

## DEDICATION

### 1

Around the corner from the doormen, the limos, the taxis, and the revolving doors at the entrance to Le Palais, one of New York's oldest and grandest hotels, there was another door - this one small, unmarked, and unremarked.

Martha Rosewall approached it one morning at quarter of seven, her plain blue canvas tote-bag in one hand, a smile on her face. The tote was usual. The smile was not. She was not unhappy in her work - being the Chief Housekeeper of floors Ten through Twelve of Le Palais might not seem like much to some, but to a woman who had worn dresses made out of flour-sacks as a girl in Babylon, Alabama, it seemed a great deal. It was just that, on any ordinary morning, a person arrives at work with an ordinary expression on one's face - which is to say, an expression that says most of me is still in bed and not much more.

Things had not been ordinary for Martha since she arrived home from work yesterday at three-thirty and found the package her son had sent from Ohio. The long-expected had finally come. She had slept little last night - she had to keep getting up and checking to make sure it was real, and still there. Finally she had slept with it under her pillow, like a bridesmaid with a piece of wedding cake.

She used her key and went down three steps to a long hallway painted flat green and lined with Dandux laundry carts. They were piled high with freshly washed and ironed bed-linen. The hallway was filled with its clean smell, a smell that Martha always associated, in some vague way, with the smell of freshly baked bread.

There was the faint sound of Muzak from the lobby, but Martha no longer heard it, anymore than she heard the hum of the service elevators or the rattle of china in the kitchen.

Halfway down the hall was a door marked CHIEFS OF HOUSEKEEPING. She went in, hung her coat, and passed through the big room where the Chiefsthere were eleven of them - took their coffee-breaks, worked out problems of supply and demand, and tried to keep up with the endless paperwork.

Beyond this room with its huge desk, wall-length bulletin board, and perpetually overflowing ashtrays was a dressing room. Its walls were plain green cinderblock. There were benches, lockers, and two long steel rods festooned with the kind of coat-hangers you can't steal.

The door to the bathroom opened. Delores Williams and a plume of warm steam came out. Delores, fresh from the shower, was wrapped in a Le Palais towel and just stripping a Le Palais shower cap from her head. She took one look at Martha's bright face and came to her with her arms out. "It came!" she cried. "You got it!"

Martha didn't know she was going to cry until the tears came. She hugged Delores and put her face against Delores's warm wet neck.

"That's all right, honey," Delores said. "You let it out. You go on and let it all out."

"It's just that I'm so proud of him," she said. "It's just that I'm so proud."

"Of course you are," Delores said, and when Martha finally stopped crying, Delores said she wanted to see it. "But you can hold it," she added, laughing. "I ain't gonna drip on it - I don't want to be talkin' through a hole in my throat."

So, with the reverence reserved for an object of great holiness (which, to Martha Rosewall, it was), she removed her son's first novel from the blue canvas tote. She had wrapped it carefully in tissue paper and put it under her brown nylon uniform. She now carefully removed the tissue so that Delores could view the artifact.

Delores looked carefully at the cover, which showed three Marines, one with a bandage wrapped around his head, charging up a hill with their guns firing. BLAZE OF GLORY, printed in fiery red-orange letters, was the title. And below the picture was this: A Novel by Peter Rosewall.

"All right - now show me what's really important, Martha!" Delores said.

And, without contradicting her, Martha turned to the dedication page where Delores read: "This book is dedicated to my mother, MARTHA ROSEWALL. Mom, I couldn't have done it without you." And below the printed dedication this was added in a thin and sloping backhand script: "I really couldn't have done it without you! I love you, Pete."

"Why, isn't that just the sweetest thing?" Delores asked, feeling tears start in her own eyes.

"It's more than sweet," Martha said. She re-wrapped the book in the tissue paper. "It's true." She smiled, and in that smile Delores saw something more than love. She saw triumph.

## 2

Martha and Delores worked from seven to three. After work they frequently stopped in Patisserie, the hotel's coffee shop. More infrequently they went into Le Cinq, the little pocket bar just off the lobby, for a drink usually a Singapore Sling for Delores, always a Pink Lady for Martha. After work on the day Martha had shown Delores her son's book, Delores led Martha into the cozy darkness of Le Cinq, got her comfortably situated in one of the booths, and left her there with a bowl of goldfish crackers in front of her while she spoke briefly to Ray, who was tending bar that afternoon. Ray grinned, nodded, and made a circle with thumb and forefinger. Delores came back to the booth and slid in. Martha looked at her with some suspicion.

"What was that about?"

"You'll see," Delores said. Five minutes later Ray came over with a silver ice-bucket on a stand and placed it beside them. In it was a bottle of Perrier-Jouet champagne and two chilled glasses.

"Here, now!" Martha said in a voice that was halfalarmed, half-laughing. She looked at Delores, startled.

"Hush," Delores said, and to her credit, Martha did.

Ray uncorked the bottle, placed the cork beside Delores, and poured a little into her glass. Delores waved at it and winked at Ray.

"Enjoy, ladies," Ray said, and then blew a little kiss at Martha. "And congratulate your boy for me, m'dear. He walked away before Martha, who was still stunned, could say anything.

Delores poured both glasses full and raised hers. After a moment Martha did the same. The glasses clinked gently. "Here's to your son's first book," Delores said, and they drank. Delores tipped the rim of her glass against Martha's a second time. "And to your son," she said. They drank again, and Delores touched their glasses together yet a third time before Martha could set hers down. "And to a mother's love," she said.

"Amen," Martha said, and although her mouth smiled, her eyes did not - not quite. On each of the first two toasts she had taken a discreet sip of champagne. This time she drained the glass.

## 3

Delores had gotten the bottle of champagne so that she and her best friend could celebrate Peter Rosewall's breakthrough in the style it seemed to deserve, but that was not the only reason. She was curious about what Martha had said - It's more than sweet, it's true. Even more, she was curious about that expression of triumph.

She waited until Martha had gotten through her third glass of champagne and then she said, "What did you

mean about the dedication, Martha?"

"What?"

"When you said it wasn't just sweet, it was true?"

Martha looked at her so long without speaking that Delores thought she was not going to answer at all. Then she uttered a laugh so bitter it was shocking - at least to Delores it was. She'd had no idea that cheerful little Martha Rosewall could be so bitter, in spite of the hard life she had led. But that note of triumph was there, too, an unsettling counterpoint.

"His book is going to be a best-seller," Martha said. "I believe that. Pete says it is, and he says the critics are going to love it. He says those two things hardly ever happen together but they are going to happen for him. And I believe it, too. Because that's what happened with him."

"Who?"

"Pete's father," Martha said, looking at her calmly.

"But-" Delores didn't know what to say. She suddenly regretted buying the champagne. She had wanted to celebrate and perhaps hear a secret. She didn't know exactly what secret she had expected to hear, but the disclosure that Martha's beloved Pete wasn't Johnny Rosewall's son hadn't been it. Not that Johnny Rosewall had been much of a catch from what Martha said, but all the same...

She cleared her throat and said, "If Johnny wasn't Pete's father, hon-"

Martha's face twisted with a sort of fastidious disgust at the mention of her late husband's name.

"He was Pete's biological father," she said. "Only have to look at his nose and the shape of his eyes to see that. Just wasn't his natural father. Any more of that, honey? It do go down smooth." Now that she was tiddly - just this side of being drunk, in fact - the South had begun to resurface in Martha's voice like a child creeping out of its hiding place.

Delores poured what bubbly was left into Martha's glass. Martha held it up by the stem, looking at the way the champagne turned the subdued afternoon light in Le Cinq to gold. Then she drank a little, set the glass down, and laughed that bitter, jagged laugh again.

"You don't know what I'm talking about, do you?"

Delores admitted she did not, but didn't add that she was no longer sure she wanted to hear - and in truth there was a part of her that still did want to hear.

"Well, I'm going to tell you," Martha said. "You probably won't believe me, and you probably won't want to know me anymore if you do, but after all these years I have to tell someone - now more'n ever - now that he's broken through. God knows I can't tell him - him least of all. But then - lucky sons never knew how much mothers love them, or the sacrifices they make, or the dedication they show, do they?"

Delores only shook her head, afraid to say anything, and Martha began to speak.

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There was no need for Martha to go over the basic facts. The two women had worked together at Le Palais for eleven years and had been close friends for most of that time.

Martha knew about the drinking problem Delores' husband had had, and how Delores had finally laid down the law: take the cure or I'm leaving you. Harvey Williams had fallen off the wagon more than once after that

but Delores had been able to recognize honest effort when she saw it. She had stuck with him and her man had finally made it back to sobriety.

Martha knew the great sorrow of Delores's life - the first child who had fallen from a stair - landing in the apartment building where they had lived, the child who had lingered four days in intensive care and who had finally died. There had been other children, four of them, the eldest now the head pediatrics nurse in a Cleveland hospital, but no child could take the place of the one who had been lost.

By the same token, Delores knew about Johnny Rosewall and all the problems he had not been able to surmount - had not wanted to surmount. The drink, the drugs, the outside women. Martha had been new in New York, naive, and had married him two months pregnant. Even then, Martha had told her, she had had an idea of what Johnny Rosewall was - Johnny with his black Trans-Am (financed at 24%) and his tu-tone airtip shoes.

That first child she had lost in the third month. Another five months or so and she had about decided to leave Johnny - there had been too many late nights, too many weak excuses, too many black eyes. Johnny, she said, fell in love with his fists when he was drunk.

"He always looked good," she told Delores once, "but a shitheel in J. Press slacks is still a shitheel."

Then she discovered she was pregnant again. When she told Johnny, he hit her in the stomach with the handle of a broom to try and make her miscarry. His explanation was that they just couldn't afford a rug-rat and they would fire her at Le Palais, where she had a job as a housemaid, as soon as they found out she was pregnant.

Two nights later Johnny and two friends tried to stick up a liquor store on lower 49th Street. The proprietor had a shotgun under the counter. He brought it out. Johnny Rosewall was packing a nickel-plated .32, a hockshop special. He pointed it at the proprietor, pulled the trigger, and the pistol blew up. One of the fragments of the barrel entered Johnny Rosewall's brain through his right eye and killed him instantly.

What Delores knew of Martha's past came down to this: her friend was well-shut of a bad man. She had worked on at Le Palais until her seventh month; she had gotten an assurance from Mrs Proulx, then head of housekeeping, that she could have her old job back later on if she still wanted it; she had borne a seven-pound boy whom she had named Peter; and Peter had, in the fullness of time, written a novel called Blaze of Glory which everyone - including the Book-of-the-Month Club and Universal Pictures - thought destined for the bestseller lists.

All this she had heard, but Delores did not hear about Mama Delorme or Peter Jeffries, the man Martha called her Peter's "natural father," until that afternoon in Le Cinq, with glasses of champagne before them and the advance copy of Pete's novel in the plain blue canvas tote by Martha's feet.

## 5

"We were living in Harlem, of course," Martha said to Delores. She was looking down at her champagne glass, twirling it between her fingers. "On Stanton Street, which crosses 119th up by Station Park. I've been back since. It's worse than it was - a lot worse - but it was no beauty spot even then, in 1959.

"There was a woman who lived at the Station Park end of Stanton Street, everyone just called her Mama Delorme, and everyone swore she was a bruja woman. I didn't believe in anything like that myself, and once I asked Tavia Kinsolving, who lived in the same building as me and Johnny, how people could go on believing such trash in a day when space satellites went whizzing around the earth and there was a cure for just about every disease under the sun. She was an educated woman - had been to Julliard - and was only living in Harlem because she had her mother and three younger brothers to support. I thought she would agree with me but she only laughed and shook her head.

" 'Are you telling me you believe in bruja?' I asked her.

"No, I don't believe in bruja," she said, "but I believe in her, Martha. She is different. Maybe for every thousand - or ten thousand - or million - women who claim to be witchy, there's one who really is. If so, Mama Delorme is that woman."

"I just laughed. People who don't need bruja can afford to laugh at it, I reckon, the same way that people who don't need prayer can afford to laugh at that. In those days I still thought I could straighten' Johnny out, and make a man of him - if you can dig that."

Delores nodded. She could dig it.

"Then I had the miscarriage. Johnny was the main reason I had it, I guess, although I didn't like to admit that even to myself back then. He was beating on me all the time, and drinking all the time. He'd take the money I gave him and then he'd take more out of my purse. When I told him I wanted him to quit hooking from my bag he'd get all woundy-faced and claim he hadn't done any such thing. That was if he was sober. If he was drunk he'd just laugh.

"I wrote my momma down in Babylon - it hurt me to write that letter, and it shamed me, and I cried 'most all the time I was writing it - but I had to know what she thought. She wrote back and told me to get out of it, to go right away before he put me in the hospital or even worse. My older sister, Kissy, went that one better - she sent me a Greyhound bus ticket with two words written on the envelope in pink Crayon - GO NOW,"

Martha smiled sadly and took another small sip of her champagne.

"Well, I didn't go. I liked to think I had too much dignity. I suppose it was nothing but stupid pride. Either way, it turned out the same. I stayed. Then I got pregnant again - only I didn't know I was pregnant. I wasn't even sicking up in the morning but then, I never did with the first one, either."

"You didn't go to this Mama Delorme because you were pregnant?" Delores asked. She'd made the assumption that Martha must have gone to the bruja woman and asked her to get rid of the bun in her oven.

"No," Martha said. "I went to her because Tavia Kinsolving told me Mama Delorme could tell me what the stuff was I found in Johnny's coat pocket. White powder in a little glass bottle."

"Oh-oh," Delores said.

Martha smiled again. "You want to know how bad things can get?" she asked. "Probably you don't, but I'll tell you anyway. Bad is when your man drinks and don't have no steady job. Really bad is when he drinks, don't have no job, and beats on you. But real deep-dish bad is when you find a little glass bottle with a spoon on it in your husband's coat pocket - where your hand was so you could maybe find a dollar to buy toilet paper down at the corner market - and you just hope like hell it's coke and not skag."

"You took it to Mama Delorme?"

Martha laughed pityingly.

"The whole bottle? No sir, no ma'am, no way, I wasn't getting much fun out of life, but I didn't want to die. If he'd come home from wherever he was at and found that two-gram bottle gone out of his pocket, he would have plowed me like a pea-field. What I did was take a little of it in a handkerchief. Then I went to Tavia and Tavia told me to go to Mama Delorme and I went."

"What was she like?"

Martha shook her head, unable to tell her friend exactly what Mama Delorme had been like, or how strange that half-hour in the woman's third floor apartment had been, and how she had nearly run down the crazily leaning stairs to the street, afraid that the woman was following her. The apartment had been dark and smelly,

full of the smell of candies and old wallpaper and cinnamon and soured sachet. There had been a picture of Jesus on one wall, Nicodemus on another.

"Very strange," Martha said finally. "She might have been seventy, or ninety, or a hundred and ten. There was a pink-white scar that went up the side of her nose and her forehead and right into her hair. Looked a little like a lightning bolt. It had pulled down her right eye in a kind of droop that looked like a wink. She was sitting in a rocking chair and she had knitting in her lap. I came in and she said, 'I have three things to tell you, little lady. The first is that you don't believe in me. The second is the bottle you found in your husband's coat is full of White Angel heroin. The third is you're three weeks with a boy child you'll name after his natural father.

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"Later on, when I could think straight again, I told myself that as far as those first two things went, she hadn't done anything that a good stage magician couldn't do - one of those mentalist fellows that wear the white turbans. She had maybe gotten a call from Tavia Kinsolving telling her I was coming. It could have been as simple as that, but how it got done don't matter. What matters is that a woman interested in being known as a bruja woman finds ways to look like a bruja woman. You see what I mean?"

"Ye-ess-" Delores said doubtfully.

"And as far as her telling me that I was pregnantwell, I'd maybe had a little feeling that I was, sort of a shine on the idea, but even if I was, that didn't make it any more than a lucky guess on her part, or ... my mother used to be damned good at knowing when a woman had caught pregnant, sometimes before the woman knew, sometimes before she had any business being pregnant, if you see what I mean."

Delores laughed and nodded.

"She said it was their smell - their smell changed, and sometimes you could pick up that new smell as soon as a day after she had caught, if your nose was keen."

Delores was nodding. She had heard of such things, certainly.

"But, fact is, none of those things mattered, because I knew she knew - she knew all three of those things she'd told me, and she hadn't come by her knowing in any slinky way. To be with her was to believe in bruja - her bruja, anyway. But it didn't go away, that feeling, the way a dream goes away when you wake up, or the way your belief in a good faker goes away when you're out of his spell."

"What did you do?"

"Well, there was a chair with a saggy old cane seat near the door and I guess that was lucky for me, because when she said what she did, what I was looking at kind of grayed over and my knees came unbolted. I was going to sit down no matter what, but if the chair hadn't been there I would have sat on the floor.

"She just sat there, waiting for me to get myself back together, and went on knitting. It was like she had seen it all a hundred times before. I suppose she had.

"When my heart finally began to slow down I opened my mouth and what came out was, 'Fin going to leave my husband.'

"'No,' she came back right away, 'he is gonna leave you. You're gonna see him out, is all. Stay around. There be a little money. You gonna think he hoit the baby but he din't be doin it.'

"'How,' I said, but that was all I could say, it seemed like. 'How ... how ... how . . .', like that. Even now, twenty-six years later, I can smell those old burned candles and kerosene from the kitchen and that old sour smell of dried wallpaper, like old cheese. I can see her, small and frail in this old blue dress with little

polkadots which had once been white but were the yellowy color of old newspapers by then. She was so little, but there was such a feeling of power that came from her, like a bright, bright light-

Martha drained the last of her champagne and set her glass down on the table with a little click.

"Well, it don't do any good to go on and on about it," she said. "If you'd been there you would have felt it. But there ain't anyway I can describe it if you wasn't.

'How I do anythin or why you married that country piece of shit in the first place ain't neither of them important now,' she said. 'What's important now is you got to find the child's natural father.'

"What do you mean?" I asked. 'Johnny's the child's natural father.' Anyone listening would have thought she was as much as saying I'd been screwing around on my man, but it never even occurred to me to be mad at her. I was just too confused.

"She kind of snorted and flapped her hand at me, like she was saying Pshaw. 'Ain't nothin natural about dat man.'

"Then she leaned a little closer and I started to feel a little scared. There was so much knowing in her, and it felt like not all that knowing was nice.

'Any chile a woman get, the man shoot it out'n his pecker, girl,' she said. 'You know dat, don't you?'

"I didn't know any such thing but I felt my head going up 'n down just the same, as if she'd reached across the room with hands I couldn't see and nodded at for me.

"That's right,' she said, nodding her ownself, 'and that's the way God made it. It's like a seesaw, ain't it? Sho! A man shoots cheerun out'n his pecker, so them cheerun mostly his. But it's a woman who carries em and bears em and has the raising of em, so them cheerun mostly hers. That's the way God planned it. But this man put the chile in your belly ain't gonna be no natural father to it - he wouldn't be no natural father to it even if he was gonna be round, because he was never meant to be yours in the first place. So tell me, girl: who is the chile's natural father?' And she kind of leaned toward Me.

"All I could do was shake my head and tell her I didn't know what she was talking about. But I think that maybe part of me - a part of me way back in that part of your mind that only gets a real chance to think in your dreams - I think that part did. Maybe I'm only making that up because of all I know now, but I don't think so. I think that for just a moment or two his name fluttered there in my head - Peter Jefferies.

"I said, 'Please - you're scaring me - I don't know what it is you want me to say - I don't know anything about natural fathers or unnatural fathers or anything like that - I don't even know if I'm pregnant!'

"Well, she sat back for a minute, and then she smiled. Her smile was like sunshine, and it eased me. 'I didn't mean to scare you, honey,' she said. 'That wasn't none of what I had in my mind at all. I'll just brew us a cup of tea, and that is gonna put you at your ease. It's just that I got the sight, and sometime it be strong. I'll make us tea. You'll like it. It's special to me.'

"I wanted to tell her I didn't want any tea, but it seemed like I couldn't. Seemed like too much of an effort to open my mouth, and all the strength had gone out of my legs.

"She had a greasy little kitchen place that was almost as dark as a cave and I sat there in the chair by the door - same one I fell into when she hit me with those things coming in - and watched her spoon loose tea into an old chipped china pot and put a kettle on the gas fire.

"I sat there thinking I didn't want none of anything that was special to her, nor nothing that came out of that greasy little kitchen neither. I was thinking I'd take just a little sip to be mannerly and then get out of there as fast as I could go and never come back.

"But then she brought over two little china cups just as clean as snow and a tray with sugar and cream and fresh-baked bread rolls. She poured it and it smelled good and hot and strong. It kind of waked me up and before I knew it I'd drunk two cups and eaten one of the bread-rolls, too.

"She drank a cup and ate a roll and we got talking along on more natural subjects - who we knew on the street, where I came from, where I liked to shop, and all like that. Then I looked at my watch and seen over an hour and a half had gone by. I started to get up and a dizzy feeling ran through me and I plopped right back in my chair again."

Delores was looking at her, eyes round.

"'You doped me,' I said, and I was scared, but the scared part of me was way down inside.

'Girl, I don't mean nothin but a help to you,' she said, 'but you don't want to give up what I need to know and I know damn well you ain't gonna do what you need to do even once you do. So I fixed both things. You are gonna have a little nap here, but before you do you are gonna tell me the name of your babe's natural father.'

"And, sitting there in that chair with its saggy cane bottom and hearing all of Harlem outside, I seen Peter Jefferies as clear as I'm seeing you now, Delores. He was just as white as I am black, just as tall as I am short, just as educated as I am ignorant. We was as different as two people could be except for one thing - we both come from Alabama, me from Babylon down in the toolies by the Florida state line, him from Birmingham. He didn't even know I was alive - I was just the nigger woman who cleaned the suite where he always stayed on the eleventh floor of this hotel. And as for me, I only thought of him to stay out of his way because I heard him talk and seen him operate and I knew well enough what sort of man he was. It wasn't just that he wouldn't use a glass a black person had used before him without it had been washed twice; I seen plenty of that and it don't cross my eyes anymore. It was that he was nothing but a puredyed son of a bitch. You know what? He was like Johnny in a lot of ways, or the way Johnny would have been if he'd been smart and had an education and if God had thought to give Johnny a great big slug of talent inside of him instead of just a nose for poontang.

"I thought nothing of him but to steer clear of him, nothing at all. But when she leaned over me, that old black bruja woman with the smell of cinnamon that seemed to come right out of the holes in her skin, it was his name that came out with never a pause. 'Peter Jeffries,' I said. 'Peter Jeffries, the man who stays in 1163 when he ain't writing his books down there in Alabama. He's the natural father. But he's white!'

"She leaned closer and said, 'No he ain't, honey. Every man's black inside. You don't believe it, but that's right. It's midnight inside every man any hour of God's day. But a man can make light out of night, and that's why what come out of a man into a woman be white. Natural got nothin to do with color. Now you close your eyes, honey, because you be tired. Now! Say! Now! Don't you fight! Mama Delorme ain't goan put nothin over on you, chile! just got sumpin I goan to put in your hand. Now - no, don't look. just close your hand over it.' I did what she said and felt something square. Felt like glass or plastic.

"'You gonna remember everythin when it be time for you t'think on em. Now go to sleep. Shhh ... go to sleep .... shhh . . . .'

"And that's just what I did," Martha said. "Next thing

I remember, I was running down those stairs like the devil was after me. I didn't remember what I was running from, but that didn't make no difference; I ran anyway. And I never went back there except one more time, and I didn't see her when I did."

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She paused and they both looked around like women freshly awakened from a shared dream. They saw that Le Cinq had begun to fill up - it was almost five o'clock and executives were drifting in for their after-work



drink or three.

Although neither wanted to say so out loud, both wanted suddenly to be somewhere else. They were no longer wearing their uniforms but neither felt she belonged among these men in their suits, their briefcases, their talk of stocks, bonds, debentures, and politics.

"I've got a casserole and a six-pack of beer at my place," Martha said, suddenly timid. "I could warm up the one and cool down the other ... if you want to hear the rest."

"Honey, I think I got to hear the rest," Delores said, and laughed a little nervously.

"And I think I've got to tell it," Martha replied, but she did not laugh. Or even smile.

"just let me call Harve."

"You do that," Martha said, and while Delores used the telephone, Martha checked in her bag once more just to make sure the precious book was still there.

## 8

The casserole - as much of it as the two of them could use, anyway - was eaten, and they had each had a beer. Martha asked Delores again if she was sure she wanted to hear the rest. Delores said she did.

"Because some of it ain't very nice. I got to be up front with you about that. Some of it's worse'n the sort of magazines the single men leave behind em when they check out."

Delores knew the sort of magazines she meant, but could not imagine her trim, clean little friend in connection with any of the things pictured in them. She told Martha again that she wanted to hear, and after getting them each a fresh beer, Martha began to speak again.

## 9

"I was back home before I woke up all the way, and because I couldn't remember hardly any of what had gone on at Mama Delorme's, I decided the best thing was to forget all about it - to put it behind me. But one thing I knew I best not forget was the little twist of powder I'd taken from the bottle I found in johnny's sport-coat. It was still in my dress pocket, wrapped up in a twist of tissue paper. I was pretty sure she'd never even looked at it, and all I wanted to do was get rid of it - maybe I didn't make a business of going through johnny's pockets, but he surely made a business of going through mine, 'case I was holding back a dollar or two he might want.

"So I made a move to grab it and that was the first I knew that I already had something curled up tight in my hand, the way a kid keeps the money his momma gave him for the movies on Saturday afternoon until he gets a chance to spend it. I took it out and looked at it and that was the first I was completely sure I'd seen her, although I still couldn't remember what words might have passed between us.

"It was a little square plastic box with a top you could see through and open. There wasn't nothing in it but an old dried-up mushroom - except after hearing what Tavia had said about that woman, I thought maybe it might be a toadstool instead of a mushroom, and probably one that would give you the night-gripes so bad that you'd wish it had just killed you outright like some of em do.

"I decided to flush it right down the commode along with whatever that powder was he'd been sniffing up his nose, but when it came right down to it, I couldn't. Felt like she was right there in the room with me, telling me not to do it. I was scairt to look up in the little square of mirror in case I might see her.

"Well, there wasn't no in-the-apartment commode, like what's right here if we want it - and with beer bein so full of vitamin P as it is and the champagne to boot, I guess we will - it was down at the end of the hall, one

bathroom for the second and third floors. Well, one of the little Parker kids from downstairs started whamming on the door and then kicking it, not giving me no chance to think or get my willpower together.

"So I stuffed that little plastic box back in my dress pocket and I took it back to the apartment and I ended up putting it in one of the kitchen cabinets, way in the back. Where I forgot all about it."

**10**

She stopped for a moment, drumming her fingers restlessly on the table and then said, "I guess I ought to tell you a little more about Peter Jefferies. He was in World War II and he wrote books about it. Novels. My Pete's book is about Viet Nam and his time there; Peter Jefferies's were about what he always called Big Two when he was drunk and partying up with his friends. He wrote the first one while he was still in the service, and it was published in 1946. It was called Blaze of Heaven."

Delores looked at her for a long time without speaking and then said, "Is that so? Is that really so?"

"Yes. Maybe you see where I'm going now. Maybe you get a little more what I mean about natural fathers. Blaze of Heaven: Blaze of Glory."

"But if your Pete had read this Mr Jefferies's book, isn't it possible that--"

"Course it's possible," Martha said, making that pshaw gesture again, "but that ain't what happened. I ain't going to try and convince you of that, though. You'll either be convinced when I get done or you won't. I just wanted to tell you about the man, a little."

"Then go ahead," Delores said.

"I saw him pretty often from 1957 when I started working at Le Palais right through until 1968 or so, when he got in trouble with his heart and liver. The way the man drank and carried on, I was only surprised he didn't get in trouble with himself earlier on. He was only in half a dozen times in 1969, and I remember how bad he looked - he was never fat, but he'd lost enough weight by then so he wasn't no more than a stuffed string. Went right on drinking, though, yellow face or not. I'd hear him coughing and puking in the bathroom and sometimes crying with the pain and I'd think, 'Well, that's it; that's all; he's got to see what he's doing to himself; he'll quit now.' But he never.

"In 1970 he was only in twice. He had a man with him that he leaned on and who took care of him. He was still drinking, even though I knew he wasn't supposed to.

"The last time he came was in February of 1971. It was a different man he had with him - I guess the first one must have got disgusted and just quit the job. Man was in a wheelchair by then. When I come in to clean and looked in the bathroom, I seen what was hung up to dry on the shower-curtain rail. Man was in continence pants by then, too. He'd been a handsome man, but he wasn't handsome no more. He looked just ... just raddled. Do you know what I'm talkin bout?"

Delores shuddered a little and nodded. She knew. She had seen such creatures at some of the AA meetings she had attended with Harvey, human ships wrecked up on the rocks which border the sea of alcohol.

"He always stayed in 1163, one of those corner suites with the view that looks toward the Chrysler Building, and I always used to do for him. After a while, it got so's he would even call me by name, but that was just my name-tag and his memory. I don't believe he ever once really saw me. Until 1960 he always left two dollars on top of the television when he checked out. Then, until '64, it was three. Then, until the end, it was five. Those were good tips for those days, but he wasn't really tipping me; he was following a custom. Custom's important for people like him. He tipped the way he'd hold the door open for a lady. The way he prob'ly used to put his teeth under his pillow when he was small. Only I was the Cleanin Fairy instead of the Tooth Fairy.

"He'd come in to talk to his publishers or sometimes movie or TV people, and he'd call up his friends - some

of them were in publishing, too, or were other writers and then there'd be a party. Always a party. Most I just knew about by the messes I had to clean up the next day - dozens of empty whiskey bottles, mostly Jack Daniel's, millions of cigarette butts, wet towels in the sinks and the tub, left-over room service everywhere once I found a whole platter of jumbo shrimp turned down into the toilet-bowl. There were glass rings on everything, and people snoring on the sofa and the floors, likely as not. That was mostly. But sometimes those parties were still going on when I started to clean at 10:30 in the morning. Mostly those were just .... what do men call them? ...bull-sessions. Talking and drinking. And always it was the war, the war, the war. Who they knew in the war. How they got to the war. Who they served under, who served under them in the war. Things they had seen in the war. How men had been killed in the war. Sometimes - not too often - it would be high-stakes poker instead of just talking about the war. Five or six men sitting around one of the glass-topped tables with their shirts open and their ties pulled way down, the table heaped with more money than a woman like me will make in a lifetime.

"But mostly it was the war.

"For men who seemed like they loved it so much, they sure - God puked a lot when they talked about it."

## 11

Delores said she was surprised the management hadn't kicked the man out, famous writer or not - they were fairly stiff about such goings-ons now and had been even worse in years gone by, or so she had heard.

"No, no, no," Martha said, smiling a little. "You got the wrong impression. You thinking the man and his friends carried on like one of those rock-groups that like to tear up hotel suites and throw sofas out the windows. Peter Jefferies was quality. He wasn't no ordinary grunt in World War II, like my Pete was in his; he'd been to West Point, went in a Lieutenant and came out a Major. He came from an old Southern family. He could tie his tie four different ways and he knew how to bend over a lady's hand when he kissed it.

"He was quality."

Martha's smile took on a little twist as she spoke the word; the twist had a look both bitter and derisive.

"He and his friends sometimes got a little loud, I guess, but they rarely got rowdy - there's a difference, although it's hard to explain - and they never got out of control. If there was a complaint from the neighboring room - because it was a corner suite he stayed in, there was only the one - and someone from the front desk had to call Mr Jefferies's room and ask him and his guests to tone it down a little, why, they always did. You understand?"

"Yes," Delores said.

"And that's not all. A quality hotel can work for people like Mr Jefferies. It can protect them. They can go right on partying and having a good time with their booze and their cards or maybe their drugs."

"Was he-"

"I don't know. He had plenty at the end, God knows, but they were all the kind with prescription labels on them. I'm just saying that quality calls to quality. He'd been coming there a long time, and you may think it was important that he was a big famous author, but that's only because you haven't been here as long as I have. It was important to them, but what was more important was that he'd been coming there a long time, and even more important that his father, who was a big landowner down in Alabama, had come here before him. The people who ran the hotel back then were people who believed in tradition. Oh, I know the ones who run it now say they believe in the same thing, and maybe they even do when it suits them, but in those days they really believed in it. When they knew Mr Jefferies was coming up to New York on the Southern Flyer from Birmingham, you'd see the room right next to that corner suite sort of empty out, unless the hotel was full right up to the scuppers. They never charged him for the empty room next door; they were just trying to spare him the embarrassment of having to tell his pals to keep it down if they could."

Delores shook her head slowly. "That's amazing."

"You don't believe it, honey?"

"I believe it," she said, "but it's still amazing."

That bitter, derisive smile resurfaced. "Ain't nothing too much for quality . . . or didn't used to be. Hell, even I recognized that he was quality, in spite of the way that he might tell a Rastus the Coon joke to his friends while I was right there emptying ashtrays or just in the next room with the door open, making a bed. Oh, he hated blacks, all right, but it wasn't just us - he hated just about everyone the same. When it came to hate, the man was an equal opportunity employer. When John Kennedy died, Jefferies happened to be in the city and he threw a party. All of his friends were there, and it went on into the next day. I could barely stand to be in there, the things they were saying - about how things would be perfect if only someone would get that brother of his who wouldn't be happy until every decent white kid in the country was fucking while the Beatles played on the TV and the stereo and the fucking jigaboos were running wild through the streets with a TV under each arm.

"It got so bad that I knew I was going to scream at him. I just kept telling myself to be quiet and do my job and get out as fast as I could; I kept telling myself to remember the man was my Pete's natural father if I couldn't remember anything else; I kept telling myself that Pete was only three years old and I needed this job and I would lose it if I couldn't keep my mouth shut.

"Then one of em said, 'And after we get Bobby, let's go get that fucking candy-ass younger brother!' and one of the others said, 'Then we'll get all the male children and really have a party!'

"'That's right!' Mr Jefferies said. 'And when we've got the last head up on the castle wall we're going to have a party so big I'm going to hire Madison Fucking Square Garden!'

"I had to leave then. I had a headache and bellycramps from trying so hard to keep my mouth shut. I left the room half-cleaned, which is something I never did before or have done since, but sometimes being black has its advantages; he didn't even know I was gone. Wasn't none of them knew I was gone."

That bitter derisive smile was on her lips again.

## 12

"I don't see how you can call a man like that quality," Delores said, "or call him the natural father of your unborn child, whatever the circumstances might have been. To me he sounds like he wasn't no more than a beast."

"No - he wasn't a beast. He was a man. In some ways - in most ways - he was a bad man, but a man he was. And he did have that something that I mean by quality. It come across in his books, too, only even clearer."

"You read one?"

"Honey, I read them all," Martha said. "He'd only written three by the time I went to Mama Delorme's with that white powder in late 1959, but I'd read two of them. In time I got caught up, because he wrote even slower than I read." She grinned. "And that's pretty slow, you better believe it."

I Delores looked doubtfully toward Martha's bookcase.

There were books there by Alice Walker, Rita Mae Brown, Yellowback Radio Broke Down by Ishmael Reed, a couple by Kurt Vonnegut - but the three shelves were pretty dominated by paperback romances and Agatha Christie mystery stories.

"Stories about war don't hardly seem like your pick an' glory, Martha, if you know what I mean. "

"Of course I know," Martha said. She got up and brought them each a fresh beer. "And I'll tell you an ironical thing, Delores Williams: if he'd been a nice man, I never would have read them at all, not even one of them. And I'll tell you another ironical thing: if he'd been a nice man, I don't think they would have been as good as they were."

"Oh, I don't believe that."

"Ain't asking you to! All I'm doing is saying what happened to me and what I believe. Now do you want me to go on?"

"Yes, of course I do," Delores said.

"Well, it didn't take me until ~ and the Kennedy assassination to figure out what kind of man he was. I knew that by the summer of '58. By then I'd seen what a low opinion he had of the human race in general - not his friends, he would've died for them, I have no doubt, but everyone else. Everyone was out looking for a buck to stroke, he used to say - I heard him use that phrase again and again. Stroking the buck, stroking the buck, everyone was stroking the buck. It seemed like him and his friends thought stroking the buck was a real bad thing, unless they were playing poker and had a whole mess of em stacked up in front of them. Seemed to me like then they stroked them, all right. Seemed to me like then they stroked them plenty, him included.

"He talked ugly and laughed at People who were trying to do good or improve the world, he hated the blacks and the Jews - which he always called the goddamn sheenies - and he thought we ought to go in there and clobber the Russians or the Cubans or whoever there was going.

"I listened to it all and started to wonder how come all the critics and book-reviewers could say he'd written great books. One of them had even won a National Book Award prize, and there was talk right up to the time he died about giving him a Pulitzer Prize. They never did, though, and I bet that frosted his balls plenty.

"Finally I decided I would just have to see for myself how everybody could be so wrong as to mistake a garbage-eater like him for someone with heart. I went down to the Public Library and got his first book, Blaze of Heaven.

"I expected it would turn out to be something like the Emperor's new clothes, everyone lying each other up because no one wanted to be the first to admit he'd made a mistake, but it wasn't like that at all. The book was about these five men and what happened to them in the war, and what happened to their wives and girlfriends back home. When I saw on the jacket it was about the war, I kind of rolled my eyes, thinking it would be like all those boring stories they told each other."

"It wasn't?"

"I read the first ten or twenty pages and thought, 'This ain't so good. It ain't as bad as I thought it'd be, but nothing's happening.' Then I read another thirty pages and I kind of ... well, I kind of lost myself. Next time I looked up it was almost midnight and I was two hundred pages into that book. I thought to myself, 'You got to go to bed, Martha. You got to go right now, because five-thirty comes early. But I read another thirty pages in spite of how heavy my eyes were getting, and it was quarter to one before I finally got up to brush my teeth.'"

Martha stopped, looking off toward the darkened window and all the miles of night outside it, her eyes hazed with remembering, her lips pressed together in a light frown. She shook her head a little.

"I didn't know how a man who was so boring when you had to listen to him could write so you didn't never want to close the book he wrote, nor ever see it end, either. How he could make up characters so real you could cry over them when they died - and when Norah got hit and killed by a taxi-cab near the end of Blaze of Heaven, I did cry. I didn't know how a man who could be so nasty and sour could make you care so much.

That book was full of pain and bad things, but it was full of sweetness, too ... and love .

She laughed.

"I can't explain it like I want to," she said. "I'm not a critic."

"You've explained very well," Delores said.

Martha looked pleased but disbelieving.

"There was a fella worked at the hotel back then named Billy Beck, a nice young man who was majoring in English at Fordham when he wasn't on the door. He and I used to talk sometimes."

"Was he colored?"

"God, no!" Martha laughed. "Wasn't no black doormen at Le Palais until 1965. Black porters and bellboys and car-park valets, but no black doormen. Wasn't considered right. Quality people like Mr Jefferies wouldn't have liked it.

"Anyway, I asked Billy how the man's books could be so wonderful when he was such a booger in person. Billy asked me if I knew the one about the fat disc jockey with the thin voice, and I said I didn't know what he was talking about. Then he said he didn't know the answer to my question, but he told me something a prof of his had said about Thomas Wolfe. This prof said that some writers - and Wolfe was one of them - were no shakes at all until they sat down to a desk and took up pens in their hands. He said that a pen to fellows like that was like a telephone booth is to Clark Kent. He said that Thomas Wolfe was like a . . ." She hesitated, then smiled. "That he was like a divine wind-chime. He said a wind-chime isn't nothing on its own, but when the wind blows through it, it makes a lovely noise.

"I think Peter Jefferies was a wind chime like that. He was quality, he had been raised quality and he was, but the quality in him wasn't nothing he could take credit for. It was like God banked it for him and he just spent it."

Martha smiled again.

"I'll tell you something," she said. "After I'd read a couple of his books, I started to feel sorry for him."

"Sorry?"

"Because his books were pretty and he was ugly. The way he was and the way my Johnny was, they weren't so much different. But Johnny was luckier, in a way, because he couldn't ever have been any more than what he was. Mr Jefferies - his books were like dreams he had. Like he picked up his pen and dreamed of all the parts of the world he didn't, or couldn't let himself, believe in."

She got up, went to the fridge, and came back to the table with two more beers.

Delores laughed and said she'd pass. "Harvey will smell it on my breath," she said. "He doesn't say anything right out, but he gets uneasy."

"You better take it," Martha said, "this is where the water gets murky." And after looking carefully in her friend's eyes, Delores took it.

**13**

"One other thing about the man," Martha said. "He wasn't a sexy man. At least not the way you usually think about a man being sexy."

"You mean he was a-

"No, he wasn't a fag, or a homo, or a gay, or whatever it is right to call them these days. He wasn't sexy for men, but he wasn't much sexy for women, either. There were two, maybe three times in all the years I did for him when I seen cigarette butts with lipstick on them in the bedroom ashtrays when I cleaned up. Those times there was the smell of perfume in the suite, and on one of them I found a Coty eyeliner pencil in the bathroom it had rolled up under the mirror where you could hardly see it.

"I reckon he'd had call-girls come in and do him, but two or three times in all those years isn't much, is it?"

"It sure isn't," Delores said, thinking of all the panties she had pulled out from under beds, all the condoms she had seen floating in unflushed toilets, all the false eyelashes she had found on and under pillows.

"I think he was sexy for himself," Martha said. "That's what I think. Just for himself. I changed a lot of sheets with stiff patches on them, if you know what I mean."

Delores nodded.

"And there'd always be a little jar of cold cream in the bathroom, or sometimes on the table by his bed. I think he used it when he pulled off. To keep from getting chapped skin."

The two women looked at each other and suddenly began giggling hysterically.

"You sure he wasn't no ass-bandit, honey?" Delores asked finally.

"I said cold cream, not Vaseline," Martha said, and that did it; for the next five minutes the two women laughed until they cried. Delores spilled her bottle of beer and it ran foaming across the table and then they laughed at that.

## 14

But nothing was really funny, and Delores knew it. And when Martha went on, she simply listened, hardly believing what she was hearing.

"It was maybe a week after that time at Mama Delorme's, or maybe it was two," Martha said. "I don't remember. Been a long time since it all happened. By then I was pretty sure I was pregnant - I wasn't throwing up or nothing, but there's a feeling to it. It don't come from places you'd think. It's like your gums and your toenails and the bridge of your nose figure out what's going on before the rest of you. Or you want something like chop suey at three in the afternoon and you say, 'Whoa, now! What's this?' But you know what it is.

"I was in the bedroom of his suite. He'd gone out for one of his publishers' meetings. The bed was a double, messed up on both sides, but that didn't mean nothing; he was just a restless sleeper. Sometimes when I came in the groundsheet would be pulled right out from underneath the mattress.

"Well, I stripped off the coverlet and the two blankets underneath - he was thin-blooded 'and always slept under all he could - and then I started to strip the top sheet off backwards, and I seen it right away. It was his spunk, mostly dried on there.

"I stood there looking at it for ... oh, I don't know how long. It was like I was hypnotized. I seen him, lying there all by himself after his friends had gone home, lying there smelling nothing but the smoke they'd left behind and his own sweat, I seen him lying there on his back and taking himself by the hand and thinking about something and jacking himself off. I seen that as clear as I see you now, Delores; the only thing I didn't see is what he was thinking about, what sort of pictures he was making in his head to get himself off ... and considering the way he talked and the way he was when he wasn't writing his books, I'm just as glad I didn't. I might never sleep again if I did."

Delores was looking at her, frozen, saying nothing.

"Next thing I know, this . . . this feeling came over me." She paused, thinking. "This compulsion came over me. It was like wanting chop suey at three in the afternoon, or ice cream and pickles at two in the morning, or ... what did you want, Delores?"

"Rind bacon," Delores said through lips so numb she could hardly feel them. "Harvey went out and couldn't find me any, but he brought back a bag of those pork rinds and I just gobbled them."

Martha was nodding.

## 15

When Delores came back from the bathroom she was at first not able to look at Martha. When she finally made herself, she saw that Martha was looking at her with a warm kindness and concern that nearly broke her heart. With no idea of what she was going to do, she went around the table and hugged her friend. Twenty minutes ago they had laughed madly together; now Martha burst into wild tears. After a few moments of holding back Delores joined her, and when she kissed Martha on the cheek and told her to go on, their tears mingled.

## 16

"I worked the rest of that day in kind of a daze. It was like I was hypnotized. People talked to me, and I answered them, but it was like I was hearing them though a glass wall and speaking back to them the same way. I'm hypnotized, all right, I remember thinking.

She hypnotized me. That old woman. Gave me one of those posthypnotic suggestions, like when a stage hypnotist says, 'Someone says the word Chiclets to you, you're gonna get down on all fours and bark like a dog,' and the guy who was hypnotized does it even if no one says Chiclets to him for the next ten years. She put something in that tea and then told me to do that. That nasty thing.

"I seen why she would, too - an old woman superstitious enough to believe in stump-water cures, and how you could witch a man into love by putting a little drop of blood from your period onto the heel of his foot while he was sleeping, and cross-tie walkers, and God alone knows what else ... if a woman like that with a bee in her bonnet about natural fathers could do hypnotism, hypnotizing a woman like me into ... well, into doing what I did ... might be just what she would do. Because she would believe it. And I had named him to her, hadn't I? Yes indeed.

"It never occurred to me then that I hadn't remembered hardly anything at all about going to Mama Delorme's until after I did what I did in Mr Jefferies's bedroom. It did that night, though.

"I got through the day all right. I mean, I didn't cry or scream or carry on or anything like that. My sister Kissy acted worse the time she was drawing water from the old well round dusk and a bat flew up out of it and got caught in her hair. There was just that feeling that I was behind a wall of glass, and I figured if that was all, I could get along with it.

"Then, when I got home, I all at once got thirsty. I was thirstier then ever in my life - felt like a sandstorm was going on in my throat. I started to drink water. It seemed like I just couldn't drink enough. And I started to spit. I just spit and spit and spit. Then I started to feel sick to my stomach. I ran down to the bathroom and looked at myself in the mirror and I run out my tongue, and for just a second or two it looked like it was all white, like it was still all coated with his ... you know.

"Then I vomited. I vomited and vomited until my legs wouldn't hold me up and I fell down on my knees in front of the toilet bowl. I was crying and begging God to please forgive me, to let me stop puking before I lost the baby, if I really did have one. And then I thought of myself standing there in his bedroom, scraping his



squirt off the sheet and eating it, just doing it and not even thinking about what I was doing - I tell you I could see myself doing it, Delores, as if I was looking at myself in a movie. And then I vomited again, and it felt like my stomach had turned itself right inside out.

"Mrs Parker heard me and came to the door and asked if I was all right. That helped me get hold of myself a little, and by the time Johnny came in that night, I was over the worst of it. He was drunk, spoiling for a fight. When I wouldn't give him one he hit me in the eye anyway and walked out. I was almost glad he hit me, because it gave me something else to think about.

"The next day when I went into Mr Jefferies's suite he was sitting in the parlor, still in his pajamas, scribbling away on one of his yellow legal pads. He always travelled with a bunch of them, held together with a big red rubber band, right up until the end. When he come to Le Palais that last time and I didn't see them, I knew he'd made up his mind to die. I wasn't sorry, neither."

Martha looked toward the kitchen window with an expression which held nothing of mercy or forgiveness; as it was a cold look, a look which reports an utter absence of the heart.

"When I come in the next day and seen him there I was relieved, because it meant I could put off the cleaning. He didn't like the housekeepers around when he was working, and he might not want the room made up until Yvonne came on at three.

"I said, 'I'll come back later, Mr Jefferies.'

"'Do it now,' he said. 'Just keep quiet while you do. I've got a bitch of a headache and a hell of a good idea. The combination of the two is killing me.'

"Any other time he would have told me to come back, I swear it. It seemed like I could almost hear that old black mama laughing.

"I went into the bathroom and started tidying that up, taking out the used towels and putting up fresh ones, replacing the soap with a new bar, putting fresh matches out, and all the time I'm thinking, But you can't hypnotize someone who doesn't want to be hypnotized, old woman. Whatever it was you put in the tea that day, whatever it was YOU told me to do or how many times you told me to do it, I am wise to you. I am wise to you and I am shut of you.

"I went into the bedroom and I looked at the bed. I expected it would look to me like a closet does to a kid who's scared of the boogeyman, but I saw it was just a bed. I knew I wasn't going to do anything, and it was a relief. So I stripped it and there was another of those sticky patches, still drying, as if he'd woke up maybe around 9:30, an hour or so before, and just took care of himself.

"I seen it and waited to see if I was going to feel anything about it. I didn't. It was just the leftovers of a man with a letter and no mailbox to put it in, like you and I have seen a hundred times before. And that old woman was no more a bruja woman than I was. I might be pregnant or I might not be, but if I was, it was johnny's child. He was the only man I'd ever lain with, and I could eat this man's spunk until it came out of my ears and it wouldn't change a thing.

"It was a cloudy day, but at the second I thought that, the sun came out like God had put his final amen on the subject. I don't recall ever feeling so relieved. I stood there thanking God everything was all right, and while I did it I scraped all of his stuff off the sheet I could get and ate it.

"It was like I was standing outside myself and watching again. And a part of me was saying, You're crazy to be doing that, girl, but you're even crazier to be doing it with him right there in the next room; 6 could get up any second and come in here to use the bathroom and see you eating his spend off that sheet. Rugs as thick as they are in this place, you'd never hear him coming. And that would be the end of your job at Le Palais - or any other big hotel in New York, most likely. A girl caught doing a thing like that would never work in this city again as a chambermaid, at least not in any half-decent hotel.

"But it didn't make any difference; I went right on until I was done - or at least until some part of me was satisfied - and then I just stood there a minute, looking down at the sheet in my hands. I could see the wet place, but now it was only wet because my tongue had been on it. That other was gone. I couldn't hear nothing at all from the other room, and it come to me that he was behind me, standing in the doorway, looking at me. I knew how he would look. Used to be a travelling show that came to Babylon every August when I was a girl, and they had a man with it - I guess he was a man - that geeked out back of the side show. He'd be down a hole and some fella would give a spiel about how he was the missing link and then throw a chicken down and the geek'd bite the head off it. Once my oldest brother Bradford, who died in a car accident in Biloxi about twenty years ago - went to see that man. My father said he'd be sorry, but he didn't forbid Brad, because Brad was nineteen then, a man. He went, and all the time he was gone me and Kissy meant to ask him what it was like. but when we saw the expression on his face we never. We knew better, you know?"

Delores nodded.

"And I knew that Mr Jefferies was standing there, had been standing there all the while, and when I turned around he'd look just like Brad after Brad seen the geek bite the head off that chicken.

"I turned around, still holding that sheet in my hands, but he wasn't there. It had just been my guilty heart seeing him in the eye of my mind. I walked to the door and looked out and seen he was still in the parlor, writing on his yellow pad faster than ever. So I went ahead and changed the bed and freshened the room just like always, but it was like somebody else was doing it. That feeling

that I was behind a glass wall was back, stronger than ever.

"I took care of the used towels and linens using the bedroom door like you're supposed to - first thing I ever learned back in 1957 when I came to work here is you don't ever, ever take the linen out to the hall through the sitting room of a suite - and then I came back in to where he was. I meant to tell him I'd do the parlor later, when he wasn't working. But when I saw him - saw the way he was acting - I was so surprised that I stopped right there in the doorway, looking at him.

"He was walking around the room so fast that his yellow silk pajamas were whipping around his legs. He had his hands in his hair and he was twirling it every which way. He looked like one of those brainy mathematicians in the old Saturday Evening Post cartoons. His eyes were all wild, like he'd had a bad shock. First thing I thought was that he'd seen what I did after all and it had ... you know ... made him feel. . . "

"Made him feel so sick it almost drove him crazy?"

Martha nodded.

"Turned out it didn't have anything to do with me. At least he didn't think so. That was the only time he talked to me, other than to ask me if I'd get some more stationery or another pillow or change the setting on the air conditioner. He talked to me because he had to.

Something had happened to him - something very big and he had to talk to somebody or go crazy, I guess.

My head is splitting,' he said.

I'm sorry to hear that, Mr Jefferies,' I said. 'I can get you some aspirin if-'

"No,' he said. 'That's not it. It's this idea. It's like I went fishing for trout and hooked a marlin instead. I write books for a living. Made-up stories.'

" 'Yes sir, Mr Jefferies,' I said, 'I have read two of them and thought they were fine.'

"'Did you,' he said, looking at me as if maybe I'd gone crazy. 'Well, that's very kind of you to say, anyway. I

woke up this morning and I had an idea.'

"Yes sir, I was thinking to myself, you had an idea, all right, and whatever it was came out all over the sheet. Only it ain't there no more, so you don't have to worry. And I almost laughed out loud. Only, Delores, I don't think he would have noticed if I had.

"I ordered up some breakfast,' he said, and pointed at the room service trolley by the door, 'and as I ate it I thought about this little idea. I thought it might make a short story. There's this magazine, you know . . . The New Yorker ... well, never mind.' He wasn't going to explain The New Yorker magazine to a darkie spear-chucker like me, you know."

Delores laughed.

"But by the time I'd finished breakfast,' he went on, 'it began to seem more like it might be a novelette. And then I started to work on it ... rough out some ideas ... and now . . .' He gave out this shrill little laugh. 'I don't think I've had an idea this good in ten years. Maybe never. Do you think it would be possible for twin brothers - fraternal, not identical - to end up fighting on opposite sides during World War II?"

"Well, maybe not in the Pacific,' I said. Another time I don't think I would have had nerve enough to speak to him at all, Delores - I would have just stood there and gawped. But I still felt like I was under glass, or like I'd had a bit of nitrous oxide at the dentist's and wasn't quite out from under it yet.

"He laughed like it was the funniest thing he'd ever heard and said, 'No, not there - in the ETO. And they'd come face to face during the Battle of the Bulge.'

'Well, I guess that could be-' I started, but by then he was walking around the parlor again, fast, running his hands through his hair and making it look wilder and wilder.

'I know it sounds like Orpheum Circuit melodrama,' he said, 'some silly piece of claptrap like Armadale, but the concept of twins ... and it could be explained rationally ... I see just how . . .' He whirled on me. 'Would it have dramatic impact?"

"Yes, sir, everyone likes stories about brothers that don't know they're brothers, especially if they're twins,' I said.

'Sure they do,' he said. 'And I'll tell you something else-' Then he stopped and I saw the queerest expression come over his face. It was queer, but I could read it letter-perfect. It was like he was waking up to do something foolish, like a man suddenly realizing he's spread his face with shaving cream and then taken his electric razor to it. He was talking to a nigger hotel maid about what was maybe the best idea he'd ever had - a nigger hotel maid whose idea of a good story was probably The Edge of Night or Search for Tomorrow . He'd forgot me saying I'd read two of his books-

"Or thought it was just a lie to flatter him and get a bigger tip," Delores murmured.

"Yeah, or maybe that. Anyway, that expression said he'd just realized who he was talking to, that was all.

'I think I'm going to extend my stay,' he said. 'Tell them at the desk, would you?' He spun around to start walking again and his leg hit the room service cart. 'And get this out of here, would you?"

"Would you want me to come back later and-' I started.

"Yes, yes, yes,' he says, 'come back later and do whatever you like. just be a good girl and take the cart and go.'

I did just that, and I was never so relieved in my life as when the parlor door shut behind me. I wheeled the room service trolley over to the side of the wall. He'd had juice and scrambled eggs and bacon. I started to

walk away and then I seen there was a mushroom on his plate, too, pushed aside with the last of the eggs and a little bit of bacon. I looked at it and it was like a light went on in my head. I remembered the mushroom she'd given me - old Mama Delorme - in the little plastic box. Remembered it for the first time since that day. I remembered taking it home, and finding it in my dress pocket, and where I'd put it. The one on his plate looked just the same-old and wrinkled and sort of dried up, like it might be a toadstool instead of a mushroom, and one that would make you powerful sick.

She looked at Delores steadily.

"He'd eaten part of it. More than half of it, I'd say."

## 17

"Mr Buckley was on the desk that day and I told him Mr Jefferies was thinking of extending his stay. Mr Buckley said he didn't think that would present a problem even though Mr Jefferies had been planning to check out the very next day.

"Then I went down to the room service kitchen and talked with Bedelia Aaronson - she died just last year, God rest her sweet soul - and asked her if she'd seen anyone out of the ordinary around that morning. Bedelia asked who did I mean and I said I didn't really know. She said 'Why you asking, Marty?' and I told her I'd rather not say. She said there hadn't been nobody, not even the man from the food service who was trying to date up the girl who was short-ordering then.

"I started away and she said, 'Unless you mean that old Negro lady, the one that got lost looking for the john.'

"I turned back and asked her what old Negro lady that was.

'Well,' Bedelia said, 'I imagine she came in off the street, looking for the rest room. Happens once or twice a day. They're afraid to ask directions because the hotel people are just as apt to point them at the door as at the can. She probably came downstairs, turned left instead of right, ended up here, and . . .' She stopped and got a look at me. 'Are you all right, Martha? You look like you're going to faint!'

"I'm not going to faint,' I said. 'What was she doing?'

"'Just wandering around, looking at the breakfast trolleys like she didn't know where she was,' she said. 'Poor old thing! She was eighty if she was a day. Looked like a strong gust of wind would blow her right up into the sky like a kite . . . Martha, you come over here and sit down. You look like the picture of Dorian Gray in that movie.'

'What did she look like?'

"I told you what she looked like. She looked like an old woman. The only thing I remember is that she had the most awful scar - it ran all the way up her nose and her forehead and into her hair. It-

"But I didn't hear any more because that was when I did faint, right into a big bowl of chef's salad she was making for lunch."

## 18

"They let me go home early and I no more got there when I started feeling like I wanted to spit again, and drink a lot of water, and probably end up down in that john again, sicking my guts out. But I just sat there by the window, looking out into the street, and gave myself a talking-to.

'What she'd done to me wasn't just hypnosis - I knew that. It was more powerful than that. I still wasn't sure if I believed in any such thing as witchcraft, but she'd done something to me, all right, and whatever it was, I was just going to have to ride with it. I couldn't quit my job, not with a man that wasn't turning out to be worth

a damn and a baby most likely on the way. I couldn't even request to be switched to a different floor. A year or two before I could have, but I knew there was talk about making me Assistant Chief Housekeeper for Ten of Twelve, and that meant a raise in pay. More'n that, it meant they'd most likely take me back at the same job after I had the baby.

"My mother had a saying: What can't be cured must be endured. I thought about going back to see that old black mama and asking her to take it off, but I knew somehow she wouldn't - she'd made up her mind it was best for me, what she was doing, and one thing I've learned as I've made my way through this world, Delores, is that the only time you can never change someone's mind is when they've got it in their head that they're doing you a help.

"I sat there thinking all those things and looking out at the street, all the people coming and going, and I kind of dozed off. Couldn't have been for much more than fifteen minutes, but when I woke up again I knew something else. That old woman wanted me to eat his stuff, and I couldn't do that if he went back to Birmingham. So she got into the room service kitchen and put that mushroom on his tray and he ate part of it and it gave him that idea. Turned out to be a book, in case you're interested - Boys in the Mist, it was called. It was about just what he told me that day, twin brothers, one of them an American soldier and the other a German one ' that meet at the Battle of the Bulge. The critics didn't like it as well as Blaze of Heaven, but the people who go out and buy books surely must have liked it, because it was the biggest seller he ever had."

She paused and added, "I read that in his obituary."

## 19

"He stayed another week. Every day when I went in he'd be bent over the desk in the parlor, writing away on one of his yellow pads, still wearing his pajamas. I'd ask him if he wanted me to come back later and he'd tell me to go ahead and make up the bedroom but be quiet about it. Never looking up from his writing while he talked. Each day I went in telling myself that this time I wasn't going to do it, and each day I went ahead and did it just the same. It wasn't like fighting a - what do you call it? - a compulsion. It was more like blinking for a minute and finding out you'd already done it. Or were doing it. He never came in, and the come was always on the sheet, still partly wet, like he woke up at exactly the same time every morning and pulled off at exactly the same time. I had no doubt then and no doubt now that was exactly what he did. He had my morning-sickness and I had his night-sweats.

"It was at night I'd really start thinking about what I was doing, and I'd start to spit and drink water and then I'd go down to the bathroom and throw up once or twice. Mrs Parker got so concerned that I finally told her it was because I was pregnant, only she wasn't to tell Johnny because I wasn't sure how he'd take it.

"Johnny Rosewall was one self-centered son of a bitch, but I think even he would have known something was wrong with me if he hadn't had things of his own to think about - him and a couple of his no-good friends were planning a liquor store holdup. He didn't even have much time to knock me around. I knew by then I'd have to leave him, but I just didn't have the strength to do it. I was still living behind that glass wall, it felt like.

"Then I let myself into 1163 one morning and Mr Jefferies was gone. He'd packed his bags and headed back to Alabama to work on his book and think about his war. Oh, Delores, I can't tell you how happy I felt! I felt the way Lazarus must have felt when he found out he was going to have a second turn at the bat. All at once it seemed like everything might turn out all right after all, like in a story - I would tell Johnny about the baby and he would straighten up, throw out his dope, and get a regular job. He'd be a proper husband to me and a good father to his son - I was already sure it was going to be a boy.

I went into the bedroom of Mr Jefferies's suite and seen the bedclothes all messed up like they always were when he was there, the blankets kicked off the end and the sheet all tangled up in a ball. I walked over there feeling like I was in a dream again and pulled the sheet back. I was thinking, Well, all right, if I have to but it's for the last time.

"But it turned out the last time had already happened. There wasn't no mark of him on that sheet. And since

I've told you all this, I might as well tell you the truth about something else: part of me was almost disappointed.

"It was over. Whatever spell that old bruja woman had put on me - and on the writer, too - it was over. That's good enough, I thought. I'm gonna have the baby and he's gonna have the book, and we're shut of it. And I don't care anything about natural fathers as long as Johnny will be a good father to my little chap."

## 20

"I told him that same night," she said, and then added dryly: "He wasn't too pleased about the idea of becoming a daddy, as I think I've told you."

"He hit you with a broom and tried to make you drop it, " Delores said.

"Yes. Hit me more than once. Hit me about five times and then stood over me where I lay crying in the corner and yelled, 'What are you, crazy, woman? We ain't having no kid! We ain't having no goddamn kid! I think you out your mind!' Then he turned around and walked out.

"I laid there for awhile, thinking of the first miscarriage and scared to death the pains would start any minute, and I'd be on my way to having another one. I thought of my momma writing that I ought to get away from him before he put me in the hospital, and of Kissy sending me that Greyhound ticket with GO NOW written on the folder. And when I was sure that I wasn't going to miscarry the baby, I got up to pack a bag and get the hell out of there - right away, before he could come back. But I was no more than opening the closet door when I thought of Mama Delorme again. I remembered telling her I was going to leave Johnny, and what she said to me: 'No - he's going to leave you. You're going to see him out, is all. Stay around. There be a little money. You gonna think he hoit the baby but he din't be doin it.'

"It was like she was right there, telling me what to look for and what to do. I went into the closet, all right, but it wasn't my own clothes I wanted anymore. I started going through his, and I found a couple of things in that same damned sport-coat where I'd found the bottle of White Angel. That coat was his favorite, and I guess it really said everything anyone needed to know about Johnny Rosewall. It was a bright purple niggery-looking thing. I hated it. Wasn't no bottle of dope I found this time. Was a straight-razor in one pocket and the cheap gun he'd bought someplace for the liquor store holdup him and his friends had planned in the other. I took the gun out and looked at it, and that same feeling came over me that came over me those times in the bedroom of Mr Jefferies's suite - like I was doing something just after I woke up from a heavy sleep.

"I walked into the kitchen with the gun in my hand and set it down on the little bit of counter I had beside the stove. Then I opened the overhead cupboard and felt around in back of the spices and the box of tea. At first I couldn't find what she'd given me and this awful stifling panic came over me - I was scared the way you get scared in dreams. Then my hand happened on that plastic box and I drew it down.

"I opened it and took out the mushroom. It was a repulsive thing, too heavy for its size, and warm, Delores. It was like holding a lump of flesh that hasn't quite died. That thing I did over and over again in Mr Jefferies's bedroom? That nasty thing? I tell you right now I'd do it again two hundred times over before I'd pick up that mushroom one more time.

"I held it in my right hand and I picked up that cheap little .32 in my left. And then I squeezed my right hand as hard as I could, and I felt the mushroom squelch in my fist, and it sounded ... well, I know it's almost impossible to believe ... but it sounded like it screamed. Do you believe that could be?"

Slowly, Delores shook her head. She did not, in fact, know if she believed it or not, but she was absolutely sure of one thing: she did not want to believe it.

"Well, I don't believe it, either. But that's what it sounded like. And one other thing you won't believe, but I do, because I saw it: it bled. That mushroom bled. I saw a little stream of blood come out of my fist and splash onto the gun. But the blood disappeared as soon as it hit the barrel.

"After a while there were just drops, and then nothing. I opened my hand, expecting it would be full of blood, but there was just that mushroom, all smashed up, with the shapes of my fingers mashed into it. Wasn't no blood on the mushroom, in my hand, on his gun, nor anywhere. And I started to think I'd done nothing but somehow dreamed it all, and then it twitched in my hand and for just a second there it didn't look like a mushroom at all - it looked like a little tiny penis that was still alive. I thought of the blood coming out of my fist when I squeezed it and I thought of her saying 'Any chile a woman get, the man shoot it out'n his pecker, girl.' It twitched again - I tell you I saw it do, Delores - and I screamed and threw it in the trash. Then I heard Johnny coming back up the stairs and I grabbed up his gun and took it back into the bedroom and put it back into his coat pocket. Then I climbed into bed with all my clothes on, even my shoes, and pulled the blanket up to my chin. He come in and I seen he was drunk or stoned or both, and that he meant trouble. He had a rug-beater in one hand. I don't know where he got it from, but I knew what he meant to do with it.

"Ain't gonna be no baby, woman,' he said. 'You get on over here.'

"No,' I says, 'there ain't going to be no baby. Put that thing away. You don't need it. You already took care of the baby, you worthless piece of shit.'

"I knew it was a risk, calling him that; it might make him mad enough to come back and land on me again, but I thought maybe it would make him believe me ... and it did. Instead of coming over and beating me up, this big goony stoned grin spread over his face. I tell you, I never hated him so much as I did then.

'It's gone?' he said.

"It's gone, all right,' I said.

'Where?' he said.

"I got rid of the mess down the hall in the bathroom,' I said, 'where do you think?'

"He come over then and he tried to kiss me, for Jesus's sake. Kiss me! I turned my face away and he went upside my head, but not hard.

"You're gonna see I know best,' he says. 'There'll be time enough for kids later on.'

"Then he went out again. Two nights later him and his friends tried to pull that liquor store job and his gun blew up in his face and killed him."

"You think you witched that gun, don't you?" Delores said.

"No," Martha said calmly, "I think she did. She just used me. She saw I wouldn't help myself, and so she made me help myself."

"But you think the gun was witched."

"No," Martha said again, and then smiled a cold and unsettling smile of absolute surety. "I don't think it was; I know it was."

## 21

"That's really the end," Martha said, shrugging. "Johnny died and I had Pete. Wasn't until I got too pregnant to work that I found out just how many friends I had. If I'd known, I think I would have left him sooner."

"That's not really the end, though, is it?" Delores asked.

"Well, there are two more things," she said. "Little things." But she did not look, Delores thought, as though

they were so little to her.

"I went back to Mama Delorme's about four months after Pete was born. I didn't want to but I did. I had twenty dollars in an envelope. I couldn't afford it but I knew, somehow, that it belonged to her. It was dark. Stairs seemed even narrower than before, and the higher I climbed the more I could smell her and the smells of her place. Burned candies and dried wallpaper and the cinnamony smell of her tea.

"That feeling came over me for the last time – that feeling of doing something in a dream. I got up to the door and knocked. There was no answer, so I knocked again. There was still no answer, so I knelt down to slip the envelope under the door. And her voice come from right on the other side, as if she was knelt down, too. I was never so scared in my life as I was when that papery old voice came drifting out of the crack under that door - it was like hearing a voice coming out of a closed grave.

'He goan be a fine boy,' she said. 'Goan be just like he father. Like he natural father.'

'I brought you something,' I said. I could barely hear my own voice.

'Slip it under here, dearie,' she whispered. I slipped the envelope halfway under and she pulled it the rest of the way. I heard her tear it open and I waited. I just waited.

'It's enough,' she whispered. 'You go on out of here, dearie, and don't you ever come back to Mama Delorme's again, you hear?'

"I got up and ran out of there just as fast as I could."

## 22

Martha got up, went over to the bookcase, and came back a moment or two later with a hardcover. Delores was immediately struck by the similarity between the artwork on this jacket and the artwork on the jacket of Peter Rosewall's book. This one was *Blaze of Heaven* by Peter Jefferies, and the cover showed a pair of GI's charging an enemy pillbox. One of them had a grenade in his hand; the other was firing an M-1.

Martha rummaged in her blue canvas tote-bag, brought out her son's book, removed the tissue paper in which it was wrapped, and laid it tenderly next to the Jefferies book. *Blaze of Heaven*; *Blaze of Glory*. Side by side, the points of comparison were inescapable.

"This was the other thing," Martha said.

"Yes," Delores said doubtfully. "They do look similar. But I still think it's possible-"

"No," Martha said. "That's not what I mean."

She picked up the Jefferies novel. She looked at it reflectively for a moment and then looked at Delores. "I bought this about a year after my son was born," she said. "It was still in print, although the bookstore had to special order it from the publisher. When Mr Jefferies was in on one of his visits, I got up my courage and asked if he would sign it for me. I thought he might be put out by me asking, but I think he was actually a little flattered. Look here."

She turned to the dedication page of *Blaze of Heaven*.

Delores read what was printed there and felt an eerie doubling in her mind. This book is dedicated to my mother, ALTHEA DIXMONT JEFFERIES, the finest woman I have ever known. And below that Jefferies had written in black fountain-pen ink that was now fading, "For Martha Rosewall, who cleans up my leavings and never complains." Below this he had signed his name and jotted August, '60.

The wording of the penned dedication struck her first as contemptuous ... then as eerie. But before she had a



chance to think about it, Martha had opened her son's book, *Blaze of Glory*, to the dedication page and placed it beside the *Jefferies* book. Once again Delores read the printed matter: This book is dedicated to my mother, MARTHA ROSEWALL. Mom, I couldn't have done it without you. Below that he had written in a pen which looked like a fine-line Flair: I really couldn't have done it without you! I love you, Pete.

But she didn't really read this; she only looked at it. Her eyes went back and forth, back and forth, between the dedication page which had been inscribed in August of 1960 and the one which had been inscribed in April of 1985.

"You see?" Martha asked softly.

Delores nodded. She saw.

The thin and sloping backhand script was exactly the same in both books, and the same was almost true of the signatures themselves.

Only the dates and the last names differed.

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