

UNENDING WONDERS OF A SUBATOMIC WORLD

OR

IN SEARCH OF THE GREAT PENGUIN

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A novel by Juli Maria Kearns

Idyllopus Press

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1

The emperor penguin died en route

Once upon a time there was an Antarctic Emperor penguin that was mailed to a cold place in Wyoming called Little America. This cold place was named Little America after Admiral Richard Byrd's ice-shingled, circa 1933 Ross Shelf expedition camp down where the Emperor penguins roamed, which was how someone got the brainy idea to mail a penguin to Wyoming in the first place.

The Emperor penguin died en route. But that's all right. Its carcass was preserved, not on ice but in glass, destiny conspiring with destination to make the bird a fun curio for the Ross Shelf's foster child, the Little America haven for travelers bested by Big Daddy America's comprehensive sea to shimmer shining sea gluttony in Wyoming's southwestern desert.

Plants, weather, funeral customs etc. have regions to which they are specifically native, or such is the pedagogical idea. Nevertheless, the summer monsoons that nourish India are generated by the planetary heat engine in Africa, and the ash that was wiped up, as dust, off a Victorian sideboard in Kansas City on September 2, 1883, had its source in the August 27, 1883, eruption of Krakatoa in the Dutch East Indies; and that is how the conclusion is very scientifically drawn (with much supporting data, of course) that "indigenous" is a misnomer. 200 million years ago all the world was one stage called Pangaea, which grew weary of its neighbors (or

lack thereof), migrated and became multiple continents. Is not one of the initial archaeological records of *Homo typicalis* the imprint of a foot at Olduvai Gorge. Why? Because it wanted to get to the other side. *Homo typicalis* has always been a migrant worker. And when it stopped migrating was when former migrators inhabited the land it wanted. At which time *Homo typicalis* became an invader, whereas *Homo atypicalis* threw a big party and married into the family. What this goes to prove is Human is not indigenous to anywhere and, following after the example of rocks that Ice Age glaciers moved hundreds of kilometers, should be classified Erratic. For Human to be other than Erratic indicates, if not an aberration, a dramatic shift in consciousness, which is in itself another *exempli gratia* of the inclination to change.

Symbols of Human should not be astrologically or sexually sub-classified but should be, universally, the sign of the moving van.

See the world. Plant spores do it. Butterflies and salmon do it. Canadian Snowbirds sun featherless limbs on the Gulf of Mexico. Via satellite, raft, horse and buggy, automobile, train, boat, bike, balloon, or a fully restored 1949 Harley Davidson 45 CI, by land, by water, by air mail, and military service, the instinctive urge to trip the globe fantastic transpollinates culturally, and otherwise, whether purist or prejudice likes it or not. Phone and TV recapitulate, to the global minority who possess them, the One World message of Pangaea that migration did not dispel but confirmed with broader horizons.

Even Mother Earth likes to travel. Once a year she loop-de-loops the Sun.

Shifting landmasses cause earthquakes all so a clump of sagebrush—yea, eventually San Francisco Bay—be supplied a new neighbor, and a river or stream is permitted an occasional change of beds. Technically, these earth-shifting occurrences are a natural outcome of pressure and the means of releasing tension. Naturally then, to alleviate a long build-up of what could be thus termed as motivation, Faith had the final option of standing still and volcanically erupting or effecting a move.

Or maybe she didn't do anything. Maybe the world was happening to her when she'd strolled into her future in-law's dining room that Monday morning to trip on a lace noose the family dog had made of her trousseau, collide with the treacherous edge of the "picture window" dining table (hammered copper embracing cut

glass, more than one game of eye spy guess-who's flowered undies had disgraced a dinner guest), then rise, head bleeding ("piquant" was how the interior designer had described the assailant) and drop the first piece of wedding silver into her bag. Without forethought, the compulsion so strong she was helpless to stop and consider either the motivations or possible consequences of her actions, she circled the dining table, transferring into her sole possession the sterling weight of fashion's creamiest designer conscious cutlery, asparagus servers, sardine and ice cream forks, teaspoons and cucumber and butter picks.

All the while, visions of outlaws danced at the end of a rope in her head, macabre tourist-interest photos she'd once been treated to as just desserts visual appetizer at a steak restaurant somewhere in Texas, the Friendship State. The outlaws as well had been trying to escape something, hadn't they? she considered.

Nor did the ravaging of the prenuptial haul end there. The congratulatory promise of holy wedlock gathered in dazzling display, weighing down the sideboard and shelves of a massive hutch, stacked on card tables brought in to catch gleaming overflow, relinquished its pride to her like a too-effective golden hen. The groom's family playing host to the blessed event, seven of the eight traveling bags which she'd been presented upon her arrival several days earlier soon jingle-clunk-clank-jangled the tune of all good returns. Seconds thereafter, a blushing pink leather golf bag (6 way full length fur dividers, 5 zippered pockets including full length apparel pocket and roomy ball pocket) emptied of its clubs (gift from her future father-in-law, owner of a pro golf shop) proved a handy receptacle for the twenty-six place settings of platinum-rimmed china courteously produced by a cornucopia of a bridal registry.

She debated over the Osiris and Isis pewter chalices. What she'd had in mind was the fine Osiris crystal glassware collection, stems intended to recall heathen columns adorned with lotus flowers, not ritual ware which when held upright symbolized the open womb, ready to receive; when inverted, spoke of birth and realization.

Just as well. Crystal would have crushed to sand under the Zojirushi Rice Cooker.

The house was empty. With no unnecessary hysterical protests to hinder pilgrim's progress, Faith loaded the bags in her car. Down a steep hill to the left, Mrs. Hodges' chlorinated, bright blue pool,

one of the smallest human-made bodies of water in the world, glittered happily, favorably impressed with its pine wood deck upon which no one lingered though two iced drinks rested on a table shaded by a sunny, yellow and white striped umbrella.

Mrs. Hodges, a friend to the Harms, bobbed up from a breast crawl to witness Faith's theft but not wearing her glasses she was none the wiser.

"They gave me these bags. They wanted me to do this, to leave."

As for the neighbor on the right, if the kitchen window had eyes, the dermatosciphobic, tight-lipped silence of the ever drawn curtains wasn't saying.

Faith, blood still dripping past her left eye and by now completely paranoid, pushed her Ferrari to the top of the mountainous driveway, dropping the negligee she'd used as bandaid. A blight of conscience seemingly under way, she climbed in and rolled silent wheels down the drive of the house which, to the unskilled eye, was indistinguishable from any other suburban fortress on the street.

Before she is gone, a mention should be made of the backyard and its swing set, both long unused, not even the green for putting practice. The house that occupied 3636 Locust Court, though its facade advertised a three or four bedroom nuclear family chain reactor, had, yes, four bedrooms, but also eight bathrooms, living room, den, study, game room, kitchen, dining room, breakfast room, exercise room, sauna, and maid's quarters all crammed on a pencil width's two acres of prime real estate within Birdie's view of one of the more famous courses in the golfing world. That narrow two acres of real estate had meant that with each addition to the house, Mrs. Harm aggrandizing, the rear became further and further removed from its suburban middle-class front, and still it nowhere approached the forlorn swing set where Marshall Harm's tennis shoes once shaved the earth bald, which is where the displaced and torn trousseau of his bloody bride-to-be would later be found buried. This is only mentioned in order to bring up again the existence of the family dog, a fetching dachshund, and not because it would later, tail wagging, uncover a white negligee dotted with blood that it was in the process of burying even as Faith slipped silently away down the driveway. No, this is mentioned because those who aren't interested in neighborly suspicions of homicide will certainly be animal lovers and desire that the generally unappreciated family pet find a good home in the end.

Let's terminate, here and now, the fear that a homicide or four may find its way into the plot. There are enough heinous crimes committed, in fact and fiction, without Marshall Harm, his fiancée Faith Hazy, or any with whom they will be closely acquainted drawing a blood bank nickel's worth of someone else's plasma for sake of avenging Abel, or to provide Cain company in his exile. Not everyone acts out the murder in their heart. But let's not underestimate Faith's ability to frog leap minor legalities qualifying what rates a good scream. As a runner-up to out-and-out premeditated murder, the crime of the here-undifferentiated outcast, the sense of his treason against the status quo, claims its fair share of indignant howling recompense, and Faith was doing a good job to make certain a number of households would be screaming down god's vengeance when that afternoon's facts were had.

Faith's predilection for bulldozing sacred totems, combined with no sardonic acceptance of the less sanitary side of what mirrors often had to offer (in short, the truth) had made life in Valentine, Georgia difficult for her.

Which leads us to wonder what was her attraction to Marshall Harm in the first place.

Never mind. It's more important to get to the subject of Valentine's trains.

Bypassed the privilege of accommodating the seceding South's Civil War capital (that's "Great War of the Confederacy" to the girl in the Dixie Chick silver glitter top and her beau in his "Got Balls?" Cannon & Battle Flag cap, \$7.95 on the internet, free wooden nickel with each purchase), for all its fascination and preoccupation with gold, the garden-strewn belle had succeeded in becoming, by statistical revelations (at some point in time, when being irrelevant) the venereal disease capital of North and South, East and West. How to deal? The Daughters of the Confederacy, knowledge deficient as to how to soothe over the sores, resorted to Dark Age tactics popular during the bubonic plague's reign and with the aid of the Chamber of Commerce anointed the stink with (if not posies) magnolia bouquets and azalea garlands.

When in doubt, send flowers.

This has nothing to do with Valentine's trains except for the fact that the Daughters of the Confederacy weren't responsible for that problem. Not that they were responsible for the high STD rate. They

weren't responsible for the Tuskegee Syphilis experiments either. Polite ignorance can't be blamed for anything, not unless you're one of those beings ("Foul tempered," Mrs. Harm would shiver in protest of such ilk) who damn that brand of Corporate Saving Grace as Pride, Prejudice and a Blind Eye.

There was a greater comparison between the vile train situation and Wild West wagons protectively rounding themselves up to fend off American Indian rights than might be first, facetiously, considered. If no one could enter the circle, by that same token neither could anyone escape, which meant that downtown Valentine was, often times, entirely disconnected from the remainder of the world, and even its hospitals unable to export or receive any of those insufficiently wounded unto death.

What this has to do with anything at all is it stands as a metaphor for Faith's terrified avoidance of Valentine for several years. For which reason she had not, until the previous few days, ever viewed Marshall Harm in his natural habitat--god bless his impoverished soul.

Faith no longer lived in Valentine but her genuine allergic response showed she was ruled by what had transpired during her post-formative, post-Wonder Bread years there, Cartesian mind-body split tossed aside.

Now, the Wonder Bread thing may seem like nothing, but to a prepubescent transplant reared on red, yellow and blue balloon polka-dotted packages stuffed with cellulose filler, it was true tragedy that the Georgia grocery stores eschewed Wonder's adlicious light as air calories for some daddy's Shirley Temple styled Sunbeam lass gobbling carbohydrate and fat on every loaf. Seemed everywhere she looked there was another jailbait beauty contestant. Also, the move had ensured complete isolation from rich relatives, and if eating deviled eggs at family reunions was requisite to getting one's name in a will, Valentine's jealous trains meant life was thereon reluctant, no matter how many relatives did demise, to materialize a comfy trust fund more prodigious than a few birthday-ribboned, bubbly Coca-Cola shares, an Atlanta old family staple Faith's San Diego great-aunt had blessed her with, saying, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." One supposes this was intended to teach Faith something.

Nothing to be sneezed at. Not the conformity motto, but the Coca-Cola shares.

Why, after all, Marshall Harm? What was the attraction? Not his money if he'd carefully hidden the fact he had any. ("Surprise!")

Salmon bucking current to return to the place of their spawning, Faith was the current and Marshall the salmon eager to fertilize. But that was Marshall's excuse for towing Faith back to Valentine. Excuses for Faith's going, when ignored, would give way to the old adage that the human trail always circulates back to Ground Zero in personal apocalypses.

Fish were now also why Faith Hazy was silent sailing the Harms' driveway, past the magnolias, the camellias, azaleas, past the white African-American iron stable boy poised to take your horse's reins, past the bird house camouflaged mail box, into the street without looking both ways until she was a block away, near the grade school grounds, before she cranked the car.

Intelligent forces of nature may accept a thimble's worth of blame. The general hubris of civilization occasionally warranted the sky, winds, rocks, water and relations pulling a trick or two for a laugh, maybe even to try to knock a couple quarters' sense in an occasional brain that had left its back door open and was just asking for it as far as they could figure. If a tornado came blowing through and deposited Faith out in left field without a map, she ought not to have had so many flat surfaces lying around that the wind could catch and have their way with.

Faith had been struck hard enough that her mind would be assessing damages for a while. The internal insurance adjuster, however, was already on his way with pen, no pencil, because his mind was made up. Something Faith wasn't aware of yet, though it seemed she had an intuition, considering her recent theft. But, no, she didn't have any capital "P" Plan; Faith was still in shock and deep denial, and had no plan at all except that a good number of her cells still believed they were on her way to a lunch date with southern born and bred Marshall Harm, who had given her the Ferrari as a wedding present. ("Surprise! Didn't know I was quasi kind-of rich, did ya!")

The internal insurance adjuster would tell Faith that she may have paid extravagantly for the tailoring but she was wearing no clothes.

Faith would reply, "That's immaterial."

The way people listened/didn't listen to others and themselves around there, "Never Mind" was a popular middle name.

Never mind also how she loved the leather smell of the new old 1967 330 GT 2+2 Ferrari; loved to open its hood and gaze with doting eyes on mechanics she didn't understand but which made it run and were therefore endearing (just like one's own heart is, well, one's own true endearing tick-tock heart); loved to sit and talk with her car (all of three days hers and eager to be tested so to please its master with high road performance); would have almost (not quite) liked to move into her car to sleep there, eat there—Faith would certainly not wed for sake of an Italian automobile, would she? Her subconscious waiting for her to recognize this fact, that she would not marry for sake of a posh auto, had taken her out of her way to strand her at Fifteenth Street in the lunch hour tangle of traffic and conflicting train schedules. “Think,” it said, “Think!” But Faith had for pleasant company her beautiful car, its pretty knobs and gadgets, the tachometer, oil gauge, the talk-back burglar alarm...

Valentine's best radio spat at her a bevy of soft rock Top Ten from a calendar year that decayed even while on a gas station's wall. “Think, think!” her subconscious begged. Which she did. Grief stricken, angst ridden, innocently bored, and filled with obligation to the very threshold of terror.

Her thoughts were swirling eddies. They were tornadoes. Maybe the family dog knew that for every wedding there should be a good story, which was why it tripped her.

Weddings occur with the frequency of births and deaths (divorce abetting). They are a multi-million, maybe even a billion dollar industry (certainly, divorce abetting). Inspirational for some, sentimentally adored by others (double ring ceremony, give the mothers a flower), though they be red hot coals funding the flames of future familial insecurity heaped on the hopeful heads of matrimonial march inebriated singles, there are a number of dry-eyed individuals who would prefer not to be invited to weddings, or read about them, are either bored or frightened by them, even see them as infantile regressions. These persons are perhaps hoping Faith will escape the impending nuptial knot tout suite and the story get on with it so they'll not have to hear any more about weddings. A war, la peste, international intrigue, drug bust, just plain musings in tepid bath water—anything but the most mundane and exceptional unification of two souls in wedded bliss for as long as they both shall live.

Getting back to symbolism.

Chance Hope (one can blame her adoptive mother's in general dysfunction for that conglomerate travesty) understood symbolism. She'd read a great deal about it on her own while studying at Valentine College for her psychology degree, where she'd been instead taught statistics. Her under-graduated assumption had been that a blue bachelor's cap and diploma would end the glut of binary information, a day awaited with no small irritation. In her heart she'd known that over the rainbow, where reside all true psychology Masters, she would be initiated into the psychedelic allegorical parade of the so-called collective unconscious, and life would never pass her by again as she'd be mainlining Spiritus Mundi. But numbers are an easy feather and her instructors continued to ignore the spiritual drought for relentless percentages relayed, related, wellbeing a material providence, emotions a chemical equation not specifically *only* but, more importantly, ultimately.

A degree in chemistry or mathematics would suffice.

"Beer," the customer at Table Number Four ordered. That's because, for better or worse, one's ills wanting succor, the panacea rival to the assuagement of any psychology whatsoever, will be and ever is..."Beer!"

Pizza by Candlelight had closed its black-painted glass doors twice, been sold, vaguely remodeled (the carpet was cleaned), reopened again under the name of Milo's Pizza Emporium, then underwent another appellative revision back to its prior Pizza by Candlelight when the public's suspicion—though they had no reason to fear—of even a modest change toward a more palatable establishment demanded undermining. Red and white checkered tablecloths, red vinyl cushioned chairs, black scroll ironwork, and red globe candles wrapped in plastic fishnet were the selling trademarks when it was young and innocent and the hottest thing in town were its three flaming gas sidewalk torches. Never tamper with success; the restaurant held a lemmings-take-a-dive attraction for even those who knew better. The cracker box, fake stucco slathered building drew a steady stream of curious, new customers who never returned, that supplemented the regulars who felt at home with the consistently poor service.

When religion bastes itself in politics and psyche is a sonarless brain bat beating its wings against the bars of preprogrammed

chemical- and neuropathologies, no one is eager to plumb the dastardly forty leagues deep where poetic spelunkers wade in what is considered by the masses as little more than mind drool. At least one school of so-called higher education was no exception. Still, there was academia to pay, and the costly expenses of her determination to keep breathing in, out, in, out.

None of which addresses why Chance happened to be waitressing at Pizza by Candlelight, maybe because so much of life just plain happens, like exhaling that first scream of confusion comes of just happening to be born into this slap happy world. And Chance's school loan and her almost quitting school (half of her was waiting for it to happen that she quit school while the other half was waiting for her to happen to continue) intimated she would be working at Pizza by Candlelight for a long time to come.

"Beer!" and more "Beer!" forever and ever, amen.

"I'll be there," Chance yelled from her stance on a chair on the squat bandstand.

"What's your fucking problem?" the thirsty customer yelled. "Don't you like tips?" Which was tip enough that she wouldn't be getting one.

The show was the conflict and cooperation of two souls meeting in the you-had-it-coming dance of karmic comic drama where no one wins who doesn't lose themselves in the fulsome void. That neither witnesses nor participants had a clue doesn't disqualify it as a cosmic production.

In self defense classes women yank imaginary balls, break kneecaps, elbow chins and poke out eyes. Tae Kwon Do, Karate, Taido Karate, Judo, Hap Ki Do, Kum Do, Ki Kong Do Bup, Cha Ryuck Sul, Jujitsu, Shih Tzu (no, that's a dog)—a quick glance through the Yellow Pages informs as to the economic viability of teaching one how to stay alive, all essential refinements on kicking, crying, screaming and running, and Chance was not without experience in the art of survival. She was confident in her ability to handle a ferment-addled redneck. But the tune scratched out by a roving rodent's claws, however familiar (they all sound alike, don't they), was inspiring enough that this was the reason she stood on a chair, on the squat bandstand, while gingerly, but oh so bravely, attempting to pinpoint the source before it went for a customer's antipasto. Thinking a loud sound would scare the creature back into its hole in

the wall, with every ounce of strength she could muster Chance picked a large black amp an inch off the floor, and dropped it.

“What do you think you’re doing with my amp?”

A musician. Guitar case battle-scarred with road stickers. Just her luck.

Chance hated musicians. She hated it that the restaurant had live music every night.

“Leak in the roof,” quick thinking Chance replied. She pointed to a long-solved stain on the low acoustic tile ceiling. “Didn’t want anyone getting electrocuted.”

“Oh. Ok. The drummer can sit there.”

One reason why Chance hated musicians. She never could tell if they were joking.

“Outta my way.” Chance was dismissed, the musician calling out, “Millie, you set up here!” as he lifted the amp to move it, “Oh Christ!”

“Oh my god, I didn’t mean to do it,” Chance breathed after a moment’s struggling recognition.

No Wicked Witch of the East. “It’s a baby chipmunk,” the musician identified the animal, flattened good as any road kill, its tail still twitching (which demonstrates the persistence and not-to-be-avoided grit of the karmic *happening*).

“I didn’t see it down there...”

“Get me a dust pan, will ya?” the musician said, but Chance wasn’t listening.

The door had opened.

Blinded by the light, the waitron’s hands reached to shield her eyes from the parking lot’s concrete-enhanced, noontday brilliant reflection of the sun that had blown Faith on solar winds in through the front entrance. Like the tambourine of an organ grinder’s monkey, her bag jingle-jangled with each step she took.

Speaking of signs—and if the subject hasn’t come up yet then now’s the time—the bright light that had stabbed Chance’s eyes should have been a sign to her in the way that dreams can lob signs at you, neon big and 20,000 candles bright. The kind of sign that lets you know to watch for what follows in its shadow. But by the time you’re struck by such a sign it’s too late to fend it off at the pass. The damage is already done, fate commencing.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to do it, really, it wasn't my fault," Chance pled in defense, Faith approaching. "It wasn't my fault, I swear." And then a second time, "Oh, my god..."

Her fault for what? What had this waitron ever done to her, Faith wondered dreamily, and if there was room under the bed for her to integrate that information into her universe.

The dust pan?

"Never mind, I'll take care of it," the musician said.

As out the door he went in search of a dumpster, Dolan had said a few other things as well that went unnoticed. He took a good long look at Faith wondering if he'd seen her before, then deciding probably and forget it (Faith having spied and mumbling something about how the chipmunk could use a shot of helium) he had taken his jacket, draped it over the woman's shoulders, and walked on, though he did look back twice.

So it goes with the majority of acquaintances made on the trip of a lifetime. They disappear off the boat, or, if still on it, get swallowed by a buffet, not to emerge again until an iceberg burps them out of the dining room.

Now for a description of Faith Hazy's appearance which has been largely ignored because it hasn't been of any significance up to this point, except for the bloodied welt on her forehead.

Faith's blond crowning glory was bleached blonder and pouffed to fill a chemically glossed crust. About her neck was a simple strand of pearls. On her hand was a diamond. On her feet, a pair of yellow, patent leather slingbacks. On her shoulders was the musician's beaded blue jean jacket. Had Faith been wearing anything else but her tattoos, the belly button pull, and the sunglasses shading her eyes, Chance might not have recognized her. And still, despite the tattoos, despite the to-the-wire wrestling match of suburbia with pop subculture, Faith advertised a high-price promissory note for which the Common Fattened Wolf would have to put up its cigarettes and do some major huffing and puffing before there was white meat for breakfast. Rights to whistle, extra. Old goats robed in senator's clothes accepted for consideration if accompanied by doctor's certificate of ailing health. Such is the power of a pair of yellow, patent leather Ferragamo slingbacks. Dressed in a killer pair of shoes, one may be butt naked but never out of style.

“What happened to your clothes?” would have been a sensible enough question. As it was, eyes roving frantic, hands grasping the air for meaning, “Wawa,” was all Chance’s now constricted vocal chords could muster.

Glancing down, with no trace of embarrassment Venus explained all with a pert, “Oh, silly me”, swept a red and white checkered tablecloth off a nearby table and tied it sarong style about her hips while racking her brain for the name that went with an increasingly familiar face. “Donna. Cinda. Cindy. No, Chance. Oh, Chance! Imagine meeting you here!” Grasping a dead friendship by the elbow, Faith steered it away from the door toward the back of the restaurant.

Chance saw the welt. “Oh, god, you’ve had a wreck. Lie down while I call an ambulance.”

“I did not have a wreck. Now, listen, I didn’t see Marshall’s car so I parked my Ferrari in the woods behind the golf course and came up the back way. Marshall’s supposed to meet me for lunch and I don’t know what I’ll do if he shows up now and ruins the surprise.” She patted her hair.

“But your head...”

“How do you like it? Product of Project E. I’d say you ought to try them some time but then you don’t have Marshall’s mother paying for the privilege.”

“Your hair. That’s your surprise,” Chance said, disbelieving, as much worried about the sacred silence that had fallen over the restaurant as she was not surprised by her worthless degree in psychology failing her in the face of an apparent psychic meltdown.

“Oh no. That was yesterday, and it was a surprise for me. Marshall’s already seen and of course he thinks it’s fabulous. I can’t remember right now what Marshall’s surprise is supposed to be, but I know he has one coming. Tell you what, why don’t you go find a table, oh, you have a name tag on, you’re the slave labor, so, hmmm, well, go find a table anyway, never mind what management has to say, I’ll pay them for you, and we can chat about old times, just as soon as I’ve made a phone call and taken a pee,” and with a flutter founce of pale pink fingernails materializing a cell phone, Faith was off to the restroom.

Two deep breaths and Chance faced the restaurant’s few customers. She grimaced, expecting she knew not what.

“Questions?” she asked, not quite able to turn her frown upside down.

“Beer,” said Table Number Four, predictably.

“Check please,” said Table Number Three.

Fleeing the restroom, Table Number Six disappeared out the front door.

While preparing check and beer and canceling Table Number Six’s order, Chance glanced repeatedly at the restroom door. The thought had occurred to her, yes, to phone the police but only out of some regurgitated spite as all of her previous experience with Faith comprehended that would be a bad judgment call. There are friendships that come in cans for which you never can seem to find the can opener. There are friendships like the tea that keeps itself on display on the kitchen shelf because it likes its nice package lending an air of hospitality to the surroundings, but ducks behind the coffee when it hears water boiling. There are friendships that casually evaporate in time’s shot glass until all that remains is a final memorial whiff of congenial spirit as that genii flies off, tickled by someone else’s lantern rubbing, your three wishes happily spent. Then there are friendships that upon crashing leave such a smear of oil and gas in their wake that after wiping out once on the scenic route’s residuals other cars take the highway. One guess as to which of these relationships Chance and Faith had enjoyed, though Faith seemed to carry no grievances, yea, scarcely any memory of Chance at all; which Chance was wondering if she should be sullen about, the idea that no matter how curled by the facts of life Faith had been since their last meeting, Chance would have been resigned to occupy a little, neatly-trimmed neurological grave marked “Dead File”. Not that she wanted to roll the rock away with a sunrise service attended by mysterious chicken nest raiding bunnies.

“A waitress, huh.”

Amazing what a good pee can do for you. Chance turned to see Faith, toilet paper trailing from her head wound, flick a red firefly off her cigarette into the twilight zone. “Gee, who would have think it, you ending up a waitress, and not even a cocktail one who gets to wear high heels, dark sheer stockings and this month’s mail order lingerie special,” sweet as Christmas pears delivered in July. “That’s all right, it’s not like what is bears any resemblance to futures I projected for myself either. I believe it was you who eventually clued me into potentials when you said the one thing I

really knew how to do was talk on the telephone,” which was the one skill Faith felt she had to sell, for which reason it had been two weeks since she was fired from her brief job as a telephone solicitor, which was her second real job, cash passing over not under the table and into her futureless social security. She had been fired from her previous job as well, as a receptionist, because she lacked several vital qualities which were later defined by the employment agency as these: (1) appropriate clothing and (2) bubbles. Yes, those tingly, tickly leftovers from a pink pastel bathtub that scrub-a-dub the ring around the tub for you even while sailboat is bumping knees, breasts operating as volcano-capped islands, yellow rubber ducky nesting in the potpourri. Bubbles that tended to pop when grated against stereotype and a forty hour workweek. “But talk about busting grand illusions! You must really be hurting.”

Chance might have understood that she had not made of herself what some might expect from a young woman with all the advantages of a republican capitalistic society, women’s suffrage, civil rights and a very democratic size 8 B width foot, but she could ably defend her right to fall short, even flat on her face.

A failed relationship, Faith is just another customer. “Fuck off,” Chance said, pushing past Faith with a blunt body block of a cork-lined shield.

Faith followed. “You were going to be best buds with Carl Jung in the history books. A psychologist or social work superhero.”

“That so?”

“What’s funny is I bet despite your hatred of this place you’re the very model of a conscientious worker, never late, responsibly filling salt and pepper shakers, daily cleaning the ketchup bottle caps when no one else will do it. And you wonder why you make no tips. Well, I’ll tell you why you make no tips. It’s because you act like an attack dog trainer holding contemptuous, renegade beasts at bay with an electric prod. And I don’t mean just your boss but your customers. And this is when you’re in a good mood. Am I right?”

Chance tried to remember for what she felt she had to apologize to Faith when she caught that first glimpse of her tripping in the door.

“Flash number two. It also hurts your tips when you think all your customers are alcoholics and refuse to serve them, saying you’re not going to be enmeshed into an enabler role. Am I right? Am I right? Tell me, am I right?” Faith encouraged response from

Table Number Four who had just finished ordering, "Beer, less foam!" His fourth and last beverage of the afternoon.

"You know it. She's about the lousiest damn waitress I've ever met."

"Now that we know what you've been up to, what about me? Do you remember when you wanted to change your name?" Faith continued. "You know, when you were thirteen. I thought you would, one day, get over it, not that I expected you to ever follow through (which is why I'm not too surprised to see you here) and because your name was such an easy joke and I didn't want to see it loosen its exquisite hold on your short hairs, in my own selfish way I encouraged you to accept what fate handed you, which it looks like you've done only it turned out to be someone else's life. Still, Chance, I knew how you felt because I wouldn't have minded changing my name either but my dad said he didn't want to confuse the postal system. As it turns out, I'm finally getting my way. Faith Hazy is on her way to being Faith Harm. I kind of like it." Faith pitched her voice low in salutation of her prospective self. "Hello, Ms. Harm, how you doing?"

"Looks like she's doing just fine to me," quipped Table Number Four with a broad lecherous grin.

"Yeah, well you weren't asked, were you?" Chance and Faith remarked, on cue, in unison. But Chance was pulling her best Mary Poppins voice of authority, you get in line now or it's up to the nursery with you without any pie, all for Table Number Four's own good. While, as for Faith, Table Number Four had no idea how quickly an innocent repartee with Ms. Hazy could turn on you.

"And who is this Marshall Harm?" Chance asked, pretending innocence. "Last I knew, you were convinced you were an actress. No acting jobs, but you were an actress."

"Never mind that. I just wish I had more control over the gross shebang. Not a lot, I'm not asking for much. But the other day, when I arrived to find Mrs. Harm had changed the wedding cake order from decorative doves to iced flowers, well, I know she says it's more practical this way considering certain adaptations of the avian digestive system for the requirements of flight, and Marshall did finally clue me in that it doesn't matter what I think, but when it comes down to it, what I think is his mother has bigger boobs than I do and for that reason she's always going to get her way."

With a crash, Faith's bag escaped her grasp and struck the floor, a cacophony of silver percussion. "Am I getting a pimple?" she fondled her chin.

Chance stared. As did Table Number Four. "Listen," Faith said after a pause, "I didn't bring much cash with me, and besides, the last time I ate here I got food poisoning so can we just leave?"

"What about Marshall?"

"He's always so passive-aggressively late he's used to my not being some place by the time he gets there. I let him think I'm just passive-aggressively forgetful."

Table Number Seven walking out the door, Chance picked up the dime tip left her by Table Number Three and, sniffing, flung it on the floor (Faith retrieved) as if this kind of insult had never happened before, when it had, and nearly every day was repeated, dangerously toying with her self-esteem, her good will toward mankind, and her commitment to her job which was only the result of her responsible position as head waitron. Deep down inside, never mind delusions of glory or how much she hated service work, she'd never thought she'd rise to that pinnacle of accomplishment.

"Faith," she said, "I'm sorry to hear you have problems, and I'd love to help if I could..."

"I knew it! What do you think of chartreuse? Does it make a person look like a worm wearing a green apple or what?"

"What?"

"Your chartreuse maid of honor's gown. I checked with the dressmaker and she can slip you in for a fitting in about fifteen minutes. We can make it if we leave now." A swatch of slick green material, the texture of a cheap nylon decorator's pillow, had materialized in Faith's hand. She held it up to Chance's cheek.

"What are you doing?" Chance slapped at Faith's hand. "I had no idea you were even getting married until a few minutes ago," she lied.

The bride-to-be was insistent. "Oh, come on, you had to have known. Friends know these things about each other, and Sherry, my best friend (only because you weren't around) up and quit on me yesterday so I don't have a maid of honor anymore. You've got to do it. I know it makes the old adage *Always a bridesmaid, never a bride* a bit too personal, and I admit chartreuse makes you look diseased, it does nothing for your complexion," Faith rubbed the cloth up and down Chance's cheek, "but doesn't it feel good?"

Chance cursed, glancing at the digital Moosehead clock above the bar, not because she was considering Faith's offer, but because, as usual, the bartender had disappeared. Business would be slow until three when, in through the more frequently opened entrance, with puffs of smoke and dulling sun illuminating sheets of dust hung in the air, would appear the bar stool regulars, men with soft job descriptions whom one could not guess what they did for work their hours being so flexible, nor did they offer clues, but gossiped, played video poker, and flirted with any female present, except Chance, but especially the Daisy Mae bartender from the Florida Keys who had dark hair that always looked strewn with negligent remnants of hay, whose figure was soft and flexible as a solid block of wood but wore revealing Spandex, dolphin's skin snug. T-shirts cut away to reveal her ample double-breastedness even before she bent over to lift another long-necked Bud from the cooler, for some reason the bartender never had to complain about tips. Or her job cramping her lifestyle. In these slow hours, she would putter around the basement with the excuse of restocking, drug connections made on her phone or making up with her boyfriend for another black eye he'd given her or she'd given him, leaving Chance to man the taps.

Sweating, Chance crawled under the bar. Her attempts to produce a beer on tap were never successful. All that filled the glass was foam and more foam. And, of course, she couldn't joke about it. Maybe if the customers liked her, perhaps, but they didn't.

Faith irritably snatched the chilled glass from the waitron and drew a picture perfect example of suds afloat sheer golden brew. "If you can't live with chartreuse, we can dye the dress tonight, any color you want. Black even. You see? I don't care. Whatever'll make you happy, sweetie. I only want what's going to make you happy."

Persuasion's heavy barrage of artillery fire followed Chance back to Table Number Four, Faith's entreaties to skillfully scamper after her on high heels, calling, "As an extra incentive I'll toss in the maid of honor's gift I was going to give Sherry. An all expenses paid vacation, with me!"

"It's about time," said Table Number Four, a middle-aged man with a coarse beard.

Chance stared, disbelieving, at the dollar he'd slid to the edge of the table. He always kept a tab. So, this dollar, this full dollar was intended for her? What was it about the way he stared at the ceiling

that made the waitron feel she was being baited? Chance thought, then thought again, almost reached out her hand, thought again, then, finally, picked the greasy green dollar up. "Thanks for the tip," she mumbled, not entirely convinced as to her good fortune.

"How come you never smile?" Table Number Four asked.

Chance gamely offered a dim approximation of a grin held for all of one second.

"Of course," Faith was saying, "if you think it's too late to change colors now, I've thought about that too, and Marshall, and if this leaves me only one way out to rectify the situation and save us all from more pyramiding mistakes, and since the Harms are paying for all this, they even paid for your maid of honor gown since you never sent a check for it, when all is said and done if I don't want to feel like I owe them anything sometimes it seems that only getting rid of the evidence will salvage me from obligation."

"How come you never mingle?" the man said to Chance. "Why don't you sit down here and we'll get to know each other a little better. Give me my money's worth."

Bingo, Faith tossed the man's beer in his face.

And nothing happened.

Imagine that.

"Sit down," the man less requested than ordered Chance. "I've got a twenty here says you'll sit down and pass a few friendly minutes." He placed the bill on the table. "No?" He swabbed his beard and eyelashes clean of foam on Chance's shirt. "I'll leave it for you anyway."

Why did this connote a threat?

"She doesn't want your fucking money, asshole," Faith said.

"Sure she does. She's a thief."

Now, no one called C. Hope a thief, who lived in a perpetual state of yes, emotional, but also financial depression, had no benefits, no medical or dental insurance (as with many of her fellow countrymen), had been reduced to a diet of canned beans (flatulence producing, it didn't help depression or frustration one bit), who hadn't worn a piece of clothing in years that hadn't come off the Salvation Army rack, drove a 1972 Chevy Impala with no shocks, but did have No Fault car insurance as she was law-abiding.

"I am not a thief," she protested.

"Sure you are. You took that dollar bill, didn't ya?"

"It was my tip."

“Did I say it was your tip?”

Sirens blared and red lights flashed on and off in Chance’s brain, a warning that she’d for a brief second considered walking out with Faith, a knee jerk response on par with the curiously warm reception a WWII Japanese prison camper might offer his former den father, or vice versa, fifty years hence, any face from the past become synonymous with cherished acquaintance as the world became more and more populated with strangers.

“Take it back.” Chance pulled the dollar bill out of her apron pocket. “I don’t want it.”

“I’m not taking it back. You’re still a thief.”

A bellow of rage, that began with a deceptive sopranic squeak, was one last laxative’s rumbling tremor away from bursting out Chance’s lungs and unloading itself Pompeii style on the man. The balance of perceived inequities having reached avalanche proportions, he was about to own them all, though he didn’t even know the dude who came in to get drunk every afternoon with his five percent tipper, Master Charge parents, always ordered in grade school Spanish and then kissy-exclaimed to his blond bombshell mother (demolition derby flak, dropped features pinned up) that Chance was the dumbest bitch he’d ever seen because she always repeated his fumbled order back to him in English. Chance had thought she’d go to the kitchen to cool down but the swinging door had the effect of spinning her back out with ferocious purposefulness. She was emerging from it, and along with her came a bill for every customer who rationalized stiffing her because of the slow kitchen, those who were either so audacious or stupid they’d dare to ask if the food was any good, who blamed her for the bar passing cheap liquor in name brand bottles; the bill was for jealous women stealing from tables tips left by dates who stared a little too long at the waitron; for men with I’ll grind your bones to make my bread eyes who said what did they want with the pennies she scrupulously included in their change and said she must not want a decent tip if she gave them coins along with bills, and those who accused her of not wanting a tip if she gave them no coin change; and those who made a game of trying to walk out on their tab; the bill was for all attempts to keep a sense of human dignity in the face of young semi-professionals who bleached their white collars whiter with authority and contempt for the lower than low who must stoop to wait on them.

And that's not all, folks! No, not by a long shot! Will take some sawing to get to the bone when this is just a paper cut on Chance's big thumb's down on unnatural "betters" who determinedly crushed ant workers returning to their hill, sadistic, giggling glee gee wasn't it great they had no souls so one could partake in a little malicious, guiltless—"God shuuure knew how to arrange a universe when he put me at the top of the food chain!"—fun?

Little did Table Number Four know Chance came partnered with centuries of rage over colonialist policy and propaganda.

But Faith knew and Faith was in the meanwhile producing a traveler's check from somewhere, anywhere, maybe from her hair, her nonexistent cleavage, her angel wings, scribbling on it, ringing open the register, slipping the check in, and trouncing back over to Table Number Four two steps ahead of Chance.

As was mentioned earlier, Faith had a way of exuding class. Placing a hundred dollar bill on the table, she hocked a good hunk of saliva on the twenty. "My friend doesn't need or want your money, asshole," she said, pulling herself up to her full five feet eleven inches worth of height.

Centuries of hated service work was about to unload itself on the man. Then he opened his wallet, and thinking himself clever, placed a five hundred dollar bill down beside Faith's one hundred, like this was a game of poker and he hee-haw had all the cards, don't ya know. "Top that," he said.

Chance picked up the six hundred and twenty-one dollars and walked out.

It may say something about Chance that her first thought, once outside the restaurant, was to block the front door (shouldn't be any call to explain why) with her Chevy Impala (Faith, parenthetically looking at her watch—not a gold Rolex but a Clockex with a broken band, kept tucked in her purse, left over from those days, about two weeks distant, when she had no idea her fiancé had as much money as he did—said, "Marshall's really late today. Do you think he had a wreck or something? I'd hate to get mad at him for being late if he'd had a wreck and was in emergency surgery"). May say something that even as Chance did this she was considering the pent-up rage of those enclosed was likely to be so focused on the audacious obstruction they'd not think to go for the back door for a good five minutes. May say something that this wasn't the first time Chance

had seen a smoking bridge, picked up a bucket, poured out the water, refilled it with fuel, aggravated the situation then prayed for rain.

Ironically, though it was an honest mistake, an oversight abetted by the heat of the moment, forty-five dollars of customer's lunch money rolled up in apron's pocket—called a "bank" in waitron terms, which was to be handed over at the end of her shift—was escaping with Chance, she blindly following Faith across the parking lot, into a six foot deep sewer ditch, over a gargantuan arterial pipe of civilization's waste and back up out of it, "You can't catch me!" pancake leaping clear of the frying pan into a rustling ear-tingling fire of foresty foliage, through oaks, firs, bamboo and a curiously convenient hole in an impressive security fence onto the sixteenth green of the golf course where she, Chance, proceeded to throw up over the sheer excitement and fear that questionable fortune can produce, six hundred and twenty-one dollars worth of it. Which is how Chance would become a thief.

The man had prophesied it.

"Great." Chance, the thief, burped, realizing her winnings were not so winning. "Now I've got to find another job."

Faith, hand acting as visor, surveyed the gentle far-stretching rolls and dips of emerald pavement. "I am so glad to see you out of there."

"I can't go back, not even for references."

"Which is how it should be." Faith believed she was speaking in agreement. "A clean break is the best break you can have. Easier to set the bone and heals faster. Anyhow, your lease was so up it wasn't even funny. You don't wait until they're bulldozing the house to leave, and that property had about as big a condemned sign on it as I've ever seen. Don't feel you have to thank me for saving you from that sinking ship either."

Chance didn't.

She picked up a sterling silver table knife off the golf green. Feeling ever more disoriented, the woman looked about at the grass, the trees. One of the things she'd liked best about the Highlights magazine for children was that in every issue there was a hallucinatory-provoking picture in which you had to find the hidden objects, kind of like Rorschach blots only god's own graphic artist was intentionally hiding things like spoons, bikes, yo-yos and monkeys in the wood grain of tables, patterns of leaves, rivulets in brooks.

“When people start calling you a thief, it’s time to say *ciao baby*, because what’s coming is they’re going to strip you clean and still say you’re a thief while slurping your marrow.”

Chance picked up a sterling silver spoon. Somewhere there was a fork. Or maybe not. They could be trying to fool her into believing she should find a complete place setting, which would keep her from seeing the parrot beneath her nose.

Faith said, “Just because I want to fulfill my destiny before I get married...”

Chance asked, “What destiny is that?”

“I’m an actress, remember?”

Oh, right. Chance, remembering, backed off the stage so Faith could continue with her scene.

“As I was saying before you interrupted, just because I want to fulfill my destiny before I get married, as afterwards I’ll be fulfilling Marshall Harm’s mother’s, doesn’t mean I’m a thief,” Faith was excusing herself to no one in particular, the street, the wind, the world. “I only took what was mine. Kind of. After all, we’re not married yet. But intent’s as good as the law, isn’t it? What do you think?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Chance hiccupped, still searching.

“Yes you do. You’re looking at me, I know, thinking is this what happens to little women raised on Barbie dolls with hair that magically grows out holes in their plastic, squeezable heads, so that when they become big little women what really matters are cosmetic options and the magic word is collagen. Total aberrations when tests prove if little Sally is offered the choice between a baby doll and an erector set, she goes for the diapers and mashed carrots every time. No, never mind that comparison. She’d take the erector set. What was I thinking? Still, at the age of three they take away the baby doll, give you a Barbie and tell you to meet your potential, be all you can be. If Barbie could do it, you can do it. But man, what assets Barbie has that you don’t! That’s why she’s charging up ladders of salaried ambition replete with confidence and drive. And that’s why you’re a failure, because they didn’t tell you every time you squeezed Barbie’s head you were squishing out your dreams and refilling your head with theirs. That’s why she’s an achiever, because she ate all the dreams that got squeezed out of you so she’s Lady Macbeth and you’re, well, you’re a waitress. Barbie would

never be a waitress unless it was a plotted step in her long good life plan. While you're a waitress because your life plan has failed."

"Plus I don't have Mattel backing me up."

Stalwart Chance, it was true, had taken to reading tales of great failures in order to remind herself of the value in endeavor above achievement; the more unapproachable the goal, the more heroic one's efforts, albeit stupid. She had come close to convincing herself that failed life plans were equivalent to better goals, which could give one a reason to be proud.

At the moment, Chance didn't mind being called a failure as she'd found the fork.

Faith took the corporate attack cue. "Look around you, Chance. There are lots and lots of people out there with homes, condominiums, cars with CD players, air conditioning, talk-back burglar alarms," lives with buffer zones like the inflatable air cushions in their cars—so, what, and the point is?—"like it or not, it's a divided world in which the have's eschew the have not's," which Chance didn't really mind as she preferred not to be continually reminded of how little she had. No VCR, no cable television, no socialized medicine, "unless the have not's are waiting on them, then they're in their place. Which is another reason you're a failure; no one's going to start to let you up to the batting plate when you're wearing, you know, the uniform of a bat boy and not a real player. But for a moment there today, you were a real player. When I put that hundred-dollar bill on the table. And look what happened."

Look what had happened. Chance had lost her job, and her gold '72 Impala, but had found a knife, a fork and spoon. On a golf course. A place where people with clubs that have either wooden or metal heads hit a small white ball with a cratered surface into eighteen holes, one at a time, not all at once, each hole occupying a different section of a course (golf course, dinner course, place settings, Chance mused) that has artificial or natural obstructions by which one may test their skill, though some have so little talent that a challenge of any sort becomes an impossibility, and their dream of making a hole-in-one the kind of impossible dream of which the late Sammy Davis Jr. sang; and singing of the Impossible Dream, for Everyman, he had attained what the rye grass variety of Everyman considered the impossible: a hit single.

Sorry, being facetious there and it doesn't work because most Everyman thinks getting a hit single can't be that difficult, with

effortless luck, luck, luck being the prime ingredient in all minstrel stories—luck which is priceless.

Serious now, what Sammy had attained that the grass variety Everyman considered impossible was more girls than you can shake a golf club at.

“It takes money to make dreams happen,” Faith said. “And work too. The right kind of work. Not a maid bit part on stage. You see, I know your pain too, from the heart. I’ve not only played it, I’ve experienced it the way a good actress would.

“You don’t have to thank me for saving your butt,” Faith was saying, pulling Chance up to her feet by her right ear, “but you could pay me a little favor in turn and play chauffeur. I’m feeling a bit giddy.”

Ha. This to a woman looking for baboons and banana ice cream splits in Georgia pine trees. “Prewedding jitters,” Chance said, feigning wisdom.

Faith had opened her bag and pulled out a weekly alternative news and entertainment tabloid. And a mini DV digital camcorder. She handed both to Chance.

“Turn the camera on,” she said. “Film me. No, not the crap newspaper. Me.”

There, on the front page, flesh fighting for black and white opportunity amidst the yellow and green graphics, was a photo of none other than Faith Hazy with not more than a spool of fishing wire to cover the whole of her liquidly limber lithe body. “Catch of the Month Hooks Prominent Young Valentine,” the headline laughed. The photo’s credit read, “Steve Long, Wild Life Magazine.”

“I’m in a hell of a mess,” Faith said.

“I see.” Approaching sobriety, Chance struggled to converse, limping towards an understanding of Faith’s erratic behavior that afternoon. Or maybe not.

But the picture was certainly sobering. She’d no idea before that morning when she first saw said paper that an image posted to the internet could make it into print so quickly.

“How do I explain this?” Faith asked. She reached over and checked the camcorder to make sure it was on.

Chance knew how, but didn’t think it would help the situation at the moment. “So, you didn’t know Marshall Harm was a prominent young Valentine?” Faith didn’t look amused. “And you think that

the prominent young Valentine won't want to marry his Barbie doll when he finds she was a prize catch in a sports hmm magazine."

"No, Faith answered. "I think it's more likely my destiny wants fulfilling elsewhere because I've got all the wedding silver in my bag, and by now Marshall's mother has returned from yet another meeting with the caterer, she's aptly surveyed my reassessment of the wedding situation, she's called Marshall's father, and the police are on their way over to dust for fingerprints."

•

Chance jolted, the right front headlight of the '72 Impala made crystalline dust. Jolted again, the left headlight following. She was on that intimate a level of correspondence with the auto, had been plotting as she and Faith tripped through the woods how she might possibly sneak back around 3 A.M. and salvage it, or at least her belongings that filled its trunk. If the auto was even there and hadn't been impounded by vile, heartless authorities, she remorse, thinking of how cozy and private its back room was, simplicity of a couple of old red flannel doubled-over sheets hung about the windows and curtaining the front seat from the rear. She thought of the light oak wood television snack tray with the brass cup holder, a nice addition, and how almost normal it made things feel when she was reading by the light of the battery rechargeable camp light and munching on potato chips. Thought of her thermal cup that kept coffee warm well into the night, and the thermos that held—tepid by the A.M. but comfortable—just enough water for a quick freshening. Her sleeping bag was more comfortable than most beds she'd slept on. As long as she was able to keep the car in running condition to make it to a truck stop and had enough money to buy gas, she was assured of a morning shower. Not sleep there, no. The trucks were too noisy grinding in and out all night long for her to park and sleep. But the morning shower was indispensable. Go without it and the rest of the day she'd feel like she was hauling the car around with her. Like some people can't work with their mates, Chance was aware that to maintain a good relationship with her car, they needed a sense of each their own space.

Chance's vision dimmed, the Impala's front windshield exploding courtesy of Table Number Four and one of three rifles he kept in the rear window gun rack of his black monster-wheel truck (and he neither hunted nor painted nor was he in military or law enforcement, which made one wonder why his need for "The most innova-

tive camouflaging material ever offered to the hunting, military, paint ball, and law enforcement markets” Spando-Flage® head net stowed in the glove compartment). A person’s home is their home, no matter how humble, and Chance didn’t like the idea of trying to find some strange car to sleep in. The only good thing about the Impala’s demolition is that with each shot that ripped it, Chance felt it increasingly necessary to her health and general wellbeing that she escape Valentine for good, maybe to South Valentine. She’d seen some decent used automobiles down there. One with windows would eat up nearly half of her six hundred and twenty-one dollar windfall. The Impala’s gold paint had been nice and cheery, but like a faithful old dog you know you can’t replace, she thought maybe it would be nice to find a flashy red Cadillac, though it might be safer to go with a pass-me-by blue. Or a station wagon. Good idea. That major expenditure out of the way, it was going to take her a while, if ever, to reach the level of comfort she’d had in her old car with its curtains and thermos, TV tray, her books, clothes, man, even the potted sage in the back window gone too, blasted to oblivion. But a station wagon. She was even beginning to feel a little excited about the prospect. More room. Or maybe that extra room was mostly illusion. The seats would be smaller and she wouldn’t have a trunk to secure stuff in. Should probably go with a Cadillac instead.

Nothing is permanent. And though Chance did indeed feel a certain middling envy for environments that lend the air a trace suggestion of immortality as comprehended by worshipers of climate control, pest control, disease control, just plain out-and-out complete and totally windowless biological control and maybe even thought control, environments so scientifically manipulated they themselves think in terms of “living spaces” and “traffic flow”, it certainly can’t be said that, say, quitting a job (purported to count as a definite black slash ten in magazine stress tests, rating right up there with divorce and death) was out of character, because then her actions would irresponsibly demand an extra suspension of disbelief. Fact is, over the course of her worker ant life, she had held some thirty-five or more jobs. A suspension of disbelief is to understand she managed to hang on at Pizza by Candlelight for a full twelve months.

She had begun to feel as though she had rotted.

A fruit left in a refrigerator crisper drawer two seasons past recognition.

(And her car was a magic pumpkin. Looked like a solid enough bonafide auto but bang bang bang took the wind out of its tires, the stuffing out of its seats, tested its metal and declared it scrap.)

As they trod through the pine straw, Faith, the Miss with the musical shoulder bag, lifted her Italian sunglasses enough to peer out from under them and watch for, perhaps, rabbit holes? Chance wondered.

“Pretty, pretty car,” Faith mumbled praise. The silver auto in its sylvan station gave the two women pause.

“This can’t be your car,” Chance broke the silence.

Faith shrugged. She took a swig of the Cold Duck she’d filched from the restaurant’s bar when drawing the beer, bent down to scratch a gummy pine straw itch on her calf. Straightening back up, she passed Chance her set of car keys. Raised a finger to the side of her nose. And winked. “All yours.”

“You can’t be serious,” Chance said, dropping down the camera.

“No, no, up, up,” Faith did an up-up thing with her hands. “Keep filming.”

“You’re giving this car to me?”

“Of course not! First you steal that money off the guy at PBC and now you think just because I park my car in front of you it’s yours? No. What I meant is you can drive it. And me. To the lake house.”

Gut instinct told Chance a person who can only afford free legal assistance should never touch the high ticket belongings of any individual who even only imagined they had the money to possess such. Just wasn’t a good idea if you didn’t want your “all I have is my pride” reputation eventually tarnished with ugly accusations of lust.

“I wouldn’t let you drink and drive,” Faith tipsy-turvied.

“I don’t drink.”

“I can’t hold my liquor.”

Elderly syndicated reruns serving as nursemaid, 80 hours of cable television a week from birth to high school graduation hadn’t been for nothing. *Let’s Made A Deal* more a philosophy than cheap reruns of a television game show hosted by a man with the incredible name of Monty Hall, with no malice, grounded firmly in the experience that to trade and trade-off is a way of being, and knowing that one will not go for Curtain B unless they are coached into

questioning their satisfaction with Curtain A, Faith, donning Carol Merrill, ran her hand, enticing, along the length of the auto's body. Jay Stewart gave the clinical facts on the Ferrari, leaving out its penchant for repair shops. Monty Hall asked, "Chance, how do you think it would feel to be in the driver's seat?"

"Nice," Chance said.

"How nice? Alotta nice or just a little bit nice?"

Never let 'em see you blink. "It'd be...OK."

"You're a tough customer."

"I've been told that."

"Then maybe you'd like to take a glance at what goes with Curtain Number C before you make your decision? How about it Carol?"

Carol Merrill rolled out a cart with Faith Hazy's brain on it. "What's that?" Chance asked.

"What does it look like? It's my brain. You get it as a research project for your psychology studies. Slice it, dice it, I'll serve it up as raw paté on soda crackers if you want; just don't leave me stranded without a cohort in my hour of need. Drive your old friend, Faith Hazy, to where she can get some distance. As a matter of fact, I happen to have the keys to Grant Harm's nifty lake house with a TV with a screen so big you can get drunk off the fumes from the other autos at the drive-in, in his words."

"Who's Grant Harm?"

"Marshall's father. My not quite in-law. Who else?"

Again, Faith tinkled the fat ring of keys held between index finger and thumb. "The lake house is really nice. I've been with Marshall and had a great time pretending I was on a pleasure trip."

Every president should leave the nation with a memento tidbit of wisdom and Ronald Reagan's had been that with horseshit may come a pony. He had conveniently left out the fact it would likely be someone else's pony you were cleaning up after, as had Jay Stewart neglected to mention the temperamental nature of Ferraris, and Chance glimpsed in the unspoken details an education concerning Faith's mess. A lesson like unto the two party American political system up to its ears in balloons and streamers and stock market confetti raining on the patriotic politics parade, melding into one giant clown screaming, "Listen to me! This will be on your next quiz!", white, metal-tipped, lightning rod pointer slapping the chalkboard as up through the oily white facial grease paint floats a

giant corporate red “Read my lips” grin with wisdom so secret not even its mouthpieces know what they say—and they do indeed think they know, think they are cunning with their repertoire of smoke and mirrors—senseless clairvoyants all who can’t help but speak the truth. Such is the sacred school of the pooper scoopers. A university you wouldn’t realize you’d even been enrolled in until you woke up in the middle of the big test, shocked, perspiring, clammy. “Which side am I on?” comes the chorus from behind their masks, but it’s all Greek to you who were pursuing a home study program in Latin in the belief a dead language held the clues.

Was *Let’s make a Deal* earlier equated with a certain philosophy of life? There is no “certain” philosophy to it. *Let’s Make a Deal* is a country without borders, the fantasy fair fabric that dresses the everyday world. The granddaddy of survivor television. And the audience, vicarious participants in the spot lit contestant’s dilemma, was shouting out advice.

“You helped make Faith’s mess, you ought to help her out of it,” the contestant dressed as Jiminy Cricket squeaked.

“But I didn’t mean to. It wasn’t my fault,” Chance pled.

“So you say. Who dug out that fishy photo, dressed it up with a fake *For Whom the Wedding Bells Toll* Marshall Harm and Faith Hazy website, then spammed the address to every search engine indexed website remotely connected with Valentine?”

“I didn’t.”

“No, but you gave the photo to Jack Ripper, the bored, Pizza by Candlelight, tech wiener, skinhead, kitchen help who, it turned out, knew Marshall Harm and was still ticked at him for putting in the third grade aquarium a red-bellied piranha that ate his prized, pet goldfish.”

“I agree, you ought to go for the ride,” the contestant dressed as a horned devil poked Chance with his pitchfork. “But not for the reason old Jiminy is touting. Take advantage of the situation. Faith made you lose your job, your home. Let her pay for it as long as you can squeeze some blood out of her twisted arm.”

“How?”

“You of little imagination, I shouldn’t tell you this but she has a new Harm bankrolled Gold Card tucked into the Ferrari’s driver’s seat sun visor.”

“So, she’s got a Ferrari and some silverware and a Gold Card tucked into the Ferrari’s driver’s seat sun visor. If she doesn’t marry

Marshall Harm, there's no future to it. That oil line will be shut down by midnight."

"Then convince her to go back to Marshall Harm!"

"We'll see how you feel about probing Faith Hazy's brain after you get a taste of what's behind Curtain Number B," Monty Hall broke in. "Carol?!"

Carol Merrill rolled out a cart with a traveler's mug on it. A nice thermal one, stainless steel. Black rubber textured hand grip.

Now, this Chance could use, having lost her old cup. Maybe it came with an old Cadillac, a television tray, rechargeable lamp and sleeping bag.

"Curtain B!" Chance said.

"She says Curtain B!" Monty Hall produced from behind his back an envelope, opened it, took out several postcards of panoramic humanity-untampered American scenery that could only be described as "big, very big" by a Japanese.

Postcards. They would look very nice taped up on the back window of the Cadillac that was sure to be revealed when they drew back Curtain B. Would be nice to wake up in the morning and look up to see the Rocky Mountains filtering the Georgia sunlight.

Curtain B slid aside.

A pair of sunglasses.

Yes! When she woke up in the morning to see the Rocky Mountains filtering the Georgia sunlight, she could slip on the UV filtering sunglasses!

But there was no Cadillac.

"And what comes with the sunglasses?" Monty Hall said.

Carol Merrill rolled Faith's brain over to the Ferrari. It was a package deal. The audience was going wild. It was a rare trick show where there were no wrong choices. Faith won no matter which curtain Chance chose!

In other words, a setup.

Faith pled, "Please, drive me to the lake house."

"I don't have an Italian driver's license."

"No, but you've got these." Faith took her extremely expensive sunglasses and plopped them on Chance's nose. "See what I mean?"

Instantly. "Where in the world did you get these?" Chance asked, the breath fairly knocked out of her.

"Then you'll do it?"

Last to dissipate was the contestant with the pitchfork, wildly jabbing Chance's side. "Faith, things might not be as irreparable as you think. Besides, I'm not convinced you don't want to marry Marshall." Not if the first place Faith had thought to run off to, as far as Chance knew, was the Harm's lake house. A panicky bride's equivalent to a child running away from home all the way out to the back yard tree house.

"Ok. Maybe you can talk me into marrying him on the way."

"Deal."

That settled, how to talk Marshall Harm into marrying Faith.

Starting the Ferrari, Chance looked in the rear view mirror at the impossibly crammed back seat. "Tell me," indicating the pink golf bag, "you carry your full-body makeup in there."

"Look serious," Faith said, the camcorder trained on Chance.

Why not. Chance tried knotting her eyebrows. But they already were.

"Marshall's dad decided I should learn how to play golf," Faith explained, shutting down the camera. "He was giving me complementary lessons as one of my many wedding gifts. The Zen kind, where you extinguish the imaginary line between pronoun and direct object. You are the golf ball and the golf ball is you. The teacher is the student and the student is your hole-in-one. A sentence structure is your brain kind of remodeling thing."

"How many gifts did they figure it would take to get you to marry Marshall?"

"Not enough to screw his father," Faith giggled. "I should though. Really. I know I should."

"Marry Marshall?"

"Fuck his father. Yesterday, on the golf course. My very first lesson. I'd say *Fore*, he'd say *play*. I said, you are so corny. Grant replied, and I quote, 'Yeeeah, but it's a get your teeth into the corn-on-the-cob kind of corny. I don't mind looking foolish with kernels in my teeth and butter on my chin.' Sure, he probably uses that pick-up line a lot, but with his form and the way he can make *frog hair* and *being in the rough*..."

"Frog hair?"

"Y'know, the grass around the green. The way he made even the peripherals sound sexy and fun," again, Faith giggled, "if he'd asked me twice...but he didn't. He asked once and when I said

maybe he said I was a wise lass and pinched my bum and that was that."

"Sounds to me like you made a date."

Faith unhinged herself from the present a couple seconds to focus inward, scan memory, do a quick fast forward to the moment in question and replay it slow, very slow. "Hunnh," tongue between teeth. She looked dejected.

"You've got morals," Chance prompted.

"So does Marshall. He's a firm believer in the sanctity of the wedding bed."

"That takes two, doesn't it?"

"I am so stupid!" Faith slapped her forehead, winced, "Ow! How in the hell did I miss that as a confirmed hit? If I'd known yesterday what I know today—"

"No, you wouldn't have!"

Faith thought a moment. "Maybe not," she conceded. But when Grant Harm had called that morning and said now he'd seen the photo he thought he would ask if Faith the Fish preferred to be eaten or mounted, well, she wouldn't have taken it as a threat.

And here she was running off to Grant Harm's lake house. Some 1700 miles distant as the cackling crow flies.

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"The 330 GT 2-2 is a Grand Touring car that won't have any problem running with the herd," Jay Stewart considerately thought to regale the pair with yet more information, because that's the kind of announcer he was, possessed with a voice that doesn't die but sticks like superfly glue feet to your brain's innards. A century distant, several generations removed, and ancestors of his baby boomer audience would be hearing him as the voice of god, unconscious content filtered through DNA mutated by repeated assaults from the penultimate salesman from beyond.

Too transcendental.

Faith stared out the convenience store window at the Ferrari and the fiberglass superpod cargo carrier now bolted to its roof.

Everyone was staring out the convenience store window at the Ferrari and the fiberglass superpod cargo carrier bolted to its roof.

"There's nothing here that I want," Faith was saying. "Nothing, nothing, nothing. Just crap and more crap."

Back in the dark middle ages, before the advent of really true convenience stores, Gas A Go Go's, and twenty-four hour banking

machines, when people took Sunday drives on roads where fast food restaurants didn't hold every street corner hostage, blue-speckled, white Styrofoam objects that commandeered a quarter of a car's usable space were symbols of freedom, were coolers, were now virtual dinosaurs that provided atmosphere and an illusion of flexibility, no ties, no reason to stop and say hi or good-bye.

A container always open for interpretation (even a Styrofoam one, when yet to be baptized with ice), Faith saw no reason in denying its ultimate shopping bag potential. As she strolled the convenience store's aisles, into it went whatever tantalized: cheese crackers, malted peanut butter crackers, boiled peanuts, Vienna sausages, detective magazines, zinc oxide in rainbow hues, fingernail clippers emblazoned with the Confederate flag, soda, bottled tea, chips, cookies, onion dip, liquid cheeze with a funnel, and a Godzilla key chain to hang from the rear view mirror. "Lime or celery green?" she demanded, brandishing two nail polish bottles before Chance's face.

"Why ask me?" asked Chance, dutifully following with the camcorder.

"Because I know you better than that tubercular clerk breathing all over the coffee bar," Faith replied, voice pitched to be heard.

The clerk coughed.

"Oh, s'mores! S'mores!" Faith delighted over a bag of marshmallows, "Got to have s'mores!"

Faith was a hungry girl. There was no question what she saw in the this and that of civilization's produce heaped into the cooler; it was a successful soup of advertising prowess and impossible consumption she poured out over the checkout counter. Consumerism moving off to concentrate on the postcard stand, Chance, personally confused and socially embarrassed, clinically and politically fascinated by this example of excessive, obsessive spending she'd heretofore only had the opportunity to read about, shrugged her shoulders apologetically in the direction of the cashier. But the cashier was neither bewildered nor concerned.

Someone that hungry was suffering from acute symptoms of diehard insecurity, and the battery from which that energy sprang was far from running down.

No, Faith was not so self-assured as she was endeavoring to seem currently (all the energy from that battery) that an endearing sort of anxiety didn't nibble her pink-painted lips.

"They're watching us," she whispered with a nod at the security camera, dropping a handful of postcards and dark sunglasses on Eskimo bars, shielding herself with a US of A, red white and blue jester hat (with bells, ding-a-ling, and one star, a propaganda hat for one union under god, peace and justice for all) that had found its way onto her head.

If Chance hadn't been without a job (more to the point, if she hadn't felt like a visitor in a strange land wherever money was involved) she would have asked Faith if it had ever occurred to her she had a problem with spending. As it was, she was counting on this demonstration to clarify Faith's character as a post Jacob Marley, scared witless, guilt-ridden Scrooge. Because, in her past life in which Chance had been acquainted with Faith, she'd been one god-awful miser.

Humans can hear from 125-20,000 hertz or cycles per second. Elephants can hear as low as 16 hertz. Mice and other small animals can hear frequencies as high as 80,000 hertz. Faith, whose gene stock will now come under scrutiny, stuffed a beef jerky in Chance's mouth. The total was rung up on the cash register. A sagging economy was boosted. "Does it look like I have a problem spending money?" asked Faith.

"Guess this'll fill up the refrigerator at the lake house," Chance said.

"Guess it will."

Chance helped Faith lug the cooler out to the car where Faith promptly dumped a bag of ice over the contents.

Chance winced, glancing up. "You're probably the first person ever to think of detailing a 330 GT 2-2 with a fiberglass cargo pod."

"I don't know why. Sports car, sporty lake house, sporty pod. Don't hate me for being practical."

Chance said, half-pinching her aching heart again, half in practical (for her) observation, "My Impala could still hold a lot more than this."

The Styrofoam cooler approached being able to hold more.

"Yeah, well, your Impala was a real car. This is a toy. A very special, very fast, supermodel kind of Johnny Lightning toy. Prime Show and Tell material."

"An excellent starter model Ferrari," Jay Stewart announced, nudging Faith down a notch.

She wasn't to be budged. "This car is worth more than you and me combined. Put us on an auction block as a twin set in the underworld sex market and see how much we go for compared to this baby. Remember, sweetheart, size doesn't count for everything."

Everything's a sex object, except when you're homeless. Chance hadn't thought about sex in a long time.

"I had my car. I wasn't homeless."

"Chance! Take a look at your 1972 Chevy Impala now!" Carol Merrill pulled aside the curtain.

Chance put back on the Italian sunglasses. It was remarkable the different spin they put on things.

Fitting the cooler into the rear seating meant, in Faith's mind, that one of the bags must meet the roadside. She hated to do it, they were made of such nice, supple brown leather, the kind of leather you want to take out on dates—a gift from Marshall's father, who else? Which bag of the seven could rationally go would be a rough question. Or maybe not. "Cheap silver plate," Faith observed of the contents of an accessible, duffel, all chafing dish holders. "Southern Baptist buffet worthy, but don't bring a dime off the show floor." She groped deeper. "Pot holders. Oven mittens. Cookbooks. God, what a bunch of cheapskates."

An elbow impacted Chance's ribs. "Fuck, they're watching us," Faith hissed. "The cashier in the store and that pasty-faced man with the black sunglasses in the black car over there."

Chance glanced. Faith pinched her. Hard. "No, no! Don't look! You don't want to draw any attention and make them think we suspect they think we're suspicious. OK? Be cool. Be calm. Everything's A-OK." So saying, Faith freeshot the duffel and contents into the Dempsey dumpster. It thudded the giant trash bin's bottom. The sound an unwelcome reminder of the numerous pets her parents had equally without honors buried, Faith winced. As did Chance.

Faith faced Chance who looked at Faith, looked at the dumpster and looked back at Faith again.

"I know what you're thinking," Faith said.

"You do? What was I thinking?"

"You tell me."

"I was thinking you should have gotten yourself a couple of T-shirts."

“Oh.” Faith looked disappointed.

“And I was wondering why you threw away that expensive duffel bag.”

“See? See? I knew it! You’re thinking that if I’d left the bag out in the parking lot some poor sots who needed chafing dishes and pot holders would have found it and believed god had blessed their suffering souls. Am I right? I could tell you that I just don’t believe anyone deserves cheap chafing dishes, but that’s not so; I think whoever wants a cheap chafing dish deserves a cheap chafing dish. What I don’t want is precisely what’s going to happen the moment we leave this parking lot. That tubercular cashier with the American Flag draped around the cross pin she had stuck in her bra strap is going to dive into that dumpster and come up thinking she’s been gifted by god with a Spanish galleon. She’s going to think god shipwrecked it just for her, here, in that very dumpster. She’s going to go home and tell her husband, see, this is what faith gets you. Gotta have faith, she’s going to say. Have faith.

“Can you imagine growing up with a name like mine? People have got to believe in something, even if it’s nothing. Most choose to believe in god. They say, have faith. Have faith. Then when faith proves itself, they don’t believe in god, they believe in faith. That’s what I don’t want to be a party too, that kind of idolatry.

“Oh, Jesus Christ!” The lightning bulb had come on. “No reason to throw out the baby with the bath water! Do you know how much that bag cost? Why didn’t you stop me? That’s what you’re here for, Chance, to stop me before I pull stupid shit like that!”

Chance sat down on the curb. She was reminded of the saying, “I felt sorry for myself for not having a pair of shoes, until I met a person with no feet,” which invariably came off sounding like, “Man, I’m glad there’s someone else worse off than me. Thank you god for not letting me be them.” The person without the shoes really needed that other person to not have any feet. But in Chance’s case, she was a person without a car, and along comes Faith who’s got shoes and a car, and even though that person had shoes and a car they needed her to drive them around and would congratulate Chance on not having a home (if she knew) or car, because that made Chance available. The person with shoes would be glad she didn’t have a home because she was therefore available to help the person with the car.

No, there just ain’t nothing like some good old wholesome pity.

Chance, not a whiner, thought through again what she'd been thinking and—except for the pity part, that was pretty straightforward—considered she'd gone too long without eating that day, not an unfamiliar feeling.

She felt like she'd been run over. In one fell swoop, everything familiar had been obliterated that day, Faith swooping down pterodactyl like, plucking her up and carrying her off to feed her ADD needs. And Chance, not being a whiner, was rather ashamed of herself, because she'd permitted it rather than pelting the carnivore with rocks. Because she felt alive soaring over the mountain tops, when she wasn't throwing up.

Chance had encountered such pterodactyls before.

She took off the sunglasses. "Faith," she said.

"What?"

"You're a mess."

"Tell me something I don't know. Why do you think I asked you to help me?"

"I can't act like I'm an impartial party."

"I don't expect you to be impartial. I expect you to be on my side."

"What I mean is that I was going to drive you wherever you wanted to, pretending I had no ulterior motives, I was doing you a favor. I was going to use the driving time to talk you into trying to get back together with Marshall and figure out a lie that would get you out of the fish photo mess. Why? Because, I could use the money."

Faith ceased trying to climb into the dumpster to retrieve the duffel, rationalizing it had a mind of its own, had bonded with the chafing dishes and was willing to stick it out with them to the bitter end.

"How would my getting back with Marshall get you any money?"

"It's more a matter of my reasoning if you didn't get back with Marshall then you wouldn't have any."

"What you're saying is that if I didn't have the money to pay for my talk therapy, no matter how screwed up I might be, forget it. But if Marshall had the cash for it, you have bills to pay so it was better for me to stay with him as long as I needed to talk about how bad it was for me." Faith smiled. "Chancy, you know what this means?"

"What?"

"You've graduated!" Faith struck Chance's shoulder a friendly blow of congratulations. "You're no longer an amateur. You're a professional psychologist!"

Chance hung her head low.

"Put back on the sunglasses," Faith said.

She did. "Amazing. Where did you get these?"

"Now, get back in the car."

"To the lake house then?"

"Yeah, to the lake house. Did you happen to get any footage of me trying to climb into the dumpster?"

"No."

"Aw, fuck. Maybe we should go back and do a retake."

Retake? It wasn't taken in the first place. "What for?" Chance asked.

"You're right. Never mind. There will be other dumpsters. Oh, for Pete's sake don't leave the camera on like this, it'll eat up the batteries."

Faith was right about the duffel bag. Later that afternoon, the bomb squad, quickly determining that chafing dishes, pot holders, oven mitts and cookbooks were all the bag held, would turn the spoils over to the convenience mart clerk, who would go home that night and tell her live-in boyfriend that she'd been praying for a sign as to whether they were living in sin or not, and a sign had been given. It was time to get married, God had thrown her a wedding shower. The boyfriend, rolling over on the sofa, would yawn and reply, "Honey, you know I don't have a job and as long as I don't have a job I am not going to marry you. I don't want anyone gossiping about how I lie around all day while my wife's out working." To which the cashier would reply, "You gotta have Faith, that's all. Have Faith and good things will come."