is called Stick and the long-haired one is named Draper. Stick does most of the talking at their table, and he always seems to be complaining. Draper doesn't say much. Putty laughs the most, and he leaves the biggest tip. Of course, he eats the most, so that makes sense. I think they're all about my age, but I'm not sure. They act like they've been friends forever. They eat off of each others' plates and sometimes help pay for each others' food. I've had friends before, people I sat with in the school cafeteria and went to their birthday parties, and I had Connie, until she

dropped out of school. I guess she's the closest I've ever had to friends like that. But it wasn't quite the same, and she was gone before the eleventh grade anyway.

November 5, 1985

Today Mr. Cosimo hired another waitress and told me he was going to cut back on my hours starting next week. I've always known he doesn't like me much, but it still hurt my feelings, especially since I'm doing the best I can, and I haven't spilled or dropped anything. Mr. Otis said "Why do you want to work so hard anyway? It will only make you old and grey like me." But he was just trying to make me feel better.

Tonight the Majestic was showing "Barbarella" and "Fantastic Voyage." When I bought my ticket, I asked Putty if they always show double features. He said they usually do because people like to feel they're getting more for their money.

I think that after he finishes selling tickets he's able to come in and watch the movie. Tonight, I saw him come into the theater and sit down across the aisle from where I was. I think he might have waved at me before he sat down, but I'm not absolutely sure. It was hard to tell in the dark.

November 9, 1985

Martha said the new waitress showed up this morning so drunk that Mr. Otis had to send her home. "She was practically falling over drunk. I was afraid she was going to yak," Martha said. I wonder if this means I'll get my hours back? I hope so. I like my job. I like having something to do.

November 11, 1985

The one they call Stick smells funny. I wasn't sure at first which one of them it was, since they all sit together, but today Stick came in first and the smell came with him. I don't know what kind of cologne it is, but it's strong and he wears too much of it.

My Uncle Earl, who wore Old Spice, but only a normal amount most of the time, explained to me why people wear perfume and cologne in the first place. "Most people think it's to attract the opposite sex," he said. "That's what the television commercials want you to believe. And up to a point it's true. That's why I wear it. But it has other uses. People who wear a lot of cologne aren't trying to attract anyone. They're trying to disguise their smell so other people can't know them. This makes it so their blood enemies can't find them. We all have blood enemies you know. But the only way we can find them is by their smell." I guess the one called Stick has a lot of blood enemies and is being very careful, but someone should tell him that his cologne is too loud.

November 12, 1985

Momma called this evening to talk about Thanksgiving plans. It seems Frederick's oldest daughter wants to have them to her house in Michigan. Momma said she thought of course I'd be invited, but that Frederick isn't sure how his daughter is going to feel about having another person. Momma said she told Frederick if I wasn't welcome then she wasn't going. She says she's sure he'll send me a plane ticket.

I wanted to tell her I'm not sure I want to fly, that it makes me nervous. I wanted to tell her that it won't matter where I am, that without Granny it won't seem like Thanksgiving anyway, but she was so busy being irritated with Frederick's daughter and the possibility that I might not be welcome there, I didn't have any room to say much of anything.

Then, while we were talking, Frederick came in, and she started talking to him while she was talking to me. I couldn't hear much of their conversation. I think maybe she was covering up the receiver with her hand, but when she got back on the line she was bright and cheerful, and she told me to expect a ticket in the mail any day.

So, I guess I'm going to Michigan for Thanksgiving. It will be better than being here all alone, I suppose.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Apparently, the fat girl wasn't one of those "I have to write in my diary every single day" types. After an initial cluster of entries, a big chunk of time was missing from the notebook. Why hadn't she written at all during December? What had she done for Thanksgiving and Christmas? Maybe she'd been all alone for the holidays and was too depressed to write. Maybe she just sat around, watched television, and ate. Since she was trying not to write about food, this speculation made sense. Cassie imagined the gap between diary entries filled with ice cream, pastries and donuts, caramel apples, cookies, and fudge, as if the Good Ship Lollipop had docked in the fat girl's apartment. This thought made her a bit queasy.

Perhaps the fat girl had grown tired of her diary and had stopped writing for a while, or maybe she'd gone to Kansas, to visit Momma and Frederick. If so, the events that transpired there may well have been too horrible to write about. Or perhaps, if she'd traveled for the holidays, the fat girl merely left her diary behind and resumed writing in it when she returned from her trip. It was even possible that the fat girl had excised some pages from the notebook. Maybe she'd finally gotten pissed at Frederick and Momma for forcing her to live by herself and had written things that she later regretted. Cassie checked the wire rings of the notebook and found tell-tale paper remnants, evidence that pages had been torn out. But this didn't prove that the fat girl had "edited" her diary. She could have torn pages from it to write letters home, or to make grocery lists or paper airplanes. Cassie would never know.

The diary resumed after the beginning of the new year, with no explanation for the missing weeks.

January 6, 1986

Old Della Parness came in around two today, as usual. Before she came in, she stood out on the sidewalk in front of the diner, waving her handbag around and cocking her head from side to side, like she was having a conversation with someone. I've never seen a grown woman with an imaginary friend before. Sweet Mr. Otis says she's talking to the pixies, but Mr. Cosimo says she's a nut, and she scares the other customers away. He's afraid of her and refuses to take money from her hand. I think that's the only reason he taught me to use the cash register, so I can ring her up. He usually likes to be the one to take the money.

She leaves pudding splatters and gravy dribbles, like a child who's just learning to eat, all over her table, but I like to wait on her anyway. She always says, "Thank you darling," in a deep smokey voice like an old time movie star's. Mr. Otis says she was once a beautiful woman. I can see that. She has good bones.

Putty and Draper came in today and asked if I'd seen Stick, but he hadn't been in. He doesn't come in without one of the two of them. They didn't stay for lunch, but Putty said, "See you at the movies." The movies change tonight, so I think I'll go.

January 8, 1986

I went to the movies last night. They were playing a double feature, "It Came from Outer Space," and "Forbidden Planet." I think I like the movies where the aliens come to earth more than the ones where they send ships to other planets.

Putty hadn't been in to the diner all day, and I wanted to say hello, but he was talking on the phone in the ticket booth when I bought my ticket, so I didn't get to do anything but wave at him. There weren't many people in the theater. I only counted nine. But maybe there were more in the balcony. I wonder how they can stay in business. Mr. Cosimo says business at the diner is terrible, and we do much better than that. Stick was working the concessions. I waved at him when I passed by, but he didn't

wave back. He just stood there behind the "Twizzlers," scowling. I can't believe that I wait on him almost every day and he doesn't even say hello.

January 12, 1986

Caroline quit and then Leslie-Ann, who was just hired to replace her, and I've been working both morning and afternoon shifts. It's a good thing we aren't too busy, or I wouldn't be able to handle things. Mr. Otis helps me and Martha out as much as he can. Martha's arthritis has been flaring up, but at least she doesn't talk about quitting. Mr. Cosimo still doesn't like me, and I suspect he'd fire me if he could, but he's stuck with me because he can't keep any one else. Caroline said the tips are worse here than at the Woolworth, and she thought the Woolworth was as bad as it got. Leigh Anne said Mr. Cosimo is too mean and cheap to work for. He kept yelling at her for putting too much whip cream on the rice pudding. She said she'd rather dance in her underwear at "The Fantasy Palace" than work here. She said that I ought to consider it. That some men have a thing for fat girls. But I could never dance around in my underwear, except maybe at home alone.

Since it's my first time as a waitress, I don't know about the tips here. They seem okay to me, but I don't have anything to compare them to. I still haven't gotten over finding money underneath the plates when I clear them away. It makes me think of the tooth fairy. Of course, I don't have to worry the way most people do. I have Frederick to help pay my bills. He wasn't happy that I'd quit the job he'd found me, but as long as I stay here, away from him and Momma, he isn't liable to complain.

January 16, 1986

I've been dreaming at night that I'm still at work, and I wake up tired already, and confused about which day it is. There are too many plates in my dreams, more plates than we have in the whole diner, and there are more tables in the dreams too, and I don't recognize any of the customers. That's the worst part in the dream, all the

strange-looking, unfamiliar people who all say, "This isn't what I ordered. Miss, I did not order this. Take this back and bring me what I ordered." I'm afraid when I walk to work in the morning, that the diner will be filled with people I don't know. But then I get there and it's Mr. Otis, and Martha, and Mr. Cosimo, and the regulars. I'm so happy to see them, even Mr. Cosimo. But then he starts yelling and ruins it.

January 22, 1986

Today I asked Mr. Otis to tell me about some of the people who come in to eat here all the time. Martha calls them the creatures of habit, but Mr. Otis says they're just the regulars. The woman who carries the empty violin case was, according to Mr. Otis, a player in a European symphony. The smiling man with the bad dentures, who writes down everything instead of talking, was in the war. I was embarrassed to ask which one and what it had done to the poor man's voice. I don't want Mr. Otis to think that I'm ignorant of history. A person ought to at least know about the wars, but I don't.

Most of the regulars live in apartments over downtown businesses, and the rest work at the insurance company or at banks or at various small businesses on the block. Mr. Otis said, "Some of these people have been coming in here for twenty years. I think maybe some have been coming in for thirty." I asked him "How old is the diner anyway?" and he told me to guess. I guessed thirty, but he said closer to fifty, and that he should know because he's worked here his whole life, along with Mr. Cosimo.

"Don't they get tired of eating the same thing every day?" I asked him. "The ones who've been coming in for twenty years."

"Maybe they don't eat the same thing every day," he said.

"But I thought that was part of what makes them regulars," I said. Most of the people who come in all the time order the same thing all the time. He knows that as well as, or better than, I do. He'll start cooking their orders as soon as they step through the door, and he wouldn't do that if he wasn't sure because Mr. Otis hates to waste food.

"They mix it up sometimes," he said. "In twenty years, they've changed things around. They might order the same thing this week as they ordered last week, but they don't order the same thing they ordered five years ago." I must have looked skeptical because he added, "And we change things around. We're always trying to improve the menu."

Martha says the menu has been the same since she started working here eight years ago. She eats the same things every day for lunch (a tossed salad and a chocolate milk shake) "because everything else is frozen or deep fried." She says she doubts there is any real meat at all in the perfectly round patties they cook up into hamburgers. I eat them sometimes, and they taste okay, but she says they can do amazing things with artificial flavoring and coloring these days. "They can make plain old sawdust taste like filet mignon," she says, "I saw it on TV."

The food here really isn't very good, but I'd never say anything to Mr. Otis about it. He seems proud of it, and I'd never say anything to hurt his feelings. I will say that his food looks better than Mr. Cosimo's. Mr. Cosimo will serve things half-done when he's in a hurry, or he'll press the food against the grill to make it cook faster. This is okay with burgers and bacon, but he makes a grilled cheese sandwich that's as flat as a cracker. I wonder sometimes how he's stayed in business for so many years, and why people would come back for the food here year after year. But I guess that people can get attached, even to things that it doesn't make any sense at all getting attached to.

January 24, 1986

The customers who come in every day aren't always my favorites, but if they don't come in I wonder where they are. Rudy the Mouth, and Mr. Microphone eat breakfast here every day. And the bank ladies come in every day for their coffee break. Charlie, the one Martha calls "Cream of Wheat," comes in every afternoon for his bowl of cereal. Martha says electro-shock fried his brain. "Whatever was wrong with him before," she said, "Must have been bad, if this is the cure."

I asked Martha why a nice man like Mr. Otis would work with Mr. Cosimo for his whole life, and she told me that Mr. Otis was married to Mr. Cosimo's dead sister. That's the way she said it, like Mr. Otis is married to a dead woman, but I know she means that he was married to her and then she died. "Don't mention it," Martha said. "It was a long time ago, but he doesn't like to talk about it."

I wouldn't think of mentioning anything about his private life to Mr. Otis. He blushes if the talk gets too personal. He blushed when he told me it wasn't ladylike to whistle, and that's not even very personal. It's strange to see an old man blush.

Stick and Draper haven't been in for a few days, but Putty came in at around 3:00. I was doing the crossword puzzle from the paper and he helped me finish it. He's just a naturally helpful person I think, or maybe he has a thing about finished crossword puzzles. Some people are that way.

January 29, 1986

Putty was in for lunch all by himself today. He asked how I liked the movies last night. They were both about boxing, "The Harder they Fall," an old movie with Humphrey Bogart, and "Raging Bull." I said they were great because I could tell he was really excited about them. "Last movie Bogart ever did," he said, and, "Did you know De Niro gained fifty pounds to play Jake LaMotta?" I wanted to tell him the gaining was never the hard part, but maybe it is for some people, and I thought about saying something about how hard those movies were to watch. It was like being punched watching them, which was maybe on purpose, since they were about boxing. I asked him instead how long he's been working at the theater. He said that he and Draper and Putty had all worked at the Majestic since they were thirteen, cleaning out the bathrooms and sweeping up at first, but then learning how to do it all. And between them, it looks like they pretty much do. When all their friends from high school left to go off to college, they just stayed on at the theater. They were thinking about trying to buy the Majestic someday, Putty told me.

I don't know why he took to talking to me so much. Maybe because I was interested. Momma used to say, "If you act interested, a man will talk to you for hours and hours. The trick is getting them to shut up once you've got them started." I don't think that's true of just men though. I think a lot of people want to talk to someone, and if you're willing to listen they'll talk and talk.

Then, for some reason, he started talking about Stick. "A big part of his problem is that he can't see very well. So he looks mean and ignores people." He says that when Stick first moved here, when they were all in the seventh grade, he was kind of on the heavy side. "And I'm sure you know how people can be," he said. "They called him dough-boy. They said he was a fag. The usual business. If Draper hadn't decided to be friends with him, I don't know what would have happened. Stick probably would have been on the nightly news, 'Thirteen-year-old guns down guidance counselor, fellow students, and self. Twenty-three dead and seventeen wounded,' or something like that.

Putty also said Stick's family moved to town after his mother died in a train wreck. I didn't think they still had train wrecks — they're so big and solid you don't really ever think of them wrecking — but I guess they do. That's a terrible thing, and it makes me feel sorry for Stick, but it doesn't really make me like him any better. There's nothing that says you have to turn mean, no matter what happens to you.

Looking at him, you'd never, ever, imagine that Stick had been fat. But his nickname isn't because he's skinny, even though he is. Putty says it comes from his last name.

February 2, 1986

All of the art work in the restaurant is of ducks. There are pictures of cartoon ducks, Daffy and Donald, migrating flocks of ducks, sitting ducks, nesting ducks, swans, drakes, and mallards, downy yellow ducklings, ducks splashing in puddles, ducks floating on ponds. There are pictures of duck bottoms and duck heads. The picture over the back corner booth, the one where Martha and I take our breaks, is a duck floating in

a toilet. It's captioned, "What the duck??!!???" You'd think with all the ducks, the diner would have a name like "The Lucky Duck Cafe," or "Cheese and Quackers" maybe, but it's called "The Deluxe," not even "Ducks Deluxe."

I've been thinking about the different pictures this evening, trying to remember who sits under each of them. The regulars all have their customary seats. Rudy the Mouth and Mr. Microphone both sit at the counter. Della Parness sits under the Donald that's dressed in a cowboy hat, boots, and holsters. The two young couples both sit by the duck in a toilet. It isn't a romantic picture, but I guess it is the most private booth. Putty and Stick and Draper sit by the big watercolor of migrating ducks. I think it's the nicest picture.

Hazel and Jim, the nice older couple who also sit by the migrating ducks watercolor, haven't been in for a while. I'm worried about her. Her skin is tight on the bones of her face and she hasn't been eating the toast Jim orders for her, or even drinking all of her tea. Her eyes look like Granny's did, in the weeks before she passed, like she's seen enough. The last time they were in, Jim ordered her a cup of soup, and it broke my heart because I took it away full almost an hour later. I tried to take it off the bill, but he insisted on paying.

February 3, 1986

Draper has terrible posture. I just noticed that today. He slouches and his hair hangs in his eyes. But after you look at him for a while, you realize that he's beautiful.

His skin is perfect and he has very, very long eyelashes. He should have been a girl, my Momma would probably say. He was in by himself today, no Putty, no Stick, and we finally had a conversation. He has the nicest voice, the kind of voice you want to listen to when you're sick and burning up with a fever. He asked me what I did before I started working at the diner, and if I still lived at home with my parents.

I told him that I hadn't seen my dad since I was three and that my mom had remarried and moved away with her new husband who didn't like me much and so I was on my own.

"That sucks," he said. "Him not liking you."

I agreed, but I suddenly realized it could be a whole lot worse. I felt the way I sometimes do when I'm watching the TV and a "Save the Children" commercial comes on, weepy and sick to my stomach and grateful for what I have in life all at once. I told him I kind of like being on my own. It was nice of him to ask about me.

At first, when I started noticing them, I thought Putty was the leader. You know how people are. There's always a leader. But now I think it's Draper. If he's around, Putty and Stick pay the most attention to him. I still think Putty is easier to talk to, but he's nice too.

February 7, 1986

Mr. Microphone slams the door every time he comes in. He always sits down as near to the center of the place as he can, unfolds his newspaper, and starts reading aloud to whoever happens to be here, not full stories, just the bits that caught his attention. He's a big man with slicked back hair, who looks like he played football or could have been a professional wrestler, and he has a booming, sports announcer voice. He uses it like a used car salesman, always trying to get someone to argue with him about current events. When he doesn't find any takers, and he usually doesn't, he'll talk about the subject anyway, as if everyone in the restaurant, or at least somebody, asked him what he thinks about it. He reminds me of my uncle Earl, except that you knew where you stood with Uncle Earl. He didn't like anyone very much, and he was consistent about that. I honestly can't tell what Mr. Microphone believes. It changes all the time.

Martha thinks Mr. Mic just plays to, or against, the crowd. "If the place is full of what look to him like liberals he goes to bat for the conservatives and visa versa. Anything to try to get a rise out of someone." I think that maybe he's just confused about what he thinks and can't make up his mind. That wouldn't make him so very different from most people, just louder than most. Making up a mind is harder than making up a bed.

"For the longest time I thought he was single, probably a widower," Martha said. "I figured who could withstand that mouth, day after day, at close range? But then one day his wife came in, a big, big, blond woman, and at least as loud as him. If they have any children, they got to be stone deaf."

February 11, 1986

All this time I've been waiting on a "she-male." That's what Martha called her or him really I guess. I always wondered why she didn't sit with the other bank ladies, and I finally asked Martha. She laughed and at me, but then she said she didn't realize right away either. It took overhearing the other bank ladies talking one day for her to get with the program.

I don't like the bank ladies. They're more work for two cups of coffee and two cups of tea than a regular table eating a full lunch. They never ask for anything, like no one taught them any manners. It's always "Bring me this," and "Bring me that." Plus, they tip in pennies.

The strange bank lady is one of my favorite customers. She's very polite and leaves a dollar tip for a cup of coffee and a sweet roll. But now I'm going to stare at her and make her feel bad. Martha said, "I don't think they've done the operation yet, the one where they snip the hose to match the clothes." I don't even like to think about it.

I wonder if Putty knows about him? I expect he does. He seems to know just about everyone who comes in the diner. I guess from working here on Main Street for so long.

February 15, 1986

We have two couples who come in almost every day. Martha doesn't like to wait on either pair of them, so I have to. The first couple I don't mind so much. They just look so good together like Farrah Fawcett and Lee Majors, or Burt Reynolds and Loni Anderson, and they seem to be having such a good time. Martha sneers and calls them "The perfect couple." She says they think they're better than everyone else, but I think they're nice.

The other couple makes me nervous. They gaze at one another for hours over coffee gone cold and oily eggs gone stiff, and limp, greasy toast. When I try to remove their plates and cups they twitch, so I leave them there. I don't mind so much that they don't eat their food, although they are both so pale and weak-looking they really ought to eat something. Martha calls them "the desperate young lovers," and she says they're "the black hole of romance. It's not healthy for two people to be that involved in one another," she says. "They're the Bermuda triangle of love."

February 18, 1986

Tonight, I saw the woman from the "perfect couple" at the grocery store. She was arguing about dish detergent with a man, a man different from the one she eats lunch with every day. I barely recognized her. I've never seen her face get red, or heard her raise her voice. She even stomped her feet, like a child taking a fit. And all this over dish soap! I managed to leave the cleaning products aisle without her noticing me, so she never has to know that I saw her like that. But I know I'll never look at her the same. I'm pretty sure it was her husband she was screaming at in the store. And all this time I thought she was married to the man she has lunch with every day. I'll bet Martha knows already, and that's why she doesn't like to wait on them.

I don't much like running into the customers outside of the restaurant to begin with except for Putty and them, and I only see them in the theater. I don't know how I'd

feel about seeing them in the grocery store or the Laundromat. I'd feel strange I think, like they were out of place. I never know what to say to customers when I see them outside the diner. I can't ask them if they need anything, but if I just say hello I don't feel like I'm being very friendly. I like being able to ask them if I can get them anything else. It gives me something to say.

I think that most of them must feel the same about me. When they see me outside the diner without my uniform, they usually looked puzzled, like something is out of place.

February 21, 1986

Today Della came in with her hair dyed black as Elvis Presley's, or Priscilla's back when they were married. Mr. Cosimo rolled his eyes and called her the Bride of Frankenstein under his breath. Even I have to admit that it isn't flattering at all. I can just imagine what Momma would say if she could see her. Not that Momma objects to hair dye. She's dyed her hair for years, but she always chooses colors that look good on her.

I used to enjoy dying day. Because it was hard for Momma to see the back, I helped, making sure the color was evenly distributed all over her head. Then we'd wrap her head in plastic, set the timer on the stove, and play cards until the color was done. She tried dying mine once, when I was around eleven. A honey blond. She said, "I think it'll suit you better." She was honey blond at the time, and it suited her fine. But it didn't do much for me, except get some comments from my sixth grade class. Ricky Heitzenreiter called me two ton Marilyn Monroe for a while, which only showed how ignorant he was, since everyone knows she was much closer to a platinum blonde.

I knew from an early age that I wasn't ever going to be beautiful, and that hair dye wasn't ever going to change that fact. But I let my Momma try. I must have been a trial to her, even as a baby, since she couldn't ever dress me up and show me off. I was just too big.

From the time I was very young, but not small, she bravely marched me into department stores whenever I needed clothes. She carried arm loads of drab, shapeless garments from racks marked "Chubbette," and "X-tra Special Girl," and waited while I tried them on, rejoicing when the zippers went all the way up or the buttons closed over my always expanding body.

From time to time she'd put us all on a diet. She'd say we all needed to be more healthy. But these diets never lasted long. No one, except Momma, had much tolerance for cottage cheese and fruit salad plates.

I guess I should have been more worried about my weight, but in some ways I never really noticed. Up until I was ten or eleven or so I didn't really look at myself much in the mirror, or if I did, I didn't see someone who was fat. I know I didn't because I was surprised when someone called me Fatty for the first time in school. Of course, maybe they'd been calling me Fatty before then, but I hadn't ever heard it until that day. I went home that afternoon and asked Granny, "Am I fat?" First she said, "Who told you so?" And then she said I was probably heavier than most, but that it wasn't a sin to be big, not the way it is a sin to be unkind. And Granny always said it was what was on the inside that counted. And inside, I felt fine.

Later on I realized that being fat could be a comfortable thing. At first boys at school laughed at me and called me names, but pretty soon they just forgot about me. I never felt like they were sizing me up and taking an inventory of my parts, like they did about other girls. I heard them saying some terrible things like this about other girls, but never about me. Most of the heavy girls, they'd talk about their breasts, but as far as I know, they never talked about me that way. I think I was too big for them to notice or at least to care about. I think I was so big I was invisible. And I found that I didn't mind.

It would have been different if I'd had a crush on any of them, but there weren't any boys I cared for. Granny always said that, for all my size, I was probably going to

be a late bloomer, and that it was just as well. I didn't entirely understand then what she was talking about, but now I think I do.

For the rest of the month and throughout the month of March, the fat girl wrote in her diary every couple of days. In many of these entries she listed and reviewed the movies she'd gone to see at the Majestic. She was a less than harsh critic; most of the movies she described as being "pretty good," with the exception of Brian DePalma's *Body Double*. That one she'd walked out of. She lapsed occasionally into descriptions of the diner food; Greek specialties that she'd never encountered before were discussed at some length. Her stunning page long description of baklava and her remarks about the chicken soup with lemon and dill almost made even Cassie hungry. She continued to write about her regular customers, noting in particular the comings and goings of the three theater employees, Draper, Stick, and Putty.

At first, Cassie found the episodic nature of the diary soothing, if a bit dull. But the longer Cassie read, the more exasperated she became. Real life, as inscribed by the diarist, had few peaks and few valleys. It was a series of movies, a collection of lunch and breakfast orders, and a steady stream of customers to go with them. Then, just as she was losing patience, the diary took a bit of a turn.

CHAPTER EIGHT

About mid-way through the notebook, post-it notes began to appear, sometimes several of them on a page. The notes were all traditional, pale-yellow, almost-three-inch squares, just like the ones Cassie remembered from her childhood. No pastels, brights, or minis, no neon-ruled, yellow-ruled, or ultra-colored three by fives.

When Cassie was a child, her mother had gone through a post-it phase. During that time, their house, the kitchen and family room in particular, had been covered with them. "Reminders," her mother called them. To the best of Cassie's recollection, the notes had stayed, sometimes for months, where ever her mother stuck them, on the furniture, on the telephone, on the walls. That was the miracle of the post-it, the adhesive. That the adhesive was an accident, the product of a failed attempt to create a new super glue, made it no less miraculous.

The notes in the diary were nearly fifteen years old, and they were sticking just fine. The handwriting on them was different from the handwriting in the diary, and the first note Cassie read made no sense to her. Fortunately, the diary entry underneath it explained its origin and significance.

April 11

Putty left a post-it with his tip today. I don't know if he left it for me, or if he just left it. I've noticed how he leaves notes stuck to the windows of the ticket booth sometimes, and even though I probably shouldn't, I read them. Sometimes they're regular notes, "Draper, see you at 6:00," or "Remember to close out the register!," or phone numbers or grocery lists (Bread, Hotdogs, Peanut Butter, Soap, Toilet Paper), but sometimes they're sayings, like in fortune cookies or at the bottom of Bazooka Joe

comics. *I think maybe they're lines from songs, or movies, or maybe they're just things he thinks or overhears.*

Today, I noticed the note, on the table of his booth, right after he left. It was beside the dollar and change he had left for a tip, and I was looking forward to reading it, but Stick was still sitting there, reading the paper, so I didn't pick it up until he'd gone.

Putty had written, "There's nothing as sad as a motherless child." Underneath that Stick had added, "You're a big pussy, Putty. A man without arms is sadder. He can't even jerk off to pass the time." Putty was probably thinking about him when he wrote it, and Stick had to turn it into something nasty, something about sex. I don't know how one of them can be so nice and the other can be so crude and how they can still be friends.

April 14

I waited on Draper's dad today. Of course, I didn't know who he was until Putty told me. He was perfectly polite to me and he left a good tip, but Putty says he has a terrible temper, so bad that Draper hasn't lived at home for the last two years. Instead, he lives in the projection booth at the Majestic. Putty says I should go up and ask him if I can take a look at it the next time I'm in the theater. "He's got it fixed up real sweet."

"What about his mother?" I asked. I think maybe I was expecting to hear that she'd run off, or they were divorced. Of course when that happens it's usually the woman who ends up with the kids, the way my Momma ended up with me, so I should have known better.

"She died," Putty said. "When Draper was eleven. Had an aneurysm in her brain and it burst and she died. He came and stayed with me and my Mom for a while after it happened."

You wouldn't know to look at Draper that his mother had died. I guess there's a lot you can't tell just by looking at someone. I've decided that it's probably best to treat

everyone like they've been through something terrible, sometime in their life, just to be on the safe side. I try to be nicer to Stick, now that I know about his mother, not that he seems to care.

Putty's the only one of them with a halfway normal family. His parents are just divorced and he lives at home with his Mom. She works down at the bank, where I opened my checking account, and I try to get her as my bank lady when I go. Even though she doesn't know who I am, that I wait on her son at the diner, she's nice to me. I've never seen her in the diner on breaks. She probably has better things to do than come in here and order tea and boss the waitresses around.

On the next page there was another post-it: a list. "Toll booth collector, Uncle Steve, Carpet Barn, NYC." It too was followed by a notation in the diary.

April 15

Maybe he was thinking about how his job is like a toll booth collector's. Or maybe he has an Uncle Steve who works as a toll booth collector in New York City. The Carpet Barn is probably a store, but I don't know what it has to do with anything else he wrote down.

I know this list means something to Putty, and if I asked him, he could tell me what. But I can't ask him. He'd think I'm crazy for reading them and keeping them, and maybe I am. But since he leaves them on the table, I'm sure he doesn't want them anymore. And because they're with the tip, he might be leaving them for me.

April 17

Tonight, between "Caddyshack" and "Stripes," I visited Draper in the projection booth. I didn't plan to visit him. I had just gone up to the ladies room and decided to take a look at the balcony. I was the only one up there and Draper had the door to the

booth open. He called me over, because he wanted me to tell Putty he needed some light bulbs and couldn't find his key to the utility closet.

He has a cot with a sleeping bag, and a chair, and posters on the walls, and a box full of his clothes. The booth looks like pretty much like a bedroom except that it has a projector and little windows that face out into the theater, which is a very strange view.

I don't guess living in a movie theater would be so bad. There are bathrooms and the concession stand. I can think of worse places to live, but I wonder where he goes to take a bath. He never looks dirty, so he must take a bath somewhere.

April 19

Mr. Otis told me the theater and the diner were built at the same time. "Used to be, we were the best entertainment in town," he said. "Used to be, we were the only entertainment. The girls from the college would come by for dinner before going next door, or else they'd stop by afterwards for milkshakes. The college used to be just for women back then. We'd stay open until ten o'clock in those days, instead of closing down at seven." I asked him if he had any pictures of those times. He said he didn't know, but when he came downstairs after his break, he lives in the apartment over the diner, he brought down a photo album.

Although it was a fat album, we only looked at a few pages. I would have liked to have seen more, but I didn't want to pry into Mr. Otis's life. I didn't want to ask him to show me things he didn't want to show me.

The only things that look nearly the same in the pictures as they do now are the theater, the diner, and the bank. All of the other businesses on the street either weren't here at all or look so different I can't recognize them. Mr. Cosimo and Mr. Otis were standing in front of the diner in several of the pictures. Mr. Cosimo looked miserable in the pictures, just like he does now, and in both pictures Mr. Otis's face is turned away

from the camera almost completely. "I didn't much like to have my picture took," he said.

The following page had two post-its attached to it. One said, "Rise to Vote Sir," and "I'll give you a dollar if you'll eat this collie." And the other said, "He hasn't enough blood in him to keep a chicken alive." The fat girl didn't say where, when, or how she'd acquired these notes, but they had obviously come from the same source as the others.

April 21

I wish they'd change the movies more than twice a week. I like going there better than coming home to the television. Momma called tonight and asked where I've been. She said the last two times she tried to call me there was no one home. I told her I've been going to the movies. She asked if I've been making any friends. I don't know if Putty and them would really be considered my friends so I told her no, although I think of them that way, except for Stick. Is a friend someone you like or is a friend someone who likes you? If it's the first one, then they're my friends, but if it's the second, I'm not sure.

April 23

Tonight's movies were both Marlon Brando. "On the Waterfront" and "A Streetcar Named Desire." Sometimes they arrange the double feature by topic and sometimes it's by movie star, and there have been a few times when I wasn't sure why they put the two movies together that they did. But I didn't want to appear ignorant, so I didn't ask.

When he was younger, Marlon Brando was such a handsome man, before he turned into the Godfather. Momma often said that Dan Rapture looked like Marlon Brando, only taller, so I spent some time, when I got home, looking in the mirror to see if I can find any resemblance, but I don't see it. I'm kind of glad, actually. I don't think it would be a good thing for a woman to look like Marlon Brando, not even when he was

young. His face is too strong somehow. It's the kind of face that looks like it's going to know a lot of trouble.

The next two pages were covered with post-its. Cassie counted fourteen. As she read through them, she thought she recognized some of the quotes. She was fairly certain that most of them had come from movies. She wondered if the fat girl had figured that out. Since she didn't comment on these notes, Cassie had no way of knowing.

"You give him credit for too much cleverness. My impression was that he's just another blundering American."

"Now you go feed those hogs before they worry themselves into anemia!"

"A Butterfly's taste buds are on the bottom of its feet."

"When I saw how slimy the human brain was, I knew that's what I wanted to do for the rest of my life."

"It's funny how the colors of the real world only seem really real when you viddy them on the screen."

"A good many dramatic situations begin with screaming."

"The only arithmetic he ever got was hearing the referee count up to ten."

"A cockroach can live for nine days without its head."

"I've been ionized, but I'm okay now."

"Yes, there are thousands and thousands of uses for corn, all of which I'm going to tell you about right now."

"When your head says one thing and your whole life says another, your head always loses."

"Roy C. Sullivan survived being struck by lightning seven times."

"Well, I guess you can't break out of prison and into society in the same week."

"More Human than Human is our Motto."

The fact that the Fat Girl saved all these notes floored Cassie. They didn't say anything of consequence. They weren't even addressed to her. Cassie wondered if the girl just kept the post-its Putty left on the table after he ate at the diner, or if she started swiping them from other places?

She remembered saving a gum wrapper once, off of a stick of Wrigley's Spearmint. It was the very first thing her highschool boyfriend, Brian, ever gave her, and she had used it as a bookmark. She even remembered being sad when she lost it. But that wasn't the same as keeping dozens of post-it notes in a diary. It was a very special piece of gum, and she'd actually dated the guy for almost a year.

She had a bad feeling about the fat girl and Putty. He was nice enough to talk to her, but a person didn't have to be very nice to do that. She knew from experience that a great many people wanted to talk, and she was pretty sure most of them didn't care to whom. Although the fat girl thought of him as, possibly, a friend, Cassie doubted that he ever gave her a second thought. To him she was probably no more significant than the booth he sat in when he ate at the diner.

April 30

He did the cross word with me this afternoon! The only customer in the place was Red Ted, and he'd already had his fifth cup of coffee, so I was sitting at the counter working the daily puzzle when he came up and asked if I needed any help. He's very good at them, I think. It only took him about ten minutes to help me finish it. But then he left without having any lunch.

It was nice doing the crossword puzzle with him, but if I had to choose, I'd rather he'd stayed for lunch because then he would have stayed longer. Maybe it's just my imagination, but I don't think he comes in to the diner as much as he used to.

I wish I could go to the movie tonight, but I already saw it last night and it would look strange if I saw it twice in a row, although I guess I could say I'm a big Sigourney Weaver fan. I probably shouldn't try it, since I've never been a very good liar. Granny

always told me I didn't have the face for it. She said she could always tell when I tried to tell her a story because my nose would twitch, like a rabbit's or Pinocchio's getting ready to grow. And anyway, watching that one movie last night gave me nightmares. (Mr. Cosimo had a creature in his chest, and it burst out all over the counter at the diner. Martha was trying to kill it by squirting whip cream at it, and poor Mr. Otis crawled under a booth and started to cry.) Wednesday the movies change and I can go again without looking suspicious or running the risk of more bad dreams.

May 3

Tonight he sat across the aisle from me at the movies. He always sits by himself, unless Stick sits with him. I've never seen him with a girl, not at the theater or at the diner. I know this doesn't mean he doesn't have a girlfriend, but you'd think that I'd have seen her by now if he does.

Sometimes I like to pretend we're at the movies together. Even though he's all the way across the aisle, he is sitting in the very same row. His face looks very serious by movie-light, less friendly but more handsome than he looks in the diner. He looks older too, more like he'll probably look in eight or ten years' time. Tonight he left halfway through "The African Queen." He usually misses the beginnings of the movies, but stays through to the ends. I wonder where he went tonight?

May 5

How did this happen to me? Only a few weeks ago I'm absolutely positive that I didn't have any feelings for him, other than as a friend, but now whenever he's around I feel nervous and excited. If I have the chance, I watch him from the front window. I know I never used to do that, but now I do.

Before he goes to work he always goes to the newsstand and the record store, and sometimes he goes to the drugstore. Then, if I'm lucky, he comes here. If he doesn't stop here for something to eat, or at least to say hello, my day is ruined. And I know it

didn't used to matter to me. He was just another regular, and not even one of the most regular ones at that.

Being around him lately is like being close to high voltage wires, the air around him is filled with a crackling energy, just like the air near Granny's old house was. She lived out near the power plant, before she moved in with us, and I used to walk down there sometimes and press myself against the fence they kept around the high voltage lines. It felt like everything was humming, and that's how it feels around him these days. Yesterday, when I was trying to refill his coffee, I lost control of the coffee pot. Fortunately, I spilled on myself, and I didn't scream. I ran to the back door, scooping up a pitcher of water on the way. As I stood out behind the diner, pouring water and ice cubes into the front of my uniform, Mr. Cosimo came back to check on me. When he realized I wasn't badly hurt, he told me not to be so clumsy. If I hurt one of the customers he could get sued.

When I returned to his table, he was very nice and asked me if I was okay, and told me to come to the movie after work, if I felt like it. But I didn't go. My breasts hurt, and even though it's dark in the theater, I didn't want to be sitting there with a big old coffee stain down my front, smelling like a coffee pot that had boiled over.

I need to be very careful about approaching him with anything hot, sharp or breakable in my hands. The only other time I've ever known anyone to shake so bad was Granny, before she started taking her nerve medicine. But she shook almost all of the time. I only shake around him.

I wonder why no one ever told me that falling in love is like the palsy?

And I have the strangest feelings, just watching him, even from a safe distance. I like the way his arms look, resting on the table. I want to touch them or lick them. I imagine that they taste like cloves and honey. His skin is smooth and pearly, like a plate of milk.

Even though the fat girl hadn't named the "he" in the passage, Cassie was sure it was Putty. Saving his post-its indicated a growing, and, she thought, a rather unhealthy fascination with him.

She was horrified that the fat girl wanted to lick his arms. She did not want to be privy to her sexual awakening. She read on, certain that no good could come of this infatuation.

May 6

I wish he'd come in every day. We were so busy today I didn't even have time to look out the window for him. We had a tour bus, of all things, on their way to Atlantic City. I think Mr. Cosimo knew the bus driver, and that's why he stopped the bus at the diner, instead of going to some fast food restaurant which would have made more sense. All of the customers were anxious to get back on the road and get to the Casinos. One old man told me, "I feel lucky now, but I don't know how long it's gonna last. I ain't got time to be sitting here, worrying about a grill cheese sandwich." He must have been in his seventies, and I think most of them were about that age. Maybe they were a special bus, chartered from an old folks' home. I wonder if gambling is easier when you get to be really old? Maybe so. They all seemed eager to get to A.C., so they could throw their money away.

Tonight Momma called and I wanted to talk to her about some of the things I've been feeling lately, but I was afraid of what she might say. I expect she'd tell me that he's half my size and ask me what on earth I'm thinking. Momma talked to me a couple of times about how I shouldn't expect to have a boyfriend, because men were only after one thing and they didn't usually look for that one thing from girls like me. She told me I was lucky really, and that I should count my blessings. "There's worse things than being without a man," she told me. "It's better not to start with them though," she added. "Because once you do, it's hard to give them up." I don't expect she'd be encouraging if I told her how I'm feeling now. I expect she'd tell me to leave well enough alone.

May 7

Tonight was one of the most wonderful nights of my entire life. I can't even sleep, I'm so happy. After the second movie, "Greystoke: The Legend of Tarzan, Lord of the Apes," was over tonight, I was sitting there reading the credits, and he came over to me and said, "Do you want to see something?" Although I had no idea what he might be planning to show me, he looked excited and happy, and I said "yes," of course. He said to wait a minute while the audience left and give him a few minutes to lock the front doors.

I sat in the empty theater, waiting. When the lights inside the theater are on, the Majestic really shows its age. You can see how the screen has been torn and repaired in two corners and how seats are missing in some of the rows, like teeth missing out of someone's smile.

When he came back he asked me to follow him. "We don't show this to just anyone," he said. "But you've become one of our most faithful customers, and you deserve to see." He led me upstairs, through an office, to a doorway that led to a narrow flight of stairs. Looking at it, I was afraid I might not be able to squeeze through, but it was wider than I thought, and I followed him up to the roof of the building!"

He led me to the front. From there I could look down on the street and onto the tops of other buildings. "I like to come up here sometimes and think," he said. "It's like a world no one knows about."

We only stayed for a few minutes and just as we were getting ready to go, Stick came upstairs. He gave me a dirty look and asked "What's she doing up here?" Putty said, "I was just showing her the roof." Stick said, "You do that." I wish he hadn't shown up, and I wish we hadn't had to leave so soon. I could have stayed up there forever.

May 8

He didn't come into the diner today, so I couldn't thank him for taking me up to the roof of the theater last night. I went by the ticket booth on my way home, but Stick

was in there, and he gave me a dirty look. I wanted to walk right up to him and ask where Putty was, but I didn't of course. I hope I see him tomorrow. I want to tell him that being on the roof was like being in "Mary Poppins." I bet he'll like that, because it's a movie.

May 9

Draper came to the diner today, but no Putty. He came to get a sandwich to go during the busiest part of the lunch rush, so I didn't have time to make conversation with him. He didn't seem to be in a very friendly mood anyway. Usually he'll smile and wave at me, but today he acted very distant, almost like he didn't even know me. I wonder how people can be that way, so very different from one day to the next. I don't think I am. I think that I'm the same all the time.

Stick was in the ticket booth again this evening, but I mustered up my courage and asked where Putty was. Stick said, "Why do you want to know?" and I could feel my face getting red and hot, and I started to leave, but then Stick said, "He has the flu. He's home puking."

I hope he'll be better tomorrow.

May 10

Today the movies at the Majestic changed, so I went after work. "Rocky IV" and "Rambo: First Blood Part Two" were showing and it was crowded for a change, so even though Putty was working in the booth, I didn't have time to really talk to him. All I got to say was "Thank you for taking me to the roof." He acted like he'd forgotten all about it. "Oh," he said, like he was surprised that I'd brought it up. "You're welcome." He didn't come in and sit down in the theater until the first movie was almost halfway over. I don't know how he's able to watch just bits and pieces of movies the way he does. It would drive me crazy.

He was gone before the lights came up after Rambo and although I loitered in the lobby for a little while, I didn't see him. And then I started to feel strange about just standing there, so I went home.

May 11

Sundays are the worst. The diner is closed. Usually I do my laundry and clean my apartment and go to the store, but today I don't feel like it. I can't go to the movie because I saw it last night. I don't suppose there's anything stopping me from just walking downtown and stopping by the theater to say hello, but I can't. It's strange that since Putty took me to the roof he's been sick and then he's been not so friendly. I don't understand why he'd show me one of his special places and then ignore me. The worst thing is, there's nothing I can do about it.

May 12

He told me today that the Majestic might be closing. He and Draper and Stick were all in for lunch together. It's been a while since that's happened, and he told me after I brought their food.

I'm glad he waited until I set their lunches down, because if he'd told me sooner I probably would have dropped their plates on the floor. My mind started to race, wondering what was going to happen to him, where he'd work, and where I'd see him.

I was so upset I gave "Cream of Wheat" Della's meatloaf special, and Della got his bowl of cereal. By the time she called my attention to the problem, saying, "Miss, I believe there's been a mistake," in her gravelly voice, he'd started eating her food. When I went to take the meatloaf away from him, he had the strangest look on his face, like he knew something wasn't just right. I gave him his cereal, but I couldn't very well take the meatloaf he'd started eating away from him. He ate them both and Mr. Otis had to make a new order for Della. I'm glad he was cooking and not Mr. Cosimo.

When I finally got back to Putty's table, they were calmly discussing the end of the Majestic. None of them seemed shocked. But then Draper said they've known it was coming. They've been pretty sure it was going to happen since before I ever started working at the diner. "We just never talked about it," Putty said. "Like saying it would make it true and not saying it would keep it from happening." I know how he feels because I've tried that too, like back when Momma started talking about marrying Frederick, but I guess it doesn't work. At the end of the summer, in just a few months, they may be closing down for good.

The man who owns the building wants to tear it down and put in a parking garage or an arcade or a mini-mall. He owns most of the property on this block, but they tell me he isn't interested in any of the existing businesses, except for the insurance companies. Stick told me, "You better be thinking about getting another job. This greasy spoon will probably be the next to go."

I wonder what will happen to all of the people who come here for breakfast and lunch. They'll have to start eating somewhere else I guess. Or have their pop-tarts at home before they go to work. They'll have to start packing tuna fish sandwiches and eating at their desks, or they'll have to get in their cars and drive to restaurants. I'm not sure that all of the regulars have cars. Most of them live in the buildings on the street. I wonder where they'll live if, as Stick says, "The whole street is coming down"?

"You've seen the guy," Stick said, "The one who's going to level the block. He looks like a pigeon with a bad attitude."

I told him I didn't know who he was talking about. I didn't recall any pigeon-looking men coming into the diner.

"No. You've seen him," Stick insisted. "He was in here yesterday, talking with Mr. Cosimo. Grey suit. Sat at the counter, smiling like a piranha.

Draper said, "Fish don't smile. I had a whole aquarium once. I know."

But Stick continued like he hadn't heard him. "Old Cosimo took the order himself. Probably doesn't ever let you wait on him."

Then, I remembered the man. I thought he was one of Mr. Cosimo's relatives. The only people Mr. Cosimo generally waits on himself are his relatives. They usually sit at the counter and talk to him. That's what this man did.

"I thought he was family," I told Stick and Putty.

"Might as well be," Stick said. "Old prick, young prick. I guess that makes them brothers kind of. Part of the big prick family."

Mr. Cosimo is a bad natured man, it's true, but I still wouldn't call him names. And I don't know why Stick's the one who's getting so upset about the theater. He's always the first to say it's a fire trap and a relic. I heard him tell Draper and Putty they were stupid to think they could buy it someday. He told them, "The Majestic was doomed even before we started working here. And in five years' time, maybe less, places like this won't even exist. People go to movies in malls, or in those big surround-sound twenty-screen kinds of places. They can rent the kind of stuff we show and watch it at home. Who the hell wants to come and watch old movies in this kind of shit-hole? The bathrooms smell like vomit, the seats are falling apart, and the screen's ancient."

I like the movies the theater shows, older movies mostly, almost all double features. I've seen "Some Like it Hot," and "The Odd Couple," and "Strangers on a Train" and "North by Northwest." I've seen "Beach Blanket Bingo" and "Grease," "Stagecoach" and "True Grit," "Hair" and "Fame," "Shane" and "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid." I've seen "Viva Las Vegas" and "Jailhouse Rock," "An Officer and a Gentleman" and "The Cotton Club."

Stick said that Putty and Draper were stuck in a time warp and that too much time in the dark had left them like those blind, mutated fish, the kind who live in caverns away from light. Of all of them, Stick's the one who seems to me most like a mutated fish.

May 13

I don't know what Putty and the rest of them will do if they close the theater down. And I don't know what I'll do either. If they don't work at the theater they won't come in for lunch, and I won't be able to go next door to the movies, and I'll probably never see Putty again.

May 14

I haven't seen anyone but Draper today. He said to come by the theater tomorrow night, after it closes. He's having a party in the projection booth.

I haven't been to a party in a very long time, and I don't know why he's inviting me. He's probably inviting all the people who come to the theater. He's probably just inviting me to be polite. But I want to go, I think. I'm sure Putty will be there, and although I probably ought to try to get used to the idea of not seeing him, I'm not ready yet. And it might be nice to see him someplace that isn't work. Of course the projection booth is sort of work to him, but not if it's a party. I'll probably be too afraid to go, but maybe I won't.

Draper said it will probably just be a small party, mostly just Majestic regulars. He says he bets I'll miss the theater almost as much as he will. I doubt that's true. He lives there, and I'm only a visitor.

I think it's funny how the theater has regulars, the same as the diner does. I guess some people like to go to the movies as much as they like to eat. Putty says that video rentals are killing theaters, that people like to be able to eat and drink and do whatever they like when they're watching movies, but I've noticed that the people who come to the Majestic do most of these things. The only thing they can't do is stop the film so they can run to the bathroom, other than that, it's a very relaxed atmosphere.

Draper says nothing can really replace the big screen and sitting in a dark room with a bunch of people you don't know and the smell of popcorn in the lobby. But Putty says that places like the Majestic are going to disappear. He says the old theaters can't

compete with multiplexes, hot new releases, and surround sound. He says the only people who come to the Majestic are people who've been coming there for years, or people who work at the diner, or people who like things kind of old and shabby, and that if they didn't run porno two weekends a month, they'd never make the rent.

I've never gone to see any of the X-rated movies. When I was younger I looked through Uncle Earl's magazines a few times. What they were doing in there didn't look very comfortable and it didn't look like much fun, but it made me feel all flushed and strange. I don't guess watching sex movies would be much different than that. And I'd be embarrassed, knowing that Draper was up in the projection booth and Putty was wandering around the theater, keeping an eye on things. I think Putty's embarrassed that they show them.

May 17th

I'm so glad it's Sunday so I don't have to see anyone. I don't know if I ever want to see anyone again. What was I thinking? The party wasn't anything like what I thought it would be. There were more people than I thought, squeezed into the booth and spilling out all over the balcony, and they were mostly all of them drinking and already drunk. And I should have left right away, but I didn't, and when the old man by the cooler handed me a wine cooler I should have said, "No thank you," but I didn't.

And I honestly don't remember very much except the part where I almost kissed Putty and then running out of the theater and slipping on a puddle of throw-up. And now my ankle's twisted and swollen, and I honestly don't know how I walked home on it this way, and I may have to figure out how to get to the doctor, and I'm not sure I'll be able to work tomorrow or even the next day. I don't even have a number to call to tell them, unless I call the restaurant tomorrow morning. Maybe I can find Mr. Cosimo's number in the book, or Martha's. I'd rather talk to Martha, except that I'm not sure what her last name is. I think it's Boyle. I hope that's right, and I hope Mr. Cosimo doesn't fire me. I don't know what I was thinking.

I should probably call Momma and tell her and ask her what I ought to do, but if I do she'll worry, and I don't want her to worry. Maybe I'll ask Martha what she thinks, if I can get a hold of her. I don't know how I could be so stupid.

May 20th

This morning, first thing I noticed was that the "Waitress Needed" sign was up out front again, but Martha said if it was her she wouldn't worry about it. "No one's come in about the job," she said, "And things have been slow the last couple of days. We haven't had any excitement," she said, "Except for the guys that work next door. Apparently one of them's gone missing."

My heart almost stopped, I swear.

"The long-haired one," she said, "Not the one you like so much." I could feel myself turn red, and I felt like crying because I didn't know anyone could tell I liked him. She said, "He seems like a nice kid. He's very worried about his friend." But I still felt like she was making fun of me.

She said Draper has only been missing for two days, as far as she knows. She said, "He's probably just off having some fun. I don't think his father has even filed a missing person's report or anything, and my gut says he'll show back up in a couple of days. And even if he doesn't, he's old enough to vote so he's old enough to decide he wants to go someplace else, right?"

My ankle hurt less than my head did all day, wondering how Putty was doing. He finally came in at around five o'clock. He looked terrible, like he hadn't slept for a couple of days, and I was happy and scared all at once to see him. When I told him I'd heard about Draper and that I was sorry, he just nodded. When I asked if they had filed a missing person's report or anything, he looked at me like I was crazy.

"It's not like he was abducted or anything," he said. "He packed up some stuff in the middle of the night, and he left. I just wish he'd given me some warning."

I felt like crying, but at least with Draper gone Putty didn't seem to remember or care about anything that had happened at Draper's party. Maybe he doesn't even know I was just about to kiss him when I ran out the door and fell down. He asked how my ankle was, when I went back to his table with his food, and I told him fine. And then he opened up a newspaper to read while he ate and I went back to the counter to marry some catsups. I didn't know what else to do.

CHAPTER NINE

Another month was missing. Not quite a month but close to it. Cassie closed the book and inspected the cover again: Five Subject Notebook. College Ruled. 250 Pages. Cassie didn't imagine there were that many pages still left in the notebook, so she counted. One hundred and eighty-two pages remained. That meant sixty-eight pages had been torn out. But had the girl removed a month of pages or had she merely stopped writing? As with the earlier gaps, Cassie had no way of knowing.

June 16

I've tried to be nice to Stick's sister. Her name is Renata, and since she got here, about a week ago, she's been following her brother and Putty around some, coming in the diner, hanging out at the theater, but mostly she wanders around with her video camera recording things.

She seems like a strange, lonely little girl, and I thought she might need a friend or someone to talk to, but she doesn't want anything to do with me. It wasn't my fault Mr. Cosimo threw her out of the diner. "Make that crazy boy with the video camera leave if he isn't buying anything else," Mr. Cosimo said. "Tell him that he can't make home movies in the diner. His camera is making the customers nervous."

When he said this, there were only two people in the place aside from him, Renata, and me. They were a couple, and they were fighting, and they didn't even know that Renata was there. But rather than explain this, I just told Mr. Cosimo, "It's a girl."

He wiped his glasses, like that was the problem, dirty lenses, instead of the real problem which is that he never pays much attention to anything that's going on, unless it involves money, or his immediate family. Then he stared at Renata for a minute before

shaking his head. "Well, tell her she has to leave," he said, and then he retired into the back kitchen to make soup or pudding or something. He's a big old bully and a big old coward. He owns the place, so he ought to be the one to tell people to leave.

I wasn't surprised when Renata taped my approach to her table. Since she came here, I've seen her taping all kinds of things, people walking down the street, ticket stubs outside the theater, a squirrel carrying around a popsicle wrapper. Since I know that I'm big and ugly, cameras don't scare me. It's only people who worry about how they look who get frightened by cameras. If you take a good, hard look at yourself, from as many angles as you can muster, those wrap around mirrors in ladies' dressing rooms are good for this, in as bright a light as you can stand, and if you can find a way to accept what you've seen, then there's no horror left in a camera. I suppose some people don't like having pictures of themselves just floating around, ending up in the hands of enemies or strangers or even in the hands of people who love them, if they don't return the affection.

It must be strange for movie stars, knowing that their pictures are in the hands of millions of people they don't know. Of course, maybe they don't think about that, or maybe they like it, or maybe they don't care. I'd think they'd have to think about it sometime, like when they drive past a billboard of their face enlarged to the size of a mobile home. To me that would still be less peculiar than knowing that someone you'll never meet has her bedroom wall covered with magazine pictures of you. Connie, my best friend in junior high, had her entire room covered with pictures of Donny Osmond, just him, not any of his brothers and certainly not Marie. If any of them were in the pictures, she cut that part out. She had so many pictures, it was like wallpaper. One day she asked me to help her count them all, and I think we got to two thousand and something.

Some people believe that a camera can capture your soul, but I don't understand how that would work. I imagine you'd need an entirely different kind of machine, if you wanted to capture a soul. I don't think anyone could build such a thing.

As I approached Renata's table, she told me I just kept getting bigger and bigger. "Now all I can see is the front of your uniform, where the buttons don't really close." She has a flattened voice, the kind people who've lived a lot of places must have, a voice that sounds like it comes from nowhere. The only thing particular about it is the squeak. Underneath her flat voice, it sounds like someone is pinching her.

I told her, pointing to the door leading back to the kitchen so she wouldn't get mad at me, that Mr. Cosimo didn't want her and her camera in his diner. I told her that if she didn't bring the camera he probably wouldn't care. I told her he said it made people nervous.

She just smiled, and then I felt bad telling her that her camera wasn't welcome. She carries it around like a little kid carries a stuffed animal. She carries it around like it's her baby or her pet. Sometimes I feel almost like reaching out to touch it, to pat it and give it a compliment. The way you'll tell a woman her baby is pretty.

She's a strange little person. I can't even tell how old she is. She looks to be about twelve, but I'm sure she's older than that. Granny always said it takes all kinds, and I don't think Renata means anyone any harm.

June 18

Today Putty left a note on his table that said, "One man's life touches so many others, when he's not there it leaves an awfully big hole." He had crumpled it up and left it in the middle of his plate, but I smoothed it out and read it when I cleared away his lunch. I know he's sad since Draper left and worried about him. He hasn't talked to me much about it, but I can tell.

And I think there's something more than Draper leaving that's bothering him. I wasn't trying to eavesdrop on them last night. I was just standing outside the lady's room after the show, when I heard him and Stick arguing. They must have been standing in the balcony, and I guess they thought everyone had left the theater. Putty said something about "telling the police." But Stick said it would only get him into

trouble. Of course I'm not positive the "him" they were talking about was Draper, but I think it was.

I hope that if I just keep listening, Putty will tell me what else is wrong. I'd like to help him if I can. I hate seeing him so upset and not being able to do anything about it.

June 23rd

The last few times I've been to the movies, Stick has been in the ticket booth, and there's been no one at the concession stand, just a sign saying to ask the ticket seller for help. Putty's upstairs doing Draper's job. I've been wondering if I ought to offer to run the stand for them? Since I'm there most nights anyway, it wouldn't be any trouble. They wouldn't even have to pay me. They could just let me into the movies for free. Maybe I'll mention it to Putty the next time I see him.

Tonight at the theater I found one of his notes on the floor in the lobby. I made sure no one was looking, and then I picked it up and put it in my pocket. It said, "Who's more foolish? The fool, or the fool who follows him?" And below that it said "When you side with a man, you stay with him. And if you can't do that, you're like some animal. You're finished." Putty's loyal. It's one of the things I like about him.

June 25

Today Stick came into the Deluxe and started threatening his sister. She was sitting in the back, with her camera by her side, hidden from Mr. Cosimo's view. Stick wasn't yelling at her or anything like that. He isn't the kind who yells, and I wouldn't have known there was a problem, except that when I walked back to see if he needed anything, he was telling her that she better tell him where something was or he was going to hurt her. He called her a sneaky little bitch, and then he noticed that I was standing there, waiting to take her order. I know it's none of my business if he's mean to

her, but I don't understand why he would be. If I had a brother or sister, I'd try to be nice to them.

I wish Putty would talk to me like he used to. Since Draper left he doesn't seem so friendly anymore. When he came in later this afternoon, I asked him why Stick doesn't like Renata. He was quiet for so long, I wasn't sure he was even going to answer me, but then he just said. "He's freaked out by her videotapes. He wants to find them."

I don't think she's taping anything important, and I don't know why he can't just leave her alone. A brother shouldn't talk to his sister the way he was talking to her today. Maybe he's worried that she's showing her tapes around to other people, making fun of him, but I wonder who she has to show them to. It doesn't seem to me like Renata has any friends. The only people I've ever seen her with are Stick and Putty. She's just a little girl really. Just a little girl with a camera and no one to play with.

June 27

I've noticed that in the last several days Renata's following Putty around, him in particular. Today I overheard him talking about it with Stick. He said he thinks it's cute. It makes him feel like he has a new puppy. Stick rolled his eyes and said, "she's no puppy."

Last night when I went to the movie, "Footloose" and "Flying Down to Rio," Putty was back in the ticket booth for the first time in weeks, and she was sitting cross-legged on the floor outside it, clutching her camera to her chest. It was a dangerous place for her to be sitting since people might trip over her. I almost did, and I was going to say something to him about how she should probably move, but he doesn't talk to me so much anymore, and I didn't think it was my place.

I guess it's good that he's being nice to her, especially since her own brother is so mean. I don't think she stayed to watch the movies, since I didn't see her come inside the theater, but I don't know where she goes, maybe outside to tape things.

Putty watched most of the second movie. I guess it was a classic, but parts of it were pretty silly, like the showgirls dancing on the plane's wings while it was flying. I couldn't tell if he was enjoying it or not, and I couldn't find him after the movie was over to ask.

June 30

I got a postcard today from Momma. She and Frederick are in Bermuda. It's hard to keep track of where they are. They're always somewhere, but it's never home. The postcard looked a lot like the others. A lot of blue water in the bright, bright sun. I imagine Momma's wearing big dark glasses and a wide-brimmed hat. She always told me a lady needs to protect her skin.

July 4

Martha asked me if I wanted to go and watch the fireworks with her and her husband tonight after I get off work. She said they could meet me somewhere or that they could come by my apartment and take me to the park with them. I didn't much feel like going, but it was nice of them to ask, and Momma always said if you don't go when people ask you, they'll stop asking you, so you better go.

It had been threatening to rain all day, and as soon as we got to the park the sky opened up. We sat in their station wagon for almost an hour, waiting to see if it would let up. Martha's husband says they're sure to reschedule the display, but it won't be the same if it isn't really the fourth.

July 5

Tonight when I went to the ladies' room between shows, I saw Renata standing outside the men's room, with her camera of course. She wasn't taping anything though, she was just standing there, like she was waiting for someone. And then when Putty came out of the bathroom, she followed him upstairs. I don't ever see him anymore

without seeing her close behind. Or I don't ever see her anymore without seeing him close behind. I didn't even enjoy "Carousel," even though it's one of my favorites.

July 8

Putty came into the diner today, but he only stayed for a few minutes. Almost as soon as he'd sat down, before I had a chance to do more than bring him a glass of water, I hadn't even had time to take an order, Renata came in. She sat down beside him and the next thing I knew they had both up and left. Later on in the afternoon, I saw them through the front window. They were across the street eating ice cream cones. I still think he's just being nice to her because her brother isn't. If she didn't look so much like an eleven-year-old boy, I guess I'd be jealous, not that I have any right to be.

July 9

I wish I hadn't walked down that alley. I wish I hadn't seen what I saw, but I did. If I'd only been minding my own business. But I didn't see them there at first. I would never have walked down the alley if I'd known they were there, in fact I almost turned around when I realized there were people there making out.

At first I didn't know who it was. The way they were standing all crushed together in the shadow of the theater made it hard to tell. I remember thinking, that's a strange place to be kissing someone, because they weren't too far away from the dumpster behind the building. It wasn't a very romantic spot. But then they came up for air, or maybe they heard me.

I hope I didn't yelp or screech or make any kind of noise when I realized who it was. I don't think I did, but I might have. I sometimes do when I'm surprised I think, when I'm surprised and hurt, I think I might make sounds. But I know I turned and got out of there as quick as I could. I didn't stand there frozen and staring. At least I don't think I did.

July 10

What's the most important thing that happened today? Putty came to the diner, shining like he'd swallowed all the light there is in the world. And it hurt me so bad to see him so happy, knowing why, I threw up out back of the diner.

No one ever told me that love could make you sick like this. Although I might just have the flu. The way my body hurts all over is like the flu.

I'm feeling sick, that's all, and tired and lonely. I'm wishing I was someplace else and that I didn't know what I've always known. Putty isn't ever going to love me. He isn't ever going to look at me the way he looks at Renata. He isn't ever going to put his hand on my arm and lean into me and whisper something meant only for my ears into my hair.

I wish someone had told me about this, and prepared me. But I don't suppose the telling ever does it justice. I watched it on television, but television never showed the throwing up part. The only throwing up you see on TV is when women are pregnant, or when there's a virus that's going to kill everyone on the planet unless an antidote is found. I also saw a movie about bulimia once where there was a lot of throwing up, but none of these cases apply to my situation. I sometimes think nothing applies to my situation.

Today, at the diner, I started watching everyone differently, looking at them for signs of the people they loved, looking at them for signs of their heartbreak. No one I saw looked heartbroken to me. No one looked like they were going to throw up or cry or scream. I started to wonder if I look different to any of them. I wondered if any of my customers noticed my broken heart. I've started to wonder if anyone ever really notices anyone else very much, unless they're in love with them.

To my complete surprise, Putty came in and handed me the crossword puzzle at a little after three, the way he sometimes used to, before Draper went away. And then he sat down on the stool next to me, to work the "acrosses" while I work the "downs." When I couldn't fill in any of the letters, when I sat there holding on to the pen so hard my

fingers ached, he nudged me. "Your mind not working today?" he asked. And then he took the puzzle back and told me it might be easier for me after he'd finished his part. But I never finished the puzzle. Even though he said it was an easy one. I can't believe he doesn't have any idea how I feel about him, but I don't guess there's any reason that he should.

I can't say what happened with Renata took me by surprise really. Putty's been letting her follow him around for weeks.

July 11

I keep having this stupid, miserable thought. And since I can't stop thinking it, I thought I'd write it down and maybe then it will leave me alone, although I doubt it.

I saw him first. Don't I sound like some explorer, sticking a flag into the ground? And isn't that ridiculous? It's like trying to plant a flag on the moon. Everyone owns the moon, I think. Or no one does.

Yet here I am, wanting to claim him, because he was my friend first, maybe my first ever, before she ever even got to town. My Momma would say it just isn't meant to be. And I know I outweigh him by at least a hundred pounds. But my Daddy must have outweighed her by at least two hundred, if everything they say about him is true. And that didn't stop her.

Oh, I know what love is supposed to look like. Who doesn't know that? There are pictures of it everywhere, on television, in movies and magazines. Love is supposed to look like candlelight and roses and two beautiful, or at least matching, people staring at each other with their eyes wide and misty. But I can't fit myself into any picture like that.

July 14

I don't know why I still go to the movies. I guess I must like to torture myself. Putty doesn't come and sit in the theater anymore. He's running the projector now and

so he has to stay in the booth, although I sometimes think he might be up on the roof. After the show I always look up, to see if I can see him, but what's up on the roof isn't visible from the ground.

I almost wish he'd never taken me up there, because I'll never be able to go up there again. There's a metal ladder that runs up the side of the building, but I'd need another ladder to reach up to it, and I'm not altogether sure it would hold me. Besides, I have no business going up there.

July 16

When I saw him snuggled up next to Renata the other night, I thought something inside me might explode. I could see that they looked like what being in love is supposed to look like, more or less. And I wanted to feel something different from what I did feel, which was hot and sharp and expanding all at the same time. I saw him first I want to tell her. I saw him first. I don't know if this has anything to do with love at all.

July 18

The one nice thing about yesterday and today was that there was no Renata, not at the diner and not at the theater. Putty was in the ticket booth this evening, but she wasn't sitting outside. And he came inside and watched part of the movie, and she wasn't with him.

I can't say I'm sorry she hasn't been around. Not that this makes much difference really, but as long as she isn't here I don't necessarily have to think about her, and I'd rather not think about her. It's a little strange though, not to see her. Since she got here I've seen her every day, usually following someone, always carrying her camera.

July 23

Tonight Stick punched Putty in the mouth. I don't know what to make of it. They're supposed to be friends.

I guess I fell asleep in the theater. They were showing "Ben Hur" and when I woke up I heard loud voices coming from the lobby. I couldn't make sense of what they were saying at first, but before I opened the door to the lobby I heard Putty say, "You fucking lied to me." And then Stick said, "You know that isn't why you're pissed at me." And then, I stepped out just in time to see Stick hit Putty.

Watching it happen, I had the strangest feeling. It reminded me of the time when I almost kissed Putty. Fortunately I stopped myself before I did, but I got as close to doing it as a person can. In that moment a force much bigger than me, and that's a big force because there's not much bigger than me except God, seemed to breath me in, pushing me within inches of Putty's mouth.

I'm probably making all of that up, but Stick didn't seem to be in very good control of himself. Whatever helped to drive his fist against Putty's mouth was bigger than him. And I'm wondering if maybe hate is bigger than love, since he made contact and I didn't. We are really living in a messed up world if it's easier to hit someone than it is to kiss him.

Putty ran off, and Stick ran after him, and I just stood there. Draper's still gone. I think that's part of the problem, although it isn't the whole problem. Stick's mad at Putty about Renata. Maybe that's why I didn't try to stop him when he hit Putty. I'd like to think that I didn't try because I didn't know it was going to happen, but I could feel it beginning to happen and I just stood there. I wonder why?

July 26

Draper's Daddy came into the diner today. This is the first time I've seen him since Draper ran off. He had been coming in a couple of times a week for breakfast, but then he disappeared, just like his son.

He didn't look very well this morning. He looked grey and congealed around the edges, like leftovers fixing to mold, but he ordered his usual big, nasty breakfast: Four eggs over so easy they're mostly raw and a double order of burnt toast. Mr. Cosimo

rolled his eyes at me, handing me the plate of food that was so deliberately ugly and unappetizing. Mr. Hollis ate it all though, and told me it was delicious. I thought that he was probably upset and hadn't been eating, so anything would have tasted good. I thought that maybe he was just trying to be polite.

"Does anyone know where my son is?" he asked, as I took his plate away.

I shook my head, of course, but then I felt bad about doing that, about having nothing more than that to offer him. So, when I brought back the coffee pot to give him a refill I said, "Even though I don't know where Draper is, I'm sure he's okay, Mr. Hollis." I'm not sure I believe that, but it seemed like the kindest thing to say.

As soon as I said it, I regretted saying anything though. Mr. Hollis looked at me hard, like he was seeing me for the first time, like he hadn't been talking to me when he asked about Draper. In that moment I started to understand why Draper would want to live in a projection booth. Mr. Hollis said, "What the hell do you know?" and threw money on the table and walked out.

Later on I was thinking how they don't look much alike, Mr. Hollis and Draper don't. It's hard to believe such an ugly man could be the father of such a beautiful son. But if you look hard you can see it in their mouths, they both have plump, very pink lips. They look nice on Draper but they look wrong on Mr. Hollis, like roses blooming outside behind the dumpster.

Even though he was nasty to me, I've been thinking how it's sad that he had to ask me where his son might be. Why doesn't he know? That commercial from way back goes through my brain. "It's ten o'clock. Do you know where your children are?" People don't know. And then, when someone disappears, his whole body up and gone, his Daddy is left asking his friends.

Although she was growing accustomed to the gaps in the diary, Cassie looked twice to make sure she was reading the date right, before proceeding to the next entry. Three weeks had passed without any comment from the fat girl.

August 18

I know I haven't written in a while, but I thought I ought to write today. This morning I walked by the theater for the last time. The marquee was bare, except for a lone "E." Putty told me that the "E" was stuck, and they'd always had to work around it. It frequently made for some strange spellings of movies. The ticket window and entrance were boarded over and the boards were scrawled with black and purple spray paint — names of bands, I think. "The Toasters" and "The Blind Venetians."

Today, while I was working, they tore the Majestic down. The wrecking ball cracked it open like an egg, letting the sun in, exposing worn, crushed-velvet seats and peeling, flocked wallpaper. When I went outside during my lunch break, that was the view I had, and it made me so sad, I ran back in the diner, wishing I hadn't looked.

As bad as looking at it was though, the sound was the worst of it. If the sky ever fell it would sound like that. The man who was running the wrecker came in for lunch, and I wondered what kind of person wants to knock things down for a living. He looked drugged up or drunk, and I started to worry about his aim. When he went back to work, it sounded like he was going to bust right through our side wall, right into booth number eight where old Mr. Pifer was sitting. It's a good thing he's hard of hearing, or he'd have been too scared to eat his soup.

This evening when I got off work, I had to walk past the rubble. A few people were standing on the sidewalk, in front of where the theater used to be, looking like people in shock. I imagine they were theater regulars, people who couldn't believe that the place they went twice a week was now just a broken pile of brick and wood. Most of them had picked up bricks, as souvenirs I guess. I saw Putty, standing there with a brick in each hand, but when I waved at him, he didn't seem to recognize me. He just stared, with a blank, wild look on his face, like something out of a zombie movie. I wondered if destruction might be contagious because he looked like he could throw those bricks at anyone or anything that crossed him.

But then he started walking toward me, and the mad look vanished. Maybe it had never been there, or maybe it was a trick of my imagination and the light. I told him I was sorry, and he told me he was sorry too and then we just stood there for a long moment. I wanted to ask him what he was going to do now, but I couldn't get the words to come out of my mouth. I kept thinking this may be the last time I see him, but I still couldn't find any words. Then Stick pulled up to the curb in his father's station wagon. He hollered out the window, "Stop staring at it, you stupid ass." And then Putty went to get in the car with him.

After this there were only two more entries in the diary, spaced several weeks apart.

August 30

Too many things are getting torn down here and too many people are leaving. I haven't gotten used to walking past the gap in the street where the Majestic used to be. If I didn't have to pass it in order to come to work, if it wasn't in the center of everything, I'd avoid it. Uncle Earl used to say, "There's no avoiding trouble. Not even if you lock yourself up at home. Trouble comes." Granny would tell him to hush. She'd say, "That's nothing to be telling the girl." He'd pick his teeth and snort. He told me most people were a crock. Granny said that Uncle Earl didn't know everything about life and that he shouldn't act like he did. She never did outright disagree with what he had to say about trouble though. I guess she'd seen some, although she wasn't one to tell tales, not of good times or sorrows. I used to ask her to please tell me stories of the "Good Old Days." She'd jerk her head, like she was clearing it, like she was trying to shake it loose from a past she wasn't ever going to tell me about, and then she'd smile. "I believe the good old days are now," she'd say. "Why don't you tell me about them?"

Now I guess I have troubles. A destroyed movie theater, a missing friend, someone I love who doesn't love me, and a girl who, when she isn't recording every stray and embarrassing minute of people's lives with her video camera, is with the person who

doesn't love me. It's funny, when I look at the list of them I realize Renata's the only trouble that's here. The rest of them are trouble because they're not. Uncle Earl used to tell me "If you can't see it, don't bother with it." He tried to talk me out of believing in ghosts that way. I don't think he believed in ghosts or things you have to look through a microscope to see. Or maybe he did. He didn't tell me not to believe in things I couldn't see. He just told me not to mess with them.

September 8

The one-eyed woman I've been watching for the last few weeks came into the diner today. At least I think she only has one eye. She wears an eye patch like a pirate and she usually sits on the bench outside the drugstore, when it's sunny, like she's waiting for a bus, but she never gets on. She reads sometimes, but I don't know what book.

She only ordered coffee and I tried not to stare at her. Even up close it's hard to tell if the eye is missing. Maybe she just has a terrible eye infection, or had an operation and the eye is healing, or maybe she just like to wear the eye patch. Some things you'll never know unless you ask. But it's none of my business really, so I didn't ask her.

I've wondered from time to time what she sees. I close one eye and see the world is different. There's always a part of it missing. But I can open both eyes and see all of it. I wonder if she can?

Cassie leafed through the few remaining pages of the notebook, but they were blank. What had happened to the fat girl? Where did Putty go after the theater was demolished? Was the diner destroyed as well? Why was Stick's weird little sister taping everything? Had Draper ever returned?

After she closed the notebook, she looked over at the lady in the tree. Her expression was frozen in a face-splitting smile. Cassie would never know her story or the rest of the fat girl's. She sighed and looked at the clock beside her bed. It was four

thirty in the morning. She reached for Louis L'Amour's *Ride the Dark Trail*. After a while she threw poor Louis on the floor and picked up *Heart of Thunder*. She fell asleep with the light on, her face pressed against the cover of the book.

And her dreams that night were strange and tiring. The world's largest cowgirl rode the world's largest horse, waving not a lasso, but a plate with ham and biscuits and red-eye gravy. When she dismounted and reached for her holsters she drew not guns, but a notebook and a gigantic BIC pen. Behind her a saloon blew up and along with the glass and wood that sprayed everywhere, film canisters popped open and rolled along the dusty streets, unreeling as they rolled.

The sound of thumping woke her, and knocked her dream to pieces. Someone was moving in, or moving out, on her floor. There had been a lot of traffic in the last few weeks. She was increasingly aware of the impermanence of boarding house populations. Houses like this one, with its shared bathroom, peeling paint, mismatched and third hand furnishings, houses filled with the smell of other peoples' sweat and sex and sadness, weren't the kind of places that people, with the exception of Lewis downstairs, wanted to stay in for long.

Her work day was uncomfortable. She had an unfortunate phrase stuck in her head, playing over and over like a song from the radio that she couldn't stand but couldn't get rid of. It was a childhood rhyme, a left-over bit of grade school, playground babble. "Comet it makes your teeth turn green. Comet, it tastes like gasoline. Comet will make you vomit. So get some Comet and vomit today." The human mind, if hers was a fair representation, stored mostly junk. The average human brain must look like Leon's shop, only worse.

At work, the waitresses, moving in and out of the kitchen, reaching for clean glasses and silverware, made her uncomfortable. She found herself imagining their diaries, the sad and useless bits and pieces that made up their lives, the bosses they worked for, the customers they waited on, the nights they spent in the dark with strangers watching actors and actresses, long since faded from glory to decrepitude, sing,

dance, fight, and fall in and out of love on a screen somewhere. All of this was crammed in and around their faltering or failed romances, the friends they made who drifted or ran away, the parents who died or deserted them to go on cruises. She was glad that none of them were fat.

She tried to reason with herself. And she tried to concentrate on the gaps in the diary, all those days when there had been no entries, all the things that didn't get written down. But it made her sad, to think that nothing was better than something. It made her sad to realize that she was pining her hopes on the missing pages.

CHAPTER TEN

Leon returned to his shop after he dropped off the bag of books at Cassie's. She'd been a bit surprised but not displeased, he thought, to see him, despite the lateness of the hour. They were, he decided, becoming friends, but they'd probably never be anything more.

She was a strange girl, alternately careless and guarded. She apparently thought nothing of wandering around town at all hours alone. The first time he'd seen her, he'd supposed she was drunk. Not because she was weaving or stumbling along as she walked, but because it was two in the morning, just after the bars closed, and drunk girls did stupid things, like walk home unescorted in the dark. However, when he'd picked her up and driven her back to her boarding house, he'd determined that she was sober. Since then, he'd decided that she was stupid without the aid or excuse of too much alcohol.

He'd seen her walking the night streets on multiple occasions, when he'd been coming back from dumpster runs. Each time he'd insisted on driving her home, and each time he'd lectured her about the dangers of her behavior. His admonitions fell on deaf ears; he continued to come across her as she was taking her moonlit strolls.

He found it odd that someone so unconcerned about her physical safety should be so emotionally guarded. In his experience, people who played fast and loose with their bodily well-being were equally reckless emotionally, but Cassie appeared to be very cautious in that regard. She kept to herself. After almost two months, after taking her with him while he worked, after having her come over and hang out with him at least a couple of times a week, he still knew next to nothing about her. He thought she might be running from rotten parents, a rotten boyfriend, or even a rotten husband, but he

didn't even know which of those it might be, if, in fact, it was any of them. It was entirely possible that she wasn't running from anything but herself. He felt sorry for her if that was the case.

When he arrived at home, he unloaded his van. He'd retrieved some books, some clothes, and some children's toys this evening. He was happy with his haul, but he'd probably return at least some of the stuff to a dumpster; he hadn't been able to see well enough to be absolutely sure what he was getting. This was the only major drawback to diving at night as far as he was concerned.

Although he carried a powerful flashlight with him for night time dives, it was sometimes easier to take entire bags or boxes that looked promising and sort through them once he got them home. This practice went against one of the unspoken credos of the universal brotherhood of dumpster divers. "One should only take what one can use." As a merchant who sold and profited from the things he found, Leon was always bending that rule to the breaking point anyway. Still, if he'd been able to see better he probably would have left behind some of the stuff he'd brought home tonight.

The clothing he'd snagged, for example, was too worn to have any resale value, even in a market where shabby chic was in. And in among the several boxes of threadbare t-shirts and boxer shorts, he found about a dozen videotapes. He didn't make a habit of retrieving tapes anymore, unless they were still shrink-wrapped, of course. During his years of diving, he'd simply found too many of them.

Most frequently these were of television shows. They were seldom labeled and were often missing the beginning of the show in question, or the end, or both. But he'd also found tapes of weddings, dance recitals, high school graduation ceremonies, high school band concerts, and birthday parties. He'd found videos of proms, plays (performed by thespians of all ages, ranging from pre-kindergarten to senior citizens), bar and bat mitzvahs, anniversary celebrations, going away parties, housewarmings, and all major (and a great many minor) holidays. He'd found tapes of births. These generally

muted his sex drive for a while after he'd viewed them, reminding him that he had no interest in helping to initiate such an exhausting and bloody spectacle. He'd found tapes of very old people, talking to the camera in order, he supposed, to preserve their image and some of what they knew. He was surprised by the number of home-made sex tapes he found, although he supposed he shouldn't be. These ranged from amusing — he'd watched men "perform" dressed up as Dracula and Superman, seen people falling off of beds, and watched beds collapse because of throes of passion — to distressing. The amount of physical pain that was inflicted in American bedrooms disturbed him; fortunately he hadn't found anything featuring animals or small children, and he hoped he never would.

He had watched many of the tapes he'd retrieved from dumpsters the way some people watch television, putting them in while he was doing other things, for companionship and background noise. As he wasn't tired, he made himself a cup of instant hot chocolate, gathered up the pieces of a sculpture he was working on, a six foot shark constructed primarily from tuna fish cans, and put in one of the several tapes he'd found that evening.

Tape one:

People's feet. At first he thought he was watching the work of a novice or a drunk, but when the camera continued its focus on feet and footwear for more than a few moments, he reconsidered. The work of a fetishist, he supposed. But these feet hardly seemed the sort that someone with a foot fetish would fancy. For one thing, men's feet predominated.

In a liberated world, he realized, a woman was as free to fantasize about feet as the next guy, but he just didn't see it happening. Weren't men five times more likely than women to exhibit fetishistic tendencies to begin with? And wasn't most of the whole foot fetish thing linked to women's shoes? The shiny, intimidating black boots of

the dominatrix, or the spiky, impossible to walk in, five or six inch stiletto heel of the vamp?

Nor did he believe that there were many men out there who were “light in the loafers” as his father liked to say, who got their jollies from looking at other men’s loafers. The clincher though, the single most compelling argument against this tape being the work of a fetishist was the fact that these feet didn’t move Leon in the slightest. If these feet had held the promise — rightly or wrongly, who was he to say? — of sexual gratification for the camera man or woman, Leon should have been able to feel it, or at least feel something. A true fetishist would have, Leon believed, communicated some of his or her desire through the tape. But these were cold feet.

And, to be honest, ugly feet, or more precisely ugly shoes, since only one pair of the feet was bare. These, the youngest feet on the tape, were the small, dirty feet of a child. The shod feet included large, Leon presumed male, ones wearing tattered Converse All Stars, ones wearing badly scuffed men’s Hush Puppy dress shoes, and medium-sized ones wearing nurse shoes. Some of the feet were walking, but most of them were resting or fidgeting. None of them were dancing. To what end would someone shoot ten or fifteen minutes of people’s feet? Leon wondered. He tried to imagine a profession that would benefit from the videotape, and concluded that neither shoe salespeople nor podiatrists would find the footage either interesting or useful.

He was thoroughly tired of the feet by the time they disappeared, replaced by the bulk of a woman’s chest, breasts mammoth enough to deserve cinemascope, breasts barely contained by a thin layer of polyester, breasts overflowing a brassiere and straining against buttons. Breasts as big as his head. These were, alas, attached to a woman of substantial girth, as unfortunately so many of the truly gigantic breasts of the world were.

Leon noted, however, that although he felt a stirring, however slight, at the sight of such boobs, the camera work invited no salaciousness.

The breasts were followed by footage of ants crawling over a dead bird, a robin he thought. After about five minutes this almost static image, despite the tiny diligence of the ants, was replaced by a small foot in a Keds tennis shoe stomping on the ants and the bird.

The dead bird was followed by plates of food, breakfast food mostly, eggs most of all. These glistened obscenely on Formica plates like watery alien eyes. These food images might be useful as a diet aid, Leon thought, before forwarding through them to a sink full of dishes being washed by big, male hands. The final image of the first tape was a rack full of freshly-washed plates and pots air-drying on a counter top.

Tape two:

By the time he'd watched the second tape, footage in a public rest room of women washing their hands, a slow, pains-taking trip through the cleaning products aisles of a large grocery store, people throwing trash into public trash receptacles, and a little girl gluing construction paper to a piece of poster board, he'd begun to speculate about the person behind the camera. The only clue he had to the camera person's gender was the restroom footage. He decided the person videotaping was female. Of course, not all of the taping had to have been done by the same person, but for some reason he was pretty sure it had. He also suspected the person taping was the person who'd stomped up and down on the bird in the first tape. The angle of the shot suggested that the camera was lying on the ground.

Tape Three:

The last tape he watched started more typically than the others had. It began with a T-ball game. Instead of narrowly focusing on isolated body parts: feet, breasts, and hands, or objects: trash cans, plates of food, dead birds, furniture polish and dish soap, this footage captured entire people. The camera person, Leon wondered, in fact, if a different person might not be responsible for this tape since its style was so different

from the others, had positioned the camera to capture the entire T-ball field and the spectators surrounding it. Because the game was shot at such a great distance, the participants, their faces mostly obscured by orange baseball caps, all looked alike. After about twenty minutes of T-ball the tape showed someone playing, and cheating at, solitaire. The following sequence started with someone chopping vegetables followed by about ten minutes of someone jerking off. The camera was focused on just the hand and the penis, and the tape ended before ejaculation occurred.

The masturbation sequence looked painful to Leon, maybe because it had been preceded by the chopping "scene," or maybe because it hadn't concluded with an orgasm. He glanced at the pile of unwatched tapes, eight of them in all. He'd found them all in the same place, so they were probably more of the same. He yawned. According to the clock over his stove, it was 6:00. The clock hadn't been running right for a while, but that felt about right to him. He left the shark on the table, turned off the television and VCR, and put himself to bed.

He awoke the next day into full daylight. The brightness of his room told him, before he had a chance to look at the clock beside his bed, he had slept well into the day.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

When Cassie stopped by his shop, on her way home from work, Leon wasn't in, or he wasn't answering the door. His absence wasn't unprecedented. Sometimes he got absorbed in a project, or had visitors. Sometimes he slept all day. He might fail to open his shop for any of those reasons, or he could be out diving. He dressed neatly and carried a clipboard for these daylight dumpster visits, so he could pose as an inspector or something else official if anyone questioned him about his actions. Cassie had come across him once while he was diving in the daytime, and she'd barely recognized him.

When she didn't find him, she started walking. The thought of going back to her room and reading was an unsatisfying one. She was bored, she was lonely, and she wanted to know what had happened to the fat girl. The girl's damn diary annoyed Cassie, the way a mosquito bite between her shoulder blades might. She liked the stories she read to have happy endings. At the very least, she expected them to have endings of some sort. She didn't know what to make of a story that just dropped off into nothingness.

After she had walked through the main downtown area, she was surprised at how few people she passed. Cars passed her on every street, but pedestrians were rare. Two of the three she encountered, a neatly dressed, young black man, a wobbling, middle-aged woman wearing flip flops and carrying a can of Miller High Life, and a shirtless older man, were talking to themselves. It looked as if no one except the crazy people walked anymore.

After about an hour of turning this way and that with no clear direction in mind, she found herself at the edge of town, on a road clearly designed for something other than pedestrian traffic. She didn't know exactly how she'd found her way onto the by-

pass, but there she was. As she waded along its shoulder, through fast food wrappers and tall grass, as she stepped over beer bottles and soda cans, traffic whizzed by at over 70 mph. The larger vehicles, trucks and buses, generated considerable slip streams. These buffeted Cassie and whipped the tall grass around her legs into a frenzy. Several ill-mannered truck drivers blasted their horns at her as they passed, startling her and making her heart race. During breaks in the flow of traffic, she breathed more easily.

It took her almost a half hour to walk to the nearest exit ramp and after another forty minutes, she wandered in to a cluster of sub-developments. As she wound her way through "Eden Ridge" and "Heaven's Gate" and "Serenity Hills," she found herself wishing she'd lasted more than a few months as a girl scout. Maybe they'd have taught her to have a sense of direction. As night started to fall around her, she decided that she was hopelessly lost. And although she was a more or less middle class, young, white woman, medium-sized and not threatening in any way she could recognize, she doubted that any of the residents of the too similar houses she was passing by would be exactly thrilled to find her on their doorstep, asking to use a phone *and* a phonebook because couldn't remember the number of anyone she might call.

But she made her way. And soon the intermittent street lights began to look familiar. As she turned onto Leon's street, Cassie's relief was followed by a moment of new anxiety. What if Leon wasn't there? She was tired from her walk, and it was starting to rain, but she still didn't feel like going home, and he was the only person she knew to visit.

The lights in the back half of the shop were on, she noted gratefully from halfway down his block. This meant he was home because he was a frugal man, sloppy in many ways, but the kind who always turned out the lights when he wasn't there. She smiled, because this meant something else. It meant she was beginning to know Leon, his habits and his patterns. But then her smile faded, as she acknowledged the weight of familiarity and its potential obligation.

The rain started in earnest when she was a couple hundred yards from Leon's door, and by the time he answered it, she was soaked.

"Looking to buy an umbrella?" he asked, as he let her in. She followed him to the back of the shop, to the part of the building where he lived, took the towel he offered her and sat down in his kitchenette/workroom.

Leon was alone, as he usually was in the evenings before he went on his nightly dumpster run. Cassie realized that she must have interrupted a repair job of some kind, since the kitchen table was covered with tools and wood scraps. A pan of soup was threatening to boil over on the stove, and the usually genial and welcoming Leon appeared distracted.

"Sorry to interrupt," Cassie said. She waved toward the stove. "Your soup."

Leon grabbed the pan, just before the boiling liquid, bits of vegetables, and alphabet noodles crested its lip. "Thanks," he said.

"So, what are you making?" She gestured to the wood and tools scattered across his kitchen table.

"Coffin for a cat."

She looked around, but didn't see a small coffin. "Isn't a shoe box standard?" she asked. "I didn't know you had a cat."

"I don't. Didn't. I found it."

"In a dumpster?"

"Nah. By the side of the road. He was standing on a wall. When I walked by him, I thought he was still alive, so I went to pet him and knocked him over. Shit, I wasn't paying attention. I should have realized he was dead. Nothing stays still like that unless it's dead."

She imagined touching the stiff and sticky fur. "Gross," she said.

"Yeah. From the one side he looked normal. But something had blown off part of his head. Junior sportsmen or something. I don't know. I just decided I'd bury him."

"So, you buried him already?"

“Yeah. In the cemetery over by the railroad tracks. I was going to dig a hole in the yard, but I was afraid the dogs around here would dig it up. I thought the cemetery would be nice.”

“The cemetery’s good for burying things,” she said.

“You want some soup?” he asked, holding the pan out to her. When she didn’t immediately accept, he started selling her on the idea. “Sure you do. You were practically drowned. Nice hot soup. Fix you right up.”

She watched while he rummaged through his cabinets for a bowl.

“You read the books I brought you yet?” he asked.

“No,” she said, shaking her head.

“I was joking. You can’t read a whole bag of books in one night, can you?”

“Six is the most,” she said. “If they’re short.”

“So you read six?”

“I didn’t read any,” she said. “I read someone’s diary instead. It was in the bag with the books.”

“Anyone interesting?”

Cassie didn’t answer right away. She was concentrating on her soup, eating the vowels first. She always ate the vowels first, and she always left her initials, “C” and “L,” for last. “Kind of,” she said. “She was fat. And she worked as a waitress.”

“Sounds fascinating,” he said. “How’d you know she was fat?”

“She wrote about it, some of the time.”

“Like what? Like ‘Today I weight two hundred and ten, guess I’ll go shoot myself?’”

Leon finished his soup but was still holding the pan and the spoon. She could imagine him banging on it like a gong.

“Do you find a lot of diaries and things like that?” she asked.

“I’ve found most everything,” he said. “But I’m not looking for diaries. I’d probably find more if I was.”

"When you find them, do you read them?"

"I guess I have," he said. "Probably." He didn't have any distinct memories of reading anyone's diary. "Personal papers don't interest me much," he said. "Some people try to get bank account numbers or private information so they can blackmail someone. But that's not my style."

She nodded. From what she knew of him, Leon was a pretty honest person. He was generally more interested in the things people threw away on purpose, not the things they didn't realize they were throwing away. "Don't you think it's strange to throw away a diary?" she asked. If she'd ever kept one, she certainly wouldn't throw it away where someone could find it.

"No stranger than anything else," he said. "People throw everything away eventually."

"I just don't think she'd throw her diary away," she said.

"Why not?"

"I just don't."

Leon shrugged. "So, maybe she lost it," he said. "Maybe she died and someone else threw it away."

This hadn't occurred to Cassie.

"You said she was fat," Leon said. "Maybe she had a heart attack."

"She wasn't very old."

"You don't have to be old," he said. "I read in the paper the other day about some twelve-year-old having a heart attack. It wasn't fatal though."

Cassie thought about being twelve and having a heart attack. Had it happened to the boy while he was at school? Was he still in grade school or starting his first year of junior high?

Leon rinsed out his pan and her bowl and then reached into his closet for a rain slicker. It was Army issue, camouflage.

"You're going out in the rain?" she asked.

"I've found great stuff in the rain," he said. "I can drive you home, if you'd like."

She must have given him a look that expressed her reluctance to go back to the boarding house, because he quickly offered to let her stay put until he returned.

"I probably won't be gone long. You want to look through the stuff I got last night?" he asked. "Maybe your diary girl threw out something else you'd be interested in."

Cassie thought this was unlikely, but the thought of sitting and sorting was mildly appealing.

"It's over there," he said. "But it was an apartment complex, so it's a bunch of different stuff. I was sorting it last night, but I got distracted."

After Leon left, Cassie sat down next to last night's dumpster pile and started pulling through it. She was hoping to find more notebooks, pictures, or even oversized women's clothing, but she didn't find any of those things. She didn't find anything that interested her at all until, in the very last bag she looked in, underneath some t-shirts and boxer shorts, she found some envelopes.

There were about twenty or twenty-five, legal-sized, security envelopes held together with a thick rubber band. All of them contained something. All of them were sealed. None of them were addressed. They could have been filled with coupons or newspaper clippings; they might have held deeds or wills or contest entry forms. But the first envelope she opened contained a letter. It was addressed to "Draper," but it wasn't signed. She opened two more envelopes. These also contained unsigned letters addressed to Draper.

She felt as though she'd just won some kind of very strange dumpster lottery. The letters and the notebooks belonged together! They might even be letters the fat girl had written, although she couldn't immediately think of a reason why the girl would write to Draper.

Instead of reading each letter and then opening another one, she opened the whole stack at once. After throwing the envelopes into a trash can, she stacked the

letters neatly in chronological order. A quarter inch of paper, she guessed, squeezing the pages together with her fingers. The type on them was a bit faded. She wondered, as she began to read, if that had happened with time, or if the typist had needed a new ribbon?

Since they were all typewritten, she couldn't be absolutely sure they'd all been written by the same person, but it seemed logical to assume that they had. Month and day were typed at the top right corner of each, and sometimes even the time at which the writer had started the letter. A person obsessive enough to note the time at which he or she had started a letter ought to include the year the letter was written she thought. She supposed, however, that if you were in a year with someone it didn't seem so necessary to state which one it was. If you were in a year with someone, both of you knew where you were in time.

She felt worse about reading the letters than she had about the notebooks because she'd had to rip them open. She also knew that tampering with someone's mail was a federal offense, but since none of these letters were addressed, let alone stamped, she didn't think the feds could do anything to her. She giggled to herself, imagining a knock at the door followed by the appearance of a dour, suited, G-man. He'd accuse her of excessive curiosity and whisk her off to some federal prison. After her unsatisfying experience reading the diary, she should have been less than enthusiastic about reading the letters, but she wasn't. She leaned back against a wall, and began the first one.

5/25 3:00 a.m.

Dear Draper,

I expected better than you leaving without a word. Even most suicides leave a note. That makes you worse than a dead man, in some ways. Of course, if the choice is between dead, but leaving a letter to explain why, and gone, without saying anything about it, it's better that you're gone. You can come back from gone.

Gone still sucks though. If you were here I'd tell you not to be such an asshole. But if you were here, I wouldn't need to.

So how come you can't tell people anything important when they're standing right in front of you? The problem is the most important things sound stupid when someone is standing right in front of you. And other important things, like telling someone not to be gone, don't make sense when someone is standing right in front of you.

And I couldn't tell you not to be gone anyway, because I didn't know you were leaving.

So, now I can spend a lot of time asking you questions you can't answer. Things like, "Why did you leave? And why didn't you tell anybody? And where the hell are you?"

Writing beats talking to myself. Writing beats imagining you dead in a ditch somewhere. Which could happen. The world being the kind of shit hole it is, I know that almost anything could happen to you.

So what are we supposed to do now? Climb to the roof of the theater and start howling? Scream out your name as loud and long as we can? Send a search party? Contact missing persons? Focus our mental energy and send out a psychic distress signal?

Of course Putty's a mess. He thinks he should have known something was wrong with you, and he thinks he should have stopped you. He thinks he should be able to read minds and fix everything. What a fucking idiot.

Who the hell told you you could leave, you stupid son of a bitch? What are you trying to do? Ruin my motherfucking life?

Your Dad is a rotten piece of shit. When Putty and I went to see him, to ask if he knew anything about your whereabouts, he said, "I don't know. I don't care. And I want you hairy assholes to get off my property." All bent out of shape about a piece of land no bigger than a litter box, in front of a dented double wide. His property. Christ. How

much of his brain has he fried? Me and Putty, assholes? Sure. Hairy? He still thinks we're supposed to be hippies I guess. I can see why you'd want to get away from him.

But that doesn't excuse leaving me and Putty here without saying anything. I'm fucking tired of people walking out of my life in the middle of the night.

And now how do I close this? Respectfully yours? With affection? How about Sincerely?

Cassie held the first letter and thought a while. Draper and Putty. But the writer definitely wasn't the Fat Girl. She picked up the second letter, increasingly sure of who had written it.

5/27 2:00 a.m.

Dear Draper,

Putty found your stuff. I guess you were hoping he would. And it really upset him. At first he didn't want to believe it was yours. He tried to convince himself that old Fat Ass put the explosives up there, so he could rig the place to blow and collect insurance money or something like that. I told him, "Arson, maybe. But probably not this."

What if he hadn't found it? What if someone else had? Were you depending on the stupidity of the local cops? Didn't you figure they'd be very interested in you if they found you had all the makings of at least a couple good sized bombs stashed in a utility closet? As it was, I had to talk Putty out of reporting his findings to the local constabulary. He thought they might try to look harder for you if they knew about the explosives. And he thought that maybe you were planning to hurt yourself. What I can't figure are two things. The first is pretty obvious. Why? The second is also obvious. Why didn't you ask me to help you? I would have helped you.

You're brilliant you know, but you're also incredibly stupid. I hope that wherever you are, the brilliant part is in charge. Don't wind up one of those bodies by the side of the road.

It's fucking cold here tonight. I hope you had the good sense to head south. In the movies, all the criminals on the lam head south. I hope to hell you remembered that. All your hours in the projection booth had to have taught you something.

Don't trust strangers, okay. Look innocent so mothers and grandmothers will take you in and feed you pie. Someone like Putty's mom. Someone who's kind to strays. Shit. I hope you're inside somewhere. I hope you get back here soon so you can tell me what the fuck you think you were doing with this stunt. I always thought you were the sane one. Even with a dead mother and a fucked up Dad. Guess I was wrong. But I don't blame myself, not like Putty does. I'm not the kind to self-flagellate. I figure it's your fault for pretending to be okay all the time. I mean how the hell were we supposed to know that you wanted to blow shit up and run off if you never said anything?

5/28

Dear Draper,

If I were different, which I'm not, I'd be wiping everyone's snotty little noses and holding their hands and telling them you'll be back soon. Not my job though. And the gigantic waitress has it covered anyway. She's being all kinds of sympathetic. She and Putty are buddies again, although I've never known why he puts up with that fat freak. He thinks he's the statue of liberty or something . . . "bring me your poor, freaky, rejects of society and I will comfort them."

You should have thought about some things before you took off. Like how if you let people care about you then you've got an obligation to them. Even I know that. Why do you think I'm such a shit? It's hard work being this much of an asshole.

You didn't think about that though, did you? You didn't think about what it would do to the rest of us if you cut out like the Lone Ranger or something.

5/30 4:00 a.m.

Dear Draper,

You're going to love this. Putty's made you into a story problem, like in sixth grade Math. He's got a map of the U.S.A. pinned to the wall and he's been doing some figuring and sticking in pins. It goes like this: If he was on foot and could travel X number of miles in a day and he went in this direction he'd be here. If he took a bus from X destination on the second day he'd be here. If he was hitch-hiking and got rides every X hours for X miles he'd be here.

He's losing it. I hope you're not hitch-hiking.

My current theory is that you're not even on the move. I figure you're holed up somewhere. It's pathetic that I can't even imagine where that might be. Neither can Putty. You'd think you'd have let something slip, somewhere along the line, about where you might go.

Okay, so we did come up with where-ever it is your mother is buried. We both think you might have gone there. The only problem is that neither of us knows where that there is.

Putty says he might try to see your dad and ask him. I told him that he's only going to yell some more. I guess desperate times call for desperate measures though.

6/1 2:30 a.m.

Dear Draper,

Here's what I can't stand. I can't stand the way Ardis slobbers all over Putty. It's disgusting. No one that fat deserves to love anyone. All the attention doesn't seem to make a difference to him. And you'd think she'd realize that. He drags around like a badly beaten dog, whimpering and watery eyed. I've started calling him "Our lady of perpetual sorrows." He loves that. He screamed at me yesterday, "Stop dragging the nuns into it."

I told him "Our lady of perpetual sorrows has nothing to do with nuns." But he just glared at me. Who knew old Putty had such a chip on his shoulder about being a catholic?

I think it's better to have him screaming rather than whining though. All his beating his breast and saying he should have paid more attention to you shit gets old. At least when he yells I remember that he has a spine in there somewhere. I asked him, "Aren't you mad at him, Todd? Aren't you mad that he ran off and left? He was going to try to blow up your theater and he didn't leave you a note or anything." He said, "There's no evidence that Draper was going to blow up the theater," but he and I both know that's what you were planning. I just hope you weren't planning to blow yourself up along with it, like some kind of crazy Indian wife jumping on the funeral pyre. Although I've heard that they don't really want to jump on. It's the culture that forces them. Pretty sick shit if you ask me.

Deep down I know he has to be mad at you Drape. I know he has to be because I am.

I went up to the roof of the theater last night. I went up there and tried to cry, you son of a bitch. No one to comfort me. No one to tell me that you'll be coming back when you're ready. No one but me and you. Because you're stuck in my head, and that's the only place that I know you are for sure. And if I go a little bit crazy, having conversations with you in my head, if you pollute all my dreams now, waving from the back of some pick-up truck, unaware that the person driving plans to take you into the woods and dismember you with a pick axe, if the only place I can talk to you or see you is there, then I guess that's just how it is.

6/2 3:00 a.m.

Dear Drape,

Maybe it's because your mother is dead. Maybe it's because you're not a shithead, even if you did run off. Maybe I don't know why. Yeah, that's it. I don't know

why I'm writing you this letter. Maybe you should burn it when you get it. (If you get it. You won't ever get it.) I don't know why I'm writing you this letter. I just am.

And now, instead of boring you with more descriptions about how everyone's a wreck since you've gone, now that I've got your undivided attention, I'm going to tell you something.

You and Putty were such dumb asses, to believe me when I told you she was dead. But most people are dumb asses. Most people will believe whatever you tell them.

So, anyway, here's one less thing you and I have in common. You've got a dead mother and mine's alive. She's out there somewhere. Maybe my Dad knows where. He knows I'll bet. Or some lawyer knows. I bet I could even find her if I wanted to. But I don't want to. I don't even miss her anymore. You probably think that's cold. And that's probably why I could never tell you, even after we became friends, because mine was alive, and I didn't care if she ever came back, and yours was dead and you really, really missed her.

She tried to burn our house down the year I turned thirteen. I never told you that before, but I figure now maybe you'd understand. Burning things down and blowing them up aren't so very different, are they?

I've never told anyone about that. That's most of the reason why we moved here in the first place. To get away from people who knew, or thought they knew, all about our family tragedy, all about our not exactly "Leave it to Beaver" life.

After she tried to torch the house, she ran off with Mrs. Jarratt down the block. Yeah, a pyro and a lesbo. You might even start being glad yours is dead. They kidnapped my sisters and disappeared one night. Mom sent Katie back after about six months. She was too little to travel or something. But Renata, my other sister, she's still with her. I sometimes wonder how she's turned out. Probably a vagabond lesbian fire hazard, just like Mom.

Dear Draper,

So anyway, you're not my first time having someone run off. So maybe I'm handling it better than everyone else, huh? Experience: the crippler of young adults. You'd think Putty'd understand it better though, since his dad ran off. Although I guess that isn't the same as disappearing. Divorce is different, I guess. I mean, he still sees him maybe once a year, whether he wants to or not.

And I've started to feel bad that I never told you about my Mom. If I'd told anyone, it would have been you. She just wasn't happy, I guess. Hell, she was motherfucking miserable. Not that it's an excuse.

Sometimes I'll think about how she used to be. She told me, "The world is your gallery, dumplin," and she'd hang my pictures everywhere. Not just on the refrigerator and in my room. All over the place. Bathroom, Hallways, Living Room. My father and I found boxes of my stuff after she left. Pretty amazing since my Mom was a great one for throwing shit away. I try to imagine her, taking those pictures down and stacking them into boxes, but I can't see it.

She hated it in Jersey. She was an Alabama prom queen. She used to say, "If this is the garden state, you can kiss my rosy red behind." She hated the move north and my father's job. "The big promotion" meant we didn't see him at all. And then she stopped talking to us and started locking herself in her room. My father said she was having trouble adjusting. He was gone a lot, my Mom was locked in a room a lot, Katie wandered around in a droopy diaper a lot, and Renata and I sat in front of the T.V. Hell, we should have been on TV. "Dysfunction: the Documentary."

The night my mother set her fire it rained. Maybe she was aware of that and maybe she wasn't. We were downstairs in the kitchen, watching my father fry bologna for sandwiches. He'd already opened a jar of pickles, a can of beans, and a bag of chips. This was the best he could cook. He said Mom wasn't feeling well. Yeah. Right.

I remember that dinner, like I could feel something was really wrong. Kate grabbed the potato chip bag and shook them all over the floor until Renata grabbed them and started her crying. She didn't give a shit. "You're burning that bologna," she said. "I won't eat it if it's burnt."

My father lifted a slice from the pan, still pinkish-red and raw looking. I used to eat the stuff, but I can't now. He held it out. "Something's burning," she said. And then the smoke alarm in the upstairs hallway kicked in.

We all went running for the stairs, except for Kate, who was trapped in her high chair.

My mother was standing at the top of the stairs, holding an empty can of lighter fluid. Her mouth was open in an "Oh." She stood in the cloud of smoke that was billowing out from the master bedroom. And my father told us to go back downstairs.

Renata must have called the fire department. My father ran from hall bathroom to the bedroom with trashcans full of water. My mother sat on the sofa and stared at nothing. And I finally heard Katie screaming and went and gave her back the potato chip bag and sat with her.

By the time the truck came, the fire was out. The firemen dragged the mattress and bed-frame out onto the driveway and hosed it down. They had questions about "How the fire had started," which my father didn't answer. He told them he was taking his wife to the emergency room, and then he did. He pushed her through the front door and into the station wagon, parked behind the soaked and blackened mattress.

A fireman with a clipboard inspected the walls and carpets in the bedroom and hall, and he stared at the mattress, making notes. In the kitchen, Kate started screaming again. The potato chips on the floor cracked underneath my feet like the bones of small animals, when I tried to take her out of her chair.

My mother was at the hospital for a few days, in the psychiatric wing. My father tried to tell us they were keeping her for smoke inhalation. But Renata asked him why she was on the Psych floor and put an end to that. She came home with pills. Pink ones

for her nerves and yellow ones to lift her spirits. When the yellow pills kicked in she chattered and sang and ran around the house, reminding me of a cartoon mouse with a high voltage wire shoved up its ass.

At night she crashed and crawled off to bed, the new one my father had picked out and had delivered. And then, one night, she didn't crash. She left.

So anyway, don't think you can mess me up by running out. Been there. Done that.

6/4 3:20 a.m.

Dear Drape,

I'm writing to you again. Any time I'm freaked out I'm writing to you. Because I don't know what else to do. Throw myself off a building? Bang my head against a wall — splat — an over-ripe melon head, scattering brain seeds and blood pulp. I could start screaming at every strange face I see in the streets. Loud as a siren. I'm a walking ambulance, hear me?

I have to write to make believe you're here. To believe that you are somewhere and could read this. I write to make you real. If I am writing, you must be somewhere. I am writing to make myself believe you're somewhere.

Putty dreams that you're wandering around blind and perilously close to an edge. He tells me what he's been dreaming lately. But I don't want to talk about my dreams.

I dream you're dead. None of that stumbling along a ledge shit. In my dreams you're cold, corpse dead. I find you everywhere. In a gully, covered with flies. Laid out on a dining room table like a feast. Sitting beside me on a bus, only frozen, stiff. Rigor Mortis Mortis.

Sometimes I try to bend you, and you break.

The worst was when I dreamed you in my bed, with your cold thighs against mine. I tried to kick you, from under my covers onto the floor. I don't care if it's you. I don't want to sleep with a dead man. But you're too heavy. You don't move, like lead,

unbreakable, unmoveable. In desperation, I try to kiss you. "Sleeping Beauty" meets "The Night of the Living Dead." Ugly stuff. Too ugly. Your lips are so cold I freeze to them and stick, like that poor kid Renata told to lick the metal swing set pole in the middle of winter. Stupid kid tore his tongue half out of his mouth. Why do people do things other people tell them to? I couldn't pull my lips away from you. I was stuck beyond my will to pull. Glued to your corpse, mouth to mouth, suffocating. I woke up suddenly cold and numb. And I didn't even try to get back to sleep. Pulled on some clothes and walked until I found a place where the frogs were singing. I wanted to scare them with my howl, make them shut the fuck up, but I couldn't move my mouth. Couldn't make a peep.

So you probably think I'm a faggot after that last part. And maybe I am. I wonder why I touch you in my dreams.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The letters were, Cassie thought, different than the notebook. Maybe because he was writing to someone, instead of writing to no one or to anyone as one did when writing a diary, although it was pretty strange of him to write to someone he couldn't send the letters to. She knew from experience, though, that people often did strange things.

While she wished that both Stick and the fat girl had left more orderly accounts of their lives, instead of bits and pieces, she realized it could be a whole lot worse. The diary and the letters might not have made sense at all. Reading them could have been like walking into a movie halfway through.

6/6

Dear Draper,

My sister's back. Renata's back. My Dad said she was coming, but I didn't believe it until we went to the airport to pick her up. "Your mother's flying her home," he said. "She wants to live with us now."

So what was I supposed to say? "Hooray?" or "Oh good. Now we can be like a real family again?" He looked at me like he was expecting something, but I didn't know what. I could have said, "She's a nightmare Dad, remember?" I could have said, "Can't you tell Mom she has to keep her, as penance for her sins or something?" But I didn't say anything.

So we cleared out all the junk we'd stashed in the extra bedroom. And I ran the vacuum cleaner in there, because he told me to. But I didn't believe she was going to show up. She was supposed to visit us last Christmas and she didn't, and she was

supposed to visit us in the summer and didn't again. My Mom wrote a letter to my Dad. Really short. He read it to me, like I was going to be all broken up about Renata not coming home. My Mom wrote, "I'm sorry she doesn't want to come see you. I can't force her."

That must be weird. To be married to someone for years and then to never hear from them except for two-sentence letters. No weirder than anything else though. All of it is weird.

I wonder why she wanted to come back. She wouldn't talk with me on the phone when my Dad finally found out where they were and started calling her. I guess she did a couple of times, but it wasn't like she told me anything. It wasn't like she said, "Oh, I wish Mom hadn't kidnapped me," or "I wish she'd taken you with us," or "I miss you guys. How's Katie?" She told me it was hot where she was. She told me Mom and Mrs. Jarrett were working at a motel. She told me she was swimming a lot.

She should have had more to say than that. It's not like she was a little kid when it happened. She's almost fifteen now. I don't know why she decided to come back.

I asked my Dad. He said something about her wanting a change and something about her fighting with Mom. "Girls do at that age," he said. Yeah. I bet.

It was strange waiting for her at the airport. It was like we didn't really know who we were looking for. The last time we saw her she wasn't even twelve, and now she's fifteen.

We don't even have pictures of her, except for an old one my Dad carries around in his wallet. Along with all the other wacked things she did, my psycho mom either took or destroyed all the family pictures before she left. I don't know if she was trying to make it hard for my Dad to sic detectives on her, or if it was just something she did because she was pissed. No great big boo hoo loss as far as I'm concerned. I was a fat, funny-looking little turd, and who wants photo proof of that laying around?

He said she even took the family picture he used to keep in his office, one of the five of us together. She asked him to bring it home from work so she could have it reframed. I got to give her credit. She was sneaky and she was thorough.

In the one picture my Dad still has, Renata's face is so smeared with cake she's barely recognizable as human. It's from her second birthday party. He showed the picture to me, while we were waiting for her plane to arrive and I said, "Yep. That's her. Old cake face. She should be easy to pick out of a crowd. Let's hope they served dessert on the plane in the middle of turbulence."

While we were waiting at the airport, I decided it's easy to separate the people who are getting ready to fly from those waiting to pick someone up. The first giveaway is the carry on luggage and other assorted travel horseshit — magazines and gum, chum. But even without the props, the travelers look different from the meeters. They look anxious, like they're running behind schedule, or sometimes like they're really scared even. Maybe they're suddenly realizing that there's something unnatural about going up in the air, or maybe they're worried that the air traffic controllers might be having a really off day. The people who are meeting someone usually look relaxed and in some cases even a little bored.

I bet we were hard to classify. We must have looked like we were going and coming all at once. The very image of bored dread, that's us.

Renata was one of the last people to get off the plane. She appeared from behind a huge, sunburned couple. You couldn't exactly say she was hiding behind them, but you couldn't say she wasn't hiding behind them either.

No tearful reunion for us. No one throwing up her arms and running for a great big hug or screaming, "Daddy, Daddy, Daddy," at the top of her lungs. Renata walked slowly, a black bag beating against her legs with every step. Whatever it was, it looked heavy enough to snap her little stalk of a neck.

The first thing she said to me was, "What happened? You used to be fat. I thought you'd be really fat by now." I guess the dough boy and the cake-faced girl

disappeared along with all the pictures of them. She let my father hug her and she hugged Kate too. So far Kate is delirious with joy about having her back. She started following her around at the airport and she hasn't let up yet.

Renata looks pretty much like she did three years ago, except that she isn't fish belly white anymore; she's a dark, red-brown color, like a gingerbread cookie left in the oven too long. She looks burnt. (My Mom always was bad about burning stuff. Ha Ha. She was such a bad cook, it's kind of amazing I was such a fat little fuck when I was a kid. It was all Twinkies and Tasty-Kakes and Kool-Aid. Stuff that came out of a box or a bag. Never anything she made.)

Other than that she's almost the same. She hasn't gotten much taller. She doesn't have tits. Her hair is still greasy and tangled. She still looks twelve, like she decided to stop growing when she left or something.

That was the first thing my Dad commented on. He says, "Has your Mom been feeding you?" Renata rolled her eyes. "No, Dad. That's why I'm here. She was trying to starve me." He almost got mad then. His eye started to twitch the way it does before he loses it. But he was jovial instead. Didn't want to ruin the prodigal's homecoming. He said, "Well, we're going out to eat then, first thing. Do you have any place in particular you want to go?" Renata said, "No." She said, "Not really," when he asked if she had a favorite kind of food. So he said he knew a place that had a little bit of everything.

On the way to the restaurant, it felt like we'd picked up an exchange student from a foreign country who was visiting the U.S. for the first time or something. My Dad asked all these getting to know you, interview type questions. "What grade are you in? What's your favorite subject in school? Are you allergic to anything? How was your flight? Did they serve you lunch? What's your favorite holiday? Do you like pets? What's that you've got in your black bag?"

Aside from giving one word answers, "Ninth, Gym, Penicillin, Okay, Yes, Halloween, No, and Camera," Renata didn't say much. Conspicuously absent from the

interrogation was anything having to do with where Renata had come from, anything at all about Mom.

During an especially long silence, when we were stopped at a red light, I thought I could feel my Dad gearing up to ask. But then he just said, "I'm glad you're here. I hope you'll be happy with us." And then he reached around and tried to pat her on the head. The car behind us started honking, and he almost poked her in the eye.

We ended up at one of those family restaurants, the kind that specialize in family fun. The waitress was dressed like a cowgirl, in boots and a hat. She didn't look like the cowgirl type. Her hair had purple streaks in it, and her eyebrows were shaved off and drawn on very thin. I don't usually notice stuff like that, unless it's really bad. And this was really bad. She looked like she felt like an asshole. Renata ordered a vanilla milk shake and mashed potatoes and cottage cheese. Kate decided she had to have the same thing. We had a table of white fluffy food. It was disgusting.

The best part was the clown. All the fun family restaurants have a clown. I don't know if you know this. I bet you've never been to a really fun family restaurant. Your Dad doesn't seem like the type who would go to one. The clown came around to our table and started making balloon animals and stuff. He made a hat and a parrot for Kate. She really liked the hat and kept patting her head to feel it. He didn't make anything for me or my Dad because we're too old for balloons. Since Renata's small, I think the clown decided he'd better play it safe and make her something too. She got one of those weiner dogs. It was blue. She grimaced when he gave it to her, and the stupid clown went away. After she was finished with her supper, she picked up her dog balloon and bit it. It didn't pop with a bang though, probably because the air in it was divided into different sections. It just deflated with a whimper.

After we finished eating, Renata opened up her black bag. She brought it with her into the restaurant and put it on the seat between her and Kate. She took out a video camera, a really nice one. I guess Mom bought it for her. I can't figure out who else would. And it's not the kind of thing a fifteen-year-old has the money to buy, not unless

she'd been saving for it for a while. I wanted to ask where she got it, but I was afraid that question would lead back to Mom and it looked like we weren't going to talk about her.

She took the camera out of the back and videotaped our plates, before the bus boy came to clear them. I think she might have taped the bus boy some too. And a woman who was picking her teeth at the table next to ours.

My Dad was having one of his out of it spells. He watched her taping for a minute and then asked her if she wanted us all to smile. She wasn't even taping us. She was taping leftovers and strangers.

I guess I'm not a nice, normal human being because I'm not happy she's back. After she went to bed last night my Dad asked me to have a little talk with him in the kitchen. He said, "You're the oldest." And he said, "She is your sister." This means I have to at least try to act a certain way if I want to keep any peace at all in the family. Well, I suppose I can do that. I can try. But I'll tell you. I'm not glad that she's back. We were doing just fine without her.

Cassie realized that, until she'd started reading his letters, she had, in the back of her mind, pictured Stick as an only child. The fact that she'd pictured his family at all came as a bigger surprise to her than the fact he had sisters. The fact he seemed to hate one of them didn't surprise her at all. She supposed he had reason to resent Renata. Still, it wasn't her fault their mother ran off, and it wasn't her fault she was taken along while Stick was left behind.

Dear Draper,

When I got up this morning, to help get Kate ready for day camp, Renata was already sitting at the kitchen table. She had the newspaper spread out in front of her and was reading the business section. She's not even fifteen years old, so what's she

doing reading the business section? Hell, maybe she wasn't reading it. Maybe she was just staring at the numbers.

When Kate came down for breakfast, she pulled her chair right up next to hers. Kate's too little to really remember her, so maybe it's just some girl thing. She wouldn't let me make her breakfast. "I want her to do it," she said.

Renata didn't even ask what Kate ate. She just poured some cereal in a bowl, splashed on a little milk, and gave that to her. Kate usually likes peanut butter and jelly toast, cut into triangles, but she ate the corn flakes. Then she insisted that Renata come upstairs and help her get dressed. Renata went. It's hard to say no to Kate.

"Maybe you can show your sister around," my Dad said, before he left to take Kate to camp and then go to work. "You could go down to the community association pool and introduce her to some of the neighbors." There's times I think the meds they've got my Dad on are seriously fucking with his head. He says this stuff straight-faced, like he really thinks I go to the community association pool and even know people in the neighborhood. I said, "Sure," though. It's easier than trying to dismantle his delusions.

"Where's the pool?" Renata asked, after he left.

I told her it was down the street, and I was even going to take her down there, since she seemed interested. I really was. I was going to try to be nice, except that she didn't want me to.

"Can I just go?" she asked, giving me this look that said, I don't need you showing me around.

I told her she better take the membership card. I don't think anyone has used it in a long time. It was pinned to the bulletin board in the kitchen. I don't know if they check or not.

She left, and I went back to bed. When I woke up, it was the middle of the afternoon. No one was home. That shouldn't have bothered me, but it did. It felt creepy. And I had this moment of panic and everything, like maybe something had happened to her. She'd been gone for hours.

So, I got dressed and walked down to the pool. She was outside the fence with her camera. Her hair looked wet, like maybe she'd gone swimming at some point, but she was fully dressed. She was taping an old lady who was just laying there on a chaise lounge, all wrinkled up and dried out, like a mummy or a lizard except wearing a bathing suit. She was just laying there, sleeping maybe. But Renata was taping her. I couldn't imagine why.

I'm gonna have to say something to Putty I guess, because it looks like she's really here to stay. Tell him that I lied about my Mom being dead and tell him I have a sister. Although maybe if I don't say anything he won't notice her, or he'll just assume she's a cousin or something. Or maybe I can wait until he asks me about her. Or I can tell him my Dad had a kid with another woman or something. I don't know what I'm going to say to him actually. But I guess I'm going to have to say something.

6/11

Dear Draper,

We went to the mall today. The whole family. My Dad suggested it at breakfast, like it would be a fun family outing. I almost didn't go with them, but I needed some stuff. As much as I try not to, I find that I still need stuff sometimes. Music. Underwear.

Renata took her camera again. Wherever she goes, it goes. It's like having the unnatural progeny of Robert Altman and Allen Funt for a little sister. Last night she taped my Dad washing the dishes. When I left to go to the theater, she was taping him and Kate watching T.V. I heard him ask, "Why do you want to tape us watching T.V.?" as I was leaving. If I were him I'd tell her to give it a rest, but I'm not the Dad.

I wonder if she brought a bunch of tapes with her, or if she keeps taping over the same one? By now she should have a great big pile of tapes somewhere, but I've never seen them. Maybe she doesn't even have a tape in the damn thing.

She taped the fountain in the mall, and then I'm not sure what else. She says, "I'll meet you back at the fountain at three," and took off before my dad could say anything.

Kate started crying and tried to take off after her. My dad's hanging on to her arm and she's screaming "I want to go with her," over and over. And of course it's nothing but perfect L. L. Bean catalog families passing by, looking at Kate, like they've never seen a kid have a tantrum before.

I helped my dad maneuver Kate into an ice cream parlor, and then I went down to Spencer's Gifts and The Gap. I probably should have tried to catch up with my Dad and Kate at some point, but I didn't feel like it. I hung out at Bert's Tape Factory until it was time to meet them back at the fountain. They all had lots of bags, and they were all smiling, even Renata, so I guess it was a successful trip.

6/14

Dear Draper,

Today was Kate's fifth birthday. The lady next door helped my Dad organize a party. I think maybe she's sleeping with him, which would be too bad for her husband. But good for Dad. I mean he probably wasn't getting any even before my Mom left, her being gay.

She's pretty hot, the next door neighbor, in that I bleach my teeth and hair and exercise seven or eight hours a day kind of way. I think she's older though, like her youngest kid is older than me and away at college and the other one is already a scientist or something. For someone my Dad's age, I guess she's not so bad. And it was nice of her to help plan the party for Kate. I think this was her first one.

She was really excited about the cake, but it freaked me out. It was a regular cake on the bottom, the flat rectangular kind, but on top of that there was a mound thing. It was supposed to be like the bottom of a fancy ball gown. The frosting on it was really elaborate. And then, stuck in the mound of frosting and cake was a Barbie doll. I thought she was naked, except that she was covered up to her waist with cake and frosting, and then there was frosting over her breasts like the top of the dress. And I kind of wanted to lick the frosting off her. But that would have been a gross thing to do.

Especially in front of a bunch of little girls. As it turns out, she had a bathing suit on, and her legs had been wrapped in plastic to keep them from touching the cake.

I'm not sure where the next door neighbor and my dad found all the screaming five-year-old girls. Actually about half of them were screaming and running around and the other half were prissy. One sat under a shrub and cried for most of the party. I tried to talk to her, but she started throwing grass and dirt at me so I gave up.

You'd think Renata would be taping all the excitement, it being a birthday. But she wasn't. She and my Dad had a fight about it. Renata said she didn't want to and he said, "Christ, you tape everything else." I don't know if she was up in her room or what for most of the party. She did come down and eat a piece of cake. And she bought Kate a present. Lipstick and nail polish that I'm pretty sure she stole from the cosmetics counter in the Woolworths. But Kate liked it better than the stuffed Zebra I got her. She sat right down and made Renata paint her fingernails and toenails for her.

6/18

Dear Draper,

Part of the problem with Renata is she stays up all night. I'm used to having the house to myself after midnight, but now she's up too. Like now I can see the light coming out from under her bedroom door. It makes it hard for me to think. Plus, she's been following me around. Not like she asks to come with me or anything. But she's been showing up at the diner and the theater. Ten minutes after I get somewhere, I'll look around and there she is. And she always has her damn camera with her and she's always taping some ridiculous shit.

I've never seen her watch the tapes she makes. Maybe she just makes them. But she has to watch them sometime, doesn't she? What's the point of making them if you aren't going to watch them?

I think she likes to tape until she gets something embarrassing, like someone scratching his ass or picking his nose or chewing with his mouth open or I don't know. For a while I thought maybe she was trying to get something she could blackmail

someone with or something like that. Some stupid fifteen-year-old get rich scheme kind of thing. But I don't think so anymore.

I'm used to being the only one up at night, after I come home from working at the theater. But even if she isn't making any noise at all, even when her light isn't on, I know she's in there. The house feels different now that she's here, everything feels different now that she's here. It sucks. I don't like it.

6/20

Dear Draper,

You're going to think this is twisted. That I'm turning into some kind of paranoid freak. But I swear she's been taping me when I'm alone. It's got so I check under my bed and in my closet. But I think she got me before I got wise to her. So now I need to find her tapes and find out what she has on them. I mean there's things you don't want taped, especially not by your sister.

To make matters worse, she's been hanging out with Putty. I told you she'd been coming to the theater, but I wasn't keeping track of where she went. I guess I thought she was watching the movies or something. But if he's up in the projection booth she's been following him there. And if he's selling tickets she stays down by the ticket booth. He asked me about her tonight when we were closing up. He said, "So how come you never told me you had another sister?" What was I going to say to him? I told him I wasn't sure I'd ever see her again, so why bother? He said, "She's been living with your Mom." And then he just stared at me, like he was waiting for me to explain it all to him. Like he was waiting for me to explain why I lied about my mother years ago. When I didn't say anything, he told me I was sick. I guess he's right.

It would probably be easier if he'd just get really pissed at me, but he won't do that. I really hope he gets over it though. With you gone, he's the only friend I've got.

Looking at the dates of the letters, Cassie was surprised to discover a substantial gap between the letter she'd just read and the one she was holding in her hand. Almost a

month had elapsed between the two of them. She shuffled through the remaining letters, looking at their right-hand corners, making sure she'd arranged them correctly. She had. Up until this point the letters had come at very regular intervals. She could only assume that some of them had been lost. She sighed and resumed her reading.

7/14

Dear Drape,

I figure you must be dead. That makes me crazy because I'm writing to a dead guy. I'm going to keep writing though, because maybe you're not dead. Maybe all the miserable fucking nightmares that keep waking me up nights aren't anything but fear. I don't like being this scared, but I'd rather be this scared forever than have you dead.

Now that I've written it down, I see it can't be true. The words look stupid on the page. They look wrong. I don't know where you are. That's all. That's not the same as dead.

Who'd have thought I'd take your leaving so hard, huh? I think I'm worse off than Putty, and he's your best friend.

I wish I could cry. But I can't. I've tried a few times, remembering every sad thing I could remember. And then one day I hit my hand with a hammer. I thought that would do it.

I'm a real pussy when it comes to physical pain. But I just broke my pinky. Then I tried cutting myself. I thought maybe a sharp pain would work better than a crushing bone kind of pain. But you can guess what happened when I started playing with razor blades. I keeled. And then I had to keep my head turned away from my bloody arm while I washed it and wrapped it up. The wound got infected. It's tender and crusty. (Makes me sound like a piece of fried chicken, doesn't it? Tender on the inside and crusty golden on the outside. Mr. finger-lickin' good.)

I've been trying to remember what I said you to that time that made you cry. It was an accident, whatever I said. I remember that we were just talking up in the

projection booth in the middle of the night. Back then I thought Mr. Bowman didn't know we stayed up there some nights. Back then it felt private. That booth was a separate world, better than some stupid tree-house, better than some car, better than a late night bedroom with everyone else in the house asleep. That booth was a planet all to itself, surrounded by the dark, empty universe of the locked up Majestic.

I don't remember what it was I said that made you cry. But I remember you crying. You were purple and wet and you were making sounds no human being should ever make. And then you started choking, like you were drowning in tears and snot.

And then you stopped. Your body stopped shaking and your face faded back to its normal color. Only your eyes were still red like a rabbit's. You wiped yourself off with your shirt sleeve. And then you thanked me.

And I remember telling you to never pull that kind of shit on me again, no matter what I said. I remember telling you that no one should be able to say anything to someone else that could make them go off like that. You just shrugged and said it might be better in the long run to let things out sometimes.

But I can't let it out. I can't break into my body with hammers and knives to get at it. And even if I could, there's be no one with me. No one to do something, anything, if I started to choke on my own snot.

7/15

Dear Drape,

I wish I knew where you are. Me and everyone else. Even your Dad's started to worry and ask about you. It sounds like he might even spend some money trying to find you. If I had any money I'd look for you myself. But I wouldn't know where to start. You disappeared clean. You and my Mom must know some of the same tricks. How to get away and leave no trace.

If I had your address I'd start sending these. (Yeah, right. I'd send you letters. After so long writing them and hiding them away.) Why is it so much easier to say things to someone who isn't here?

I feel sometimes like you're a million miles gone. With that much space between us, whatever these stupid words say couldn't make any difference.

Although there are times when I think you're still around here somewhere. Wearing the world's best disguise. Keeping your eye on us. That's paranoia in reverse I think.

But I wouldn't mind for you to spy on me. That's scary, but true. I don't think anything I do would really surprise you.

Not much anyway. Lately I follow Renata. But I'm no detective. She feels me behind her. Turns around and screams at me. "I know you're there, you asshole." Nice way for a sister to talk. But she's never been nice. I try to tell Putty what a bitch she is. How she held that little kid's head underwater at the lake and almost drowned him. Since she's been back I've been remembering things about her. How she was always a rotten kid. Cute as hell when she was little, but rotten. And now, she'll go weeks without a bath. And she steals and hides things. He won't listen though. These days Putty's thinking with his dick. And his dick's so dumb it wants to drag him straight to hell.

He follows her as much as I do. We'd look insane from an aerial view. Rat people in a maze town. Following each other around.

I told him, "Look. You need to help me find where she's put those tapes." You'd think he'd want them since the only one we've seen makes him look like an idiot. I barely remembered him crying that night, until we saw the tape. Of course, I was as fucked up as he was then.

Nothing since though. No drugs. No alcohol. It isn't worth it. What I thought was a nice safe black space, warm and dense, turns out to be another trap. Life shouldn't be this hard. Everyone ought to have some place they can escape to. People shouldn't have to stay sharp or get fucked.

I don't know if that's what Renata was trying to do. Taping away all the places of escape. Don't open your mouth. Don't get sloppy. That little bitch could be somewhere hiding with her video-camera. Making a spectacle of the spectacle you're

making of yourself. Documenting the moments when you thought, or at least wished, you were hidden.

Watching Putty come to pieces on the screen that night was like watching one of those movies they show you in highschool driver education about defenseless, seatbeltless, drunk, and drugged up driving. Carnage. Faces smashed through windshields. People pieced back together afterwards who wished they hadn't been, telling their horror stories from wheelchairs. What the fuck's she trying to do anyway? Show us how ugly we are so we'll try to stop breathing? Give us our guts spread all over a plate. Look here asshole. Here's your humanity. Here's you and your best friends. Get over it.

So I haven't been fucked up since the night I saw that tape. Although Putty's still stupid and sloppy. Hell, he drinks with her. I followed the two of them up to the theater roof. He got a mayonnaise jar full of some crazy cocktail he'd swiped from his mother. They were drinking and having a high old time. I didn't see her camera that night. She must have stashed it.

Sometimes I have creepy dreams that it's become part of her body now. Like she can absorb it and then eject it at will. The way a snake can stretch out an incredibly long tongue or the way men get hard ons. Almost nothing, almost inside your body and then all of a sudden there's something there. Something to fuck you with.

I told him to stop feeding booze to my little sister. I told him she's only fifteen years old. She told me to take a flying leap off the roof. I thought about grabbing her and forcing her down the stairs but I could just imagine her kicking and scratching and screaming and both of us falling and at least one of us breaking our necks. So, I left.

I hate that. Even when you find what you're looking for. Even when you find the proof, there's nothing you can do about it. There wasn't really anything I could do.

Putty says he doesn't think there are any tapes, except the one we saw. He says I'm making shit up. He says, and I almost punched him for this because it was such an asshole thing to say, that I should mellow out, find a girlfriend and get laid or

something. He's reached that stupid state where he thinks fucking someone will cure everything.

I spend too much time these days following after Renata, trying to find out where she hides her tapes. I don't even want to see them. But I don't like knowing they're out there.

This is what I get for not paying enough attention to her when I could have. She wouldn't be hiding from me now if I'd been nicer. But I couldn't be nicer. She was never a nice little girl. Never the kind of little girl you wanted to be nice to. I never wanted to be mean to her. She's always been littler than me. But I couldn't be nice to her either. I just couldn't.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

7/18

Dear Draper,

Putty and I ran "Star Wars" last night. A private screening for just him and me. We won't be able to do that soon. Soon we'll have to watch movies in theaters full of other people, just like everyone else. We had one last showing of it this weekend and drew some pretty good crowds. Not quite as freaky as the "Rocky Horror Picture Show" people, but pretty strange. Girls and gay guys with honey-bun hair-dos. Skinny, pimply guys with homemade light sabers. I was going to suggest to Ardis that she dress as Jabba the Hut, but I forgot to.

I had to tell this one chick she couldn't bring her dog. He was dressed as an Ewok. I guess since we let in drunk sorority girls who we know are going to puke all over the place, I shouldn't be so concerned about the possibility of a little dog shit. I told her to wait still we showed "Pink Flamingoes" again. She didn't get it. She was not amused. But you've got to draw the line somewhere. I can't remember if people wore costumes the last time we showed it or not. It feels like every day is Halloween around here lately. Freddy Krueger and Michael are waiting behind every tree. It's started to feel like the beginning of the end.

Putty's a much better projectionist than you, Drape. He got all the reels in the right order. He didn't let the film run out. No one screamed focus at the projection booth, not even once. Of course, since there wasn't anyone in the theater except him and me there wasn't much chance of that happening. But if he'd fucked up, I'd have told him.

It's just too damned easy to pick on Putty. But I probably ought to cut it out. When you tell him that he's fucked something up it really seems to bother him, hurt him

really. And he cries. He cries more than anyone I've ever seen. I'd think he was some kind of a fag, except that I know better than that. I'd know better than that even if he wasn't trying to screw my little sister, which he is, although he'd never think of it that way.

She's been blowing him off lately. At first, she followed him around all the time. But now that he's into her, she doesn't want to hang around him anymore. You'd think that would piss him off, right? Make him say, "Well, to hell with her." But not Putty. It's making him try even harder.

He thinks he's in love with her. The thought makes me sick. It's bad enough that he wants to screw her, but I can almost, just barely, deal with that. Screwing isn't personal. Especially like in the movies where they do it like dogs or take it up the ass. What's personal about that?

And anyway, Putty's never going to screw her, so I don't have to really worry about that. First, he won't even admit that he wants to. Second, he's a big pussy. And third, she won't let him get near her.

Love's different. Love's like you want to know someone and talk to them. There's no way Putty can love my sister. She's a freak.

I've tried telling him that. Especially this last week when she won't have anything to do with him. I've tried telling him about all the shitty things she's done ever since she was little kid. He doesn't want to hear it though. I don't think he can hear it. The couple of times I tried telling him, he cried and then he got mad and punched a wall. That's Putty for you. Wouldn't even punch me in the face. Broke his hand going after a wall instead.

I'd almost rather he'd tried to bust my nose. That would make more sense. And I wouldn't take it personally or anything. And it would give me an excuse to hit him back. I could try to knock some sense into him and not feel bad about it.

Putty cried when Darth took off his mask. I could almost understand that. Poor old scarred up slob takes off his death helmet and then he dies. That's it I guess. You

show your human face and somebody sees you and maybe even loves you for a minute if you're really lucky and then you croak. Then they roll off to save a bunch of hairy little alien pet life forms and have a big celebrational feast about the goodness of everything and you're just dead, just dead, that's all.

7/20

Dear Drape,

What makes you love someone — not you, but anyone? I know, it's an asshole question, but I'm an asshole so I'm allowed.

I've been thinking about this a lot lately, probably because Putty is being such a fucking Hallmark card. I don't think I'll ever really love anybody, certainly not in that romantic send them flowers and "love means never having to say you're sorry" kind of way. I mean I want to fuck people sometimes, but I'm smart enough to keep that separate from thinking that I love them.

I don't even think I'm capable of the other kind, like the family kind. I mean I really don't think I love anyone. Except maybe Kate sometimes, and I don't think that counts. Loving little kids is like loving a toy or a pet or something. They're not really like humans. And even with her, I know I don't love her all the time. Only when she's being cute. The more she starts to seem like a real person, the less I love her. I'm afraid there's a good chance I'll stop loving her completely once she grows up. I can already see where she's starting to piss me off. And I know I never used to feel that way about her.

I know I'm supposed to love my mother because she cleaned up my shit and fed me and took me to the doctor and kept my clothes clean. But I don't remember most of that. And anyway, she left and didn't even say goodbye, and you can't love someone who leaves like that.

And my Dad — he keeps a roof over our heads and he doesn't give me shit anymore about much of anything so long as I seem to be doing what he says for me to

do. And mostly I do what he says because it's stuff that makes sense. Take out the garbage stuff. But I don't know if I can honestly say I love him.

There used to be all these happy pictures of him and me, having a good old father and son time. Before my Mom destroyed them, I used to look at them sometimes and try to remember what it was like to think he was the greatest guy in the world. I remember he used to read to me before I went to sleep and kiss me on the head sometimes when I was little. He's not much of a kisser though. Even when I was little. We used to bump our cheeks together instead, like Eskimo kisses only cheeks instead of noses. Kind of like movie-star air kissing. And I don't ever remember him saying "I love you." Not even to Kate and she's only five and she is pretty cute sometimes. Not even to my Mom.

I asked him, after she left, why he'd married her. I wondered if he'd had any suspicion that she'd run off with another woman somewhere down the line, but of course he didn't talk about anything like that. He said he didn't know why he married her. That she was pretty and she made him laugh sometimes. He said, "Look around son. Most people get married. It seemed like the thing to do."

7/22

Dear Drape,

It's late. I just walked Putty home. He was in no condition. We'd been drinking on the roof again. I was thinking about that time he fell flat on his face in the middle of the street. And he was sober that time. And about all the times he's tripped over trash cans and run into telephone poles. Thank god he doesn't own a car. We'd all be dead if Putty had a car.

Mr. Bowman had a cookout. Just his neighbors and a few soon to be ex-theater employees. Renata's probably got it all on tape somewhere. Although I didn't see her, it felt like she was around. She probably followed us and hid in the bushes. Hell, for all I know she can turn herself into a bush if she wants to. Spy. Creepy. Unnatural. Uncanny. My sister. Maybe she's the spawn of aliens. "Demon girl from another

planet, coming soon to a theater near you." That's why she's always taping us. She's collecting data, gathering samples, getting the goods on us so she can show them to her far off alien cohort in the sky. She's too young to be an important researcher or scientist in her world. What the fuck. We're probably just something like a high school sociology project. A bunch of pissy, pimply, bored aliens are probably going to watch tapes of us and yawn. And Renata, or whatever she's called in that world, will get a B- for her report. (It'll be late. The editing will be sloppy. Her alien teacher will criticize her for the poor sound quality and the blurred photography. She'll ask why Renata has so many shots of people's feet and knees.)

I can't stand cookouts. I guess that's why I hate summer holidays. The smell of all the meat burning on grills makes me sick. I was wondering why we're always burning dead animals outdoors to celebrate? We do it for Labor Day. We did it for the Fourth of July and Memorial day. I'm sure the war dead are real glad that we all get drunk and torch a bunch of dead animals on their behalf. Although they used to burn up animals to make their gods happy, didn't they? Do you suppose they ever ate any of it? Are you allowed to eat a sacrifice? It's almost enough to make me want to read the Bible real close. I might find evidence that all that sacrifice was nothing more than an excuse for a barbeque.

7/23

Dear Drape,

Tonight I punched Putty in the mouth, and I made him bleed. I think it was his mouth I hit. My hand is scraped up like I must've run my knuckles into his teeth. He was bleeding so much I thought I must have cracked open his nose. A nose bleeds more than a mouth, doesn't it? There was a lot of blood on the floor, in a trail leading out the door. I don't even know how bad I hurt him. He ran off. And he wasn't even trying to hit me back. That's the worst thing. I wanted to keep on hitting him and he wasn't even trying to hit me back.

I almost think that made me madder. I wanted to hit him so hard he'd have to hit me back.

Have you ever hit anyone? In the face with your fists? I'd never. I'd never hit anyone or anything before, not even the dog when he crapped all over the house. My father said, you're supposed to hit them then, that's the only way they'll ever learn. But I couldn't ever hit the dog. Maybe I was scared he'd bite me, although he'd never bitten anyone. Maybe I was scared that I'd like it and wouldn't be able to stop. I feel that way about stuff. I don't want to start because I'm scared I won't be able to stop. It's like being an alcoholic I guess. One drink and they're pretty much screwed. Except that it's about a lot of things for me. One anything and I'm pretty much screwed.

My hand has scrape marks, like Putty tried to bite me. Maybe he tried to bite me while I was punching him in the mouth. I think it was the fault of my hand, trying to mash itself inside of his face. I was forcing my hand into his mouth. If he bit me it was because he didn't have any choice. If you slam your hand into someone's mouth and their teeth leave marks on your skin you can't really say they bit you, can you? His blood is on my wrist. Or maybe it's my blood. Or maybe it's both our blood. We're blood brothers now because I hit him in the mouth and he bit me without meaning to. And our blood's all tangled up together.

We were talking. We were just talking. Is that how it happens? Is that how people start beating the shit out of each other? One minute you're talking and then you realize there's no words that will say what you want to say? There's no word as loud as a fist. (Sticks and Stones will break my bones but names will never hurt me.)

And I can't even say he had it coming. What's Putty ever done? Leave his little notes around that no one can understand. Want a piece of my sister's ass. That's no reason to hit him.

Like I'm going to want to beat the shit out of him because he's been chasing Renata? It's gross to think of someone you know messing with your sister. You wouldn't

know because you don't have one. But I try not to think about it. And I don't think she's messing with him anyway. She's too weird. She doesn't like people to touch her.

Maybe it is because he wants to mess with her. But then I'd be hitting him for being such a stupid ass. I wouldn't be hitting him for her. She can take care of herself. I probably hit him to save him from his own moronic dumbness.

I wish he didn't like everybody. I wish he'd realize that people can be ass wipes. Maybe, since I hit him, he'll think I'm an ass wipe. At least that's a start.

I don't know why I hit him. What was he saying when I hit him? He was probably telling me to loosen up.

He was about half-way wasted. You know Putty on a Saturday night after the theater shuts down. A bottle of some shit, no beer, which is for lightweights. Maybe I just hit him because he's so damned stupid when he's drunk. Maybe I couldn't stand the thought that he was going to hug me before it was all over. He was going to hug me and say, "You know I really love you, man." I don't want his drunk, hugging the world love.

Why can't he figure that out? Why can't he just play his own position and pass me something and let it go at that? Let me cover my own ass and let him take care of his.

That's why he could never play with us. He couldn't ever cover his own and he couldn't pass. He couldn't defend because he got too involved with whoever was carrying the ball.

He should have been some kind of crazy cheerleader. Rushing from side to side, hollering at everybody all at once, telling them how great they were doing. Everybody's doing great.

Yeah. He's great. I think I might have broken his nose. And I'm great. My hand all bloody and swollen. And you're great. You've run off and no one even knows where the hell you are. Great. We're great.

Dear Draper,

I was looking for the tapes. When I find them, I'll bust them open with a rock and throw them in the river. Or maybe I'll make a bonfire. I'm not sure which. But some kind of complete destruction. She'll never be able to watch them again, or show them to anyone.

I found another picture of my mother in Renata's underwear drawer. That picture, instead of what I was really looking for. In it my mother is black from the sun. More tan than any human should ever want to be. She's bony too, and smiling with all her teeth, like she wants to take a bite out of whoever took the photograph. Only two people in the whole world have a smile like that. My mother and my sister.

She walked in and found me in her room. I heard the door creak open and I shoved the picture back into the drawer. It was a reflex. I shouldn't be scared of her. She's younger than I am and I'm bigger. But I was, I guess, the one doing something wrong. Violating her privacy. Only, the way she acts she doesn't deserve privacy. She doesn't let anyone else have it.

She asked if I'd found anything interesting. "A picture of Mom," I told her. Then I asked her why she kept it in her underwear drawer. She said, "No one but me has any right to be interested in my underwear."

And then I wanted to apologize for snooping through her things. Even though she'd do the same to me. Even though she's done worse to me, to all of us.

She told me that Katie needed a piece of posterboard for a project. She's not even in kindergarten until the fall, but already she has projects. I asked her what the posterboard was for on the drive to the store. They're making family trees at her day care. Where do they come up with this shit anyway? Why don't they let little kids be little kids? Let them eat glue and stuff crayons up their noses. What's this tree supposed to teach Katie? She said she's going to draw a pine tree, like Christmas, because that's the only tree she remembers our family ever having.

Dear Draper,

Renata's been wearing the same clothes for a week and a half. She smells like she's putrefying. Kate's the only one who'll go near her. That doesn't make sense to me. Kate's usually the first one to pinch her nose and whine when something smells bad, but she still asks Renata to tie her shoes.

8/2

Dear Draper,

Obviously she left it where I could find it. Just that one. And I was stupid enough to fall, headlong into the VCR. Worse than pornography. I think she made it for me. Like a voodoo hex. Plain and simple. She left this one where I could find it as a warning. So that I will leave her alone.

But I will not leave her alone. Especially not after this.

She let him kiss her first. So I thought I knew where this was leading. I didn't want to see my sister naked with Putty. I don't know if I would have stopped when/if their clothes had come peeling off. I think I would have. But not this. A kiss was all. Their faces blurred together. How could the scene have gone out of focus? She had to be shooting it from a tripod, or more likely she'd propped her camera on the edge of a chair or on a bed.

She and Putty were on the floor. Cross-legged, knees touching, facing one another, leaning into the kissing for that only their faces merged and blurred. How could they? The room seemed to be sweating, or the lens. But then how could it suddenly clear? Bright as interrogation.

She took his hand then. It was clenched. He'd made a fist of it, without realizing it maybe. Maybe he was resisting her wild, disgusting ideas. He knew, I think, what she had in mind. Where did her mind come from? I will never be able to know that.

She took his fisted hand and stroked it, soothed it, until she could peel his fingers out. She only needed one. The index finder, white and long, marked, how could I see

this? How could the screen so grainy sometimes suddenly be so sharp? His finger marked with ink and scars and burns. No one else's finger but the Puttyman's.

Which she pulled toward her, to her opened mouth. To suck it, like a blow job? I could see that. Renata trying to see if she could get someone to come through his fingertip. No. Not that. To bite it off? I remember her little girl teeth, after she'd chewed a tube of my mother's lipstick, gory, horrible teeth. I was afraid then that she'd bitten something to pieces until it was dead. And I ran through the house screaming until my mother stopped me. No. She wasn't going to bite him.

She rose to her knees and took hold of his forearm. And tried to swallow his finger and as much of his hand as she could. She tried to force his hand into her face, his finger into her throat.

How could she? Well, she couldn't. I know this drill well enough. I've done it often enough myself, but never even thought of using someone else's finger. Difficult enough to get the angle on my own, to push hard enough to reach that place in the back of my throat where everything inside of me rolls, where my guts connect to something I can touch. And maybe he resisted her just enough. You have to want to touch that place very badly, you have to need to feel your insides rise and spill.

They tried. She tried. But they couldn't. She couldn't.

Cassie had just finished reading the letters, and was trying to imagine what had been happening in the video-tape Stick described in the last one — surely they hadn't been sticking their fingers down each others' throats — when Leon came in from the rain. She was glad to see him, glad to be rescued from the letter writer's world.

"You can't not go just because the weather sucks," he said, shaking himself like a dog. "And usually, I'm lucky in the rain. But not tonight." He reached into his refrigerator and pulled out a beer. "You want one?"

She took the offered beer. It had been months since she'd had one and its smell brought back a tide of memories.

“So, you didn’t find anything?” she asked, mostly to be polite.

“Not much. Some cans without labels, out behind the Shop-N-Bag. Mystery Meals,” he said. “I left them in the van. You?”

She held up the sheaf of papers. “Letters. In with a bunch of boxer shorts.”

“Diary girl’s?” he asked.

“No. Not hers. But someone she knew, I think.” She took a swallow of beer. It was bitter on her tongue. “That’s kind of weird isn’t it?”

Leon was drying his wet head with a dish towel. When he hung it back on the rack never the sink to dry, Cassie flinched, remembering the soup she’d eaten earlier. “What’s weird?” he asked.

“That she had someone else’s letters,” she said.

“Nothing says she had them, just because they were in the same dumpster,” Leon said. “Although it is an odd coincidence. Maybe he had her diary, instead of the other way around.”

This also seemed strange to her and unlikely.

“Or maybe they lived in the same apartment complex and decided to clean out their closets at the same time,” he said. “You’ll never know. Dumpsters are mysterious places sometimes.” Leon sat down on the floor beside her.

“Would you throw out your old letters?” she asked.

“I don’t get that many,” he said. “But, yeah, I guess I do.”

“Do you throw them away right after you get them?”

He thought for a minute. The last letter he remembered receiving had come from his mother — just a few lines on a piece of paper folded around a check. He’d folded the check and put it in his pocket and he’d thrown the “letter” and the envelope it came in away. “Pretty much,” he said.

“But what if you saved them?” she asked. “Until you had a bundle of them tied together with a string or something?”

“But I don’t,” he said.

“But if you did. If you went to the trouble of saving a pile of letters would you throw them out?”

“Eventually,” he said, after appearing to give the question some thought. “I’d forget why I kept them, or I’d forget the people who wrote them, or I’d realize I was never going to reread them.”

“But what if somebody else read them?”

“The odds are against it,” he said. “Even if someone found them, they probably wouldn’t bother.”

“Maybe so,” she said, “But I wouldn’t like it.”

“How would you know?” he asked. “You wouldn’t.”

She realized this was true.

“Do you even write letters?”

“No,” she said. She tried to remember the last time she had written a letter to someone. It was, she thought, in the ninth grade. When her French teacher, Mrs. Wehunt, had arranged for everyone in the class to have a pen pal in France, she’d written three letters to a girl named Genvieve. Because they were school work, she’d burned Genvieve’s letters that year when she burned her French notebook.

Leon got up to get another beer. When he sat back down beside her, she asked, “Did there used to be an old movie theater in town?”

“When I first moved here. Twelve or thirteen years ago,” he said. “On Main Street.” He closed his eyes, conjuring a former configuration of downtown out of the darkness in his head. “Between a shoe store and a diner. They’re gone too. I went there once or twice, but I can’t remember the name . . . not a Bijoux, not a Rialto . . .”

“Majestic,” Cassie said.

“Majestic,” he echoed her. “They used to have names like that, pretty names, elegant names. Before they started naming everything after corporations.”

“The guy who wrote the letters used to work there. And the diary girl used to go to the movies. She worked at the diner next door.”

“I went there too, I think,” Leon said. “But I don’t remember any really fat waitresses. Of course, that was a long time ago.”

“What’s there now?” Cassie asked.

“A mini-mall. Sweet investment for whoever built it. Lots and lots of businesses paying rent for that spot instead of one.”

It really was all about the investments, Cassie thought. She glanced up at Leon’s clock. It was shaped like a schooner and was fashioned from Pabst Blue Ribbon cans. Its hands pointed to midnight, but it felt later to her. “I should go,” she said.

“I’ll drive you,” he replied.

She looked at the stack of beer cans in front of him. Could he have really finished four beers in less than a half an hour? “I think I’d be safer walking,” she said. “No offense.”

“You could stay here,” he said.

She imagined the various repercussions of staying. Waking up on a lumpy sofa, in her clothes, without her toothbrush did not appeal to her. Waking up anywhere else in Leon’s place appealed to her even less.

“I wouldn’t mess with you,” he said, as if he’d read her mind.

“I didn’t think you would,” she said. “I’d just rather go home.”

“I’ll walk you then,” he said, picking up his slicker. “And let me get you a coat and an umbrella.”

“Can I keep the letters?” she asked.

“Better stick them in a plastic bag. It’s really wet out there.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Leon had a present for Cassie, when she visited him several days later.

“Newspaper clippings,” he said, handing her a scrapbook. “One about the old movie theater.”

Cassie turned the scrapbook’s heavy pages and skimmed through the clippings. The opening of a bowling alley, an article about fried green tomatoes, one about some woman’s beautiful rose garden, and then she came to the article Leon had mentioned: “Majestic No More.” Two pictures accompanied it. One showed the Majestic soon after it opened in 1929. The facade and marquee reflected the then popular art deco style, and the building looked spruce and welcoming even in the grainy old photograph. The other picture was taken from inside the theater, apparently half-way through its demolition. Part of a wall had caved in on a row of seats, and light streaming into the theater caught clouds of brick dust hanging in the air.

“Fifty-seven year old Main Street icon demolished amid controversy,” the article read. “Built in 1929 by Reginald Hassler and Sons, the Majestic was Winthrop’s first nickleodeon, serving as a vaudeville road house as well as showing silent and talking films. Although the theater had run upon hard times and ‘wasn’t turning much of a profit,’ according to Lyle Bowman the manager of the Majestic for the last fifteen years, ‘It was still a viable property and could have been productively converted into a community cultural center. It touched generations and it’s a real shame to see it end this way,’ said Bowman. The property’s owner, Steven Talmadge, who purchased the theater just last year with the ostensible intention of renovating it, couldn’t be reached for comment, but Randall Royster, the executive vice president of Talmadge Holding Company, stated, ‘The building’s structural integrity was suspect. It would have been

almost impossible to insure. It also became apparent that it was economically unfeasible to rehabilitate it.' When asked why theater was destroyed so suddenly, despite its inclusion in the Winthrop historical register and despite a vocal, albeit hastily formed, community coalition to save it, Royster stated, 'No amount of demonstrating was going to make that building safe. We chose to move expediently to avoid a protracted and economically unproductive scene.'

Town residents who gathered late today in front of the toppled movie house expressed dismay and shock over the destruction of the Majestic. Tami Wilcox, a twenty-two-year-old student at Sweetwater University remarked, 'They've taken away one more cool thing about this town. Soon there won't be anything left.' Mitchell Morton, a student at Winthrop High School added, 'My parents met there. They took me to see my first movie there. You can't replace something like that.' Willa Vincet, whose family has lived in the area for generations, said, 'My mother and her brother carved their initials into the arm rests of the seats in the front row center. My brother and I carved our initials into those same arm rests, right alongside theirs. I was hoping my kids could sit front and center and do the same.'

Talmadge Holding has filed plans with the city to construct a four-story mini-mall, with room for two dozen retail outlets and several office suites, accompanied by an adjacent four-story parking garage, in the space formerly occupied by the theater. City officials have yet to approve these plans."

There was no mention of Putty or Draper or Stick in the short article. No mention of a fat waitress who was sad that everyone was leaving and everything was getting torn down. Cassie wasn't surprised, although she thought the reporter should have interviewed more of the people who had actually worked at the theater, instead of just town people who had gathered on the sidewalk after the building came down.

"Where'd you find it?" she asked, flipping forward in the scrapbook and finding the rest of it empty.

“Sorting through some stuff in the back. I think it was from an auction box lot, but I can’t remember when I got it.”

She turned back to the page with the theater article and studied the picture. “It was a nice old building,” she said.

“And it looked really good with the marquee lit,” he remarked. “After I read that old newspaper, I started to remember it a little better. How it smelled in there, musty but nice, the way some old women smell.”

“But you don’t remember any of the people who worked there?” she asked.

“No. The nose remembers back the farthest. They’ve done studies.” He paused. “Really,” he said, “Odor is a time machine.”

“What’s it mean about a controversy?” she asked. “Do you remember anything about that?”

“I do,” he said. “There were rumors about people being bribed to say the structure was unsafe, and bribed to expedite the demolition permit.”

“So, they didn’t really have to knock it down.”

“Not if the rumors were true. But it would have been a bitch to restore.”

“So they built a mini-mall?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “But not right away. Talmadge went to jail for some unrelated scam, and construction was stalled. Since the property was tied up in a legal mess, there was this big grassy lot in the middle of the downtown business district for a couple of years. It looked weird.”

She closed the scrapbook and tried to hand it back to Leon.

“You keep it,” he said. “It belongs with the rest of your stuff.”

When she returned to the boarding house, Cassie added the mostly empty scrapbook to the pile of letters and the diary-notebook at the foot of her bed, under the watchful eye of the lady with no hands.

On the following day, after she finished at work, she took a long walk through the business section of Winthrop. In addition to a mini-mall, these blocks housed the expected range of law offices and drug stores, hair cutteries and restaurants. There was a bakery (Sweets to the Sweet) and a shoe store, a five and dime (Winthrop Five and Ten), two stationers, two sandwich shops, three pizza parlors, four clothing stores, a bookstore, a shoe repair business, two real estate offices, an ice cream parlor, three banks, three coffee shops, a newstand, two fast food places, a cosmetology school, two music stores, a furniture store, a Goodwill Industries, a pawn shop, two florists, eleven bars, a bicycle shop, a laundromat, and a tattoo parlor (Pigments of Your Imagination). Although Cassie had been a resident of Winthrop for most of the summer, she had only frequented the Goodwill and the Five and Ten. She really wasn't much of a shopper.

After walking around downtown for a couple of hours, she began to feel a bit faint. She couldn't remember if she'd eaten all day. The closest place that might have food, a coffee shop, "Brew Ha Ha," was ridiculously crowded, as was the "Delly-icious" with its promise of a "genuine sandwich experience." In fact, all the nearby eateries were too populated for her taste, except for the faux-swiss-chalet-styled and unfortunately named "Purple Foot." Although its posted menu advertised "International Cuisine at All-American prices," she wasn't tempted.

As she couldn't find a suitably quiet restaurant, she sat down on a bench to rest. While she sat, she considered other things she might do instead of returning to her room. She could use a haircut, she decided, but the salon, Christopher's, looked too chic and modern, and she was afraid of what might happen to her hair if she stepped through the doors into Lyota's House of Beauty — an establishment that clearly catered to older women. It might have been soothing to listen to some blue-hairs gossip and then sit for a while under a hair-dryer, but she didn't have the nerve.

She was attracted to Pigments of Your Imagination. Not that she'd had much luck with tattoos. Her only one — she'd requested a tree, but it more closely resembled a stunted shrub — had been inflicted on her by a convicted rapist, a fact she wasn't

apprised of until long after she'd been inked. It was a nasty piece of work, a remnant from her most drunken times with Tyler, and she was going to have it surgically removed someday. Still, the tattoo parlor was brightly lit, and the atmosphere inside, where two tattoo artists were busy needling college girls, seemed strangely festive and jolly.

Although she hadn't been in a bar since before she broke up with Tyler, she suddenly had the urge for a drink. Both The Stone Ballon and The Monkey Room were filling already with ladies' night throngs, so she passed by them and entered The Bucket and Barrel, a small, dim room with a female bartender and a handful of patrons.

"Can I help you, honey?" the bartender called before Cassie even made her way to the bar.

Instead of seeming friendly, by calling out to her before she even had time to take a seat, the bartender appeared territorial, or possibly desperate, and Cassie almost turned to leave. But the thought of going back out into the street made her tired, so she cautiously bellied up and ordered a gin and tonic. The woman nodded curtly, but took her sweet time preparing the drink. She looked to be nearly sixty, fairly well preserved and dressed much younger than her years in a short skirt and a midriff-baring blouse. Cassie tried not to stare at her.

When she brought the G. and T, she demanded payment right away. Then she returned to the far end of the bar, where the only other customers sat. These must have been regulars. Cassie had been in enough bars with Tyler to recognize their general mien.

She was almost halfway through her drink, which she was, out of old habit, drinking rather quickly, when the bartender set a second one down in front of her with a thump and a splash. She gestured impatiently toward the cluster of drinking men at the other end of the bar as she sashayed back toward them. One of them waved.

Something like reflex made Cassie wave back, and in response to this feeble hello, one of the men slid from his stool and headed her way. He looked to be about the

bartender's age, but he wasn't wearing his years nearly as well. He had the posture and physique of many bar regulars, sloped toward the bar and anchored by a heavy mid-section.

The gin going straight to Cassie's head temporarily mitigated the fight or flight response the stranger's approach gave rise to. Instead of bolting from her stool, she stayed put.

"You've never been here before," he said, when he got within earshot. His breath was bourbon-heavy, and he made this statement with certainty, as if he kept watch in the Bucket and Barrel all day, every day.

She nodded her agreement.

"You going to the college?" he asked.

She shook her head. So far this was easy.

"You look lonely," he said, once again with authority, as if there was no doubt regarding her social and emotional condition.

She shrugged. She supposed this was possible. She didn't really know what she looked like to the man.

During their brief conversational exchange, she was sucking desperately on her straw, in an attempt to finish her drink as quickly as possible. Lessons about not wasting good liquor had been ingrained in her during her time with Tyler.

"So, what brings you here?" the man asked.

"I don't know," she replied.

He nodded, suddenly sympathetic, as if not knowing why one did things was a condition he understood. "I'm Lloyd," he said. When she didn't immediately respond by giving her name, he asked, "And who are you?"

"Loretta," she replied.

"Old-fashioned name," he said. "So, are you an old-fashioned girl?"

As he spoke, he leaned in, and Cassie realized that he was beginning to flirt with her. Along with the realization came a sudden surge of adrenalin. She wondered how

far he'd take the flirtation if she played along. She wondered how drunk she'd have to be to sleep with a sixty-year-old man. She wondered if he did this sort of thing often. She hoped not. Her anxiety about his flirtatious behavior didn't prevent her from feeling embarrassed for him. "Thank you for the drink," she said, sliding from her bar stool. "I need to go home."

"What's your hurry?" he asked rather belligerently, but she was already opening the door to the street.

On her way back to the boarding house, she stopped in front of the mini mall that had replaced the old movie theater. The attempt had been made to adjust the appearance of the large brick structure, to make it look quaint and old-fashioned — a natural if somewhat more attractive part of the street — but it was clearly one of the newest buildings in the area. It was also the most impressive and housed the most chains, from Starbucks Coffee to the Gap to Barnes and Noble to Blockbuster Music to Subway to The Limited. After entering the mini-mall and taking a quick inventory of what was there, she left.

History — that largely unknown previousness layered beneath the world she inhabited — generally didn't trouble her. But she didn't like standing where the fat girl and Putty and Draper had worked. She had the creepy feeling that they still lived in town. In some ways, finding their personal papers in a local dumpster supported this possibility. What were they doing if they were still here? They were in their thirties, maybe married (although, of course, not to each other), maybe parents. She might have passed them on the streets of town or seen them at the auction. How horrible to walk past someone whose diary you had read and not even know you were passing by her. How strange to have in your possession the letters of someone you might be sitting beside at a sandwich shop, or waiting in line behind in the "ten items or less" lane in the grocery store.

The following morning, Cassie packed up her few belongings and went down to the Drug World to buy a bus ticket. Although she didn't give notice at work, she did

leave a full week's rent in the envelope she slid under Mrs. Schreiber's door. She debated whether or not to say goodbye to Leon, but in the end decided against it. She left behind the things he'd given her as a housewarming gift for the next occupant of the smallest second floor bedroom in Mrs. Schreiber's boarding house.

Cassie's earlier bus ticket had, of course, expired. The six days left on it were like the mysterious hours she'd lost crossing back and forth over time zones months earlier. After the expansive bounty of her Ameripass, she felt a bit strange buying a ticket for a specific destination. It was considerably cheaper, but it was by no means the bargain her twenty-one-day fare had been.

Because she was trying to go some place in particular, she was forced to wait for a bus headed in the right direction. While she waited, she walked the aisles of the Drug World. She glanced at the glossy best-sellers in their racks, paused among the analgesics, and browsed for a while in the greeting cards. Her mother's birthday was coming up soon, and even if she was home by then, she'd need a card. She lingered in the school supplies aisle, staring at the notebooks. At the checkout counter, she bought a pack of gum.

The bus, when it came, was crowded. The only available seat, an aisle one directly across from a woman with a birdcage, had a newspaper on it. Cassie picked up the paper and sat down. The bird lady told her, without any provocation or prompting on Cassie's part, "I paid for an extra seat, so they made an exception."

Cassie thought of her own long-dead cockateil, Bert, and how her mother had tried to revive him, digging him up several hours after they'd ceremoniously buried him in the back yard and giving him mouth to beak resuscitation. "Your mother just wanted to make sure Bert was really dead," her father had explained. "She knew how much you loved him, so she needed to make sure." Even when she was eight, she'd known that some of the things her mother needed to make sure of didn't have anything to do with love. But she'd also known that talking about it wouldn't change a thing, so she didn't.

She glanced down at the newspaper she held in her lap, the one she'd picked up from the seat. "Dumpster Baby Okay," it said. She read the first two paragraphs.

"Officers in the vicinity of Cherokee Street recovered a healthy female infant from behind the SHOP-N-BAG at 9:08 last night. 'We received an anonymous call at 8:57 informing us that a baby had been abandoned out behind the SHOP-N-BAG dumpsters,' officer Elwin Bainbridge stated. 'The call was traced to the phone booth at the corner of Grubb and Delancy Streets. We have reason to believe the anonymous female caller may be the infant's mother.'

Dr. Alice Reedy, who was on call last night at the Woodrow County Emergency Room, said, 'The baby appeared to be no more than eight or nine hours old when she arrived at the hospital. She was wrapped warmly and seems to be perfectly healthy. Clearly, the woman who abandoned her cared about what happened to the infant,' Dr. Reedy said. 'I can only hope she isn't having any post-partum complications.'

It took Leon several days to realize that Cassie had left town. Although her appearances at his shop had become increasingly regular over the past few months, she didn't always stop by every day. He couldn't exactly say he was surprised by her sudden departure, but he had hoped she might say goodbye.

After she'd stayed more than a few weeks at the boarding house, he'd suspected she'd be moving on. The ones who weren't planning to go started looking for more permanent digs, moved into little apartments, got house plants, started decorating. When, after a couple of months, she was in the same dusty room, still buying nothing but cheap paperback books, he'd given her another two months, three at the outside. He confirmed her leave-taking by stopping by the boarding house. He was in the neighborhood anyway.

"Left the rent check under my door a couple days ago," Mrs. Schreiber said. "Settled up to the end of the week. And she left a note to keep her deposit too, since she

hadn't given any notice. A very nice girl. " She looked at Leon for a moment before asking, "She's not in any kind of trouble, is she?"

Leon shook his head.

"You run the junk shop," she said. "I think she left some stuff in her room. I'll let you have it for a buck."

Leon appreciated the irony of buying back the things he'd given to Cassie: the almost-empty scrapbook, the letters, the notebook, and the lady with no hands. He thought about retrieving the lamp he'd sold her as well, but he imagined the landlady would want to renegotiate the price if he did. Besides, the room really needed a lamp. He was just sentimental enough to flip through the scrapbook, hoping to find a note or a scribble of some sort, something that might say goodbye for her. But he didn't find anything really connected to her at all.

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