

YOUR FACES, O MY SISTERS! YOUR FACES FILLED OF LIGHT!

Hot summer night, big raindrops falling faster now as she swings along the concrete expressway, high over the old dead city. Lightning is sizzling and cracking over the lake behind her. Beautiful! The flashes jump the roofs of the city to life below her, miles of cube-buildings gray and sharp-edged in the glare. People lived here once, all the way to the horizons. Smiling, she thinks of all those walls and windows full of people, living in turbulence and terror. Incredible.

She's passing a great billboard-thing dangling and banging in the wind. Part of a big grinning face: W-O-N-D-E-R-B-R-E-A, whatever that was, bright as day. She strides along, enjoying the cool rain on her bare head. No need to pull up her parka for a few minutes yet; the freshness is so great. All headaches completely gone. The sisters were wrong; she's perfectly fine. There was no reason to wait any longer, with the messages in her pack and Des Moines out there ahead. They didn't realize how walk-ing rests you.

Sandals just getting wet, she notes. It feels good, but she mustn't let them get wet through; they'll chafe and start a blister. Couriers have to think of things like that. In a few minutes she'll climb down one of the ramps and take shelter.

There's ramps along here every half-mile or so, over the old city. Chi-cago or She-cago, which was it. She should find out; she's been this way several times now. Courier to the West. The lake behind her

is Michigam, Michi-gami, the shining Big Sea Water. Satisfied, she figures she has come nearly seventy miles already since she left the hostel yesterday, and only one hitch. Im not even tired. That beautiful old sister, she thinks. I'd have liked to talk with her more. Like the wise old Nokomis. That's the trouble, I always want to stop and explore the beautiful places and people, and I always want to get on too, get to the next. Couriers see so much. Someday

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she'll come back here and have a good swim in the lake, loaf and ramble around the old city. **So** much to see; no danger **except from falling walls; she's** expert at watching that. Some sisters say there are dog-packs here; **she** doesn't believe it. And even if there are, they **wouldn't** be dangerous. Animals aren't dangerous if you know what to do. No dangers left at **all**, in the whole free wide world!

She shakes the rain out of her face, smiling up at the blowing night. To be a courier, what a great life! Rambling woman, on the road. Heyo, sister! Any mail, any messages for Des Moines and points west? Travel, travel **on**. But she **is** traveling in really heavy downpour now, she sees. She squeezes past a heap of old wrecked "cars" and splash! one foot goes in ankle-deep. The rain is drumming little fountains all over the old roadway. Time to **get** under; she reaches back and pulls the parka hood up from under her pack, thinking how alive the highway looks in the flashing lightning and rain. This road must have been full of the "cars" once, all of them shiny new, roaring along probably quite close together, belching gases, shining their lights, using all this space. She can almost hear them, poor crazy creatures. *Rrrr-oom!* A blazing bolt slaps down quite near her, strobes on and off. Whew! That was close. She chuckles, feeling briefly dizzy in the ozone. Ah, here's a ramp right by her, it looks okay.

Followed by a strange whirling light-shaft, some trick of the storm, she ducks aside and runs lightly down from the Stevenson Expressway **into the** Thirty-fifth Street underpass.

"Gone." Patrolman Lugioni cuts the flasher, lets the siren growl diminu-endo. The cruiser accelerates in the curb lane, broadcasting its need of a ring job. "S—tass kids out hitching on a night like this." He shakes his head.

Al, the driver, feels under his leg for the pack of smokes. "I thought it was a girl."

"Who can tell," Lugioni grunts. Lightning is cracking all around **them; it's a** cloudburst. On every side of them the Saturday night madhouse **tears on, every car towing a big bustle of dirty water in the lights of the car** behind.

—Dry under the overpass, but it's really dark in here between the light-ning flashes. She pushes back her parka, walks on, carefully avoiding wrecks and debris. With all that flashing, her night-vision won't develop. Too bad, she has keen night-vision. Takes forty-five minutes to come up fully; she knows a lot of stuff like that.

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She's under a long elevated roadway down the center of an old street; it seems to go on for miles straight ahead. Almost straight West, good. Out-side on both sides the open street is jumping with rain, splashing up white like plaster grass as the lightning cracks. *Boom! Baroomm-m-m!* The Mid-west has great storms. She loves the wild uproar; she loves footing through a storm. All for her! How she'd like to strip and run out into it. Get a good bath, clean off all the dust and sweat. Her stuff would keep dry in here. Hey, shall I? . . . Almost she does, but she isn't really that dirty yet and she should get on; she lost so much time at that hostel. Couriers have to act responsible. She makes herself pad soberly along dodging junk in the dark, thinking, Now here's the kind of place a horse would be no good.

She has always this perennial debate with herself about getting a horse. Some of the couriers like to ride. It probably *is* faster, she thinks. But not much, not much. Most people have no idea how fast walking goes; Im up and moving while they're still fussing with the horse. And so much trouble, feeding them, worrying about their feet. You can carry more, of course. But the real point is how isolated it makes you. No more hitching, no more fun of getting to know all kinds of sisters. Like that wise motherly sister back there who picked her up coming into the city. Sort of a strange dialect, but I could understand her, and the love showed through. A mother. . . . Maybe Ill be a mother someday, she thinks. But not yet. Or Ill be the good old Nokomis. *The wrinkled old Nokomis, many things Nokomis taught her. . . .*

And those horses she had, I never saw horses go like that. Must be some tremendous farms around here. Tomorrow when she's out of the city, she'll get up on a high place where she can really look over the country. If I see a good horse-farm, I'll remember. A horse would be useful if I take the next route, the route going all the way West, across the Rockies. But Des Moines is far enough now. Des Moines is just right, on my own good legs.

"She was one of *them*, one of those bra-burners," Mrs. Olmsted says pursily, sliding gingerly out of her plastic raincoat. She undoes her plastic Rainflower bonnet. "Oh god, my set."

"You don't usually pick up hitchers, Mom." Bee is sitting in the dinette, doing her nails with Plum Love.

"It was starting to storm," the mother says defensively, hustling into the genuine Birdseye kitchen area. "She had a big knapsack on her back. Oh, to tell you the truth, I thought it was a Boy Scout. That's why I stopped."

"Ha ha ha."

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"I dropped her right at Stony Island. That's as far as we go, I said. She kept talking crazy about my face."

"Probably stoned. She'll get murdered out there."

"Bee, I told you, I wish you wouldn't use that word. I don't want to know about it, I have no sympathy at all. She's made her bed, I say. Now, where's the Fricolator lid?"

"In the bathroom. What about your face?"

"What's it doing in the bathroom?"

"I used it to soak my fluffbrush, it's the only thing the right shape. What'd she say about your face?"

"Oh, Bee, your father would murder you. That's no way to do, we eat out of that." Her voice fades and rises, still protesting, as she comes back

with the lid.

"My hair isn't poison, Mom. Besides, the heat will fix it. You know my hair is pure hell when it rains, I have to look good at the office." "I wish you wouldn't swear, either." "What did she say about your face, Mom?"

"Oh, my face. Well! 'Your face has wisdom,' she says in this crazy way. 'Mother-lines full of wisdom and light.' *Lines*. Talk about rude! She called me the wrinkled old somebody. I told her what I thought about girls hitchhiking, believe me I told her. Here, help me clear this off, your father will be home any minute. You know what she said?"

"What did she say? Here, hand me that."

"She asked, did I mean dogs? *Dogs!* 'There is no fear,' she says, 'there is no fear on the whole wide earth.' And she kept asking me where did I get the horses. I guess that's some word they have, she meant the Buick." "Stoned, I told you. Poor kid."

"Bee, *please*. What I say is, a girl like that is asking for it. Just asking for whatever she gets. I don't care what you say, there are certain rules. I have no sympathy, no sympathy at all." "You can say that again."

—Her sandals are damp but okay. Good leather, she sewed and oiled them herself. When she's real old, she'll have a little cabin by the road somewhere, make sandals and stuff for the sisters going by. How would I get the leather, she thinks. She could probably deal with one of the peddler sisters. Or can she tan it herself? It isn't so hard. Have to look that up

some time.

The rain is still coming down hard; it's nice and cool now. She notices she has been scuffling through drifts of old paper, making it sail away into

the gusty wind. All kinds of trash, here and everywhere. How they must have lived. The flashing outside is lighting up a solid wall of ruined build-ings. Big black empty windows, some kind of factory. A piece of paper blows up and sticks on her neck. She peels it off, looks at it as she walks. In the lightning she can see it's a picture. Two sisters hugging. Neat. They're dressed in funny old clothes. And the small sister has such a weird look, all painted up and strange. Like she was pretending to smile. A picture from the troubles, obviously.

As she tucks it in her pocket, she sees there's a light, right ahead be-tween the pillars of the overpass. A hand-lantern, it moves. Somebody in here too, taking shelter. How great! Maybe they even live here, will have tales to tell! She hastens toward the light, calling the courier's cry:

"Heyo, Sister! Any mail, any messages? Des Moines and going West!"

Yes—she sees there are two of them, wrapped up in raingear, leaning on one of the old "cars." Probably travelers too. She calls again.

"Hello?" one of them replies hesitantly. They must be worried by the storm. Some sisters are. She'll reassure them, nothing to be afraid of, nothing at all. How she loves to meet new sisters; that's the beautiest part of a courier's life. Eagerly she strides through papers and puddles and comes into the circle of their light.

"But who can we report it to, Don? You aren't even known here, city police wouldn't pay any attention."

He shrugs regretfully, knowing his wife is right.

"*One more unfortunate, weary of breath, rashly importunate, gone to her death.*"

"What's that from?"

"Oh, Hood. Thomas Hood. When the Thames used to be full of ruined women."

"Wandering around in this district at night, it's suicide. We're not so safe here ourselves, you know. Do you think that AAA tow truck will really come?"

"They said they would. They have quite a few calls ahead of us. No-body's moving out there, she'll probably be safe as long as this downpour lasts, anyway. We'll get inside when it eases up."

"Yes. ... I wish we could have done something, Don. She seemed so, I don't know, not just a tramp."

"We couldn't very well hit her over the head and take her in, you know. Besides, she was a fairly strong-looking little piece, if you noticed."

"Yes. . . . Don, she *was* crazy, wasn't she? She didn't hear one thing

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you said. Calling you Sister. And that ad she showed us, she said it was two women. That's sick, isn't it—I mean, seriously disturbed? Not just drugs?"

He laughs ruefully. "Questions I'd love to be able to answer. These things interact, it's tough to unscramble. But yes, for what it's worth, my intuition says it was functional. Of course my intuition got some help, you heard her say she'd been in a hospital or hostel somewhere. ... If I had to bet, Pam, I'd say post-ECS. That placid waxy cast to the face. Capillary patches. A lot of rapid eye movement. Typical."

"You mean, she's had electric shock."

"My guess."

"And we just let her walk away. . . . You know, I don't think that truck is coming at all. I think they just say yes and forget it. I've heard the triple-A is a terrible fraud."

"Got to give them time on a night like this."

"Ummm ... I wonder where she is now."

"Hey, look, the rain's letting up. We better hop inside and lock the doors."

"Right, sister."

"Don't you start that, I warn you. Lock that back window, too."

"Don . . ."

"Yeah, what?"

"Don, she seemed so, I don't know. Happy and free. She—she was *fun*."

"That's the sick part, honey."

—The rain is letting up now, she sees. How convenient, because the sheltering ramp is now veering away to the North. She follows the median strip of the old avenue out into the open, not bothering to put the parka up. It's a wrecked part of the city, everything knocked down flat for a few blocks, but the street is okay. In the new quiet she can hear the lake waves smacking the shore, miles behind. Really have to stop and camp here awhile some trip, she thinks, skirting a wreck or two on the center strip. By the Shining Big Sea Waters.

Was it Michi-Gami or Gitche-Gumee? No matter; she loves the whole idea of Hiawatha. In fact she always felt she *was* the sister Hiawatha somehow; it's one of the few pieces from the old days that makes any sense to her. Growing up learning all the ways of the beautiful things, the names of the wild creatures, learning lovingly all the richness, learning how. There are words for it, some of the sisters talk so beautifully. But that's not her way, words; she just knows what's the way that feels right. The good way, and herself rambling through the wonderful world. Maybe she's a

little superficial, but it takes all kinds. I'm the *working* kind, she thinks proudly. Responsible, too, a courier. Speaking of which, she's at a Y; better make sure she's still headed West. These old streets can twist you.

She stops and opens her belt compass, watches the dim green needle steady. There! Right that way. And what luck. In the last flickers of light-ning she can see trees a couple of blocks ahead. Maybe a park!

How fast these storms go. She dodges across a wreck-filled intersection, and starts trotting for the sheer joy of strength and health down the open median toward the park. Yes, it looks like a long strip of greenery, heading due West for quite a ways. She'll have nice walking. Somewhere ahead she'll hit another of the old freeways, the Kennedy or the Dan Ryan, that'll take her out of the city. Bound to be traffic on them too, in the morning. She'll get a hitch from a grain-cart maybe, or maybe a peddler. Or maybe something she's never seen before, one more of the surprises of the happy world.

Jogging, feeling her feet fall fast and free, she thinks with respect of the two sisters she met back there under the ramp. The big one was some kind of healer, from down South. So loving together, making jokes. But I'm not going to get sick anymore, I'm really well. Proud of the vitality in her, she strides swiftly across the last intersection and spots a path meandering into the overgrown strip of park. Maybe I can go barefoot in there, no glass, she thinks. The last lightning-flash helps her as she heads in under the drip-ping trees.

The biker cuts off his spotlight fast, accelerates past the park entrance. She looked okay, little and running. Scared. But something about her bothers him. Not quite right. Maybe she's meeting somebody in there?

He's running alone tonight, the rain freaked them all out. Alone isn't so good. But maybe she's alone, too? Small and alone. . . .

Gunning up Archer Avenue, he decides to cut back once through the park cross-over, check it out. The main thing is not to get the bike scratched up.

—Beautiful cool clean breeze on her face, and clouds are breaking up. Old moon is trying to shine out! The path is deep in leaves here; okay to get the sandals off and dry them awhile.

She balances one-legged, unbuckling. The left one is soaked, all right. She hangs them over her pack and steps out barefoot. Great.

Out beyond the trees the buildings are reared up high on both sides now, old cubes and towers sticking up at the racing clouds, glints of moon-

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light where the glass windows are still in. **Fantastic. She casts a loving thought back toward** the long-dead ones who **had built all this. The Men**, the city-builders. So complex and weird, so different from the good natural way. Too bad they never lived to know the beautiful peaceful free world. But they wouldn't have liked it, probably. They were sick, poor things. But maybe they could have been different; they were people too, she muses.

Suddenly she is startled by the passage of something crashing across the path ahead, and without thinking springs nimbly into a big bush. Light-ning, growling noises—in a minute it fades away. A deer, maybe, she wonders, rubbing her head. But what was the noise? One of those dogs, maybe? Could it be a dog-pack?

Hmmm. She rubs harder, frowning because the headache seems to have come back. Like a knife-blade in her temple. Ouch! It's really bad again; it's making her dizzy. She blinks, sees the buildings beyond the park blaze up brightly—squares of yellow light everywhere like a million windows. Oh no, not the bad hallucinations again. No, she's well now!

But yes, it is—and great lights seem to be suddenly everywhere; a roar of noise breaks out all around her in the dead streets; things are **rushing** and clanging. Maybe she isn't quite as well as she thought.

Grunting softly with pain, she strips a bunch of cool wet leaves, presses it against her forehead, the veins in her neck. Pressure. That's what **it is**; the air-pressure must have changed fast in the storm. She'll be all right in a few minutes. . . . Even the memory of the deer seems strange, as if she'd glimpsed some kind of crazy machine with a sister riding on it. Crazy! The uproar around her has voices in it, too, a ghostly whistle blows. . . . Go away, dreams. . . .

She stands quietly, pressing the coolness to her temples, willing the noisy hallucination to leave. Slowly it does; **subsides**, fades, vanishes. Leav-ing her in peace back in the normal, happy world. She's okay; that **was** nothing at all!

She tosses the leaves down and strikes **out on the path**, remembering— whew!—how bad it had been when she was **back there at the** hostel. All because of that funny flu or whatever that made her gut swell up so. Bad dreams all the time, real horrible hallucinations. Admit it; couriers do catch things. But it's worth it.

The sisters had been so scared. How they kept questioning her. Are you dreaming now? Do you see it now, dear? Making her describe it, like she was a historical play. They must read too much history, she thinks, **splash-ing through** a puddle, scaring up some little night-thing. A frog, probably, **out in** the rain like me. **And** all that talk about babies. Babies. . . . Well,

a baby might be nice, someday. Not till after a lot more trips, though. Right now she's a walking sister, traveling on, heading for Des Moines and points West!

Left-right, left-right, her slim strong legs carry her Indian style, every bit of her feeling good now in the rain-fresh night. Not a scrap weary; she loves her tough enduring wiry body. To be a courier, surely that's the best life of all. To be young and night-walking in the great free moonlit world. Heyo, sisters! She grins to herself, padding light-foot. Any messages, any mail?

"Of course she's not dangerous, Officer," the doctor says authoritatively. The doctor is a heavy, jolly-looking woman with a big Vuitton carry-all parked on the desk. The haggard young man slumped in a lounge over at the side stares tiredly, says nothing.

"Jeans, green parka, knapsack, sandals. May have credit cards," the detective repeats, writing in his notebook. "Hair?"

"Short. Just growing out, in fact, it was shaved during treatment. I realize that isn't much to go on."

The policeman juts his lip out noncommittally, writing. Why can't they keep track of their patients, a big place like this? One medium-height, medium-looking girl in jeans and a parka. . . .

"You see, she is quite, quite helpless," the heavy woman says seriously, fingering her desk calendar. "The delusional system has expanded."

"You were supposed to break that up," the young man says suddenly, not looking up. "My wife was, I mean, when I brought her here . . ."

His voice is stale with exhausted anger; this has all been said before. The psychiatrist sighs briefly, says nothing.

"The delusion, is it dangerous? Is she hostile?" the detective asks hope-fully.

"No. I told you. It takes the form of a belief that she's living in another world where everybody is her friend. She's completely trusting, you'll have no difficulty."

"Oh." He puts the notebook away with finality, getting up. The psychi-atrist goes with him to the door. Out of

earshot of the husband she says quietly, "I'll be at my office number when you've checked the morgue."

"Yeah."

He leaves, and she walks back to the desk, where the young man is now staring unseeingly at a drift of Polaroid snaps. The one on top shows a young brown-haired woman in a yellow dress in a garden somewhere.

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—Moon riding high now in the summer night, cutting through a race of little silver clouds, making shafts of light wheel over the still city. She can see where the park is ending up ahead; there's a wreck-strewn traffic circle. She swings along strongly, feeling now just the first satisfying edge of tiredness, just enough to make her enjoy her own nimble endurance. Right-and-a-left-and-a-right-and-a-left, toes-in Indian style, that trains the tendons. She can go on forever.

Now here's the traffic circle; better watch out for metal and glass under-foot. She waits for a bright patch of moonlight and trots across to the center, hearing one faint hallucinatory screech or roar somewhere. No, no more of *that* She grins at herself firmly, making her way around the pieces of an old statue toppled here. *That is but the owl and owlet, talking in their native language*, something *Hiawatha's Sisters*. I'd like to talk with them in their native language, she thinks—and speaking of which, she sees to her delight there's a human figure on the far side of the circle. What, another sister out night-walking too!

"Heyo, sister!"

"Hi," the other replies. It's a Midwest person, she can tell. She must live here, can tell about the old city!

Eagerly she darts between the heaps in the roadway, joyfully comes to the beautiful sister, her face so filled in light.

"Where heading? Out to ramble? I'm a courier," she explains, taking the sister's arm. So much joy, a world of friends. "Any messages, any mail?" she laughs.

And they stride on together, free-swinging down the median strip of the old avenue to keep away from falling stuff in the peaceful old ruins. Over to one side is a bent sign saying *To Dan Ryan Expressway. O'Hare Airport*. On the heading for Des Moines and points West!

"I don't remember," the girl, or woman, repeats hoarsely, frowning. "I really don't remember, it was all strange. My head was really fucked up, I mean, all I wanted was to get back and sack out, the last John was a bummer. I mean, I didn't know the area. You know? I asked her could she give me some change."

"What did she say? Did she have money with her?" the older man asks with deadly patience. His wife is sitting on the leather sofa, her mouth trembling a little.

"I don't remember, really. I mean, she was talking but she wasn't listen-ing, I could see she was behind some heavy stuff. She offered me some chocolate. Oh shit, she was gone. Excuse me. She was really gone. I thought she was—well, she kept saying, y'know. Then she gave me all her cards."

The man looks down at them silently, lying on the coffee table. His daughter's married name embossed on the brown Saks plastic.

"So when I saw the paper, I thought I should, well, you know." She gets up, smoothing her white Levis. "It wasn't just the reward. She. . . Thanks anyway."

"Yes," he says automatically. "We do thank you, Miss Jackson, was it."

"Yes," his wife echoes shakily.

Miss Jackson, or whatever, looks around at the woman, the man, the elegantly lived-in library; hitches her white shoulderbag.

"I tried to tell her," she says vaguely. "She said, about going West. She wouldn't. . . I'm sorry."

"Yes, thank you." He's ushering her to the door. "I'm afraid there wasn't anything anyone could do."

"She wasn't in this world."

"No."

When the door closes behind her, the older woman makes an uncertain noise and then says heavily, "Why?"

Her husband shakes his head, performs a non-act of straightening the credit cards, putting them on another table.

"We'll have to call Henry, when he gets back from . . ."

"*Why?*" the wife repeats as if angry. "*Why* did she? What did she want? Always running away. Freedom. Doesn't she know you can't have freedom? Why isn't this world good enough for her? She had everything. If I can take it, why can't she?"

He has nothing to say, only moves near her and briefly touches her shoulder.

"Why didn't Doctor Albers *do* something? All those drugs, those shocks, it just made her worse. Henry never should have taken her there, it's all his fault—"

"I guess Henry was desperate," her husband says in a gray tone.

"She was all right when she was with us."

"Maria. Maria, please. She was out of her head. He had to do some-thing. She wouldn't even recognize her own baby."

His wife nods, trembling harder. "My little girl, my little girl . . ."

—Glorious how bright it is now; she pads along still barefoot on the concrete median, tipping her head back to watch the moon racing above the flying clouds, imparting life and motion to the silent street, almost as if

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it was alive again. Now watch it, she cautions herself cheerfully—and watch the footing too; no telling what kind of sharp stuff is lying out here. No more dreaming about the old days; that was what gave her the fever-nightmares. Dreaming she was stuck back in history like a caged-up ani-mal. An "affluent young suburban matron," whatever that was. All those weird people, telling her, Don't go outside, don't do this, don't do that, don't open the door, don't breathe. Danger everywhere.

How did they *live*, she wonders, seeing the concrete good and clean underfoot. Those poor old sisters, never being free, never even being able to go walking! Well, those dreams really made history live and breathe for her, that was sure. So vivid—whew! Maybe some poor old sister's soul has touched hers, maybe something mystical like that. She frowns faintly, feeling a stab of pressure in her forehead.

Now really, watch it! she scolds herself, hoisting up the pack-straps, flapping the drying parka. All secure. She breaks into a slow, light-footed jog, just because she feels so good. Cities are so full of history. Time to forget all that, just appreciate being alive. Hello, moon! Hello, sky! She trots on carefully, tickled by it all, seeing a moon's-eye view of herself: one small purposeful dot resolutely moving West. Courier to Des Moines. All alone in the big friendly night-world, greeting the occasional night-bird sisters. One traveling woman, going on through.

She notes a bad scatter of debris ahead and slows to pick her way with care through the "cars," not wanting to put her sandals back on yet. It's so bright—and Hello! The sky really is brightening in the East behind her. Sunrise in another hour or so.

She's been on the road about twenty hours but she isn't really weary at all; she could go on all day if it didn't get so hot. She peers ahead, looking for signs of the Ryan Freeway that'll carry her West. What she'll do is stop and have a snack in the sunrise, maybe boil up some tea. And then go on awhile until it heats up, time to find a nice cool ruin and hole up for the day. Hey, maybe she can make O'Hare! She stayed there once before; it's neat.

She had enough rations in her pack to go at least two days easy, she figures. But she's short on chocolate now; have to get some at the next settlement if they have it. Sweet stuff is good for calories when you're exercising. She pads on, musing about the sister she shared her chocolate with while they walked together after the park. Such a free sweet face, all the sisters are so great but this one was especially interesting, living here studying the old days. She knew so much, all those stories, whew! Imagine when people had to sell their sex organs to the Men just to eat!

It's too much for her, she thinks, grinning. Leave that to the students. I'm an action-person, yes. A courier, a traveler, moving along looking at it all, the wonderfilled world. Sampling, enjoying, footing it over the miles. Right-and-a-left-and-a-right-and-a-left on the old roadways. A courier's feet **are tough and brown** as oak. *Of all beasts she learned the language, learned their names and all their secrets. Talked with them whene 'er she met them* —a great rhythm for hiking, with a fresh breeze behind her and the moon setting ahead!

The breeze is making the old buildings on both sides creak and clank, too, she notices. Better stay out here in the middle, even if it's getting narrow. The houses are really crowded in along here, all sagging and trashy. "Slums," probably. Where the crazy people lived on top of each other. What a mess it must have been; interesting to her but rotten for them. Well, they're gone now, she thinks, dodging around a heap of broken junk in the intersection, starting down the center-strip of the next long block.

But something isn't gone, she notices; footsteps that have been pad-padding along after her for a while are still there. An animal, one of the poor dogs, she thinks. Following her. Oh well, they must do all right in here, with rats and such.

She whirls around a couple of times, but sees nothing. It must be scared. What's its native language, she wonders, and forgets about it as she sees ahead, unmistakable, the misty silhouette of a freeway overpass. Hey, is that the Ryan already?

She casts a glance up at the floating-down moon, sees the sky is paling fast. And the left side of the street is passing an empty cleared place, the going looks all right there. She decides to cross over.

Yes, it's good walking, and she settles into her easy barefoot swing, letting one last loving thought go back to the poor maddened people who once strove here, who somehow out of their anguish managed to send their genes down to her, to give her happy life: courier going West! With the dawn wind in her hair and the sun coming up to light the whole free world!

"A routine surveillance assignment," the young policewoman, O'Hara, says carefully.

"A stake-out." The bald reporter nods.

"Well, yes. We were assigned to surveil the subject building entrance. Officer Alioto and myself were seated in the parked car."

"So you saw the assault."

"No," she says stiffly. "We did not observe anything unusual. Naturally

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we observed the pedestrians, I mean the female subject and the alleged alleged assailants, they were moving West at the time."

"You saw four punks following her."

"Well, it could look that way."

"You saw them going after her and you just sat there."

"We carried out our *orders*," she tells him. "We were assigned to surveil the building. We did not observe any alleged attack, nobody was running."

"You see the four of them jump this girl and you don't call that an attack?"

"We did not observe it. We were two blocks away."

"You could have seen if you wanted to," he says tiredly. "You could have cruised one block, you could have tapped the horn."

"I told you we were on a covert detail. You can't expect an officer to destroy his cover every time some little tramp runs down the street."

"You're a woman," he says wonderingly. "You'd sit there and let a girl get it."

"I'm not a nursemaid," she protests angrily. "I don't care if she was crazy. A spoiled brat if you ask me, all those women lib freaks. I work. Who does she think she is, running on the street at night? She thinks the police have nothing more important to do than that?"

—Sunrise coming on sure enough though it's still dark down here. The magic hour. And that stupid dog or dogs are still coming on too, she notes. Pad-pad-pad, they've crossed over to the sidewalk behind her. Well, dogs don't attack people, it's just like those of false wolf-scaries. *Learn of every beast its nature. Learn their names and all their secrets.* They're just lone-some and curious, it's their nature to follow people. Tag along and veer off if I say Boo.

She strides along, debating whether she should put her wet sandals on or whether it's going to stay this clean. If so, she can make it barefoot up to the expressway ramp—and it *is* the Ryan; she can see the big sign now. Great, that'll be the perfect place to make her breakfast, just about sunrise. Better remember to pick up a couple of dry sticks and some paper under the ramp, not much to burn on those skyways.

Ignoring the footfalls pattering behind, she lets her mind go back plea-surably to the great breakfasts she's had. All the sunrise views, how she loves that. Like the morning on the old Ohio Turnpike, when all the owls hooted at once, and the mists turned pink and rose up and there was the shining river all spread out below her. Beautiful. Even with the mos-quitos. If you're going to appreciate life, you can't let little things like

mosquitoes bother you. . . . That was before her peculiar sickness, when she was at the hostel. So many good hostels she's stopped at, all the interesting different settlements and farms, all the great sister-people. Someday she'll do the whole West route, know people everywhere. . . . Pad-pad-pad; she hears them again momentarily, rubs away a tiny ache in her temple. *Boo*, she chuckles to herself, feeling her bare feet falling sturdy and swift, left-and-a-right-and-a-left, carrying her over the miles, across the free beautiful friendly Earth. O my sisters, living in light!

Pictures flit through her head, all the places she wants to visit. The Western mountains, the real big ones. And the great real Sea. Maybe she'll visit the grave of the Last Man when she's out there, too. That would be interesting. See the park where he lived, hear the tapes of his voice and all. Of course he probably wasn't the actually last Man, just the one they knew about. It would be really something to hear such a different person's voice.

Pad-pad-pad—louder, closer than before. They're going to be a nuisance if they follow her up the ramp and hang around her breakfast.

"Boo!" she shouts, laughing, swinging around at them. They scatter so fast she can barely glimpse dark shapes vanishing into the old walls. Good. "Boo!" she shouts again, sorry to have to drive them away, and swings back on course, satisfied.

The buildings are beside her now, but they're pretty intact, no glass she can see underfoot. In fact, the glass is still in the old store windows here. She glances in curiously as she passes, heaps of moldy stuff and faded pictures and printing. "Ads." Lots of sisters' faces, all looking so weird and fake-grinning. One window has nothing but dummy heads in it, all with strange-looking imitation hair or something on them. Fantastic.

—But here they come again behind her, pad-pad-pad, and she really ought to discourage them before they decide to stick with her up the freeway.

"Boo, boo! No—" Just as she's turning on them, something fast and dark springs and strikes or snaps at her arm. And before she can react, she sees they are suddenly all around her, ahead of her—rearing up weirdly, just like people!

"Get out!" she shouts, feeling a rush of something unknown—anger?— sending heat through her. This is almost like one of the dreams! But hardness strikes her neck, staggers her, with roaring in her ears.

She hits out awkwardly, feels herself slammed down on concrete—pain —her head is hurt. And she *is* striking, trying to fend them off, realizing unbelieving that the brutes are tugging at her, terribly strong, pulling her legs and arms apart, spread-eagling her.

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"Sisters!" she shouts, really being hurt now, struggling strongly. "*Sisters! Help!*" But something gags her so that she can only choke, while she feels them tearing at her clothes, her belly. *No, no*—she understands with hor-ror that they really are going to bite her, to eat her flesh, and remembers from somewhere that wild dogs tear out the victim's guts first.

A great wave of anger convulses her against their fangs, she knows this is a stupid accident, a mistake—but her blood is fountaining everywhere, and the pain, the *pain!* All in a moment she is being killed; she knows now she is going to die here.

—But as a truly terrible agony cuts into her crotch and entrails, she sees or thinks she sees—yes!—in the light, in the patches of sky between the terrible bodies of her attackers, she can see them coming—see far off but clear the beautiful faces of her sisters speeding to save her, to avenge her! O my sisters, yes—it will be all right now, she knows, choking in her blood. They will finish these animals. And my knapsack, my messages—some-where inside the pain and the dying she knows it is all right, it will be all fixed when they get here; the beloved sisters will save her, this is just an accident—and soon she, or someone like her, will be going on again, will be footing over the wide free Earth, courier to Des Moines and points west—