My Last Love Story
by C.J. Hall

I pick up a loaded tray of used dishes mosaicicked with food remains and sashay my way into the kitchen. Style, you have to maintain your style here, keep your cool or you're out. God, I need a cigarette break. I pull the Winstons out of my monkey-jacket pocket and step into the alley. Ramon is taking out some garbage, and I wish I had one of those compacts with a little mirror. I could be a real floozie, put on lipploss while he's watching, blow his mind behind the meatfreezer and be back to collect table 14's plates before the cows are done chewing. I think about that for a while.

When the cigarette burns down to my fingers I flick it in Ramon's direction, cough and think about spitting. Instead I grimace, swallow, and go back inside. Table 14 is ready for coffee. Well, I wouldn't have had time to do Ramon behind the freezer. I smile to myself as I pour coffee. "Would anyone care for something from our dessert cart?" Ramon rolls the dessert cart over, they're short staffed tonight. "The strawberries in the tarts are from Wini- fred's Farm down the road. The Grand Marnier petit four is a big favorite." The fat one chooses the standard cheesecake with cherry topping. He doesn't need it and just as typically has a wife that frowns and herself just has black coffee. A woman in a peach hat chooses the tart. A tart for a tart, sweetes make you fart. I hope my shift is over soon. Ramon is sneering from behind the rumcake the whole time I cut and serve the tasty tidbits. I take my time placing the dollies and cutting slices. Let him wait, let him sneer, he'll get his from the town's hottest queer.

Following him into the kitchen for spite, I stand by the doorway, arms folded, just looking at him James Dean style. "I saw you watching me out back, you fairy," he snarls the words over some carrots he is chopping—a regular jack of all trades.

"It's cause I think you're so cute, Romeo. You drive me wild, somebody hold me back before I butt-fuck him to death, quick!" The cooks don't speak English, the manager's making time with the hostess and no one is he is around. Ramon glares at me and holds up the knife in mock threat.

"Just wait until we get home and we'll see who does what to whom, bitch." He puts down the knife, grabs my arm and pulls me into the alley. We have time for a quick squeeze and an ear lick before slipping back into the kitchen just ahead of the manager. Ramon, see, he's the only reason I'm not dead or married or something else fucked up today.

I met him on the beach in Long Branch. I'd known I was homosexual for a couple of years, but it was the first summer I'd ever had the brass to really try and do something about it. Ramon was a lucky first choice. He can tell stuff, I don't know, but he seemed to know all about me real fast. It was at a hot dog stand. I wasn't cruising or anything. I just made some dumb off-hand remark about how much mustard he put on his dog. Ramon's only three years older than me, and he wasn't exactly worldly, but like I said, he picks up on things.

Before I go on, I guess you ought to know that neither of us look like we're fags or anything. You could never tell if you didn't know and not a whole lot of people know. I'm tall, 6'1", what you might call "well built!" because I was on the swim team the couple of years I was in high school and didn't do much of anything else. I have a firm jaw, no limp wrist and have been shaving since I was fourteen. I've got this heavy dark beard that gets blue around five.

Ramon's not a wimp either, but he's hard to describe. Needless to say, I think he's one hot number, the cat's pajamas. He's got this curly hair, and brown eyes that always look like you just caught him peering somewhere he wasn't supposed to be looking; not shiftly, just shy. He's shorter than me, but broader built. He's got this darling little ase that you just want to squeeze off so you can sleep with it under your pillow, but I don't figure you want to hear so much about that.

He ate his hot dog as we walked down to the water. Ramon talked a lot about Freud in those days and how the sand was softer here. He talked about
summers in Salinas with his cousins while we both played with the sand between our fingers, caressing the beach, making crevices, hills and spirals. Our fingers sometimes bumped into each other’s in the fluid hills. “Touch,” Ramon said. “It’s so human, but people are always afraid of it. Especially Americans.” I let him pull his trick and disproved the stereotype. My hand stayed next to his, our little fingers overlapping. The calm waves, cool sand, and blue electricity shimmering through my body.

“You better come off your ass if you don’t want trouble, Gary,” he tells me, as if I don’t already see the customers. Restaurants, turn them upside-down and they’re all alike: understaffed, underpaid, and they always try to get something from you. Ramon bugs me like he’s got stock in the place.

“Get off your ass, Ramon, not come off your ass. The expression is that one had better get off one’s ass if one doesn’t want trouble. Besides, I see them, I’m going.”

“Get off your lazy ass.” You try to help someone speak properly and they give you shit.

A couple sits at my station, holding hands over the table and looking like what they want to eat isn’t on the menu. Just what I need. “I’d recommend the oyster appetizer.”

She giggles and tugs at her neckline.

“Would you care for anything from the bar?”

“A cerveza, please, and a Juicy Red, twist under my nose, but even that stuff’s old hat. Time doesn’t change in the restaurant, but the same scenes get acted over and over with no commercial breaks. In the kitchen I tell Ramon, “Type C, Table 12. Bet he has the steak, with French dressing on the salad, she’ll have chicken. God I’m bored.”

“I’m bored talking to you about them. I’ve been in restaurants like this all my life, but at tables, not in the kitchen.” Ramon sometimes misses the money he had when he was with his folks. Seams to me it never made him feel any better when he had it. Like when I first met him, we had better times just hanging around than he had with all their money-made entertainment.

When I met him, Ramon was down in Long Branch for a month with his parents and I was down for the whole summer, really pretty much indefinitely. Back then it didn’t make a difference to anyone where I hung out. I was a waiter in this crab shack: lots of mess, not many tips and the place always smelled like it just got laid. Ramon used to come in and stay while I mopped down the place for the old gal’s next day of whoring. I guess the manager, this fat bastard Ernie, starting catching on about us. He started asking me about my girlfriends, “a good-looking kid like me.” He never did like me slipping Ramon beers. Then Old Ernie must have had a change of heart because he starting hitting on me real subtle. I mean like following me into the bathroom saying, “I bet you go down real good,” and acting pissed. Even my mother could’ve seen how much he wanted it. He didn’t fire me, just put me on lousy hours, nights and during the day Saturday and Sunday. It was OK, bad for money, but I had plenty of time for fun in the sun with Ramon.

“Hey, Ramon,” I shouldn’t be hanging out in the kitchen so much, but everything was under control.

“Remember Old Ernie?”

Certainly, he still owes you forty dollars.”

“No, I mean how we used to cut him down, and the stuff we ripped off without him even knowing, the dumb ass.”

“T’ll never eat crabs again, I always think of his scummy little shack.”

“We had some great times.”

“You shouldn’t be in here,” Ramon put his hand on my shoulder. “Go back to your tables.”
We used to joke about Enie, and chew the fat about Equador and the places he traveled. I’ve done a lot of traveling, mostly on the East Coast, and have a lot of stories to tell, but Ramon’s been everywhere. He was always with his folks on the road. They’re pretty strict and they used to give him a real hard time about where he went all day and who he was with. He was twenty and could have just said “Fuck You” to them, but Ramon doesn’t like trouble. It was easier for him to just keep telling them what we did and lie when he had to. Like he does now. We mostly just hung out at the beach, getting tans, swimming and drinking beer out of styrofoam cups. He doesn’t even like dope so we were two of the most respectable guys around. We sure as hell didn’t go chasing after bikini-bottomed jail bait.

In the afternoon when we’d had enough sun-surf we’d go to my room. I remember one time, yeah, that time. It was so much like the others, but different, each time is different. Ramon had just come out of the shower looking like a skinny pup after he shakes the salt water off. His hair was all tasseled like that. His skin was almost the color of a wet Irish Setter, red-brown from the sun. He had this Popeye towel wrapped around him and his thigh sticking out was lean, strong like a dancer’s. I remember not taking my eyes off that thigh. He turned to the dresser to dry his hair, and the towel slipped from his waist. He must have been feeling whore-cocky, cause he didn’t bother to pick it up. He laughed suddenly; I saw him looking at my hard-on in the mirror, and that bastard kept right on drying his goddamn hair.

I waited, God did I wait, listening to the wheezing siren of the blow dryer. I’ve heard of sailors throwing themselves onto rocks because of a siren’s call and I knew how they felt when I dove for the cord of that shitty little hot air machine.

“What the fuck,” Ramon said, right on cue. “Exactly,” I was on my back staring straight up at his balls.

“Yeah, but really slowly this time. I mean slow.” And hell, he meant it. Excruciating, exquisite, X-rated, and I won’t go on about it too much longer, but I’m talking sex: wet lips, wet sweat, rough hair over rough skin, hard cock and pillow-sweet ass. I got tables to wait on and here I am, erection the size of Mount Everest.

Needless to say, I survive the night’s shift. I daydream some more, forget orders, mop up, get tipped and close down. I’m not sure what’s with me, I’m having an attack of affection, watery-eyed tenderness for Ramon. I keep thinking of those first days on the beach. On the ride home from the restaurant I reach over, squeezing his knee, the back of his neck. He’s grumpy.

“What’s with you tonight? How come you’re touching me so much?” He looks over at me while driving.
"I don't know." How do you tell someone who's bitchy that you're feeling all sweet on him? "I'm just feeling all sweet on you."

"Well, don't."

"Boy, you're in a fucking mood." I'll attack him with the vacuum cleaner—attention, it's what I want. The rest of the drive home is silent. It's only a ten minute ride, but I'm real relieved when we hit the gravel driveway to our house.

I have a house. Me, Gary McGregor, age 18. And a yard to rake if I ever feel like it. Two bedrooms, fireplace, kitchen, bathroom and windows so big and high they're too expensive to make gingham curtains for. We get inside and he heads for his room. Separate rooms are perfect for times like this. I head for the bourbon. Drinking JD, feet on a plush-covered footstool, head on a plush-covered cushion, it makes me think how Ramon really knows how to live. Well, I know how to survive.

I can hear Ramon talking softly on the phone. He's speaking English; I know, 'cause he never bothers to speak softly in Spanish. "So, you've taken another lover," I'll joke when he gets off the phone. The bourbon tastes good, and if we had a dog I'd be rubbing its ears and patting its butt. I'll just have to wait for Ramon. It's late and he's taking a long time.
To Alex:
by Margherita Gudenzi

I can't believe my glazzies, Alex
Lewdies these days
engage too much
in the ol' ultra-violence
Are we, my droog
like victims of this Modern Age?

And Oh my brother
this world is just a malenky bit
like mixed-up
No one reads a gazetta
or uses the ol' gulliver

But
Don't frce, my droog
you still have Ludwig van
...And the Glorious Ninth

Pee and em are left
boo-hooing over your resistance
(Did you really want to snuff it?)

What of this mesto?
What of it brother?
Dim, Pete, and Georgie boy
engage in the mindless...
young rozzies

Despite Ludivico
(the sinner will never be the same)
there may be a choice
Alex, o boy
Ah... Mere subtleties

Julia: 1982
by Victor Carlton R

When you left,
i actually wept
each time i sat still,
ever expecting
the overwhelming
unreality in all things
of which you
were not a part.

It was easy to live
when nothing much mattered;
it's getting damned hard
to die with this star in my eye.
Gestalt Energy
by Margherita Gudenzi

Footprints on my libido
Now
of his attention
an apparent movement
(such a phenomena)

This feeling I have
I perceive
see complete
complete
(What of it Max?)

I nurture
my instincts
a Rerun
of experiences

I turn it on—
my primary reinforcer
what we will find
perpetuates
my neurosis

Rain
by Jason Doulwitt

when the rain comes,
they sit and shake their heads.
you might as well be dead,
when the rain comes.
—Beatles

In the city, who
cares about the rain?
Never a matter of life or death,
it is only a nuisance, a day
to spend indoors, making love.
Slowing down the hustle-bustle.
cooling off the hot hurried blister
of the city in July.

No one praises the rain, no one
celebrates nature's logic,
the thrill of water to dry roots.
Imagine: if you were a turnip or
just you,
too dry,
searching desperately for a little
moisture in your soil, the excitement
when the rain floods over
you, showers you, beats you
with its sustenance.
Leaving you to an easy life
for a week or so.
How I Came to Lose an Earring
by Janine Kijner

Like I said I ain't stupid or anythin' like those dumb broads you always see on television who are left standin' by the bar stool goin', "Oh! Oh!" in those silly, slinky voices. No—I'm not all smiles and teeth when a fellow marches up to me askin' for directions here or there. Ya gotta keep your guard up if ya don't want to end up like those silly dames. The thing is—I really wasn't expectin' it. I mean when I met him he didn't look me up and down before askin' me how to get to the nearest Shell Station. Then he sort of looked into the sidewalk and asked me what my name was. He could've said just about anythin', but he thought to be real polite and respectful.

I knew he was from out of town cause we only have two gas stations in town and one of them is a truck stop way out by Old Man McGinn's. Anyway, newcomers usually ask where the Shell is first thing, cause lil' Willie Kathers down at the drug store, scares them into buyin' gas. He tells them some story about a farmer who didn't know the gas stations here close on the weekend and how he was forced to spend the entire weekend here. When he finally made it back home, he found that his wife had left him—on account of she thought he found another woman—this was before Mapledale had a phone service installed—but Willie always seems to forget that part. So newcomers around here always make sure they got enough gas to get them through the night. I don't hear Mr. Kathers complainin' much—seen as how he owns the station. Anyway—I tell him, "There's a station up the street from the Paradise Lounge."

He just leans his head out the window restin' his elbow on the side of the car, and gives me a slow, even grin. The kind ya can't help but notice. I mean it was nice. If there's one thing I hate—it's guys with crooked smiles. Those are the ones who take you to the movies and twenty minutes before the flick ends, try to feel you up just cause you let them buy you Milk Duds. They'd be sittin' there all the time lookin' sideways at you—just a smile' and a talkin'—though I don't know how they ever managed to say anythin'—what with their mouths always fixed at that sly angle. Anyway—this one—at least he had a comfortable mouth; it looked soft and cushiony.

When I finally get my wits about me and stop starin' at his face, I notice his car. I gotta admit I ain't never seen one quite like this before. It's black as night with a gold eagle trapped on its pointy nose—lookin' like it's about to take-off, and rocket-like wings stickin' out the back. I notice the fancy tires and shiny red seats inside—I mean this guy must have money. It's a brand new car, judgin' from the sticker plastered smoothly over the side window he didn't bother to take off. I can't stop starin'—even though I know it's rude. He must've been checkin' me out while I was checkin' out the car, cause all of a sudden he says, "Would you like to go for a spin?"

He says it so softly I almost don't know if I heard right. Right away I'm in a dilemma—I can just see myself spinnin' down the street, my hair wavin' in my face (I gotta say right now I watch a lot of movies so that's where I got that idea) and havin' old Jimmy Spruce watch open-mouthed, as I'm dropped off at my front porch. Right about then all I can see is myself as an
I appreciate this. Most people don’t notice things like that. For instance, I’d been walkin’ around prouder than a peacock with those pure gold stud earrings for a month, when my pa looks at me one day and says, “What ya do to your ears? Ya done went and got holes punched in them! I told ya I don’t like ya hangin’ out with Mary Lou—she got less sense than you do!”

For a week after that I wore my hair up and let the sunlight dance off my shiny new earrings. Anyways—when he said this he grew tall as a beanstalk in my eyes.

Besides—I don’t mind people starrin’ at me. It happens all the time. Everytime I take my little brother to the movies, the boys behind the candy counter stare at me and make those little sneezein’ noises that sound like they’re havin’ an asthma attack.

“What do you do?”

“I work in a laundromat. Ain’t much to tell—it’s pretty borin’ most of the time.”

I’m still thinkin’ about ol’ Jimmy Spruce’s face at the altar when he turns to me expectin’ an eager “I do” and I just look at him and say “So—ya gonna tell my poppa about my fancy dreamin’ are ya? Ya done ready to marry me now—are ya? Well—I sure as hell ain’t ready to get stuck to a borin’ ol’ shoe salesman—take that and plug it in your shoebox!” Then I’d

old sack of groceries bein’ dumped on the porch stairs and sit-’in’ there forever—just rottin’ away. Probably with Jimmy Spruce still watchin’ and shakin’ his finger sorta singin’ out, “I told ya this would happen if ya didn’t marry me. Nobody wants ya now—you used up.” Maybe he’d even be happy about it. Why just this mornin’ he told me if I didn’t stop all my fancy daydreamin’ he’d tell my pa he’s never gonna marry me—even if his uncle does leave him the shoe store. It don’t bother me none—I don’t plan on gettin’ married if I can help it anyway!

What the heck—I’ve always thought of myself as the adventurous type. Besides—one ride won’t kill me. Though you never can tell. I mean you hear so many stories about hitchhikers that wind up in some far out-of-the-way field face down. I spook myself so—I almost snap my hand back and walk away, but I get a hold of myself and open the door. The vinyl seat’s cold and sticky and makes a squeaky noise when I sit down.

“My name’s Scott,” he says and pulls out a stick of chewin’ gum. “How old are you?”

“Eighteen,” I tell him.

He smiles and starts talkin’. When he talks the freckles on his nose sprinkle up and down, this way and that; even if you’re not really listenin’ it’s pretty interestin’ to watch. He takes a fast right and I concentrate on soundin’ smart—I can’t stand it when broads get all giggly and dumb.

“I’m on my way back to the city,” he says real importantly.

“Yeah—you’ll probably be able to breathe a lot easier back home in your smoggy, noisy city,” I say. I can tell he thinks it’s pretty funny cause all of a sudden he turns and looks me straight on. Up until this time he’s been starrin’ at me from out the corner of his eye.

“I like your earrings,” he says. “They match the yellow in your eyes.”
up and march down the aisle—pure and sweet as can be, stand by the church door, throw my pink and yellow carnations at skinny Emily Craws and hop into this here old shiny brand-new black bird!

"Have you ever thought of leaving here?" We're stopped in front of Nell's Supermarket.

"Once I did."

I got caught one day hidin' out in an old barn with a knapsack full of cheese, crackers, family pictures, and a hammer. My father beat the livin' daylight out of me! He thought I'd eloped with Johnny Murphy. I'd dined him a couple of times. One time he took me to a drive-in movie and tried to give me his ring—I wouldn't let him. He's not a bad fellow, but I sure wouldn't run off with him.

"Have you ever been to the city?" he asks.

I'm sort of ashamed about this part—see I never really been anywhere. Except for the time me and my best friend, Tammy, hopped the train to Oaksville and went bar hoppin'. We both told our parents we were gonna stay with each other's aunt. I guess you could say that's the most excitin' thing I ever done.

I look up across the street and see ol' Molly behind the cash register spin'in' on me. She's burnin' holes into me with her beady little eyes. I know, as soon as she can, she's gonna report to my mama about how she saw me get into a stranger's car. Then I'll be in some good, hot trouble. Ya gotta understand, folks around here don't like for strangers to come snoopin' around, disruptin' everythin'—they can't be trusted. My cousin Thelma up and run off with one from Philadelphia. Disgraced the whole family.

I figure since I'm gonna catch hell anyway, I might as well have an excitin' adventure. Here I am in a fancy car with a real suave fellow who's taking a likin' to me, when all of a sudden I realize how it's the opportunity of a lifetime to leave Mapledale with its silly old women gossipin' on their porches, rockin' their lives away and putty-faced Jimmy Spuce just wastin' his life away—waitin', and finally take off to the big city. Like I'd always dreamed when I was a kid. When else could I just up and leave? Not when I'm workin' at the laundromat to support myself—not when I'm married with ten kids, so.

Besides, maybe I'd find the perfect job in the city. Then I'd never have to come back. I could even send fat Mr. Stuart a letter of resignation tellin' him what a cheap ol' bastard I always thought he was. And how I only worked for him because I could steal detergent and some of his customer's pillow cases without him noticin'. And then I'd be free. Maybe I'd even strike it rich. Everyone in town always thought I was the kind who would end up fadin' quietly away. This way I could leave them with a bang. So I turn to him, smile, and off we went. I could picture myself in a shiny sailboat headin' off towards China, people standin' at the edge of the water shoutin' out my name, and me just smilin' and wavin'—not a care in the world.

Leavin' without a look back.

We're not drivin' long when he starts gettin' moody. I can tell cause he keeps glancin' over at me with this worried look on his face. Like he made a mistake after all. I sink into my chair tryin' to make like I'm not there. He looks over at me every few seconds and shakes his head. Then his face changes—it relaxes into a smile. After a few seconds, his hand starts to inch over my way. It crosses the soft red of the seat and weaves its way over to my row crossed legs.

I'm actin' like he's not there—but out of the corner of my eye I can see everythin' he's doin'—perfectly. His hand starts creepin' over to my side, soon it's restin' on my knee cap. It's restin' there so light, I suppose he thinks I don't know it's there. My knee gives a jerk; I thought we'd both go right through that chrome windshield. But he seems not to have noticed. He lets his hand rest on my knee for a second, and once it catches its breath, lets it crawl up my thigh. I'm real still and stiff. Then I throw my knee up—I almost knocked my eye out—and his hand goes flyin' off. We drive for ten minutes in heavy silence. Then he starts to play with my seat belt. He must've thought I was a real dummy to do that. I whipped my head back so fast I
"You okay?" He looks at my funny.

His eyes were as clear as the sky on a sunny day and they were just as warm—considerin' ya didn't get on his wrong side. Then he pulls me over and gives me the sweetest kiss anyone's ever given me. It was softer than a marshmallow and fluffier. I'm no sucker—like I said, but I was more than a little surprised. I never expected him to be such a good kisser. I'm not that experienced myself, but I have been rated a good ol' "10" when it comes to kissin'. I won that title playin' Spin the Bottle a long time ago. I felt like I couldn't stop kissin' him if I'd wanted to. He told me he knew I was a nice, respectable girl and how he wouldn't get no harm come to me if he stayed with me—so I kept kissin' him.

It's weird the way these things happen. Sometimes there's one fellow ya can't stop thinkin' about and he's the only one that can't ever remember your name. Then there'll be another fellow who's so nice you're afraid to tell him you can't go to the prom with him. Because he's got pimples and wears braces you're kinda ashamed to be seen with him. But everybody says he's sweet and ya wind up goin'. But it don't feel right.

Then there's one who nobody's exactly sure about and you can't eat when you think about him. People throw advice at ya right and left about which one to stick with. But it's your decision. So ya go for the nice guy cause it's safer that way. Everybody says how much better off ya are and pat ya on the back. It's strange—but with this one I didn't even stop and think. I just kept on kissin' him. Deep down inside I knew it wasn't right—but it felt like it was. So I kept on. After all—sometimes the way ya feel is what counts.

We're parked in the middle of this dirt road with nobody around. I pull out a joint. He jerks back so fast I thought maybe he was a narc. "What's the matter with you? Ain't you never smoked a joint?" I say, soundin' cool as can be.

"Of course I have. Why I once smoked an ounce of the finest with none other than Fergie Jenkins from the Chicago Cubs."

"Oh," I say, and stare at him with my head cocked to one side like my Aunt Sally's parrot.

He gets all mad and says, "I ain't afraid of that shit." He reaches over and takes a hit. A big hit. Bigger than fat Matt Slater. He's the one taught me how to smoke. He's a big fellow and his lungs hold more than most normal folks do. No matter how hard he tries not to choke or wheeze, he can't stop himself.

"Could you please hand me the bottle in the back?"

So I hand him the bottle of JD. How am I supposed to know he had a bottle of water in the back? I didn't see it. It's all I can do to keep myself from grinnin'. I bite my lip so hard I think I'm bleedin'. His face gets all red. I thought he'd go up like a chimney. After a while he seems to regain his senses.

"Let's get out of here," he mumbles. He sits upright in his seat, turns the key, and gets back on the highway. We drive on. It's getting darker and darker.

"Boy—the sky sure is gettin' black," I finally say.

He don't look mad at me anymore. He nods and fingers my pinky in his hand. He had nice hands with long, thin fingers that look like French fries.

He parks in front of a small "Country Inn." He's real quiet, not sayin' anything. I notice he hasn't stopped lookin' at me since we parked.

"Well!" I say, kinda nervous. I mean—what does he want? "Well, it's getting kind of late," he says.
As if I hadn’t noticed. Thank you. Who does he think he is, after all? Probably he thinks he’s gonna be a newscaster, the way he announces this fact.

“Why don’t we stop here before heading on to the big city tomorrow?” he says. It’s supposed to be a question, but he makes it sound like an order—only put in a nice way. Then he punches my shoulder and waits for me to answer.

“Sure, no problem.” I sound real calm. But my knees are shakin’ and my stomach’s churnin’. He gets out, I make like I can’t wait to get out of the car. He stops me with a “Hold on. Let me find out if they’ve got room for us.”

I nod wisely, as if I’m used to this sort of thing. Why did I ever get into this car? This has to be the stupidest thing I’ve ever done. When he goes inside cross my hands, knees, and neck, and pray there’s no room for us. He comes out with a huge grin—I never seen anything bigger, and announces that there’s plenty of room for us.

“Great.”

“We just made it—some guy decided he didn’t want to stay after all. He was checking out when I asked about a room. Now we’ll be able to get a good night’s rest.”

This guy can sure talk up a storm when he wants to. He’s already pullin’ his suitcase out of the car. I have to run to catch up to him.

Room 203. We’re on a balcony that overlooks the parkin’ lot. It’s not a true parkin’ lot—it’s made of gravel rocks and stones and has a bunch of smushed beer cans floatin’ all over the place.

“What a view,” I say. He doesn’t appreciate this. He’s still tryin’ to open the door. He’s cursin’ and fumblin’ with the lock, at this rate I’m thinkin’ we’ll never get a “good night’s rest.”

This perks me up.

“I think you have the wrong key,” I’m already tryin’ to figure out how to get down the stairs, through that mean o’ parkin’ lot, and into the car without him noticin’ us. We’ll see who gets a good night’s rest.

“Got it!” he practically yells, and wipes the sweat off his forehead. You can tell he ain’t no country boy the way he’s all pink and out of breath just from nyin’ to open a damn door. I’m standin’ at the edge of the dooway—there ain’t no way in hell I’m gonna step foot inside his pleasure pit! One bed—a small crooked one with a bumpy mattress that looked worse than lumpy oatmeal. A crooked green lamp shade sittin’ uncomfortably on a cracked, plastic base. It looked like some kid in art class’s mistake. A three-legged table with one black panty hose leg hangin’ over its edge—like a snake about to strike. Vertically the color of sour cream—only speckled with grey dust and fingerprints—flyin’ over the open window. At least I could climb out when he was in the bathroom. The bathroom. I really had to go now.

I figured maybe I should step inside—just so he wouldn’t think I was scared. I walked in and found the bathroom. What a sight that bathroom was! I ain’t never seen nothin’ worse in my entire life. And I seen a lot of bad sights. Like the time Eddie Fleps sliced his finger to bits in the blender, and the time of Maggie’s black cat was run over by a truck. At least those things were accidents—they weren’t supposed to happen. But this! This was just sittin’ there waitin’ for people to use it. Not even makin’ any excuse for itself. The tile was cracked and moldy-lookin’, some pieces were missin’ and there were big patches of hard cement all over the place. Everythin’ that was metal was nasty, and squeaked when you turned or pressed on it. But worst of all—there’s no lock on the door! Now how am I supposed to take a leak with a grown man in the room next door just waitin’ for a chance to pounce all over me? I was in a fine mess. I couldn’t just up and call my family or even Jimmy Spence. Tell them to come pick me up in the “Country Inn”—Room 203! I’d get the life beat out of me! Besides—if I did that—it would be just like admittin’ I made a mistake by comin’ in the first place. I couldn’t do that. I may be a coward—but I’m no quitter!

I open the door a crack, to see what he’s doin’ out there. He’s lyin’ on the bed, comfortable as can be—his shoes nappin’ over by the dark, heavy chair in the corner. He picks his head up slow as a lion on the prowl, and winks, I shut the door. I stand with my head pressed against the back of it. The whole situation’s gettin’ worse by the minute. The more I think about where I am, the more I gotta use the john. I toilet paper the seat (if there’s one thing my mama taught me—it’s how to cover the toilet seat in strange places), and sit down, with one foot straight ahead of me on the door, ust let him try to get in now. I may not be at my best at this moment in time—but I’m also not bored. There’s a price for everythin’, as my grandma’s fond of sayin’. Ya gotta give up some comforts for a life of excitement. After all, this is an adventure I flush. I flush again. Then I flush like I ain’t never flushed before. I take hold of that handle and press all my 96 pounds into one great big effort—this damn toilet’s gonna flush if it kills me.

If he hadn’t burst through the door like some damn Superman, it would never have happened—believe me! It was pretty embarrassing! I’m standing there holdin’ the handle to the toilet in my right hand, he’s gappin’ over the toilet and lookin’ back at me as if he’s in a daze. I fling the handle hard as I can on that tired old tile and run out.

I’ve got one foot out the front door when he grabs me by the arm and swings me around. He seems to think he’s some sort of hero. I turn my face away; I can’t stand for no one to see me cryin’. Then he does a real sweet thing. He takes my chin with two fingers and real soft and slow, turns my face towards his.

“Don’t worry about it. Green Eyes. I’ll call room service and they’ll fix it. No harm’s done.” Room service!

And he kissed the tip of my nose. It wasn’t really a kiss—it was more like a soft massage—only with his lips. He moved slowly up toward my eyes that were locked tight—only now they were startin’ to unwrinkle—and rested his lips on each
one for a few seconds. Then—with the tip of his two index fingers—he traced a star on my face.

You know what that was for?” he breathed in my face. I shook my head—for once in my life I was speechless. If only Jimmy the heelf could see me now. Before I could think of anything to say he answered his own question.

“That was for the star you are.”

Wow! Nobody’s ever said anythin’ that nice to me before.

The nicest thing Jimmy ever said to me was, “You make the hottest raisin biscuits this side of town Gwendie—you’re gonna make a great wife someday.” He was just commentin’ about things I done or could do for him, never just on me. Kissin’ him was like tryin’ to melt warm butter on a cold piece of toast. But this—this was just like bein’ in a dream—only I knew I wasn’t sleepin’! Well—you can guess what happened next. One thing led to another and soon we was sprawled out all over that lumpy bed, only now it wasn’t the least bit uncomfortable.

His arms was wrapped around me like moss around a tree and he was countin’ my ribs from behind. He counted eleven, up until I told him if he got past fourteen I’d personally see to it that he’d be minus a limb for the rest of his tree-climbin’ life. He stopped countin’ and just held me. He stroked my hair—the way I’d stroke a cat’s belly—first light and smooth, then curlin’ and uncurlin’ pieces of stray hair up into his fingers. Quickly—before I could lose my nerve—I lifted my head from the crook of his shoulder, stared him straight in the eye like Lauren Bacall did at Humphrey Bogart right before their big kiss in “To Have or Have Not,” bent forward and planted him a great big kiss on his sweet mouth. I could barely believe I’d done that. It didn’t seem like somethin’ I’d normally do—but after all I wasn’t exactly under normal circumstances—so there I just went and did it. As quickly as I jumped into his sleek black car, and just as quickly as I left off Jimmy Spruce for good. He didn’t seem to mind none—or even be surprised—in fact he looked like he was spectin’ that all along. Suddenly things went from soft and slow to hot and bothered. Before I knew what I was doin’ I was helpin’ him unbuckle my red and white checkered shirt (the one Jimmy always called my picnic blanket shirt on account of it looked like a tablecloth my mama uses only for our Easter Picnic). I didn’t really help him—I was just unfastenin’ the hook at the top that was jammed and was makin’ me lose my breath—I couldn’t get enough oxygen.

When I open my eyes I see his shorts lyin’ in a crumpled heap by the foot of the bed, sort of like the heap that’s left after the wicked witch melts in “The Wizard of Oz.” It took about a second to register. Then I let out a yell that must’ve sounded like the cackle of an old witch, cause he stops what he’s doin’ and looks around to see where that noise come from.

“Don’t think I’m not onto you!” I sit up and the sheets fall off my topless body. Quickly I grab for the sheets and dive under the blanket. He’s just standin’ at me like I’m a puzzle he can’t piece together.

“Jesus Christ, you’re nuts—you know that? Nuts!”

“And don’t go sayin’ His name in vain, ya heart!” And I turn my back on him to show him I ain’t interested in whatever he’s got up his sleeve. I make like I’m sleepin’ and start snorin’. He nudges me in the ribs with his bony elbow—I try not to breathe. I try to act dead or imagine what it feels like to be a chair—but he’s not buyin’ this. He’s standin’ down at me like he’s gonna pounce on me. That’s when I let him have it. “You ain’t no gentleman! Tryin’ to take advantage of the situation! I’ll have you know I’m a good Catholic girl—and if you lay one paw on me I’ll break your face!”

I sure told him off! He don’t say nothin’—just looks over at me as if he’s about to decide somethin’ important. Then he he up and rolls out of bed. Only he forgot about one thing. And that one thing is just a standin’ me straight in the face. He gets out of bed—he’s not the shy type at all—and acts like he’s not lookin’ for his underwear. He even starts whistlin’ a tune as he puts on a jacket and walks around completely bare-assed. And he calls me nuts! Then he inconspicuously looks under the dresser, behind the chair, in the corner, over the bedboard, and around the bathroom. Inconspicuous is a good word for the way he was searchin’. It’s my grandma’s favorite word and it comes in handy at times. If I wasn’t so mad I woulda burst into laughter. Just when I was gonna give up on him leavin’, he had sense enough to look around the corner of the bed and find it. Though he didn’t seem the least bit uncomfortable walkin’ around without underwear, he did seem relieved when he finally got ‘em on. It took him about two seconds flat to get them on.
I couldn’t control myself. “I think you missed your cue a while ago.” For a moment it was quiet, then the door slams, loud, behind him.

I don’t move a muscle for a good ten minutes. Then I jerk up faster than a hooked fish on the end of a line. What if he up and leaves? Not that I care—mind you—exceptin’ if he sticks me with the bill—then I’ll be up an alley, Jesus—why do I get myself in these messes? I can already see tomorrow’s headlines: “Winfred Girl Found Abandoned in Sleazy Hotel Room—Half-Naked!” Well—serves me right. This is what happens when you get involved with strangers. I should’ve listened to my mama—men are nothin’ but trouble. What did I think I was gonna do in the city anyway? It’s not like I been trained for any kind of job—except hangin’ clean shirts and foldin’ sheets. Probably in the city you have to know how to press tuxedos—somethin’ I’ve only done one time. Ya don’t get that many tuxedos in Mapledale.

I’m about to call the police and turn myself in. But what will I say? I’ve been suckered in by one suave guy from the city. I don’t know nothin’ about him—exceptin’ for he’s a Captain in some fancy restaurant with a sleek black bird. They’ll never find him with that description!

All of a sudden he saunters in as if it’s the most natural thing to do at one o’clock in the morning. He’s perfectly comfortable—it’s the most normal thing in the world to up and leave a pretty girl in bed! He’s been gone longer than an hour—but I’ll be damned before I say anythin’. He looks over at me. I close my right eye, it’s facin’ him. He takes a blanket from the closet and lies down on the floor. I don’t mind one bit. No siree! I most certainly couldn’t have been happier! If there’s one thing I like it’s sleepin’ alone—it’s so refreshin’. It doesn’t bother me none. Though he did look might uncomfortable all alone on that hard floor. I just lay in that big, wide bed—it didn’t seem so small now—tossin’ and turnin’ until the white light of mornin’ finally sneaked in through the shades. I felt mighty relieved when it did—I mean anythin’ could’ve happened to me that night—what with sleepin’ with an odd boy and all.

He stretches out of bed. Not a word about last night. He’s grinnin’ like a polar bear that just got fed. I’m considerin’ askin’ him to take me back home. It would serve him right if I left! I’m still waitin’ for my apology when he jumps up from the floor faster than a shootin’ star and sails into the bathroom. Just like that—without sayin’ a word. Not a “Good morning to you” or a “How’d you sleep last night?” I may come from a small town—but at least the folks back home got manners—I mean good manners. I’m kinda missin’ my mama’s home-cooked muffins and sunny side eggs—so I decide I’ll make my first move when he comes out of the bathroom.

No sooner than I decide this, than he comes marchin’ out of that mean ol’ bathroom with a white towel wrapped around his drippy wet body. That white towel couldn’t have been bigger than my little brother’s undershirt—it looked like a diaper turned sideways on him. Just like that—with me in the room—he throws it off and starts gettin’ dressed. Last night was one
thing—it was dark. First he reaches for his blue and white striped underwear, then he puts on a blue and yellow short-sleeved shirt. After this—his socks (one of them had a hole in the toe which he turned in toward his heel fast as he could) and then—I could barely believe my eyes—his shoes!

“What are you looking at?” he asks in this perfectly normal voice—as if I’m the crazy one.

“Ain’t nobody ever taught ya anything?” I ask.

“Sure,” he says, and winks. “Only nobody ever got around to everything.” This fellow sure got a thing about winking. I’m still sittin’ in bed with the covers pulled up to my ears and he’s practically out the door.

“Want some breakfast?” Maybe he does have some manners after all—I’m thinkin’. I guess he figures the way to my heart is through my stomach. He dashes out the door with “Be dressed when I arrive with your meal, my lady.”

He says it like he’s got marbles rollin’ around his mouth. He’s real educated so I figure I better go along with it, else the joke’ll be on me. I’m gettin’ dressed when it hits me why he’s bein’ real friendly just now. Boy—it’s a good thing I’m on my toes else he’d’ve made the biggest sucker in the whole Midwest out of me. He probably thinks if he makes a big stink about breakfast, I’ll forget all about his stormin’ out of here last night like a madman. I gotta hand it to him, though, he’s one mighty smart fellow.

He comes back with two candy bars and some peanuts and puts them right in front of me. He takes a small step back and bows before me:

“For you, Madame.”

I look from him to the food—all the while he’s standin’ there lookin’ cheerful as can be. I cross my arms over my chest real tight—like my momma does when she’s mad at my pa for comin’ home smellin’ like a brewery. He asks me if I don’t like chocolate or if I’m as hung up about eatin’ peanuts in the mornin’ as I am about funeral’ around in a motel room. He can be nasty. I throw him a look and he opens the peanuts and tosses a few in his mouth to show me what he thinks of my hang-ups.”

“I’m not the one with hang-ups,” I say. “Where did you go off to last night?”

He looks uncomfortable and hot in his clothin’ and mumbles real shy-like, “Just for a walk.” After a minute he adds, “Besides, what are you—my mother?”

Fine. I’m not lookin’ for trouble. Just let me get to the city so I can lose this guy. I don’t care if I never see him again—he’s too sneaky and strange for the likes of me.

“Let’s get out of here,” I say.

We’re checkin’ out of our little “love nest” as he calls it, when the clerk—a big man with a stomach that hung over his belt and hair the color of sand, tells us about the scandal. Seems some lady in 215 got all her money plus jewelry stolen right from under her nose. I touch my ear just to make sure my earrings are still there. They are. She told the clerk she always kept them in a little gold box—though it beats me why anyone would want to keep somethin’ valuable in a valuable thing. If you ask me—it sounds like the lady was cookin’ for trouble. When she woke up in the mornin’ it was gone. She couldn’t find it anywhere. Anyway—she comes tearin’ down to the clerk so fast she forgot to take her night creme off. She scared the bejeesus out of him! He thought he was seein’ a ghost! I guess strange things happen to ya when ya work all night at a desk. Well, she really gave it to him! Told him that if he ran a high class place this would never have happened. He told us he didn’t take offense at this cause people never mean what they say when they’re mad—they’re just talkin’ out of their ears. He had a pretty good hold on life, as my pa would say.

I don’t know what to say when he’s finished tellin’ us this.

“Cee, that’s too bad,” says ole Studs, not soundin’ the least bit like he means it.

I’m just thinkin’ about what could’ve happened to me last night when ol’ Studs left me to go strollin’ through the moonlight. To tell the truth—I was startin’ to get mad all over again. Still—I was kinda relieved I was with a man—even if he did have more arms than an octopus. Ol’ Studs decides to break in and interrupt the clerk in the middle of his sentence, “We’re leaving, we’re in a hurry.”

I tell you—I ain’t never seen such bad manners as cityfolk got. They can’t take the time of day to exchange a pleasant hello with each other—no wonder they’re always stavang’ and murderin’ each other. I’d go mad if no one said hello to me.
After what seems like years we get to the city. I feel the same uneasy way I do when I'm in Doc Shelly's office, waitin' for him to fill a cavity. I guess it's the excitement. My knees are rubbery and tired from bein' still so long. The city's just gettin' dark. There are little flecks of light poppin' up all over the place. Cars and buses are honkin' like mad at each other. I wasn't used to the noise. I kept jumpin' and startin' myself so, I thought I'd never stop shakin'. There was smog everywhere—in my nose, ears, lips, toes. I was ready to take another shower. He just looked over at me, with his hair whippin' about his face, as if he was waitin' for me to say somethin'.

Finally I said "I'm hungry." I couldn't think what else to say. I didn't want to insult him, but I thought everybody on the street was rude. They all walked with their heads down—not lookin' at each other. At intersections they ran into and around each other—like ants in a race.

He takes my arm—just like we were married—and says, "If you liked your first taste of the city, wait until you taste another part of it." Ha, ha. I don't know how he does it. One funny line after another. But I don't say anything—on account of he looks so proud, as if the city was a dog he personally trained to bark.

As we walk, we pass a huge building. "What's this?" I come right out and ask—I couldn't help myself.

"It's the Wax Museum," he says, soundin' like a proud father.

I ain't never seen a wax museum before. Back home the closest we got to one is the County Fair and that comes but once a year. I knew if I looked at him the right way he'd take me inside. I lean close to him and squint my eyes up at him. It works.

We walk past all sorts of famous people, the ones you see everyday on TV in old movies. I'm standin' by Marilyn Monroe. He's on the other side, by Bing Crosby, just starin' over at me. At first I'm not sure if he's starin' at me or Marilyn Monroe, but then I realize it's me. It makes me kinda nervous bein' stared at in that way—almost like I'm a dummy made of wax and he come to look at me. He's even startin' to look like a wax figure himself—cause of the blank look on his face, and the way he hasn't moved for a while. I'm gettin' spooked. I feel a hand brush against my sidepocket and almost scream. But instead I freeze. What if I'm bein' robbed this very second? I turn but there's nobody around him—starin'.

"Ready?" I ask, but my voice comes out crackly and weird. He shrugged and we left.

"Did you ever wonder what it would feel like to be rich?" he asks. I thought he was testin' me—probably to see if I was the kind of girl who would run off with a fellow just because he had a few bucks. I never really thought about it before—seein' as how I'd always thought I'd be stuck forever in Mapledale.

"I figure as long as ya got enough money to eat—you're doin' okay."

When I told him this, he just looked at me sideways. These city folk, they never believe you when you're up front with them.

"I'm going to take you to my restaurant," he says. His restaurant? "It's some of the best food in all of Chicago—probably even all of Illinois."

As soon as we walk in, the hostess comes runnin' over. I thought she'd fall off her shoes and kill herself—she was in such a hurry to kiss him smack on the mouth and give him a big hug—but she didn't. Instead she sits us right in the middle of the room.

"The best seats in the house," she says to him. You'd have thought I was invisible.

The carpet was red and there was even some on part of the wall. It was a real high class place—the kind you see all the time in the movies when people go out to dinner. The waiters were wearin' tight black pants and white shirts. The waitresses wore tiny red skirts that showed their underwear everytime they bent over. They looked like the cocktail waitresses at the "Paradise Lounge" back home. He ordered wine with our dinner.

"I recommend the Filet Mignon," he says, soundin' like a Captain.

But I settled for a plain ole steak with potatoes. Then he orders snails with a fancy name in garlic sauce, but his face don't look none too happy with his choice when it finally comes. He keeps pickin' at his plate with this small fork.

"Are ya sure ya don't wanna send it back and order somethin' else?" I ask. He gets real offended and says, "You know something—you have no class." Just cause I don't wanna try a bunch of smelly ol' snails that look like pieces of a rubber tire.

As I recall, the service was real slow. They'd bring one dish out. They'd wait. They'd fill a glass with water up. They'd wait. They'd clear a plate. They'd wait. I thought I was gonna starve to death before they finally brought me my food. I was surprised it was still hot. I noticed this one thing about city folk. They don't know how to eat. Instead of just pilin' their plates
little hostess friend flirtin' with an old, bald man. He doesn't. He's too busy reachin' over and playin' with the tips of my fingers. He kisses my fingertips and tells me, "All Frenchmen kiss their lovely women this way." I'm not buyin' this stuff—but it beats sittin' around bein' ignored.

He's been actin' strange all through dinner—real irritable. Askin' if I miss my family and if I need money to go back home—when he knows I ain't got but a dime to my name. Then lookin' like he's bein' strangled by his tie when I tell him how I plan on gettin' a job anyway—maybe even in his big, fancy restaurant. He don't look none too happy at this, and gets quiet and snappy when I try to make conversation. Then, without a warnin' he switches his mood and gets all smiley and touchy—I can't keep up with him! I don't know if I'm supposed to be havin' a good time or a bad one. So I just chew my food and swallow—waitin' for him to say somethin' smart. I already made up my mind—if he says one more word in that nasty tone—I'm gonna throw my food all over him! By this time I don't care where we are. I'm no sucker and nobody's gonna treat me like one. No matter how fancy he is. Anyway— lucky for him, he's beamin'. I look up to see if the waitress is watchin' but she's too busy with her ancient admirer. Boy—if we were back home—that waitress would never've gotten away with this funny business. Makin' eyes at every man she sees—that is.

His fingers are runnin' up and down my arm, real soft—like drops of dew or rain fallin', fallin' softly. I'm not really payin' attention to too many things, except that the next time I look over at our sweet little hostess, she's standin' over here. The grandfather's still standin' over her shoulder. I move closer to Studs and act real lovery-dubby. She keeps lookin'. So I really play it up—I run my finger down his crooked nose and trace the sprinkle of freckles on his face as if I was blind. The hostess is standin' frozen in the same position. She looks like she's not breathin', like a marble statue. I know that what I did wasn't very Christian of me—but I couldn't help it. I'm startin' to feel bad about it, too. Especially since she's takin' it so hard. She looks up at the old man and points over here. I can just imagine what she's sayin' about me.

"What are you thinking of?" Studs purrs out to me, soft as a cat. This fellow, he sure got a way about him. He's sophisticated—he knows how to act and what to do. That's somethin' I really admire about a person. Most of the folks back home wouldn't know what food to order or how much to tip—they'd get to feelin' pretty uncomfortable here. But this guy—he knows exactly the right thing to do. I could sure learn a lot from him.

"I really am feelin' good," I tell him. And I was, too.

I'm about to sneak a peek at the hostess again, when I notice the grandfather's standin' by our table. He stands over ol' Studs and stares at him. Doesn't say nothin'—just stares. He's taller than I thought and I have to crane my neck up to see his face.

In a real deep voice he says, "Mind if I sit down, son?" and sits—doesn't even wait to see what we have to say about this. Well, you could just tell Studs didn't very much like being called son by an old man he never met before. But he was polite, didn't say nothin'—only nodded.

"Your name Scott Mann?" grandfather flat out said—all the time pretendin' he's askin'.

"Scott J. Mann. Yes sir, I am," he answers proudly.
“I’m wonderin’ what this old man wants with us—when it hits me! Of course! He’s probably that little hostess’s father—and we thinkin’ all the while he was out to do her wrong! He’ll probably give ol’ Studs a lecture about treatin’ his daughter with more respect—on account of they both work together they might as well get along—and then they’ll shake hands and everybody’ll be all right. I might even have to throw in a small apology. The old man hasn’t said a word yet, he’s sittin’ straight as can be, with his legs crossed. Ol’ Studs is even lookin’ a little hot under the collar. I’m beginnin’ to enjoy myself. I can feel the old man lookin’ through me so I give him my sweetest, “little of me” smile. He don’t smile. He must be real offended. Maybe that little hostess let her tongue run off with her. Maybe she thought she should add in a couple things didn’t happen—just to make her story sound good. I don’t know. Maybe it’s somethin’ else.

He’s still sittin’ there lookin’ colder than an iceberg, when another old man in a dark suit joins him. Only this guy talks.

“What’s goin’ on here?”

The grandfather opens his mouth to answer when he notices the man is lookin’ at Studs. Studs don’t look too good by now. He’s sittin’ at his napkin as if he never saw anythin’ more interes’tin’ in his whole, entire life. The hostess is standin’ in the corner twitchin’ and flitterin’ around like a moth.

“Who are you?” the grandfather mumbles. I sure wouldn’t want to run into him in a dark alley.

“I’m the manager here. Is anything wrong Scott?”

Next time I look up, there’s a whole flock of waiters and waitresses flitterin’ about. Any minute now, I expect them to start flappin’ their arms and fly right out the restaurant—they’re makin’ such a clamor. The grandfather answers for Studs again.

“Well, then I think you’ll be interested in hearing about this.” He says it like he’s Walter Cronkite. I’m beginnin’ to doubt that this has anythin’ to do at all with the hostess. Even back home—when Mary Fletcher’s pa caught her in the haystack with Freddie Lessin—he didn’t make such a big production about it. He just told him to get on home, and if he ever caught him around his daughter again—he’d take the shotgun to him. But that was only talk.

Then this guy opens his mouth and starts to spill. I would never have guessed he had it in him from the Indian-like way he was talkin’ before. When he talked he sounded like he was garglin’. He starts by tellin’ us about some burglary in a “Country Inn” last night. Then he goes on to mention that the suspect drives a black sportscar. My brain’s rollin’ around my head. I can’t believe what I’m hearin’! Then he asks Scott J. Mann where he was last night.

“I’m not sure.” He sounds like he’s chokin’. He even looks a little like he’s chokin’. His face is all red and he looks like a firecracker that’s about to pop.

“What do you mean you’re not sure?” the grandfather asks, soundin’ like an FBI agent.

“Well—I think I was in Glen Echo, but I’m not sure.” His voice is thick and heavy, like molasses.

That’s all he says. He doesn’t even say if he did it or not, or make no excuses. He just sits there with his nose twitchin’ like a rabbit and his knee knockin’ against mine under the table. Never mind that what he just said don’t make no sense.

I check out the clothes he’s wearin’. He changed in the car before we got out. He’s got dark blue pants, a white button-down shirt the buttons all lined up like stripes, and shiny black shoes. Still, he don’t look like no millionaire to me.

The manager looks like he’s gonna topple over. He looks over at Scott, then to the grandfather and says, “Scott’s been my dishwasher for over eight months now. He’s a fine boy—a little wild—but here’s no way in the world he would ever do what you’ve just insinuated. Where is your proof?”

Dishwasher!!! I feel my insides fall apart. It feels like a great big explosion inside! I can’t hardly stand to look at him! He must’ve had some good laughs over that one! Havin’ me think he was a Captain—and me all the while so impressed! Fellow’s like him shouldn’t be allowed to roam the streets. He belongs behind bars for the rest of his dishwashin’ life!

“I got a witness that’ll swear he saw this here young man pull into the Country Inn with a black Firebird last night. How’s that for proof?”

Scott flinched at this and turned white as a ghost. I sneaked a peek at him out of my left eye. I wasn’t gonna give him no sympathy neither! But when I took a good look at him he looked like a man that’s just been sentenced to hang. And he was! At least in my book. He had this look my Cocker Spaniel, Charlie, gets after a ball we’ve been throwin’ around bounces off his forehead. He just sits there with his head hangin’ down and his eyes lookin’ up at you, like two giant frisbees. The candlelight flickered over his face, he looked like he was gonna melt like hot wax. The manager frowned and bit his lip.

“I don’t know what this is all about—but I know one thing for sure. I haven’t robbed anyone—ever.” He had picked his head up and his voice was deep and low. He looked up at the candlelight and said, “Darin’ me to question him. I didn’t know what to think. I was so confused.

Everybody was quiet. All around us was the clangin’ of dishes and silverware and the titterin’ of the waiters in the corner, but I could barely hear them. I could see them—so I knew they were talkin’ and laughin’, but I couldn’t piecethe sounds to the picture. It was like being suspended in slow motion. A couple people were sittin’ over at us. You’d have thought we were all sittin’ around without a stitch on—the way the people at the table next door were crankin’ and strainin’ their necks. I thought one lady with pointed purple shoes was gonna slide right off her chair and land on my lap. She wore tight black pants—the kind which bulge at the side because the zipper’s pulled so tight, and some sort of furry white sweater with puffed shoulders that made her look like a ball of cotton. I made it known I didn’t like her sittin’ over here one bit—and
her eyes darted away mighty quick, as if she had been caught eatin' the last piece of pie but didn't want me to know it.

"Can you prove you had nothing to do with last night's burglary," the detective said. He didn't look nothin' like a grandpa anymore. Scott turned his head towards me, not sayin' nothin' but lookin' real hard into my eyes. His eyes were like a magnet, they pulled mine to his and held them. It was all up to me. He was with me all night except, of course, for those forty or so minutes. That can't be long enough for a burglary. But then again, forty minutes ain't short either. I couldn't decide. Should I save his neck and lie? Say he was with me the entire time? I'd be doomed for a life in hell—as Granny's always warnin' me when I do somethin' she don't approve of. But I can't be sure he ain't tellin' the truth. Not to brag or anythin'—but I'm usually a pretty good judge of character. And like I said before, I don't like to make mistakes. Maybe he lied to me about his job—but that's a white lie—hell—I do that all the time! I can almost understand why he felt he had to lie to me. All eyes are on me—I'm the center of attention. Five minutes ago none of them acted like I even existed—now—all of a sudden I'm a star! If I don't say anythin' now—nobody's gonna listen to a word I have to say.

"I was with him," I almost yell. This is very effective. They're all waitin' for me to say more. So I do.

"We spent the night together," Silence. I felt I had to go on.

"He never moved from my side. I can almost feel Scott let out a deep sigh. His fists unclench. The manager smiles gratefully at me. I'm beginnin' to realize he's more interested in the restaurant's reputation than in his dishwasher.

"And you're willing to testify to this?"

"Yes." The old detective shakes his round nose into my face and starts blurtin' out questions—all the while takin' down everythin' I say in a little black notebook. Name! Address! Occupation? How do I know the suspect?

The little bird of a hostess tiptoes real softly over to him and whispers somethin' in his ear. She certainly does like to whisper. Then she bites her lip and gives Scott a weak smile, before runnin' away. The detective gets up and follows her.

"My partner's on the phone—be back."

It felt like he was gone about a month. No one looked at each other or said anythin'. Finally he came back. Only this time—he was lookin' at me.

"You did actually spend the night with Mr. Mann, didn't you?"

"Yes," I told him again.

He sat down and turned to a new page in his notebook. We were all lookin' at him as if he was God come down from the mountain to give us a new set of commands. He turned slowly and looked at each one of us straight in the eye. Then he looked at the manager with the receding hairline and said, "Mr. Baron, you have nothing to worry about. Your boy's been let off the hook for the burglary."

Then he got up a little red and said that the lady had called in to report that she'd found her gold box in the trunk of her car. Right away everybody breaks into a smile except for the old man. He just sat there like a stone. I was ashamed to even think that I thought Scott was a burglar. I felt like huggin' him, he winked at me and lifted his glass of wine.

"Here's to you," he mouthed. The detective just sat there lookin' at me as if I was on display at a carnival.

"Gwendy! Lee Winfred," he said. "Do you know that you have been declared a missing person as of two o'clock this afternoon?" He waited. "You were last seen driving off in a black, rented firebird with a young man." And he looked at Scott. Rented? He didn't own it?

Then everythin' happened too fast. I reached over for my wine, but somehow it landed all over Scott. I felt like I was in some sort of dreamland with all the dishes and clear glasses and fancy waiters in their black pants and white shirts slowly wavin' in and out with the flickerin' of the candle. His hand slid around the base of the glass and sent it foamin' over slowly—like a calm wave, explodin' along he knuckles of his hand, and waterfallin' into his shirt sleeve.

The heavy detective pushed his chair out and said, "I think I'll just be on my way—if you'll be so kind as to call the young lady's parents."

A man in a gray overcoat with a mustache walked over and nodded the to old man. Scott was real attentive. He jumped up and volunteered to call my family. I sat quietly in my chair—wisin' by now that I was invisible. Out of habit, I reached up to my ear. I played with my ear for a good minute before I realized somethin' was wrong. My gold stud was missin'! Gone—just like that! One second it was there and the next...I bit my lip so I wouldn't cry. Right when I was gonna start lookin' for it the detective rumbles.

"I'm afraid you're not going anywhere, son" and pushes him back down in his chair. Scott had this odd look on his face—like any minute the stars were gonna fall out of the sky and land on him. Before he could open his mouth, the man with the mustache stands over him and says, "I'm afraid you're staying. The young lady in question is a minor. You're under arrest—statutory rape."

Scott's mouth dropped into an "O." He looked like he'd been struck dumb by a shootin' star. His hands fell open, the way roses unfold when they blossom, and lay, limp, at his sides. I couldn't lift my head to look at him anymore. His leg started tremblin' again next to mine. The man read him his rights. When I looked up they were gone.

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**a short thing for Lear**

by Martin Cunningham

When I told you I was broke and confused
You said not to worry,
A kingdom, after all, is not everything.

Naked, on my knees, I bawled betrayal.
When it comes to kings, you said,
There is a thin line between betrayal and survival.

Ambition rarely enters the picture, you warned,
Singing: We are both cold and hungry here,
and the rain it raineth every day.