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These Rooms

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## CHAPTER

### 1      Store Room

Preceding each hearing were many restless nights. The pillow seemed to harden as she lay awake wondering how it would all play out, whether she would be on top of the facts, whether she could remember the law. Then the day arrived, and she stuffed every drop of kindness down and away from consciousness.

The whirlpool accelerated. Everyone was suspected of villainy. Rulings went for her client, against. The tailspin gained velocity. By the hearing, her soul was routed and all she asked from any God she could imagine was for it to be over.

This trial was no different. As the decision was announced, she stared outside, wishing she was anywhere but where she was. Even though she'd won, there was skull crushing loss. Victory faded into the web of bravado in which she was a reluctant participant. Then, sprung from the lion's den, she slowly awakened from the nightmare. Her vision cleared; humanity returned.

"Do you enjoy being a lawyer?" the triumphant client had asked after the clerk issued the writ.

Explanations charged her mind. She smiled a half sob, half grin that burst forth whenever she thought about the whole mess and spat the stock answer, "I hate it."

Once outside, she was a tree relieved of snow, files and books weightless compared to the burden she had left behind the iron doors. From inside a courtroom, every day looked dismal. Today, the drizzle was real. Sidewalks swelled with people whose clothing, the finest money can buy, was corrugated from stress and dotted by raindrops. Commuters raced to vehicles. Were they, she wondered, unhappy about their work? Probably not. Most people were more than willing to sacrifice peace of mind for money. Once, she had been, too.

A storefront drew her in. "Are you singing the song you came to sing?" Someone had calligraphied the words on poster board and pasted it in the window. An intimidating question, she thought. Who posted it? She surveyed the unit through a patch where the paint had crumbled away. Completely vacant – the only hint of human spirit

reverberated in her. Her stomach snarled, yanking her homeward. The song she came to sing. She paddled toward the car. I could practice in the country and do Wills and Estates, she thought. No, work like that wouldn't earn enough to pay the food bill. How about finding some partners and working in a firm? Rain washed away the sidewalk's drab, revealing pebbles of every color. Forget it. Collaborating with lawyers on a daily basis would break the stress meter.

A misstep splashed water, sending a chill up her spine.

Had she imagined, or misread? After all, trials did to her brain what earthquakes do to mantle. She retraced. "Are you singing the song you came to sing?"

She wasn't, that was for sure. "But who is?"

The poster had no answer.

Hoping relaxation was the fuel she needed to take rush hour on, she let her cases down and stuck herself on top, sidesaddle. "Oh what a beautiful morning," she mused, "oh what a beautiful day." There. A song she knew.

"Is that what you mean?" she asked.

The statement stared; a bystander squeegeed moisture from her glasses while gaping at her.

"Do you know who put this sign here?"

Dew flew from her rain hat as the woman shook her head, hurrying off.

"I've got a beautiful feeling, everything's going my way" was the

next line, she was sure, but the phrase after that was somewhere other than in her memory. Oh well. The verse didn't apply. A law career and beauty weren't compatible.

"I should've taken the hint from law school," she said, mining her purse for keys. In nearly every one of the examples from the suitcase sized textbooks they'd analyzed, she'd predicted the decision incorrectly. But her ambition to make money had been so bloated she had ignored the obvious – that she didn't belong in the profession.

"Daddy slogged away at a job he hated for thirty-five years," she reminded herself, "and Mom did too except for when we were young and she stayed home to torment us." She righted herself, posture perfect. "Work is work is work is work."

"This is just an aftershock," she said, gathering her bags. Trials turned her upside down and inside out, and sleep deficit distorted reality.

A banker type cut ahead, his object, she wagered, the Mercedes™ down the block.

By tonight, she thought, this "song" thing will dissolve into my memory. Her stomach roared. Bags balanced, she sloshed toward the car.

Rockefeller unlocked the Mercedes™. Before he mounted his steed, he shook the droplets from his mane. Hands that shunned labor draped his jacket on the seat. As if to relieve an itch, he rocked his back against the leather. After that he craned at the mirror and preened.

Only then did his key make it to the ignition.

Slam. Her ribs crashed into a parking meter. Eyeglasses sailed to the ground. The man drove off, sleeves frosting the wheel, without notice.

What a relief to cry.

The trial, the sign, the battering, a decade of swimming against the tow – each upset drew tears. She donned her glasses, now aslant, and made it to the car. "Not enough singing, I guess." The door trapped her hem. Shit – grime tattoo on pink gabardine. She stifled the next sob and pulled out. Enough crying. Self-pity was as tiresome as its causes.

The Nora cabinet called a meeting.

"Your glasses weren't broken, so stop complaining."

"Yeah, but look at my dress."

"Take it to the cleaners."

"I hate being a lawyer."

"You won the case."

"Only because for once the other guy didn't lie."

Traffic slowed.

"You have a career, a family and a nice house."

"I'm not happy. I have a right to be happy, don't I?"

"Ninety-five percent of the people in the world are happy if they just get enough to eat. Why are you entitled to more? Anyway, you should spend more time with your kids. If your work isn't fulfilling,

stay home."

"I couldn't take care of kids full time. It would drive me crazy. And what kind of a role model would I be if I was depressed?"

"You are depressed."

"Not as depressed as I would be if I didn't have a career."

The wipers struggled across.

The song she came to sing might just be the ticket out of this jam, she thought, provided she could figure out what it was.

She switched to intermittent.

"If there's such a thing as a happy marriage, I want one."

"Is there such a thing as a happy marriage?"

Maybe the radio would quiet the colloquium.

"A man shot and killed his mother in what is called ..."

Next station.

"Hearings on a bill requiring school districts to provide free day care beginning at age two began today at the capitol. Senator Sewall, the Chair of the Education Committee, promised he would lead the fight against the bill."

Yet another case of a man making decisions on issues about which he is ignorant, thought Nora.

"... the legislative office building. Senator, why shouldn't day care be as available to families as schools?"

"Day care won't be needed when the moral fabric improves. Women wouldn't work if family was as valued as making a buck."

"Bullshit," said Nora.

"What do we do until then?"

"Use relatives as our parents and grandparents did. Day care is no substitute for family."

Nora flipped to music. "Morals shmorals. I have always wanted to work." She unfolded sunglasses. "Satisfying work is integral to happiness." There wasn't enough sun; she took them off. "And women are figuring it out in record numbers." Had fellow commuters noticed her talking to herself? She checked. The man in front was on the phone. In the next lane, a woman contorted to retrieve a scarf from the back seat and proceeded to clean the inside of her windshield with it, using spit for moisture.

"When men go on about what women want and why, I want to throw up. He has no insight into women like me but he's got the platform and the power. Well, Senator Stupid, I want a taste of all the world has to offer – all the fun, all the pain, and all the glory."

Wipers erased raindrops.

"I'm not going to end up like Agnes!" she announced. The obituary had been in today's paper.

"Agnes Ethel Simco, dead at 91, survived by her children, Virgil Simco of Danbury, Connecticut and Marcella Vigil of Minneapolis, Minnesota, was preceded in death by her husband, Samuel. Mrs. Simco was a homemaker."

The thought of being remembered for a life of cooking and



cleaning made her shiver. "Homemaker. What an achievement." A twirl of the switch launched the heat. "But who am I to talk?" In an instant, it was warm.

"On the other hand ..." It occurred to her that the pumps that persecuted her toes were extraneous. She kicked them off. "... my obit will say I practiced law all my life and hated it." Water soaked her heel; she jammed the shoes back on.

Now traffic was bumper to bumper. With a tissue, she blotted the goo on her dress. "No wonder I've got problems. A woman in a man's profession who doesn't have a male mentor gets no boosts up the career ladder. And now that I've got kids ..." There was no getting around it. The brass ring was more unreachable than ever. Prosperity, even after ten years of effort, was a long way off.

Shaken, she braced against the headrest. A look in the rear view mirror confirmed what she already knew — creases were making a permanent home at the top of her nose. As an experiment, she imagined the highway was gone. In the fantasy, she floated in a lagoon, its bottom as stunning as the sapphire sky.

The wrinkles vanished.

Cars strangled the freeway. Billboards offered distraction. Abraham Lincoln in a stocking hat proclaimed that skiing Sun Mountain was the essence of freedom. Joe Camel bulged into the sky. "Maybe cigarettes would reduce my stress," she thought.

The notion was another indication of post court insanity.

Another billboard showed a man at a desk, hands on his stomach, wishing for antacids. The meaning – work makes you ill – rang true. "I'm with you. For the sake of my obituary, I take cases to court, which is worse than walking barefoot on hot coals." The car ahead smacked his brakes; Nora hit hers. Screeching marched up the line. A basketball dribbled in her chest, slowing until she caught her breath. A near miss.

"Relax and enjoy easy listening music," the radio prodded.

She cringed. No use trying to relax. There was nothing to relax about.

Brake lights faded. The rest of the trip was a time warp, its end signaled by the clack of the garage door.

She strapped on her briefcase and swaggered to the trunk. Laden, she headed inside. Keys. Down went the bags. Pockets? Poking around turned up nothing, so she plundered the briefcase. Hmm. She surveyed the floor – nothing shiny there except oil. Around the car she stalked, cat pursuing mouse, until she found the keys hanging from the trunk. She watered in disbelief. Another aftershock.

The door slammed harder than she intended.

Still, today was still not as disgraceful as Monday.

She had answered the door to a police officer, who handed her a piece of paper. At the top it said, "LARCENY REPORT."

"Ma'am, we have a report of a theft."

"Oh?" There was no need to panic. She never stole anything.

"Someone with license plate number 4ZW-309, listed to this address, described as short, twenty years old with black, curly hair."

"Well, that doesn't sound like me ... I'm thirty-four!" He had surely noticed that she wasn't short.

"I don't know ma'am, but the party filled their tank at the Crimmon station and pulled away without paying."

"Excuse me a minute, officer, while I get my calendar." She shrank into the house and checked. Sure enough, the report was made the day of the Thebault partition hearing, another career low point. Opposing counsel demanded that the judge throw her in jail for asking a witness the name of his ex-lover. Turns out there was a law she'd never heard of making that a crime.

Most likely she did forget to pay.

She deliberated. What to tell the officer? "It was an awful hearing that day. Horrible. On my way home, I noticed the tank was empty. Usually I go to Quick Stop, but there was a line, so I crossed over to the Crimmon station. Still, I had to wait. The man in front of me was fueling a Jaguar, which made me think the usual stuff, you know, 'He's wealthy, but he's probably not happy.' Then the gong rang. 'I'm not happy and I'm not wealthy either.' I was shattered. By the time the Jag was done, I was in tears. You see, Officer, as miserable as practicing law is, it hasn't even made me rich.

"I put the nozzle into the tank hold and watched the numbers climb while I tried to slog through the haze of musings. Hearings

make me defenseless against my thoughts. For the hundredth time that day, I assessed the hornet's nest of my life. 'In my wildest dreams,' I told myself, 'I never thought I would live anything other than a distinguished life, earning admiration and acclaim from gracious colleagues. But instead of being honorable, the practice of law has forced me to rub shoulders with liars, sleazes and thieves.' It's a world of low-lives who will stoop to anything to make money. And that, Officer, is just the lawyers. The clients are another story. I'm still in shock, and I've been practicing for nine years."

Once he heard her tale of woe, surely he wouldn't book her.

"Officer," she would go on if he let her, "I asked myself there at the pump, 'How did this happen?' I was a star student, ethical as they come. Can you believe that in my work I've been threatened with jail?"

At that point the officer would shake his head sympathetically.

"The tank slurped. I rehung the handle. But to be honest, after that the picture gets fuzzy. I'm racking my brains trying to remember paying the attendant. I'm deeply sorry. Can I make restitution with interest?"

It was good, she thought. It was real. She grabbed her purse so she'd have it if he threw her in jail and trudged to the door. Sun outlined the frame that shifted patiently, clipboard propped against the bricks. His pen was poised to cram data into the allotted blanks.

The story slipped away.

"Officer, I'm a lawyer. I was so stressed that day. It was after a trial." She could only hope the admission would protect her from too great a penalty. It took effort to keep breathing. When words returned, they were limp, whispered. "I was trying to keep track of so many things ..."

"Ma'am, it happens all the time. Anyway, I know how terrible court can be."

She recognized on him the half sob/smile she knew so well. "Do you need to take me in?"

"No. Restitution is all I'm here for."

"Oh," she said, knees rattling as her lungs were reacquainted with air. "I'm really sorry."

His clipboard slipped, throwing grains of mortar onto the porch. "No problem."

"Law is turning me into a zombie."

He nodded.

She had a momentary urge to cry, to throw herself into his arms, like a child. But as soon as she wrote the check he was quickly off, twelve dollars and forty cents accounted for, to confront the next thief.

Yes, Monday had been a low. Other than bumping into the parking meter, today's worst casualties were figments.

"Brrr it's cold in here," she said, depositing the mail on her desk. She upped the thermostat. Pipes clattered; hot encountered

cold; joists creaked. She stowed her bags in the office where tonight she hoped to work. That is, if attending to family didn't sap all her energy.

Dinner was the first domestic hurdle, but the refrigerator yielded no ideas. She scoured the freezer, grimacing at the vapor. The late Agnes Simco, she imagined, was never caught with such a lack of groceries.

Tortillas, waffles and spinach aside, the entrees revealed themselves. She grabbed their tails and shucked them of plastic. This was a meal she would enjoy, though the memory of the girls' reaction to last trout dinner still rankled. The mother-child exchange, "What's for dinner?", "Trout" had resulted in an exodus followed by a telephone call from a neighbor asking Valerie and Shera to stay for spaghetti.

The doorbell portended delight. She switched the dome on, giving the hall its only illumination. "What a waste of space," she had remarked to Neil about the windowless vestibule on their first tour of the house. "In new houses the rooms open into each other so it seems brighter."

"There's no way I'm gonna buy the garbage they build these days. This house was built using top notch materials, its got space to spare, and we don't have to worry that the foundation will sink. I love it."

She was still waiting for him to deliver that measure of emotion

about her and the kids.

The door chugged open and before her were the love hubs. Valerie hugged her leg. "Mom, we made paper maché masks, and my class is going to the circus!"

Bigger than Valerie, though older only by minutes, Shera issued the first challenge. "Valerie got to make two masks. Mr. Nelson only did one with our class. And we're not going to the circus. We're going to the stupid old rock and mineral show." Her eyes bounced against her lashes. Nora released a permission slip from Shera's hand.

The desire to make it better was great, but the right words were elusive. When they were toddlers, it was easy. Their arrival propelled them into her arms, where they embossed her with kisses. Now, those moments were saved for private times, mostly before bedtime.

She commanded four eyes with a smile. "How about hanging up your jackets?"

Each miniature pulled out of her sleeves. Shera tugged on the knob. She, then Valerie, pitched a jacket onto the closet floor, already spread with sweaters, mittens and scarves. The hooks Nora had hung so little girls could reach them were, other than a jump rope, bare.

"Hang them, girls," she said gently.

The jackets found their places.

"I'm exhausted," Neil said. "Gonna take a nap." He lugged his legs up, one stair at a time.

"What about dinner?"

"Wake me up."

"Tomorrow's trash day," she called as he shut himself in. A vessel in her forehead throbbed. With children needing attention and dinner on the stove there was no time to think about their marriage. Anyway, it was probably her problem; she expected too much.

Valerie skipped into the kitchen.

"It's not fair," said Shera. "Why can't we go to the circus?" Only Mommy could undo the tangle.

Verbal mastery was lost somewhere in the courtroom. "I'm sorry, sweetie. You never know. You might change your mind once you've seen the show."

Valerie rounded the steps, hands hidden.

"Please don't eat upstairs," said Nora.

"Okay," she said, stuffing bread into her mouth.

Shera still awaited Mommy's magic words.

"Y'know, Shera, rocks and minerals are pretty interesting." It was all she could think of, and luckily it struck the right chord. Shera scooted upstairs behind her sister. Nora followed. "Other than the masks and circus, how was school?" she said, hovering between bedrooms.

"Fine," they said together.



Should she press for more information?

"They answer 'nothing' when I ask them 'What did you do in school today?'" she had complained to Valerie's teacher.

"We hear that all the time. Try asking 'What did you learn?'"

Okay, here goes. "What did you learn today?"

"Nothing."

Still unanimous.

"Mommy where's Chutes and Ladders?"

"And where's my Etch-a-Sketch?"

"I put all the games in the basement."

"Let's go." Bodies scampered downstairs.

"I love you." Her kisses missed their heads. She tiptoed after them as far as the basement steps, where she peered between railing and ceiling.

"What should we play?" Valerie said, surveying the stack.

"How about Bingo?" said Shera, pulling it out. The boxes above thumped down.

"It's my turn to go first."

"No it isn't."

"Yes it is. You always go first."

Nora bit her tongue. Invisibility was required if she was to watch the greatest show on earth – children at play. Already the scene was melting away her tension.

"Oh all right. Let's play on the couch."

"No, it's too bouncy. Let's play on the floor."

Moved beyond words by the innocence, a murmur of pleasure escaped.

"Mom, we're playing," they said together.

"Can't I watch?"

"No."

She was almost upstairs when Valerie yelled, "You can watch, Mom."

"That's okay, honey. I need to get dinner going."

"You sure?" Valerie was on the steps, arms tendering love.

"Positive." She took both hands in hers. Whatever overwhelmed her the day they were born returned. "I love you."

"Me too," Valerie said, taking off. Halfway down, she turned.

"Don't Moms get to play stuff?"

"Yes, of course. But we play big people games."

"Like what?" She stared up.

"Like ..." The storefront sign and part of a melody danced through her head. In the tune, she heard her children. "Like cooking."

"Yuck," said Valerie, disappearing into the basement.

CHAPTER

2 Sun Room

Nora unfolded, waiting for brain and eyes to awaken enough to comprehend the clock. She listened for the little ones, but heard nothing. The panic of a late start bobbed her into the air. Then she noticed Neil. It was Saturday.

Diving back into the marshmallow, she ordered her brain to halt so she could sleep. Midway to slumber, she remembered soccer. She managed prop herself and kick off the covers, but her limbs were as stuck as telephone poles, and she fell back.

"I want to stay in bed all day," she whispered.

"What's with you?" Neil mumbled.

"I'm exhausted."

"Why?"

"Because I practice law."

"I thought you were dumping your big case."

"The estate? I did."

"That was supposed to make you feel better. It should, anyway, 'cause giving cases away sure isn't gonna make us rich."

"Still my other cases are stressful and the greed ..."

"I've heard this before." He growled, squirming out of bed and heading to the bathroom. "Thanks for waking me up."

"Sorry." She scanned him, hoping for a connection.

He shut the door. "Which case were you in court on this week?" The medicine chest slammed; the shaver resounded off tiles.

"You know I can't tell you." He knew about lawyer-client privilege so why did he always ask?

"That estate case is gone forever, though?" he yelled.

"It's as gone as a case can be ..." Of course, John Felvet's quagmire would live on in memory forever. How to keep from rehashing it? She took refuge under the covers, but the rerun played.

Three years ago, on Memorial Day to be exact, she was putting the finishing touches on lunch, when the ring of the office line threatened to slash hope for a carefree afternoon. To answer or not to answer, she wondered, doing her best to get the sandwiches into

good enough shape to eat. A family expecting lunch was no kind of backdrop for a telephone conference.

Another ring.

"Don't get it," said Neil, buried in the newspaper.

His motive was obvious, she thought. The phone call could ruin his plan to be served. "I thought you wanted me to make more money." One more ring, she decided, was a signal from God that she should pick up. "You can finish the sandwiches yourself."

He rippled discontent.

Again it rang. Who was she kidding? There were bills to be paid, including the one for bus stop bench ads. That one lay on her desk. "Invoice past due - Pay or ads will be removed."

"I better get it. I need to get clients to pay for the ads to get clients." A quick dunk in water probably removed most of the tuna, or peanut butter, or whatever it was, the remainder of which she wiped on the dish towel. "Hello," she said, taking a clean dish towel and tossing the soiled one on the floor.

The sucking sound of hard won breaths filled an unusually long silence. "Nora Clifter?"

"Yes."

"I was referred to you by Sam Voiland. My sister Shelly died and the Will leaves me about a million dollars. Shelly's ex-husband's daughter says she's got a Will that leaves the estate to her."

"Do I know Mr. Voiland?"

"He works with me at Milton Construction."

"Milton?" Neither rang a bell. She scrambled the kitchen drawer in search of paper. "I'm sorry. I was in the middle of something." The laundry marker on the counter was for writing names in the kids' clothes, but it was all she could find. "May I get your name?"

"John Felvet."

"Was your sister, uh ..."

"Shelly."

"Was Shelly married when she died?"

"Sort of. Her husband, Harvey's his name, he's been in a nursing home for years. Harvey had a daughter, too, but she wasn't Shelly's."

"What did Shelly leave her husband?"

"Nothing. But Harvey doesn't need anything. He had a stroke, needs round the clock attention. His nursing home care was prepaid, anyway. Some deal through their church."

It was hard to write quickly with a laundry marker. "Can you hold?"

"Sure."

Damn. She forgot the kitchen phone didn't have a hold button. With a hand on the receiver, she pointed to her desk. "Neil, I need a pen." If she left the phone, no telling what family stuff Mr. Felvet would overhear. Better get back to him quick. "She can't disinherit her husband by law. So that will be a problem no matter whose Will is valid."

The children banged in. "We want to see Big Bird. He's at the mall. Serena's going and there are balloons ..."

"Shhh," she said, hand on the mouthpiece. "This is a new client. I'll be just a minute. When I'm done we can play with my jewelry."

They about-faced and stomped upstairs.

"I'm sorry Mr. Felvet. I've got a lot going on today."

Neil handed her a pen.

"Well I need to know how much ..." Mr. Felvet dropped out mid-sentence.

With the kids home, cutting this short was a necessity. "To represent you I'll need a \$2,000 retainer."

His only response was a wheeze.

The pen didn't work. "I'm sorry. Hold one more second."

"Okay."

"Neil please - a different pen - this one doesn't work."

He grimaced.

"Would you like an appointment, or do you prefer to think about it and call me?"

"I'll talk to my wife and get back to you."

That meant he wasn't interested. Whenever she gave new people a choice, they usually preferred to think about it and never did call. That was why she wasn't rich. The way to wealth was to scare people into hiring you. Still, she scrawled "\$2,000" and a few facts as a reminder, checking to make sure the marker wasn't bleeding through to

the counter.

"It's unheard of," said Neil. "Are you businesswoman or an ass  
kisser? You need to be velcro to cases like that, not ..."

"Teflon?"

He groaned.

As usual, Neil had nothing but contempt for her style. But this  
time, she was lucky. Felvet called again a few days later. "Ms.  
Clifter, John Felvet. I need you to start right away."

"On contesting your sister's other Will?"

"Yes."

"This is about which Will should be honored, the one you have or  
the one the daughter of her ex-husband has, right?"

"Good. Yes."

Even she was surprised at her recall. "And your sister ..."

"Shelly."

"Shelly had no children of her own, but the widower – the one in  
the nursing home ..."

"Harvey."

"He's entitled to his share."

"I know. You told me. But he doesn't need anything."

"Doesn't matter. He's entitled by law."

"Automatically?"

"He has to ask for it."

"He never will. He's very sick."



"Well actually he doesn't have to."

"His daughter can do it for him?"

"Bingo. Will contests get very complicated because everyone gets in the act."

He insisted on seeing her that week. In the meantime, the usual stuff chugged around her brain – what would John Felvet bring into her life, was he a murderer/angel/average guy, would he like her, would she like him, would he fire her before the case was over, would she quit over a fee dispute, would she win the case?

At the appointed time, he ducked in. The top third of his head, which dusted the ceiling, was eyebrows.

"Nice to meet you."

His hand sanded hers. "Same here."

"Have a seat, Mr. Felvet." She hoped it would bear his girth.

He set his attaché down. "Call me John."

"Okay. Well, I've heard the overview. Do you want to fill me in on the details?" This time she was ready with pad and pen. "And show me whatever paperwork you've got."

His index fingers, too broad to depress the numbers of the combination, deferred to his pinky. "Shelly was not a poor woman. A couple hundred thousand in the bank, I guess. Plus other stuff. I dunno. Over a million I think."

She started writing.

"But she did not trust attorneys, Ms. Clifter. She drew up her

Will with the Silver Will Kit." Knees as broad as dinner plates supported the valise, from which he pulled disks and a manual, each embossed with the same design and slogan, "Silver's International Will Kit. FILL IN THE BLANKS. It's easy and fast." He fluttered his pinky as a cool down after its workout.

Nora perused the manual. "This is what's going to make the probate lawyers of tomorrow rich."

"Maybe so. All I know is Shelly confused the paperwork. Or it was a situation where her printer broke while the Will was printing out." His eyes rolled out of sight. "I've got the repair bill for the printer somewhere here ..." The pupils returned. "Hmm, let me see." He shuffled the contents of the attaché until most of it was on the floor. "Oh, here's the Will stuff." A bundle landed on Nora's desk. "On top there is the one my sister's ex-stepdaughter's got." He folded his mass in half, drawing the records back into the case. "Under that is the one that leaves it all to me."

She was impressed. Compared to most clients, he was organized. And he seemed sincere. Maybe this relationship would endure. Either way, the complexity of the case meant that by the time they were done, there would be a sizeable fee.

"The top one – Peg's version – is supposedly Shelly's handwriting." Despite several attempts, he could not cross his legs – their bulk forced them to return to parallel. "And the one that leaves the estate to me ..." Shoes like rubber rafts dragged his

chair closer so he could take her on a tour of the papers. "Well, it's the printout I told you about. See here?"

"Yes."

"But not all the blanks're filled in." He handed it to her.

"And I think she might've got the he's and she's mixed up."

"Let me take a minute and look it over." Here was the document on which his case depended. She started at the top but moved no farther than the first sentence. Comprehension competed with the worry train, which was now out of the station. Bad cases were not worth having, she thought, so if Felvet was wrong about this Will, \$2,000 was going to end up in some other attorney's pocket. Futile battles, lost because she'd taken them on for the money, had taught her to be very selective. On the other hand, finding too much fault with cases would condemn her to poverty.

John tapped his feet; eyes wandered the walls.

She eluded doubt just long enough to digest the page. Hmm. Shelly had worked the Will over on different occasions, and carelessly each time, but it wasn't illegal on its face. Relief that the case was sound hit at the same time as a new line of worry. If she lost the case, she would have to live with the knowledge that the wrong person was victorious. Because she was selective, defeat was the more crushing.

"A good screening raises the stakes."

"Huh?"

"What's the name of the woman who came up with the holographic Will?" she said, reaching for a pen.

"Holographic?"

"Handwritten."

"Peg Livey."

"And do you know whose signature is on that version?"

"Let me show you." He removed his glasses; his eyebrows flopped forward. "Peg claims it's Shelly's of course."

"Is it?"

"No. Or I should say the handwriting might be but the signature isn't. Peg's been greedy all her life — hard up for money as long as I've known her. I've got a ton of dirt on this woman. The only work she's ever done is sell magazine subscriptions."

"There's no law against that."

"She's what's commonly referred to as sleazy."

"It isn't going to help your case to tear her down."

"Are you kidding?" He squinted into the window. "All her life Peg Livey has thought of no one but herself."

"Opposing parties never report each others' marvelous traits. There's too much at stake. So when judges hear comments like that, they hold it against the person saying it."

She imagined how a judge might look at the Will that John favored. Other than errors in gender, there was nothing that would automatically invalidate it. The self-executing provisions,

paragraphs required by state law, had been squeezed onto the last page in a different typeface, presumably from a typewriter after the printer broke, but that wouldn't be enough to completely discredit it.

"The judge has to listen. He's gotta know what's going on."  
Felvet's panic darkened the room. "Harvey's completely out of it and Mara took a lawyer to the nursing home last Monday and had him sign a bunch of stuff, including a new Will which I'll bet leaves everything to her greedy self."

"Who's Mara?"

"Harvey's daughter."

"Shelly's?"

"No. I told you. Shelly never had kids."

"Only her husbands did."

"Right."

"How do you know Harvey's got a new Will?"

"I spoke to the floor nurse the day after I called you. She told me she walked in on a bunch a people in Harvey's room with pens and official looking papers and she told them Harvey shouldn't be signing things. So Mara explained that Harvey was leaving his estate to her in the Will and she was his only heir so it was no big deal. Then someone who said he was Harvey's lawyer told the lady she had no right to keep Harvey from planning his estate. So she let him sign and they left."

"That sounds okay."

"It isn't. Not from my point of view. Harvey and I have always been very close. His old Will left everything to Shelly, but if Shelly died then to me. His daughter wasn't going to get anything because she never gave Harvey the time of day." His mouth twitched. "Until Shelly died, that is. Now I'm sure the new Will eliminates me."

"I understand, but I doubt if anything can be done about it. Unless you want to get Harvey a Conservator. Even then, the Court will probably appoint his daughter Conservator. And that doesn't invalidate documents signed before the appointment."

His forehead compressed like folded phone cord. "Let me get this straight. Harvey's going to inherit from Shelly even though he won't ever need the money. And to make it worse, when he dies, his estate won't go to me like it was supposed to." John forced the briefcase shut and tried to stand it on the file cabinet. Instead it dove to the floor, scattering the contents. "And as if that wasn't enough, we can get someone to take care of Harvey's dough, but it'll be Mara." He covered his face. "This was my one chance at ever having any money. I've been working hard all my life."

"What do you do?"

"Construction. I build greenhouses for nurseries. Or used to, anyway."

"That sounds lovely ... working around things that are growing." She saw herself in a glass room, bathed in light. Rays streamed in,

thawing her hands. Ah, to work where she was caressed by sunshine and chlorophyll.

"I used to travel all over the country doing nursery construction. But two years ago I hurt my back and all I can do now is shuffle papers. It stinks."

"Have you considered retraining?"

"I'm fifty-two, Miss Clifter. Too old to retrain."

"I feel that way too, sometimes." He was a kindred spirit.

"Call me Nora."

The coiled brow unwound. "Please, Nora, make them stop bringing Harvey things to sign."

"I'll try. Unfortunately, the damage has already been done.."

"And make them stop Peg from saying that hologram Will ..."

"Holographic."

"Whatever. Make them stop her from saying that holo-whatever is the real Will."

"We'll need a handwriting analyst."

"We will?"

"In a case like this, that's how the Court determines which Will is valid."

"Those handwriting people are scammers, aren't they?"

"Maybe so, but we're gonna hire one anyway. That's why notaries and witnesses are required by the Probate Code." Outside, leaves trembled, clouds glinted in the morning sun. Oh to be part of that

instead of this can of worms. "Of course, the Court could decide your Will, the computer one, is the valid one."

"Yes. Yes." In his excitement he rose; the chair relaxed.

"But you need to realize that this case might take months. And if the Court appoints a Conservator for Harvey, whomever is appointed will make Harvey's election."

"Huh?" His backside touched down; the chair bowed. "What election?"

"In probate law, elections guarantee that the spouse will get half of everything the decedent owned."

His eyes were ping pong balls.

"But we'll work hard and hope for the best." Her hands, inexplicably cold, burrowed into her pockets. "No matter what else happens, Shelly's mistrust of lawyers is going to cost her estate plenty."

"And if the court doesn't believe the printout I've got is the real Will, I've lost my investment in your fees?"

"Correct."

Standing, he scanned Nora's diplomas. Addressing his reflection in the frame of her law degree, he said, "I'm going to have to take that chance."

Felvet's mess wasn't something to rehash on a Saturday morning, she thought, cramming a second pillow under her head so she could see outside. Trees and tumbling squirrels were what she needed to be



thinking about. Nature occupied her, only to be driven from her brain once again by the Felvet puzzle.

Neil switched on the exhaust fan. She yelled over it. "I remember when I first entered my appearance in that damn estate. I should've known better. I had a sinking feeling the minute that guy left my office."

"You shouldn't have taken the case, then."

"Things went okay for awhile there. But, like everything else, it turned into a nightmare."

"Not everything is a nightmare."

"No, only everything in law."

"Not everything in law is that bad either."

"Everything since I started law school."

"If you never liked law, why'd you finish in law school? Why'd you get the degree?"

"I kept expecting it to get better."

His reply was drowned out by the flushing toilet.

CHAPTER

3      Lecture Hall

I never thought about my soul before coming here, but now I worry about it. I ache between my ears. Is my brain shriveling from malnourishment? Things will get better, I tell myself upon entering the place every morning. The next lecture will tie it all together. Once the lingo is familiar, and I'm accustomed to the concepts, I'll enjoy myself. But now I realize that every course, every seminar is as malignant as the last.

There is no hope.

Law school has been a three year century. Between the students,

ice kings and queens who admit to none of the misgivings I'm plagued with, the incomprehensible professors, and the irrelevant information, I am as lonely and bored as can be. Scores of smart people gather in these rooms, and yet nothing of benefit to society, nor even anything of interest, is going on. The tapestry of stimulation and enlightenment I wove during college is in shreds. Thanks to law, I have toppled into an abyss of indifference.

The teacher drones. A smattering of pens and three simultaneous yawns are the only indications of life. Only half of the seats are filled. That's for the best. Even with rampant cutting, there are a couple hundred bodies in this room. I search the walls and ceiling for something with which to entertain myself.

The professor pauses for water, which trickles down his chin.

Is it that I'm not as smart as I thought, or is law mostly hot air? The students' faces, spoiled and colorless, provide no clues. What are they thinking? In almost three years, I still don't know.

The good news is that I'm at the end of this nightmare. This is my last class before finals.

"The common law's approach to estates in real property," says the professor, "including life estates, tenancies and ..."

I flush, recalling my outburst in the cafeteria. "Don't you think case law is a hodgepodge? I said. I mean don't you think there is no rhyme or reason to a lot of decisions? It seems to me that judges decide how they do because they feel like it."

If there was truth serum in the salad dressing that day, it only affected me. The other kids, or whatever they are, acted like I was talking gibberish. Some of them have not acknowledged me since.

"And so ownership of Blackacre becomes a fee tail." Professor Blaner speeds up to cram as much vapidty as possible into the few remaining minutes.

I should be relieved that classes are over. Instead, I fear the ghosts of unpreparedness. Assuming I pass the bar exam, I have been taught nothing about how to advise people. How can I counsel people about the law when I don't understand it?

"The reversionary interest will lapse, and the grantor will have constructive consideration."

The rules of property law are imparted using words from a hundred years ago. I'm baffled. And if I ask a question, I won't get a lucid answer, which makes me wonder if the instructor understands it either. There are no points for class participation, but I raise my hand anyway. It'll break the monotony.

The robot points to me, ignorant of names.

"Professor Blaner, could you explain what you mean by constructive consideration? Consideration is the payment people get when they sell something. I grasp that. But constructive things, like constructive trusts, are so nebulous. Are they used when judges want to decide in a certain way, but they don't have the law or facts to back them up?"

Some students groan, some giggle.

"If you had been listening earlier in the year, you would already have an understanding of constructive consideration," says Blaner.

"It is simply consideration that is not actual, but which is construed. It may be money, but it may also be some in-kind or related remuneration."

Faces in front of me swivel back around to oblivion. This has happened many times. I ask; I get nowhere. My triumph lies in having provoked a moment of reaction to my truth.

Unlike college, nothing I say or do in this room will increase or decrease my grade. Only the final counts, but instead of a name, each of us is required to use our student number on the exam book. Thus one day of anonymous reckoning yields the stony grade, which in turn will get me a degree into which humanity has not been figured.

I daydream that I am outside, leading a band of students in a demonstration against the lies put forth by this institution. As a result of my efforts, a revolution occurs in American legal education. Law schools become academies characterized by energy and daring, where dynamic instructors infuse once indifferent students with the courage they need to fight hard for human rights and against suffering.

Blaner appears to be choking.

Daydream over.

Hand trembling, he sips water, executing a gulp without a dribble. I restrain my impulse to applaud. From his pants comes a

handkerchief so big, it hits his thighs as he blows his nose. I decide to seize this opportunity to agitate. The law school I dream about can only happen if I stop swallowing bullshit. I'm going to tell him again that I don't understand. My hand is about to go up, but something pops inside. I know what it is. It's a spring in my soul, breaking. My arm slackens and falls.

"And so the court found in Wilhelm Homeowners Association versus McGill that covenants indeed run with the land, and purchasers for value from the original owner must abide by documents of record according to the records of the County Clerk and Recorder in the county where the land ..."

Passivity exhausts me. Sleep is the only way out of torpor. My eyelids pour together. The rest of the class is lost.

I awaken at the bell. Students bustle past, but there are no farewells. In law school, glances replace greetings. Or is it just that most law aspirants are impolite?

I walk the halls for nearly the last time, relishing the knowledge that after finals, I will never again be darkened by the doorsteps of this place. The ache in my soul ejects me from the building and into the bus shelter, which sparkles under afternoon sun. Reading the revised schedule, already faded by weather, is a challenge. Extrapolating, I figure out that I just missed a bus, and it will be half an hour until the next one. My life is as beyond my control as the bus' rounds. The ambition to practice law, now odious,

propels me without my approval. When or how I will ever get into the driver's seat?

Textbooks engulf me in tedium. When the bus arrives, I snatch a seat. An ad on the overhead asks that I report all child abuse to the County Department of Social Services. Another announces a new number for the food stamp hotline. Directly across is a poster that proclaims, "The Supreme Court has ruled that abortions are legal in the United States of America, and your nearest Family Destiny clinic can help. Consult the business pages of your phone book." Not long ago I was dogged by fear that in my hour of need, I wouldn't be able to find someone to scour my uterus, returning me to girlhood. What a difference Roe vs. Wade has made in my life. Law does do good, I remind myself. My ingratitude about a law career is shameful. Surely the power and respect that being a lawyer will bring will make the struggle worthwhile.

I resume studying.

At my stop, I divert my eyes from the candy shop, ice cream store and bakery. The number of days that have passed since I last ate sugar, a statistic I once tallied like a marathoner counts miles, escapes me. My six year battle with food addiction is drawing to a close.

The mailbox is my last detour before home sweet home. In the stack is a letter exhorting me to register for a bar review class. I read it in the elevator.

"You have a statistically better chance of passing the bar exam if you take a class to study for it. Enclosed is the list from which you may choose the class that best fits you."

Dread follows me into my apartment. I ponder the possibility of foregoing the seven day test and pursuing a completely different career, but I can't. If I jump ship now, I won't get the proof positive of my genius that a law license can give me.

I call ten of the seventeen bar review classes for prices. Most cost in the thousands. LBP-VEI (Lawyer's Bar Proficiency - Ventures in Education, Incorporated), which is held in the old Star Theater building instead of in a hotel like the more pricey bar review courses, costs \$295.00. I push my pen around the name. Fancy classrooms mean nothing to me — I just want to pass.

I put the list on a hill of papers from which my mother's handwriting, which resembles a seismographic record, peeks out. "Here's the picture I told you about," she says in the letter. "It proves you were a lot happier kid than you claim you were." The photo is of me standing next to my fourth grade teacher, beaming. "Everyone always said your joy could light the world," her note concludes.

I let the sheaf fall into the trash. We both know the smile was a fake. Underneath my facade was a rock pile of terror and confusion brought on by my mother's rage.

When things were going great, meaning I was recognized by all as a top student, I grinned ear to ear. But when I moved on to college,



where academic perfection was no longer possible, feelings of worthlessness nearly did me in.

The phone rings.

"Hello."

"Hello."

Speak of the devil.

"Nora, this is your mother. Remember me?"

The wheedle burns. My brain commands me to remain collected, but this creature makes relaxation infeasible. I pray for the strength to handle what she has to say. "Hi."

"How come you never call me? You don't treat me like a daughter should treat her mother."

I hang on to composure.

"I told you I was going to talk to Virginia about her nephew, didn't I?" said Nancy.

"Yes."

"Well I did. He's a city planner. Did I tell you that?"

"No."

"He's got some kind of special degree and Virginia says he'll make lots of money some day."

"That's good." City planning doesn't strike me as a cash cow but what do I know?

"Anyway he's interested in meeting you. Remember I told you?"

"I do remember." Everything is okay so far, especially since I

haven't had to say the word "Mom."

"Will you go out with him?"

"I told you. He needs to call me."

"But will you say yes?"

"He can't take a risk and ask me himself?"

"Virginia wants to know."

"Then tell her to have him call me." I doodle on the bar review schedule.

"Now Nora, don't get like this. We're doing you a favor."

"I appreciate it. But if the guy doesn't know how to use the phone ..."

"It's not the phone. It's calling a strange girl he's never met."

"He should be interested enough in the date to call." The list is now a snarl of curlicues. I lay down the pen; my picture flips to the floor.

"He will call. He just wants to know whether you'll go out with him."

"I imagine I will."

"You imagine?"

"Mom, I've gotta go. I've got massive amounts of studying to do."

"Does that mean you don't have time to date?"

"Tell him to call, Mom."

The conversation ends without words I long to hear like "How's law school, honey?" or, "How are you, Nora?" or, "Remember when you're out there in the world that I love you." or, "Law school is hard, but you can do it. I have confidence in you."

I scoop up the picture. The schoolgirl's agony is apparent, if only to me. "I'm dying from never having been nurtured by my Mommy," she says, hiding grief with a smile. I tape the photo onto the wall to remind me how not to deal with pain.

When the phone rings again, I am buried in books.

"Nora, my name is Larry. Your mother knows my Aunt Virginia."

"Yes, she said you'd call."

"I was wondering if you were busy tonight."

I don't want to seem too eager, but if I hesitate he might change his mind. "No." Does he sense how nervous I am?

"Can I pick you up from your place? I'm going to be in the area anyway."

How will I ever get a husband if every man makes me quiver? "Do you know where I live?"

"Virginia gave me the address. She got it from your mother."

"Oh."

"I thought we could go out to eat."

I hesitate because he's a stranger, but I have to divulge. "I have a lot of food allergies." That's how I explain the addiction. People respect allergies but they never believe you can't go near

certain restaurants because you're a junkie. "And I'm allergic to cigarette smoke, too." That part is absolutely true. Bad air makes me sick.

No response.

I figure I've lost him already. "Sorry." I don't mean it.

"Oh. Okay," he says. "Are you allergic to movies?"

The question is funny; his sneer isn't. "No."

"How about the new Woody Allen one?"

"That would be great."

"It's playing at the Cinelux on ninth. That's not too far from you. The name escapes me right now — let me think."

"Does it start with the word 'suddenly' or 'sometimes' or a compound 's' word like that?"

"No, you're thinking of the new one from that other director whose name I can't think of. Hmm. Too much studying's frying my brain."

"You're studying?"

"Yeah."

"What?"

"Law."

My tremors cease. I should tell him to find himself another date, but I'm too desperate. "My mother said you were a city planner."

"Special program. Dual major. Masters in Urban Planning and

J.D. in Law." He snorts. "I got the Masters."

"I'm having a hard enough time with just law."

"Come on, law is easy."

"Law school is like the Emperor's New Clothes. I don't get why no one ever admits it's a sham." My mother would warn me against such a statement. Men, she always said, don't like smart aleck women.

"What?" he shrieks.

She's right. "Just kidding," I lie.

In my brain, the tape of my mother plays, "No man will ever like you."

I'm moving away from terror toward disgust. "What law school do you go to?" I ask, pouring a glass of water.

"Roosevelt."

"Roosevelt's easy?"

"Put it this way, hard or easy, it's what I need to do to get where I'm going."

"Well, that's true ..." Common ground at last.

"Well, dinner's not gonna work, so I'll pick you up at seven-thirty. And after the movie, I'll take you right home because I'm sure you don't want to stay out too late."

His words get stuck in a gulp. It's possible that he's more pleasant in person than he is on the phone, but not likely. Kind law students are rare. Anyway I already know he's a phony. Law school's easy, my foot. But I'll give him a chance. The possibility of love

is more important than a first impression.

I take to the tub, losing my feet under the tap. In this ocean I find my true size. Just two years ago, imprisoned by fixation on food and dieting, I was thin and saw myself as heavy. Now I'm fat, but I think I'm beautiful. At last I know weight is not everything.

"If he likes me that's his problem. If he doesn't, it's his loss," I say, repeating what I've heard at Eating Addicts Anonymous meetings. "Love and marriage may never happen to me. If they do, I will be experiencing as close a thing to a miracle as I've ever known."

What wisdom I harvest at EAA, and all without obligation, except for what I donate when they pass a collection basket.

The only thing EAA gives me no insight about is law school.

I wipe beads from the mirror. My curves are more pleasing naked than in clothes. Once tiny breasts have plumped to womanly proportions. But better still is that under the mass of curls is a brain that is more balanced than ever. Sanity was the pot of gold at the end of a path along which I devoured every doughnut and hot fudge sundae my subconscious demanded. At last, eating is no longer a punishment or a reward, meals not appetizers for an endless entree of junk. My body is distorted, but the desire for health dominates the craving for junk food.

I dress; the lobby bell rings. "Who is it?"

"Larry."

A nudge on the "admit" button and he's in. "You're not perfect, but you're not garbage," I say, mimicking someone at a meeting and kissing my hand. I notice my apartment is piled high with books and papers. Panic. I open the refrigerator, figuring that whatever judgment he makes about my housekeeping won't be as crucial as what he'll think if I can't feed him. Uh-oh. Nuts and dried fruit punctuate an otherwise vacant space. A knock moots the issue. I open. Larry's hair matches his eyes, both black. Broad shoulders tower over a torso and thighs that are a little fat, like mine. Wow.

"C'mon in."

He orients himself. "Nice."

"Books everywhere."

"Same at my place."

Maybe we'll have fun after all. "Do you like law school?"

"Yeah, do you?"

"It's okay."

He wanders to the window.

While he enjoys the milky way, the promise of love weakens my knees. I want his stomach on mine. In my fantasy my hands explore his chest and thighs. "Are you hungry?"

"No. I just ate."

Good. "I feel so funny about these books everywhere. I meant to clean up but ..."

"Huh?" He turns from the view. "Are you ready to go?"

"Sure."

The evening is laden with promise. I make it to the car without wobbling.

He passes me by, gets in and lunges to raise the passenger lock.

A chorus of disappointment chants that if I were thin, he would have opened the door for me, but I am determined to stay upbeat. Maybe he's in a rush. Anyway, I don't need a man to open the door, do I?

"Today was my last day of classes," I say.

"Me too."

"I'm taking LBP-VEI."

He says nothing.

I rescue us from silence. "Oh, I forgot. You're not taking the bar exam till next year."

His eyes launch darts. I focus on the scenes outside. He's not so great, I assure myself. His chin is too long, and his earlobe is hairy. Still, I try to connect. Palm on his wrist, I say, "I didn't mean to say the wrong thing."

His fingers drum the shift.

I want his hands under my blouse.

"Uh-huh."

It sounds like he's forgiven me. "What kind of car is this?"

"You've got to be kidding," he says, biting the air.

"I'm really bad with cars. They all look alike to me."



"It's a Toyota Celica™. One of the best foreign cars made.  
Don't tell me you don't drive."

"I drive but I don't own a car."

"Why not?"

"Too poor. Just to park it would be a fortune."

"I'll never be too poor to have a car."

With him, it seems like every statement is a contest. I'm glad  
I'm graduating first.

We sputter onto a dark street and he steers to the edge, grunting  
like a caveman.

"What's the matter?"

"We're out of gas."

"What do we do?"

He nods toward the lights we passed earlier. "Walk to get some."  
He snaps a button; lights flash. "We're not going to get to a movie  
though."

My heart sinks. "Can we go in the middle and watch the beginning  
of the next showing?"

"I hate doing that."

The night is warm enough for a hike, but his disinterest gives me  
chills. "I hate law school. I feel stupid there and the whole  
institution is devoid of humanity." Desperation to reach him lets out  
what I should censor.

"Why don't you leave?"

"I need to finish what I started." My foot makes contact with an apple, which rolls, striping the pavement with muck. "But what do you think about the humanity part?"

"I'm gonna work as a city manager or something. There're lots of humans in cities."

Was he making fun or sympathizing? "I wonder if there are any women city managers."

"Probably very few."

"Why?"

"Women aren't qualified."

"I doubt that."

"Of course. You're a woman."

The gas station lights imprint on the underside of my eyelids. I can see that this guy isn't worth my time, but I try one more time.

"Do you date many law students?"

"I don't count them."

"Besides city planning, what do you want in life?"

"To have enough money to live well."

"How about being happy?"

"With enough money, I'll be happy."

"Money doesn't make people happy." In truth, I'm not sure of that.

"People who have money look pretty happy to me."

"Not to me they don't." We reach the oasis.

He flings his deposit at the clerk and takes a gallon can.

"Can I help?" Maybe if I was more useful he'd like me.

"No." Gas hisses into the container.

"Watch it." Too late. The excess drips to the ground, sowing a powerful scent. He jerks the jug up the road. Though I feel nothing for him, rejection tears at my self-esteem. Am I doomed to live by myself?

"No man will ever like you," says my mother, ever-present in my brain. "You talk too much. You're not feminine."

The dome of stars reminds me that I'm part of something bigger than this event. On the way home, I roll down the window, enjoying the breeze. Show me how to not hate myself because this man isn't interested, I ask my Higher Power.

"Close the window."

"Please close the window," I say, feigning self-assurance. Glass splits me from the night. He's a nothing, doesn't even share my values, I argue. He thinks law is a good field and I know it's warped. My defenses gain strength until my mother interrupts.

"You're ugly," she says. "You're stupid. You'll never be married. No one will ever like you ..."

We arrive. Is there any hope that he'll see his error of judgment?

"Good night." He's wearing a smile for the first time this evening.

"Good night."

Off he drives, taking my dream of intimacy with him. Someday he may realize what a great person I am.

But I don't like him, so it won't matter.

"You don't deserve a man you like," says mother.

Sleep is my haven from self-criticism. I take refuge under the covers, waiting for the firing squad to run out of ammunition. Eventually, peace replaces negativity. What an awful date, and what an unpleasant man. Suddenly the whole thing seems funny. Laughter chases away hurt, and I sleep.