

The Cranesbill



Francesco Rizzuto

THE CRANESBILL

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ISBN 9781988905013

Sample Chapters

Author's Note

The Cranesbill is a novel inspired by the paintings of American Artist Edward Hopper (1882-1967).

Hopper was a painter of silent spaces and uneasy encounters. His figures include somnambulant, diaphanous women – dressed, semi-clad, and nude – through which he channels the conflictive moods of solitude, isolation, loss, loneliness, regret, melancholy, and resignation: the dark side of the American dream. Post-coital scenes are common in Hopper's paintings. The viewer assumes the role of voyeur, spying on a couple's intimacy or lack of it, contemplating the dubious value of hope where it springs from the premise of sex.

The setting for The Cranesbill is Hopper's America of 1944-45. The country is emerging from the turmoil of the Great Depression and World War II. Thanks to the war, the economy is again flourishing. Its business leaders become wealthy while ordinary people suffer dislocation and the loss of their loved ones. Marriages are strained, and wives' attentions wander as absentee husbands leave for faraway battlefronts, some returning years later, others never. Relationships have become provisional, focusing on the gratification of basic needs during an uncertain time. Sex is at the root of the story and drives the story throughout.

The Cranesbill is a member of the Geranium family. It is a fragile plant yet given sufficient water and soil in which to grow, it produces an amazing number and variety of coloured blossoms. It is considered a symbol for stupidity and folly; nonetheless, it reappears in profusion each and every year.

Chapter illustrations by Edward Hopper (1882-1967)

Cover portrait by Robert Henri (1865-1929)

HUMDINGER	1
A CHANGE IN THE WEATHER.....	7
CHOP SUEY.....	10
CLUB SANDWICH AND A COKE	24
ON THE PEDESTAL	28
FRUIT PLATE WITH COTTAGE CHEESE.....	31
THE CIVIL WAR IS STILL OKAY	37
CALIFORNIA DREAMING	43
EX-LAX.....	46
IT'S A DANCE.....	50
EXTRA CLASSES	54
A PROPOSAL.....	57
MIME.....	60
TEA AND CARNATIONS.....	66
AN APPARITION	69
OFF TO WAR.....	71
XXX (SOME KISSES FOR YOU).....	73
TO THE TOP OF THE WORLD.....	75
A NEGOTIATION.....	79
THE ARRANGEMENT.....	84
THE LETTER	88
A KEPT WOMAN	91
NEW MEXICO, WASN'T IT?.....	99
TODAY'S NEWS	104
CARRY ON, BEATRICE.....	107
THE STAIRCASE	112

HUMDINGER



Overheard by a fly on the wall of Madigan's Tavern, 226 E. 138th Street, New York:

"Hello there. Where ya from, soldier? The Land of Oz?"

A red-lacquered fingernail picked at the Rainbow Division insignia on the man's sleeve, teasing out a loose thread. The nail's owner was tall and sinuous and generously structured. Attractive. A diaphanous agent provocateur blouse left precious little to the imagination.

"Hey! Stop it, will ya? I'm gonna have to sew the god-damned thing back on if ya keep that up. You any good at sewin'?"

"No."

"I didn't think so."

"I'm good at other stuff, though. If you want, I can hum 'Over the Rainbow.' But you need to buy me a drink first."

"Hummin's a great skill, especially for a girl."

"Yeah. Comes in useful sometimes. Staying in town for a while?"

"We're shippin' outta here tomorrow."

"East or West?"

"Now, that's classified information. Whatta ya, a spy or somethin'?"

“Yeah, a spy. A spy in the house of love.”

“What’s that? Another whorehouse?”

“No. A novel. But it hasn’t been written yet.”

“Hey, you’re a clever one. What kinda drink ya want? Or maybe you’re gonna write some books first?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“What? Drinkin’ or writin’?”

“Drinking. Gin tonic. Light on the tonic. Afterwards, I invite you up to my apartment. Then we write the book together. A blockbuster.”

“You sure you’re not a spy? What’s a girl like you know about blockbusters, anyway?”

“I see you’re not much of a reader. Okay, let’s quit the interrogation and get out of here. I didn’t really want that drink. Don’t need it.”

“Sure. But I only got a twenty-four-hour pass minus time wasted in this cruddy dump. It might be New York, but I’ll take Santa Rosa, California, any day of the week.”

“That’s because you don’t know New York. I can show you the town. Teach you the Bronx Cheer. I’m good at humming, remember?”

* * *

Later. A narrow staircase leading to rooms above a roughneck diner on 167th Street, Bronx. A flashing red and blue neon sign punctures the enveloping darkness outside.

Her slender fingers fumbled for the fugitive room key somewhere inside a worn leather handbag, while his large, rancher’s hands encircled her narrow waist in a gesture of barely restrained need, as if this lucky apparition might vanish into thin air. He could wake up in barracks, like a dream, a wet dream, complete with hangover, or hallucinating inside the rolling, stinking tin-can belly of a troop ship, awash in vomit.

“Hey, I thought we was goin’ up to your apartment.”

“This is my apartment. Everything’s in one room. A studio. See?”

She reached to switch on a small, paper-shaded table lamp on a dusty nightstand next to a bed that looked as if it hadn’t been made in a long while. The room smelled stale, with faint overtones of mildew and urine, like old hotels and rooming houses always do. It was a studio alright, with a tiny bathroom and no kitchen, cheap but tastefully decorated; a working girl’s room with white-painted wainscoting and a framed picture of nothing in particular on the wall.

She unbuttoned her woollen overcoat with the fox fur collar then tossed it over the back of an armchair. An asthmatic iron radiator under the curtain-less window announced itself with a clank, clank, clank, like an old wall clock too exhausted and worn out to strike the hour. Intrusive flashes of coloured neon rebounded off the dirt-encrusted window.

Hoarfrost was forming on the outside of the pane, sure sign of a frigid night ahead, his last night. Shipping out tomorrow.

“There’s a fifth of whiskey over there on the window sill. Go help yourself. Glasses on the sink in the bathroom.”

He shut the bathroom door with a dull thud, then unbuttoned the fly of his khaki trousers to relieve himself into the toilet bowl. After giving his hose pipe a perfunctory twitch, he reached for the slim roll of tissue to remove a few renegade droplets from the seat. A gentleman always lifts the seat before he urinates, is what his mother had said. He checked his wallet for the army-issue condom, hoping it might emerge intact this time, and was rewarded with a handful of rubberized cornflakes from the crinkled foil wrapper.

When he returned with two water glasses that looked like they needed a good scouring, the girl already lay naked on the mattress under the crumpled bedsheet that skirted her chin like the missing window shade, a mess of red-orange hair bracketing her features in a flaming halo across the pillowcase. She was pretty in a more than ordinary way with freckles that spilled across her nose and cheeks, large, watery blue eyes and fleshy lips, and a feverishly high colour. Even in the dim glow of the lamp, he could see she had good teeth, creamy white and straight.

“I thought you was gonna hum a tune for me? What was it? Oh, yeah, the Bronx Cheer. I been to Yankee Stadium, ya know.”

“Is that right?”

“Yeah. I’m a big fan of that shortstop fella, the Scooter, and DiMaggio too. Them Wops sure know how to play ball. Scooter signed a baseball for me before he went overseas. Well, not exactly for me personally. I bought it for fifty cents in a flea market in Santa Rosa. Well, anyhow, I hope he gets back okay. A lot of them ballplayers enlisted. Like me. I enlisted. For the duration.”

By the time this monologue is finished, he’d shed the uniform, each component carefully folded and placed side by side on the cushioned seat of the battered armchair, the one with her threadbare coat dangling over the backrest, the room’s only chair. Her simple skirt and low-cut silk blouse lay carelessly on the carpet, topped by a pair of frayed white cotton panties and a matching, worse-for-wear bra. It was a nice woollen carpet, antique, a once-quality carpet, oval with ochre-coloured flower motifs worked into a reddish background.

The corner of his eye caught a glimpse of an ancient typewriter resting on a writing table in a corner of the room, surrounded by piles of hard-bound books and loose papers that spilled onto the floor.

“You really are writing a book, huh?”

“Yeah. Kind of. I earn a living proof-reading for publishers. It doesn’t even pay the rent. Used to teach English before the war.”

“What happened? All your students get drafted?”

“Something like that.”

He removed the wrinkled bedsheet from under her chin then carefully folded it, as his mother had taught him to do, neatly and squarely, and placed this tidy package onto the chair atop his uniform, then mounted the creaking bed, straddling the girl's narrow waist over her flattened tummy, shifting a little from side to side like seating a mare. He was a horse breeder's son from California, experienced in breaking and training. She was well formed, firm, the way he liked his animals. He could fall in love with a creature like that, had fallen in love with one back on the West Coast. It was as if he were with her kid sister now, sharing a secret in the subdued light of a poorly furnished room, a whole continent away.

He laid his calloused hands on her ample breasts that were firm like the rest of her and pinched each erect pink nipple between his thumbs and forefingers until she winced. A slight gasp of air prefaced a soft moan in a muted exclamation of arousal. Eyelids squeezed tightly shut, her perfect torso rose in response to the teasing.

He lowered himself against her comfortable body, burying his face in the welcome fragrance of her thick mop of reddish hair, at the same time running his rough palms in a grooming motion up and down the girl's smooth sides. She smelled nice, of cheap perfume with a hint of woman sweat, the way he liked a girl to smell. She in turn encircled his thickly muscled torso with her lanky arms then raised her flawless legs to his waist, locking her ankles in the small of his back.

"Fuck me now. Fuck me hard."

"Yeah, sure Honey. But I don't even know your name."

"You don't need to know my name. You'll be out of my life tomorrow so, please, no questions. Just fuck me."

He sought out her mouth with his lips, but she turned her face away.

"What's the matter? My breath bad?" Resting on one elbow, he placed an open palm against his chin and exhaled a sharp puff of air, sampling his own breath. No surprise. It smelled like whiskey.

"No. But I need to save something for my husband."

"Your husband? Hey, look. I didn't come here to get set up. When's he expected home, by the way?"

"He's not. Coming home, I mean. He's dead."

"Huh? You're married to a dead guy? Hey, this is gettin' spooky. I think I should go."

"No. Please don't go. I'm going to pretend you're him and I want you to fuck me hard, very hard, the way he did."

She reached up to lubricate the palm of her hand with saliva then encompassed his stiffened member in her fist, gripping it like the handle of a concealed weapon between their conjoined torsos, her finger on the trigger.

"No more words. Please."

"Okay, then."

He placed his hard hands like a stiff saddle beneath her butt cheeks, then fluidly guided himself into the already moist slot between her thighs. She was soft and warm and tight, the way he liked a girl, a small furnace of desire and unadorned lust. Rocking her bottom against himself, the stubby head of his penis met the lumpy, impenetrable entrance to the girl's womb, blocking further entry. He was a large man, a stallion. He was only half in, half out, but still it felt okay, really okay, better than with her older sister. This is what he imagined as he fucked a nameless girl hard in a dimly lit room over a diner on 167th Street in New York.

The girl began to shudder, then stiffened in his embrace, her sharp crimsoned fingernails digging into his muscled shoulders, releasing small droplets of bright red blood like a fresh tattoo, while he rode her like the rancher's son that he was. Then, with her moistened lips pressed against his ear, she whispered, "Okay. Your turn. I'm going to teach you the Bronx Cheer."

In a practiced motion, she rolled their conjoined bodies onto their sides then pulled away, leaving him suspended on the metaphorical edge of release, trembling in anticipation of what was to come. Sliding down his torso, she wrapped her un-kissed lips around the engorged head of his throbbing member while rapidly flicking the purplish tip with the point of her tongue, causing his knees to tremble. When he noticed his own shape outlined inside the girl's throat beneath her chin, he marvelled that she didn't suffocate.

Then, she began to hum.

"Take me out to the ballgame, take me out to the park. Buy me some peanuts and crackerjacks, I don't care if I never get back..."

He knew the words by heart. Everyone knew them. The song was more popular than the national anthem. Her steady humming ignited a small bonfire inside his lower abdomen until his mid-section shook out of control and a thick milky rivulet trickled from the corners of her lips as she continued to pump and hum until he grabbed her hands to still them. She raised her eyes, then whispered in a throaty voice.

"Welcome to the Bronx."

The click of a key in the bathroom door followed by the sound of running water in the iron bathtub signalled that the girl was cleaning herself up, rinsing away his slippery emission from inside her mouth with Lysol and scrubbing her pale, freckled skin with Ivory Soap to remove his man scent. He reached for the whiskey bottle and poured two fingers' worth of amber liquid into the glass. That's when he noticed an envelope rimmed with black banding peeking out from beneath the base of the small table lamp, a telegram. He slid the message from its paper sheath and held it under the light.

*WESTERN UNION
CAP32 44 GOVT=WUX WASHINGTON DC 13 1020A
MRS GINGER MARTIN=*

*THE SECRETARY OF WAR DESIRES ME TO EXPRESS HIS DEEP REGRET THAT YOUR
HUSBAND TECHNICIAN FOURTH GRADE HENRY MARTIN HAS BEEN REPORTED
KILLED IN ACTION IN FRANCE= YOU WILL BE PROMPTLY NOTIFIED REGARDING
DISPOSITION OF REMAINS=*

J A PRENDERGAST THE ADJUTANT GENERAL

A sudden chill travelled up his spine. With a furtive glance at the bathroom door, he quickly stuffed the sinister missive back inside its envelope beneath the lamp, then counted out five crisp one-dollar bills from his wallet and placed them on the nightstand.

She didn't want to know his name, is what she'd said, but now he knew hers. It was Ginger. Ginger Martin. He'd once owned a beige filly called Ginger. He rose from the mattress and wiped himself with the unfolded bedsheet then tossed it carelessly back onto the mattress.

The girl emerged from the bathroom fully clothed, this time in a full red skirt with a black, sleeveless top that showcased her cleavage to good purpose. She sat herself on the bed, studying her feet for a while, then turned her gaze to the window, as if someone were waiting on the fire escape in the waxing dawn on the opposite side of a frosted pane.

He collected his uniform from the armchair and marched dutifully into the bathroom. The first rays of dawn were piercing the tiny bathroom window, barely enough to see now. He'd be shipping out today. Retrieving his leather wallet from a trouser pocket, he extracted a thin, white paper card, one of his family's business cards that read: Circle Six Ranch, Horse Breeders and Trainers. Using the gold-mounted fountain pen his mother had gifted him when he joined the army, he scribbled a message across the card's unblemished backside:

This one's a humdinger.

He used a dollop of toothpaste to glue the message to the underside of the toilet seat. A woman wouldn't think to look there, but a gentleman always lifts the seat before he urinates. That's what his mother had taught him back at the ranch in Santa Rosa, California.

A CHANGE IN THE WEATHER



Ginger Martin stared through the open sash at the potted plant she'd placed outside on the fire escape. It was a small cranesbill with furry green leaves and a clutch of unopened buds in a terracotta pot that the flower shop clerk had gifted her on the previous afternoon. Later, she'd visited the public library where a horticultural guide suggested that cranesbills were associated with stupidity and folly. She should talk to her cranesbill, the attractive and friendly shop girl had insisted, encourage it to flower. She could come back to the shop anytime to talk too. They might have coffee together. They could be friends.

Flowers or no flowers, change was certainly in the air. She felt it like a burning sensation in her lungs, inhaled it over the stinking exhaust of a Coca-Cola truck parked with its noisy engine left running in the street below her window. The very cold weather had quite inexplicably given over to a warmish, Spring-like regime that promised a pleasant shift from the grim realities of the fall and early winter of '44. The war would be over soon, is what people were saying. That was change enough.

Ginger had over-slept this morning and missed her appointment with Mister Hobbs at the literary agency. Hobbs was a one-man whirlwind with his tentacles in businesses across the city and an iron grip on the publishing industry. He wasn't a publisher per se, but rather the gatekeeper, Saint Peter of the Book Sellers she called him, deciding which souls would be rewarded and which consigned to literary oblivion. He was a major stakeholder in some of the country's largest presses. Ginger wasn't keen to encounter such an intimidating character so early in the day. For now, she'd be content to linger naked awhile longer in the blue upholstered armchair in her rented room over the diner, staring out the window with her feet nested in a pair of worn-out black pumps that doubled as slippers.

As usual, her first thoughts of the day had flown to Henry, her poor dead Henry, his shattered body parts resting who-knew-where. She had come to think of it as a bad habit, like compulsive hand washing or eating chocolate cupcakes, only it didn't make her any cleaner nor any fatter. It made her cry.

Still, she thought of Henry each and every morning before washing away the night sweats from her pale, freckled skin with a moistened cotton rag and staring like a zombie at her warped image in the chipped and peeling mirror over a cracked ceramic sink. The battered old mirror indiscriminately returned fractured likenesses of whoever or whatever approached it, without protest or argument. Like Ginger herself, it longed to be something different than what it was, anything, so desperately was it in need of re-silvering.

After the ritual ablutions, she set out a few items of clothing on the bed: a brightly flowered cotton blouse to wear over a simple red wool skirt with a light knitted shawl to throw overtop in case it turned chilly. She would deliver the soiled bed linens and a pillowcase filled with undergarments to the coin laundry down the street then pop into the diner for coffee and a glazed donut or two before deciding what to do with the rest of her day.

She'd finished her last proof-reading assignment, working into the wee hours of the morning while resisting the urge to visit a nearby tavern that she routinely frequented, or maybe drop into the USO and pick up a dance partner for the night. She would deliver the manuscript to the Hobbs Literary Agency later in the afternoon. If she were lucky, she might come back with another assignment or two.

In her mind, she struggled with the notion that entertaining soldiers and sailors and airmen wasn't really causing anyone any harm, not as most people defined the term. One fellow had even argued that she was doing her part for the war effort. He was a virgin and she'd given him something he'd always remember, he said afterwards. He was going to come back to marry her just as soon as America won the war, then they'd go back to Mobile together where he and his brother worked a shrimp boat in the Gulf. They'd make babies and live on jambalaya. Ginger promised to write and scribbled his name and army post office number down on the back of a grocery receipt then tossed it away.

Anyhow, she needed the extra money just to afford this dingy room and the one decent meal she enjoyed each day. One couldn't live on novel writing, she suspected; indeed, she'd not yet sold even a single story. She needed an agent. There was nothing left to set aside in a savings account, no insurance policy for whatever might come afterwards if indeed there was an afterwards. She'd shown one of the agency's editors a few chapters of her novel in hopes that the sample might find its way to Hobbs himself and that he'd take an interest. Being from upscale Manhattan, their paths were otherwise unlikely to cross outside the office. Hobbs didn't go slumming. Once, she'd seen his black-and-white picture in the society pages of the New York Times, attired in a sleek tuxedo and sipping cocktails with his pug-faced heiress wife at the Stork Club.

First, she'd tidy up the apartment a little, maybe even clean the bathroom this time, though truth be told, Ginger Martin wasn't much of a housekeeper. Instead, she was determined to become more than what her mother had been, beholden to her husband and children, in that order, confined in her duties to the soft cage of their dull Arizona home. At least she'd scrub out the bathtub, throw some soapy water into the toilet bowl, then air the old carpet over the fire escape and maybe beat it awhile with the broom handle. Still without a stitch of clothing on her body, she approached the rickety old typewriter to tap out a short punch-list for the day ahead.

An unfinished entry stared back at Ginger from the machine. She spun the roller until the upper third of the paper emerged from the carriage.

I tried to suppress the notion that I fancied her. The potted plant was meant as a kindness I suppose, nothing more, no hidden agendas. Still, how could this lovely stranger not sense the emptiness inside of me, and why did she refuse the handful of coins I'd extended over the counter? The sensation of her warm fingers enfolding my proffering hand, then lingering for a long moment in this metaphorical embrace, had sent my heart racing.

Now there was no avoiding the fact that I wanted to lift that flowered shop apron from over her shoulders then pry open the front of her simple cotton blouse one button at a time to release those two lovely, perfectly formed breasts with their pinkish nipples jutting to left and right. No. That wouldn't have been enough. I wanted to see her stripped naked, to run my palms all over that pliant young body, and yes, I wanted to hear her moan a little too. Then I would rebutton the blouse, starting from the bottom like a mother does with her little child. I would stroke her long auburn hair and plant a soft kiss behind her delicate, unadorned earlobe.

Then the bell would chime in another customer and once again we'd become strangers. I would walk casually out the door with my potted cranesbill, not daring to return.

CHOP SUEY



A cold front had suddenly blown in from Canada is what they were saying. I threw on a dark wool sweater and the blue stocking cap my mother had knitted with an ochre coloured silk scarf hanging loosely about my neck. I asked myself if maybe I should dress more seductively but instead decided to be conservative. On top of the worsening weather, the war news wasn't good, a big battle raging someplace in Europe, 'The Bulge' the papers were calling it, but why that name I hadn't a clue. Not a cause for dieting, certainly.

Candida was her name. The flower shop girl. The one who'd so unexpectedly inserted herself into this novel, the novel of my life, that is.

"I love the name Candida. Where'd you get it?"

"My father picked out the name when I was born. He happened to be reading Voltaire's 'Candide' at the time. You know, 'Tout est pour le mieux dans le meilleur des mondes possible?' I guess he was kind of a cockeyed optimist. Still is. We argue constantly."

"I can relate to that."

Well, it was either that or 'Cunégonde'. She was in love with Candide. Can you imagine?"

"It sounds like a social disease."

"Yeah, it does. Okay. My turn now. How'd you get the name Ginger?"

"Well, actually it's just a nickname. My real name is Erma. Erma Smith. You can't get any plainer than that."

“So where did the Ginger come from?”

“My husband was enamoured of Ginger Rogers, the dancer. He’d seen all her movies and fancied himself as her dance partner, so he started calling me Ginger whenever we made love. I guess it just kind of stuck after a while. I didn’t mind. When we got married, he wrote the name on the license.”

“Oh. I guess you’re married, then?” There was a tinge of disappointment in her voice at my casual statement of a fact that seemed to have altered the soft tinkling nature of her speech; a negation of some as yet undefined expectation, hinting at premature closure.

“No. I’m a widow. Henry Martin was killed last year during the Normandy landings. So far, I’ve gotten only one telegram and nothing more. No personal effects, no pension, no kiss-my-ass. Nothing.”

All of a sudden, I felt the weight of today’s headlines on my heart. The manufactured low casualty figures and heavy enemy losses, the optimism and fanfare that the war would soon be over, the patriotic jingoism. I’d been suppressing any feelings of bereavement or loss for a good half year now. Indulging in grief was unproductive, I told myself. Get past it. Move on. I’d moved on, I continued to remind myself, repeating the advice over and over again like a mantra.

Candida reached across the table and covered my hands with hers like she’d done in the flower shop when I tried to pay for the little cranesbill. A rush of warmth flowed up my arms into my chest. I felt my nipples harden inside my sweater. I’d not worn a bra that day. All my undergarments were stuffed inside a soiled pillowcase in the bathroom; not even any panties under the woollen skirt that chafed now and promised an annoying rash. I was wet, and began to soak the soft, upholstered seat of the chair as we sat there drinking jasmine tea while a couple of fortune cookies stared up at us from a china plate in a chop suey joint around the corner from the flower shop.

“That’s sad, Ginger. I’m very sorry. You must be awful lonely.”

“I’m okay. I’m getting over it now. Got myself a room over on 167th Street and a part-time job with a publisher’s agent. I do a little writing too; short stories mostly. Working on a novel. Used to teach high school English back in Tucson before we married. I’ll be twenty-six this year. Well, now that’s a mouthful, isn’t it? The whole story of my life.”

Candida just sat there, quietly studying my face while saying nothing. Her blue-green eyes were boring a hole in my soul. I was beginning to feel self-conscious and slightly uncomfortable, nervously shifting my unclad bottom on the seat.

“Hey. Let’s open our fortune cookies, shall we?” I suggested, trying to break the gloomy spell. “Let’s see what my cookie says.”

‘Something you lost will soon turn up.’

“How about that! Okay, now you open yours.”

Without another word, Candida took the brittle, folded cookie shell in her fingers and cracked it open like a large hollow nut. She began to laugh, then tears came streaming down both our faces.

‘Today you will meet the love of your life. Or maybe not. I’m just a cookie.’

So far, I knew no more about this girl than that she was named after a famous French novel. Still, there'd be a moist stain on the soft seat of the chair when we left the restaurant together, arm-in-arm, but I didn't care.

Ginger cranked the typewriter carriage a few more strokes to eject the sheet from the roller then folded the paper and stuffed it inside the cover of her diary. She inserted another sheet and tapped out her shopping list in the top left quadrant of the paper: Lysol, toilet tissue, deodorant.

She then gathered up her soiled items of clothing from a heap on the bathroom floor and stuffed them into the pillow case, placing a nearly empty box of detergent powder alongside. Ivory Flakes, it said on the front label, pure soap to gently wash away the stains. She threw her worn woollen coat over her naked body and buttoned up the front, then slipped on a pair of black pumps and headed off to the coin laundry.

AFTERNOON SHADOWS



It was four-forty-five by the time she arrived at the Hobbs Literary Agency in Manhattan. She'd returned to her room to freshen up a bit after visiting the coin laundry and consuming a ham sandwich and a Coke at the diner in the street below her room, her usual single meal of the day. She resisted the urge to visit a local tavern for some liquid courage before facing the man who controlled her meagre income and maybe even her destiny. This time she would keep her priorities straight and arrive sober.

Having missed her morning appointment, she decided to dress a little more provocatively this time, selecting a tight-fitting blue dress and arranging her hair in a tight bun at the back; 'office sexy' is how she thought of the style. She hoped that Hobbs had actually looked at the plot outline she'd left with the editorial staff and perhaps even read the sample chapters of her draft novel. She was tired of proof-reading other authors' works. She wanted a publishing contract of her very own. She needed a break, a new beginning for herself, however far she might need to go to get one.

Late afternoon shadows were carving up the city's sidewalks. A newsboy shoved the New York Times evening edition in her face, but she waved him away. She had no appetite for depressing news of the war; instead she needed to keep positive. When she strolled into the lobby of a rather non-descript brick building, she asked the elevator jockey for the sixth floor, then boldly exited, clutching the fat manila envelope under her arm.

A diffused glow seeped through the frosted glass panel in the door that opened directly into Hobbs' private office opposite the elevator. It was a charmless and claustrophobic space, with only room enough for two desks facing one another. A soot-

encrusted window with a cream coloured pull-down shade looked out onto the alley below. Not the office one would expect of such a powerful man.

She swung open the door without knocking, finding Hobbs seated at his desk, his attention occupied by a document that she instantly recognized as the draft of her novel. A half-smoked Camel smouldered in a black, cut-glass ashtray, a lazy grey stream of cigarette smoke snaking out the half-open window. Ginger's heart pounded inside her breast.

"You're late...again."

The most powerful literary agent in New York didn't bother to look up, obviously annoyed by her unreliability. He was a busy man. Still, he was reading her manuscript.

"I know."

"Just drop your stuff into the file cabinet over there, will you? Hilda has gone for the day and I'm a bit occupied at the moment. Give me a few minutes more and I'll cut you a check for the last assignment. Then we can talk about other matters."

Ginger did as she was told. Hobbs liked women who did as they were told. Filing her last assignment alphabetically according to the respective author's name, she tilted her head slightly in order to study this well-groomed, middle-aged man seated at the desk, his dirty-blond head streaked with white at the temples, bent over her badly typed pages, her hopes resting uneasily in his carefully manicured paws.

He was a smallish man in a meticulously tailored, somewhat tight-fitting brown suit, reeking of Old Spice. She knew that small sized people often invented oversized, grandiose personas for themselves, as if to make up for their lack of stature. It was a way of making taller people look up to them, in manner of speaking. Ginger imagined him in the role of a fairy-tale dwarf or a troll, although he wasn't really bad looking. He was just on the short side, not the way she liked her men. She wondered just how small he was and suppressed a giggle. He was studying her manuscript now, not the best time for jokes.

"I was wondering what you think of my writing," she ventured in a hesitant voice.

"We'll talk about it," he replied without looking up.

Gregory Hobbs was a master of manipulation. A well-connected and successful literary agent, his recommendations were respected by the country's largest publishing houses with many best-selling novelists in his stable of authors. He was like a one-man life insurance company. Any author who'd been rejected by his agency had little hope of securing coverage with any of the lesser representatives in the market. His opinion could make or break an aspiring author. When Hobbs told a publisher to print something, they printed it.

Ginger Martin was one of his proof-readers. There was an in-house team of editors as well. This is how the Hobbs Agency earned its keep, by charging pre-publication costs deducted from the small publisher's advance on royalties earned by an author. If a book happened to flop in the market, then the author was on the hook for services rendered. It was a bullet-proof formula. The agency got paid upfront before the author saw even a single penny, then siphoned off most of the downstream royalties. Ginger thought of a vampire bat. She knew from talking with the editors that she'd be lucky to see even ten percent of the street price of her book. Still, it was a better proposition than what she was doing now, entertaining servicemen and, from that point of view, a good deal less risky.

Agency staff in the adjoining office liked Ginger and they willingly shared any scuttlebutt that they'd managed to unearth on their boss. Ginger, for her part, always returned more than she was given, that is, besides proof-reading for spelling, grammar and typography errors in a manuscript or galley, she usually attached a few sheets of ad-hoc commentary, gratis. In this way, she added value to the assignment. Hobbs was considering offering her a promotion to editor at a fixed weekly salary, is what they hinted during her last visit. Now the staff had all gone home for the day. She was left alone with the man in his small private office with the pull-down shade that opened onto the darkening alley.

Any less determined woman would run from here, was her next thought, but now the stakes were much too high for flight. It was a matter of survival. She rolled over the possibilities in her mind, how far she'd be willing to bend to get that first precious publishing contract. Picking up furloughed soldiers for one-night stands was one thing; at least it gave her pleasure and some measure of escape, made her forget. And it helped pay the rent. She'd never see any of these men again, of course. Would Hobbs politely ask her to sign on the line and go home, waiting for the proverbial check to arrive in the mail? No. It couldn't be that simple.

"There's a publisher's convention going on in Chicago next week, Ginger."

Hobbs raised his eyes from her manuscript to gauge her reaction to this news.

"What's that have to do with me?" she replied disinterestedly. She feigned refile of the sheets she'd earlier proof-read, moving them from one hanging file to another then back again, not looking up from the open cabinet drawer and pretending that she hadn't noticed what it was he'd been reading when she walked in.

"Well, everything and nothing, I suppose. Hilda's off on vacation that week so I thought perhaps you might come along as my fill-in secretary. I'll give you the equivalent pay rate plus a travel bonus. All other expenses are covered, of course. I've already reserved a couple of roomettes for us on the Twentieth Century Limited for Sunday evening, arriving Chicago the following morning. I've a suite of rooms booked at the Palmer House as well."

He was propositioning a woman in his usual obtuse way. Hobbs with the wandering hands is what the office staff called him, although thus far he had never laid even a finger on Ginger Martin. Their relationship to date had been strictly business, though she wasn't sure it would continue that way. Nonetheless, this surprising offer fit in well with her aspirations to break into the business of writing. She'd leave her past behind, reinvent herself as a best-selling authoress.

"Sure. But I don't think I have anything to wear. I couldn't possibly go."

"Don't worry about that. We'll get you a whole new wardrobe. Marshall Field's is right around the corner from the hotel. A business dress and a couple of cocktail gowns should do well enough."

"But why me?"

"I'm a straight shooter, Ginger, as you well know. I've no love for time wasters. You do good work and I can see from this draft here that you're capable of more; much more. I'm going to give you a chance, introduce you to some big names in the industry. I plan to stuff this draft up their snouts until they suffocate. We'll come back with that publishing contract

you've been dreaming about. How about it? The train leaves at eight pm sharp from Grand Central."

"Okay. But what's in this for you? I mean besides the convention and all that money you're going to make on my book." She couldn't hold back the smirk.

"Who said I'm going to make any money? The reading public needs to reach into their pocketbooks first. You can expect a small advance on royalties but that's all."

"No small print in the contract?"

"Like I said. We'll talk about it."

"Well then, I'll need to think about the Chicago trip. I'm pretty busy these days. I'll let you know."

"Don't think too long. You could miss the train."

The afternoon shadows had deepened into moonless night and no sounds came from the alley below the window. She reached over to shut the office door with a sharp click, then turned the key in the lock and switched off the ceiling light. There was only the faint glow of a crumpled cigarette stub smouldering in the ashtray on the desk.

She wanted to strip him naked, to take out the tape measure from Hilda's desk drawer to see just how small he was. She wanted to unzip his carefully creased gabardine trousers then reach her hand inside the crisp white cotton boxer shorts. She wanted to fill her hollow cheeks with his swelling tumescence while she sucked and stroked. She wanted to see his knees buckle as he erupted into her throat while she gagged and struggled to swallow. She wanted him to collapse before her onslaught, the most powerful man in the publishing industry brought to his knees by an as-yet unpublished young authoress.

A GIRL IN THE TRAIN



Gregory Hobbs retired to the dining car for a nightcap and a cigarette before bedtime. He was a fastidious man and punctual to a fault, never having neglected any of the petty rituals that constituted his daily routine. Breakfast at seven at the coffee shop in the lobby below the couple's spacious Manhattan apartment, a noon lunch at the club, dinner at whatever trendy restaurant his semi-attractive, heiress wife happened to favour, a quick face washing and tooth brushing in their luxurious bathroom with the gold-mounted fixtures. A perfunctory hand job to round out the day. Lights out by eleven.

Ginger elected to remain in the club car perusing a slim volume that she'd selected from a bookseller's display in the station before boarding. The fleeting glare of towns and small cities and lonely, outlying gas stations penetrated the windows in short, staccato bursts, as the clickety clack, clickety clack of iron wheels on steel drew the train unerringly toward Chicago. A svelte, dark-haired girl in a bright red dress and high-heeled black shoes, like the ones Ginger was wearing, stared at her a little too intently from across the aisle. She'd caught a glimpse of the girl while boarding and thought she resembled Candida.

When Hobbs failed to return after another hour, Ginger felt herself nodding off in the comfortable armchair and thought it time to revert to her roomette in the sleeper. She hailed the club car attendant.

"Would you please make up my roomette?" she asked. "I'm not quite sure how to open the bed."

"Why, yes, Ma'am. I'll alert the sleeping car attendant for you. Thank you, Ma'am," the fellow replied.

He was a black man with a practiced smile a lot brighter than it was sincere. Ginger pointed to the car and compartment numbers printed on the face of the paper ticket she'd

been using as a bookmark. It was a sticky-sweet romance about a girl too much like herself. Ginger didn't believe in happy endings. Not really. She didn't enjoy sucking lollipops. She decided to leave the unfinished book on the seat of the chair, in case someone even more desperate than herself might happen by and decide to take it to bed. She glanced at the girl in the red dress across the aisle, then marched off in the opposite direction toward the sleepers.

I sensed a flurry of activity outside my roomette, the shuffling of heavy baggage down the narrow corridor, passengers issuing instructions to the porter, a conductor consulting with the occupants of a nearby compartment who'd boarded the train at the last station, the crisp snap of a metal punch perforating paper tickets, children's high-pitched voices. I'd left my black shoes for the attendant to shine as per custom, a crumpled dollar bill stuffed loosely into the toe.

Sleepless between the crisp, white bed linens of a stiff and too-narrow pull-down bunk, I now regretted having left my book in the club car. All at once, there came a sharp whistle accompanied by an abrupt jerk, as the train resumed its journey, unperceptively at first then gradually picking up speed. I was soon coaxed into slumber by the syncopated rhythm of the rails as our sleek streamliner knifed its way through the blackness, every few minutes a sharp flash of red and green from a semaphore signal or the soft glow of a country depot seeping into the compartment along the lower edge of the window shade.

In that drugged place between wakefulness and deep slumber, I sensed a stirring within the small compartment but felt myself paralyzed, unable to raise my limbs to move from the suspended mattress. My restive heart began to pound as if in a panic but soon calmed again as a pair of soft hands moved against my skin, warm and smooth, a woman's hands, hands that were foreign to any kind of labour, a stranger's hands, stroking in perfect rhythm with the constant vibration of the train dashing along the track.

I felt pairs of fingers caressing my nipples that stiffened like obedient soldiers snapping to attention while I lay helpless as if bewitched. A soft palm moved to my abdomen to rub against the mound of my vagina. Then a moistened finger eased the petals apart before inserting itself into the undefended opening, sliding in and out on my juices in a practiced motion that soon found my sweet spot. As one hand continued to pinch my erect nipple, punishing it, the other gently caressed my crotch as the chemical ebb and flow of pure desire robbed me of any and all sense of time or control. My lips uttered words that seemed meaningless, nothing more than a soft moaning, without protest, a plea for this lovely torture session to never stop. In rhythm with the motion of the train and unable to do otherwise, I abandoned myself to the rapid building of unadulterated pleasure and was soon rewarded with the most intense and all-consuming orgasm I'd ever experienced.

I awoke to the attendant boldly knocking on the compartment door, announcing that our next stop would be Chicago. I felt myself refreshed after a deep and satisfying slumber and ready for whatever was to come. The thought that my erstwhile employer might have been waiting in the corridor outside gave me pause. His own roomette was located at the opposite end of the sleeping car and we'd made an appointment for breakfast in the diner. I expected that in any case we would soon reunite on the platform. I wondered what kind of night he might have had, most likely having drunk himself into a stupor.

I lifted the seat to the small toilet, then dropped my panties to pee into the metal bowl. The fabric was wet, stained with the evidence from whatever had occurred in the night. Drying myself with a handful of shiny tissue, I noticed something lying on the floor. It was the book I'd left in the club car, the one entitled 'Love in the Wrong Places.'

THE PILLAR



The press tended to describe Gregory Hobbs in superlatives, at times positive, more often negative. In spite of his somewhat small stature, the man was nonetheless solidly-built and muscular for his size. He'd graduated among the Class of '21 at Harvard and was co-captain of the collegiate wrestling team. He was ambitious and, some might argue, even brilliant. And he was a bully.

Like some other short people in the 1940's – the Hitler-Mussolini tag team comes to mind – Hobbs tended to make up in attitude for what he naturally lacked in altitude, causing larger but less prepotent men to address him more respectfully than he deserved. Combining bravado with a rough, frontier-style ambition, the educated but penniless young Hobbs had courted and married Miss Irene O'Hara of Atlanta, one of the most desirable, if less attractive, girls of the 1925 social circuit and heiress to an immense personal fortune acquired over several centuries of slave trading then, after the Civil War, railroad construction with mining interests throughout the newly opened West. Irene was, in effect, a Carnegie on her mother's side, and the family's fawning association with the aged Andrew guaranteed them a solid, if somewhat dubious, place in American history.

Young Gregory had majored in American literature, a choice of studies that surprised almost everyone. He'd not married Irene for her money, is what he argued. He would make his mark in literature, if not as a writer then as a publisher. Hobbs considered himself an artiste, somewhat more adept at manipulation and capitalizing on opportunity than creativity. No matter. Managing wealth was a kind of art, he proclaimed. He was working on a book too, a non-fiction treatise on the laws of power. Expensive paintings, an extensive personal

library, and solid gold door handles to the couple's rambling suite of rooms in one of the finest residential complexes in Manhattan announced the Hobbs formula from every possible angle. More than this, his recent ventures into real estate had earned Hobbs attention as an up-and-coming property developer and venture capitalist. In many respects, he really was a genius. Having married into money didn't hurt his prospects in the least.

The project that earned Hobbs his laurels and placed his name almost daily in the New York Times and Daily News, involved the renovation of the New Amsterdam Hotel, a crumbling old 19th century edifice located in lower Manhattan and slated for the wrecking ball. On the promise of a twenty-million-dollar loan from Irene's family as seed money, he approached the hotel's cash-strapped and nearly bankrupt owners with the proposition of a lease on the property at a very attractive rent, fixed for the entire duration of the contract. It was an offer they could hardly refuse. The lease was conditional on the granting of a building permit and operating license by the City of New York.

At a specially convened New York City Council meeting, Hobbs made the compelling argument that the bankruptcy of the New Amsterdam meant the loss of at least seven hundred jobs, an especially onerous proposition given that the city and country were wallowing in the throes of the Great Depression. All that Hobbs asked was a tax vacation, a grace period of say, fifty years, in exchange for making the crumbling landmark a showpiece for the city's aggressive spirit and its emergence from the world economic crisis, not to mention the saving of seven hundred salaries, people who, in the end would pay income taxes into the system rather joining thousands of other Americans already on the dole. Mayor La Guardia reluctantly agreed. Later, when envious property developers and journalists asked him how it was that he'd gotten a fifty-year tax holiday, Hobbs cynically remarked that it was because he hadn't asked for a hundred years.

But Hobbs was not happy. Thieves had lately ransacked their luxurious apartment and crassly removed the gold taps from the bathroom sink then cracked open the wall safe and made off with Irene's jewelry and a small stash of banknotes. The premises were insured, of course; nonetheless, this assault on what he thought of as his castle impacted Hobbs' ego in a rather unpleasant way. Instead of calling in the police, Hobbs grabbed the telephone to ring up the uncle of a young 'noir' writer who had been seeking representation with his agency, an Italian boy. Less than a week later, a battered shoe box sealed with adhesive tape and wrapped round and round with electrical wire arrived mysteriously at his Manhattan office. The box contained Irene's jewelry and every cent taken from the safe. A brace of gold faucet handles rested in the bottom. Next day, The Times announced that a couple of badly mauled corpses had been recovered from the East River, their arms and legs bound with electrical wire, mouths sealed with adhesive tape.

Now Ginger Martin stood idly alongside the Twentieth Century Limited, the most famous train in the world. She felt like a naïve girl who'd been stood up on a daring date with the high school bad boy, abandoned in her newly polished black heels, her battered cardboard suitcase resting on the platform. She scanned the area with her mascaraed eyes for any evidence of Gregory Hobbs among the throng of emerging passengers. Railway agents and porters and baggage handlers scurried to and fro, driving heavily laden, tottering trollies before them like a line of miniature circus elephants in the general direction of the La Salle Street station. Apparently, the man had escaped from the other end of their sleeping car and was now lost somewhere in the burgeoning crowd.

Now she felt herself the object of a particularly nasty practical joke and dabbed with her white cotton handkerchief at the fresh tears forming in the corners of her eyes. Her newly applied mascara was going to run.

Then he appeared.

“Are you the young lady? Mister Hobbs’ secretary, I mean.”

The stranger was tall and dressed in a stylishly dark, pin-striped vested suit with wide lapels and a sleek blue silk tie. In the buttonhole of his left lapel there was a small red, white and blue stud, signaling that the fellow had served his country, a discharged veteran. He was young, Ginger’s age or perhaps a bit older, it was hard to tell with the noisy crowd rushing past them on the steamy platform amidst the pervasive odour of diesel oil and axle grease, cigarette smoke and women’s perfume.

A thick crop of straight, black pomaded hair flowed away from his broad forehead, a-la-Rudolph Valentino. Large dark eyes complimented a perfect aquiline nose over full lips and a prominent chin. She had to reach for her sunglasses, his teeth were so white. She thought of the late silent film star and smiled while her heart pounded hard and fast in her breast.

“Why yes, I am. I can’t seem to find him anywhere. Do you think you could help me?”

“Sure can. I’m Mario D’Angelo, one of his authors. I was on my way to the same convention when he called. He asked if I would look after his attractive secretary for a few days.”

“Well, sure. But, where is he? We were supposed to meet for breakfast in the dining car, but he never called at my compartment. I’m a bit in the dark at the moment. Like maybe I just stepped into somebody’s noir novel.”

“Hey, that’s good. I’m a noir writer myself by the way. Said he’d be pitching your new book to some hotshot publishers this week. Asked me to fill in for him.”

“Yes, but where is he now?”

“Oh yeah. Sorry. I always get distracted by beautiful women. He’s, well...he should be in Baltimore by this time.”

He was laying it on thick as Bolognese sauce and she knew it. This Mario character explained that Hobbs had been handed an urgent telegram when the train reached Albany and needed to change for Baltimore on short notice, and at this point she had no other option but to believe him. Mario D’Angelo, like the Brooklyn underworld boss, same surname. She envisioned Hobbs being thrown from the train and herself kidnapped, confined to the dingy cellar of a farmhouse somewhere in rural Illinois. How much ransom would a struggling war widow bring and did the Hobbs Literary Agency Incorporated even care?

I was stripped naked and securely tied to a rough wooden pillar in the middle of the damp cellar of a decaying farmhouse. The only light came from a single dim bulb suspended by a couple of frayed wires from the ceiling. There was a group of coarse men, around six or seven of them, hunched over a folding card table, engaged in a heated poker game. The room

was thick with cigar smoke and the heady aroma of man sweat and whiskey, a toxic cocktail that caused me to tremble in anticipation and dread of what was to come.

Now I knew what it was the men were getting so excited about. The winner of each poker hand would be allowed to take his pleasure with me as his gangster friends looked on.

The first-round winner revealed two aces and two eights that he slammed face-up on the table then shouted, "The Dead Man's Hand!" and immediately began to toss his clothing onto the floor. This so-called 'Dead Man' was anything but; he had the longest and thickest penis I'd ever seen on a human being and for the first time since the abduction I started to shiver in panic. They wouldn't have to kill me because I'd already be fucked to pieces by that time. I began to writhe and squirm against the ropes that held my wrists behind the pillar. I could feel a few wood splinters lodged in the tender flesh of my butt cheeks.

He shoved his rough, unwashed hand between my clenched thighs to try and pry them apart, but I held my knees together like a vise. When he reached for a pistol from the table and pressed its muzzle against my forehead, grabbing my long red hair and looping it around his other hand, I began to scream in pain and sheer terror. He friends cheered like onlookers at a prize fight when the pretender closes in for a knockout.

Suddenly there came the sound of a noisy car engine from the farmyard outside and for a brief moment the assailant loosened his grip on my hair.

"Porca misera!" he shouted aloud. "It's fuckin' Old Man D'Angelo himself."

The others hurriedly gathered up the playing cards from the table and stuffed their shirt tails back inside the tops of their trousers. The guy with the monster-sized dick quickly untied my hands from behind the pillar then reached into a corner for my clothes.

"Here. Get dressed. Fast. Or the boss's gonna fuckin' kill me!"

CLUB SANDWICH AND A COKE



They escaped the busy crowd milling about the platform of the LaSalle Street station. A male voice crackled over the public-address system, announcing the departure of yet another train to yet another destination. Chicago was a rail hub in the heart of mid-America, unlike New York that looked away from the rest of the country toward the broad Atlantic and Europe.

Mario D'Angelo carried Ginger Martin's tattered cardboard suitcase easily in one of his large hands. Ginger thought they looked good together and allowed her imagination to run ahead of her reason. It was the story of her life.

"Shall we drop in at the lunch counter for a sandwich and a Coke?"

"Sure," she replied. It was a pure knee-jerk response. If he'd asked her to do cartwheels, or lift her skirt then drop her panties and pee on his face, she would have gladly complied.

"I love these old railway stations. This one was built in the 1800's. Still busy as ever. Of course, with the war on and all, you can expect there'd be lots of traffic. The war's been great for the country, don't you think so?"

They hugged the lunch counter exchanging small talk. At his mention of the war, Ginger stopped sucking her straw and laid the half portion of a club sandwich they were sharing back onto the thick china plate.

"What's the matter? Did I say something wrong? I apologize if I did."

"No. Nothing's wrong."

She was thinking about poor Henry again, an unproductive habit that she was desperately trying to break but without much success. She was still Missus Henry Martin, that is, until the government got around to certifying that her late husband had been blown into dozens or hundreds or maybe even thousands of large and small fragments that once pieced together and identified might constitute a claim for war widow status and a government pension check each month.

It seemed they needed some kind of remains, like a certain percentage, just to confirm that the man had ever existed. Ginger herself was beginning to wonder if her marriage to Henry Martin had actually happened, or whether it was simply another imagined episode in the sordid dime novel of her life. Of course, there was the telegram, and she'd received a brief letter from someone in his platoon saying what a great fellow Henry had been and that the writer hoped they could meet sometime; her husband had talked so much about her. I'll bet he had, Ginger thought bitterly. The jerk probably wants to take his place between my legs. She had cried and tore the letter up into as many pieces as she imagined Henry might be in at that moment. What exactly did 'blown up' mean, anyway?

"Well, if I do say anything out of line, then you just tell me, okay? By the way, what's that book you're planning to pitch at the convention this week? Romance, I suppose. Women authors always write romance."

"Yeah, I guess you could call it that."

"What's it about? I'm keen on romance, you know. Never read the kind of stuff I write. Too dark and depressing. Too much like real life."

Ginger had never discussed her writing with anyone, unless the draft she'd given the Hobbs Agency counted as a discussion. Certainly, it was the catalyst that had catapulted her from a cheap rented room over a diner on 167th Street in the Bronx to a lunch counter on busy LaSalle Street in downtown Chicago. She was unsure as to what she would even be doing in this city now that Hobbs himself had disappeared. She hadn't any clue about where she would stay either, although he'd mentioned something about the Palmer House, wherever that was.

"It's about a girl."

"It's always about a girl. There isn't a novel that was ever written that isn't somehow about a girl. They say there are only so many basic character stereotypes imprinted in the human psyche. Call them archetypes, if you will. You know, the hero, the saint, the trickster, the seductress... Can you believe that?"

"Sure. But this one's kind of biographical. And then it isn't. It's a novel within a novel, you might say."

"Hey, now that's a new idea. The author is telling one story while the reader is reading another."

"Yes. That's the kind of story it is."

"I'd like to read it sometime. By the way, where are you staying?"

"I don't really know. Without Mister Hobbs, I've become a fish out of water. I used to proof-read for the agency on a part-time basis; that is, until he offered me the chance to act as

his traveling secretary. Now I'm marooned. Suppose I'll have to use the return portion of my ticket and hop back on the train to New York."

"Well, it's like I said before. Mister Hobbs asked me to look after his attractive secretary. My family has a home over in Oak Park. You're welcome to stay as my guest if you like. I'm driving downtown for the convention each day, so I'll be going your way. What do you say?"

"I guess that would be okay. I've come this far, so why not?" If he'd invited her to stay the week with him in Hell, to be roasted on a spit and basted with shit, she would have said the same. He was that handsome.

"Matter of fact, I don't even know your name yet."

Ginger paused. She studied the good-looking stranger more closely this time. He was a large man, well groomed, strong, the way she liked her men. He was probably a good dancer into the bargain, like her poor dead Henry. He'd be calling her Ginger, like Ginger Rogers, like Henry used to do whenever they made love. But she'd never revealed her name to any of the drunken servicemen she routinely picked out of taverns and diners and the USO and dragged up to her room for the night. Maybe she'd call herself Erma this time, Erma Smith. It was her maiden name and the one on her birth certificate. Why not tell the truth for once?

"My name's Ginger. Ginger Martin."

"Pleased to meet you Miss Ginger Martin."

"Likewise, Mister D'Angelo."

"Shall we grab a taxicab and ditch this city for a while? You're going to enjoy Oak Park. It's a suburb, open spaces and trees and lawns, lots of greenery. Frank Lloyd Wright's got a home there. Left his mark on the place."

She knew who Frank Lloyd Wright was. He was a world-famous architect who'd run off with a client's wife back in the early part of the century. The woman was later murdered along with a couple of her children in their communal love nest in Wisconsin. Ginger thought she might someday write a novel around the pair, kind of a fictionalized biography. She imagined herself in the role with the handsome Mario D'Angelo playing the notorious architect. She already had a title: 'What's Wrong is Wright.'

It was the first time I'd even thought of cheating on Edwin. He'd been a good husband and provider, a responsible and loving father to the children. Yet here we are living in this lovely house that Frank has designed and built for us in Oak Park. It doesn't feel like our home at all; no, it feels more like Frank's home. This house and my life, both have his name written large across its facade.

People will treat us with disgust and aversion if they knew. But I won't care. I can't hold back any longer. Edwin doesn't need me, at least not in the same way that I need Frank. Our lovemaking is seldom and perfunctory, like the tasteless meals we take together; overcooked meat and starchy potatoes without gravy. Oh, how I long for the gravy!

I know I should not have agreed to meet with him again, but how could I resist? Our last encounter is seared on my memory like a white-hot branding iron against my pale and

tender breast. He'd left his mark, like a true architect, with his gleaming white teeth, a deep red bruise at the nape of my neck that I had to artfully conceal with makeup and powder until it faded. Luckily, my husband and I don't sleep together anymore, or he would have found out, seen the other bite marks around my nipples and the scratches running down my back and across my buttocks. What passion!

Frank and Catherine are like Edwin and myself, long past the honeymoon and bored to distraction. It's more than just a physical attraction, of course. We share ideas, values, goals, hopes and dreams. More than soulmates, we are intellectual equals. Frank wants to start a kind of commune where harmony is the key to happiness. He says that love is not exclusive, that one is naturally capable of loving and giving in multiple directions at the same time and that monogamy stifles the human spirit. Marriage is a monstrous institution meant only to keep woman in her place, that is, locked inside a gloomy, cheerless home and away from the power bases. So, we must boldly reject all that came before.

I wonder how to break the news to Edwin. As the French say, "Les chaînes du mariage sont si lourdes qu'il faut être deux pour les porter. Quelquefois trois" – the chains of marriage are so heavy that it takes two and sometimes even three to carry them.' But Edwin doesn't speak French. Would he agree to a threesome? Of course, it's usually a man and two women, or at least that's what I'm told. I have no experience with such daring arrangements. I wouldn't even know how to broach the subject with him. And how will Catherine take the proposition? Does she share the same values as her husband? I wonder.

Awoke with nausea this morning. How well I know the signs! But whose child will it be this time? I will dress more seductively tonight, lavish my attention on Edwin then try to lure him into my bed. It's been a long time and lately he seems distracted. Perhaps he has a mistress and some secrets of his own.

How wicked we all are!

End of sample chapters.

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