Motel stories

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MOTEL STORIES

By

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Spanish Dancers

Ever since they promoted me to head maid, Billie's been acting funny. She and Sandy are all hush-hush when I walk into the laundry room to get more soap and she makes up these lame excuses about how busy she is when I ask her to babysit Karen. I guess jealousy has gotten the best of her. But I can't help the fact that Mr. Hamilton chose me for the job. There's no way I'm going to give it up just to make her happy. Besides, being head maid is tough. It's tougher than they think.

I started working at the Matador when I was seventeen. I've been working there off and on for the last six years. Making the same twenty-eight beds, scrubbing the same shit-stained toilets and cussing out the same skunk of a vacuum cleaner. It wasn't so bad when Sam, my husband, was still around. My paycheck would help out, but it wasn't bread and water like it is now. Sam took off on Karen's third birthday. Out the door and on the highway as if he didn't have a care in the world. Maybe he didn't. There wasn't much I could do but hang on to my job. I used to tell Karen he'd come back, I don't know why. I think she finally caught on. It's far from a bundle, but what I make will have to do, that's what I told her. Maid work's then only thing I know.

We used to have manager problems. Darlene, the desk attendant, is now in charge of personnel which means she sweet talks us in the morning with coffee and doughnuts then bites
our heads off come two o'clock when everything's rented and only half the room's are clean. Darlene walks around the place like she's managing a castle instead of a two-star motel in the pit of the Sacramento valley.

Mr. Hamilton, the present owner, is ten years younger than Darlene but they seem to get along. Now that I'm head housekeeper, I can let them know what their employee's think. Being a maid, you understand priorities a little better. If you're trying to decide whether to buy a Mr. Coffee for the front office or new wheels for the maid carts so they'd back up once in a while as well as go forward, you'd choose the wheels, naturally. You've got to keep your maids happy. Darlene chose the Mr. Coffee but I've been talking to her, explaining things. She's never been a maid. She doesn't know what it's like.

The woman who trained me, Wilma Mathews, worked in motels off and on for fifteen years. She could do a room with four beds, a crib and a bathroom full of Kentucky Fried Chicken and dirty Pampers in thirty minutes. It's got to be a record. Her husband, Frank, hauled cow shit from an arena in Red Bluff. Lord knows where he took it. He hitched rides to Grady every few weeks to beat Wilma up and steal her money. He said he was saving up for a house trailer but you knew just by looking at the guy that he spent it on Old Crow.

"He's a rotten stinking liar" I kept telling Wilma.
"What's he done for you in the last month, in the last year
for crissakes"

"Not a living thing" she'd say, as if the fact didn't really enter into the picture but she didn't want to cross me. Make a fool of herself. We could always tell when he was in town because she'd come to work with a bruised face or a fat lip. He drove her to work a few times so he could cruise town in her old Buick. Billie and I would give him dirty looks when he came to pick her up but he didn't catch on. He had the gall to whistle and yell "Hey ladies, how about a beer." He was real greasy looking with squinty, nicotine eyes. Just a pipsqueak playing like he was Mr. Cool. The thought of him slobbering into a beer, thinking we were enjoying his company, was enough to crack us up good. Billie started making pig noises when she was playing like she was Frank, talking about the cow shit business. I'd break down into hysterical laughter every time.

Wilma bad mouthed him whenever we discussed it on break. She'd smoke a whole pack of Kents talking about what a scum bastard he was. She'd have to bum cigarettes from Billie if she got real worked up. Turns out, it was all talk. One day she didn't show. The front office couldn't get ahold of her because she didn't have a phone. Billie figured she was hiding from Frank. I wagered on Frank killing her off so he could have her car.

She showed up a month later to pick up her check and acted like she didn't know us from Adam which was just fine. Frank
was spiffed up in a clean white shirt and combed hair. Wilma threw me a look I couldn't read. She had a bruise on her face the size of a lemon. I bet she didn't want to get back in that car with him. But she turned her back when Billie asked "How're you soing?" It pissed me off just like the day she left us with all her rooms to do. The whole place had been rented the night before and they were all check-outs.

But if there was such a thing as maid of the year, Wilma Mathews would have won it hands-down. She could make a bed faster than I could strip one. I adopted her no-water sink cleaning method which saves all the time you spend drying because you never turn the water on and you end up carrying less rags to boot. But after a while, things get to you. It's like a finger sore you have to keep dunking in ammonia water. You can't get away from it. A stray thread on the carpet that won't vacuum up can ruin your whole day. You start ignoring smudges on the light switches and you stop polishing the mirrors altogether.

Especially with people like the Greenfields. They come to the Matador every August. Mrs. Green's mother lives in Grady. We call them the Greens because they're filthy rich, drive a silver-blue cadillac, drink bloody mary's for breakfast and never worry their dollar infested little heads about leaving a tip. Not like the CE drivers. You can count on them leaving some change for a Coke, sometimes a box of cookies like Pearson in fifteen. And they don't make a mess. Maybe a Big
Boob magazine and a couple empty bottles of Lucky Lager.
That's it.

But the Greens were up there. They had to have towels
delivered all day long in 115 degree weather when all I could
think of was turning the hose on my head for about a month.
Last year they left pizza stains in the bathtub. We puzzled
over that one for some time. I'll never figure people out.
You'd think they'd care a little, but no. It's like the used
rubber I had to scrape off the wall in twenty-one because some­
one missed the wastebasket. You'd think with something like
that. People just let all sops out when there's someone to
clean up after them.

I was scrubbing the bathroom floor in nine, thinking about
maybe buying popsicles after work to surprise Karen. There's
a little place on Wilson that sells them separately which they
don't do anymore at Safeway. A box of popsicles wouldn't fit
in the little spot above our mini-fig they call a freezer any­
how. Darlene came up from behind and scared the daylights out
of me.

"We're hiring two new maids. You'll have to train them
tomorrow" she said.

"Two?"

"The Best Western inspectors are coming next week and we
have to get this place in shape. It's a mess. We'll have to
spend more time on each room." She looked at herself in the
mirror as she talked. For a woman pushing fifty, she looked
real put together. She could do wonders with make-up and she were those expensive-looking suits, even in summer. I was sweating up a storm and smelling like a regular hound dog.

"The air conditioner's broken in fifteen" I said. "And eight's got a leaky faucet. Wasn't Turner supposed to fix it yesterday?"

"He'll do it. Make a list. Make a list of everything that needs to be fixed." She put her hand up to her cheek.

"God it's hot."

I had to spray a double dose of Daisy Fresh to get rid of Darlene's perfume. It smelled like the kind Mrs. Green uses. Once when I was doing their room, I tried a little of this stuff called Joy. It reminded me of shopping for Easter shoes when I was a kid. White patent leathers. First we'd spend hours looking in the ladies clothes stores. My mother would try on turquoise-colored dresses and dresses with thin yellow stripes and some with pretty pink roses. Like nothing she ever owned and nothing she'd ever buy. My sister Beth and I knew she wasn't going to buy one but we'd pretend like she was really shopping and remark how good the purple one looked but how she could wear her gold necklace with the yellow one. At the end of the day we'd go to the shoe store. Beth and I would get white patent leathers to wear with the dresses Mom was making.

White patent leathers don't last long. You can hardly try them on without scuffing the heels. We'd get home and put
them on and take them off and put them on again as if they'd disappear if they weren't on our feet. Beth and I would parade around the kitchen, clicking our heels on the tile. The look on my mother's face was partly pleased, partly sad. Like when we were playing hide and seek in the racks of those expensive dresses that smelled like Joy. The store ladies would give us dirty looks and my mother half wanted to let us keep playing. But she told us to stop with a little smile that said if she was in charge, she'd do things differently.

Mrs. Green kept her suitcases locked but I know she had some nice things. Even Mr. Green wore nice, cool summer shirts. Just about a different color every day. Sometimes I hated doing their room or bringing them towels, I knew for a fact that if I ever stopped them on the street, they wouldn't give me the time of day. But there was always something strange about the mess they made. It was like a secret I had over them. Maybe they got a thrill out of taking all the towels home with them, and leaving their broken glasses in the sink. But I knew, and everytime I saw them something inside me would smile.

Billie and Sandy weren't too happy when I told them about the inspectors. It was bad enough working in this godawful heat.

"And we've got to take all the shower doors apart" I said, reading off the list Darlene had written up.

"Sweep the breezeway"

"That's Turner's job" Billie piped in.
"He still hasn't sprayed the ants in seventeen" said Sandy. She lit another cigarette and blew smoke my way. I got a pencil and a piece of Matador stationery and started a new list. I wrote 'Turner' at the tip next to the bull-fighter.

"We getting paid overtime for this?" asked Sandy.

"Darlene's hiring two more maids. I guess we'll each fewer rooms and spend more time cleaning." I was about to finish reading Darlene's list when Billie took an orange-flowered blouse off the shelf and turned to Sandy.

"Somebody in three left it."

"That blonde woman that lounged around the pool all day."

"I hope she doesn't come back for it. I'd love to have it."

"She probably won't even miss it. Did you see the guy who picked her up?"

"D-O-L-L"

"And driving that whatchamacallit sport's car."

"We'll figure all this out tomorrow morning" I said. I could tell they weren't in the mood for Darlene's list. Billie asked me if I needed a ride home which relieved me to no end. I wanted her on my side. This whole Best Western thing was going to be a dilly to get through. I could tell that the minute Darlene came up behind me in the bathroom. It's a rare sight to see her set foot in a room.

Karen was jumping rope when I got home. She had one end
tied to the outside faucet and Bobby Adams, who just turned five, was holding the other end, trying with all his might to get the damn thing over Karen's head.

"Spanish dancers do the splits" Karen sang, ducking her head under the rope. "Spanish dancers do the kicks." Bobby kicked up his heels and Karen yelled "Not you!"

It had to be at least 105. I asked them why they weren't running through the sprinkler like everyone else. Karen stopped and said jumping rope was more important. Bobby kept turning and the rope hit her in the head.

"Bobby!" Mommy will you turn?"

"Mommy's too tired" I said, opening the screen door.

"Bobby can't turn" she whined.

"I can too" he said.

"Can not" she said and I saw her go over and yank the rope out of his hand just before the screen door slammed behind me. I remembered the popsicles then and could've kicked myself for forgetting. I knew I shouldn't be leaving Karen alone while I was at work. But for an eight year old she did alright. I knew she wasn't growing up like a regular kid because she doesn't have half the toys or clothes her friends have. And we never go places. A lot of times at work I picture her going off to summer camp. Then she'd get to see some things. Ride a horse and swim in a lake. Maybe even cook marshmallows over a campfire. Myself, I'd just like to go. No place in particular. Maybe Sam never knew how much I'd like to high tail it out of
here. He's not the only one who wants to get out of paying bills and working six days a week. He's not the only one itching to take off. Just ride and ride. Like those highway songs. Bond for nowhere. I just wish I could make it different for Karen. I opened the screen door again.

"Karen, be nice."

"He can't turn" she yelled. The heat was getting to her. What she needed was an ice cold cherry popsicle.

"I'll turn, Bobby. You watch." Bobby backed away. I could've dropped dead then and there from exhaustion. My back was killing me but I owed her this much.

"Spanish dancers turn around" she sang, turning around as she jumped. "Spanish dancers touch the ground"

"Good girl" I said, trying to sound enthused. She touched the ground without missing a jump.

"Spanish dancers get out of town." She ran out in time to miss the rope but ran straight into Bobby's Big Wheel. Her legs tangled under her as she flew over the bike and landed on the sidewalk with a smack that would ring in my ears for the next two weeks, making me cringe at the thought of her skin scraping off on the cement. Bobby and I ran over to her. She was trying not to cry but let loose once I picked her up. Bobby patted her arm. Luckily nothing was broken but both elbows and both knees were raw and bleeding. We took her inside and bandaged her up. I had Bobby watch her while I walked to the market on Wilson for popsicles.
The last thing Karen wanted me to do the next day was leave her alone. When you’re laid up in bed or you’ve got the flu, you feel like the whole world’s caving in. Like sneezing is going to cause your face to blow off. Everything hurts. I called Darlene so Karen would know I was trying. I knew the answer before I dialed.

"I understand completely Joanie" she said, raising my hopes for nothing. "But you know what kind of day is ahead of us. If it's an emergency...I need you to train the maids. We've got so much to do and so little..." I told her I'd be there shortly.

My stomach did a few somersaults when I saw Mr. Hamilton in the front office. He usually shows up when something's wrong. He invited me to breakfast with he and Darlene. Mandy's was right next door to the motel so we walked over. I was too nervous to eat so I just ordered coffee. It didn't make any sense for us to be sitting there past eight-thirty. The new maids would be wandering around not knowing what to do. Mr. Hamilton spread some papers on the table. They were efficiency charts or something like that. He figured out how much time we'd be in each room, what things needed doing and how many hours everyone should be working a week. Then he said as head maid, I'd get Saturdays off. It would be incentive for the other maids to work up, he said. We usually rotated so everyone had a weekend off occasionally. I told that to Mr. Hamilton but he said he didn't want to mess with rotations.
Darlene sat there stuffing her face with pancakes, nodding at every word he said. I was about to tell him that we were used to working at least seven hours a day when things were busy. He had us down for five. But he looked at his watch and Darlene took the cue.

"Time for business" she said, smiling at me with her raspberry syrup covered teeth.

The two maids weren't green. A blessing. Certain people can't handle this job. The minute they see blood on the sheets, which is routine, they want out. I had them start on my room and went to tell Billie about the carts. I'd let Darlene tell her about the weekend thing. Billie was in twelve. I could hear Mayberry RFD on the T.V. before I went inside. She was striping beds.

"These next three days are gonna be killers" I said, sitting down in the desk chair.

"What's that." she said, not looking up.

"Hamilton's got these charts. He's making changes. I heard he bought the Southside."

"Charts?"

"Things he wants done in so much time."

"We're working our butts off now. He's crazy." She walked past me carrying the sheets and dumped them in the cart outside. I was thinking of Karen with pillows under her arms and legs watching T.V. What if she needed something? Billie came back and changed the channel to The Price Is Right.
"I'm behind" she said. "How're the new maids doing?"

"Fine. I've got to go around and wash the outside lights. Has Sandy gotten to twenty-two yet?"

"Sandy went home"

"Sick?"

"Of this job"

"But not his week. She can't."

"Turner hasn't gotten off his fat butt to do jack shit. He's supposed to be groundskeeper isn't he? Sandy went home when Darlene told her to sweep the walkways. She said it wasn't her job."

"Just like that? Didn't Darlene try and stop her?"

"With two new maids? Darlene doesn't need her" Billie said and went into the bathroom. "Jesus Christ" she said "someone puked all over the toilet."

I went to find Sandy's cart so I could see what rooms were left to do when Darlene nearly knocked me over. She was in a huff about something.

"We need this rating Joan. You know that" she said as if she were breaking bad news to me. "The walkways have to be swept."

"Where's Turner?"

"Cleaning the pool, I think. I'm not sure." She walked away still in a hurry. If Karen got up to get something to drink and slipped and fell. I kept seeing her falling. Falling again. Bones crushed on the cement. Her head cracking
open. Her cheeks scraping. I'd never forgive myself. If only Mrs. Tulane could've babysat.

"Getting paid for walking around" Birdie sneered as she whizzed by me, arms full of clean sheets. Damn right I said to myself. I'm not up to it today. Any other time I deserve the extra thirty cents an hour, although Billie's been here as long as I have and works just as hard. I thought about calling Karen but I didn't want her to move to answer the phone. Mr. Hamilton came up to me carrying a vacuum cleaner.

"Why wasn't this taken to Turner?"

"Is that the broken one?"

He scrunched his face and said "You know, it would only take Turner five minutes to fix the belt on this."

"If you could ever find Turner" I said, but he didn't hear me.

"Five minutes saves you the trouble of vacuuming the room twice over." He set the vacuum at my feet and walked back to the office. I needed to check on the new maids, sweep the walkways, or did Sandy sweep them? I didn't have time to be fooling with a broken vacuum cleaner. It was the porch lights that needed washing. I eyed the empty parking lot, digging in my pocket fro my list but I couldn't even find my keys, and Karen would be on the floor by now because she'd have to hobble to the bathroom and loose her balance. That was it then. I headed across the dirt parking lot. My palms gushing like sprinklers. The keys decided it.
The chlorine smell of the motel pool was still in my nose as I walked down Third. It was like I’d find something if I kept walking. It was all just ahead of me, the keys, the lists, instead of behind me. Like when you get up in the morning and you don’t want to get out of bed and there’s your door, staring you in the face. My brain flashed a picture of Karen lying dead on the floor. What if someone broke in? They’d have a gun. She could be shot or kidnapped. They could get in through the back window.

I sort of trotted the rest of the way, not wanting to cause a stir, but inside I was running as fast as I could go. When I saw the house, I barely recognized it, like I’d been gone for years. Skipped up the stairs, dug around the mailbox for the key and unlocked the door. There she was, sleeping like a baby, her arms and knees propped up on pillows like she was getting ready to fly off. The phone woke her up. My heart was beating a mile a minute. Maybe I’d tell them I got the flu.

I went over and turned off the T.V. and got out the Sears catalogue because, things were flashing in my brain that I couldn’t let go of. The phone stopped ringing for a minute, then started up again. Karen gave me a puzzled look. She was half asleep. I put the catalogue in her lap and took a crayon out of her box.

"You can pick three dresses" I said. "Three dresses for school."

"Three?" she didn’t know what I was saying.
"Circle the ones you like" I said, hooking her fingers around the crayon. The phone started ringing again. "We are not answering the phone. Do you understand me?" I was so jittery I had to sit down. The phone kept ringing. It was Darlene's ring. I could tell. "Don't go near that phone Karen. Do you hear me? I said, do you hear me? I took her by the shoulders and shook her until hse understood.
Evening Of Paris

Fifty-five years ago this fourth of July, Birdie and Hazel sold their skirts made of sailor ties, their satin-tuck pin cushions sewn to look like weeping wysteria (Hazel's purple, Birdie's lavender) two candy green-colored grasshopper pies, and saved a paycheck each from Tacoma Biscuit and Candy Company so that they could buy matching pairs of black patent leather, french heeled, dancing shows. They never minded Birdie's father who told them they looked like floozies. They laughed and hooked pinkies, and swayed their low-hipped, flounced at the gather, Saturday night dresses, Evening of Paris cologne dabbed on their ankles and the glassy shoe points sharp enough to poke holes in their tafetta slips which they put on feet first.

To think of it now, Hazel couldn't recall much about the high heels or exactly what they'd sold to buy them, but a certain dusky smell, the scent of tiger lillies and dark red wine had startled her throughout the years, stopped her on the street or at the lingerie department in Macy's. Her gloved fingers tingling, the floor underneath her falling away, she'd concentrate on both the smell and the backward push, never reconciling the two, never naming the cologne she'd worn as a young woman, she'd straighten her shoulders against the half-hearted shove that jolted her into trying to remember, and step away.

Birdie would remember the shoe straps flapping as she chased her brother across the cow pasture because he'd hidden
her button hook. She now bought beige, lace-up oxfords at a special shoe store and went to the foot doctor every three months for her corns and her once fox-trotting ankles which had shifted inward over the years. The bones throbbed when she stood on her feet too long, as they were hurting her now while she watched Hazel pull the slot machine handle down with both hands. The machine rang and spun and clicked into its window; two oranges, a bar, and a grape, then started spitting nickels so fast, some coins bounced out of the tray and landed at Hazel's feet. Hazel looked at Birdie as if she'd done something wrong.

"Lucky day" Birdie whispered, scooping nickels into Hazel's cup.

"But it's not a jackpot." Hazel watched, horrified, as Birdie knelt on the floor to pick up the strays.

"You going to give it back?" Birdie smiled.

"What if they catch me?" Hazel looked around.

"I don't know, Hazel. I think if it wants to give you money, you take it."

Hazel shrugged her shoulders, eyeing her now heavy paper cup. The last few nickels dropped into the metal pocket. Two rows over, another machine rang out, reminding Hazel of a distant siren—thank god, in someone else's neighborhood. She saw gambling as a terrible and greedy thing, begging a machine to give you what wasn't yours. Then having to stand there while the lights flashed and the dimes clattered. Everyone knew. Some people even smiled as the trays sprung their lit-
tles nests of silver.

Birdie wanted Hazel to be happy about winning. Not everyone gets a jackpot on their first trip to Reno. She loved the lights and the noise, even the men playing craps fascinated her. She'd yell along with them as they petted and wooed the dice. Birdie noticed Hazel squinting her eyes at her. She took off her white wool coat, folding it carefully over her arm. "Hot in here."

"Why Birdie!" Hazel finally said, too loud. "You've got black on your face." She set her cup down and fumbled in her coat pocket for a Kleenex.

"What do you mean?" Birdie touched her chin. "Wait, Hazel. Look at this. Look here." She pointed to Hazel's fingers and held up her own. "It's the nickels. The coins. They turn your fingers black. I must've rubbed some on my face."

Hazel stood dabbing a lint-feathered Kleenex tissue against her tongue, getting it ready to clean Birdie's cheek. But her tongue, to her dismay, wasn't damp enough.

"Not here, Hazel. I'll fix it in the rest room" Birdie said, looking for the sign. "Over there. Are you coming?"

"I'm going to change these nickels first. Don't like carting around a cup full of money. Like I was proud of it or something."

Birdie started off towards the rest room but Hazel caught her by the arm. "Birdie" she whispered. "What is it?"
"My face"

"Your face?"

"Did I get any?"

"It's fine Hazel" Birdie sighed. "It looks fine"

Walking away from her, Birdie thought about all the convincing it took to get Hazel to come along. Reno? Hazel kept saying, Reno. What do I want with Reno. Birdie explained how a person's got to do things, keep active. She'd even accused Hazel of watching too much T.V., though she'd rarely scolded her friend in all the sixty years she'd known her. Birdie was impressed by the woman at Seniors who had given a speech about recovering from a hip operation by making covers for the bathroom air freshener can. They were made to look like skunks with the tail hanging over the part that sprayed. Birdie thought they were cuter than any of the things they glued together in crafts. She was determined, she told Hazel to make some herself when she got the chance.

Hazel would have nothing to do with Seniors. She didn't like bingo and she didn't like pot lucks. Ever since she'd fallen down in her kitchen and had to hobble around on crutches for two months, she'd lost all her get up and go. That's what Birdie would tell her. She didn't mind hearing about the Senior group trips but, lately, Birdie's stories left her depressed and angry. She'd cover up by asking questions, though she had a difficult time keeping all the people straight. Birdie never pestered her into joining. She'd mention a foreign dish pot
luck they were having, then leave it up to Hazel. "Give me a call if you want to go," she'd say, snapping her purse shut. Sometimes, to Hazel's confusion, Birdie's lack of insistence that she join them saddened her. She'd go back to the newspaper on her lap as Birdie drove off and imagined dust settling on her furniture where Birdie had stirred it up, swishing her arms and crossing the room back and forth to admire Hazel's African violets. Her little sing-song "K-K-K-Katie, beautiful Katie" would linger in the air before sifting into the sofa cushions.

As she later stood at the kitchen sink peeling carrots, Hazel would find herself mimicking Birdie. Though she knew all the words to the song, she'd repeat the first two lines; "Jimmy was a soldier brave and bold. Katie was a maid with hair of gold" paring the carrot slices to the four-four count, until her eyes blurred at the limp J's of orange skin and she sang Katie as the soldier, Jimmy as the maid, to cheer herself up.

After Birdie cleaned the smudge off her cheek, she and Hazel decided to have a drink before returning to their motel room. Birdie held her good black purse in front of her with her hand on the clasp like the man showed them at the crime prevention meeting. She'd lost a wallet in Encenada by letting her purse dangle at her side. Hazel, too, had gotten into the habit of resting her arm on her purse, minding its whereabouts like she would a small child's. Hazel arrived at the bar first,
though Birdie's voice, considering out loud what drink to have, arrived before her.

"I think I'll have that pinya drink with the pineapple and coconut" Birdie told no one in particular.

"Pina Colada" Hazel said.

"But those daiquiries are always good. Especially the frozen kind" Birdie winked.

Hazel looked at the bartender and smiled. "My friend here loves coconut. Remember that coconut creme pie you used to make Birdie?"

"Oh, give me an Old Fashioned" Birdie raised her hand to the bartender.

"Doesn't have coconut in it" the bartender grinned.

"I'll have a Seven and Seven" Hazel said. She always ordered Seven and Seven because it was easy to remember.

"I did not make coconut creme pie. That was Elizabeth." Birdie answered loud enough for the whole bar to hear.

"Elizabeth?" Hazel raised her own voice. "Elizabeth?"

"Elizabeth in Tacoma." Birdie stared down at Hazel, then let her eyes wander over the top of her head. Hazel was a good three inches shorter than Birdie, though Birdie was convinced they had once been the same height.

"Here you go, ladies. That'll be four-fifty." The bartender anticipated the next deliberation and leaned his stomach against the bar, folding his arms in front of him.

"I'll get it Hazel. You got the last one." Birdie dug
into her purse, trying to find the five she'd tucked away.

"That's not true. You paid for lunch. Here you go young man" Hazel quickly slipped a bill under the bartender's arm and held out her hand for the change.

"Now Hazel, Damn it. You can't pay for everything." And they went back and forth like this until they found a table compromising the distance close to, and away from, other people.

"Look at that man over there" Birdie satrted in. "You can't see him because we're too far away, but he looks just like Marshall Miller, the fellow who worked with Hank at the fire station. You and Hank just moved to Oakland." Birdie raised her chin in the air as if to get a better look at him.

"I don't think so" Hazel squinted, pulled down her glasses to look over the rims, then pushed them back against her forehead. "Hair's too grey."

"Well, he'd be older now. Wouldn't he" Birdie turned a little in her chair, observing the other people in the bar. She noted the black, pill box hat on a blonde woman's head. "Coming back in style" she said aloud and pointed so Hazel could see.

Hazel was busy pressing the bones of her rib cage in where the whiskey had flared inside her. The honey menthol taste on her lips reminded her of the nights she'd sneak into the kitchen. Carefully placing the step ladder in front of the refrigerator
to get to the cupboard above, she'd step up, one at a time, tip the Seagram's bottle on the top shelf in order to take it down without banging it against the cupboard, then step cautiously back down, making sure the flap of her slipper didn't catch on the ladder. She'd quietly loosen the silver jigger from the tangle of gadgets in her silverware drawer and set it next to the bottle on the counter. But for all her effort, there was no one to hide it from. Her husband Hank had been dead eight years. She lived alone.

Sliding the bottle back and forth on the counter top, she'd weigh the possibilities. Birdie could find her dead drunk in the morning, if the next day was Thursday. Every other week, Birdie helped Hazel do her grocery shopping because Hazel had no car. Or she might leave the bottle out for Birdie to see, pretending like a friend of hers had brought it over. A man friend. Some nights, while grasping the bottle neck, she saw it smash against her counter, sending whiskey and glass all over her kitchen floor. She'd have to walk through the living-room to get to the mop on the back porch. And even then, she'd find tiny fragments in her hair, digging into her skull like tics or sparkling back at her in the bathroom mirror the next morning. But Thelma always chose the juice glass that once held orange-pineapple marmalade, a gift from Birdie. She'd pour one jigger full of Seagram's, careful not to spill, then fill the rest of the glass with water. It was only to help her sleep.
"Did you want another one Hazel?" Birdie took the glass from Hazel's hand and put it on the bar maid's tray.

"What" she said startled. "Why, yes. Why sure. One more" She addressed the woman wearing a white low-cut T-shirt and black mini-skirt. "Just one. Then it's bedtime."

"Bedtime for this old gal, too" Birdie said, watching the waitress go back to the bar. "I wonder how she moves a-round in that get-up. Seems like you'd always be pulling and tugging."

"It's disgusting" Hazel said. "She's more naked than dressed. And they wonder why men are always after them."

"What's that?" Birdie asked.

"You know my Jane down in San Diego. Well. I get her on the phone and all she talks about is having to get rid of a man that's after her. You should see." Hazel stopped when she saw the waitress coming back over. She darted her eyes and leaned her head towards the bar so Birdie would know why she stopped. After the waitress left, she started in again, feeling confused at what she was saying, but determined to set Birdie straight.

"I was down there and saw for myself what Jane runs around in. Thirty-seven years old and still on the loose. Is that any way for a woman of her age to act?"

"Oh, Hazel" Birdie patted her friends hand. It was a ti-rade she'd grown accustomed to, though it had only started a few years before. "It's hot in San Diego"Birdie gently ar-
guessed. When I was down there, like I told you, I was in the pool or the ocean half the time. I'd run around without clothes too, if I looked like they did."

"Birdie! you would not" Hazel tried to sound appalled, but her heart wasn't in it. She couldn't fight with Birdie anymore because Birdie didn't understand. Things were growing much, much worse and no one wanted to realize it. She'd shake her head at Peter Jennings on the channel seven news. "You sit there and smile at the end" she clucked her tongue. "You always smile at the end" then lean forward and witch the channels.

"Wish I had her blonde hair. The one next to the stage. Long, long. Used to have hair like that." Birdies said, twirling the straw in her drink. "Used to have pretty blonde hair like that."

Hazel picked up a match book from the ashtray and read aloud "Cal-Neva Club. What kind of name is that?" She snapped open her purse. "Birdie, what kind of name is that?" dropped the matches in then shut it with a click.

"It's both states put together, I guess."

"A very strange town" Hazel started in.

"Let's go back to the motel" Birdie offered.

"Twenty-four hours. All those lights and bells. You come here twice a year, Birdie" Hazel accused.

"I like it here. You don't have to like it just because I do." Birdie continued, "we can leave tomorrow. You don't have to stay." She stood up, shuffling her arm into her coat
sleeve, avoiding Hazel's eyes. Then she added "Maybe next time we'll see a show. The MGM. Or Johnny Mathis might be in town. You like to hear Johnny Mathis sing, don't you?"

During the drive to the motel, Hazel kept her eyes leveled on the dash board where blue-red light flashed as they passed the casinos, spread into oblong shapes, then glared through her window as they slowed to a stop. She shut her eyes to the glare, folding and straightening the hem of her coat with stiff fingers. Hazel's hairdresser had drawn the bob of white hair up too high on the back of Hazel's head before she set the perm. The combed out ringlets sat like a pillow of tiny cotton balls on the crown of Hazel's head. A draft or sudden noise pricked the hair wisps on her neck, reviving the fine scrape of the hairdresser's razor against her skin, causing her to shudder violently. Birdie shook her finger at a car speeding through the intersection on a red light. "Shame on you, mister. That's how we get accidents. Did you see that guy, Hazel?" Hazel released the bunch of wool coat from her fist and nodded her head yes.

Once inside the motel room, Birdie got to work laying out her night gown, robe, and bathroom things. Hazel stood at the front door, testing it, making sure it stayed locked, then sat on her bed, too tired to drag her suitcase out of the closet. She began pressing her thumb against her wrist while Birdie examined her chin in the mirror above the dresser. If she could cut off a little of the circulation, Hazel thought, the pain
in her fingers would stop.

"Do you think I should take these whiskers off before we go?" Birdie asked without turning around. "One more day probably won't hurt." She walked over to Hazel with her chin sticking out. "What do you think?"

Hazel turned away. "Oh, I don't know. It doesn't matter," and she went to the closet to hang up her coat.

"I could get up an hour early and take em off tomorrow morning. Or I could do it now. Give us a head start on the road."

As she pulled out her suitcase, Hazel thought of her house in Oakland. A dim, dark-shuttered clapboard, yellowy grass lots on either side instead of neighbors. It was a photograph she'd taken fifty years ago. She'd sent a group of them to her mother in Washington, never thinking to have hank pose, or leaving a dish or two out on the sink so it looked like someone lived there. In stead, she'd foolishly scrubbed and polished the rooms, feeling proud that they belonged to her, snapping the pictures as her left eye twitched with excitement. The photographs came back after her sister, Ruth, passed away. The last of her family in Tacoma. Hazel had reluctantly opened the fat brown envelope Ruth's neighbor sent down, expecting legal papers or house deeds. The envelope spilled the few letters she'd written Ruth and her mother, and the pictures. Dusty, yellow pictures with a thick smear, as if she were looking at them under too many layers of glass. She'd hurriedly stuffed
them into her kitchen garbage pail, underneath the avacado
rinds and crusts from her breakfast toast. Hazel looked around
to find Birdie, who was standing at the mirror, in her night-
gown and robe, putting creme on her face.

"Ever try this stuff?" Birdie held up a bottle.

"What is it" Hazel said, hoarsely, then cleared her throat.

"Turtle oil. Supposed to be good for your skin"

"Oh, Birdie. I told you about that stuff. It gives you
more wrinkles. I told you the day I read that article."

"It wasn't turtle oil. How could it make more wrinkles.
It's supposed to take them away."

"It's turtle oil and some others. You can't believe every-
thing they put on the labels. You'd end up buying hundreds of
those cremes and lotions promising you things. It's all a trick,
Birdie. I'm surprised at you."

Birdie's hand stopped mid air. A drop of white fell from
her fingers onto the dresser. "And what's the name of the stuff
you use?"

"It's a prescription from my doctor."

"I've seen Jergen's right next to your kitchen sink, Hazel
Smith."

"Hands are different. I don't put Jergen's on my face."

"Guess I'll get some more wrinkles then." Birdie screwed
the top on her turtle oil then lowered her voice. "Did you want
to use the bathroom first?"

"No. You go ahead." Hazel opened her suitcase and rum-
maged for the blue plastic bag she kept her worn stockings in. It was impossible to tell Birdie anything. Hazel couldn't understand how her friend even got through the night, living in such a bad neighborhood, near the railroad tracks, and her house being broken into twice, once set on fire. But Birdie refused to move. "Lot of nice flowers in that garden" was her excuse. Of course, Hazel wouldn't move from her house either, even though every Christmas her daughter Jane tried talking her into an efficiency apartment. "Too much trouble" was Hazel's excuse. She shook her head as she rolled her stocking down.

Birdie came out of the bathroom, put her things away and layed down on the floor beside her bed to do her exercises. Her white leg shot up in the air, blue veins sewn like beginner's stitch across her swollen ankle, wavered for five counts, then lowered while the opposite leg took flight. Birdie counted out loud between short breaths. When she finished with her legs, she put her arms in the air, wiggling her fingers, watching the wedding ring, now set in a fanned out shell and called a dinner ring, nod up and down. Birdie let her arms drop with two rock thuds, forgetting that Hazel was in the room. At home she'd bang her pot of broccoli against the inside of the sink to shake the water off, electric mix her potatoes, slam her cupboard doors when she couldn't find the can of baby onions, listen to a loud radio while she clipped breakfast cereal coupons she never used, and never thought twice if she was making too much noise, something Hazel accused her of from behind her movie
magazine.

"What's that?" Birdie's elbow jabbed into the bed for balance as she got up from the floor.

"I said, you sure are raising a ruckus with all that counting and kicking." Hazel stared at the page as if she were reading, which she was not.

"Where are your glasses?" Birdie folded the rust-colored spread down to the foot of her bed before crawling in.

"I'm not reading. Just looking." She'd read all the articles at the beauty parlor last week, so she studied the Fredrick's of Hollywood as. The cupless bras and crotchless, string knot panties on the pointy, wild haired drawings of women blurred into black wavery lines that formed a cone breast or corsetted waist only when Hazel brought the page next to her face.

"I'm turning off the light now" Birdie reached over to the nightstand.

"Wait a minute, I'm not finished yet" Hazel turned a page.

"Be good to get some sleep. Got a long drive ahead of us." Birdie ran her fingers up and down the lamp, feeling for the switch. "Turning it off in just a minute" she sang.

"I'm not going back there. I'm not leaving." Hazel pushed in her left eye, heavy with its strain to focus.

"What's that? What does that mean Hazel. Not leaving tomorrow?" Birdie looked over at her best girl friend who had found Nelson Eddy kissing a pig in low enough to touch clouds, their toes yanking out grass and kicking it over their heads.
in confetti strips, blue raspberry stained fingers blocking out the sun, and when they finished the sixth grade and school forever, they carried the berry bucket hand on hand and ate until the seeds jammed into their teeth and fingernails. But the face Birdie saw folded like layers of white tissue, thin as a veil, pinched at the temples and crumpled under the eyes that frightened Birdie with their moss green bulbs receding into brown then saucer black.

"You're wearing it" Hazel said, opening the drawer of the nightstand and slipping the magazine inside. "You're wearing that cologne, Birdie" she pushed the drawer shut.

"Waht cologne. I'm not wearing any cologne." Birdie layed her head on her pillow and reached up. "I'm turning off the light now."

"I can smell it from here. I'm always smelling it and I never wore it. You wore it to the dances." Hazel turned away from Birdie and pulled the covers up to her head.

"Here it goes Hazel. The light's going off"

"You do it on purpose. You wear it and I can't see things. It get smokey." Hazel's voice sounded far away after she'd turned her back.

"I don't know Hazel. When you talk now. I don't know the things you say."

"I can smell it on the sheets. Even here. It never goes away" Hazel almost whispered.

When Birdie turned the switch, Hazel's blanket glowed pink
from the motel sign flashing in the window on its slow spin around the pole. Her hair, looking like a white jar cap under the blankets, turned an ash-grey on the sign's dark pivot. Birdie stared at the blankets on the opposite bed, who it was underneath, she wasn't sure. Her hip throbbed and her back moaned for her to turn over, shift her weight, but she couldn't move, she'd better not move. The pink blankets shimmered then dulled, shimmered and her eyes sunk in their rims, the corners watered and stung as she watched, while Hazel slept.
Marleena used to meet me at the bus station, nights, after the bars dried up. Any bars. She'd say sitting in them was like sitting in a mayonnaise jar full of smoke. I'd say it was like being in a toilet that wouldn't flush. We had our differences. Last time I saw her at the bus station, she was standing outside, all her possessions in a paper bag except the pink make-up case which she forgot so she's looking a little empty around the eyelids. It's this paper bag from Albertson's she clutches and wearing these white sneakers, these godawful white pointed sneakers and no socks. "You're a dead giveaway, Marleena" I say.

It's about twenty degrees out. Wrapped in a pea green sweater that barely covers her ass, face white as the sneakers, maroon pant legs hitting about two inches above her ankles, she squints her eyes and looks down the bus garage as if she's expecting the greyhound any minute. "Forty minutes til the next bus" I say, and she throws her shoulders hard against the cement wall and sighs. I go in, how's business to Nelson and hit the coin return on the candy machine.

Rick's sleeping half off a chair, Levi legs sprawled as if he'd been shot. I fiddle with his boot, using my shoe to kick it from side to side. No life. "No life in this boy." His orange down vest held closed by his crossed arms. They say they're like babies when they're asleep. They'd never say it about Rick. He hasn't got the features. Someone
should buy him a cowboy hat to hide his face. But aren't scars wonderful? Swaying back and forth on gin and rum and whatever else, I see this guy from the bar come up to Marleena and I'm thinking, what the hell's she doing out there in that polar breeze, a saying I steal from Rick now and then.

Nelson McSwaney, the guy who makes a living selling bus tickets, talks to me from behind his counter about the new posters. See America with pictures of America all around. He ordered them weeks ago and isn't it a fine thing if business doesn't pick up because the station doesn't advertise. "People who ride the bus are people who know where they're going" I tell him, leaning my head toward Baggage. "Oh, the hell" I say and walk over.

"They aren't coming in here to say "let's get some vacation ideas." What do you think. Half the people riding the dog come back the next day. You know it. Nelson you know you're not running any goddamn travel agency so lock up on the posters will you?"

"Get the hell out, Dorie. You're no one to be shooting a mouth tonight. I was making polite conversation, like a regular, and here's you ready to blow my brain's out."

"Didn't get any tonight, Nelson. My insides are all twisted up just waiting to get untwisted." I head for the door.

"Cut the floozy crap, Dorie. Go back to your husband and kid where you belong. When you get declawed, come see me."

I make it to the front doors and rest my head against the
Nelson shuffles the baggage tags and looks out his window. Not much hair left on that man's head. His chubby cheeks stop their puffing. "When's the next bus" I say.  

"Thirty minutes." His mud-colored eyes look my way.  

Marleena wasn't exactly on pins and needles to tell me what happened that night with her and the guy from the bar. She ends up saying it like a weather report.  

"He comes up to me and goes, wanna listen to some country music?"  

"Jesus Marleena, do men still say that?"  

She boils coffee water on his stove in his one room trailer. I'm sitting on the very edge of the unmade bed like maybe contamination is on the sheets.  

"Now you're all mother and warm toes, I bet."  

"He sells cars."  

"Don't the best of them?" I grin. "No more Thunder Bird motel for you." But it isn't like that and she knows it and I know it. Anybody's going to be a certain way when the bottom falls out. It's not like we ever go to a bar for a better reason then to take a load off. Things happen. You can count on it. Sometimes you can coast along pretty far before the bottom drops out again.  

"You're a lucky woman"  

"Until February"  

"February?"  

"His wife comes back from San Antonio. Relatives. It's
like you, Dorie, the missing wife."


"Should've been up there with the homecoming queen candidates" she says, batting her lashes and pulling her yellow front teeth over her bottom lip.

"If it weren't for these Bags." I put my fingers under my eyes.

"A broken nose from my Daddy never helped." She hands me the coffee and I sit there blowing on it, thinking about the other days.

"How long'll they let you stay?" She sips at her cup.

"Betty? She don't mind that much. I do all her damn chores. She had me sewing Ned's socks the other night. Good thing they got T.V."

"You used to hate her guts."

"Still do. But she's my cousin. Relatives owe you somehow. Besides, I needed to get away from Jack. Don't know why he ever decided to move to Salmon, Idaho. The place gives me the creeps, all tangled up with that river and so many trees around you can't see the light of day. Takes hours just to get on a straight road. Ever been there?"

"No" she says. She's heard the story of my bad luck husband and baby Nancy enough. How his looking for jobs was more fun than finding one. Newspapers piled up on the card
table. Classifieds cut out and taped to the refrigerator.

Five Heavy Machine Operators Needed in a row. Everytime I'd go for the milk I'd have to read them again. But I never said a word.

"Ever wanna just get away. Leave all you know behind you" I ask Marleena. "I spose now with this guy you never think of it."

"Sure I do. I'm going to California."

"And leave this little love nest?"

"He can't do it."

"What?" I giggle.

"It's not funny" she starts a grin. "He's only cold."

"And lonely" I say. "Don't forget the lonely."

"I don't mind. It never was for that, you know."

"It never hurt."

"No" she says and looks out the little window above the sink.

"What else."

"Oh, nothing except fat and ugly and never brushes his teeth and the lights on all night."

"My kind of guy" I say, but I know I'm pushing it by the look on her face. Never so old as the day you make a wrong decision and sit with it. The coffee tastes like hot water and cigarette ash. I tell her nobody goes to California anymore. I heard it on the radio a long time ago. Last year they all went to Florida. There was a special on T.V. This year, I don't know. Not much else left. But she says she's going
because the ocean's all she's been thinking about lately. Thirty-five years old and never seen the ocean, she says.

"Remember Missy Litton?" Marleena asks.

"Red hair. Right? Buck teeth and no knees."

"I got her address from her brother. She moved to Crescent City, by Oregon."

"Will she take you?" I picture Missy working maid at the Thunder Bird. After three years she got to be desk attendant but only because she started buying those co-ordinated suits from K-mart. "She might be up there" I tell Marleena but she's looking past me towards the Livestock calendar, the names of the days printed over real big squares, the little red numbers sitting small in each corner. "When you leaving?"

"Oh, you know" she says and turns around to rinse out her cup. Marleena's not much of a figure but she's got a face that's like brushed clean or, what is it. Like she's just walked in out of the cold and smiling about it. Her real tired eyes melt the best of them. There's something there that naptaking would rob her of. The little lines do her good but, it's probably the auburn hair. Gorgeous, shiny hair like the polished table tops at the mall. We looked in Safeway once for her hair color on those boxes. Just to match up. Autumn Twilight's the closest we came and I still say she's got the better.

"I'm going to have to kick you out now Dorie" she says.

"He comes here for lunch."
"Isn't that just the sweetest" and she throws the dish rag at me. I don't see her again til it snows.

It was dark, past midnight and I'm checking the front seats for weirdos. Two Mexicans and a black-haired woman's yelling for the partiers to shake it down the rear. I sit up front by the grandmother with the bonnet on her head. Her face shows powdery in the light from the depot, eyes out the window like everyone else. We're not on the road yet, grandma, here's a human one next to you, but she'll have nothing to do with me. "Nice day" I say but she's busy mumbling out the window. The bonnet turns out to be a hat with a sheer scarf wrapped over it and tied under her chin like that actress in the old movies.

Fifteen minutes later, Lester Allen climbs aboard, starts the engine then skips back down the steps just to egg us. We finally slide out into the street, 12:30 by the station clock. Nelson's looking out his window at the bus like always, but this time he's scratching his head. That's his wave, I grin. Good ol Nelson, always buttin in, wanting to do me and Marleena favors, thinking we can't see through that I'm-a-young-one talk of his. Why he tries to keep care of us in that brotherly way of his, I'll never know. Nothing better, I guess. Lester crackles, my name's Lester Allen and I'll be your driver as far as Spokane and no one listens until he gets to the part about smoking in the last three rows only, no pipes, cigars, or marijuana. That work winds their clocks and we hear hoots
and claps from the back of the bus for the next five miles.

The noise reminds me of the time me and Marleena were in high school, we must have been juniors, our class took a field trip to the lake. It was those cheerleaders who put trips like that together, but they invited us anyway. Not that we hated them. We all understood; they didn't see us, we didn't see them, even though when it came time for try-outs, Marleena would get a routine together, thinking she had a chance.

We're on the school bus and I'm holding a wet, sweet and sour candy sucker between me and Marleena like a microphone and we're singing the greatest hits in Chinese voices. Crystal, who was hanging over the back of her seat, sang along and thought of wrong things about the trip every five minutes. First, that we're even going. Second, that we're going to the lake and not bowling but always that she had to pee. Finally she gets the guts to use the one on the bus. The boys did exactly what our nightmares said, opened the door to Crystal, pants down around her ankles, elbows on her bare knees. "Up yours" she yells so they lock her in till we get there. "No asswise comments from you" she says all day long.

I brought two packs of Camels and Marleena smoked a whole pack in minutes. The way she'd suck in then talk like there was no smoke coming out her mouth, I'll never forget. That field trip was the day we met Rick working with the Salt Creek conservation crew from the county jail. They were picking up trash from the boat doacks when we spied them and walked over.
Rick was all charm and ain't I cool, talking and spiking his trash with that pole like he was collecting money. He's bragging about this house he's getting in Montana, soon as his uncle kicks off, then he's saying how cute we look, winking and cracking his gum. His boss called him over and we had to leave. The whole way back to town Marleena and me are trying to claim he wasn't much. She wrote him in jail and we saw him when he got out that summer. We all three buddyed around, hitched rides up to the lake and smoked on the boat docks that were closed that year, the lake was half mud from drought. I liked him enough from the start, but not the way she did. To this day she won't admit she looked him up way later and found him in Deer Lodge. "An accident," she says and I've always wondered.

It could be that Marleena's found herself a place by the ocean. One of those wooden get-ups you see in the magazines, blue mesh curtains and lots of stairs going down to the water. Maybe even a big porch to sit back on and watch the waves. She'd be working for some hot shot lawyer, typing his papers, wearing fancy dresses. Or those suits, those soft grey suits you see the bank women wear with their silky white blouses, bright pins stuck in the collar and their diamond rings. In a pretty dress, smart looking heels, hair in a style, she could get about any job she wanted.

Lying back on a yellow recliner, tanning her skin, she'd sip at a tall cool one and watch the sailboats swing back and
forth real slow. She'd have the house to herself, lock her
doors and listen to the radio all day long. At night, she'd
wear elegant gowns, one of those sheer black long things with
no straps, and throw a party, serving crackers and cheese on
a silver tray. The man with the dark eyes and curly hair would
watch her as she floated around the room, touching people on
the arm.

Her wedding would be a fan-dangle affair. The kind you
read about in the paper. A long trail of satin, white as all
the damn snow I left in Missoula. Everyone would stand up to
look at her, the bride's maids all dolled up in pink satin.
Then she'd be running off with the groom, her big bouquet
flying in the air. She'd disappear in the car with its clank­ing
and scraping cans strung up behind it. And the church
bells would ring.

All this thinking's got my jaw going a mile a minute.
The gum Rick gave me ran out of peppermint miles agao, but I
keep on chewing. By now I'm starting to feel a little dried
up. The air's funny on a bus. Warm enough but piped in. I'd
give just about my last dime for a seat by the window, touch
some cold glass, as close as you'll get to fresh air on this
dog. The hat woman's been mumbling all along and before I know
it she throws her jaw out and says "They'll be crawling on
their bellies before it's over."

I'm nodding my head up and down, yes, that's nice and she's
gritting her teeth and hissing "They'll be gone before
it's finished but they'll suffer first." I'm thinking this woman's got a .45 in her purse and she's going to blow us all away. She eats on the inside of her cheek a minute. They'll get what they deserve and crawl until they can't crawl any longer." She hooks the two top buttons of her coat, looks me in the eye "crawling on their bellies" and looks away before I do.

It's something Jack's mother would do if she wasn't afraid of bus rides. She'd act like she was gonna gun down anyone who crossed her even though she was a scared rabbit inside. My reflection's all I see when I look out the window so I think about Jack and Nancy. Slip them in and out of cars coming to meet me. Her hair all brown curls and fluff, a good dress. Jack fades out behind the steering wheel or butt backed against the Olds. Her anyway, she's always skipping towards me, laughing and singing and just before she's into her mama's arms she shakes my head up. Has her crying fit, laying down in parking lots and on the kitchen floor. I never wanted it. The heels of her white baby shoes cutting black marks in the linoleum. Her eyes wild to the ceiling. I never wanted it.

Things fall apart. It makes me nervous. Like Marleena's guy claiming he sold cars at Bigham Chevrolet, circus flags and a bright yellow coat just like on the commercial. After a week she was beating her with the electric cord, mostly his hand. I met her once for coffee. Lemon slices we begged off the waitress going on her bruises. She'd seen that in a mag-
azine, tea bags for black eyes, too.

"It's not heaven, Dorie, but it's a roof."

"Cut the one about the roof, Marleena. If it's less than heaven, get out."

"I don't wanna talk about it."

"Talk about him for once, would you? Get him arrested. It's against the law."

"He's letting up, I told you."

"Not enough. Betty'll let you stay with us. The door's open."

"It's better than it was."

"I suppose he buys flowers and candy when he's through."

"Never should have told you."

"Tell yourself."

"The snow's piling up."

"Jesus, jesus. Look in this napkin holder. Look at your goddamn black and blue face" I say and she leans over a little towards the holder.

"It's not that bad."

"Not the yellow parts. What do you tell people?"

"I don't go anywhere."

"You're getting there fast. I hate to see it. Is he really letting up?"

"Hasn't been bad. Four days, maybe five."

"It's no good. I can't tell you anything about how to live. Look at me. But, christ, you can do better can't you?"
"Never have" she says to piss me off and hang her up for a while. Too long, it turns out.

Marleena, Marleena, I say, under my breath. She was serious about one thing, getting to California. I found the letter and some travel books in a green metal bread box. He never knew I broke in. Patrick's Point was circled in pencil and the Redwoods. Her yellow nightgown hooked on the bathroom door. The pink eye-make-up case, pills for her back ache, her miniature sewing kit with the thimble missing on the bathroom shelf.

Once these two men, a few months after I got into town, two men from Billings and me and Marleena danced on the sidewalk, New Year's Eve, when the midnight horns went off. Hot rum sliding around our insides and bad weather biting our faces on the out. Me and Marleena laughing at the one guy's real red ears, I mean red like the hairs on his ears shone white and pieces of the bar napkin we ripped up sticking to everyone's head.

Back in the bar, we got them all going again, linking arms and kicking legs around and around in a big circle, the alcohol red in our faces, and everyone's hot and making it hard to breathe. Then we're hiding in the bathroom so they'd leave without us. Marleena standing on one side of the toilet seat and me on the other, whispering as loud as talking "shush up they'll hear us." Nelson locked us out of his house later, feeling mad that we didn't stop by before New Year's was over.
We knew we'd be safe there. Nelson never tried anything on us which was a great relief. We banged on his bedroom door for him to let us in. "Ran the whole damn way, Nelson" until he gives up and lets us sleep on the floor.

I think farther back than that, November, in Deer Lodge, friends dropping me off at Rick's, me not knowing what to expect, and here's Marleena Steven's fresh off the bus from Missoula. It'd been years since I'd seen her. Rick decides to go duck hunting right off the bat, maybe suspects a little of the goings on under our smiles. The two of us are throwing words back and forth, finding out some things. We pay Rick three buck to take us with him. I wasn't about to sit around his smelly house all day so he borrows a truck and the next thing I know, we're laying low behind these branches Rick piled up for a blind. I can tell Marleena wants to know if I'm thinking about getting into Rick's bed. I'm avoiding it like I don't know what her eyes mean.

When Rick finally starts blasting away, I can tell by how she watches him that she's hurting about something. Only luck with one of his tries so he's a little pissed off but joking. "Should've brought the damn decoys and what do I bring instead?" He looks at us and I smile. I know darn well he likes us there watching him but Marleena's not that sure.

We hear noises from far off, coming towards us. I'm beating my mitten hands together to keep warm and Marleena's kind of shaking up and down. Rick's reloading and we all three stop
when they come into view, maybe a hundred of these birds flying, shiny white against the grey sky, calling to each other, some making patterns. Rick says "snow geese" and Marleena's eyes are up there, following, slipping around in some tears. When they're gone, she and I are looking towards the mountains in their direction, waiting. Rick starts telling his shot mallard, that's still squirming on the ground with a broken neck, to hurry up and die so we can go home. We had left-over spaghetti for lunch and I never did answer Marleena's question.

The nights she stayed with Rick they'd get drunk and stay drunk for days. It was bad between them. They were like criminals together, hiding out in his house. Then he'd take off somewhere and she'd be lost. I was at my cousin Betty's in Missoula by then. Marleena's riding the eighty miles back and forth from Missoula to Deer Lodge so much, she don't know where to live. Nelson even threatened to quit giving her free passes. It was better for her in Missoula. We'd walk it off around town and Marleena would whimper about the dresses in the store windows. Then I knew she'd be O.K. Oh the hell, I'd tell her, a little car with good gas mileage is all a woman needs.

I ditch the crazy woman in Superior. A window seat and too tired to look out. Count up all the windows I've leaned against and Dorie, you'd have a truck full of glass. The woman in front of me is so fat she takes up both seats. I think, to carry around all that extra and still get hungry. I know
she does. She could be as fat as this bus and she'd still have to eat sometime when no one's around to point.

Like Nancy's trouble. Never a place where you can stop it and say, the whole thing starts here. She just got worse, dragging the one foot behind her like an old man and the braces someone told us would fit into her shoes we couldn't afford and everything going wrong in her brain. Jack says "It's your side of the family that did it. Freaks from way back" and me saying nothing. Saying it loud. Then he says it's not his kid and I think it's his pride talking. Just as sorry as me we can't do better. Nancy had more than one thing go bad since she was born but Jack wouldn't hear of a doctor, said they were thieves, says it's my fault, what the kid needs is a real mother. It pisses me off enough to look someone up. Rick's the one I think of first, being the closest, and maybe to get Jack's goat, so three days later, I'm on Rick's doorstep in Deer Lodge, Montana, freezin' my ass off in weather that's colder than it looks.

"Go back to Salmon" Rick tells me the next week from his black recliner, The Joker's Wild blaring on T.V., First I clean the kitchen. Then I scrape the scum off his tub and take a nice hot one. Some friends are like that, I'm thinking. Should-have known when Marleena showed up the first day that it was a mistake to stay. I borrow the six bucks bus fare to Missoula where I look up cousin Betty, what I should've done to begin with.
The bus pulls into Spokane real early. About three flights of stairs until you get to the restroom. Nelson should see this station; big coffee shop and four different candy machines, the women's room; mirrors and sinks on all sides and me thinking, why don't Missoula rate? Two teenage girls are rubbing on some brown-colored lipstick and their friend, Carlos, walks right in to get them. Carlos is moving his hand on the one's ass real secretive. They're both saying his name twenty times between the lipstick, looking worried and pleased at the same time.

I never considered Salmon. First you've got to ride a van instead of a bus with maybe two or three others. Maybe none. After you get to Darby, which is as far as the van goes, it's this little mail car, woman driver, nice as could be, for the rest of the way. Helped her deliver mail and everything but once we got past the Welcome to Idaho sign, I'm sweating a seat full. The one time I try going back there and I get her to take me back to Darby, her two boys thinking I'm a little strange, but we all had a Coke and laughed about it. I'll never forget how the passengers got narrowed down. First we let the boy off in Stevensville. Then the two old women in Hamilton and finally it's me in the mail car. Just me in this car feeling like a one-way package with no insides.

Back home in Tulelake, me and Marleena used to sit behind Lyon's grocery store, on the old timer's bench, throwing rocks across the dirt parking lot. I'd been married to my first
husband, Sidney, maybe two months, just out of high school. She'd tell me again how her wedding would be, the lace on her dress, her little cousin carrying the rings on a red pillow. Then she'd talk about going to Beauty college or the typing school for short hand. We talked about our weddings since we were ten but mine was over and Marleena never had a guy. I was tired. None of it ever comes true.

She left town without telling anyone back then, too. Should have known about her. Never a letter or a post card. Not even on Christmas. I think I could've stuck it out, put Sidney off a while. It wouldn't have been that hard to say no. Putting our money together, me and Marleena could've done something.

I check the candy machine window for Milk Duds. Nope. Maybe next batch. On the wall behind the big desk, staring me in the face, is a long, long list of places to chose from, departure time's in white, arrival time's in red. I lean my back against the desk, hands stuffed in my coat pockets. The chairs all have bucket seats and connect at the arms. Pretty colors; orange, pink, yellow. The drinking fountain by the front door shines like a pot and the floors are white spic-n-span, just the way I like em.
Serenade

Stewart tells me everything connects if you force it, therefore nothing. He should know. He sleeps on a bunk crammed head to foot with four others, three rows next to his, half the crew unable to shake their saliva stung jaws. "It's the wave crash as high as the ship that proves a certain disconnectedness" he says (this up and coming merchant marine). "Or vastness. How the word vastness shrivels on paper when I try writing you the day the storm breaks." Mostly we're friends by mail, though I imagine his facial cringe checking my theories about living in the past. He says he doesn't think recalling pain necessarily alleviates it. Sometimes I see his seriously pale face bent over a letter in progress, the stubbed pencil callousing his middle finger—he writes microscopic.

At night, in its mad moment of vulnerability, his mouth rings O's of pleasure, though I've tied him to the bed against his will. Stewart doesn't know it yet, but I fuck him telepathically while night clerking at the Shamrock motel, portable T.V. on for comfort. (We come sometime after Johnny Carson, before the Creature Feature). One night, while my fingers slyly inched their way into my jeans, the phone rang and a Texas voice with nothing better to do droned on about licks and dicks and tits and anything the guy could come up with that rattled his mazooza. I slammed the phone down, zipped up my jeans and checked the fornt office for mirrors. Coincidence, I assured myself. But sitting back down in my mapelwood swivel rocker,
I noticed an immediate aversion. I'd lost the intensity, that small pulse-like reverberation, the minute genital throbbing that started when I'd imagined Stewart in these dozen or so compromising positions. Repulsion set in. He was now in full uniform, buttoned up white collar, the patent leather bill of his cap obscuring his wanton eyes, the shorn head like a shiny white gift box without ribbon. And me in navy blue pumps and white gloves doing something decent like waving goodbye or kissing him on the air side of his collar. No lipstick stains. And I'd have to imagine him marching, marching, every-time his pants threatened to shimy off his waist. The dirty rotten Texan ruined a week of my carefully arranged clandestine meetings.

Last week Stewart sent me a postcard from Pago Pago. A walnut-nosed woman in flaming pink feathered head dress, five silver arrows shooting out from her skull, a string of yellowy prehistoric teeth circling her neck, accentuating the V-collar of her purple tassled shift. She clutches a machete, smiling a coy, faintly sadistic smile. "Castration: penalty for non-payment" Stewart writes after the salutation "Aloha GEO-graph (my initials are GEO). But he's still got his balls he assures me, doesn't go in for portside prostitution. I carry the postcard in my back pocket for a week. Pull it out late at night when the Coke machine lulls me drowsy with its tepid buzz. I get a lot of flack from customers who insist on writing personal checks and Mr. Dillman, the owner, calls me Clerk Four and for-
gets where he hides the cash key. Other than that, it's a cake walk job.

AHOY SALTY SEA DOG I write on one of our Shamrock postcards and think of the last time I saw him. We were alone at his cousin's house in an old almond orchard. Played jazz records, eyeing each other endearingly over a game of poker and cheap, sugar high wine. The music reminded me of my mother and father dancing. Big loops of saxophone and trombones, Sunday mornings while the eggs fried. Their sweetheart smiles, tuck and twirl, her silver spatula in hand, rumpled hair and yellow quilt robe. And him holding her close, his string of pearls, his moonlight serenade.

"Too much grape drink" Stewart groaned, massaging his temples, interrupting my reverie. We'd been hinting all along about a transition from friends to people who have sexual intercourse with each other. In letters, the topic of inventing new words for love and sex spurned pages of discourse and hack psychological analysis. In person, we were shy. Stewart drunkenly stumbled to the back porch bedroom. I followed.

It had been raining torrents and monsoons which continued throughout the night, providing oh-wow-ohmygod material seeings how his fingers stayed on his forehead, his boxers on his ass. "There are other things in life" he'd say everytime he refused my grasp. The transition didn't seem to be working out. Stewart could become philosophic at the drop of my torch red panties like no one I've ever seen. How can you let your erection just
go away, I wanted to ask, but didn't. "Listen to that rain,
Geo." He touched my bare knee and looked out the porch window.
Then his eyes swayed heavy, his head dropped and there was no-
thing but pillow from his neck up.

Months. I hold out for months and this is the thanks I
get, I mumbled, stepping out of the bed, a loosely hinged vessel
that squeaked like a styrafoam ice chest. Wrapping myself in
an itchy wool army blanket, I opened the back door and stood
on the porch step landing. He didn't wake up to see the for­
lorn look on my face, so I closed the door between us and leaned
against it, scrutinizing all the wetness coming down. How the
swamps must be surging and the marshes billowing and the gulf
streams inundating. My feet soaked up the puddle on the porch.
Dear Stewart, I started in. Fuck you and your fucking headache.
The rain gutter along the porch roof sagged in the middle,
causing a drip-drop sound on the bottoms up bucket underneath.
Fuck you, fuck you, I chanted to the drip-drop, drip-drop and
sat down in the puddle, sticking my feet out into the warm rain.

Half a dozen men stood soldier fashion, saluting when I
called out their names. Each and every one (I, sniffling my
nose, assumed) would be more than willing to accomodate my
present needs. Not counting the million or so chin-in-their-
beers desperadoes tired of the hole in the bathroom wall. But
big black check marks cut into every name I thought of. Com­
plications arose. It wasn't such an easy manuever anymore, to
have thrilling, yet tender, intimate, yet shadily kinky sex.
The curse of it. I made rash and unacceptable resolutions of celibacy. Maybe sex wasn't everything, I determined in my most mature, experience-ridden, twenty year old voice. Chilled from a sudden wind, I took a deep, healthy inhalation of wet earth and the then gold and lickering sky, went back inside and crawled underneath Stewart's sleep heavy arm, whereupon two of his groggy fingers scratched affectionately on the side of my head.

"Nine inches of rain fell in 24 hours" hummed the bus station radio. Stewart curled my fingers around a rusty skeleton key he'd stolen off the doornail from his cousin's house. "Don't connect it" he said, and dried his lips on my forehead. He left me slouching in a smoke-gagged bus station crying my eyes out. But not before I begged for mercy.

"I hated you last night" I said. "Now I don't wanna go. Don't make me go."

"You have to go" he said.

"That's right" I said. "If you won't give me what I want, somebody else will."

Then he got pool-eyed, shuffled his deser boots and shrugged his ocean bound shoulders. He puts on this look that shakes my heart right at the weak hinge. I mumble "write me sometime, Sinbad. Send lots of postcards."

"See you at sea, Galena" he says, and I'm alone.

Within those shadowed and timeless hours spent from midnight to six, jotting down passionate redress and humble anec-
dotes to Stewart, I'm never tempted to say "life goes on."
But once or twice a month, it's my duty to pinch hit for Lor­
raine, the day shift D.A.. Twirling fire batons is not so im­
pressive during daylight hours. So my heady, letter conversations
with Stewart smolder in the bottom drawer of the front desk
while I revive myself by assuming an 8 a.m. Clerk Three posi­
tion, hoping that something significant will happen. On
Thursday, something came close.

The desk attendants here at the Shamrock have an under­
standing: don't trust the maids. They'll say "yeah, sure,
I'll clean thirty-two next" then disappear for an hour, leav­
ing Mr. and Mrs. thirty-two in the front office, pissed as hell.
Or they'll tell you they've finished a room and you send cus­
tomers up, only to have them stomp back to the office fuming,
because there's a couple in the bed getting one more in before
check-out. So when Lizzie said she'd found a dead body, I had
to wonder why she wanted me out of the front office.

"How do you know it's dead?" I watched her face carefully.
She's been known to steal small change.

"He ain't breathing. Proof enough for me."

"What room?"

"Fifteen. Didn't sleep in either bed." Lizzie coughs
and looks around the office. I should tell her to go back to
work. Instead, I take her with me to fifteen. Sure enough,
there's a man lying face down on the floor between the bed and
the bathroom. Green plaid flannel shirt, Levi's, hiking boots,
a familiar bow to his legs.

"Can't get into the bathroom to clean with him laying there" Lizzie says, trying to sound tough. I kneel down next to him. "Don't remember the name on his registration slip" I mumble. "Fifteen. Fifteen."

"What're you gonna do" she says, standing over me. I move a fluttery hand over to his houlder and shake him.

"Hey you. Wake up" I say, stupidly. "Do you know his name lizzie?" She doesn't answer. They guy had dark curly hair and a dark beard. I was about to shake him again when his eyelid quivered, then his cheek twitched, then bam! He's up on all fours looking around like a mad dog.

"Jesusgod" shouts Lizzie. I test a trembling knee, stand up and look at the guy's red face.

"Lizzie here thought you were. She didn't know. I didn't know what to do." He shakes his head rapidly from side to side, then sits back on his haunches. His puffy eyelids barely slice an opening.

"It's the Mickey Mouse, man. Daffy Duck. Seen em around town?" he says to the bed. I look at Lizzie and shrug my shoulders. She's standing there ready to go to work, a rag in one hand, Ajax in the other.

"Daffy Duck?" she says, looking at him then me. "I'm going to twenty-five if you need me for anything."

"Guess he's not dead, eh Liz?" I say, my evil eye hitting her blank one.
"Guess not" and she shuts the door behind her.

"Bad, bad, bad" he mumbles and lays back down on the floor. "Bad acid in this town. Eats through your fingers."

"If you're checking out" I say on my way out the door, "you've got until noon." He's back on his hands and knees crawling towards the toilet. I go to the front office and wait.

His name is Luther Wentz, just as I'd suspected. The unmistakable bow in his legs and the flash bulb blue eyes gave him away, although the beard threw me for a while. I'd met Luther in college, worked with him at the Earth and Stars grocery, attempted a sex-like-tennis agreement with him that lasted four months. Any minute now, if he didn't lie on his registration slip, he'd be checking out. I hurriedly prepared off-hand speeches in my head about the good old times. But thinking of how he'd treated me, the speeches turned into bitter chastisement. Had he even liked me. What about his unsuspecting girlfriend. How childish to have so little control over his insatiable itch. The shakey tower of building block accusations clattered to the floor when Luther stepped into the front office, looking exactly like the promising young photographer I'd known two years before. Once he recognized me, he sauntered up to the front desk and with genuine enthusiasm sort of patted me on the back and kissed my ear.

"What the hell" he said in a too high, too loud voice.

"How're you doing" I slurred, then changed it to "Where you heading?"
"Yakima. Taking my brother's stuff up there. So, well, I'll be damned. How're you doing?" he patted my hand.

"Taking a little vacation from school. Getting by, I guess."

"Married yet?" he laughed, rubbing my arm. I'd forgotten what a toucher Luther was.

"Married" I sneered. "You gotta be kidding."

"Why not?"

I made a groaning noise to answer. Seeing Mr. Dillman's car drive up, I thought it best to get Luther out of the office. "It's the boss" I pointed. "Got to get to work."

"How about later, talking" he grinned, "or smoething."

"I've got to work" I repeated, not having made up my mind. the bells on the front door jangled as Luther set his room key on the desk. "Later" he said to me, winking, then "good-morning" to Mr. Dillman and he was out the door. After Mr. Dillman picked up the mail, I took out a piece of Shamrock stationery and scribbled curly cues under the bright green clover leaf. At the bottom of the page I wrote "why not" in very tiny letters before ripping it up.

While Luther threw together enchilladas in my closet kitchen, it occurred to me that our meetings had never had the wine-n-dine preliminaries. It had always been after the bars closed or when he crawled through my bedroom window in the middle of the night, or on our lunch break at Earth and Stars. I could never say no to that pulsing blue vein groping his brown
arm, the furtive, pen and ink dashed lines at the corners of his eyes, the smokey, woodsy smell of his Levi's. And as long as his eyes snapped and flashed when he talked, I felt that every time he dropped by, I'd be compelled to say yes. However, I did harbor some incriminating evidence, just in case I had to detach myself, or in case he detached me.

"Always someplace else." He handed me a glass of wine.

"Isn't everyone" I defended.

"I'd forgotten about you and your monster green eyes." He clinked his glass against mine. "What're you doing anyway."

"Doing?" The already hot apartment was growing stuffy with tomatoe sauce and cheese.

"You going to work in that motel forever?" he sat down.

"I'm going back to school. Someday." I took the chair opposite him, "It's not a bad job. I get by."

"Like I said, Gwendolyn, what're you doing? Weren't you the one who wanted to make medical advice cheap understandable to the poor."

"The word is inexpensive. I'm temporarily derailed. Financial crisis."

"Blah. I don't believe you." His brown eyes turned yellowy. He had brown eyes, I stared, not blue. I looked out the window.

"Call my bank" I said to the curtains.

"Where there's a will" I jumped forward and covered his mouth. How could I have thought he had blue eyes.
"What about you. You weren't exactly in the greatest shape this morning. New addiction?" I grinned.

"Side effects. No big deal." I smiled again. He surveyed the livingroom. "No T.V.?"

"I do a lot of reading. Plus yard duty at the school down the street." Switching on the radio I continued, "you know, the usual."

He walked over and sat on the arm of my chair. Rubbing the back of my neck, he told me about his Alaska plans. His stepfather had connections with a fishing boat. He'd work at sea but hoped to take a lot of pictures so he could finish his portfolio. He and Alice, his college girlfriend, were getting married next summer. I got him to leave after we'd finished the enchilladas and the second bottle of wine. "She'll never know" he kept saying. "She's not here. You're here."

"She knows Luther." I shoved his arm into his red wool jacket.

"You've turned into a prude" he yanked his coat out of my hand. "You used to be fun" he pouted. "I promised Alice. No more screwing around after we're married. She says it hurts her feelings. I keep telling her she's a Victorian. It's no big deal. Right? You used to think right." Instead of putting his arm into the other sleeve, he took his jacket off. "I'm not leaving until I know why."

"Why what?"

"Why you won't be nice to me. Ten whole months I've got."
"So what does that make me?"

"Shit. Don't start in with that respect me stuff. Now that Alice is a law school graduate." He shrugged his shoulders, blinking hard. "Now that Alice is a lawyer. I've been all over the world and I still don't understand it."

"You're not making any sense" I picked up the jacket he dropped on the floor.

"Have breakfast with me, at least" he whined, then took his jacket.

"I don't hink so"

"Not even friends?" He held out his hand for me to shake.

"Sure. Friends." I took his hand but he wouldn't let go.

"What difference does it make? Let me sleep here. We'll just hug."

I had to laugh. I couldn't help it. "Just hug?" I giggled. "You?" But he wasn't laughing. He looked hurt.

"You're so alone here." He let go of my hand. "It's sad."

"You're sad. I'm not sad. Or alone. You're alone."

"You need" His tawny eyes turned a dark brown as he considered.

"Sleep. Luther. Thanks for cooking." I pushed him towards the door.

"You're missing your big chance Gwen."

"I know. Either way I'll have regrets."

"Liar" he opened the door. "See you around, kid" his fist mock-hit my chin.
"Later, baby" I said in my own tough guy voice and watched him saunter his bowed legs down the hall, biting the inside of my cheek. Some click of the brain, wag of a finger, gush of an adrenalin gland threatened to call him back. But there was an unopened letter waiting for me from Stewart. It's all detour, I mused. Having somewhere else to turn, I mused further, taking confident, assured strides into the bedroom. I straightened my clothes over their hangers with deft, purposeful tugs, neatly turned down the blankets and hopped into bed, anxious to read another one of Stewart's adventure tales.

His letter sat on my lap for two long minutes as I traced my address with a hesitant finger. He'd used green felt tip pen, blocking the letters; G. The Green-Eyed. It was only a memo compared to his others;

GREETING GLENGA (the good green witch). I'm in a cafe in Acapulco, sipping cerveza, no cliff divers in sight. Believe it or not, this infamous bare back rider of the seven seas longs for the hearth, for the place to call hime, for the nail to hang my middie cap on. No one's ever satisfied. You're mourning over the fact that you never wrapped up the college wad, with a degree, that is. Well, I couldn't measure the momentum of that little silver ball either. Maybe science isn't your field. And those elementary school tikes you claim to hate, yet write pages about. You might think your yard duty whistle of authority scares them. I remember it as a source of amusement, bullies that we were. In any case, you should
remember why you quit school in the first place, as I often do. (Remember why I quit school).

These cruises, which may be as romantic as they sound, don't last forever. It's always back to the Academy for me and the mates which means the usual weekend watch, various plans to humiliate the commendants and demerits for breakfast. They didn't appreciate our last mode of recourse, the swastika arm-bands, but the fact that it was Halloween saved our respective arses. What we do to get by embarrasses me in retrospect.

We hit a few rough patches on our way out and almost a bridge. New Zealand was and is my choice of the choice spots. We drank Sunday beers in a place called Apostleship of the Sea, run by the Catholic church. Father Mc Gee served up our yeasty communion and forgave us our eager chugs while pocketing quite a profit. He was full of praise for our buzz hair cuts which some of the sailors hold accountable for having to resort to the back room and fifty bucks.

While in Maui, we rented an auto and traversed the gravelly roads in order to get a better view of the country side which was hilly terrain massed with jungle-type greenery. In the middle of the maze trail, we passed the Charles Lindberg estate, a sad looking place, a refuge in the middle of nowhere.

Most of the beaches here in Acapulca are between high rise hotels embodied by tourist-types. A sign at the entrance of one of these "private" sand boxes starts "No defecato..." L.Dw promptly pissed on it. Such ugly americans.
You still haven't sent a description of the school where you work. It helps to picture where you are and what you're doing. Your last S.O.S. was great but full of questions, as usual. Isn't pen palism enough? I guess I'm just in the slow, slow lane of traffic on the long highway of hurt. (I apologize for the bad metaphor. I must be going deaf).

It's up to you. Ours has been a rough ride. I hope to dock around December. Let's get together. I don't think I can give you what you want, if you even know what that is and it's just about impossible to write warm things without sounding like Wonder bread and chocolate milk. But the empty grows without you. The shipwrecked, Sven Svenson (Alias, Sailor Dan).

Red Sails in the Sunset violined from the other room. I'd forgotten to turn off the radio. I tip-toed into the living room, half waltzing to the music. My arms hooked themselves around the still enchillada-thick air and I started twirling and swaying, smiling at my dashingly adept partner. My father must hear these songs, I thought, far away, in his brand new town. He must think of her, I curtsied, his now ex-wife, an x-ed woman, my mother. He must dance like this on some nights, arms extended, fingers caressing, laughing at her silly asides. We could be dancing in the same smoke-dim room, the lisping saxophone tickling a thigh, an elbow, he'd shift his weight, adjust his arms. I'd spy him over my own partner's shoulder. And he'd wink and I'd wink and Stewart's palm would press the small of my back. My mother's jade dangle earrings
would sparkle as she lifted her chin for a kiss from my father and we'd dance until two.

Sunday morning I dump the contents of my memory box onto the bed and take stock. Two withered pink carnation corsages that smell like old shoes, a little silver baseball pin, my father's black stone tie clip, cheap gold (lifted off his dresser before he moved out), a Kennedy half dollar, an empty Trojan foil envelope, a rusty skeleton key, thirteen letters and four post cards from Sinbad. I roll the rubber band off the bundle of letters. A nested trio of baby birds snap open their hungry beaks on the stamp from Costa Rica. A penned arrow points to the scraggly wet feather turts at the back of their tiny heads. "Born yesterday" is written in microscopic letters underneath the stamp. Having received an early phone call from Stewart cancelling our plan to meet on the coast, then cancelling every other plan I offered with a quiet but firm, "I don't think so," I decided to read up on him, refresh my memory of his weakness for cheap food and bad wine, his annoying habit of optimism in the face of despair.

After putting everything back in the box, I took it to a nearby park where I like to think things over. Two little girls were screeching and laughing while they bounced each other up and down on the see-saw. The one on the ground let up as if to take her turn in the sir, then slammed the seat back on the ground, jerking her friend whose legs and arms fell forward like a rag doll's. "Let me doooown" she screamed,
strengthening her grip on the handle by straightening her arms. The snow-heavy sky lowered over their heads. I tried to think of something about Stewart while I splayed a bunch of his letters in my hand, fanning my knees. Something smart and final.

The little girl in the red parka ran up and asked me to play ring around the rosie. She must have recognized me from her school. I took her cold little hand and let her lead me over to her friend. A sprinkling of snowflakes salted our heads as we awkwardly trudged around the ring. After we'd fallen down enough times, the girl in the green, too-big corduroy coat, who grabbed at her fallen socks every few minutes in an effort to pull them up, demanded that I twirl her. We had one false start, then her ankles caught the momentum, lifted, and her green coat ballooned and flapped in the whirlwind. The empty branches and scattered yellow leaves tilted into a fine gold blur until I lost my balance and had to stop. The girl in the red coat shouted "your papers!" pointing to the letters scattering in the wind.

"It's O.K." I said, staring.

The girl in the green coat ran after one, stomping her foot down on the corner to make it stop. "I got one" she yelled.

"Let them go" I yelled back, half-heartedly. She grabbed at another one. I went over and took them out of her hands. "This is not a game" I said. Her eyes watered with cold and
excitement. I threw the letters in a nearby trashcan and went back to the park bench to get the box. She continued darting at the flapping letters like a hungry bird shouting "three, four, I got four." I dumped the whole box into the trash, taking out the tie clip and the baseball pin which I threw in the direction of the creek.

As bigger snowflakes sifted down, I grasped the rim of the trash can, watching the pile of letters to make sure they didn't fly back into my hands. The red-coated girl marched in a circle around me, the unlatched buckles on her boots making a click-clack sound, her Christmas bulb knees stepping high. Her friend leaned over the trash can, trying to pull out more letters. "This is not a game!" I shouted, shoving her away. The red-coated girl kicked a letter that flew between her feet, laughed, and scooped her tongue into the frozen air.