

AUGUST

BONNIE MCCARTHY opened a drawer of her dressing table and removed the hat her sister-in-law had sent from New York. It was a summer hat of soft, silken material in a pretty shade of blue—the half-melon hat her sister-in-law had begun to wear at fifteen and had gone on wearing, in various colors and textures, until her hair was gray. This particular melon was designed for travel. It could be folded until it took no more place in a suitcase than a closed fan. Bonnie pushed her lips forward in a pout. She held the hat between thumb and forefinger, considering it. She pulled it on her head, tugging with both hands. The frown, the pout, the obstinate gestures were those of a child. It was a deliberate performance, and new; after years of struggling to remain adult in a grown-up world, she had found it unrewarding, and, in her private moments, allowed herself the blissful luxury of being someone else.

The hat was a failure. Framed by the chaste blue brim, she seemed slightly demented, a college girl aged overnight. After a long look in the triple mirror, Bonnie said aloud, "This just isn't a normal hat." She dropped it on the table, among the framed pictures and the pots of cream. None of the clothes from America seemed normal to her now, because they no longer came from a known place. She had left her country between the end of the Second World War and the onslaught of the New Look (this is how history was fixed in her memory), and, although she had been back for visits, the American scene in her mind's eye was populated with girls in short skirts and broad-shouldered coats. Her recollection of such details was faultless, but she could not have said under which President peace had been signed. Bonnie's New York, the real New York, was a distant, gleaming city in a lost decade. A lost Bonnie existed there, pretty and pert, outrageously admired. This was the Bonnie she sought to duplicate every time she looked in the glass—Bonnie tender-eyed, blurry with the sun of a perished afternoon; Bonnie in her wedding dress, authentically innocent, with a wreath of miniature roses straight across her brow. With time—she was at this moment fifty-two—a second, super-Bonnie had emerged. Super-Bonnie was a classic middle-aged charmer. She might have been out of Kipling—a kind of American

Mrs. Hauksbee, witty and thin, with those great rolling violet-blue eyes. When she was feeling liverish or had had a bad night, she knew this was off the mark, and that she had stopped being tender Bonnie without achieving the safety of Mrs. Hauksbee. Then she would think of the woman she could have been, if her life hadn't been destroyed; and if she went on thinking about it too much, she gave up and consoled herself by playing at being a little girl.

When Bonnie was still under forty, her husband had caught her out in a surpassingly silly affair—she had not in the least loved the lover—and had divorced her, with the result that her conception of herself was fragmented, unreconciled. There was Bonnie, sweet-faced, with miniature roses; wicked Mrs. Hauksbee, the stormy petrel of a regimental outpost; and, something near the truth, a lost, fallow, frightened Bonnie wandering from city to city in Europe, clutching her daughter by the hand. The dressing table was littered with these Bonnies, and with pictures of Florence, her daughter. There was Flor as a baby, holding a ball in starfish hands; Flor on her pony; and Flor in Venice, squinting and bored. To one side, isolated, in curious juxtaposition, were two small likenesses. One was a tinted image of St. Theresa of the Child Jesus. (Bonnie had no taste for obscure martyrs. The Little Flower, good enough for most Catholics, was good enough for her.) The Saint had little function in Bonnie's life, except to act as a timid anchor to Bonnie's ballooning notion of the infinite. The second picture was of Bob Harris, Bonnie's son-in-law. It had been taken on the beach at Cannes, two summers before. He wore tartan bathing trunks, and had on and about his person the equipment for underwater fishing—flippers, spear, goggles, breathing tube—and seemed to be a monster of a sort.

When she had done with the hat, Bonnie licked her forefingers and ran them along her eyebrows. She pulled her eyebrows apart and counted to twenty, but when she released the skin, the line between her eyes returned. "La première ride," she said sentimentally. She put on a wry, ironic look: Mrs. Hauksbee conceding the passage of time. When she left the dressing table and crossed the room, she continued to wear the look, although she was already thinking about something else. She sat down at a

writing table very like the dressing table she had just abandoned. Both were what her son-in-law called "important pieces." Both had green marble tops, bandy legs, drawers like bosoms, and brass fittings, and were kin to the stranded objects, garnished with dying flowers in a vase, that fill the windows of antique shops on the Left Bank of the Seine.

Bonnie was easily wounded, but she had sharp, malicious instincts where other people were concerned. She seldom struck openly, fearing the direct return blow. The petty disorder of her dressing table, with its cheap clutter of bottles and pictures, was an oblique stab at Bob Harris, whose apartment this was, and who, as he had once confided to Bonnie, liked things nice.

She pulled toward her a sheet of white paper with her address in Paris printed across the top, and wrote the date, which was the fifteenth of July. She began: "My darling Polly and Stu—First about the hat. You sweethearts! I wore it today for the first time as it really hasn't been summer until now. I was so proud to say this is from my brother and his wife from New York. Well darlings I am sorry about George. I must say I never did hear of anybody ever getting the whooping cough at his age but I can quite see you couldn't let him come over to Paris in that condition in June. Two years since we have seen that boy. Flor asks about him every day. You know those two were so crazy about each other when they were kids, it's a shame Flor was seven years older instead of the other way around. At least we would all be still the same family and would know who was marrying who. Well, nuff said."

So far, this letter was nearly illegible. She joined the last letter of each word onto the start of the next. All the vowels, as well as the letters "n," "m," and "w," resembled "u"s. There were strings of letters that might as well have been "nununu." Now her writing became elegant and clear, like the voice of someone trying on a new accent: "The thing with him coming over in August is this, that he would have to be alone with Florence. Bob Harris's father is coming over here this year, and Bob Harris is going with him to the Beaujolais country and the Champagne country and I don't know what all countries for their business, and they will be in these countries all of August. Now I have been invited to stay with a dear friend in Deauville for the entire month. Now as you know Flor is doing





"Let's face it. They're all the picture of health!"

this business with psychiatrist and she REFUSES to leave Paris. It wouldn't be any fun for Georgie because Flor never goes out and wouldn't know where to go even if she did. It seems to me Georgie should go to England first, because he wants to go there anyway, and he should come here around the end of August when I will be back, and Bob will be back, and we can take Georgie around. Just as you like, dears, but this does seem best."

Bonnie was in the habit of slipping little pieces of paper inside her letters to her sister-in-law. These scraps, about the size of a calling card, bore a minutely scrawled message that was what she really wanted to say, and why she was bothering to write a letter at all. She cut a small oblong out of a sheet of paper and wrote in tiny letters: "Polly, Flor is getting so queer, I don't know her any more. I'm afraid to leave her alone in August, but she pulls such tantrums if I say I'll stay that I'm giving in. Don't let Georgie come, he'd only be upset. She's at this

doctor's place now, and *I don't even like the doctor.*"

IT was three o'clock in the afternoon. Florence was walking with cautious steps along the Boulevard des Capucines when the sidewalk came up before her. It was like an earthquake, except that she knew there were no earthquakes here. It was like being drunk, except that she never drank any more. It was a soundless upheaval, and it had happened before. No one noticed the disturbance, or the fact that she had abruptly come to a halt. It was possible that she had become invisible. It would not have astonished her at all. Indeed, a fear that this might come about had caused her to buy, that summer, wide-skirted dresses in brilliant tones that (Bonnie said) made her look like a fortune-teller in a restaurant. All very well for Bonnie, who could be sure that she existed in black, who did not have to steal glimpses of herself in shopwindows, an existence asserted in coral and red.

At this hour, at this time of year, the crowd around the Café de la Paix was American. It was a crowd as apart from Flor as if an invasion of strangers speaking Siamese had entered the city. But they were not Siamese; they were her own people, and they spoke the language she knew best, with the words she had been taught to use when, long ago, she had seen shapes and felt desires that had to be given names.

"... upon the beached verge of the salt flood..."

She did not say this. Her lips did not move, but she had the ringing impression of a faultless echo, as if the words had come to her in her own voice. They were words out of the old days, when she could still read and relate every sentence to the sentence it followed. A vision, clear as a mirror, of a narrowing shore, an encroaching sea was all that was left. It was all that remained of her reading, the great warehouse of stored phrases, the plugged casks filled with liquid words—a narrowing shore, a moving sea; that was all. And yet how



"Don't you ever want to better yourself?"

she had read! She had read in hotel rooms, sprawled on the bed—drugged, drowned—while on the other side of the dark window rain fell on foreign streets. She had read on buses and on trains and in the waiting rooms of doctors and dressmakers, waiting for Bonnie. She had read with her husband across from her at the table and beside her in bed. (She had been reading a book, in a café, alone, the first time he had spoken to her. He had never forgotten it.) She had read through her girlhood; and even love hadn't replaced the reading, only at times.

If Bonnie had been able to give some form to her own untidy life, if she had not uprooted Flor and brought her over here to live—one majestically wrong decision among a hundred indecisions—Flor would not, at this moment, have feared the movement of the pavement under her feet and watched herself in shopwindows to make sure she was still there. She would not have imagined life as a brightly lighted stage with herself looking on. She would have depended less on words; she would have belonged to life. She told an imagined Bonnie, "It was always your fault. I might have been a person, but you made me a foreigner. It was always the same, even back home. I was the only Catholic girl at Miss Downland's. That was being foreign."

"What about the Catholic girls from Mexico?" said Bonnie, from among the

crowd before the newspaper kiosk where Flor had paused to consult, blankly, the front page of the *Times*.

Trust Bonnie to put in a red herring like the Mexican girls at school. It didn't merit a reply. Still, the discovery that it had always been the same was worth noting. It was another clearing in the thicket that was Dr. Linnetti's favorite image; another path cleared, another fence down, light let through. She groped in her purse for the green notebook in which she recorded these discoveries, and sat down on a vacant chair outside the café.

The table at which she had put herself was drawn up to its neighbor so that a party of four tourists could have plenty of room for their drinks, parcels, and pots of tea. One of the four had even pulled over an extra chair for her aching feet. Florence put her notebook on the edge of the table, pushing an ash-tray to one side. The vertigo she had felt on the street was receding. In her private language she called it "the little fox going to sleep." What was the good of an expression like Dr. Linnetti's "vertigo experienced in the presence of straight lines and related objects"? The effort of lines to change their form (the heaving pavement), the nausea created by the sight of a double row of houses meeting at the horizon point, the work of the little fox had begun being a torment when she was twelve, and had come to live abroad. In those days,

Bonnie had put it down to faulty eyesight, via a troubled liver, and had proscribed whipped cream. Now that it was too late, Florence remembered and recognized the initial siege—the weakening of her forces so that the invader could take possession. Accepting this, she had stopped believing in Dr. Linnetti's trees, clearings, and pools of light. She was beset, held. Nothing could help her but sleep and the dreams experienced in the gray terrain between oblivion and life—the country of gray hills and houses, from which she was suddenly lifted and borne away. Coming into this landscape was the most difficult of all, for they were opposed to her reaching it—the doctor, her mother, her

husband. Circumstances were needed, and they were coming soon. In two weeks it would be August, and she would be left alone. Between now and August was a delay filled with perils—her mother hesitating and quibbling, her husband trying to speak. (He no longer attempted to make love. He seemed to have a tenacious faith that one day Dr. Linnetti was going to return to him a new Flor, strangely matured and more exciting than ever.) This period traversed, she saw herself in the heavy silence of August. She saw her image in her own bed in the silence of an August afternoon. By the dimming of light in the chinks of the shutters she would know when it was night; and, already grateful for this boon, she would think, Now it is all right if I sleep.

"Some people just don't care."

"Ask her what she wants to drink."

"Maybe she's after you, Ed Broadfoot, ha-ha."

The four people on whom Flor had intruded thought she was French—foreign, at any rate; not American. She looked away from the notebook, in which she had not yet started to write, and she said, "I understand every word." A waiter stood over her. "Madame désire?" he said insultingly. In terror she scrawled, "Mex. girls wouldn't take baths," before she got up and fled—wholly visible—into the dark café. Inside, she was careful to

find a place alone. She was the picture of prudence now, watching the movements of her hands, the direction of her feet. She sat on the plush banquette with such exaggerated care that she had a sudden, lucid image of how silly she must seem, and this made her want to laugh. She spread the notebook flat and began to write the letter to Dr. Linnetti, using a cheap ball-point pen bought expressly for this. The letter was long, and changed frequently in tone—now curt and businesslike, when she gave financial reasons for ending their interviews, now timid and cajoling, so that Dr. Linnetti wouldn't be cross. Sometimes the letter was almost affectionate, for there were moments when she forgot Dr. Linnetti was a woman and was ready to pardon her; but then she remembered that this cheat was from a known tribe, subjected to the same indignities, the same aches and pains, practicing the same essential deceptions. And here was this impostor presuming to help! Dr. Linnetti, charming as a hippopotamus, elegant as the wife of a Soviet civil servant, emotional as a snail, intelligent—Ah, there she has us, thought Flor. We shall never know. There are no clues.

"What help can you give me?" she wrote. "I have often been disgusted by the smell of your dresses and your rotten teeth. If in six months you have not been able to take your dresses to be cleaned, or yourself to a dentist, how can you help me? Can you convince me that I'm not going to be hit by a car when I step off the curb? Can you convince me that the sidewalk is a safe place to be? Let me put it another way," wrote Flor haughtily. Her face wore a distinctly haughty look. "Is your life so perfect? Is your husband happy? Are your children fond of you and well-behaved? Are you so happy . . ." She did not know how to finish, and started again: "Are you anything to me? When you go home to your husband and children do you wonder about me? Are we friends? Then why bother about me at all?" She had come to the last page in the notebook. She tore the pages containing the letter out, and posted the letter from the mail desk in the café. She dropped the instrument of separation—the lethal pen—on the floor and kicked it out of sight. It was still too early to go home. They would guess she had missed her

hour. There was nothing to do but walk around the three sides of the familiar triangle—Boulevard des Capucines, Rue Scribe, Rue Auber, the home of the homeless—until it was time to summon a taxi and be taken away.

FLORENCE's husband left his office early. The movement of Paris was running down. The avenues were white and dusty, full of blowing flags and papers and torn posters, and under traffic signals there were busily aimless people, sore-footed, dressed for warm weather, trying to decide whether or not to cross that particular street; wondering whether Paris would be better once the street was crossed. The city's minute hand had begun to lag. In August it would stop. Bob Harris loved Paris—but then, he loved anywhere. He had never been homesick in his life. He carried his birthright with him. He pushed into the cool of the courtyard of the ancient apartment house in which he lived (the last

house in the world where a child played Czerny exercises on a summer's afternoon); waved to the concierge in her aquarium parlor; ascended in the perilous elevator, which had swinging doors, like a saloon; and let himself into the flat. "Let himself into" is too mild. He entered as he had once broken into Flor's and Bonnie's life. He was—and proud of it—a New York boy, all in summer tans today—like a *café liégeois*, Bonnie had said at breakfast, but out of his hearing, of course. She was no fool. The sprawling old-fashioned Parisian apartment, the polished bellpull (a ring in a lion's mouth), the heavy doors and creamy, lofty ceilings appealed to his idea of what Europe ought to be. The child's faltering piano notes, which followed him until he closed the door on them, belonged to the décor. He experienced a transient feeling of past and present fused—a second-hand, threadbare inkling of a world haunted by the belief that the best was outside one's

scope or still to come. These perceptions, which came only when he was alone, when creaking or mournful or ghostly sounds emerged from the stairs and the elevator shaft and formed a single substance with the walls, curtains, and gray light from the court, he knew were only the lingering vapors of adolescent nostalgia—that fruitless, formless yearning for God knows what. It was not an ambiance of mind he pursued. His office, which was off the Champs-Élysées, in a wedding-cake-shaped building of the thirties, was dauntingly new. The people he met in the course of business were sharp with figures, though apt to assume a monkish air of dedication because they were dealing in wine instead of, say, paper bags. There was nothing monkish about Bob; he knew about wine—that is, he knew about markets for wine; and he knew about money, too.

Nothing is more reassuring to a European than the national who fits his national character; the waspish Frenchman, the jolly Hollander, the blunted Swiss, the sly Rumanian—each of these paper dolls can find a niche. Bob Harris corresponded, superficially, to the French pattern for an American male—"un grand gosse," a big kid—and so he got on famously. He was the last person in the world to pose a problem. He was chatty, and cheer-



ful, and he didn't much care what people did or what they were like so long as they were good-natured, too. He frequented the red-interior bars of the Eighth Arrondissement with cheerful friends—more or less Americans trying to raise money so as to start a newspaper in Cannes or Nice, and apple-bosomed starlets with pinky-silver hair. Everyone wanted something from him, and everyone liked him very much. He had a seal's sleek head and soft eyes, and a circus seal's air of jauntily seeking applause. The more he was liked, and the more he was exploited, the more he was himself. It was only when he entered his darkened bedroom that he had to improvise an artificial way of thinking and behaving.

His wife's new habit of lying with the curtains drawn on the brightest days was more than a vague worry; it seemed to him wicked. If ever he had given a thought to the nature of sin, it would have taken that form—the shutting out of light. Flor had stopped being cheerful; that was the very least you could say. Her sleeping was a longer journey each time, over a greater distance. He did not know how to bring her back, or even if he wanted to now. He had loved her. An inherent taste for exaggeration led him to believe he had worshipped her. She might have evaded him along another route—in drinking, or a crank religion, or playing bridge; it would have been the same betrayal. He was the only person she had trusted. The only journey she could make, in whatever direction, was away from him. Feeling came to him in blocks, compact. When he held on to one emotion, there was no place for another. He had loved Flor. She had left him behind. It had happened quickly. She hadn't cried warning. He accepted what they told him—that Flor was sick and would get over it—but he could not escape the feeling that her flight was deliberate and that she could stop and turn back if she tried.

He might have profited by her absence now to go through her drawers, searching for drugs or diaries or letters—something that would indicate the reasons for change. But he touched nothing that was not his own in the silent room. Nothing remained of the person he had once seen at the far table of the dark café in Cannes, elbows on table, reading a book. She had looked up and, before becoming aware that a man was watching her, let him see on her drowned face everything he was prepared to pursue—passion, discipline, darkness. The secrets had been given up to Dr. Linnetti—"A sow in a Mother

THE ROAD BACK

The car is heavy with children
tugged back from summer,
swept out of their laughing beach,
swept out while a persistent rumor
tells them nothing ends.
Today, we fret and pull
on wheels, ignore our regular loss
of time, count cows and others,
while the sun moves over
like an old albatross
we must not count or kill.

There is no word for time.
Today, we will not think
to number another summer
or watch its white bird into the ground.
Today, all cars,
all fathers, all mothers, all
children and lovers will
have to forget
about that thing in the sky
going around
like a persistent rumor
that will get us yet.

—ANNE SEXTON

Hubbard," said Bonnie, who had met the lady. He felt obscurely cheated; more, the secrets now involved him as well. He would never pardon the intimacy exposed. Even her physical self had been transformed. He had prized her beauty. It had made her an object as cherished as anything he might buy. In museums he had come upon paintings of women, the luminous women of the Impressionists, in which some detail reminded him of Flor—the thick hair, the skin, the glance slipping away—and this had increased his sense of possession and love. She had destroyed this beauty, joyfully, willfully, as if to force him to value her on other terms. The wreckage was futile, a vandalism without cause. He could never understand, and he was not sure that he ought to try.

His mother-in-law was in the drawing room, poised for discovery. She

had heard him come in, and, while he was having a shower and changing his clothes, composed her personal tableau. The afternoon light diffused through the thin curtains was just so. Bonnie was combed, made up, corseted, prepared for a thousand eyes. Her dress fit without a wrinkle. She was ready to project her presence and create a mood with one intelligent phrase. She had been practicing having colored voices—thinking blue, violet, green, depending on the occasion. Her hands were apart, hovering over a bowl of asters—a bit of stage business she had just thought up.

If Bonnie had not been the mother of Flor, and guilty of a hundred assaults on his generosity and pride, he might, he realized, have liked her. She was ludicrous, touching, aware she was putting on an act. But a natural relationship between them was hopeless. Too much had been hinted and said. She had wounded him too deeply. He had probably wounded her. She greeted the young man as if his being in his own apartment were a source of gay surprise, and he responded with his usual unblinking reverence, as if he were Chinese and she a revered but long-perished ancestor. At the same time, because she was such a silly woman, and because she was putting on an act, he could not stop grinning all over his face.

The effect of discovery was ruined since he wouldn't play the game with her. Bonnie had dressed and smiled and spoken in vain. Even the perfect light-





"He's a great one for delegating responsibility."

ing was a lost effect; the sun might just as well set now, as far as Bonnie was concerned. She was only trying to look attractive and create a civilized, attractive atmosphere for them all, but nobody helped. He saw that she was once more offended, and was sorry. He offered her a drink, which she refused, explaining in a hurt voice that she was waiting for tea.

"Where's Flor?"

"You know," said Bonnie. On the merits of Dr. Linnetti they were in complete accord.

He sat down and opened the newspaper he had brought home. Bonnie gave a final poke at the flowers and sat down, too, not so far away that it looked foolish but leaving a distance so that he need not imagine for one second she expected him to *talk*. He looked at his paper, and Bonnie thought her thoughts and waited for tea. She was nearly contented. It was a climate of mutual acceptance that had about it a sort of coziness; they might have been putting up

with each other for years. The room seemed full of inherited furniture no one knew how to get rid of, yet almost nothing in the room was theirs; they had taken the apartment as it was. They were trailing baggage out of a fabricated past. The furnishings had probably appealed to Bob's need for a kind of buttery comfort, and the colors and textures reflected Bonnie's slightly lady taste, which ran to shot silk, pearly porcelain, and peacock green. Afloat on polished tables were the objects she had picked up on her travels—bibelots in silver and glass. There was a television set prudishly hidden away in a lacquered cabinet, and on the walls were the paintings Bob had collected. It was not a perfect room, but, as Bonnie often told her sister-in-law in her letters, it could have been so much worse. There was nothing in it of Flor.

WHEN Flor came in, a few minutes after this, there was someone with her—a tall, round-faced young woman

with blond hair, whose dress, voice, speech, and manner were so of a piece that she remained long afterward in Bob's memory as "the American;" as though being American were exceptional or unique. Flor hung back. The visitor advanced into the room and smiled at them. "I'm Doris Fischer. I live down below. It's marvellous to find other Americans here."

"We met on the stairs," said Flor seriously.

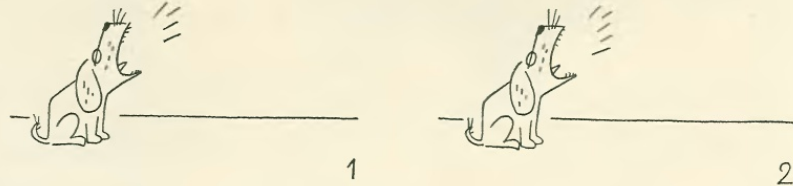
"Met on the stairs, Flor? Met on the stairs?" Bonnie sounded fussed and overcontained, as if she might scream. Flor never spoke to strangers and, since spring, had given up even her closest friends. The two young women seemed about to reveal something. For an instant Bonnie had the crazy idea that one of the two had been involved in a fatal accident and that the other was about to describe it. That was how you became, living with Flor. Impossible, illogical pictures leaped upward in the mind and remained fixed, shining with more bril-

liance and clarity than the obvious facts. Later, Bonnie realized that this expectation of disaster was traceable to a quality in the newcomer. Doris Fischer, so assertive, so cheerfully sane, often took on the moody gestures of an Irish actress about to disclose that her father was a drunkard, her brother an anarchist, her mother a saint, and so on. It gave a false start to her presence; any portentousness was usually due to absent-mindedness or social unease, although that could be grave enough.

"We were both down there waiting for the elevator," said Doris in her friendly, normal way. "It was stuck someplace. You know how it never works in this building." They had started to climb the stairs together, and she had spoken to Flor. That was all. It was quite ordinary, really.

In Flor's mind, this meeting was extraordinary in the full sense of the word. That any one should accost and speak to her assumed the proportions of fatality. She had been pinpointed, sought out, approached. In her amazement she grasped something that was not far wrong: she had been observed. Doris Fischer had been watching the comings and goings of these people for days, and had obtained from the concierge the fact that they were American. Thoughts of simply presenting herself at their door had occurred and been rejected—wisely, too, for Bonnie would not have tolerated that. This passive spider role was contrary to Doris's nature. She was observing when she wanted to be involved, and keeping still when everything compelled her to cry "Accept me!" She was a compatriot and lonely, and the others might take her at that value, but Flor's perspective was not wholly askew. Doris was really extraordinary and like a card suddenly turned out of the pack: "Take care of a fair-haired woman. She attaches herself like a limpet to the married rock." She would want them all, and all their secrets. She would fill the idleness of her days with their affairs. She would disgorge secrets of her own, and the net would be woven, and tight, and over their heads.

Everyone remained standing. The fairly mundane social occasion—the person who lived downstairs coming to call—was an event. Doris Fischer saw the husband and the mother as standing forms against the hot summer light. Her eyes were dazzled by the color in the



room. The chandelier threw spectrums over peacock walls; blue silk curtains belled and collapsed. Doris thought the room itself perfectly terrible. Her own taste rotated on the blond-wood exports from sanitary Sweden, on wrought iron in its several forms, on the creeping green plants that prosper in centrally heated rooms but die in the sun. Nothing in her background or her experience could make her respond to the cherished object or the depth of dark, polished wood. She saw there were modern paintings on the walls and was relieved, for she disliked the past. Radiating confidence now, she stepped farther inside, pointed at the wall opposite, and accused something hanging there.

"It's very interesting," she said in an agreeable but slightly aggressive voice. "What is it? I mean, who's it by?"

"It is by an Australian who is not yet recognized in his own country," said Bob. He often spoke in this formal manner, never slurring words, particularly when he was meeting someone new. He considered Doris's plain brown-and-white shoes, her plain shirtwaist dress of striped blue cotton, her short, fluffy hair. He was anything but aggressive. He smiled.

They all turned to the painting. Bonnie looked at a bright patch on the bright wall, and Doris at something a child of six might have done as well. Flor saw in the forms exploding with nothing to hold them together absolute proof that the universe was disintegrating and that it was vain and foolish to cry for help. Bob looked at a rising investment that at the same time gave him aesthetic pleasure; that was the way to wrap up life—to get the best of everything. Quite simply, he told the price he had paid for

the painting last year, and the price it would fetch now that the artist was becoming known; not boasting, but showing that a taste for beauty paid—something like that.

Distress on the fringe of horror covered the faces of the three women like a glaze, endowing them with a sudden superficial resemblance. Florence's horror was habitual; it was almost her waking look. Bonnie suffered acutely at her son-in-law's trampling of taste. Doris, the most earnest, thought of how many children in vague teeming, starving places could have been nourished with that sum of money.

Doris stayed to tea. They kept her for dinner. She came from Pennsylvania but had lived in New York. She knew no one Bonnie knew, and Bob thought it typically wicked of his mother-in-law to have asked. They were all in a strange land and out of context. Divisions could be recognized; they needn't be stressed. Doris said that her husband was a cameraman. Sometimes she said "cameraman," sometimes "film technician," sometimes "special consultant." He was in Rome on a job, and would be there all summer. Doris had decided to stay in Paris and get to know the place; when Frank was working, she only got in his way. She was imprecise about the Roman job. A thought hovered like an insect in the room: She's lying. Bonnie thought, He's gone off with a girl. Bob thought, They're broke. He's down there looking for work. . . . Doris was clumsy and evasive, she was without charm or fantasy or style, but they insisted she stay. Flor could do with an American friend.

In honor of the meal, Doris went home, and returned wearing some sort



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4



TEN SMITS

of finery. She looked like a social worker going to the movies with a girl friend, Bonnie thought. Unjust appraisal always made her kind; she all but took Doris in her arms. Doris was surprised at the meal, which was scanty and dull. She could not decide if these well-to-do people were ascetic or plain stingy. Flor ate next to nothing. Doris looked at her over the table and saw a bodiless face between lighted candles—a thin face and thick, lustreless hair. They had lighted the candles without drawing the curtains, and, as the summer night had not yet descended, the room was neither dark nor light, which, for some reason, Doris found disturbing. The dining room was Chinese; throughout the meal she was glared at by monsters. It was enough to put anybody off. Bonnie chattered and nervously rattled the little bell before her. Bob was all indifference and charm. He couldn't stop charming people; it was a reflex. But it didn't mean much, and Doris left him cold. She sensed this, and wished she could make him pay. She would have been distant and mysterious, but she had already talked too much about herself. She had given it all away first go. They had bantering jokes together, underneath which moved a river of recognition. Bonnie listened to them with a glued smile, and fell into a melancholy state of mind wondering if she were to spend the rest of her life with moral, mental, social, and emotional inferiors. She thought these two were perfectly matched. Actually, they were alike, but not in a way that could draw them together. Neither Bob nor Doris had much feeling for the importance of time. Either of them could have been persuaded that the world began the day he

or she was born. It was not enough on which to base a friendship. In any case, Doris had decided she was chiefly interested in Flor. One day she would ask Flor if Bob really loved her, and if he had any intellectual interests other than painting, and what they talked about when they were alone, and if he was any good in bed. This was the relationship she was accustomed to and sorely missed: warm, womanly, with a rich exchange of marital secrets. She smiled at Flor, and Bonnie intercepted the smile and turned it toward herself.

"Florence is spending August in Paris," Bonnie said with a curved, smiling, coral-colored voice. "True Parisians prefer the city then."

Bob Harris looked at his mother-in-law and was visibly shaken by a desire to laugh. His mother-in-law stopped being Mrs. Hauksbee and glared. It seemed to Doris good-humored enough, though exclusive. She wondered if Flor was pregnant, and if that was why Flor was so quiet.

THAT night, Bonnie got the invitation to Deauville out of the bottom tray of her jewelry case, where she kept letters, medical prescriptions, and the keys to lost and forgotten trunks. She scarcely knew the woman who had sent it. They had met at a party. The signature evoked a fugitive image: thin, dark, sardonic, French. She began saying to herself, "I hardly know Gabrielle, but it was a case of affinity at first sight."

Gabrielle—the Frenchwoman—had rented a villa at Deauville. She was inviting a few people for the month of August, and she stated in her letter what Bonnie's share of the costs would be.

Bonnie was not offended. Possibly she had always wanted this. She sat at her dressing table, in her lace-and-satin slip, and read the letter. She wore horn-rimmed reading glasses, which gave her appearance an unexpected dimension. When she looked up, the mirror reflected her three ways. Her nose was pointed. Underneath her chin hung a slack, soft little pouch. She saw clearly what Gabrielle was and who the other guests would be and that she had been selected to pay. She saw that she was no longer a young woman, and that she depended for nearly everything material on a son-in-law she had opposed and despised. She closed her eyes and put the edge of the letter between her teeth. She emptied her mind, as if emptying a bottle, and waited for inspiration. Inspiration came, as warm as milk, and told her that she had been born a Fairlie, that her husband had ill-used her, that her daughter had made a *mésalliance*, and possessed a heart as impierceable as a nutmeg (whereas Bonnie's heart was a big, floppy cushion, in which her loved ones were forever sticking needles and pins). This daughter now bore the virus of a kind of moral cholera that threatened everyone. Inspiration counselled Bonnie to fly, and told her that her dingy aspirations might save her. She opened her eyes but did not look at herself in the glass, for she no longer knew which Bonnie she expected to see. She said aloud, in an exceedingly silly voice, "Well, everybody deserves a little fun."

Later she said to Flor, "I won't feel so badly about leaving you, now that you've got this nice friend." She made this sound as casual as she could.

Flor gave no sign. She was cunning

as a murderer: "If I seem too pleased, she'll be hurt, she won't go away." She imagined the hall filled with suitcases and someone coming up the stairs to carry them away.

Flor had given as her reason for spending August in Paris that Dr. Linnetti had deemed it essential. Even if she went away, she said, she would have to continue paying for the three weekly appointments. If she left Dr. Linnetti in the lurch, Dr. Linnetti might resent her, and then where would they all be? "Morally, it stinks," said Bob. He threatened to go and see the Doctor, but Flor knew he wouldn't. Bonnie now began talking about Flor's August in Paris quite gaily, as a settled event, which left Bob without an ally. He was perplexed. His father was expected from New York any day now. He could not leave his wife alone in Paris, he could not really take her with him on a long business trip, and he did not want his father to see what Flor, or their marriage, had become. He had depended on Bonnie, whose influence had seldom failed. After a time he understood about Deauville. Bonnie knew that he understood. She remembered the philosophy of self-sacrifice she had preached, and that still moped in a corner of their lives like a poor, molting bird. She would have smothered, if she could, this old projection of herself; but it remained, indestructible as the animal witness in a fairy tale. Bob ignored her now. He seemed to have turned his back. He continued to offer holiday pictures to Flor with accelerated enthusiasm. Spain, Portugal, Portofino, Lausanne, Scotland, gaudy as posters and as unsubstantial, were revealed and whisked away. "I have to stay here," she said. He obtained nothing more.

Because of Bob's nagging, Bonnie became possessed with the fear that Flor might decide not to stay alone after all, and oblige Bonnie to take her to Deauville. This was hardly feasible, seeing how queer Flor had become. She was likely to say and do anything. She had always been a moody girl, with an unpredictable temper, but that was the personality that went with red hair. Then, too, she had been pretty; a pretty girl can get away with a lot. But since spring she had floated out of Bonnie's grasp. She dressed oddly, and looked a wraith. If she did queer things in front of these people at Deauville, Bonnie felt she wouldn't know where to hide with shame. If Flor and Doris Fischer became good friends, Flor might remain more easily in Paris, doing all the sensible things—chatting away to Dr. Lin-

OFF MARBLEHEAD

A woeful silence, following in our wash,
fills the thick, fearful roominess, blanketing
bird noise and ocean splash; thus, always
soundlessly, rounding the point, we go

gliding by dippy, quizzical cormorants.
One black maneuver moving them all at once,
they turn their beaks to windward then, and,
snubbing the gulls on the rocks behind them,

point, black, a gang of needles against the gray
dial sky, as if some knowledge, some certainty
could now be read therefrom. And if we
feel that the meter may melt, those thin necks

droop, numbers vanish from the horizon when
we turn our heads to scribble the reading down
on salty, curled, dried pages, it is
merely our wearied belief, our strained and

ruining grasp of what we assume, that blurs
our eyes and blears the scene that surrounds us: tears
of spray, the long luff's reflex flapping,
crazy with pain, and the clenching sheet,

and, looming up, Great Misery (Named for whose?
When?) Island. Groaning, jangling in irons, crews
of gulls still man a rolling buoy not
marked on our charts. Overhead, the light

(impartial, general, urging of no new course)
spares no approving brightening for the sparse
and sorry gains of one we hold to
now, ever doubting our memory. But

no matter—whether running before the wind
away for home, or beating against the end
of patience, toward its coastline, still the
movement is foolishly close to one of

flight, the thick, oily clouds undissolving, crowds
of sea birds, senseless, shrill, unappeased, no boats
about, and, out to sea, a sickening,
desperate stretch of unending dark.

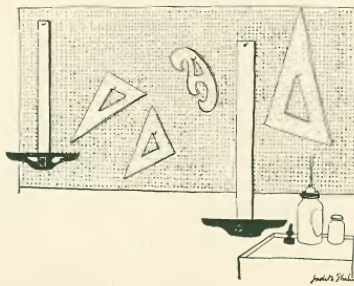
—JOHN HOLLANDER

netti, visiting couturiers with Doris, eating light lunches of omelet and fruit, and so forth. Diet was of great importance in mental equilibrium; you are what you eat. Friendship mattered, said Bonnie, not losing sight of Doris—friendship, rest, good food, relaxing

books. In the autumn, Flor would be a different girl.

Flor listened, and thought, I used to believe she was God.

FIVE days remained. Bonnie was rushed off her feet, and wore an expression of frank despair. She had left essential duties such as hair, nails, massage until the end, and every moment was crowded. Nevertheless, because of the importance of the Flor-Doris friendship, she accepted Doris's suggestion one day that they all three go for a walk. Doris liked wandering around Paris, but when she walked alone, she imagined North Africans were following her. Being fair, she was a prize. She might be seized, drugged, shipped to Casablanca, and obliged to work in a





"There isn't a soul here I'd care to know socially."

brothel. Even in New York, she had never taken a taxi without making certain the window could be lowered. This cherished fear apart, she was sensible enough.

The three women took a taxi to the Place de la Concorde one afternoon and walked to the Pont Neuf. They crossed to the Left Bank over the tip of the Ile de la Cité. It was a hot, transparent day—slumbering summer Paris; a milky sky, a perspective of bridges and shaking trees. Flor had let her long hair free and wore sandals on her feet. She seemed wild, yet urban, falsely contrived, like a gypsy in a musical play. Bonnie walked between the two girls and was shorter than both. She was conscious only of being shorter than Flor. It was curious, being suddenly smaller than the person over whom you had once exercised complete control. Bonnie's step was light. She had been careful to keep a young figure. Doris, the big blonde, thought she looked beaky and thin, like a bird. A mean little bird, she amended. There was some-

thing about Bonnie she didn't like. Doris wore the dress they had come to consider her day-duty uniform—the neat, standard shirtmaker. Bonnie's little blue hat would have suited her well. Bonnie thought of this, and wondered how to offer it. Doris expressed, from time to time, her sense of well-being on this lovely day. She said she could hardly believe she was really alive and in Paris. It was like that feeling after a good meal, she said, sincerely, for the gratification of her digestion compared favorably with any pleasure she had known until now. Although neither Flor nor Bonnie answered, Bonnie had an instant's awareness that their reaction to Doris was the same; they needn't share a look, or the pressure of hands. Later, this became one of Bonnie's most anguished memories. She forgot the time and the year and who was with them, remembering only that on a lost day, with her lost, loved girl, there had existed a moment of unity while crossing a bridge.

Flor was letting herself see in high,

embossed relief, changing the focus of her eyes, even though she knew this was dangerous. Human cunning was keeping the ruin of Paris concealed. The ivy below Notre Dame had swelled through the city's painted crust. It was the tender covering of a ruin. The invasion of strangers resembled the busloads of tourists arriving at Pompeii. They were disoriented and out of place. Recording with their cameras, they tried not to live the day but to fix a day not their own. It had so little to do with the present that something she had suspected became clear: there was no present here, and the strangers were perfectly correct to record, to stare, to giggle, to display the unease a healthy visitor feels in a hospital—the vague fear that a buried illness might emerge, obliging one to remain. Her heart had left its prison and was beating under her skin. The smell of her own hands was nauseating. Nobody knew.

When they reached the opposite shore, Bonnie decided the walk had gone on long enough. She began look-



"She's lovely, but I don't want to get involved."

ing for a taxi. But Flor suddenly said she wanted to continue. The others fell in step—three women strolling by the Seine on a summer's day.

"There is a window with a horse in it," Florence said seriously. "I want to see that."

Bonnie hoped Doris hadn't heard. There was nothing she could do now. Her daughter's eyes were wide and anguished. Her lips moved. Bonnie continued to walk between the two young women so that any conversation would, as it were, sift through her.

"Didn't we walk along here when I was little?" said Flor.

Flor never spoke of the past. To have her go into it now was unsettling. It was also a matter of time and place. It was four o'clock, and Bonnie had a fitting with her dressmaker at five. She said, "Oh, honey, we never came to Paris until you were a big girl. You know that."

"I thought we used to come along here and look at the horse."

This was so bizarre, and yet Bonnie could not help giving Doris an anxious, pathetic glance, as if to say, "We used to do things together—we used to be friends." They were still on the Quai de Montebello when Flor made them cross the street and led them to a large corner window. Well, there was a stuffed horse. Flor wasn't so crazy after all.

An American woman, dressed rather like Doris, stood before the window, holding a child by the hand. Crouched on the pavement, camera to his eyes, was the husband, trying to get all of them in the picture—wife, child, horse. The boy wore a printed shirt that matched his father's, and his horn-rimmed glasses were the same, but smaller. He looked like the father reduced. Doris's delighted eyes signalled that this was funny, but Bonnie was too bothered with Flor to mind. Flor looked at the child, then at the horse, with a fixed, terrified stare. Her skin had thickened and paled. There was a film of sweat on her cheeks.

The child said, "Why's the horse there?" and the mother replied in a flat bored voice, "I donno. He's dead."

"That's wrong," said Flor harshly. "He's guarding the store. At night he goes out and gallops along the river and he wears a white and red harness. You can see him in the parks at night after the gates are locked."

Doris, joining in what she imagined the play of a whimsical mind, said, "Ah, but if the gates are locked, how do you get in to see him?"

"There's a question!" cried Bonnie gaily. She was not listening to her own voice. Everything was concentrated on getting Flor away, or getting the three openmouthed tourists away from her.

"We did come here when I was

little," said Flor, weeping, clasping her hands. "I remember this horse. I'm sure I remember. Even when I was playing in the grass at home, I remembered it here." She saw the leafy tunnels of the Tuileries on an autumn day, and the galloping horse. She could not convey this picture, an image of torment, nostalgia, and unbearable pain.

"Oh, love!" said her mother, and she was crying now, too. There was something in this scene of the old days, when they had been emotional and close. But their closeness had been a trap, and each could now think, If it hadn't been for you, my life would have been different. If only you had gone out of my life at the right time!

Doris thought, Spoiled. Fuss over nothing. She also thought, I'm like a sister, one of the family. They say anything in front of me.

Perhaps this was true, because it seemed natural that Doris find a taxi, take them home, and put Flor to bed. She even ordered a nice cup of coffee all around, putting on a harmless comedy of efficiency before the cook.

By now, after a few days, she might have known them for years. She came into their lives dragging her existence like a wet raincoat, and no one made a move to keep her out. She called them by their Christian names, and had heard Bonnie's troubles, and had hinted at plenty of her own. Bob referred to her as



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Moonface, because she was all circles—round face, round brown eyes. The first impression of American crispness had collapsed. Her hair looked as if mice had been at it. The shirtmaker dresses were held together with pins. Dipping hems had been stitched with thread the wrong color. She carried foolish straw baskets with artificial flowers wound around the handles, and seemed to have chosen her clothes with three aims in mind: they mustn't cost much, they must look as if anybody could wear them, and they must be suitable for a girl of sixteen. She did not belong in their lives or in the Paris summer. She belonged to an unknown cindery city full of used-car lots. She sat by Flor's bed, hunched forward, hands around her knees. "I know how you feel, in a way," she said. "Sometimes I feel so depressed I honestly don't like going out on the street. I feel as if it's written all over me that something's wrong. I get the idea that the mob will turn on me and pull me apart because I'm unhappy and unhappiness is catching." She seemed genial and lively enough, saying this. She was fresh from a different world, where generalized misery was possibly taken for granted. Bob said that Moonface was stupid, and Flor, for want of any opinion, had agreed, but could Flor be superior? She would have given anything to be a victor, one of that trampling mob.

There wasn't much to be had from Flor, and Doris turned to Bonnie instead. She would try every member of the family in turn, and only total failure would drive her away. Within the family, on whatever bankrupt terms, she was at least *somewhere*. She had been afraid of never knowing anyone in Paris. She spoke very little French, and had never wanted to come abroad. But it was not long before she understood that even though Flor and her mother and husband had lived here for years, and used some French words in their private family language, they were not in touch with life in France. They had friends; Bob and Bonnie seemed to go about. But they were not in touch with life in the way Doris—so earnest, so sociologically minded—would have wanted. Still, she enjoyed the new intimacy with Bonnie. For the few days that remained, she had tea every day in Bonnie's bedroom. Bonnie was packing like a fury now. They would shut themselves up in the oyster-colored room, Bonnie dressed in a slip, because a dress was a psychological obstacle when she had something to do, and gossip and pack. Doris sat on the floor. The chairs were laden with the dresses Bonnie was

or was not going to take to Deauville. Bonnie was careful to avoid dropping the Deauville hostess's name, out of an inverted contempt for Doris, but Doris got the point very soon. She was not impressed. She suspected all forms of titled address, and thought Bonnie would have been a nicer and more sincere person if she had used her opportunities to cultivate college professors and their wives.

Bonnie didn't care what Doris thought. Everything was minimal compared with Flor's increasing queerness and her own headlong and cowardly flight. She talked about Flor, and how Flor was magnifying Bonnie's failings in her sessions with Dr. Linnetti.

"All children hate their parents," said Doris, shrugging at this commonplace. She was sewing straps for Bonnie.

She bit off a thread. There were subjects on which she permitted herself a superior tone. These people had means but were strictly uneducated. Only Bob had a degree. As far as Doris could make out, Flor had hardly even been to school. Doris was proud of her education—a bundle of notions she trundled before her like a pram containing twins. She could not have told you that the shortest distance between two points was a straight line, but she did know that "hostility" was the key word in human relations, and that a man with an abscessed tooth was only punishing himself.

"All I can say is I adored my mother," said Bonnie. "That's all I can say."

"You haven't faced it. Or else you don't remember."

Bonnie remembered other things. She remembered herself, Bonnie, at thirty-seven, her name dragged in the mud, vowing to Flor she would never look at a man again; swearing that Flor could count on her for the rest of her life. She had known in her heart it was a temporary promise, and she had said, "I still have five good years." At forty-two, she thought, My life isn't finished, I still have five good years. And so it had been, the postponement of life five years at a time, until now Flor was married and in a dream, and Bonnie was fifty-two. She wanted Flor to hold off, to behave well, not to need help now, this very minute. She was pulled this way and that—now desperate for her own safety, now aghast with remorse and the stormy knowledge of failure. She left Doris sitting on the floor and went into her daughter's room. Flor was lying on the bed, wide-eyed, with a magazine. She kept a magazine at hand so that she could pretend to be reading in case

someone came in. None of them liked her habit of lying immobile in the semidark.

Bonnie sat down on the bed. She wanted to say "Flor, I've had a hell of a life. Your father was a Catholic. He made me be a Catholic and believe a lot of things, and then he left off being one and divorced me. And that isn't everything, it's only a fragment." What she said was, "Darling, I'm not going to suggest you see a priest, because I know you wouldn't. But I do agree with Bob—I don't think Dr. Linnetti is any good. If you're going to stay here in August anyway, you should see someone else. You know, I used to know a doctor . . ."

"I know," said Flor, loathing awakened.

But Bonnie hadn't meant that old, disastrous love affair. She had meant a perfectly serious professional man out in Neuilly. Flor's eyes alarmed her. Bonnie fingered the magazine and thought of the other doctor, the lover, and wondered how much Flor had seen in those days. Flor must have been eleven, twelve. She felt as though she had been staring in the sun, the room seemed so dark.

"You see," said Flor, "I'm really all right and I don't need a priest. Mama. Listen. I'm all right. I'm slightly anemic. It makes me pale. Don't you remember, I was always a bit anemic?"

Flor had said what Bonnie wanted said. "Oh, I know," she said eagerly. "I remember! Oh, lambie, when you were small the awful chopped raw-liver mess you had to eat! You were anemic. Of course I remember now."

"It makes me tired," said Flor gently. "Then there's Doctor L. three times a week. That's tiring, too. It just wears me out. And so I lie down. August alone will be just wonderful. I'll lie down all the time. I'm *anemic*, Mama."

Bonnie's soft, eager eyes were on her daughter. She would have cried at her, if she dared, "Yes, tell me, make me believe this!"

Now, that was the disarming thing about Flor. She could be so sensible, she could explain everything as though you were the nitwit. She could smile and say, "Don't *worry* about me," and you would think, Flor knows what she's doing. She's all right.

All the same, thought Bonnie, it was a pity that she was only twenty-six and had lost her looks.

BOB HARRIS had no division of purpose. He wanted Flor to go away from Paris for the next four weeks. Sometimes he said Cannes, because she



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liked the sea. He mentioned Deauville, but Bonnie pulled a long face. He knew there was more to it than getting through August, but that was all there was time for now. His father had arrived from New York. He was a mild old man, and he had not wanted this marriage. He seemed to take up no space in the apartment, and he made everyone generous gifts. Bonnie tried to charm him and failed. She tried to treat him like a joint parent with foolish young people to consider, but that failed, too. She gave up. She felt that disapproval of the match should be her own family's prerogative and that the Harrises were overstepping. The old man saw Flor, her silence, her absence, and believed she had a lover and that her pallor was caused by guilty thoughts. The young people had been married two years; it seemed to him a sad and wretched affair. There were no children and no talk of any. He thought, *I warned him*, but he kept still; he did not want to cause the estrangement of his only son. His gentle sadness affected them all. He was thinly polite, and looked unwell. His skin had the bluish clarity of skimmed milk. Bonnie wanted to scream at him, "I didn't want your son!" She wondered why he felt he had to be so damned courtly. In her mind there was no social gap between a Jewish wine merchant and her ex-husband's old bootlegger of thirty years before.

Bonnie and her son-in-law were linked in one effort—keeping the old man from knowing the true state of affairs. Bonnie was always willing to unite when their common existence was threatened. She deplored the marriage and believed Flor might have made a better match, but most of the time she was grateful. She worshipped the Harris money. She would have washed all the Harris feet every day if that had been part of the deal. There had always been an unspoken, antagonistic agreement between Bonnie and Bob, which Flor had never understood. She never understood why Bob was nice to her mother. She guessed—that was at the start, when she was still curious and working things out—that it was Jewishness, respect for parents. But this was a subject from which he slid away. Evasion was seared into his personality. He had a characteristic sliding movement of head and body when conversation took a turn he didn't like.

The façade they put up now was almost flawless; the old man may even have been deceived. In the effort, they were obliged to look at themselves, and these moments—near-horror, near-perfection—were unrehearsed. They

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dragged resisting Flor to parties, to restaurants, to the theatre. At times Bob and Bonnie began to believe in the situation, and they would say, in amazement, "There, do you see how good life can be?" Flor seemed quite normal, except that she complained of being tired; but many women are like that.

One day the four of them made an excursion to Montparnasse. Bob bought pictures, and Bonnie had unearthed a young artist. She said he was Polish and full of genius. It was a bad outing; Bob was irritated because Bonnie had promised to help the young man without telling him first. The studio was like dozens more in Paris. There was a stove with last year's ashes, and the pictures the young man showed them were cold and stale. There was a flattering drawing of Bonnie tacked to the wall. The painter talked as if he owed his diction to an attentive study of old Charles Boyer films. He had a ripe-pear voice and spoke English with a French accent.

"I don't like him," said Bob when they were driving home. "He's nothing. He paints like a little girl. Anyway, he's a phony. What's that accent? He's just a New York boy."

"He has lived here for many years," said Bonnie, the bristling mother bird.

"I may live here a lot longer, but that won't change my voice," said Bob. "He's afraid. He's scared of being what he really is. If he talked naturally, he wouldn't be Michel Colbert. Colbert. Colbert. What is that?"

"What is Harris?" said Bonnie, trembling.

Nothing more was said; nothing was said about anything, and the silence beat about them like waves. The elevator in the building wasn't working again. Bonnie clutched at Flor as they climbed the stairs. "What have I gone and done?" she whispered heavily, pinching Flor's arm.

Flor had not been lying down a minute before her husband came in and slammed the door behind him. He stood over her and said, "Why the hell didn't you back me up?"

"I didn't listen," said Flor in terror. "I didn't speak."

"That's what I'm saying. What do you think my father thinks?"

He didn't go on with it. Too much had been taken away from him. He did not want to diminish what remained. Flor seemed frightened, looking up at him, curled on the bed like a child, and he was filled with pity for her and for them all. She had been dragged from her bed for the futile visit to the studio,

and now he was having to drag her out again. She was a sick girl—he had to remember that. He sat on the bed with his back half turned and said gently, "We have to go out for dinner, you know?"

"Oh, no, no."

"It's my father and some of his friends," he said. "You know I have to be there. These people have invited us. Bonnie's coming." By this he meant that Bonnie understood the requirements of life.

"I'd rather not go."

He was so tired, yet he was someone who had never been tired. He thought, You shouldn't have to plead with your wife over such simple things. "It'll do you good," he said.

"I went to the studio," she said plaintively.

"People go two places in one day," he said. "It's not late. It's summer. It's still light outside. If you'd open those shutters you'd see." He had a fixed idea that she feared the dark.

Light and dark were outside the scope of her fears. She moved her head, unable to speak. He would have taken her hand, only he never touched her now. In the spring, she had begun pleading with him to let her sleep. She had behaved like a prisoner roused for questioning. Tomorrow, she had promised, or in the morning. Any moment but now. He woke her one dawn and was humiliated at what they had become, remembering Cannes, the summer they had met. He couldn't discuss it. He never touched her again. He couldn't look at her now. Her hair, loose on the pillow, was a parody of Cannes. So were the shuttered windows.

Flor felt his presence. She had closed her eyes but held his image under the lids. He was half turned away. His back and the shape of his head were against the faint summer light that came in between the slats of the shutters. One hand was flat on the bed, and there was the memory of their hands side by side on the warm sand. When he had moved his hand to cover hers, there remained the imprint of his palm, and, because they were both instinctively superstitious, they had brushed this mold away.

He said, in such a miserable voice, "Are you really all that tired?" that she wanted to help him.

She said, "I've already told you. I'm afraid."

He had heard about her fear of cars but couldn't believe it. He had never been afraid; he was the circus seal. They had always clapped and approved. He



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tried to assemble some of the practical causes of fear. "Are you afraid of the next war? I mean, do you think about the bombs and all that?"

Flor moved her head on the pillow. "It's nothing like that. I don't think about the war. I'm used to the idea, like everyone else." She tried again. "Remember once when we were out walking; remember under the bridge, the boy kicking the man? The man was lying down."

"What's the good of thinking about that?" he said. "Somebody's kicking somebody else all the time. You can't make yourself responsible for everything."

"Why didn't the man at least get up? His eyes were open."

He had been afraid she would say "Why didn't we help him?" The incident had seemed, even when they were witnessing it, far away and grotesque. When you live in a foreign country, you learn to mind your own business. But all this reasoning was left in the air. He knew she was making a vertiginous effort to turn back on her journey out. He said something he hadn't thought of until now and that seemed irrefutable. "We don't know what the man had done to him first." Perhaps she accepted this; it caused a silence. "I'm glad you're talking to me," he said humbly, even though he felt she had put him in the wrong.

"I'm afraid of things like that," said Flor.

"Nobody's going to pull you under a bridge and kick you." He looked at her curiously, for she had used a false voice, not as Bonnie sometimes did but as if someone were actually speaking for her.

"Sometimes when I want to speak," she said, in the same way, "something comes between my thoughts and the words." She loathed herself at this moment. She believed she gave off a rank smell. She was the sick redhead, the dying, quivering fox. "It's only being anemic," she said wildly. "The blood doesn't reach the brain."

On an impulse stronger than pride he had already taken her hand. This hand was warm and dry and belonged to someone known. He had loved her; he tried to reconstruct their past, not sentimentally but as a living structure of hair, skin, breath. The effort surpassed his imagination and was actually repugnant. It seemed unhealthy. Still, remembering, he said, "I do love you." But he was thinking of the hot, faded summer in Cannes, and the white walls of his shuttered room on a blazing afternoon, and coming in with Flor from the beach. He saw the imprint of his fingers



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on her brown shoulder; he thought he tasted salt. Suddenly, he felt as if he might vomit. His mouth was flooded with saliva. He thought, I'll go crazy with this. He was appalled at the tenderness of the wound. He remembered what it was to be sick with love.

"You'd better come out," he said. "It'll do you good. You'll see there's nothing to be afraid of." With these words he caused them to resume their new roles—the tiresome wife, the patient husband.

He had never insisted so much before; but too much had been taken away in his wife's retreat, and he had been, without knowing it, building on what was left: money and his own charm. He could not stop charming people. The concierge was minutes recovering from his greeting every day. These elements—the importance of business, his own attractive powers—pulled away like the sea and left him stranded and without his wife.

Flor's crisis had passed. The sharp-muzzled animal who inhabited her breast had gone to sleep. She looked at her husband and saw that whatever protected him had left him at that moment; he seemed pitiable and without confidence. She might have said, "Forgive me," or even, "Help me," and it might have been different between them, if not better, but Bonnie came in. She knocked, and must have thought she heard an answer. Neither Bob nor Flor heard clearly what she said. The present rushed in with a clatter, for Bonnie threw the shutters apart, with an exclamation of annoyance, and past love, that delicate goblet, was shattered on the spot.

Bob stood beside Bonnie. Between them, joined enemies again, they got Flor up and out. "I shall never forgive you," said Flor. But she rose, bathed, put up her hair. Their joint feeling—hers and Bob's—was one of relief; there was no need to suffer too deeply, after all. No present horror equalled the potential suffering of the past. Reliving the past, with full knowledge of what was to come, was a test too strong for their powers. It would have been too strong for anyone; they were not magical; they were only human beings.

TWO days after this, on the fourth of August, everyone except Flor went away. The cook and the maid had already departed for Brittany, each weighted with a full shabby suitcase. Bob and his father left by car in the morning. Bob was hearty and rather vulgar and distraught, saying goodbye. He patted Flor on the buttocks and kissed

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her mouth. This took place on the street. She had come down to see them loading the car—just like any young woman seeing vacationers off. She stood with her arms around her body, as if the day were cold. The old man, now totally convinced that Flor had a lover in Paris, did not look at her directly. In the afternoon, Bonnie took off from the Gare Saint-Lazare, and Flor went there, too. The station was so crowded that they had to fight their way to the train. Bonnie kept behaving as though it were all slick and usual and out of a page entitled "Doings of the International Smart Set"—young Mrs. Robert Harris seeing her mother off for Deauville. Bonnie was beautifully dressed. She wore a public smile and gave her daughter a woman's kiss, embracing the air.

Flor saw the train out. She went home and got out of her clothes and into a nightgown covered with a pattern of butterflies. She had left a message for the cleaning woman, telling her not to come. She went from room to room and closed the shutters. Then she got into bed.

She slept, without stirring, until the next morning, when there was a ring at the door. It was Doris Fischer. She looked glossy and sunburned, and said she had caught a throat virus from the swimming pool in the Seine. She was hard, sunny reality—the opponent of dreams. She sat by Flor's bed and talked in disconnected sentences about people back in the States whom Flor had never seen. At noon, she went into the kitchen and heated soup, which they drank from cups. Then she went away. Flor lay still. She thought of the names of streets she had lived in and of hotel rooms in which she had spent the night. She leaned on her elbow and got her notebook from the table nearby. This was an invalid's gesture—the pale hand fretfully clutching the enchanted object. There were no blank pages. She had used them all in the letter. She looked at a page on which she had written this:

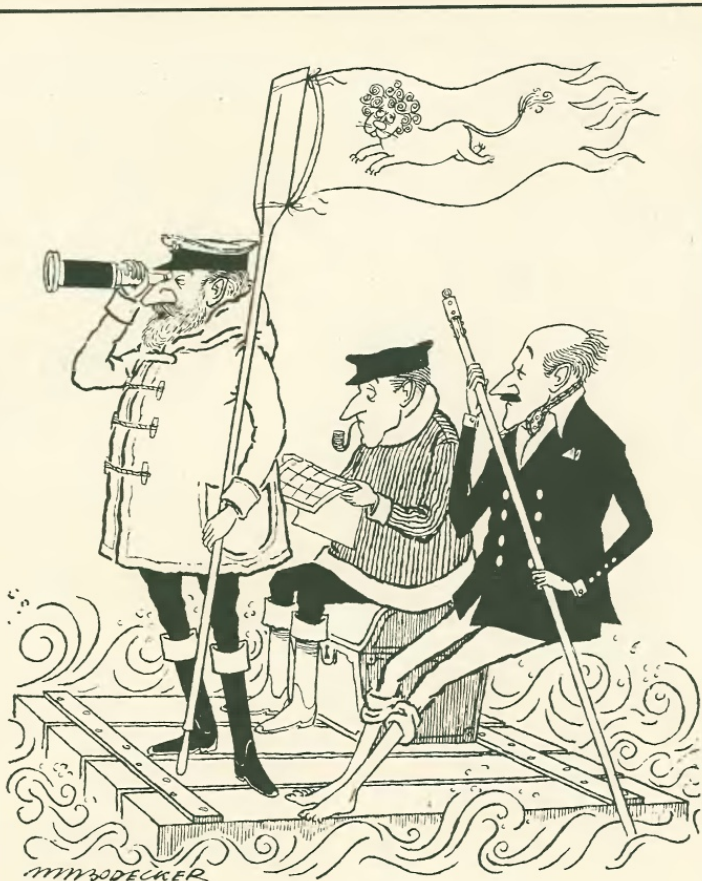
Maids dancing in Aunt Dottie Fairlie's kitchen

Father Doyle: If you look in the mirror too much you will see the Devil

Granny's gardener

B. H.: "The only thing I like about Christ is when he raised the little girl from the dead and said she should be given something to eat"

She turned the pages. None of these fragments led back or forward to anything, and many called up no precise image at all. There was nothing to add, even if there had been space. The major discovery had been made that July afternoon, before the Café de la Paix,



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and the words "It was always the same," were the full solution. Even Dr. Linnetti would have conceded that.

She could not sleep unless her box of sleeping tablets was within sight. She placed the round box on the notebook and slept again.

The next day, Doris returned. She sat by Flor's bed because Bonnie had gone and there was no one else. The traffic outside was muffled to a rustling of tissue paper, the room green dark.

"What are those pill things for?" Doris said.

"Pains," said Flor. "My teeth ache. It's something that only happens in France, and it's called 'rage de dents.'"

"I've got good big teeth, and I've never had a filling," said Doris, showing them. "That's from the German side. I'm half Irish, half German. Florence, why don't you get up? If you lie there thinking you're sick, you'll get sick."

"I know perfectly well I'm not sick," said Flor.

Doris thought she was on to something. "You know, of course," she said, fixing Flor sternly, "that this is a retreat from life."

For the first time since Doris had known her, Flor laughed. She laughed until Doris joined in, too, good-natured but slightly vexed, for she guessed she was being made fun of.

"Don't worry about me," said Flor as lucidly as you please. "I'm a Victorian heroine."

"The trouble is," Doris said, "you've never had to face a concrete problem. Like mine. Like..." and she was away, divulging the affairs she had only hinted at until now. Her husband had left her, but only for the summer. He intended to return, and she knew she would take him back, and that should have been the end of it. That was the story, but Doris couldn't leave it alone. Behind

the situation struggled memories and impulses she could neither relate nor control. Trying to bring order through speech, she sat by Flor's bed and told her about their life in New York, which had been so different. Names emerged: Beth and Howard, Peter and Jan, Bernie and Madge, Lilia, who was brilliant, and Wolff and Louis, who always came to see them on Sundays, and lived in a stable or garage or something like that. Doris and her husband were prudently Left Wing, and on speaking terms with a number of jazz musicians. They had among their friends Chinese, Javanese, Peruvians, and Syrians. They had a wonderful life. Then this year-abroad thing had happened, and her husband,

filming a documentary for television, had met a woman studying Egyptian at the Ecole du Louvre. "Don't laugh," said Doris miserably, to Flor, who was not laughing at all.

Why did these things happen? Why was Doris alone in Paris, who had never been alone in her life? Why weren't she and her husband still in college or still in New York? Why was she nearly thirty and in a foreign place and everything a mess? "You tell me," Doris demanded. Flor had no replies.

She lay on the bed, in the butterfly-covered nightgown, and her dreams were broken by Doris's ring at the door. Doris occupied the chair beside her bed as if she had a right to it. She came every day. She opened cans of soup in the kitchen, and she never washed the saucepan or the cups. She took clean dishes from the cupboard each time, and it was like the Mad Tea Party—although even there, eventually, it must have become impossible to move along. The dishes here would finally reach an end, too, and she would have to do something—go home, or follow her husband, whether he wanted her around or not, or stay here and wash cups. Flor was not making the division between days and nights clearly, but she knew that Doris came most frequently in the afternoon. She told Flor that she woke up fairly optimistically each day, but that the afternoon was a desert and she couldn't cross it alone.

Then a disaster occurred: Flor's sleeping tablets disappeared. She took the bed apart and rolled back the carpet. Doris helped, unexpectedly silent. It was a disaster because without the pills in the room she was unable to sleep. Her desire for sleep and dreams took the shape of a boat. Every day it pulled away from shore but was forced to return. She

had left the door key under the mat so that Doris could come in when she wanted, after a warning ring. She got up early one day and took the key inside. She heard a ring and didn't answer. The ring was repeated, and Doris knocked as well, but Flor lay still, her eyes closed. Once the imperative ring surprised her in the kitchen, where she was distractedly looking around for something to eat. There were empty cans everywhere, which Doris had opened for her, and dirty cups, and a spilled box of crackers. She found corn flakes and some sour milk in a jug and a sticky packet of dates. In a cupboard there were more tins. She opened a tin of mushrooms and ate them with her fingers and went back to bed. The



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scene had the air of a robbery. It was midday, but the light was on. The kitchen was shuttered, like every other room. Flor's quest for food was stealthy and uncertain, partly because the kitchen was not her province and she seldom entered it. When Doris rang, she stood frozen, in her nightgown, her head thrown back, her heart beating in hard, painful, slow thumps. She had a transient fear that Doris possessed a miraculous key and could come in whenever she wanted to. She felt the warmth and weight of her thick hair. Her neck was damp with fear.

The ringing stopped. That afternoon, she slept and half slept and had her first real dream, which was of floating, sailing, going away. It was pleasant, brightly lit, and faintly erotic. There emerged the face of a Russian she and her mother had once talked to in a hotel. She remembered that in the presence of a whirlwind you defied Satan and made the sign of the Cross. She opened her eyes with interest and wonder. She had followed someone exorcising a number of rooms. She was not in the least frightened, but she was half out of bed when she woke.

The building was empty now. She heard the concierge cleaning on the stairs. In the daytime there was light through the shutters. She was happiest at night, but her plans were upset by the loss of the pills. Once, her husband telephoned, and she replied and spoke quite sensibly, although she could not remember afterward what she had said. She turned her room upside down again, but the pills were gone. Well, the pills might turn up. There were other things to be done: cupboards to be shut, drawers tidied, stockings put away. She knew she would be unable to lie in peace until everything was settled; August was wearing away. Every day she did one useful thing. There were the gold sandals Bonnie wanted repaired. She had left them on a chest in the hall so that Flor would see them on her way out. These sandals did not belong in the hall. The need to find a place for the broken sandals drove her out of bed one afternoon. She carried the sandals all around the flat, from shuttered room to room. There was no sound from the street. In her mother's bedroom she forgot why she had come. She let the sandals fall. That was where Bonnie found them—one on the chair, one on the floor, with its severed strap like a snapped twig some inches away. Once, she had told Dr. Linnetti that her husband was her mother's lover. She had described, in a composed voice, the scene of discovery. He came home

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very late, and instead of coming into his own room went into Bonnie's. She knew it was he, for she knew his step, and the words this man used were his. She heard her mother whisper and her mother laugh. "Then," said Flor, "he tried to come to me, but I wouldn't have it. No, never again." A month later she said, "That wasn't true, about Bob and my mother." "I know," said Dr. Linnetti.

"How do you know?" said Flor, trembling, in Bonnie's room. "How do you know?"

She saw herself in a long glass, in the long, loose butterfly-covered nightdress. She looked like a pale-rose model in a fashion magazine, neat, sweet, a porcelain figure, intended to suggest that it suffices to be desirable—that the dream of love is preferable to love in life.

"You might cut your hair," said Bonnie.

"Yes," said Flor. "You'd love that, wouldn't you?"

Bonnie's windows were closed and the oyster-silk fringed curtains pulled together. But still light came into the room—the milky light of August, in which Flor, the dreamer, floated like a seed. Bonnie had not entirely removed herself to Deauville, for her scent clouded the room—the cat's-fur-Spanish-servant-girl scent she bought for herself in expensive bottles. Flor moved out of the range of the looking glass and could no longer be witnessed. She opened a mothproof closet and looked at dresses without touching them. She looked at chocolates from Holland in a tin box. She looked desultorily for her pills. She forgot what she was doing here and returned to bed.

She knew that time was going by and the city was emptying, and still she hadn't achieved the dreams she desired. One day, she opened the shutters of her bedroom, and the summer afternoon fell on her white face and tangled hair. There was the feeling of summer ending; it had reached its peak and could only wane. Nostalgia came into the room—for the past, for the waning of a day, for a shadow through a blind, for the fear of autumn. It was a season not so much ending as already used up, like a love too long discussed or a desire deferred. An accumulation of shadows and seasons ending led back to some scene. Maids dancing in Aunt Dottie's kitchen? She held the shutters out and apart with both hands, frozen, as if calling for aid. None came, and she drew in her thin arms and brought the shutters to.

She was interrupted by the concierge, who brought letters and said, "Are you

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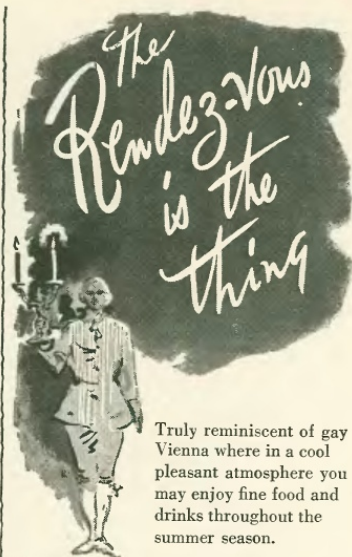
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still not better?" She left unopened the letters from her husband, because she knew he was not saying anything to her. She opened all the letters from Dr. Linnetti—those addressed to herself and to her mother and her husband as well. She had long ago intercepted and destroyed the first letter to Bob: "Her hostility to me was expected . . ." (Oh, she had no pride!) ". . . but she is in need of help." She gave the name of another doctor and said that this doctor was a man.

Flor had no time for doctors. She had to finish sewing a dress. She became brisk and busy and decided to make one dress of two, fastening the bodice of one to the skirt of the other. For two days she sewed this dress and, in one, took it apart. She unpicked it, stitch by stitch, and left the pieces on the floor. She was quite happy, humming, remembering the names of songs. She wandered into Bonnie's room. The mothproof closet was open, as she had left it. She took down a heavy, brocaded cocktail dress and, with Bonnie's nail scissors, began picking the seams apart. There was a snowdrift of threads on the parquet. The carpet had been taken away. When she went back to bed, she could sleep, but she was sleeping fitfully. There were no dreams. It was days since she had looked into the notebook. The plants were dying without water, and the kitchen light was left burning night and day. For the first time in her memory, she was frightened of the dark. When she awoke at night, it was to a whirling world of darkness, and she was frightened. Then she remembered that Bonnie had taken the prescription for the sleeping tablets, and she found it easily in the jewel case, lower tray.

She dressed and went down the stairs, trembling like an invalid, holding the curving rail. The concierge put letters in her hand, saying something Flor could not hear. She went out into the empty city. The quarter was completely deserted, and there was no one in the park. She saw, from the fit of her dress, that she had lost pounds. It was the last Sunday of August, and every pharmacy she came to was closed. The air was heavy and still. There was no variation in the color of the sky. It might have been nine in the morning or four in the afternoon. The city had perished, and everyone in it died or gone away. She had perceived this on a July day, crossing the Pont Neuf. It was more than a fancy; it was true. The ruin was incomplete. The streets lacked the crevices in which would appear the hellebore, the lizards, the poppies, the ivy, the nesting birds. High up at one



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of the windows was a red geranium, the only color on the gray street. It flowered, abandoned, on its ledge, like the poppies and the cowslips whose seeds are carried by the wind and by birds to the highest point of a ruin.

There were no cars. She was able to cross every street. The only possible menace came from one of the letters the concierge had put in her hand. She came to a café filled with people huddled together on the quiet avenue. She sat down and opened the letter. It was nearly impossible to read, but one sentence emerged with clarity: "I am writing to Dr. Linnetti and telling her I think it is *unprofessional* to say the least," and one page she read from the start to the end: "I want this man to see you. It is something entirely new. Everything we think of as mental comes from a different part of your body and it is only a matter of getting all these different parts under control. You have always been so strong-minded darling it should be easy for you. It is *not* that Swiss and *not* that Russian but someone quite new, and he has helped thousands. When he came into the room darling we all got to our feet, it was as if some unseen force was pulling us, and although he said very little every word counted. He is most attractive darling but of course above and outside all that. I asked him what he thought of The Box and he said it was all nonsense so you see darling he isn't a fake. When I explained about The Box and how you put a drop of blood on a bit of blotting paper and The Box makes a diagnosis he was absolutely horrified so you see love he isn't a fake at all. I remember how you were so scornful when The Box diagnosed my liver trouble (that all the doctors thought was heart) so it must be an assurance for you that he doesn't believe in it too. Darling he was so interested in hearing about you. I am going to ask Dr. Linnetti why you must pay even if away and why you must have sessions in August. He is coming to Paris and you must meet. He doesn't have fees or fixed hours, you come when you need him and you give what you can to his Foundation."

She became conscious of a sound, as a sound in the fabric of a dream. Florence looked away from Bonnie's letter and saw that this sound was real. At one of the café tables, a laughing couple were pretending to give a child away to a policeman. The policeman played his role well, swinging his cape, pretending to be fierce. "She is very naughty," said the mother, when she could stop laughing enough to speak, "and I think prison is the best solution." All the people in




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the café laughed, except Flor. They opened their mouths in the same way, eyes fixed on the policeman and the child. The child cried out that it would be good now, but everyone was too excited to pay attention. The child gave one more promise and suddenly went white and stiff in the policeman's grasp. He gave her back to her parents, who sat her on a chair. "She'll be good now," the policeman said.

The closed face of Paris relaxed. This was Paris; this was France. Oh, it was not only France. Her mother's mother's gardener had broken the necks of goldfinches. "If you tell you saw, you'll get hit by lightning," he had said.

"It's because of things like that," said Florence, earnestly, retracing her steps home. "I'm not afraid of bombs."

She unlocked the empty apartment, and an element she recognized and needed but that had evaded her until now rushed forward to meet her, and she knew it was still August, that she was still alone, and there was still time. "I only need a long sleep," she said to the empty air. The unopened letters from Bob she put on the chest in the hall. Her advancing foot kicked something along, and it was a trodden, folded letter that had been pushed under the door. It was dirty and had been walked on and was greasy with city dust. She carried this letter—three sheets folded one over the other—around the flat. She closed all the doors except the door of the kitchen and the door of her bedroom. The passage was a funnel. Her sleep had been a longer and longer journey away from shore. She lay down on the bed, having been careful to remove her shoes. The letter spoke to her in peaked handwriting. She had no idea who it was from. "I have stupid ideas," said this pointed hand, "and you are right to have nothing to do with me. You are so beautiful and clever." It grovelled on like this for lines. Who is the writer of this letter? Her husband loves her but has gone away with another woman. "The girl knows I know, and it doesn't work, we are all unhappy, he has his work, and I can't just make a life of my own as he suggests. I thought you would help me but why should you? You are right not to let anyone hang on your skirts. The important thing is that I have made a decision, because I understood when you locked me out that what is needed is not slow suffering or hanging on to someone else but a solution. I went out on the street that day and wanted to die because you had locked me out and I realized that there was a solution for me and the solution was a decision and



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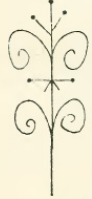
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so now I am going home. I am not going away but going home. He can follow, or he can stay, or he can do what he likes, but I have made a decision and I have cabled my father and he is cabling the money and I am going home. I'm leaving on the sixteenth and I'll wait for you every evening, come down if you want to say goodbye. I won't bother you again. All I want to tell you is I hid your sleeping pills and now I know I had no right to do that, because every person's decision is his own. I know I was silly because you're young and pretty and have everything to live for and you wouldn't do what I was afraid you would. I can't even write the word. . . . You may have been wanting those pills and I'm sorry. They're in the kitchen, inside the white tin box with 'Recipes' written on it. Don't be angry with my interference and please Florence come and say goodbye. Florence, another thing. Everybody makes someone else pay for something, I don't know why. If you are as awful to your mother as she says you are, you are making her pay, but then Florence, your mother could turn around and say, 'Yes, but look at my parents,' and they could have done and said the same thing, so you see how pointless it is to fix any blame. I think my husband is making me pay, but I don't know what for or why. Everyone does it. We all pay and pay for someone else's troubles. All children eventually make their parents pay, and pay, and pay. That's the way I see it now, although I may come to change my mind when I have children of my own. Florence, come once and say goodbye."

SHE had no time and no desire to say "They have paid." At the edge of the sea, the fox departed. She saw the animal head breaking the water and the fan-shaped ripples diminishing against the shore. She turned her back and left the sea behind. At last, she was going in the right direction. She rode Chief, her pony, down an alley of trees. Chief was a devil; he daren't bolt or rear, but he sometimes tried to catch her leg against a tree. Nearby, somebody smiled. She held herself straight. She was perfect. Everyone smiled now. Everyone was pleased. She emerged in triumph from the little woods and came off Chief, her pony, and into her father's arms.

—MAVIS GALLANT

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