

# **Love Palace**

A Novel by  
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I had a meltdown after my birthday. I had managed to slip past forty in a fog, ditto forty-one, which was when I was breaking up with my longtime live-in boyfriend. But birthday number forty-two hit me with the fact that I wasn't beginning my fourth decade but my fifth, and this completely spooked me. I took a step back and saw myself: alone and lonely, chronically underemployed, and barely managing payments on my ill-kept apartment across the river from New York City. My boss was having cash flow problems and hadn't paid me in six weeks, and I hadn't paid my therapist in six months.

During the years of the longtime boyfriend, who I call Rotter the Third (Rotter Two being my divorced husband and Rotter One being my father), I had taken myself out of the job market at a time when I might have been rising toward some reasonably lucrative glass ceiling. Rotter the Third was a bond salesman, and we had a nifty apartment in the city. He did better and better, until he was doing so well, thank you, that he could afford to marry someone half my age. On his tab, when I was out of the job market, I got a leisurely Masters in English and also security for the downscale rental on the Jersey side of the river.

I considered my assets: men, if I wanted them. Men like to look at skinny women, but in bed they enjoy flesh. I'm good in bed, too, by which I don't mean particularly skilled, just happy. I have always felt good when I'm naked in bed with someone.

After that, I ran out of assets and drank a bottle of merlot all by myself and called my boss's answering machine and quit my job. I told him what I thought of his high minded ideology and personal boorishness. I told him I was sick of his grungy office and his cash flow problems, and I quit.

I spent the rest of that weekend and most of the next week in my apartment watching TV

I ordered in pizza and buffalo wings, and when I ran out of cash and couldn't face going to the ATM machine, I ate spaghetti. When the jars of red sauce ran out, I ate it with margarine and garlic salt.

There is something really satisfying about sinking to the bottom like this. I had the image of myself as a girl in a swimming pool, sunny day, shallow end, water warm. As an experiment, I go under and let my breath out slowly. I sink till I am sitting on the bottom in the silence. If I don't go up soon, I'll be dead.

Low self-esteem is a way of life with me and my mother and my sister, although baby sister masks it well, what with being a hot shot lawyer with a fancy condo, also in Jersey, with a spectacular view. Mom works at even lower-level jobs than I do, and some of her men have been true bottom-feeders, Dad being Exhibit A. I used to look up words for the kind of man he was, and my favorites were all Britishisms: blackguard, knave, miscreant, reprobate, and, of course, rotter. It's because the Rotter left us, I believe, that my sister and I have body image difficulties and an impressive laundry list of other problems.

On the other hand, it was Rotter's mother, our Nana, who took care of us. Good old dumpy Nana, our stability while Mom moved around looking for a better job and/or a better man. Nana was our stability even when we were adults. I stayed with her for six months when my marriage broke up, and I somehow always expected I'd go back to her again, but then she had her stroke and went to a nursing home where I almost never visit.

For a long time after Nana's stroke, my therapist Madame Landowska took care of me, until the cash flow tough love crisis, when I couldn't pay. Madame said I could not have an appointment until I paid something on my debt.

“How can I do that?” I wailed. “I don't have a job!”

“I am afraid you are not serious about getting well,” she said. “You chose to leave your job. I think you are taking advantage of me.”

“I'm desperate!” I howled.

“You are a very intelligent lady,” she said. “You are intelligent enough to know it is necessary to be employed in this country.”

“I'm not a lady, I'm a deeply neurotic woman.”

“Ah,” she said, “but you are not sufficiently serious about getting well, Mar-ta.” Marta, she calls me, not quite able to do the “th” in the middle of “Martha.”

I don't owe her *that* much anyhow. A number in the medium high four digits. Eight years of devotion, and she throws me out.

To prove my desperation, I stayed in the apartment way beyond finishing the red sauce. I stayed until I got totally bored with watching cooking shows on TV, so I washed my hair, got in my car, which started after only six tries, went to the cash machine and then to Pietro's for the Any Day is Sunday Brunch. I ate at the bar, with a neatly folded copy of the Want Ads in front of me, circling possible job openings with a green pen.

Long before Robby came in, I had begun to circle ads in the social services section. I don't know why, maybe because I had the feeling that the helping professions might help me too. I'd never been a do-gooder— my generation came of age under the regime of Ronald Reagan!— but I needed a change, and I was steering clear of office manager, editorial assistant, and anything too much like what I'd been doing since Rotter Three decided that, unlike his hedge funds, I was not increasing in value.

Then Robby walked in. Everyone noticed him. I didn't know his name yet, of course, but I couldn't keep my eyes off him. He sat at the bar too, and even in the greenish pink Pietro's light, he had magnificent, smooth, young skin. There was one empty stool between him and me. I was drinking Mimosas and eating Pietro's special Eggs Benedictine with Canadian bacon, Hollandaise sauce, and a splash of liqueur.

I couldn't decide if he was a boy or a man. Dark blonde, an all-American jaw, liquid brown eyes, broad shoulders and a long narrow waist. He was dressed for spring in short sleeves and light colors, even though it was a raw cold day. I decided that he was so good looking he had to be gay. He ordered a Coke and ate pretzels from the basket, staring straight ahead at the bottles and mirror.

I felt a familiar rising tide, the beginning of something. An adventure. A lovely self-destructive adventure.

Bi-sexual, I decided, not gay.

Up through my shoulders, in my lungs. Just one more one-night stand. I've done everything else, eaten badly, gotten my therapist mad at me, rent due. I'll take one more step down before I go job hunting. Pick up a baby stranger! Feel totally shitty! Adelante! Yes!

I began talking about eggs and Canadian bacon and Pietro's little flourish with the Benedictine. "It's better than you'd think," I said.

He turned to me and smiled pleasantly and said in a light baritone that he had stopped eating meat when he was a child. He used to get nauseated by anything richer than ginger snaps. No cookies with raisins, chips, or creme. As he got older, he could tolerate nuts in small quantities, chopped fine in the cookies.

“A baby neurotic,” I said fondly. His nails had been chewed. Each finger tip had the tiniest lozenge of nail surrounded by flesh.

“My mother eats broiled fish and runs three miles in the morning,” he said. “My dad eats what he wants, but he has a workout room at his office.”

“I only eat high cholesterol foods with extra salt,” I said. Not very witty, but I didn't care. If I slept with him, it would be a lark. I felt like my biggest problem was if I should stick with Mimosas or switch to Screwdrivers. Robby had an innocence, as if he'd been privately educated in a monastery.

We exchanged names. I told Robby I was just coming out of an agoraphobic period. “I'm the star neurotic of Dr. Landowska's string. I have dysfunctions most people have never dreamed of.”

Actually, I wasn't feeling particularly neurotic, except for the rush of self-destructiveness, but maybe it was just sexual energy, fuel for an upswing. I told Robby about my therapist and how I had quit my last job and was looking for a new one. Robby ate pretzels. His eyes were big with listening. “I've had my troubles,” I said. “The First Rotter— that's my father— deserted us, and our mother was gone a lot too. We usually lived with Nana, the Rotter's parent, source of our Jewish genes. I have my reasons for being miserable, although my therapist doesn't find them as convincing as she should.”

Yes? Madame always says. Yes? I am sorry for your family problems. But your mother always came back.

To which I reply, She chased the Rotter and caught up with him long enough to get pregnant! She came back to dump the baby on me and Nana! And she was emotionally absent

even when she lived with us for six months or a year now and again.

But your grandmother, says Madame, who raised you and your sister. She was a fine woman. And you too, you are an intelligent lady with many assets.

I'm not talking about intelligence! I scream. I'm talking about feelings!

So, she says. Yes. You feel very bad?

Damn straight I feel bad. And I'm not a lady. I'm promiscuous whenever possible.

Robby had pale bare ankles and docksiders with no socks. He turned his stool to face me and said with unexpected firmness, "You're ready for a change, aren't you?"

"You got that right."

"I mean, you're looking for a job." He pointed at the want ads beside my Eggs Benedictine.

"Yeah, I'm starting tomorrow. To get serious about job hunting, I mean."

He said, "I might know about a job."

"Seriously?"

But it was clear he was a serious person. He looked at me for a long time. Looked at my forehead, at my chin, at my chest, looked at me the way a little kid on the train stares over the seat at you.

He said, "Today is my twenty-first birthday."

"Well, Happy Birthday, baby. That makes me almost twice your age."

"The same as my mother."

I said, "So what are you doing here all alone on your twenty-first birthday?"

"Oh, I'm not alone." He smiled a dazzling smile and began to talk about someone very

important to him. I kept having this feeling he was building up to telling me he was gay.

It has always been one of my fantasies, to do what I had let Robby do to me, to observe a person as long as you want. I have an early memory of standing next to the Rotter's easy chair—I would have been under four, of course, if he was still living with us. In my memory, I am watching him nap. I recall giant nose hairs and a field of bristles on his cheek.

I got my turn to examine Robby while he talked about his big shot friend. Robby was pale around the eyes. Institution, I thought, inspired. A woman in my group therapy group who is cousin to a really famous family that we are all pledged (what a waste of good gossip) not to reveal, said you can always tell people who've been *In* by a certain kind of paleness. Even if they've been in good places where you get to spend time out of doors, they still have spiritual paleness.

Robby was talking about this important person who had done a lot for him. This person who could do things for me. Help me make my change, anything I wanted. Did he mention a job again? Or maybe only that This Person could do anything for anyone.

“This is Fairy Godmother talk, darling,” I said, but Robby kept going. I was having a smooth sliding-board-into-warm water buzz. A shaft of sunlight had come in one of the back windows, remarkable in itself at Pietro's. I used to come in here when I first moved into the area, scoping it out immediately as the Right Place to pick up the Wrong Men.

There was a pretty up-front competition in my therapy group over who was most self-destructive. Dr. L. considered that my debt burden made me an excellent candidate for first place. Money grubbing bitch, I thought, missing her sorely. One of my main reasons for starting to look in the want ads so soon was in order to go back and complain to Dr. Landowska.

Robby was still talking about this powerful friend of his. And then, he suddenly looked at me directly and said, “I’d very much like to introduce you to him.”

And he extended his arm down the bar. Naturally, I looked to see who I was going to meet. There was nobody else at the bar. A couple in a booth, out of the line of his gesture. A group of guys at a table watching something on television with lots of green grass, golf, or maybe polo. But no one in the immediate vicinity.

“*Him*,” said Robby softly. “Jesus. He’s standing right here, next to me, now and always, and he wants to be standing next to you too.”

I let out air. Crazy as a bedbug, although at least crazy with a tradition. At one period in my life I tried out churches. The Rotter and Nana don’t practice Judaism, and Mom, Baptist trailer trash, only goes to church when she visits her people in West Virginia. So I used to go with friends, a Pentecostal church for a while, and then to a Born-again Megachurch. Nana was a free love atheist old Leftist, which was all the more reason for me playing Born Again to make her mad. She didn’t mind when I tried a Church of Holiness so much because they were black. She forgave black people their addiction to religion because of their status as oppressed, and she had a certain respect for the former priest Berrigan brothers, but she didn’t like most white churches.

Robby leaned forward. “John says he’ll touch your heart and ease the ache.”

“I’m having trouble with your pronoun antecedents,” I said. “I thought we were talking about Jesus.”

“John is our spiritual advisor, and he gave me a new way of understanding Jesus. Jesus doesn’t judge you, he lifts up your spirits and makes you free to walk in His path.”

I crunched on some ice and wondered if I should have another drink.

“*He* wants to get to know you,” said Robby. “*He* sent me to find you. Once you have *Him* in your life, you can have all you ever dreamed of.”

“Who are we talking about now?”

“Jesus,” he said, closing his eyes. “Jesus sent me, but John gives me direction.”

I looked at myself in the mirror behind the bar. My face was framed by José Cuervo and the tequila with the worm in the bottle. I looked alert and receptive. I didn’t believe for a second that Jesus had sent the crazy little bedbug, but I did wonder what had attracted him to an old lady like me. Was it my perky smile or my shiny hair? Not my skin, not compared to someone really young like him. Maybe my legs. Had I been stretching a leg when he came in? I have long legs for my height.

I said, “Well, you probably shouldn't waste your time, Robby. I'm half-Jewish, you know, wrong half, but my Jewish grandmother raised me. Although her real religion is Socialism. She's in a nursing home now, not doing so well, congestive heart failure on top of a stroke, but when she first went there she rolled around in her wheelchair bothering all the old ladies with her petitions.”

It seemed hard for him to come back from what he was saying, which was practiced, possibly even memorized. He cleared his throat. “That's another wonderful coincidence.”

“What is?”

“Jesus was Jewish too.”

My God he's dumb, I thought. Unless it was thorazine. “Listen, Robby. You're a very nice young person, and I hope you have a happy birthday, but I don't want to mislead you.

Religion is the last thing I'm interested in right now. Food, a job, maybe sex, but not religion. I have a deep debt to my once and future therapist and I've pretty much maxed out my Visa and MasterCard. Does *He* do financial planning?"

"All of those things. He can cure you. He cured me."

"Of what? I mean, excuse me, but what did you ever have that needed curing?"

"I've always been. Different."

"Who hasn't?"

"And also—I've been—away."

It was true then; he'd been hospitalized. I was proud of my perspicacity. I said, "What did you need to be cured of? You can tell me. I'm old enough to be your mother." I waited for him to deny it, but he didn't, the candid little bastard. I said, "Go ahead and tell me what you needed to be cured of."

"I was attracted to other men."

"Ahh. Or, as my grandmother would say, *nu*? Lots of people are attracted to the same sex, you should go and live happy. Properly protected for sexually transmitted diseases, of course."

He shook his head. "My family isn't like that. We don't believe in it."

"Oh please. Sexuality isn't a belief system."

"I hid from it. It was a great burden on my heart. I was in despair, and I— and I—"

"Tried to kill yourself?"

He looked up. "How did you guess?"

"Because I've been around the block. You tried to kill yourself only not very hard—"

He extended his wrists which had bands of thin white scars.

“Poor baby,” I said. “And you had a breakdown, and you've been away somewhere—”

“Almost a year. It's a very beautiful place, and they have music in the summers. I prayed for Him to take it away, and He did, and now I'm free. It sounds simplistic, but that's the beauty of it.”

A little ditty formed in my mind: The Lord He say, Don't be gay, just kneel and pray, Go free today. Best poem I'd written in years, compliments of this cute, sexually confused little proselytizer. “So now you've switched to women?”

“I've been celibate.

“Sublimation works for some people,” I said. I could feel my neuroses clearing away like a stuffed nose shot up with Afrin. I could feel the breezes. I'd take a poetry workshop. I'd get a job counseling teenagers. “Did you ever do it? With men?”

“He was protecting me, even before I knew Him.”

“Let me get this straight, so to speak. Are you saying that you, a twenty-one year old American male in the twenty-first century, have never had sex?” I had a wonderful rush of energy and lovely bad thoughts. “That's fairly remarkable, but it doesn't prove you don't love men. It only proves you've repressed your sex drive. Don't you think you should sleep with a woman, just to prove you've really changed? This is only if you really want to be changed, of course. I know you trust *him*. But look what he's thrown in your way.” I was suddenly a force, a devil bubbling with persuasive powers. “Here you have before you a woman who has ceased to believe she can be loved— ”

“He loves you— ”

“But I don’t believe it. I don’t know him. I only know you. I need to be convinced that I’m lovable. Me, without a job, slightly overweight– ”

“And getting older,” he added for me.

“You’re not supposed to agree with me that I’m unlovable, Robby. You’re supposed to come home and love me.”

Robby closed his eyes: “*He* loves you! He loves all of us, right through the blemishes and the sickness at heart. I know because I’ve been there!”

“Have you? Well, you may have been there, but you haven’t been to my apartment.” I was feeling unreasonable joy. I was going to expose my apartment to this boy—a far more difficult thing than to undress and have sex. My actual body, as opposed to my body image, is the least of my problems. I’ve never looked especially good in clothes because of the big breasts, both sides of my family, Jewish and hillbilly, have way too much bazooms for fashion, even including my size two baby sister. Naked, however, I am ample and graceful. And I have great faith in the power of men’s libido to overcome their socialization. In this area, I have experience.

I decided that if I could get Robby to come home with me, my luck would change. I would make the phone calls. I would have a job within the week. A good job, enough money to go back to Madame. Get rid of the five pounds I’d picked up, and be so self-confident and svelte that I could bid farewell to Madame and the group forever by August when Madame went to her house on Long Beach Island.

Dr. Landowska says there are worse reasons to have sex than in order to feel beautiful, but there are also better ones. And *much* better ways to feel worthwhile. It was like a lot of what Dr. Landowska says: practical, true, and way beyond my ability to put into effect.

One of the best things about therapy is that I have interesting dreams as Dr. Landowska likes to hear about them. I said, “There’s a place that recurs in my dreams. I call it Ramshackle Street. It has lots of jerry-built, jury-rigged tenements like the city, but it’s really in that stupidhead industrial hell hole of a town in New Jersey where I lived when I was a kid.”

“Yes?” said Dr. Landowska.

“There are frame houses with wooden porches, balconies, fire escapes, twisted hallways, deep stair wells. The sky is like a little channel overhead, deep greenish black if it’s night in the dream and yellow if it’s day. A depressed street. Nothing growing, no plants, some pathetic four-legged animals of indeterminate species. Lighting so poor you have to peer and squint. Nothing is ever clear except the buildings.”

“Ah,” said Dr. Landowska.

“Ah yourself, Dr. L. I’m trying to create an atmosphere. So in my dream, we—you and I—are in one of those buildings trying to find a room where we can have our session. And every room is occupied. In some of them, people are sleeping or having meals on boards laid between twin beds. Middle aged men are smoking cigars in their underwear. I get anxious because I’m afraid we’re using up my time looking for a room. The last door opens onto the street, where, under an extremely Freudian lamppost, lies this little small dog with its entrails spilling out onto the cobblestones. I say, ‘Someone should put it out of its misery.’ You give me a disapproving look and, then, with your knees carefully aligned, because you have on a tight skirt, you lower yourself to crouch beside the dog. You are wearing this suit with big shoulders, like a career

woman in an old movie, you know, what's her name. Joan Crawford."

Dr. Landowska said, "I never liked big shoulder pads."

"Well, it looked like they had made this suit just for you. You squatted down and cooed and babytalked the dog, and then pulled a nickel-plated gun out of your hand bag and shot it between the eyes."

"I am so cruel!" said Dr. Landowska.

"The dream isn't over. I made this dramatic gesture, stood back and pointed at you—*j'accuse*, you know. 'You!' I shouted. 'You shot it!' But the dog wasn't really dead. It had a small red hole in its forehead and it couldn't get up, but it kept panting and wagging its tail."

I stopped and pressed my lips closed. Dr. L. steepled her fingertips, a ring on just about every finger. She said, "And you think?"

"I think the dog is me. Foolishly, I keep coming back to you for more. The end was that you stood up and looked at me. I was noticing everything about you, you were monumental in this suit, wearing gold around your wrists—and don't tell me you don't like gold, I know you like gold jewelry."

"I do," said Dr. Landowska, "I do like gold."

"Well, in this dream, it was on your arms and in your ears, and around your neck, and you had a big gold tooth."

"Like a pirate."

"Yes, and your hair was all waved and blonde, raised over your temples by decorative combs, gold of course. Czarina of all the Russias, Valkyrie of the West."

"You know nothing of European history or geography, either, Martha."

“Queen of Poland, then, and probably Hungary and Yugoslavia too.”

“And all the time the poor little dog lies there bleeding,” she said. “You must be very angry at me.”

“I think I am always spilling my guts. Like the dog.”

“Ah. Yes. You would find this painful?”

“What do you think, Dr. L.? Must you be so obvious? I’m the disgusting little doggy with its guts hanging out and no one loves me, and you come and shoot me down.”

“Tell me how you feel about the waved blonde hair.”

“Your vanity astounds me. You don’t even pretend to hide it! Sometimes it’s like you’re from another dimension.”

“Start wherever you want. “

“How about the cigars? How about the lamp post?”

“You may start with lamp posts and cigars if you prefer,” said Dr. Landowska serenely.

- 3 -

I do a lot less hooking up with strangers these days, thanks to Dr. L. and the general slowing down of my metabolism with advanced age. I have less tolerance for drinking and the noise in pick-up bars, too. Mostly in the last year or two I have held off till Rachman is in town on business, which isn’t very often because Rachman’s travel to the U.S. has been sharply curtailed since the World Trade Center. Also, he has become more religious, he tells me. He has a very Muslim family life back home in Egypt, although he refuses to tell me how many kids he

has. He still likes to wine me and dine me, but he is more conflicted about it. He does not drink back home. What I like about Rachman is that I know exactly where I stand.

I thought I knew where I stood with Robby that night too. Enjoying something fresh and new. Recalled to life. Robby seemed to consider me therapy, or maybe visible proof of the Power of Jesus. He was sweet and sort of breathless, so proud of himself, and fell asleep immediately afterward, on top of my green satin comforter that still isn't paid for. I doubled the other half of the comforter over him and took a shower. I was so energized by having sex for the first time in six weeks that I wiped the hairs out of the sink and gave the toilet a quick swabbing. Then I straightened the apartment. I had already kicked a pizza box under the bed when we first arrived. Now I made a laundry pile and gathered up two black plastic bags of garbage and stacked newspapers.

I was doing all this naked, and I jumped when Robby spoke: I had almost forgotten he was there. He said, "You have a soft body." He was all wrapped up, just his face showing, very cute.

I said, "Do you want some tea or coffee? I don't have any food, but I have tea and coffee, and I think maybe some packets of instant hot chocolate."

He chose the hot chocolate, of course.

While I was boiling water and washing out a cup, I said, "You were really a virgin, weren't you?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean, don't know?"

"I don't know what counts."

“You mean, like, does there have to be penetration or whatever? So, what have you done?”

He murmured, “Touch.”

“Touch what? Yourself? You can answer yes or no. You and someone else? You touched each other. You and another boy. You and another boy touched each other?”

He nodded. I stirred the powder into the hot water and brought it to him. He had to get out of the covers, bare torso, a little silky brown hair in the middle of his chest.

“And you felt bad about it? I hope you don’t feel bad about today.”

“Jesus sent me to you.”

“Did he, honey? That’s nice.” I always love a good rationalization, and confessions. Confessions have a dramatic quality that intensifies everything else. “I could make some confessions too,” I said.

He sipped hot chocolate and said, “Tell me.”

“When I was in high school, this football player liked me, or pretended to. Anyhow, I accepted his invitation to go to his house even though I knew his parents were away, well, actually I invited myself. And his friends came over.”

I have told this so many times, in so many variations. In group therapy they used to roll their eyes: Oh please, not Martha and the Randall Football Team again. It wasn’t the entire team anyhow, just three boys total. The only one who never got tired of the story was our middle-aged business owner, some kind of paper product imports, I think. He loved to hear about sex.

“Go on,” said Robby. “Tell Him.”

“I’m telling *you*.”

“He’s listening, let it out, doesn’t it feel good to tell it?”

“It turns you on, doesn’t it?” They’re all voyeurs, I thought. Robby and the old guy in group and maybe Jesus too. I ran a finger down the little diamond of silky brown hair on his chest, and he closed his eyes and smiled. I said, “I wasn’t sorry, either, until afterward, when they passed the word around to everyone. Good old Randall. Ring-Around-the-Blue-Collar hellhole Randall. For a while, those three or four months, I did it all—I got laid, went all the way, came across, went down, went under. You name it. I think I wanted to make them notice: Nana, my MIA father, my mother. My sister the little academic star.”

Robby sipped hot chocolate.

I said, “Nana was oblivious. She didn’t notice, and she was committed to free love anyhow. And my mother never even found out. I ran out of steam, and stopped doing that. I found myself a couple of friends, and calmed down by smoking marijuana at lunch hour.” I waited. Finally, I said, “Your turn, Robby. You have to tell about what was good and what embarrassed you.”

“This guy. I thought I loved this guy, the one I told you about.”

“Yes, you touched each other and you don’t know if that counted. You were just kids.”

“We were in the youth group together at church.”

“I love sex that starts in church. It’s so transgressive.”

“We prayed together. We knew we were doing something bad, so we prayed in church. And— ”

”Started feeling each other? In church?” My group would have liked this a lot, well the importer guy would have, anyhow. “Where in the church?”

“In a pew, we were just sitting there, praying. In the dark. After youth group. We made a date to pray again, but really pray. Only the next time, he didn’t come, his father did. His father was the head pastor.”

“Omigod.”

“I was expecting to meet the boy, and instead, his father—he had told his father—his father went up to the pulpit and threw on the lights, and started preaching a sermon just for me—“

Robby’s face crumpled, and tears ran out of his eyes. “Oh Robby,” I said, “poor Robby. There’s nothing like expecting something nice and getting something bad. It’s like biting into a piece of candy and breaking your tooth.”

“He told me that it’s bad enough, to do that, to be that—but the ones who seduce others into it, they’re the worst—”

”You were just two kids experimenting!”

“But if I hadn’t wanted it— it wouldn’t have happened. What I went through— it was from my own sinfulness.”

“Poor baby.”

“I like you so much,” he said.

And this time, after he’d carefully set his cup on the floor, he was the one who leaned over and kissed me first.

Later, I said, “This is a gift, you see, for both us of us. It’s what we need.”

There was a crooked little smile on his face.

“You just like doing it, don’t you?” I said. “You don’t care who you do it with, you just like *It*. Am I right?”

His skin was so smooth and damp. I could feel the springiness of muscle and the tremor of life under his skin. I had a flash, just a passing hunch. that he really did like boys best. It was not his—how do you call it—performance. That was just fine. Couldn't have been better. But there was something about the way he spoke about that preacher's son, and John, and Jesus.

He said, "We could get married."

That got my attention. "You and I?"

"Listen, come and have supper at the Love Palace."

"I forgot," I said. "I forgot you were supposed to be converting me."

"Just come, I want you to meet people. It's not a church, it's sort of a community center. We help people."

Why not, I thought. Get out, meet some nice Christian boys. "Okay. Should I wear anything in particular?"

"*He* doesn't care. And we can give you a job, too, you know. Jesus is arranging all this. I know you're looking for a job." He pointed at my newspaper I brought home with me. "We advertised. That was how I knew in the bar that you were what I was looking for. We've had an advertisement in the paper for a couple of weeks. Jesus made you circle it."

"I circled the job at your place?"

He picked up the paper and studied it. His face fell. "No, you didn't circle it. But it's in the same section where you did circle things."

He handed the paper to me and pointed. I remembered the ad. I skipped over it because even though it was in the social services section, it was for an Administrative Assistant/Executive Director, which has sounded to me like they had no idea what they wanted.

“If you’ve been advertising for weeks, how come the job is still open?”

“Because Jesus has been holding it for you. He’s been holding you for me and the job for you.”

Okay, he was a nut case. But I liked his smell and his smile. I put on fresh underwear, fresh jeans, my nice denim shirt and my denim jacket. Robby helped me carry out the garbage.

“Don’t you have a coat, Robby? It’s the middle of March.”

“I always go inside,” he said. Then, “Martha, I know you don’t believe it yet, but He brought us together for a purpose. You aren’t married, are you?”

I controlled my impulse to tell him how cute he was “I’m divorced. I’m just coming to have supper and see what kind of place produces you, Robby. I don’t want to get married, but thanks for asking. I have a lot on my mind.”

“He’ll take care of it,” said Robby.

- 4 -

I drove Robby back to Pietro’s in Guzzler-the-Heap, my car like they don’t make anymore, thank the Goddess. An engine that will still turn over after nuclear war if you can find enough gas. “What do you think of my car?” I asked him. “It was owned by an old lady who didn’t use it for the last ten years of her life. She never had a garage and it sat in her driveway, which explains the condition of the body.” The color had originally been bronze, I was told, but the right front fender was white, a result of the lady’s last drive, after which she got the car repaired but not repainted, then never drove it again. The inside was in pretty good condition,

except for an unexplained slash on the passenger portion of the split front bench which I kept covered with a fake Indian blanket.

“Cool,” said Robby.

“1977 Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme Brougham.”

He laid a hand on the blanket. “That’s a decade older than I am.”

Oh Lord, I thought, oh Lord. Why am I going to dinner with a bi-sexual baby religious fanatic?

But I thought I knew why. Back when we were small enough to be companions, my sister Mari and I used to do things we called adventures– a walk to the corner store, a picnic of pb & j sandwiches on the swings in the park. All it took was to say, We’re having an adventure, and it became one. All I ever really wanted, I thought, was for every day to be an adventure. I had climbed out of my hole, at least for this one gorgeous afternoon as blue and gold as a high school marching band in October. Of course, it was March, and I had hated all the patriotic school spirit nonsense, but I was on an upswing.

Robby pointed at the tape deck. “Is that a cassette player?”

“It’s more than a cassette player, baby. It’s an Eight Track tape deck. Didn’t you ever see one of those?”

He actually leaned forward for a better look. “An eight track? Does it work?”

“It still works as far as I know. There was just one tape in the car, Jim Nabors, who played this TV. doofus, Gomer Pyle? Not that you’d remember. I played a it a few times, and then one day the tape all unreeled. So now I have no tapes, but I listen to the fine am radio to get the weather.”

“I’d like to hear an eight track,” said Robby dreamily. Then, “There’s my car,” pointing at a red Miata.

“That? That’s your car? I thought you were a poor little missionary.”

“It’s really my mom’s car. Ever since I had the break-down—well, before too—she gives me stuff. It’s got a big scratch on the fender, but you can’t see it from here.”

He wanted me to ride in the Miata with him, so I left the Guzzler at Pietro’s. We were compatible drivers, anyhow, clinging to the right-hand lane.

Robby said, “You’ll have to meet my mother and father.”

“No thanks.”

“They’re on the Board of Directors of Love Palace. Them and John and other people from our church. I bet they’re going crazy wondering where I am. Eleanor and Warren, I mean, my parents. I was supposed to go to Pinnacle for my birthday.”

“Pinnacle,” I said. “Now that’s a snowy white Anglo Saxon protestant town, is it not? And your mother and dad: Long and slim and blonde?”

“Mom’s very nice,” said Robby. “She won’t give you a hard time. She’ll like you.”

“Am I right, though? Is she slim and elegant?”

He hesitated. He always seemed to be trying to tell the truth, like a character in a Russian novel. This had potential for being tiresome. “I don’t have enough perspective on her to, you know, notice her figure.”

“You know if she’s fat or thin!”

“When I close my eyes, I see her face. I see her face on a level with mine, and I know she always looks nice, and anxious about me.”

“Never mind, Martha knows. Your mother is slim and elegant and she would make me feel like a— like an ox.”

“The important one is John,” he said. “Eleanor and Warren don’t matter.”

We turned off the elevated highway at a sign that said “Hudson Blvd.-Waterfront District.” They had been promising to redevelop this area for years, the way they had already redone the next neighborhood, the Warehouse District where my sister lived. The Waterfront was supposed to be the next big thing, old wharfs to become bistros and boutiques.

Hudson Boulevard was boulevard-like only in being wide, and its name changed to Water Street as it curved down the hill around the Bishop Stebbins Senior Houses, a big nineteen-sixties project of enormous high rises set in fields of rubble with a few basketball courts and some people sitting in a bus stop looking like they had been there a long time. The project wasn’t for senior citizens, if I recalled correctly, it was “Senior” to distinguish the Bishop Stebbins it was named after from the present Councilman Bishop Stebbins Junior, a preacher and politician like his father. The buildings were well-known in the news for drugs and crime.

After the projects came a succession of rubbled-over empty lots, most of them fenced with razor wire. “Yeah, this is depressing,” I said, already wishing I had brought my own car for a quick getaway, but at the same time, since I consider myself able to get out of tight situations, I made a mental note about where you could theoretically catch a bus.

After the rubble came an old-fashioned skid row of empty lots and tenements, some occupied, some not; a bar called the Blue Lagoon with some multi-cultural derelicts in front; then a second hand shop with bedsteads chained to window gates even though the store looked open.

Robby said, “The kids call it Water Rat Street instead of Water Street. The good

buildings are at the other end.”

I squinted, and saw a short block of attached houses that might be the good buildings he was talking about, or maybe he meant the glass skinned high rise just beyond, eighteen or twenty stories, changing colors as the cloud cover shifted. “I know that high rise,” I said. “You can see that from everywhere around. You see it from my sister’s condo, which is not that far as the crow flies. Not that I have any idea how the crow flies.”

“Yeah, Riversedge Renaissance. The contrast is really sharp, don’t you think? The projects at one end, Riversedge Renaissance at the other.”

“Sort of like department store anchors at a mall.”

As usual, and I could see this would be a problem if I spent much more time with Robby, he didn’t get my humor. “Yeah, you’re right,” he said. “It captures something about America..”

A bus came up Water Street. It would be a long time till the next bus, should I decide to bail out. Well, I could always borrow a few dollars and call a cab.

He pulled over in front of the lone building across from the little row of attached houses. The building had a fresh coat of bright blue paint, or rather, a fresh coat of paint about halfway up. “This is it,” he said. “This is Love Palace. We meant to call it Love *Place*, but everyone started calling it Love Palace.”

“Robby, tell me the truth. What goes on here?”

“It’s like an old fashioned settlement house? Except not old fashioned?”

“A post modern settlement house. Okay. And you park your car here?”

“Nobody pays any attention to the alternate side parking. They don’t do much street cleaning.”

“Don’t be dumb! I mean, do you park your fancy schmancy Miata on the street? This would be old home week for the Guzzler, but a convertible?”

“Usually, I don’t have a car with me,” he said. “I was supposed to go out to Pinnacle today, that’s why I had the car. But nobody bothers our cars.”

I didn’t believe it. We breathed in chilly, garbage-scented air. The tenement across the way was boarded up, but a group of boys stood around under a fire escape with a boom box, doing business or hanging out or both. I said, “This has all the earmarks of a really a crummy neighborhood.”

“Yeah, it does, doesn’t it?” He looked around. “I was thinking the Good News Crew would be out here.”

“That would be?”

“Our music group. Gil does keyboard and synthesizer. He’s the real musician. The girls sing okay, but Gil is really talented. It’s rock ‘n’ roll with a message. Christian rock.”

A hamburger wrapper came flitting across the street and wrapped itself around my ankle. I kicked it off. “I’m thinking I won’t stay,” I said. “I’ve got a lot to do—”

A skinny man wearing a suit jacket and an Afro was walking toward us.

“Here comes Ace,” said Robby. “You have to meet Ace. He was a Black Panther in the sixties, and now he’s a tenant organizer.”

“A real Black Panther? Like Kill Whitey Kill Kill Kill? Or is that a Comedy Central skit?”

“No, it wasn’t like that at all,” said Robby. “He’ll tell you. They gave milk to the babies. Hi, Ace,” he extended his hand eagerly and insisted on some kind of complicated shake.

Ace said, "You have to work on that handshake, Robby."

Robby's cheeks took on a little flush of what appeared to be pleasure, and he introduced me.

"Martha," said Ace, perfectly bland and polite. "Pleased to meet you." He had a little gray in his wiry beard and an energetic way of moving. He changed directions to walk with us, on my left side, Robby on my right.

I said, "Robby tells me you were a Black Panther."

He gave a nice baritone grunt. "Robby tells everything that isn't nailed down. Yeah, I was a Panther."

"Cool," I said. Should I tell him that my grandma had been a Communist in the forties? "So what are you now?"

"A college professor!" said Robby. "Tell her, Ace! He teaches mathematics to the young brothers and sisters who got fucked over by the education machine!"

Ace looked pained. "I'm an adjunct at County Community. Basic math."

I was liking Ace. He had a nice controlled energy and a way of looking at Robby with wry tolerance.

We were in front of the blue building now. Robby said, "I'm taking Martha to meet John."

"Well, John's the man to meet around here all right," said Ace.

I had a moment of panic, afraid to go in. I said to Ace, "Aren't you coming in?"

"Not me," he said, giving the building a look I couldn't read, so I gave the building a good look too. Someone had plastered over its bricks and a lot of its architectural features so that

its one bay window on the second floor popped out like a hernia. A long crack ran from the top all the way through the new paint to the tacked-on stoop roof. High up on the old paint was the faded image of martini glasses and vertical lettering that spelled out “**LOVE P LACE.**”

There was a big swath of white paint over what must be another A.

“So it really was Love Palace,” I said. “Was it a whore house?”

Ace burst out laughing. I love it when people laugh at my wit. “You got it,” said Ace.

“This was once Big Bill’s Topless Bar and Commercial Sex Scene.”

“And now—and now what exactly goes on here?” I was still clinging to Ace as the most normal person in sight.

Robby seemed eager to go in. “Service. We look for what people need.”

Ace said, “They give the people Jesus songs in one-two time.”

“We serve meals, we help Ace rehab apartments in other buildings. We help the homeless—“

”Like me?” I said. “I’m about to be thrown out of my apartment.”

Ace got serious. “Thrown out of your apartment? What for?”

“Oh, I haven’t been paying the rent— it’s not a big deal—“

”Haven’t been paying your rent for what? Lack of services?”

“No, more like lack of job. I just got behind. I’ve been moving a lot of my stuff to my sister’s. I paid my therapist instead of the rent.”

Ace shook his head. “You can’t withhold rent unless you have a reason and an organization. When you get evicted for cause, nobody much can help you. I’m on my way somewhere, but I can talk to you later about that rent business.” He left us, after Robby had

insisted on practicing the handshake one more time. I wanted to go with Ace.

Robby said, “Don’t worry, Martha. *He* will find you a place to stay.”

“Ace?”

“*He* will,” said Robby, pointing up. Were his brains fried? He stepped up and gestured toward the door, cocked his pretty head.

I kept my feet planted. Robby said, “Come on in. I’ll introduce you to the Good News Crew too. We started the band after Gil found some amplifiers really cheap at the pawnshop.” He lowered his voice. “It took me a long time to sing with them. It reminded me of when I used to be in the choir, you know, with the boy I was telling you about.”

“The one you loved.”

Robby said, “I never wanted to sing again, but *He* helped me.”

We were still standing on the stoop. “Listen, Robby—I’m having second thoughts—I’m really not very inspired by religion in general. I mean, I’m not a potential convert, you know? For a while I experimented with various belief systems, and I don’t have anything against people using what works for them, but it’s not for me.”

Robby nodded. “The kids aren’t very religious either, really. They’re like runaways and drop-outs. The religious connection has gotten unfortunately thin. Gil doubts everything, except music. Kristen and Cara are just here because John saved them. He got in touch with their families and cut a deal, and the families aren’t supposed to bother Kristen and Cara till they’re ready to talk. They’re staying at least through the summer, that’s what he negotiated with their parents. He’s really good with things like that. He has a lot of other duties. He’s here now, though, there’s his car.”

I caught a glimpse of an Oldsmobile of about the same vintage as the Guzzler, then something heavy and silvery, a Benz or a Lexus. That will be the reverend's car, I thought, the big shiny one.

I gave up and went in. What the Hay, you know? Love Palace was dim, the main floor probably more or less what it had been when Big Bill had his topless girls here, except it was set up as a lounge now. There was a staircase on one side and a swinging door and metal pass-through and counter at the far end. Also down at that end was a rather grand conference table, but most of the floor space was filled with randomly arranged vinyl couches and easy chairs. There were people in a lot of them, too: one man sleeping under newspapers.

"Some of our clients," said Robby proudly, from the foot of the stairs. "Waiting for dinner."

On the wall under the staircase was a large painting of what I took to be Jesus, dressed in more or less the same style as the derelicts only his sweat shirt was purple. He was carrying a scrunch-faced little brown person on his shoulder, a midget possibly meant to be a child. Representationally speaking, the painting was pretty bad, but the colors were creative.

"Cara did the mural," said Robby.

"Nice concept," I said. "Homeless Jesus." I was beginning to feel cheerful. Maybe it would be nice to be brainwashed. All the proselytizing groups you run into, including the ones I'd flirted with— they always had these slick world views, everything tied up so blessedly neatly. This one seemed like it might be low-key and funky, more like my own natural view of the world.

Dr. Landowska would say, Martha, always you are looking for the easy way in.

I said, “So it’s like a settlement house, and your Reverend John oversees it. And there’s a bunch of former runaway kids who live here, and you have a band.”

At the top of the steps were two doors, one to another flight of stairs and one to an office. Robby went into the office, but I stopped in the doorway.

It was tiny with no windows, a computer crammed onto a table on one wall, a vinyl couch like the ones downstairs, a desk, a phone/fax askew on a stack of paper reams. A man leaning his backside on the front edge of the desk, touching nothing else, beautifully dressed in gray draped slacks and open-throated shirt, jacket tossed over his shoulder with European aplomb. Fabrics with a good hand (a phrase from Nana, who had done time in the garment industry). A truly fine-looking man, my age or a little older, wavy dark hair, going gray at the temples in the most dignified way, springing back from his high forehead that you would never mistake for balding.

He had this quality: like, he was the vacuum cleaner, and I was a piece of fuzz on the carpet.

Robby did names and said John was at the church in Pinnacle as well as the founder of Love Palace. I was doing eyes: I don’t trust light eyes, and would never have stayed with Madame the Polish Valkyrie had she not had nice normal brown eyes in the middle of the bloneness. Robby has brown eyes, and Nana and Mari and even Mom— but my dad and I have blue eyes, and I don’t trust either one of us.

When I finally let myself look at John’s, I still wasn’t sure what color they were. Intense, but no color. I focused on his right cheekbone and the tiny vertical line between his eyebrows. He extended his hand. “Welcome to Love Palace, Martha. It’s a pleasure to meet a friend of

Robby's. Robby, your mother has been calling. She has a cake."

Robby looked petulant. "I never said I'd go out there. I want this birthday to be— what I want it to be, not what my parents want it to be. And so far, it has been. John, I need to talk with you. I've been with Martha today."

"I'm just on my way out," said John.

"Don't want to miss the curtain?" I said, not wanting him to try any tricks, intimating he was off to save the world when he was really on his way to Broadway. He had an absolutely stunning smile, and teeth that looked freshly refinished.

"Seventeenth and eighteenth century court music at the Performing Arts Center," he said, "with original instruments."

"We won't take long," said Robby. "Something happened—"

"Oh, I think you should go ahead," I interrupted. "Don't miss your music. Robby just wanted to get permission for me to have supper here."

"You don't need permission. Everyone is welcome. That's what we're about here, welcoming."

Yes, I thought, really enjoying his smile. Just suck me up, Big Vacuum, I'm ready and waiting.

"No," cried Robby. "Don't go yet. Martha and I—we've—begun a relationship. I mean—" he paused significantly, "a real relationship."

This caused a nice round silence.

I said, "Well, okay, I think, on second thought, I'll pass on supper, Robby. I'm in the mood for a nice slice of pizza—"

His face was exalted, totally focused on John. “But there’s much more. I know I was supposed to find her. She’s looking for a job and she’s being evicted from her apartment—”

”I’ll find a job, Robby. Honest. I totally exaggerate my circumstances. I’m going to stay at my sister’s, most of my important stuff is already there. It’s just a little wiggle in the lifeline—”

”So I thought she could take Rhonda’s job, and she and I may want to get married.”

“No, we don’t want to get married. *I* don’t!”

John said, “I see. Let’s sit down, then and talk for a few minutes.” He resettled himself on the desk, and Robby grabbed my hand and pulled me down beside him on the couch, where a stack of magazines promptly fell into my lap.

Robby and John both hopped into action and Robby moved half of them back to the arm of the couch and John put the other half on the floor. “Listen,” I said, “I don’t know where Robby is going with this. He didn’t consult me about his announcement. This is like, you know, a goof for me.”

John resettled himself on the desk edge and made a spire with his fingers, just like Madame, except that her spire is Russian Orthodox or maybe Catholic, I never got the Central European church affiliations straight. John’s had the solid, clean-lined look of a university bell tower.

I said, “I’m just a garden variety recidivist neurotic with intermittent agoraphobia and low self-esteem. I went out today for the first time in a few days and ran into Robby in a bar, and we picked each other up and he came home with me, and he was very sweet, and I appreciate his offer, but I’m not really a candidate for—whatever it is that’s going on here. Besides, I’m half

Jewish.”

“Half Jewish?” said John.

I knew he’d do it, the therapeutic repeat-the-phrase. But I forgave him because he had such a wonderful serenity even as the moments were ticking away. “Robby invited me for supper. I thought I owed it to him to listen to the pitch.”

“Let’s not talk about what we owe people,” said John, stroking his chin with his impeccably clean nails. “Or about pitches. I’ve never really found that productive. Let’s talk about what we want. That’s my idea about Love Palace. The real issue is what people want, which is sometimes but not always the same as what they need. Robby, what do you want?”

Robby gazed into John’s face adoringly. You, I thought. He wants you. And I will too, if I stick around. Robby said, “Martha made me feel like a man. Jesus killed my old devil, and Martha— is an angel from Him. I discovered I could have feelings for a woman. For Martha.”

“Making love is a good thing,” said John.

“What I want is, I want to marry her.”

“You want to marry her?”

“I want to marry her, and bring her to Jesus. I know, I know. You can’t make someone. She has to do it herself, but I wanted you to talk to her.”

John gazed unhurriedly at Robby, then unhurriedly turned to me. “And you, Martha, what do you want?”

“Meaning in my life.” It just popped out. I was trying so hard not to say You that I let this other thing slip out. “I want meaning, but I need a job. I need the money and a reason to get up in the morning.”

“We all need that,” said John. “We all need a reason for getting up in the morning.”

And, I thought, to pay off Madame so I can go back into therapy and tell her about you and Robby and my adventure at the Love Palace. I said, “Robby did a good deed today. I’m going to have dinner with you guys and go home and try to get a job. I feel really jump-started. There are lots of things I need, love and companionship and all the usual, but right now, it’s practical arrangements I need.”

“What kind of work do you do?”

“I have a master’s in literature, but I’ve been doing copy editing and office management.”

“Desk top publishing? Computer skills?”

“Oh, sure.”

“Excellent,” he smiled.

“You see?” said Robby. “I told you, she’d be perfect for Rhonda’s job.”

“Who’s Rhonda?”

“She was our executive director,” said Robby. “This was her office.”

John was watching Robby and watching me. “Yes,” he said. “She did a lot of good work for us. She got us to incorporate; she got some grants that have since run out. Do you do grant writing, Martha?”

“Nope,” I said. “I guess I’m not your girl.”

John nodded. “I’m sure you could learn. We’ve also been struggling to start a little newsletter. We need an editor for the newsletter, also someone to oversee some of the daily operations here. Are you interested?”

I said, “Is the salary fifteen dollars a week, or twenty?”

“Give me a figure,” he said. “We could include a room here. Possibly even an apartment,” he said.

It was how he said things, with an almost Southern accent, but that isn’t right, it was just a smoothness, not slow, but you felt like there was plenty of time. And also, just faintly, I could feel this vibrato in his voice.

“This is great,” said Robby. “We really need a responsible person. I don’t mean responsible like old, just responsible.”

John said, “You could have your meals here, of course. Depending on what you like to do, what you’re good at doing. Rhonda was good at grant writing; she set up the Board of Directors. I’ll tell you what. Make up a budget, bring it back in the morning and we’ll fix on a salary.” John glanced at his watch. “How does that sound?”

I said, “Why did Rhonda leave?”

“She got a better job.”

And then this imp-Martha that sometimes comes out and dances on my shoulder and tells lies said, “It’s an interesting officer, but sadly, it’s too late. They’re going to evict me tomorrow.”

“Then get your things tonight. Robby will set you up in a room upstairs.”

Martha-the-imp widened her eyes and put her hand on her hip. “I’d need cash up-front.”

“How much?”

“A couple of hundred to, you know, rent a van to bring some stuff to my sister’s since I’d be moving from an apartment into a room.” I pretended I was just letting the imp have an airing, but at the same time, part of me was aware of a door opening. It was as vivid as one of my best

therapy dreams: I was wide awake, I would say to Madame L., I was talking to these people, and there was this white metal door that kind of glowed as if the metal were hot, but it wasn't hot, it was cool, and it was opening into a bright landscape, and I was stepping through. If I kept my stuff at my sister's, I could bail out anytime I wanted.

John said, "Could you stay around till I get back this evening? I know it would be late, but I have to go out now, and I don't have the cash on me. I'll bring you the money, if you can wait, and we'll strike a deal."

"What about getting married?" said Robby.

John offered him the smile. "A job I can provide unilaterally, but marriage, Robby, requires two people."

I said, "It was charming of you to ask, Robby, but we only met this afternoon."

"Sometimes that's all it takes!" he said. He was squeezing my hand, over and over in an annoying way. "Isn't that right, John? Sometimes your heart knows immediately? Doesn't His hand reach right in through the flesh of your chest and grab your heart all at once, suddenly?"

John got up. He began uttering a little sermon as he moved toward the door, no hurry, but you didn't doubt he was leaving now. "Robby," he said, "the Spirit comes in many, many ways. Sometimes it prompts you to act, and sometimes it urges you to be still. You told me what you wanted. Now I'm going to tell you what you need. When you told me what you wanted, I heard 'Quick Fix.' I heard, 'Silver bullet—answer to all my problems.' But what you need, Robby, is to think of Martha. Let's think of Martha's needs. Can you be satisfied that Martha is here with you tonight? She's going to have supper here and stay for the evening. Can you enjoy Martha right now? Then we'll see if she wants to come and be with us tomorrow too."

Robby finally let go of me and covered his face with his hands. “I’m such a punk,” said Robby. “I’m such a piece of shit.”

I had this urge to confess. I lied about being evicted tomorrow. That was a fabrication. I’m behind on the rent, but not *that* far behind. But I got hold of myself and said, “Let’s think of John’s needs too. He’s going to be late if he doesn’t get moving.”

“Robby,” John smiled, “set up a meeting tonight. I want to talk to the Crew when I come back tonight. I have some things on my mind.”

He was leaving, he was gone. I put an arm around Robby. We listened to John’s descending footsteps.

“He’s right,” said Robby into my left bosom. “I’m so selfish I never think of anything but my own needs. It’s all rotten—whatever I do. I could be handing out food to the hungry and my mind goes—rotten.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself. If you want to hear about inappropriate wandering minds, let me tell you about mine.”

“I’ve been so selfish,” he sobbed. “You’re so good to me. Stay, Martha, don’t leave me.”

I pulled his head farther over onto my ever ample bosom. Too bouncy for most weight-bearing aerobic exercise, and the boobs attract male attention even when you’ve got the flu and just want to go to sleep. Robby felt nice there, though. Very warm. Maybe I still had time to have children, I thought. Do I have it in me to nurture? Rotters II and III would say no, but they were assholes. I patted Robby’s back and looked around the office. I could straighten this up, I thought. I’m not a bad office manager. This clutter was just supplies plus people dumping things here since Rhonda. Before I signed on any dotted lines, though, I intended to find out why

she really left.

After a while, I noticed a framed cover of *Time* magazine. I had to twist my neck to see it, because it was behind the couch where we were sitting. It was familiar, from a few years back. A picture of a good looking dark-haired white man holding what appeared to be a dead or dying black man. It was a famous photo, and the nickname suddenly came to me: *Prison Pietà*, the media used to call it.

“That picture on the wall, Robby. Is that John? I knew I knew his face. It was that prison riot. John’s the guy holding the guy who got shot?”

Robby sat up. “That’s John.”

“What was he, the chaplain?”

“I think so. He doesn’t talk about it, but he’s famous. It’s like having Jesus in the room with you.”

He doesn’t talk about it, but the picture is here, I thought. Yes, John has charisma, and Robby is a sweetheart, and this is a nut house, and I am out of here, very soon. But I was still in adventure mode, and also I was curious if John would actually come back with the cash. And, of course, I wanted to see John again.