Fall 1975

The Deer Drawing

Joanne Meschery
THE DEER DRAWING

Millie passed her finger across her tongue and flipped the page. She frowned over the small print and leaned nearer a table lamp beside the bed. Her skin puffed around the straps of her satin slip as she bent over the magazine. She was a small woman and her flesh, freckled with age, was soft and full.

“Elena,” Millie called, pushing herself off the bed, “listen to this.” She padded across the thick red carpeting and stood at the bathroom door. “Just listen to this.”

Elena wiped a space in the steamed bathroom mirror. “Go ahead,” she said, dotting a wrinkle stick under her eyes.

“Now, if they could only have peace of mind,” Millie read, glancing up at Elena’s face in the mirror. “It is our silent prayer. Let’s all hope and yes, pray that Sonny and Cher soon have this awful business behind them.”

Elena raised her eyebrows and blotted her lipstick with a tissue. “This time it’s really happened,” Millie said, sighing. She closed the magazine and laid it on the long vanity in front of Elena. On its cover, Sonny and Cher strode down a corridor. Millie was certain the picture had been taken in an airport. She couldn’t make out Sonny’s face. It was hidden by the blonde-haired daughter he carried on his shoulder while Cher walked behind, trailing a white feather stole.

Millie shook her head. “I never saw Cher look so irritated. She’s really left him this time. And that poor child. It says Cher is going to take her but if I know Sonny, it won’t be without a fight. He adores Chastity.”

“Listen, Millie, if you don’t get dressed we’re going to be late,” Elena said, brushing powder from the collar of her gray knit jacket. “I don’t know why you want to upset yourself with the things they write in those trashy magazines. Sonny and Cher are probably out in Hollywood laughing about the whole thing. You just shouldn’t believe those stories.” She patted Millie’s shoulder and switched off the bathroom light. “Now, you get dressed. We’ll pick up a copy of Time in the lobby. If Sonny and Cher have separated, it’ll be in there.”

Millie and Elena stepped off the elevator into the lobby of the Red Carpet Motor Lodge. It was one of Reno’s smaller hotels and had no
casino. However, it was only two blocks from Virginia Street. Millie and Elena thought the Red Carpet was one of the best motels in the city. They liked the gold chandeliers and wine-red flocked wallpaper in the lobby. And they liked coming back to a quiet place after a night in the casinos. Their room was large with two queen-sized beds and on the bureau there was always a fat envelope full of casino coupons for free drinks and two dollar’s worth of nickels for slot machines. Millie and Elena had used all of the coupons on their first trips to Reno but now, six years later, they used only a few. Elena chose the casinos carefully. Her game was blackjack and she wouldn’t sit at a table with a three-deck deal. “Diminishes your odds,” she told Millie. “Might as well be throwing nickels into a machine.” Millie played only slot machines. The tables made her nervous. When she lost at the machines, as she had the night before, she knew she was not to blame.

There were two quarter slot machines beside the front entrance of the Red Carpet. Millie sorted through the change in her coin purse while she waited for Elena at the magazine rack.

“You want that magazine?” the red-headed woman behind the counter asked Elena. The woman sprayed a foamy trail of glass cleaner across the counter top. “That’ll be fifty cents,” she said, not looking up.

Elena moved over to the counter, watching the woman wipe the glass in slow circles. “You have lovely nails, dear.” She smiled, turning the woman’s hand in her own. “I don’t believe I’ve ever seen such perfect cuticles.”

The woman drew her hand away, examining it. “My hands are my best feature,” she said, a little shyly. “Sleep with gloves on—that’s the secret.” She smiled. “Rub a little glycerin with rosewater on your hands and put gloves on—you know, the white cotton ones you get at the drugstore.” She took a sidelong glance at Elena’s veiny hands. They were as transparent and yellowed as the skin on an onion. “You just try it. It works.”

“Well, I surely will,” Elena said, dabbing at a spot on the counter the woman had missed. “But tell me, dear, we’re trying to get some news on Sonny and Cher, have you read anything recently about their marriage? My friend and I have heard some disturbing things.” Elena eyed the woman behind the counter and pursed her thin lips.

“You can believe everything you heard,” the woman answered. “Sonny’s in Vegas right now and it doesn’t look good. Cher’s got
around-the-clock guards looking after Chastity. Rona Barrett had it on her show this noon. Now myself, I'm not a bit surprised. . ."

Millie and Elena walked toward the casinos, crossing the Truckee River at Sierra Street. It was a pale, September night and the river was low and noisy. Millie could imagine Cher standing there on the bridge in a silvery dress. Everything about her sparkled; her mouth shining deep crimson and her teeth provocative, uneven. Wet and glistening. She saw Cher remove the flashing diamond from her finger and hurl it slowly, trailing a shower of sparks like a comet, into the water.

Elena turned, waiting for Millie to catch up. "Millie, if we don't hurry we'll miss the Deer Drawing."

Millie and Elena came to Reno twice a year. They came in early May, before the heat and the tourists, and they came for the third weekend in September. At dawn, on the third Sunday of September, deer hunting season opens in Nevada. Harold's Club hold its annual Deer Drawing on Saturday night.

Millie and Elena stood on the heated sidewalk outside Harold's Club. Inside, a young woman dressed in brown velvet leotards with pink spots across her hips and tiny pink antlers crowning her hair, was reading off a list of prizes. There were rifles and boxes of cartridges, Swiss army knives, Coleman stoves, free taxidermy for head and hooves, free dressing and freezer storage, and ten doe permits. The grand prize was a four passenger Land Rover with all the optionals.

Millie and Elena thought Reno was never more exciting than on the opening of deer hunting season. "The men have a nice smell about them," Millie told her friends in Seattle. "Like campfires and mountain pines."

Traffic stood still on Virginia Street. "Would you look at all those California license plates," Millie said. "It gives me a homesick feeling seeing them."

"Millie, there's not a thing left in California to be lonely for," Elena said. "I don't imagine there's even a deer left on the other side of the Sierras."

Millie nodded, re-arranging her red fox fur stole over her small shoulders. Millie had lived most of her life in California. She remembered the years of her marriage by the houses she had lived in. She had followed her husband, Jimmy, from one bedroom
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community to another as he moved to new printing jobs on the peninsula south of San Francisco. “My Jimmy,” Millie thought. “You went too soon.” She thought of Jimmy lying in the funeral home in his blue suit, his fingernails like black half moons.

“Let’s go in,” Elena said. “They’re getting ready to start.”

There were no doors on the casino, only spacious openings with forced air heat coming up from the sills. The warmth seemed to sweep hundreds of men in off the street. Millie followed Elena inside, feeling the men’s rough wool jackets brush the blue cotton lace of her dress.

Ticket stubs flew like confetti inside a revolving plastic ball and the young woman on the stage smiled at the crowd. The ball stopped. She pulled out a card, keeping her eyes, teasing and mysterious, on the men below her. Her lips brushed the microphone as she read the winner’s name in a low, breathless voice.

A man standing in front of Millie rocked back on his heels and whistled. He wore a fluorescent orange vest. The sight of it rocking back and forth, nearly touching the tip of her nose, made Millie dizzy.

“Elena, I can’t see a thing back here,” she said, pulling herself up on her toes as more cards were withdrawn, more names announced. “I can’t see a thing but that girl’s antlers.” She looked around her. So many men. She could almost feel their breathing; see it riffling the fox fur at her neck. She watched their faces and thought of them in the woods. She thought of their faces with a day’s growth of beard.

“Let’s get out of the crowd,” Elena said. She stopped clapping and looked past Millie. “We can watch the rest from the bar. We have time for a drink before we leave.”

Millie was relieved to see several women sitting at the bar. “Probably waiting for their husbands,” she thought, looking back at the men gathered around the stage. She ordered a Tom Collins and Elena had a gin and tonic with a twist of lemon. Millie swirled the plastic stick in her drink and then sucked on the cherry. She had a fine view of the Deer Drawing from the bar stool. The lights over the bar were dim, golden pin points turning above her. She imagined how the light softened the blue-white curls about her face; how the rhinestones in the frame of her glasses gleamed.

Millie smoothed her dress over her knees and smiled at Elena. She always felt things were more special when she was with Elena. Elena was special; she had dignity. She was the only friend of Millie’s who wore contact lenses and tinted support-hose. And she had been a
professional woman. She had expense accounts and had taken vacations to Egypt and to Mexico. People noticed Elena. She had a youthful figure and she kept her hair as dark as it was when she was twenty except for a streak of silver that began at her forehead and coiled through the full chignon at her neck.

They had met at a Christmas get-together in their apartment building soon after Millie moved to Seattle. It was Millie's habit to notice a ring finger before a face and she could not take her eyes away from the dinner ring on Elena's hand. Its stone was as large as a purple grape. She invited Elena for coffee and dessert the following Wednesday. After that, they spent every Wednesday together. One week Millie would go to Elena's apartment and the next week Elena would come to hers. Millie bought demitasse cups for those nights and tiny silver spoons made in Amsterdam with windmills carved on the handles. On Wednesday night, she always wore a dress.

The first time they watched Sonny and Cher on television, Millie worried that Elena was humoring her, simply keeping her company as they sat without speaking, cups and saucers balanced in their laps. But then Elena had laughed, rattling the cup in its saucer. "What an odd pair," she said, laughing until her eyes grew watery. "How do you suppose they found each other?" Millie laughed, too. It was something the way Sonny and Cher carried on. How they teased. How they clowned and hugged and sang and afterward walked off leading little Chastity. Later, Millie looked across the room, fingering her neck absently, feeling how the skin had turned to crepe. "That's the way love is," she had said.

Millie sipped the last of her drink and dangled the cherry between her fingers before she popped it into her mouth. Applause broke out, loud and final, as the winner of the Land Rover was announced.

"He looks like a youngster," Millie said, watching the young man accept the keys to the Land Rover, his face flushed and grinning. She slipped off the stool and hurried to the back of the crowd. "Good luck!" she called, waving the tiny fur legs of her fur stole. "Bring home a big one."

Outside, Elena hailed a cab. "The Nugget, young man," she said. "We have reservations for the late show. Can you get us there in time?"
The cabbie reached back and opened the door. "Burl Ives, huh?" He pushed his dark glasses onto the top of his thick, curly hair. "Yeah, I'll get you there, no sweat. Had Burl Ives in my cab last year when he was here. Picked him up at the Overland Cafe. He was wearing a Tyrolean hat. It's his trademark. You can't miss him on the street."


"Where you ladies from, New York City or something?" The driver turned off Virginia Street, following the river east. "This is no big city we got here, you know. I can get you across town in ten minutes."

Millie leaned back in the seat as they waited for a light. She watched couples crossing a concrete bridge over the river, some of them laughing, their arms about each other, as they walked toward the casinos. Near the edge of the water, two boys sat on the rocks and passed a cigarette back and forth. Millie watched them until the light changed. Not far from here, in the foothills, it was dark enough to see the glowing ash of a cigarette. The hunters would be making camp.

"Now, Vegas is different," the driver continued. "I drove there for a couple of years. Traffic's a mess. Everything's growing too fast. It's a boom town."

Elena nodded though she had never been there. "Las Vegas is an abomination," she said, pinning a strand of hair back into her chignon. "That's why we come here. Reno has more charm. More culture, if you know what I mean."

"But you can't beat Vegas for big names. I had them all in my cab, one time or another, when I was there. You name 'em, I've met 'em."

"Sonny and Cher," Millie said as they pulled up in front of the Nugget. She handed the driver a bill.

"Cher," he said, shaking his head. "Skinniest woman I ever met. Skin and bones." He opened the ear door and gave Millie three silver dollars in change. "T.V. makes you look fatter, you know."

"Can you imagine?" Millie said as they pushed open the big glass doors. "I forgot to tip him. And he was so friendly."

"Never mind." Elena pulled off her leather gloves. "I gave him something though I think all his talk was jabber. What do you suppose he took us for? Celebrities don't go around riding in cabs, for heaven's sake."

"Maybe not," Millie said. "But I'll play this one for him, anyway."

Millie had always wanted to play the gigantic dollar machine. It
caught her eye the moment she stepped through the door. The machine looked brand new with shiny chrome dollar signs on top of it and colored lights running like ribbons around its frame. Its three reels were as large as the window panes in Millie's apartment. Millie had to stretch to reach the coin slot and finally to jump slightly to reach the big handle. The knob on the end of the handle was the size of a soft ball.

Millie let the handle carry her down. The smooth, low sound of the machine pleased her. She closed her eyes because it was her idea that to watch the reels was bad luck. She listened as the machine clicked off three deeper tones like the last chords of an organ recital and then she opened her eyes. Lights flashed above her. A bell rang. Silver dollars clattered into a tray. The sound was nothing like the shallow jingling of the nickel machines Millie usually played.

“Good Lord, I've won,” Millie said in a half whisper. The bell stopped abruptly and a red light flashed on: “Deposit one to four dollars”. “Elena, I won!”

“Three cherries. My, they pay a lot for three cherries,” Elena said. She gathered the silver dollars and stacked them into Millie's hands. “Eighteen dollars. Well, you've paid for the show plus some.”

Millie let the silver dollars fall to the bottom of her purse. They walked quickly across the casino to where a long line had formed for the late show. Millie could still see the big red ball on the machine's handle from where she stood.

A middle-aged man in a blue plaid sports coat tried to stand as Millie and Elena were seated at his table. “They really pack 'em in,” he said apologetically, moving his chair slightly to give Millie more room.

“Don’t worry,” Millie smiled. “We're used to it. We've seen several shows here and never once had a table to ourselves. You'd think for eleven dollars they could make it a little more comfortable, though.”

The Circus Room was dim and the closed curtain rippled here and there. It was difficult to talk over the loud, bright music of the band.

“At least they give you your money's worth in drinks,” the man said. He gestured to the row of glasses in front of him. “Six of any drink you can name. Of course, this is just beer. Never touch the hard stuff, myself. Not tonight, anyway. I've got a date with a deer
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tomorrow.” He took aim with his finger and winked at Millie.

Millie turned, taking a closer look at him. “Is that so. We just came
from the Deer Drawing at Harold’s Club.” She leaned nearer the
man. “Elena and I go every year. Oh, forgive me.” She touched
Elena’s hand. “This is Elena Talcott and I’m Mrs. Mildred Corson.
We’re from Seattle.”

“Ed Hacker,” the man grinned, putting down his beer. “Auburn,
California. Happy to meet you.”

“Millie,” Elena said, gesturing to a waiter in a red cotton jacket and
black pants. “Do you want your drinks all at once or three at a time?”

“Tom Collins,” Millie said, beaming up at the waiter. She reached
into her purse and handed him two silver dollars. “All at once.” She
winked back at the hunter. “I just won eighteen dollars from the big
machine out there, the one by the door. I won on the first dollar.
Never had a thing like that happen.”

Ed Hacker looked mildly surprised, his thin brows lost in the deep
creases of his forehead. “That’s wonderful. I don’t do a heck of a lot of
gambling but those machines by the door are set loose.” Millie
noticed that his eyes were blue and serious. Bright blue, not grayish
like her own. He tapped the table for emphasis. “Remember that.
They keep those machines paying off to get people through the doors.
You remember that.”

Millie felt extravagant as she looked down at their table. It
reminded her of the pictures of posh Hollywood parties that she saw
in magazines: tables covered with glasses and bottles where only two
people sat. The room was warm but she gathered her stole around her
remembering the photographs; the sables hanging open over deep
bosoms.

The band played Cabaret, the music loud and brassy. Millie sang
softly, “When I go I’m going like Elsie.” She lifted her glass to Elena.

Ed Hacker chuckled. He touched the stole at Millie’s shoulder. “I
wouldn’t go walking all over Reno in this fur tonight if I were you.
You’re liable to get shot at by some plastered hunter.”

The lights flickered and then dropped, and the band went into
Elephant Walk. The curtains came apart, quick and crisp. A young
woman with smooth, pale skin skipped onto the stage. Behind her
came “Tina”, a smallish elephant who had opened the show for as
long as Millie and Elena could remember. Tina circled the stage in a
loping hesitation step. The girl smiled brightly at the elephant and
then tapped Tina’s leg with a gold baton. Millie and Elena laughed as Tina stumbled into her drunk act. Millie nodded from time to time to Ed Hacker.

“I’ve hunted all my life,” he said, draining his beer. “I’d be out at camp now but I couldn’t stand that son-in-law of mine another minute. But mark my words, I’ll be up before he is in the morning. He’s no hunter. You ever hear of an accountant who could hunt, I mean really hunt? Why Cissy married him I’ll never know.”

“Elena, that girl’s got a terrible bruise.” Millie frowned as Tina swept the young woman up in her trunk.

“It’s just her skin,” Elena whispered. “I can tell by looking at her she bruises easily. Mine’s that way, you know.”

Millie stared at the bruise. It was high above the young woman’s thigh where her tights were cut almost to her pelvis. Millie marvelled at how tight her flesh was, even in that tender place. Millie had been kissed there. Many times. Such a tender place and Jimmy tracing those small hollows with his tongue.

“Well,” Millie said loudly as though waking up, “the best thing for a bruise is Vitamin C.”

“You don’t say,” Ed Hacker said. He studied the bruise. “She’s a beautiful woman, all right. I wouldn’t be surprised if she got that from some man. Girl like that.” Hacker opened his palm and closed it slowly.

“Someone should tell her about Vitamin C,” Elena said.

“Course someone should tell her,” Millie said. She took a long drink from her Tom Collins. “Maybe I’ll just write her a little note. She could save herself a lot of trouble.”

Millie picked up one of the postcards the Nugget left on each table and reached into her purse for a pen. She wrote carefully trying to think exactly how she should phrase it. Then she put down the pen.

“Dear,” she read aloud to Elena, “if you take 500 mg. of Vitamin C a day, you’ll find that you won’t bruise. Best wishes, Mildred R. Corson, Seattle, Washington.”

“Put my name on it, too,” Elena said. “And put your address down there at the bottom. You never know. She might want to write a little ‘thank you’ or something. I removed a wine stain from that lady’s dress in the rest room at the Oyster House years ago and she’s sent me ‘secret pal’ cards ever since. People like to do those things.” She signalled a waiter. “It makes them feel better.”
Millie put a few extra postcards into her purse. The picture on each card was of Burl Ives, only his face, and he was not wearing a Tyrolean hat. "Elena was right about the cabbie," Millie thought. "Burl Ives doesn't wear a Tyrolean hat. And Cher is not skinny." She sighed. "Cher is willowy, yes, but not skinny. She's almost too beautiful when she stands next to Sonny. And so witty. Sonny's no match for her there."

She whispered across the table to Elena. "She's too much woman for him. I wouldn't be surprised if there's another man."

Ed Hacker put down his drink and stared at Millie.

"What are you talking about, Millie?" Elena said and frowned.

"Sonny and Cher," Millie whispered again, and then she turned to Ed Hacker. "Oh, forgive me, Mr. Hunter, I don't suppose you know—"

"Hacker."

"Yes, well, it's just that Sonny and Cher have split up. Such a lovely couple. It was a terrible shock. So much unhappiness—"

"Well, we don't know that it was another man," Elena said.

"Oh, I'm sure of it," Millie said. "And those things never work out, you know. It always ends in tragedy. You're a married man, Mr. Hacker, you must know."

Ed Hacker cleared his throat. "I've seen a lot of it, if that's what you mean. But I couldn't speak for that Hollywood crowd. Those people don't play with a full deck. Now, I'm not saying I have a perfect marriage but I lay all my cards on the table with my wife. Honesty. And respect. I'd say most of all respect."

Millie nodded. "Cher ought to be here to hear this."

Then Burl Ives was standing at the side of the stage in a circle of light. Millie had thought his hair would be gray but it was blonde, blondish-red, and he wore a dark green suit with a green string tie. His shoes were green, too, wide-toed and solid as he was.

"Elevator shoes," Ed Hacker said.

The room grew quiet. The guitar music was easy and gentle.

"Delia, let your hair hang down.
I'll give you a ring,
And a wedding in the spring."

Songs came one after another. After a while the curtain opened and two young women in long, green velvet dresses with lace collars joined Burl Ives for Mary Ann Regrets and A Little Bitty Tear Let Me Down.
Millie took a sip of her drink and kept it in her mouth waiting for the applause before she swallowed. “He’s a wonderful man,” she said to Elena. “I believe he’s seen real sadness.”

“Oh, yes, I imagine,” Elena nodded. “You can’t sing like that if you haven’t.”

“I gave my little girl a chipmunk once,” Ed Hacker said, touching Millie’s wrist. “Got it out in the woods—wild little thing. She wanted to tame it. She didn’t like just watching it run around in this wheel I fixed up for it. I told her she’d never tame it but everyday she took it into the bathroom and closed the door.”

The audience was singing the chorus of *Blue Tail Fly* along with Burl Ives. At each chorus the voices grew more confident, echoing from the balcony to the floor where Millie and Elena sat listening to Ed Hacker.

“One day I went in there with her, into the bathroom. We lay on the floor, just the two of us, all spread out so the chipmunk would have to touch us. And we didn’t move. Cissy’s legs looked so long. The tiles on the floor were cold. We didn’t say a word to each other. We just lay there trying not to move when we breathed, and I watched Cissy. We were lying real close, you know, and I wanted that chipmunk to run right up her leg and sit on her shoulder. Don’t think I ever wanted anything so much in my life. But he never moved. The little thing sat behind the toilet the whole time. Cissy started to cry. I held her. She hugged me for a long time.”

Applause broke out and Ed Hacker straightened in his chair. “Of course, those little things smell. Oh, they look clean, all right, but they have a funny smell.” He laughed. “Sometimes I think I still smell it in the bathroom.”

“Elena,” Millie said, “did you have many lovers?”

Elena looked from Ed Hacker to Millie. Her eyes widened. “I believe I’ll take these contacts out.” She reached for her purse. “There’s too much smoke in here.”

Millie draped her fox fur over the chair back. The room was growing very warm and the dress shields under her arms felt hot and sticky. Her mouth was dry. “I had a lover once,” she said. “Oh, I suppose not what you’d call a real lover. Just someone I knew. We used to talk about it, though. About really being together.” She gave Ed Hacker a meaningful look. “I’d turned forty six that year. He was married, but I never saw his wife. He said she was beautiful. And
when he said that I thought I must be beautiful, too, because he loved me. We used to take walks, and I always wore my light coat so I could feel his arm around me. One day we drove to Inverness and it was so cold on the beach, so cold walking in my light coat." Millie laughed quietly, her finger following a wet ring on a cocktail napkin. "But then, we couldn't do that forever, could we? I mean you get tired, finally, just walking. You get tired and you know nothing will ever happen."

Ed Hacker squeezed Millie's hand. "Your husband's a lucky man, Millie. You're a fine woman."

"Jimmy passed on seven years ago," Millie said, feeling the lines in Ed Hacker's coarse palm. "But he went to his grave knowing I was faithful. Thirty four years we had and all of it for him."

"Well, if I weren't a married man myself, I'd take both you ladies out to camp with me right now," Ed Hacker said and grinned.

"The man's a born entertainer," Elena said as they walked through the casino.

"He sure put on one heck of a show," Ed Hacker said. He buttoned and unbuttoned his sport coat. "Well, look, it's nearly one and I'd better shove off. I'll be glad to give you ladies a ride. Save cab fare."

Millie smiled at the thought of riding through Reno in Ed Hacker's big camper. She looked from Elena to Ed Hacker. "It's nice of you to offer, Mr. Hacker, but I think we'll try our luck a little before we go back to the hotel. We leave tomorrow, you know." She smiled up at him thinking how he was already gone, as though they had never been sitting together at the table. "I hope you get a deer."

"Oh, I'll get one, all right," Hacker said. His face brightened. "Get one every year. I have a trellis in my back yard covered with antlers. All deer. Darndest thing you ever saw."

Millie and Elena laughed. Then Ed Hacker laughed, leaning over them with his hands in his pockets.

"And I have a nice set of elk antlers in the den—twelve points. Got that one in Idaho. The missus antiqued it gold. Now, that's another sight. You ought to stop in if you ever get near Auburn."

"Well, we just might," Millie said. "You never know where we'll turn up. Isn't that right, Elena?" She took a postcard of Burl Ives out of her purse and handed it to Ed Hacker. "Why don't you write your
address, just in case. And I'll give you ours. You never know.”
Millie studied the postcard for a moment after Ed Hacker had
moved on. “Auburn, California,” she said. “Well, you never know.”

“I'm going over there,” Elena said as they left the ladies’ room. She
nodded at a blackjack table.
Millie’s hand was in her purse, sifting through the silver dollars.
“I'll be at the big machine when you want to leave,” she said.
“For heaven’s sake, Millie,” Elena said. “Don't waste your
dollars.” But Millie was already making her way between the tables.
Elena sat at the blackjack table and waited until the dealer, a tall
buxom woman with “Jessie” embroidered on the pocket of her
western blouse, shuffled the cards. Then she put a silver dollar in
front of her. A man sitting to Elena’s right cut the cards.
“Cut 'em deep, win a heap,” he said and chuckled. He drew sharply
on a cigarette and ran his thumb along the thin stack of chips before
him.
The dealer didn’t smile. Cards glided from her fingers. Elena
admired her long, red nails, so much like the bright red hearts on the
card the dealer had turned up.
Elena stared at the card. “Oh, Lord,” she said, “I forgot to put my
contacts back in.”
The dealer gave the man beside Elena another card and then
paused. She looked beyond Elena, her eyes flat and staring, and
tapped her finger on the table.
“Let's see what you have here,” the man said, lifting the edge of
Elena’s cards. “Well, will you look at that.”
Elena could see them. Two aces. She turned them over quickly,
face up, and put another dollar out.
“Double down,” she said.
A few people stood watching Millie play the big machine.
“I saw an old lady play that thing sixteen hours straight one night,”
a young man said. “Funny how they go for that machine.”
Millie didn't turn around. She had her eyes closed, listening to the
tumble of lemons, oranges and cherries falling past the glass. Then
she pushed the “change” button.
“Give it to me in silver dollars,” Millie said, handing the change girl
a twenty dollar bill. “This machine’s about ready to pay off.”
She thought of Ed Hacker as she played. He had said the machine was set loose. He had held her hand and told her she was a fine woman. Millie swept a loose curl from her forehead and felt the mist of sweat on her face. She stretched up again with a little jump and pushed a silver dollar into the machine. “Only men and women,” she thought as she pulled the handle. “That’s all there is in the world.”

She rode the handle down. The dress shield under her right arm had come loose. It flapped out, yellow-white, from the sleeve of her dress, and the fur legs of her fox stole flew around her.