

They Don't Make Life Like They Used To

By Alfred Bester

The girl driving the jeep was very fair and very Nordic. Her blond hair was pulled back in a ponytail, but it was so long that it was more a mare's tail. She wore sandals, a pair of soiled bluejeans, and nothing else. She was nicely tanned. As she turned the jeep off Fifth Avenue and drove bouncing up the steps of the library, her bosom danced enchantingly.

She parked in front of the library entrance, stepped out, and was about to enter when her attention was attracted by something across the street. She peered, hesitated, then glanced down at her jeans and made a face. She pulled off the pants and hurled them at the pigeons eternally cooing and courting on the library steps. As they clattered up in fright, she ran down to Fifth Avenue, crossed, and stopped before a shop window. There was a plum-colored wool dress on display. It had a high waist, a full skirt, and not too many moth holes. The price was \$79.90.

The girl rummaged through old cars skewed on the avenue until she found a loose fender. She smashed the plate-glass shop door, carefully stepped across the splinters, entered, and sorted through the dusty dress racks. She was a big girl and had trouble fitting herself. Finally she abandoned the plum-colored wool and compromised on a dark tartan, size 12, \$120 reduced to \$99.90. She located a salesbook and pencil, blew the dust off, and carefully wrote: *I.O.U. \$99.90. Linda Nielsen.*

She returned to the library and went through the main doors, which had taken her a week to batter in with a sledgehammer. She ran across the great hall, filthied with five years of droppings from the pigeons roosting there. As she ran, she clapped her arms over her head to shield her hair from stray shots. She climbed the stairs to the third floor and entered the Print Room. As always, she signed the register: *Date—June 20, 1981. Name—Linda Nielson. Address—Central Park Model Boat Pond. Business or Firm—Last Man on Earth.*

She had had a long debate with herself about *Business or Firm* the last time she broke into the library. Strictly speaking, she was the last woman on earth, but she had felt that if she wrote that it would seem chauvinistic; and "Last Person on Earth" sounded silly, like calling a drink a beverage.

She pulled portfolios out of racks and leafed through them. She knew exactly what she wanted; something warm with blue accents to fit a twenty-by-thirty frame for her bedroom. In a priceless collection of Hiroshige prints she found a lovely landscape. She filled out a slip, placed it carefully on the librarian's desk, and left with the print.

Downstairs, she stopped off in the main circulation room, went to the back shelves, and selected two Italian grammars and an Italian dictionary. Then she backtracked through the main hall, went out to the jeep, and placed the books and print on the front seat alongside her companion, an exquisite Dresden china doll. She picked up a list that read:

Jap. print
Italian

20 x 30 pict. fr.
Lobster bisque
Brass polish
Detergent
Furn. polish
Wet mop

She crossed off the first two items, replaced the list on the dashboard, got into the jeep, and bounced down the library steps. She drove up Fifth Avenue, threading her way through crumbling wreckage. As she was passing the ruins of St. Patrick's Cathedral at 50th Street, a man appeared from nowhere.

He stepped out of the rubble and, without looking left or right, started crossing the avenue just in front of her. She exclaimed, banged on the horn, which remained mute, and braked so sharply that the jeep slewed and slammed into the remains of a No. 3 bus. The man let out a squawk, jumped ten feet, and then stood frozen, staring at her.

"You crazy jaywalker," she yelled. "Why don't you look where you're going? D'you think you own the whole city?"

He stared and stammered. He was a big man, with thick, grizzled hair, a red beard, and weathered skin. He was wearing army fatigues, heavy ski boots, and had a bursting knapsack and blanket roll on his back. He carried a battered shotgun, and his pockets were crammed with odds and ends. He looked like a prospector.

"My God," he whispered in a rusty voice. "Somebody at last. I knew it. I always knew I'd find someone." Then, as he noticed her long, fair hair, his face fell. "But a woman," he muttered. "Just my goddamn lousy luck."

"What are you, some kind of nut?" she demanded. "Don't you know better than to cross against the lights?"

He looked around in bewilderment. "What lights?"

"So all right, there aren't any lights, but couldn't you look where you were going?"

"I'm sorry, lady. To tell the truth, I wasn't expecting any traffic."

"Just plain common sense," she grumbled, backing the jeep off the bus.

"Hey, lady, wait a minute."

"Yes?"

"Listen, you know anything about TV? Electronics, how they say ..."

"Are you trying to be funny?"

"No, this is straight. Honest."

She snorted and tried to continue driving up Fifth Avenue, but he wouldn't get out of the way.

"Please, lady," he persisted. "I got a reason for asking. Do you know?"

"No."

"Damn! I never get a break. Lady, excuse me, no offense, got any guys in this town?"

"There's nobody but me. I'm the last man on earth."

"That's funny. I always thought I was."

"So all right, I'm the last woman on earth."

He shook his head. "There's got to be other people; there just has to. Stands to reason. South, maybe you think? I'm down from New Haven, and I figured if I headed where the climate was like warmer, there'd be some guys I could ask something."

"Ask what?"

"Aw, a woman wouldn't understand. No offense."

"Well, if you want to head south you're going the wrong way."

"That's south, ain't it?" he said, pointing down Fifth Avenue.

"Yes, but you'll just come to a dead end. Manhattan's an island. What you have to do is go uptown and cross the George Washington Bridge to Jersey."

"Uptown? Which way is that?"

"Go straight up Fifth to Cathedral Parkway, then over to the West Side and up Riverside. You can't miss it."

He looked at her helplessly.

"Stranger in town?"

He nodded.

"Oh, all right," she said. "Hop in. I'll give you a lift."

She transferred the books and the china doll to the back seat, and he squeezed in alongside her. As she started the jeep she looked down at his worn ski boots.

"Hiking?"

"Yeah."

"Why don't you drive? You can get a car working, and there's plenty of gas and oil."

"I don't know how to drive," he said despondently. "It's the story of my life."

He heaved a sigh, and that made his knapsack jolt massively against her shoulder. She examined him out of the corner of her eye. He had a powerful chest, a long, thick back, and strong legs. His hands were big and hard, and his neck was corded with muscles. She thought for a moment, then nodded to herself and stopped the jeep.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Won't it go?"

"What's your name?"

"Mayo. Jim Mayo."

"I'm Linda Nielsen."

"Yeah. Nice meeting you. Why don't it go?"

"Jim, I've got a proposition for you."

"Oh?" He looked at her doubtfully. "I'll be glad to listen, lady—I mean Linda, but I ought to tell you, I got something on my mind that's going to keep me pretty busy for a long t . . ." His voice trailed off as he turned away from her intense gaze.

"Jim, if you'll do something for me, I'll do something for you."

"Like what, for instance?"

"Well, I get terribly lonesome, nights. It isn't so bad during the day—there's always a lot of chores to keep you busy—but at night it's just awful."

"Yeah, I know," he muttered.

"I've got to do something about it."

"But how do I come into this?" he asked nervously.

"Why don't you stay in New York for a while? If you do, I'll teach you how to drive and find you a car so you don't have to hike south."

"Say, that's an idea. Is it hard, driving?"

"I could teach you in a couple of days."

"I don't learn things so quick."

"All right, a couple of weeks, but think of how much time you'll save in the long run."

"Gee," he said, "that sounds great." Then he turned away again. "But what do I have to do for you?"

Her face lit up with excitement. "Jim, I want you to help me move a piano."

"A piano? What piano?"

"A rosewood grand from Steinway's on Fifty-seventh Street. I'm dying to have it in my place. The living room is just crying for it."

"Oh, you mean you're furnishing, huh?"

"Yes, but I want to play after dinner, too. You can't listen to records all the time. I've got it all planned; books on how to play, and books on how to tune a piano ... I've been able to figure everything except how to move the piano in."

"Yeah, but ... but there's apartments all over this town with pianos in them," he objected. "There must be hundreds, at least. Stands to reason. Why don't you live in one of them?"

"Never! I love my place. I've spent five years decorating it, and it's beautiful. Besides, there's the problem of water."

He nodded. "Water's always a headache. How do you handle it?"

"I'm living in the house in Central Park where they used to keep the model yachts. It faces the boat pond. It's a darling place, and I've got it all fixed up. We could get the piano in together, Jim. It wouldn't be hard."

"Well, I don't know, Lena ..."

"Linda."

"Excuse me, Linda. I—"

"You look strong enough. What'd you do, before?"

"I used to be a pro rassler."

"There! I knew you were strong."

"Oh, I'm not a rassler anymore. I became a bartender and went into the restaurant business. I opened The Body Slam up in New Haven. Maybe you heard of it?"

"I'm sorry."

"It was sort of famous with the sports crowd. What'd you do before?"

"I was a researcher for BBDO."

"What's that?"

"An advertising agency," she explained impatiently. "We can talk about that later, if you'll stick around. And I'll teach you how to drive, and we can move in the piano, and there're a few other things that I—but that can wait. Afterward you can drive south."

"Gee, Linda, I don't know ..."

She took Mayo's hands. "Come on, Jim, be a sport. You can stay with me. I'm a wonderful cook, and I've got a lovely guest room ..."

"What for? I mean, thinking you was the last man on earth."

"That's a silly question. A proper house has to have a guest room. You'll love my place. I turned the lawns into a farm and gardens, and you can swim in the pond, and we'll get you a new Jag ... I know where there's a beauty up on blocks."

"I think I'd rather have a Caddy."

"You can have anything you like. So what do you say, Jim? Is it a deal?"

"All right, Linda," he muttered reluctantly. "You've a deal."

It was indeed a lovely house with its pagoda roof of copper weathered to verdigris green, fieldstone walls, and deep recessed windows. The oval pond before it glittered blue in the soft June sunlight, and mallard ducks paddled and quacked busily. The sloping lawns that formed a bowl around the pond were terraced and cultivated. The house faced west, and Central Park stretched out beyond like an unkempt estate.

Mayo looked at the pond wistfully. "It ought to have boats."

"The house was full of them when I moved in," Linda said.

"I always wanted a model boat when I was a kid. Once I even—" Mayo broke off. A penetrating pounding sounded somewhere; an irregular sequence of heavy knocks that sounded like the dint of stones under water. It stopped as suddenly as it had begun. "What was that?" Mayo asked.

Linda shrugged. "I don't know for sure. I think it's the city falling apart. You'll see buildings coming down every now and then. You get used to it." Her enthusiasm rekindled. "Now come inside. I want to show you everything."

She was bursting with pride and overflowing with decorating details that bewildered Mayo, but he was impressed by her Victorian living room. Empire bedroom, and country kitchen with a working kerosene cooking stove. The colonial guest room, with four-poster bed, hooked rug, and tole lamps, worried him.

"This is kind of girlie-girlie, huh?"

"Naturally, I'm a girl."

"Yeah. Sure. I mean ..." Mayo looked around doubtfully. "Well, a guy is used to stuff that ain't so delicate. No offense."

"Don't worry, that bed's strong enough. Now remember, Jim, no feet on the spread, and remove it at night. If your shoes are dirty, take them off before you come in. I got that rug from the museum, and I don't want it messed up. Have you got a change of clothes?"

"Only what I got on."

"We'll have to get you new things tomorrow. What you're wearing is so filthy it's not worth laundering."

"Listen," he said desperately, "I think maybe I better camp out in the park."

"Why on earth?"

"Well, I'm like more used to it than houses. But you don't have to worry, Linda. I'll be around in case you need me."

"Why should I need you?"

"All you have to do is holler."

"Nonsense," Linda said firmly. "You're my guest and you're staying here. Now get cleaned up; I'm going to start dinner. Oh damn! I forgot to pick up the lobster bisque."

She gave him a dinner cleverly contrived from canned goods and served on exquisite Fornasetti china with Danish silver flatware. It was a typical girl's meal, and Mayo was still hungry when it was finished, but too polite to mention it. He was too tired to fabricate an excuse to go out and forage for something substantial. He lurched off to bed, remembering to remove his shoes but forgetting all about the spread.

He was awakened next morning by a loud honking and clattering of wings. He rolled out of bed and went to the windows just in time to see the mallards dispossessed from the pond by what appeared to be a red balloon. When he got his eyes working properly, he saw that it was a bathing cap. He wandered out to the pond, stretching and groaning. Linda yelled cheerfully and swam toward him. She heaved herself up out of the pond onto the curbing. The bathing cap was all that she wore. Mayo backed away from the splash and spatter.

"Good morning," Linda said. "Sleep well?"

"Good morning," Mayo said. "I don't know. The bed put kinks in my back. Gee, that water must be cold. You're all gooseflesh."

"No, it's marvelous." She pulled off the cap and shook her hair down. "Where's that towel? Oh, here. Go on in, Jim. You'll feel wonderful."

"I don't like it when it's cold."

"Don't be a sissy."

A crack of thunder split the quiet morning. Mayo looked up at the clear sky in astonishment. "What the hell was that?" he exclaimed.

"Watch," Linda ordered.

"It sounded like a sonic boom."

"There!" she cried, pointing west. "See?"

One of the West Side skyscrapers crumbled majestically, sinking into itself like a collapsible cup and raining masses of cornice and brick. The flayed girders twisted and contorted. Moments later they could hear the roar of the collapse.

"Man, that's a sight," Mayo muttered in awe.

"The decline and fall of the Empire City. You get used to it. Now take a dip, Jim. I'll get you a towel."

She ran into the house. He dropped his shorts and took off his socks but was still standing on the curb, unhappily dipping his toe into the water when she returned with a huge bath towel.

"It's awful cold, Linda," he complained.

"Didn't you take cold showers when you were a wrestler?"

"Not me. Boiling hot."

"Jim, if you just stand there, you'll never go in. Look at you, you're starting to shiver. Is that a tattoo around your waist?"

"What? Oh, yea. It's a python, in five colors. It goes all the way around. See?" He revolved proudly. "Got it when I was with the Army in Saigon back in '64. It's a Oriental-type python. Elegant, huh?"

"Did it hurt?"

"To tell the truth, no. Some guys try to make out like it's Chinese torture to get tattooed, but they're just showin' off. It itches more than anything else."

"You were a soldier in '64?"

"That's right."

"How old were you?"

"Twenty."

"You're thirty-seven now?"

"Thirty-six going on thirty-seven."

"Then you're prematurely gray?"

"I guess so."

She contemplated him thoughtfully. "I tell you what, if you do go in, don't get your head wet."

She ran back into the house. Mayo, ashamed of his vacillation, forced himself to jump feet first into the pond. He was standing, chest deep, splashing his face and shoulders with water when Linda returned. She carried a stool, a pair of scissors, and a comb.

"Doesn't it feel wonderful?" she called

"No."

She laughed. "Well, come out. I'm going to give you a haircut."

He climbed out of the pond, dried himself, and obediently sat on the stool while she cut his hair. "The beard, too," Linda insisted. "I want to see what you really look like." She trimmed him close enough for shaving, inspected him, and nodded with satisfaction. "Very handsome."

"Aw, go on," he blushed.

"There's a bucket of hot water on the stove. Go and shave. Don't bother to dress. We're going to get you new clothes after breakfast, and then ... the piano."

"I couldn't walk around the streets naked," he said, shocked.

"Don't be silly. Who's to see? Now hurry."

They drove down to Abercrombie & Fitch on Madison and 45th Street, Mayo wrapped modestly in his towel. Linda told him she'd been a customer for years and showed him the pile of sales slips she had accumulated. Mayo examined them curiously while she took his measurements and went off in search of clothes. He was almost indignant when she returned with her arms laden.

"Jim, I've got some lovely elk moccasins, and a safari suit, and wool socks, and shipboard shirts, and—"

"Listen," he interrupted, "do you know what your whole tab comes to? Nearly fourteen hundred dollars."

"Really? Put on the shorts first. They're drip-dry."

"You must have been out of your mind, Linda. What'd you want all that junk for?"

"Are the socks big enough? What junk? I needed everything."

"Yeah? Like ..." He shuffled the signed sales slips. "Like one Underwater Viewer with Plexiglas Lens, nine ninety-five? What for?"

"So I could see to clean the bottom of the pond."

"What about this Stainless Steel Service for Four, thirty-nine fifty?"

"For when I'm lazy and don't feel like heating water. You can wash stainless steel in cold water." She admired him. "Oh, Jim, come look in the mirror. You're real romantic, like the big-game hunter in that Hemingway story."

He shook his head. "I don't see how you're ever going to get out of hock. You got to watch your spending, Linda. Maybe we better forget about that piano, huh?"

"Never," Linda said adamantly. "I don't care how much it costs. A piano is a lifetime investment, and it's worth it."

She was frantic with excitement as they drove uptown to the Steinway showroom, and helpful and underfoot by turns. After a long afternoon of muscle-cracking and critical engineering involving makeshift gantries and an agonizing dolly-haul up Fifth Avenue, they had the piano in place in Linda's living room. Mayo gave it one last shake to make sure it was firmly on its legs and then sank down, exhausted.

"Je-zuz!" he groaned. "Hiking south would've been easier."

"Jim!" Linda ran to him and threw herself on him with a fervent hug. "Jim, you're an angel. Are you all right?"

"I'm okay." He grunted. "Get off me, Linda. I can't breathe."

"I just can't thank you enough. I've been dreaming about this for ages. I don't know what I can do to repay you. Anything you want, just name it."

"Aw," he said, "you already cut my hair."

"I'm serious."

"Ain't you teaching me how to drive?"

"Of course. As quickly as possible. That's the least I can do." Linda backed to a chair and sat down, her eyes fixed on the piano.

"Don't make such a fuss over nothing," he said, climbing to his feet. He sat down before the keyboard, shot an embarrassed grin at her over his shoulder, then reached out and began stumbling through the Minuet in G.

Linda gasped and sat bolt upright. "You play," she whispered.

"Naw. I took piano when I was a kid."

"Can you read music?"

"I used to."

"Could you teach me?"

"I guess so; it's kind of hard. Hey, here's another piece I had to take." He began mutilating "The Rustle of Spring." What with the piano out of tune and his mistakes, it was ghastly.

"Beautiful," Linda breathed. "Just beautiful!" She stared at his back while an expression of decision and determination stole across her face. She arose, slowly crossed to Mayo, and put her hands on his shoulders.

He glanced up. "Something?" he asked.

"Nothing," she answered. "You practice the piano. I'll get dinner."

But she was so preoccupied for the rest of the evening that she made Mayo nervous. He stole off to bed early.

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It wasn't until three o'clock the following afternoon that they finally got a car working, and it wasn't a Caddy, but a Chevy—a hardtop because Mayo didn't like the idea of being exposed to the weather in a convertible. They drove out of the Tenth Avenue garage and back to the East Side, where Linda felt more at home. She confessed that the boundaries of her world were from Fifth Avenue to Third, and from 42nd Street to 86th. She was uncomfortable outside this pale.

She turned the wheel over to Mayo and let him creep up and down Fifth and Madison, practicing starts and stops. He sideswiped five wrecks, stalled eleven times, and reversed through a storefront which, fortunately, was devoid of glass. He was trembling with nervousness.

"It's real hard," he complained.

"It's just a question of practice," she reassured him. "Don't worry. I promise you'll be an expert if it takes us a month."

"A whole month!"

"You said you were a slow learner, didn't you? Don't blame me. Stop here a minute."

He jolted the Chevy to a halt. Linda got out.

"Wait for me."

"What's up?"

"A surprise."

She ran into a shop and was gone for half an hour. When she reappeared she was wearing a pencil-thin black sheath, pearls, and high-heeled opera pumps. She had twisted her hair into a coronet. Mayo regarded her with amazement as she got into the car.

"What's all this?" he asked.

"Part of the surprise. Turn east on Fifty-second Street."

He labored, started the car, and drove east. "Why'd you get all dressed up in an evening gown?"

"It's a cocktail dress."

"What for?"

"So I'll be dressed for where we're going. Watch out, Jim!" Linda wrenched the wheel and sheared off the stern of a shattered sanitation truck. "I'm taking you to a famous restaurant."

"To eat?"

"No, silly, for drinks. You're my visiting fireman, and I have to entertain you. That's it on the left. See if you can park somewhere."

He parked abominably. As they got out of the car, Mayo stopped and began to sniff curiously.

"Smell that?" he asked.

"Smell what?"

"That sort of sweet smell."

"It's my perfume."

"No, it's something in the air, kind of sweet and choky. I know that smell from somewhere, but I can't remember."

"Never mind. Come inside." She led him into the restaurant. "You ought to be wearing a tie," she whispered, "but maybe we can get away with it."

Mayo was not impressed by the restaurant decor, but was fascinated by the portraits of celebrities hung in the bar. He spent rapt minutes burning his fingers with matches, gazing at Mel Allen, Red Barber, Casey Stengel, Frank Gifford, and Rocky Marciano. When Linda finally came back from the kitchen with a lighted candle, he turned to her eagerly.

"You ever see any of them TV stars in here?" he asked.

"I suppose so. How about a drink?"

"Sure. Sure. But I want to talk more about them TV stars."

He escorted her to a bar stool, blew the dust off, and helped her up most gallantly. Then he vaulted over the bar, whipped out his handkerchief, and polished the mahogany professionally. "This is my specialty," he grinned. He assumed the impersonally friendly attitude of the bartender. "Evening, ma'am. Nice night. What's your pleasure?"

"God, I had a rough day in the shop! Dry martini on the rocks. Better make it a double."

"Certainly, ma'am. Twist or olive?"

"Onion."

"Double-dry Gibson on the rocks. Right." Mayo searched behind the bar and finally produced whiskey, gin, and several bottles of soda, as yet only partially evaporated through their sealed caps. "Afraid we're fresh out of martinis, ma'am. What's your second pleasure?"

"Oh, I like that. Scotch, please."

"This soda'll be flat," he warned, "and there's no ice."

"Never mind."

He rinsed a glass with soda and poured her a drink.

"Thank you. Have one on me, bartender. What's your name?"

"They call me Jim, ma'am. No thanks. Never drink on duty."

"Then come off duty and join me."

"Never drink off duty, ma'am."

"You can call me Linda."

"Thank you, Miss Linda."

"Are you serious about never drinking, Jim?"

"Yeah."

"Well, happy days."

"And long nights."

"I like that, too. Is it your own?"

"Gee, I don't know. It's sort of the usual bartender's routine, a specially with guys. You know? Suggestive. No offense."

"None taken."

"Bees!" Mayo burst out.

Linda was startled. "Bees what?"

"That smell. Like inside beehives."

"Oh? I wouldn't know," she said indifferently. "I'll have another, please."

"Coming right up. Now listen, about them TV celebrities, you actually saw them here? In person?"

"Why, of course. Happy days, Jim."

"May they all be Saturdays."

Linda pondered. "Why Saturdays?"

"Day off."

"Oh."

"Which TV stars did you see?"

"You name 'em, I saw 'em." She laughed. "You remind me of the kid next door. I always had to tell him the celebrities I'd seen. One day I told him I saw Jean Arthur in here, and he said, 'With his horse?' "

Mayo couldn't see the point, but was wounded nevertheless. Just as Linda was about to soothe his

feelings, the bar began a gentle quivering, and at the same time a faint subterranean rumbling commenced. It came from a distance, seemed to approach slowly, and then faded away. The vibration stopped. Mayo stared at Linda.

"Je-zuz! You think maybe this building's going to go?"

She shook her head. "No. When they go, it's always with that boom. You know what that sounded like? The Lexington Avenue subway."

"The subway?"

"Uh-huh. The local train."

"That's crazy. How could the subway be running?"

"I didn't say it *was*. I said it *sounded* like. I'll have another, please."

"We need more soda." Mayo explored and reappeared with bottles and a large menu. He was pale. "You better take it easy, Linda," he said. "You know what they're charging per drink? A dollar seventy-five. Look."

"To hell with the expense. Let's live a little. Make it a double, bartender. You know something, Jim? If you stayed in town, I could show you where all your heroes lived. Thank you. Happy days. I could take you up to BBDO and show you their tapes and films. How about that? Stars like ... like Red ... Who?"

"Barber."

"Red Barber, and Rocky Gifford, and Rocky Casey, and Rocky the Flying Squirrel."

"You're putting me on," Mayo said, offended again.

"Me, sir? Putting you on?" Linda said with dignity. "Why would I do a thing like that? Just trying to be pleasant. Just trying to give you a good time. My mother told me, 'Linda,' she told me, 'just remember this, about a man. Wear what he wants and say what he likes,' is what she told me. You want this dress?" she demanded.

"I like it, if that's what you mean."

"Know what I paid for it? Ninety-nine fifty."

"What? A hundred dollars for a skinny black thing like that?"

"It is not a skinny black thing like that. It is a basic black cocktail frock. And I paid twenty dollars for the pearls. Simulated," she explained. "And sixty for the opera pumps. And forty for the perfume. Two hundred and twenty dollars to give you a good time. You having a good time?"

"Sure."

"Want to smell me?"

"I already have."

"Bartender, give me another."

"Afraid I can't serve you, ma'am."

"Why not?"

"You've had enough already."

"I have not had enough already," Linda said indignantly. "Where's your manners?" She grabbed the whiskey bottle. "Come on, let's have a few drinks and talk up a storm about TV stars. Happy days. I could take you up to BBDO and show you their tapes and films. How about that?"

"You just asked me."

"You didn't answer. I could show you movies, too. You like movies? I hate 'em, but I can't knock 'em anymore. Movies saved my life when the big bang came."

"How was that?"

"This is a secret, understand? Just between you and me. If any other agency ever found out ..." Linda looked around and then lowered her voice. "BBDO located this big cache of silent films. Lost films, see? Nobody knew the prints were around. Make a great TV series. So they sent me to this abandoned mine in Jersey to take inventory."

"In a mine?"

"That's right. Happy days."

"Why were they in a mine?"

"Old prints. Nitrate. Catch fire. Also rot. Have to be stored like wine. That's why. So took two of my assistants with me to spend weekend down there, checking."

"You stayed in the mine a whole weekend?"

"Uh-huh. Three girls. Friday to Monday. That was the plan. Thought it would be a fun deal. Happy days. So ... where was I? Oh. So, took lights, blankets, linen, plenty of picnic, the whole schmeer, and went to work. I remember exact moment when blast came. Was looking for third reel of a UFA film, *Gekronter Blumenorden an der Pegnitz*. Had reel one, two, four, five, six. No three. Bang! Happy days."

"Jesus. Then what?"

"My girls panicked. Couldn't keep 'em down there. Never saw them again. But I knew. I knew. Stretched that picnic forever. Then starved even longer. Finally came up, and for what? For who? Whom?" She began to weep. "For nobody. Nobody left. Nothing." She took Mayo's hands. "Why won't you stay?"

"Stay? Where?"

"Here."

"I am staying."

"I mean for a long time. Why not? Haven't I got lovely home? And there's all New York for supplies. And farm for flowers and vegetables. We could keep cows and chickens. Go fishing. Drive cars. Go to museums. Art galleries. Entertain ..."

"You're doing all that right now. You don't need me."

"But I do. I do."

"For what?"

"For piano lessons."

After a long pause he said, "You're drunk."

"Not wounded, sire, but dead."

She laid her head on the bar, beamed up at him roguishly, and then closed her eyes. An instant later, Mayo knew she had passed out. He compressed his lips. Then he climbed out of the bar, computed the tab, and left fifteen dollars under the whiskey bottle.

He took Linda's shoulder and shook her gently. She collapsed into his arms, and her hair came tumbling down. He blew out the candle, picked Linda up, and carried her to the Chevy. Then, with anguished concentration, he drove through the dark to the boat pond. It took him forty minutes.

He carried Linda into her bedroom and sat her down on the bed, which was decorated with an elaborate arrangement of dolls. Immediately she rolled over and curled up with a doll in her arms, crooning to it. Mayo lit a lamp and tried to prop her upright. She went over again, giggling.

"Linda," he said, "you got to get that dress off."

"Mf."

"You can't sleep in it. It cost a hundred dollars."

"Nine'nine-fifty."

"Now come on, honey."

"Fm."

He rolled his eyes in exasperation and then undressed her, carefully hanging up the basic black cocktail frock, and standing the sixty-dollar pumps in a corner. He could not manage the clasp of the pearls (simulated), so he put her to bed still wearing them. Lying on the pale blue sheets, nude except for the necklace, she looked like a Nordic odalisque.

"Did you muss my dolls?" she mumbled.

"No. They're all around you."

"Tha's right. Never sleep without 'em." She reached out and petted them lovingly. "Happy days. Long nights."

"Women!" Mayo snorted. He extinguished the lamp and tramped out, slamming the door behind him.

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Next morning Mayo was again awakened by the clatter of dispossessed ducks. The red balloon was sailing on the surface of the pond, bright in the warm June sunshine. Mayo wished it was a model boat instead of the kind of girl who got drunk in bars. He stalked out and jumped into the water as far from Linda as possible. He was sluicing his chest when something seized his ankle and nipped him. He let out a yell and was confronted by Linda's beaming face bursting out of the water before him.

"Good morning," she laughed.

"Very funny," he muttered.

"You look mad this morning."

He grunted.

"And I don't blame you. I did an awful thing last night. I didn't give you any dinner, and I want to apologize."

"I wasn't thinking about dinner," he said with baleful dignity.

"No? Then what on earth are you mad about?"

"I can't stand women who get drunk."

"Who was drunk?"

"You."

"I was not," she said indignantly.

"No? Who had to be undressed and put to bed like a kid?"

"Who was too dumb to take off my pearls?" she countered. "They broke and I slept on pebbles all night. I'm covered with black and blue marks. Look. Here and here and—"

"Linda," he interrupted sternly, "I'm just a plain guy from New Haven. I got no use for spoiled girls who run up charge accounts and all the time decorate theirselves and hang around society-type saloons getting loaded."

"If you don't like my company, why do you stay?"

"I'm going," he said. He climbed out and began drying himself. "I'm starting south this morning."

"Enjoy your hike."

"I'm driving."

"What? A kiddie-car?"

"The Chevy."

"Jim, you're not serious?" She climbed out of the pond, looking alarmed. "You really don't know how to drive yet."

"No? Didn't I drive you home falling-down drunk last night?"

"You'll get into awful trouble."

"Nothing I can't get out of. Anyway, I can't hang around here forever. You're a party girl; you just want to play. I got serious things on my mind. I got to go south and find guys who know about TV."

"Jim, you've got me wrong. I'm not like that at all. Why, look at the way I fixed up my house. Could I have done that if I'd been going to parties all the time?"

"You done a nice job," he admitted.

"Please don't leave today. You're not ready yet."

"Aw, you just want me to hang around and teach you music."

"Who said that?"

"You did. Last night."

She frowned, pulled off her cap, then picked up her towel and began drying herself. At last she said, "Jim, I'll be honest with you. Sure, I want you to stay a while. I won't deny it. But I wouldn't want you around permanently. After all, what have we got in common?"

"You're so damn uptown," he growled.

"No, no, it's nothing like that. It's simply that you're a guy and I'm a girl, and we've got nothing to offer each other. We're different. We've got different tastes and interests. Fact?"

"Absolutely."

"But you're not ready to leave yet. So I tell you what; we'll spend the whole morning practicing driving, and then we'll have some fun. What would you like to do? Go window-shopping? Buy more clothes? Visit the Modern Museum? Have a picnic?"

His face brightened. "Gee, you know something? I was never to a picnic in my whole life. Once I was bartender at a clambake, but that's not the same thing; not like when you're a kid."

She was delighted. "Then we'll have a real kid-type picnic."

And she brought her dolls. She carried them in her arms while Mayo toted the picnic basket to the Alice in Wonderland monument. The statue perplexed Mayo, who had never heard of Lewis Carroll. While Linda seated her pets and unpacked the picnic, she gave Mayo a summary of the story and described how the bronze heads of Alice, the Mad Hatter, and the March Hare had been polished bright by the swarms of kids playing King of the Mountain.

"Funny, I never heard of that story," he said.

"I don't think you had much of a childhood, Jim."

"Why would you say a—" He stopped, cocked his head, and listened intently.

"What's the matter?" Linda asked.

"You hear that bluejay?"

"No."

"Listen. He's making a funny sound; like steel."

"Steel?"

"Yeah. Like ... like swords in a duel."

"You're kidding."

"No. Honest."

"But birds sing; they don't make noises."

"Not always. Bluejays imitate noises a lot. Starlings, too. And parrots. Now why would he be imitating a sword fight? Where'd he hear it?"

"You're a real country boy, aren't you, Jim? Bees and bluejays and starlings and all that ..."

"I guess so. I was going to ask; why would you say a thing like that, me not having any childhood?"

"Oh, things like not knowing *Alice*, and never going on a picnic, and always wanting a model yacht." Linda opened a dark bottle. "Like to try some wine?"

"You better go easy," he warned.

"Now stop it, Jim. I'm not a drunk."

"Did you or didn't you get smashed last night?"

She capitulated. "All right, I did; but only because it was my first drink in years."

He was pleased by her surrender. "Sure. Sure. That figures."

"So? Join me?"

"What the hell, why not?" He grinned. "Let's live a little. Say, this is one swingin' picnic, and I like the plates, too. Where'd you get them?"

"Abercrombie & Fitch," Linda said, deadpan. "Stainless Steel Service for Four, thirty-nine fifty. Skoal."

Mayo burst out laughing. "I sure goofed, didn't I, kicking up all that fuss? Here's looking at you."

"Here's looking right back."

They drank and continued eating in warm silence, smiling companionably at each other. Linda removed her madras silk shirt in order to tan in the blazing afternoon sun, and Mayo politely hung it up on a branch. Suddenly Linda asked, "Why didn't you have a childhood, Jim?"

"Gee, I don't know." He thought it over. "I guess because my mother died when I was a kid. And something else, too; I had to work a lot."

"Why?"

"My father was a schoolteacher. You know how they get paid."

"Oh, so that's why you're anti-egghead."

"I am?"

"Of course. No offense."

"Maybe I am," he conceded. "It sure was a letdown for my old man, me playing fullback in high school and him wanting like an Einstein in the house."

"Was football fun?"

"Not like playing games. Football's a business. Hey, remember when we were kids how we used to choose up sides? *Ibbety, bibbety, zibbety, zab?*"

"We used to say, *Eenie, meenie, miney, mo.*"

"Remember: *April Fool, go to school, tell your teacher you're a fool?*"

"*I love coffee, I love tea, I love the boys, and the boys love me.*"

"I bet they did at that," Mayo said solemnly.

"Not me."

"Why not?"

"I was always too big."

He was astonished. "But you're not big," he assured her. "You're just the right size. Perfect. And really built, I noticed when we moved the piano in. You got muscle, for a girl. A speciality in the legs, and that's where it counts."

She blushed. "Stop it, Jim."

"No. Honest."

"More wine?"

"Thanks. You have some, too."

"All right."

A crack of thunder split the sky with its sonic boom and was followed by the roar of collapsing masonry.

"There goes another skyscraper," Linda said. "What were we talking about?"

"Games," Mayo said promptly. "Excuse me for talking with my mouth full."

"Oh, yes. Jim, did you play *Drop the Handkerchief* up in New Haven?" Linda sang. "*A tisket, a tasket, a green and yellow basket. I sent a letter to my love, and on the way I dropped it ...*"

"Gee," he said, much impressed. "You sing real good."

"Oh, go on!"

"Yes, you do. You got a swell voice. Now don't argue with me. Keep quiet a minute. I got to figure something out." He thought intently for a long time, finishing his wine and absently accepting another glass. Finally he delivered himself of a decision. "You got to learn music."

"You know I'm dying to, Jim."

"So I'm going to stay awhile and teach you; as much as I know. Now hold it! Hold it!" he added hastily, cutting off her excitement. "I'm not going to stay in your house. I want a place of my own."

"Of course, Jim. Anything you say."

"And I'm still headed south."

"I'll teach you to drive, Jim. I'll keep my word."

"And no strings, Linda."

"Of course not. What kind of strings?"

"You know. Like the last minute you all of a sudden got a Looey Cans couch you want me to move in."

"*Louis Quinze!*" Linda's jaw dropped. "Wherever did you learn that?"

"Not in the army, that's for sure."

They laughed, clinked glasses, and finished their wine. Suddenly Mayo leaped up, pulled Linda's hair, and ran to the Wonderland Monument. In an instant he had climbed to the top of Alice's head.

"I'm King of the Mountain," he shouted, looking around in imperial survey. "I'm King of the—" He cut himself off and stared down behind the statue.

"Jim, what's the matter?"

Without a word, Mayo climbed down and strode to a pile of debris half-hidden inside overgrown forsythia bushes. He knelt and began turning over the wreckage with gentle hands. Linda ran to him.

"Jim, what's wrong?"

"These used to be model boats," he muttered.

"That's right. My God, is that all? I thought you were sick or something."

"How come they're here?"

"Why, I dumped them, of course."

"You?"

"Yes. I told you. I had to clear out the boathouse when I moved in. That was ages ago."

"You did this?"

"Yes. I—"

"You're a murderer," he growled. He stood up and glared at her. "You're a killer. You're like all women, you got no heart and soul. To do a thing like this!"

He turned and stalked toward the boat pond. Linda followed him, completely bewildered.

"Jim, I don't understand. Why are you so mad?"

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"But I had to have house room. You wouldn't expect me to live with a lot of model boats."

"Just forget everything I said. I'm going to pack and go south. I wouldn't stay with you if you was the last person on earth."

Linda gathered herself and suddenly darted ahead of Mayo. When he tramped into the boathouse, she was standing before the door of the guest room. She held up a heavy iron key.

"I found it," she panted. "Your door's locked."

"Gimme that key, Linda."

"No."

He stepped toward her, but she faced him defiantly and stood her ground.

"Go ahead," she challenged. "Hit me."

He stopped. "Aw, I wouldn't pick on anybody that wasn't my own size."

They continued to face each other, at a complete impasse.

"I don't need my gear," Mayo muttered at last. "I can get more stuff somewhere."

"Oh, go ahead and pack," Linda answered. She tossed him the key and stood aside. Then Mayo discovered there was no lock in the bedroom door. He opened the door, looked inside, closed it, and looked at Linda. She kept her face straight but began to sputter. He grinned. Then they both burst out laughing.

"Gee," Mayo said, "you sure made a monkey out of me. I'd hate to play poker against you."

"You're a pretty good bluffer yourself, Jim. I was scared to death you were going to knock me down."

"You ought to know I wouldn't hurt nobody."

"I guess I do. Now, let's sit down and talk this over sensibly."

"Aw, forget it, Linda. I kind of lost my head over them boats, and I—"

"I don't mean the boats; I mean going south. Every time you get mad you start south again. Why?"

"I told you, to find guys who know about TV."

"Why?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"I can try. Why don't you explain what you're after—specifically? Maybe I can help you."

"You can't do nothing for me; you're a girl."

"We have our uses. At least I can listen. You can trust me, Jim. Aren't we chums? Tell me about it."

.....

Well, when the blast come (Mayo said) I was up in the Berkshires with Gil Watkins. Gil was my buddy, a real nice guy and a real bright guy. He took two years from M.I.T. before he quit college. He was like chief engineer or something at WNHA, the TV station in New Haven. Gil had a million hobbies. One of them was spee—speel—I can't remember. It meant exploring caves.

So anyway, we were up in this flume in the Berkshires, spending the weekend inside, exploring and trying to map everything and figure out where the underground river comes from. We brought food and stuff along, and bedrolls. The compass we were using went crazy for like twenty minutes, and that should have give us a clue, but Gil talked about magnetic ores and stuff. Only when we come out Sunday night, I tell you it was pretty scary. Gil knew right off what happened.

"By Christ, Jim," he said, "they up and done it like everybody always knew they would. They've blew and gassed and poisoned and radiated themselves straight to hell, and we're going back to that goddamn cave until it all blows over."

So me and Gil went back and rationed the food and stayed as long as we could. Finally we come out again and drove back to New Haven. It was dead like all the rest. Gil put together some radio stuff and tried to pick up broadcasts. Nothing. Then we packed some canned goods and drove all around: Bridgeport, Waterbury, Hartford, Springfield, Providence, New London ... a big circle. Nobody. Nothing. So we come back to New Haven and settled down, and it was a pretty good life.

Daytime, we'd get in supplies and stuff and tinker with the house to keep it working right. Nights, after supper, Gil would go off to WNHA around seven o'clock and start the station. He was running it on the emergency generators. I'd go down to the Body Slam, open it up, sweep it out, and then start the bar TV set. Gil fixed me a generator for it to run on.

It was a lot of fun watching the shows Gil was broadcasting. He'd start with the news and weather, which he always got wrong. All he had was some Farmer's Almanacs and a sort of antique barometer that looked like that clock you got there on the wall. I don't think it worked so good, or maybe Gil never took weather at M.I.T. Then he'd broadcast the evening show.

I had my shotgun in the bar in case of holdups. Anytime I saw something that bugged me, I just up with the gun and let loose at the set. Then I'd take it and throw it out the front door and put another one in its place. I must have had hundreds waiting in the back. I spent two days a week just collecting reserves.

Midnight, Gil would turn off WNHA, I'd lock up the restaurant, and we'd meet home for coffee. Gil would ask how many sets I shot and laugh when I told him. He said I was the most accurate TV poll ever invented. I'd ask him about what shows were coming up next week and argue with him about ... oh ... about like what movies or football games WNHA was scheduling. I didn't like Westerns much, and I hated them high-minded panel discussions.

But the luck had to turn lousy; it's the story of my life. After a couple of years, I found out I was down to my last set, and then I was in trouble. This night Gil run one of them icky commercials where this smart-aleck woman saves a marriage with the right laundry soap. Naturally I reached for my gun, and only at the last minute remembered not to shoot. Then he run an awful movie about a misunderstood composer, and the same thing happened. When we met back at the house, I was all shook up.

"What's the matter?" Gil asked.

I told him.

"I thought you liked watching the shows," he said.

"Only when I could shoot 'em."

"You poor bastard," he laughed, "you're a captive audience now."

"Gil, could you maybe change the programs, seeing the spot I'm in?"

"Be reasonable, Jim. WNHA has to broadcast variety. We operate on the cafeteria basis; something for everybody. If you don't like a show, why don't you switch channels?"

"Now that's silly. You know damn well we only got one channel in New Haven."

"Then turn your set off."

"I can't turn the bar set off; it's part of the entertainment. I'd lose my whole clientele. Gil, do you *have* to show them awful movies, like that army musical last night, singing and dancing and kissing on top of Sherman tanks, for Jezus' sake!"

"The women love uniform pictures."

"And those commercials; women always sneering at somebody's girdle, and fairies smoking cigarettes, and—"

"Aw," Gil said, "write a letter to the station."

So I did, and a week later I got an answer. It said: *Dear Mr. Mayo: We are very glad to learn that you are a regular viewer of WNHA, and thank you for your interest in our programming. We hope you will continue to enjoy our broadcasts. Sincerely yours, Gilbert O. Watkins, Station Manager.* A couple of tickets for an interview show were enclosed. I showed the letter to Gil, and he just shrugged.

"You see what you're up against, Jim," he said. "They don't care about what you like or don't like. All they want to know is if you are watching."

I tell you, the next couple of months were hell for me. I couldn't keep the set turned off, and I couldn't watch it without reaching for my gun a dozen times a night. It took all my willpower to keep from pulling the trigger. I got so nervous and jumpy that I knew I had to do something about it before I went off my rocker. So one night I brought the gun home and shot Gil.

Next day I felt a lot better, and when I went down to the Body Slam at seven o'clock to clean up, I was whistling kind of cheerful. I swept out the restaurant, polished the bar, and then turned on the TV to get the news and weather. You wouldn't believe it, but the set was busted. I couldn't get a picture. I couldn't even get a sound. My last set, busted.

So you see, that's why I have to head south (Mayo explained)—I got to locate a TV repairman.

There was a long pause after Mayo finished his story. Linda examined him keenly, trying to conceal the gleam in her eye. At last she asked with studied carelessness, "Where did he get the barometer?"

"Who? What?"

"Your friend, Gil. His antique barometer. Where did he get it?"

"Gee, I don't know. Antiquing was another one of his hobbies."

"And it looked like that clock?"

"Just like it."

"French?"

"I couldn't say."

"Bronze?"

"I guess so. Like your clock. Is that bronze?"

"Yes. Shaped like a sunburst?"

"No, just like yours."

"That's a sunburst. The same size?"

"Exactly."

"Where was it?"

"Didn't I tell you? In our house."

"Where's the house?"

"On Grant Street."

"What number?"

"Three fifteen. Say, what is all this?"

"Nothing, Jim. Just curious. No offense. Now I think I'd better get our picnic things."

"You wouldn't mind if I took a walk by myself?"

She cocked an eye at him. "Don't try driving alone. Garage mechanics are scarcer than TV repairmen."

He grinned and disappeared; but after dinner the true purpose of his disappearance was revealed when he produced a sheaf of sheet music, placed it on the piano rack, and led Linda to the piano bench. She was delighted and touched.

"Jim, you angel! Wherever did you find it?"

"In the apartment house across the street. Fourth floor, rear. Name of Horowitz. They got a lot of records, too. Boy, I can tell you it was pretty spooky snooping around in the dark with only matches. You know something funny? The whole top of the house is full of glop."

"Glop?"

"Yeah. Sort of white jelly, only it's hard. Like clear concrete. Now look, see this note? It's C. Middle C.

It stands for this white key here. We better sit together. Move over ..."

The lesson continued for two hours of painful concentration and left them both so exhausted that they tottered to their rooms with only perfunctory good nights.

"Jim," Linda called.

"Yeah?" he yawned.

"Would you like one of my dolls for your bed?"

"Gee, no. Thanks a lot, Linda, but guys really ain't interested in dolls."

"I suppose not. Never mind. Tomorrow I'll have something for you that really interests guys."

.....

Mayo was awakened next morning by a rap on his door. He heaved up in bed and tried to open his eyes.

"Yeah? Who is it?" he called.

"It's me. Linda. May I come in?"

He glanced around hastily. The room was neat. The hooked rug was clean. The precious candlewick bedspread was neatly folded on top of the dresser.

"Okay. Come on in."

Linda entered, wearing a crisp seersucker dress. She sat down on the edge of the four-poster and gave Mayo a friendly pat. "Good morning," she said. "Now listen. I'll have to leave you alone for a few hours. I've got things to do. There's breakfast on the table, but I'll be back in time for lunch. All right?"

"Sure."

"You won't be lonesome?"

"Where you going?"

"Tell you when I get back." She reached out and tousled his head. "Be a good boy and don't get into mischief. Oh, one other thing. Don't go into my bedroom."

"Why should I?"

"Just don't anyway."

She smiled and was gone. Moments later, Mayo heard the jeep start and drive off. He got up at once, went into Linda's bedroom, and looked around. The room was neat, as ever. The bed was made, and

her pet dolls were lovingly arranged on the coverlet. Then he saw it.

"Gee," he breathed.

It was a model of a full-rigged clipper ship. The spars and rigging were intact, but the hull was peeling, and the sails were shredded. It stood before Linda's closet, and alongside it was her sewing basket. She had already cut out a fresh set of white linen sails. Mayo knelt down before the model and touched it tenderly.

"I'll paint her black with a gold line around her," he murmured, "and I'll name her the *Linda N.*"

He was so deeply moved that he hardly touched his breakfast. He bathed, dressed, took his shotgun and a handful of shells, and went out to wander through the park. He circled south, passed the playing fields, the decaying carousel, and the crumbling skating rink, and at last left the park and loafed down Seventh Avenue.

He turned east on 50th Street and spent a long time trying to decipher the tattered posters advertising the last performance at Radio City Music Hall. Then he turned south again. He was jolted to a halt by the sudden clash of steel. It sounded like giant sword blades in a titanic duel. A small herd of stunted horses burst out of a side street, terrified by the clangor. Their shoeless hooves thudded bluntly on the pavement. The sound of steel stopped.

"That's where that bluejay got it from," Mayo muttered. "But what the hell is it?"

He drifted eastward to investigate, but forgot the mystery when he came to the diamond center. He was dazzled by the blue-white stones glittering in the showcases. The door of one jewel mart had sagged open, and Mayo tipped in. When he emerged, it was with a strand of genuine matched pearls which had cost him an I.O.U. worth a year's rent on the Body Slam.

His tour took him to Madison Avenue, where he found himself before Abercrombie & Fitch. He went in to explore and came at last to the gun racks. There he lost all sense of time, and when he recovered his senses, he was walking up Fifth Avenue toward the boat pond. An Italian Cosmi automatic rifle was cradled in his arms, guilt was in his heart, and a sales slip in the store read: *I.O.U. 1 Cosmi Rifle, \$750.00. 6 Boxes Ammo. \$18.00. James Mayo.*

It was past three o'clock when he got back to the boathouse. He eased in, trying to appear casual, hoping the extra gun he was carrying would go unnoticed. Linda was sitting on the piano bench with her back to him.

"Hi," Mayo said nervously. "Sorry I'm late. I . . . I brought you a present. They're real." He pulled the pearls from his pocket and held them out. Then he saw she was crying.

"Hey, what's the matter?"

She didn't answer.

"You wasn't scared I'd run out on you? I mean, well, all my gear is here. The car, too. You only had to look."

She turned. "I hate you!" she cried.

He dropped the pearls and recoiled, startled by her vehemence. "What's the matter?"

"You're a lousy, rotten liar!"

"Who? Me?"

"I drove up to New Haven this morning." Her voice trembled with passion. "There's no house standing on Grant Street. It's all wiped out. There's no Station WNHA. The whole building's gone."

"No."

"Yes. And I went to your restaurant. There's no pile of TV sets out in the street. There's only one set, over the bar. It's rusted to pieces. The rest of the restaurant is a pigsty. You were living there all the time. Alone. There was only one bed in back. It was lies! All lies!"

"Why would I lie about a thing like that?"

"You never shot any Gil Watkins."

"I sure did. Both barrels. He had it coming."

"And you haven't got any TV set to repair."

"Yes, I do.

"And even if it is repaired, there's no station to broadcast."

"Talk sense," he said angrily. "Why would I shoot Gil if there wasn't any broadcast?"

"If he's dead, how can he broadcast?"

"See? And you just now said I didn't shoot him."

"Oh, you're mad! You're insane!" she sobbed. "You just described that barometer because you happened to be looking at my clock. And I believed your crazy lies. I had my heart set on a barometer to match my clock. I've been looking for years." She ran to the wall arrangement and hammered her fist alongside the clock. "It belongs right here. Here. But you lied, you lunatic. There never was a barometer."

"If there's a lunatic around here, it's you," he shouted. "You're so crazy to get this house decorated that nothing's real for you anymore."

She ran across the room, snatched up his old shotgun, and pointed it at him. "You get out of here. Right this minute. Get out or I'll kill you. I never want to see you again."

The shotgun kicked off in her hands, knocking her backward and spraying shot over Mayo's head into a corner bracket. China shattered and clattered down. Linda's face went white.

"Jim! My God, are you all right? I didn't mean to ... it just went off ..."

He stepped forward, too furious to speak. Then, as he raised his hand to cuff her, the sound of distant

reports come, BLAM-BLAM-BLAM. Mayo froze.

"Did you hear that?" he whispered.

Linda nodded.

"That wasn't any accident. It was a signal."

Mayo grabbed the shotgun, ran outside, and fired the second barrel into the air. There was a pause. Then again came the distant explosions in a stately triplet, BLAM-BLAM-BLAM. They had an odd, sucking sound, as though they were implosions rather than explosions. Far up the park, a canopy of frightened birds mounted into the sky.

"There's somebody," Mayo exulted. "By God, I told you I'd find somebody. Come on."

They ran north, Mayo digging into his pockets for more shells to reload and signal again.

"I got to thank you for taking that shot at me, Linda."

"I didn't shoot at you," she protested. "It was an accident."

"The luckiest accident in the world. They could be passing through and never know about us. But what the hell kind of guns are they using? I never heard no shots like that before, and I heard 'em all. Wait a minute."

On the little piazza before the Wonderland monument, Mayo halted and raised the shotgun to fire. Then he slowly lowered it. He took a deep breath. In a harsh voice he said, "Turn around. We're going back to the house." He pulled her around and faced her south.

Linda stared at him. In an instant he had become transformed from a gentle teddy bear into a panther.

"Jim, what's wrong?"

"I'm scared," he growled. "I'm goddamn scared, and I don't want you to be, too." The triple salvo sounded again. "Don't pay any attention," he ordered. "We're going back to the house. Come on!"

She refused to move. "But why? Why?"

"We don't want any part of them. Take my word for it."

"How do you know? You've got to tell me."

"Christ! You won't let it alone until you find out, huh? All right. You want the explanation for that bee smell, and them buildings falling down, and all the rest?" He turned Linda around with a hand on her neck and directed her gaze at the Wonderland monument. "Go ahead. Look."

A consummate craftsman had removed the heads of Alice, the Mad Hatter, and the March Hare, and replaced them with towering mantis heads, all saber mandibles, antennae, and faceted eyes. They were of a burnished steel and gleamed with unspeakable ferocity. Linda let out a sick whimper and sagged against Mayo. The triple report signaled once more.

Mayo caught Linda, heaved her over his shoulder, and loped back toward the pond. She recovered consciousness in a moment and began to moan. "Shut up," he growled. "Whining won't help." He set her on her feet before the boathouse. She was shaking but trying to control herself. "Did this place have shutters when you moved in? Where are they?"

"Stacked." She had to squeeze the words out. "Behind the trellis."

"I'll put 'em up. You fill buckets with water and stash 'em in the kitchen. Go!"

"Is it going to be a siege?"

"We'll talk later. Go!"

She filled buckets and then helped Mayo jam the last of the shutters into the window embrasures. "All right, inside," he ordered. They went into the house and shut and barred the door. Faint shafts of the late afternoon sun filtered through the louvers of the shutters. Mayo began unpacking the cartridges for the Cosmi rifle. "You got any kind of gun?"

"A .22 revolver somewhere."

"Ammo?"

"I think so."

"Get it ready."

"Is it going to be a siege?" she repeated.

"I don't know. I don't know who they are, or what they are, or where they come from. All I know is, we got to be prepared for the worst."

The distant implosions sounded. Mayo looked up alertly, listening. Linda could make him out in the dimness now. His face looked carved. His chest gleamed with sweat. He exuded the musky odor of caged lions. Linda had an overpowering impulse to touch him. Mayo loaded the rifle, stood it alongside the shotgun, and began padding from shutter to shutter, peering out vigilantly, waiting with massive patience.

"Will they find us?" Linda asked.

"Maybe."

"Could they be friendly?"

"Maybe."

"Those heads looked so horrible."

"Yeah."

"Jim, I'm scared. I've never been so scared in my life."

"I don't blame you."

"How long before we know?"

"An hour, if they're friendly; two or three, if they're not."

"W-why longer?"

"If they're looking for trouble, they'll be more cautious."

"Jim, what do you really think?"

"About what?"

"Our chances."

"You really want to know?"

"Please."

"We're dead."

She began to sob. He shook her savagely. "Stop that. Go get your gun ready."

She lurched across the living room, noticed the pearls Mayo had dropped, and picked them up. She was so dazed that she put them on automatically. Then she went into her darkened bedroom and pulled Mayo's model yacht away from the closet door. She located the .22 in a hatbox on the closet floor and removed it along with a small carton of cartridges.

She realized that a dress was unsuited to this emergency. She got a turtleneck sweater, jodhpurs, and boots from the closet. Then she stripped naked to change. Just as she raised her arms to unclasp the pearls, Mayo entered, paced to the shuttered south window, and peered out. When he turned back from the window, he saw her.

He stopped short. She couldn't move. Their eyes locked, and she began to tremble, trying to conceal herself with her arms. He stepped forward, stumbled on the model yacht, and kicked it out of the way. The next instant he had taken possession of her body, and the pearls went flying, too. As she pulled him down on the bed, fiercely tearing the shirt from his back, her pet dolls also went into the discard heap along with the yacht, the pearls, and the rest of the world.

The End

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