

## AWAY FROM HERE

by Lisa Goldstein

Lisa Goldstein's novelette, "Dark Rooms" (Asimov's, October/November 2007) was a recent finalist for the 2008 Nebula awards. She returns to our pages with an enigmatic tale about a young woman who must face the unknown to discover if she has what it takes to get...

I'm cleaning one of the vacant rooms when the bell over the front door rings. "Liz!" my mother yells from somewhere down the corridor. "Liz, could you get that?"

I'm almost done here, though, and I don't want to stop. I fluff up the pillows on the bed and go out to the corridor to get the vacuum cleaner, and I'm pushing it into the room when I see my mother heading toward me.

"Didn't I ask you to get the bell?" she says. "What's the matter with you? You know we can't afford to keep the guests waiting."

"I thought I'd finish—" I say.

"Right, and have them go to some other hotel. Remember those people who left because you weren't quick enough?"

"Oh, come on, that was a year ago," I say, but my mother doesn't stay to hear the rest of it. I head down the hall to the reception room, wondering if she's ever going to forget that one mistake.

Once I see the people waiting, though, everything she's said goes right out of my mind. They're like nothing I've ever seen at our hotel, and for a moment all I can do is goggle at them. The man in front is dressed in a top hat and a long shiny black jacket, and the woman next to him has on what looks like a costume from a marching band, with braids and epaulets and bars stretching across her coat; she looks sort of like she's wearing a xylophone. Another woman is dressed in a frilly pink dress and what I think is a feather boa around her neck, though I've never seen one in real life. They don't look silly, though—it's more like they're bringing some other part of the world inside with them, some larger part.

I go behind the counter. The group of people all head up toward me at once. There are only five of them, I realize—the three I mentioned and two men standing at the back, both dressed in identical gray three-piece suits, one very fat and the other very thin.

"Terrible weather we're having, isn't it?" I say. In fact I haven't been outside all day, but one of the guests told me it was about ninety degrees out there, and my father's big on making small talk.

"Better than nothing," the man in front says.

I open my mouth to ask the usual questions—what kind of room do you want, how long will you be staying—but I finally register what he's said. What the hell does *that* mean? I decide to ignore it and continue on.

"How many rooms would you like?" I ask.

Something moves in the man's jacket pocket, and I step back, startled. A mouse

peeks out, its pink nose sniffing the air. "There's no—we don't allow pets in here," I say.

The mouse wiggles back down into the pocket. "What do you mean?" the man says.

"The mouse. In your pocket."

He pats his pocket. It's flat, nothing there. I have to laugh—I can't help it. My brother Bert used to practice magic tricks, though he was nowhere as good as this guy.

The mouse pokes its head out again. "Elmer!" the man says, looking chagrined. "I thought I told you to stay inside!"

"It's stuffy in there, boss." The mouse moves his top lip, showing his teeth—it really does look like he's talking.

I laugh again. "Are you playing somewhere around here?"

"Playing?" the man says. "We're playing right here."

"What?" I say, astonished.

He grins at me. "Playing around. Playing with words. Playing a game."

"No, I mean—" I try again. "Are you doing some kind of show?"

"Ah. No, just passing through. Passing through." I'm disappointed; I realize I'd been looking forward to seeing them perform. "Two rooms, if you please. The very largest this establishment has."

"And your smallest bed," the mouse says.

"You can't—" I say. I stop and think of my brother again. Before he left he disobeyed my parents more and more, so often I think they might have been happy to see him go. One of the last things he did was to give a room to a woman with a tiny yapping dog, who ended up biting my father in the leg when he went to clean the room. The dog, I mean, not the woman.

Usually I manage not to think of my brother at all, and now I've remembered him twice in the space of a few minutes. He went off to college a year ago, after a ginormous argument with my parents, who wanted him to keep working here. I expected him to write, to tell me what he was doing, but he never did.

I look on the computer and find two double rooms a couple doors down from me. "Okay," I say.

"Fantastic," the man says.

"How long are you staying?"

"Oh, let's say ... one night."

"Just a night?" I say, surprising myself. I hadn't meant to say that.

“For now. We’ll see how it goes.”

“Okay, then—I need you to fill out this form, please. And can I have a credit card?”

“Don’t believe in them. How much are the rooms?”

I tell him. He fishes out a handful of money from another pocket and fills out the form. I give him the keys and the group starts for the door. As the woman in the pink dress turns I see her boa move, sidling along her neck like a snake. I look again and it’s standing still, and obviously made of feathers; it couldn’t possibly have done what I thought it did.

After they leave I stop and look around the reception room for a minute. It’s so shabby and familiar that usually I barely notice it, but now it’s as if I’m seeing it through their eyes. The rug’s worn through in a trail that leads to the desk, and some of the bulbs in the overhead lamp are out. The walls are paneled in this bogus wood, some kind of weird material that doesn’t even try to pretend it comes from trees. It actually has this brown fuzz on it, some of which is always flaking off and getting all over the furniture.

I glance down and see I’m still holding all the cash they gave me. I open the safe and put it inside. Then I realize I don’t even know the man’s name, and I look at the card he filled out.

“Ebenezer Monologue,” it says. Yeah, right. And he didn’t put down his home address, which annoys me. There’s some law that says we need this information, and my mom gets mad when it’s not filled in—not at the guest, of course, but at me. For a wild moment I think about filling it in myself, making something up that would go with the name, but with my luck one of my parents would get to talking with them and find out that all the information was wrong.

I go back to the room I was cleaning. I can’t stop thinking about them, though, and I keep smiling to myself. Who are they? Where are they from? What are they doing here, in this town where nothing ever happens?

\* \* \* \*

I wake up feeling excited the next day. I lie in bed for a while, wondering why, and then I remember the people who checked in yesterday. There’s a weird tune running through my head, and I think I’ve dreamt about them, performing in time to the music.

I dress and go to the small kitchen behind the reception room where we have all our meals. My parents are already there, having breakfast, and my dad’s ready with a list of the rooms I have to clean, where the people have checked out early.

We break for the day, but instead of going to the first room on my list I hang around reception and polish the front desk instead. I’m rewarded when the woman in the pink dress and feather boa comes into the room. Sweeps into the room is more like it—she seems to leave a pink blur in the air behind her.

I’m watching her boa so closely I miss what she says and have to ask her to repeat it. “We’ve decided to stay a few more nights,” she says.

“Great,” I say.

She opens the clasp on this purse made out of tiny silver links, like chain mail. I unlock the safe—and I can't find the money from last night.

I look up. The woman's gone, disappeared. "Hey!" I yell. "Hey, come back!"

I run out of the room. I don't see the woman anywhere, just my mother coming down the hall, carrying a package of light bulbs. "What is it, Liz?"

I don't know how to explain what's happened, so I take her back into the reception room. Once I'm there I realize I left the safe open, something I've never done before. Worse than that, my mother's noticed, and this is the kind of mistake she never lets me forget.

"The money," I say. "The money they gave me last night. It's not here."

My mother looks inside the safe. "Who?" she asks.

I hand her the card the man—Ebenezer—filled out. Too late, I remember he never wrote down his address. Another mistake.

To my surprise, though, she smiles. "So they're back," she says.

"Who? Who's back? Who are those people?"

"Oh, they stay here sometimes," my mom says, still smiling.

It's so unusual to see her even this happy—over the years she's developed this sort of tight-lipped expression, worried about everything—that I almost don't want to ask any more questions. I'm too curious to stop now, though. "That isn't his real name, is it?"

"Oh, I don't know."

"Come on. Who are they? When were they here before? I don't remember them. What do they do? Are they actors, or what?"

"They came about ten years ago, when you were five or six. And they were here another time, too, a few years before you were born. They showed you some magic tricks, don't you remember?"

I shake my head. But I'm starting to remember something, a man with a cigarette puffing smoke out of his ears, a woman throwing a napkin that turned into a bird and flew around the room. "So they're magicians? Where do they perform?"

"Magicians. That's right." She looks away from me, back to the safe. "They paid cash again, didn't they?"

"Yeah. And I put it in the safe, and now it's gone."

"Well," my mom says. She's serious now, like when she talked to me about sex. "They don't—we don't actually charge them to stay here."

"We don't? Why not?"

"It's a—a tradition."

“Then why the hell did they give me money? And where the hell did it go?”

“Language, Liz.”

She swears more than I do, but she thinks if I get into the habit I’ll start doing it around the guests. I’m so frustrated now I don’t care. She seems to understand that, because she says, “It’s a game to them, I think. They like to have fun, to play around.”

“But why don’t we charge them?” I know the hotel isn’t doing well, that every year we earn less and less. That’s why I have to work so hard, and why my parents got so angry when Bert left; we can’t afford to hire anyone else.

“Because—well, they’re just a lot of fun to have around.”

This is so unlike my mother that I just stare at her. I can’t remember the last time she had fun doing anything. And she never lets people get away with not paying—she even charged a friend of hers from high school when she stayed here.

She looks down at the package of light bulbs, still in her hand. “We need to change some bulbs in here, I think. Could you go find your father?”

This is her way of telling me not to ask any more questions. I head out, swearing under my breath, but this time, luckily, she doesn’t hear me.

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Megan calls the next day and asks me if I want to take a bus with her into the nearest town and go shopping. “No, I have to work today,” I say.

“It’s Saturday, Liz,” she says.

I actually hadn’t realized that—over the summer pretty much every day seems the same here. “Yeah, well, the weekend is our busiest time.”

She sighs; I hear it come gusting through the phone lines. “What are your parents, slavedrivers? You’re fifteen years old—I think there are laws about this. Don’t you get any time off?”

Suddenly I’m angry. Who the hell does she think she is, criticizing my family? “Yeah, in the middle of the week,” I say, trying to stay polite. “I’ll call you then—how about that?”

She sighs again. “Okay,” she says, and hangs up.

I wonder if I’m really going to call her. I never managed to keep in touch with friends from school last summer—they asked me to come over to their houses or out for dinner, but after I turned them down a few times they stopped. I could have called them on my days off, but I was usually tired and it seemed like too much trouble. Mostly I just stayed at the hotel and helped my father with some project or other.

And it’s not like there’s a lot of places to go around here. We’re barely a town, just a collection of restaurants and gas stations off the freeway about halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco. The land is hot, baked flat, surrounded by miles of farms and

orchards in every direction.

I start on my cleaning. Maybe my parents do work me too hard, I think, but they can't help it. And it's even harder during the school year—with all my chores I barely have enough time to finish my homework or study for tests. Still, it's none of Megan's business.

I make an effort to think about something else. Ebenezer and the others: the graceful way they move, the way they seem to know things no one else does. The mouse, sticking out of Ebenezer's pocket. I laugh to myself and take my mop into a dirty bathroom.

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I wake up that night from a complicated dream, something about a crowd of people going somewhere to watch a show. There was music in the dream, a weird compelling run of notes, and I realize that I'm still hearing it, that it's coming from a few rooms away. I put on my slippers and go down the hallway.

Ebenezer's door is open, and I look inside. There's a woman on a unicycle in the middle of the room, holding out a horizontal pole for balance. It's the woman in the pink dress, and I'm so caught up in watching her that for a moment I don't even notice all the furniture's gone, that it's just her, cycling backwards and forwards in a circle of spotlight.

The music, mostly trumpets, is louder, and I have a sense that the others are here too, watching from beyond the spotlight. The woman looks up. I follow her gaze—and the ceiling's gone, there's nothing there but the moon and the stars. The woman upends her pole and raises it up, higher and higher, until she hooks the moon. She draws the pole down, hand over hand, the moon still hooked on the end, the pole somehow collapsing as she brings it down. The music is full of trumpets and drums.

Then, suddenly, she wobbles on the unicycle. The trumpets screech one long note. The spotlight widens, and clowns run out into the circle, looking terrified. They tumble and bumble around her, holding their hands out for the moon or hiding their heads in their arms.

The woman grabs the moon and lifts it high up over her head. The music sounds triumphant now, and the clowns bow and turn somersaults. The woman tosses the moon out of the light and it floats lazily, very white in the dark room. One of the clowns reaches for it, jumps, then jumps again, flapping his hands and feet to keep himself afloat before he comes crashing back to the stage. The moon skips upward, like a balloon when a child lets go of the string.

The clown tries again, and this time he catches hold of it. Then the moon lifts him up, pulls him into the air. He fights with it, wrestling it down, and then thumps back to the stage, cradling the moon in his arms.

A big grin spreads across his face. He turns the moon over and over in his hands; he polishes it with his sleeve. He bites it and makes a horrible face, fanning his hand in front of his mouth to get rid of the taste. Then he sits down—though there's no chair, he's sitting on nothing. He turns the moon face up, pulls out a pair of drumsticks from somewhere, and plays it like a drum.

For a while he manages to play along with the music. Then the trumpets speed up, and he beats faster and faster, trying frantically to keep up. Crash! and the clown falls to the floor, and when he stands up again he's holding the broken halves of the moon, looking from

one to the other with an expression of terrible sorrow.

Suddenly he grins. He throws one of the halves into the sky. It hangs there, swaying back and forth, and then slowly comes to a stop.

The woman on the cycle looks at him. Then she sees me beyond him, and our eyes meet. Someone—I think it's Ebenezer—comes toward me and closes the door.

I stand in the darkness of the hallway, feeling lost, left out. I want more than anything to open the door, to watch the show, see what they're going to do next. At the same time, of course, I know there's no way I can. This is another one of my parents' hard and fast rules—never bother the guests.

I go back to bed. I can still hear the music, very faint, and I think I'm never going to get to sleep. Then, to my surprise, I'm waking up and it's already morning. The sun's coming through the window, and I hear the hum of the freeway. In the clear light of day what I saw last night seems impossible, a dream, and the more I think about it the more I'm sure that that's what it was.

Still, I check on Ebenezer's room after breakfast, even though it's not on the list of rooms I have to clean that morning. The "Please clean room" sign is out, and my heart pounds as I knock on the door and then turn the key in the lock, wondering what I'll find.

It's just a normal room, though—two beds, a chest of drawers, a television set. I look up, feeling silly, but of course there's nothing there but the ceiling, with the stain that looks like Africa that my mom's always trying to get my dad to paint over. The only thing that's unusual—if you can even call it that—is the suitcase on the luggage rack. It's brown leather, cracked and creased all over like it's been handled for a hundred years, and stuffed to the point where the straps around it are stretched tight.

We're never, ever supposed to look in our guests' things. I sigh and strip the beds, then bring in clean linen. As I make the beds I wonder for the first time which of them is sleeping where. Is Ebenezer with the woman in pink, or the one in the marching costume? Or is he sleeping with one of the men, platonically or otherwise?

I'm blushing now, I'm hot as a radiator. Sometimes my parents try to guess what's going on in one of the rooms, but never when they think I'm listening, or Bert either, when he lived here. We're not supposed to wonder about it—we're supposed to mind our own business. I've certainly seen my share of strange things lying around in the rooms, massage oil and handcuffs and things shaped like penises, but if you listen to my parents no one ever has sex here. (For the record, I haven't seen an actual penis yet, but I'm pretty sure I know what they look like.)

The room's so clean it takes only a few minutes to finish. I glance around, reluctant to leave, and I realize I haven't seen the unicycle anywhere. I look in the closet, but it's empty. I look at the brown suitcase again. I go over to it, and before I can think about what I'm doing I unbuckle the straps and tug on the huge clasp keeping it closed.

It springs open, almost like there's someone trapped inside. Things pour out and clatter to the floor—a trumpet, a candlestick, a mask made out of feathers, a horn from an ancient phonograph. The unicycle comes next—but it couldn't possibly have fit in there, it's far too big. There's a huge crash as it falls, and I freeze, panicked, waiting for one of them to storm into the room and demand to know what I'm doing there.

I force myself to get moving. My heart's beating so loudly I can barely hear anything beyond it. I start putting things back into the suitcase, but there seems to be even more stuff on the floor now—a framed black-and-white photograph of an elephant, an old-fashioned bicycle horn with a rubber bulb, a couple of wigs, a scatter of beads, gold and purple and stoplight red.

Everything's telling me to hurry, but for some reason I stop and look at the picture of the elephant. It's being led along a beach by two people in bathing costumes from at least a century ago, the man in long trunks and a T-shirt, the woman in a skirt and sleeveless top. I look closer and see that it's Ebenezer and the woman with the feather boa. On the back it says, "Ebenezer Monologue and Sophronia Prerogative, 1908."

I don't have time to think about this, though. I shove everything I can inside the suitcase, but I have to leave some stuff on top and the unicycle propped up against the luggage rack.

I move on to the room next door, but there's nothing unusual here, not even any luggage. As I go through all my familiar chores I start to calm down, and by afternoon I'm feeling excited again, expectant, waiting for night and another dream, if that's what it was. I even wonder if they left that suitcase there for me to find, if they wanted me to open it.

At dinner my father asks me about the loud crash he heard that morning. "You better not have dropped another lamp," my father says. "It's coming out of your allowance if you did."

The lamp is also something I did last year, but my parents never forget anything I did wrong. "Don't worry, I didn't break anything," I say.

I think he's going to say something else, but he just shakes his head and stares off into space. My mother seems less talkative too, and I start to feel relief—they don't know about the suitcase, Ebenezer didn't say anything to them. We sit there eating, each in our own worlds. It's so quiet I hear the rush of the freeway, like running water, and over that, in my own mind, the music I heard in Ebenezer's room.

I don't think I'm going to sleep at all that night, but once again I wake up to faint music. I get out of bed and go down the hall. To my great delight Ebenezer's door is open, and I go toward it as quietly as I can and peer inside.

The woman—Sophronia—is on the unicycle again, pedaling back and forth. This time she's juggling pure white points of light, sharp as crystal—stars, I think, taken from the sky the same way she took the moon. She throws one high in the air while the others keep circling, then another, and another—and then suddenly she misses one and it streaks for the ground like a comet.

A clown runs out and grabs it before it hits the floor. She leaves the other lights in mid-air and goes after the clown, chasing him on the cycle as he scuttles back and forth. Just as she reaches him he throws the star to another clown across the room. She starts toward the second clown—but he's already tossed the star to the first. The clowns go back and forth for a while, playing catch with the star, Sophronia racing between them.

Finally she stops in the center, pedaling a little on her cycle, and studies the two of them. Then she turns and heads toward the second clown, and reaches him just as he



catches the star. He looks cornered, unable to throw the star with her blocking his path—and then suddenly he opens his mouth and swallows it.

Sophonria looks horrified. So does the first clown, and so do the fat man and the thin man, who come on stage and head with the other two toward the clown who swallowed the star. The second clown shakes his head frantically. He opens his mouth to say something, and silver light pours out.

The thin man waves his hand, and pulls a sword out of the air. He advances toward the clown, and with one quick motion he chops off the clown's head.

I gasp loudly. Everyone turns to look at me. The door closes again—but this time I can't bear it, I pound on the door and shout at them. I don't even know what I'm saying; it's something like, "Let me see, oh please, let me see!" over and over.

The door opens a crack. The clown—the *dead* clown, the man whose head was chopped off—peers out at me. It's not a man at all, I see, but the woman who wore the marching uniform. "Who is it?" someone inside the room says.

The fat man comes to stand behind her, so huge he looks like a backdrop for the clown. Now he's wearing a vast flannel shirt and a nightcap, like an ad for a chain of motels I saw once. He yawns. "What is it?" he says. "We're trying to sleep in here."

"I wanted—I just wanted to see the rest of it," I say lamely.

He squints at me. "Your parents own this hotel, is that right? What do you think they'd say if they heard you were waking up their guests in the middle of the night?"

"Sorry."

"Yes, well, sorry." He slams the door.

I think about knocking again, but then I imagine what my parents would say if any of them told on me. I go back to my room and try to sleep, but I'm too excited, my mind's too busy with everything I saw. The clown came alive again, I think. Alive. In the middle of the night, halfway dreaming, it seems vastly important, a cause for celebration.

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I clean Ebenezer's room first the next day. The suitcase is closed again, stuffed tight. I don't dare to open it, but I do peek in the closet and all the drawers. There's nothing there, no clothes at all. Do they wear the same thing from day to day, Ebenezer in his fancy suit and Sophronia in her pink dress? And where are the clown costumes?

I wander around the hotel for a while, looking for the troupe. I lose track of time and end up not getting to some of my chores, and my mother checks some guests into a room I haven't cleaned yet. I have to stand there and listen to her yell at me, but fortunately she finishes quicker than I expected, and at the end she just tells me to get back to work.

I go back to Ebenezer's room instead. I've checked the room twice already, but this time when I open the door the troupe is sitting along the two beds, talking quietly to each other. "Hello," I say, trying frantically to think of a reason for being in their room. "Do you need anything?"

“Is it the policy of this hotel to look in on their guests’ private meetings?” someone says. It’s the thin man; he’s up near the headboard, almost hidden by the fat man next to him.

“Sorry. I’m sorry.” No one moves to close the door, though, so I start talking, not even sure what I’m saying, just trying to get everything out as fast as I can. “I saw you the last few nights, the unicycle and the clowns and everything, and it was the most wonderful thing I’ve ever seen in my life, and—and if you need someone to work for you, to—to carry your suitcases or clean up or anything, well, I’ll do it, you don’t even have to pay me, just let me go with you...”

I run out of breath. “Ah, another one,” Ebenezer says.

“Another one what?” I say.

“Another one who wants to run away with us.”

“Yeah, but—but I’m a hard worker, I work here all the time. Please—you have to let me go with you. I’ll go crazy if I stay here, doing the same thing over and over.” I’ve never thought any of this; up until a few minutes ago, in fact, I would have said I liked working at the hotel.

“Good. We’re crazy too.”

“There, see?” I smile. He’s going to come around, I really think he is. “We have something in common.”

“But if you’re crazy here ... and you leave the hotel ... well, you’d be sane then, wouldn’t you? And we wouldn’t have that in common anymore.”

I can’t say anything for a moment, trying to work my way around this, realizing how cleverly he’s boxed me in. “Well, then I’d be crazy like you,” I say lamely.

“I don’t know. Are there different kinds of craziness?”

The mouse sticks his head out of Ebenezer’s pocket. “I don’t think so, boss,” he says.

“Oh, come on,” I say. “What does a mouse know about—about sanity?”

“Who would *you* ask?” Ebenezer says.

I feel like I’ve gotten lost in this conversation. I try to get back to my original argument. “Look—I can clean for you, do anything you want. I’ve worked hard all my life. Ask—” Who should they ask? My parents? They’d kill me if they knew I wanted to leave.

“Ask your mother, yes,” Ebenezer says, just as if I’d said it out loud. “It’s your mother I was thinking of earlier, when I said you were another one. She made the same request of us, ten years ago. And ten years before that, too.”

I feel as if someone has just hit me, knocked all the air out of my lungs. My mother? The same woman who’s always talking about responsibility, how important it is to keep the hotel going?

Ten years ago I was five. Five years old, and she'd wanted to run out on me, leave me and my father and Bert and the hotel...

I'm standing there staring at them, my mouth open. I try to concentrate. "Think about it, okay?" I can't trust myself to say any more, and I turn to go.

"It's a thought," Ebenezer says.

I catch my breath. What has he just said? I turn back. "Fantastic," I say.

He's right behind me, though the last time I saw him he was sitting on the bed. He's smiling, like he's about to give me a present. I grin back at him, even though I know he's going to close the door on me. It doesn't matter. He said he'd think about it—that's all that's important.

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I go through the rest of my chores in a daze, humming the music I heard in Ebenezer's room. What would it be like to travel with them? Would they teach me how to ride a unicycle? Will they tell me their secrets—how to steal money from a locked safe, how to make a hotel ceiling look like the sky, how to cut off a man's head and bring him back to life?

But the whole time I'm also thinking about what Ebenezer told me, that my mother wanted to leave us. I've been angry with her, lots of times, but that's nothing compared to what I feel now, when I see what a hypocrite she's been. I manage to finish my chores, though, and my mother doesn't check anyone else into a dirty room.

"Dinnertime, Liz!" my mother yells down the hallway.

I keep working; I don't think I can face her. And I want to stay in the public areas of the hotel, in case Ebenezer's made a decision and needs to find me.

A few minutes later, unfortunately, I see her heading toward me. "If you don't hurry up we'll start dinner without you," she says.

"What do you care?" I say.

She looks startled. We argue a lot, but I've never been out-and-out rude to her.

"You're looking for those magicians again, aren't you?" she asks.

"So what if I am? At least I'm not planning to leave two small children. I was only five then, wasn't I?"

"Oh. You heard about that."

"Yeah. I had a nice long talk with Ebenezer today. He'll probably take me with him when they go, he said so."

"Really," she says. It's not a question.

"Yeah, really. And I can see why they turned you down. I don't have any

responsibilities to keep me here, not like you did.”

“Well, they must have turned you down for some other reason, then. They checked out this afternoon.”

At first I just stand there and stare at her. I don’t even take her words in; I only know that something bad has happened, that I’ve just been given the worst news of my life. Then, slowly, the meaning of what she’s said begins to penetrate.

“You’re lying,” I say. “You’re just being spiteful.”

“See for yourself.”

I turn away from her and run down the hallway. I knock on Ebenezer’s door, but no one answers. I take the universal key out of my pocket and open the door—and the room is clean, empty, no luggage or any sign of them at all.

I go to the room next door, but that one’s deserted too. I look all over the hotel, down the main corridor, in the reception room, the office, the kitchen, even my room. But my mother’s right—they’re gone.

I sit down on my bed. How could they lie to me like this? They said they’d think about taking me. No, they said “It’s a thought,” which could mean anything. I stare at the walls of my room, thinking about how ugly the paint is, how awful everything is here.

After a while my mother comes inside without knocking. “I don’t know what they told you, but they never had any intention of taking you,” she says. She sits next to me on the bed. “It’s just something they do—they come to town, they show you all kinds of—of enchantment, glamour, and then they vanish. I don’t know why.”

I’m still too angry to talk to her. But through my misery I feel vaguely surprised to hear her use words like enchantment, glamour.

“They don’t care about us, you see,” she says. “They—they’re not like us, maybe not even human. They visit, they have their fun, and then they leave.”

“How the hell could you have thought about leaving us?” I say. “I was just a little kid then. You had responsibilities here, to me, and Dad, and—and the hotel—”

She sighs. “That’s what they make you do. You forget everything, everything but their lovely magic.”

“They don’t *make* you. You decided, all on your own.”

“You know that’s not true. You feel it too. And don’t forget, you have your own responsibilities. You know how hard it is to manage here.” She sighs again, and smiles faintly, as if she’s looking at something far away. “I asked them this time too,” she says. “When I passed them in the hallway. ‘I’m ready’—that’s all I said. And he nodded at me, Ebenezer did, and I felt—well, you know what I felt.”

She’s not listening, I think. “You were going to leave us here, and—and what about the hotel? You’re always telling me how important the hotel is, how we have to keep it going...”

She laughs sadly. "Oh, Liz," she says. "Don't you understand by now? I keep the hotel going for them. In case they come back. And it's been worth it, waiting all these years, just to see them again."

"You mean—all this time, all the work I did—it's just for them? Three times in twenty years? I thought—and Dad, what does he think? Does he know why you want to stay here?"

"I think he does. He's—I'm pretty sure he talked to them himself."

I'm outraged now, I can't stop myself. "Do you know how selfish you're being? You had me work here like—like a slave, and all because you were waiting for them to come back. I couldn't go out, I couldn't see my friends, I barely passed my classes—" I can hardly breathe, thinking about how she's lied to me.

"You know why, though. You feel it too."

"Get out of my room. I don't even want to talk to you."

She stands up and heads for the door. "Think about it, Liz," she says. "You'll understand, once you calm down."

I sit for a while after she leaves, not doing anything. My anger's draining away now, and a picture comes into my mind, the woman on the unicycle. I hear the music again, and I wonder where they went, if they'll come back. If they visit once every ten years, I'd be twenty-five. Could I wait that long?

Of course I can. It's a long time, but I'd think about them every day, keep them fresh in my mind. And what if they returned and I wasn't here? I feel panic at the thought; I stand up and start to pace nervously. How could I live without what my mother called glamour?

Do they visit other places, hotels, restaurants, tourist attractions? Are there other people, all across the country, trapped in mean little towns like this one, just waiting for them to come back? Why do they do it, Ebenezer and the others? For no reason we can understand, probably. They're not like us, my mother said.

I think of all those people, waiting years for just a few moments of magic. I think about my mother, how sad she looks, how pinched and harassed by all the problems at the hotel. How unhappy she must have been, to want to abandon her children without a second thought. Do I really want to become like her?

I understand, slowly, the trap they've built for my mother, for me. Unable to get away, to get on with our lives. Not caring about anything except seeing them one more time.

But how can I leave? I feel a sharp pain in my stomach at the very thought, and my breath comes short again. I barely even know what's out there, where the freeway goes. I could try to find Bert, maybe go to college—but could college possibly be as exciting as these last few days?

I go to my window and look out at the flat desolate land outside, and at the freeway beyond that, the river that carries all those people away. I have to go, I know that.

Can I leave now, though, at fifteen? But what would happen if I don't? I see myself

waking each morning, tempted to stay just one more day, hoping that this will be the day they come. Running to the front door when the bell rings, convincing myself that this time, really, it'll be them sweeping through the reception room, laughing and juggling and playing music, making everything wonderful again.

The pain returns. Can I hold firm to my resolution? Can I break away from here, is there enough glamour out in the world to hold me? I don't know. I hope so.