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DON'T PACK ME A SANDWICH

A novel by

Donna Steinberg

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"Mama may have, and Papa may have ... but  
God bless the child that's got its own...."

- Billie Holliday  
and Arthur Herzog, Jr.

\* PART I: OYSTER BED

## CHAPTER 1

I just love getting into hot water.

Few things in life give me greater pleasure than getting into hot water up to my neck and just lying here until I'm drained; until I've steamed away every impulse to move or think. In this house a hot bath is the only chance I have to get away for awhile. It's my only chance to be alone. Or at least it WAS until Ma picked the lock with a knitting needle and came barging into the bathroom — screeching my name at the top of her chalk-on-the-blackboard voice:

"Shayna Pearl ... ShaynaPEARL! Wake up, SHAYNA PEARL!"

Wake up, she said? Wake up? Hell, the way she was carrying on she could have brought half the dead in Montreal back to life!

"What? WHAT!" I cried, springing to my feet and splashing water from here to kingdom come. "What happened?"

"Honestly," she clucked her tongue at me in disgust, "if I'd let you, you'd lie in that GodFORSAKEN tub and daydream your entire life away!"

"For crying out loud, Ma!" I wanted to strangle her. "Is that why you came storming in here like your girdle was on fire? To lecture me on the evils of daydreaming?"

"Never mind your shenanigans, Shayna Pearl! Stanley's on the phone. He says it's important. Something about tonight being the first night of the rest of your life if he could help it?"

"Well, what do you know?" I had to laugh. "I've been dating the guy for months now and all along I thought he was a lawyer. I had no idea he was a closet fortune-teller!"

"Are you going to stand there all night like Lady Godiva or are you going to find out what this is all about?"

"Awwww, Maaaa ...", I stared longingly at the steaming tubful of Jean Naté bubble bath, "I'm not in the mood for Stanley tonight." Lately, it seems, I haven't been in the mood for Stanley any night. Or day for that matter. He gets on my nerves to be perfectly blunt. All he has to do is open his mouth to say 'hello' and every hair on my body bristles. But go and tell THAT to Ma! She thinks Stanley Charles Drabkin, B. Comm. (Bachelor of Commerce), B.C.L. (Bachelor of Common Law), C.M. (Certified Mensch), is the greatest thing since Grease Relief.

"What do you mean, you're not in the mood for him?" She almost choked. "You think a boy like that grows on trees?"

"I've got my reasons, Ma. Can't you just tell him I'm not here or something?"

"I'll do nothing of the kind!" She grabbed the 'It's Better In The Bahamas' bath towel from the rack and wrapped it around me. "Oh, my baby!" All of a sudden she threw her arms around me and hugged me to pieces. "I think this is IT! The Night of Nights! I think Stanley is going to pop THE ques ..."

"Ma! You're squishing my boobs!" I cried, wriggling out of her grasp. "And I'm not your little baby anymore, for crying out loud. I'm twenty-three years old!"

"Boobs, shmooobs," she grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me so hard my teeth rattled, "didn't you hear me? I said Stanley's going to

pop THE question!"

"No!" Suddenly it all began to sink in. "No ..."

"Yes!" she cried ecstatically. "Yes!"

"He's not going to propose tonight?" I don't know why the whole thing came as such a shock. I mean, Stanley's been dropping enough hints lately. Deep inside, I knew it was only a matter of time before it came to this. "Not tonight?"

"Can you think of any OTHER reason why tonight would be the first night of the rest of your life?"

"Propose as in m-m-marriage?"

"I'm willing to bet my life on it."

"M-m-marriage as in 'Till Death Us Do Part'?"

"Knock wood," she banged on the cupboard door.

"In that case, DON'T tell him I'm not here."

"I knew you'd come around once I mentioned the magic word."

"JUST TELL HIM I'M DEAD!"

"Shayna Pearl, GodFORBID! Bite your tongue!"

We both bit our tongues.

"If you don't mind," I told her, "I want to be alone now."

"I want to be alone ... I want to be alone," she mimicked me.

"What is it with you and this Greta Garbo routine lately? If you're not shut up in your room with those ridiculous stereo headphones blasting that awful rock music into your ears, you're lying there in that GodFORSAKEN tub ... shvitzing yourself silly!" She gave me a worried glance. "Even your father who never notices anything, GodBLESS him, has noticed that you've been acting peculiar these days. What's wrong with you anyway?"



"What's wrong?" I didn't know whether to laugh or cry or what. There were so many things I'd been dying to tell her for so long. Things I'd kept bottled up inside me because I knew she didn't want to hear them. Because I knew she would never understand. She and my father both. "You wanna know what's wrong?"

"For crying out loud!" She threw her hands up to God. "Why do you always have to answer my questions with more questions like some old Jewish lady? Can't you just tell me what's wrong? You're the one with the college degree in Communications — so communicate!" She gave me another worried glance. "It's not something terribly wrong, is it?"

"The pits," I said. At least I thought so.

"Oh, pooh," she sneered, "what could possibly be so wrong with a Shayna Pearl who was BORN with the world as her oyster? Are you down because your best friend (Jo Ann Pecker's husband bought her that snappy new Firebird while you have to drive around in that crummy old Camaro your father bought for you on your twenty-first birthday? Or is it because you can't decide whether to spend your next vacation at our condo in Florida or at the Club Med in Cancun? The pits indeed! Everybody should have your problems!"

So much for keeping things bottled up inside. I popped my cork. "You wanna know what's wrong?" I cried. "I'll tell you what's wrong. My LIFE is WRONG! All wrong ..."

She looked at me like I was nuts or something. "What do you mean your life is all wrong? Couldn't you be a little more specific? Is it that time of the month again or what?"

I stared at her in disbelief. I could be having a complete nervous breakdown before her very eyes and she'd think it was THAT time

of the month again. She and my father-the-gynecologist both.

"Well, is it? Do you want me to bring you some Midol? Pamprin? Darvon Compound? 222s?"

"PAMPRIN SHMAMPRIN!" I blurted. "Can I help it if I want more out of life than worrying about whether or not Stanley Charles Drabkin has Ring Around The Collar, Socks That Don't Cling or Underwear That's Slowly Going Grey? Or if he prefers Stove Top Stuffing to potatoes? Or if I'm buying the right toilet paper for him to wipe his ass with? Because quite frankly, m'dear ... I DON'T GIVE A SHIT!"

"Shayna Pearl!" Her mouth dropped open so wide you could see her tonsils. "Either you're in shock or you've been watching too many television commercials lately. You don't know what you're saying!"

That did it. I had just about all I could take. I sat down on the edge of the tub and burst into tears. "Oh, Ma, I don't wanna get married!" I wailed. "Not to Stanley ... not to anybody! There's so many things I want to do fi-r-irst ..."

"I don't understand." She sat down beside me and cradled me in her arms. "You've been seeing Stanley for months now. And he's so crazy about you. He'd give you the moon if you'd ask for it." She let out a heavy sigh. "I thought for sure he was The One."

"So did I," I sobbed. "All my friends were getting married and I felt so left out ... like a freak or something ... and he was just there ... and you were so crazy about him ... EVERYbody was so crazy about him ... and I thought I could, you know, grow to love him with time ... and I tried ... GodKNOWS I tried ... but I didn't ... I couldn't ... I still can't ... and I don't think I'll EVER!"

All of a sudden she started to laugh.

"What's so bloody funny?" I cried. I was incensed. "My whole life is falling apart and you're laughing?"

"Oh, Shayna Pearl, sweetheart," she hugged me, "I know exactly what's bothering you!"

"You do?" My eyes almost popped right out of my head. "But ..."

"It's alright, you don't have to explain. I understand."

"Oh, Ma!" I threw my arms around her. "Thank you!"

"Yes, it's the Bridal Jitters is what it is. We all get them. Even I got them before I married your father."

The Bridal Jitters? Could you believe that woman? I knew all that understanding was too good to be true. "You think that's what's bothering me?" I jerked away from her just as surely as if she had slapped me. "The Bridal Jitters?"

"Yes, that's exactly it," she smiled reassuringly. "It's only natural to be nervous about taking a big step like marriage. Nothing a little Valium won't cure though. I'll go get the bottle ..."

"Valium?" I couldn't believe my ears. "I don't need Valium!"

"In fact, I think I'll take a couple myself," she said, massaging her temples, "I'm a wreck!"

"You're a wreck? What about me?"

"In that case, maybe I should bring you something stronger?"

If I didn't strangle her right then and there, I probably never will. "You could bring me heroin, Mother," I told her as I got back into the tub and submerged myself up to my chin, "but I won't change my mind. So you can just go back to the phone and tell Stanley to find himself another wife!"

"Oh, my God, STANLEY!" She smacked herself on the head. "I left

him dangling on the phone. ALL this time?!"

"And you tell me I've been treating him like dirt lately?"

"Oh, dear, you got me so farchadat I don't know if I'm coming or going anymore!"

"Tell me about it."

"HANG ON, STANLEY DEAR!" she yelled as she tore out the bathroom door. "I'M COMINGGGGGG!!!"

Damn that woman anyway! She drives me insane. The only way she's ever going to take me seriously is if I go out and commit some sort of heinous atrocity. Something twenty-three-year-old Jewish Princesses from pish-posh suburban Hampstead just don't do. Like getting arrested for prostitution or landing a job as a nude dancer at the Sextuple Club or something. Yeah, maybe that's what I have to do to get the message across. Become a nude dancer at the Sextuple. And then, when she drives down St. Catherine Street and sees my name up in lights:

APPEARING NIGHTLY ... SHAYNA PEARL FINE, EXOTIC NUDE  
DANCER ... FEATURING THE BIGGEST PEARLS THIS SIDE OF  
THE ATLANTIC

she's bound to realize that marriage to Stanley is the furthest thing from my mind these days. That is if she doesn't die of the shock first.

Oh, Christ, what am I saying? I don't want her to die! She's my mother and I love her and I don't want her to actually die. It's just that sometimes ... well, sometimes I hate her enough to KILL her! Oh, shit, will you just listen to yourself, Shay? You're not making any sense. I mean, how can you hate a woman who endured thirty-two hours, seven minutes and fifty-eight seconds of excruciating labour just to give birth to you (and the hemorrhoids afterwards, don't ask! It was months before she could sit down without feeling like she had a bag of

golf balls under her). And how can you hate a woman who, for the past twenty-three years, has selflessly devoted her every waking hour — plus many a sleepless night — to your care and feeding (and if you think it's all been a breeze, well, you only have to count the gray hairs, wrinkles and assorted worry lines you alone have contributed!). And how can you hate a woman who would trade places with you in a minute should you ever, GodFORBID, contract a debilitating or fatal disease (any and all types of venereal disease being the exceptions, of course) so that you might be spared? How can anyone POSSIBLY hate such a woman? Such a regular Joan of Arc?

That's my problem, you know. I don't hate her enough. Life would be so much easier if I despised her. Then I wouldn't have to worry about disappointing her when I tell her that my future plans include, amongst other things, being a career woman and moving into my own place in downtown Montreal — or maybe even Los Angeles. And she will be disappointed. Not to mention furious, outraged, disgusted and downright pissed off. I guess you can even say she's laid down the law as far as I'm concerned: no daughter of Sylvia and Arnie Fine, M.D., Ob. Gyn., leaves home without making a pit-stop at the local synagogue to exchange vows (of course Dad agrees with her — he ALWAYS agrees with her for the sake of keeping the peace around here). My wedding day is supposed to be the Greatest Show on Earth and then some. Divorce statistics and Woman's Liberation aside, Ma and Dad live for the day that they can marry off their precious, virginal Shayna Pearl (so-named, I am told often enough, because I was born with the world as my oyster) to a Nice Jewish Boy. They long to see me dress up all in white and walk down THE Aisle. They just can't wait to hear THE Crunch of glass

under my groom-to-be's foot.

I guess that's why they've been so anxious for me to marry Stanley ever since that night, some six or seven months ago, when he came to the house to pick me up for a blind date. The very moment Ma laid eyes on his feet (he was wearing, amongst other things, a very impressive pair of Gucci loafers) she decided (and Dad agreed, as usual) that Stanley was The One. The One whose feet could handle THE Crunch in one fell swoop.

Naturally, Stanley's size twelve Guccis are not the only reasons why Ma and Dad think he's such a great catch. They do have at least four other very good, solid reasons. Firstly, Stanley's mother's maiden name just happens to be Gertie Blutstein — of THE grocery chain Blutsteins, so Stanley is rich. Secondly, Stanley's father owns one of the biggest shmata businesses in Montreal, so Stanley is wealthy. Thirdly, Stanley's grandfather just died and left him a bundle, so Stanley is loaded. And fourthly, but certainly not lastly, Stanley's law firm, which specializes in representing various show-business types like movie stars and rock singers, is raking it in, so Stanley has money. I mean, why else would they want me to marry an overweight, balding guy who has all the personality and sex appeal of a piece of Gefilte fish?

Oh yeah, I know, I know, he's madly in love with me. And he's precisely the kind of guy I'm supposed to marry. The Nice-Jewish-Professional-Boy-Type. The type who can afford to keep a spoiled-rotten (not to mention sheltered and pampered) Jewish Princess like myself in the royal manner to which I have grown accustomed. But it's not enough, dammit, it's just not enough and I'm through pretending that it is!

I've had it with this whole ridiculous charade. I can't keep going through the motions my entire life just to please my family. Just to do what they consider to be the 'Right Thing'. The 'Respectable Thing'. The 'Acceptable Thing'. The ONLY thing. I mean, what about me? What about how I feel? Don't MY feelings ... MY desires ... MY needs count for anything? Doesn't anybody out there even care that I don't love Stanley? Or his money? Or his body?

The faucet looked like an erect prick. That's how I imagined it.

It always looks that way when I'm soaking in a hot tub and the bathroom gets all steamed up. Always. I reached up and caressed it with my foot, wondering what it would be like if it were the Real Thing, instead of just a piece of metal jutting out of the wall. I tried to imagine what it would be like to hold it in my hands. To have it in my mouth. To slide it up in between my legs.

And then, suddenly, he appeared. The Man of My Dreams. The incredibly rugged, fantastically sexy Man of My Dreams. The star of my every fantasy. He was standing over the tub wearing nothing except the beard on his face and a towel around his waist. He's always bearded and he always wears just a towel around his waist. Though sometimes he'll surprise me and wear nothing at all.

"Mm-mm, you look good lying there," he said, his baby blue eyes sparkling as they travelled up and down my naked body. Up and down. Up and down. "In fact, you look good enough to eat ..."

"Oh, you!" I laughed. It was a deep, throaty kind of laugh. My sexiest. "You're always saying that!"

"Well, it's the truth," he smiled down at me, "hell, I get a

hard-on just looking at you."

"Is that a fact?" I glanced over at his crotch to see if the familiar (but always tantalizing) bulge was there. It was. I reached out and ran my hand over it, tracing the outline with my fingers. I could just feel it grow, harden, expand until I thought it might burst right through the towel. "You wouldn't just be saying that, would you?"

"Of course not," he moaned from the pleasure of it all, "a prick never lies." He looked down at his ever-hardening hard-on straining against my hand and then he looked up at me and grinned. "Never ..."

"No, a prick never lies," I smiled seductively as my hand continued to caress him, to tease him, "I've never had a prick that's lied to me yet."

"We gonna do it in the bath again tonight?" His breath was coming in short gasps.

"Yeah," a shudder ran right through me as I anticipated the good things to come, "I just love doing it in the bath." I reached up and peeled away the towel. It fell to the floor in a heap and his erection sprang out, landing right in front of my lips. I kissed the tip. A drop of creamy white stuff oozed out and my tongue snaked out to lap it up. "What are we waiting for?"

"Damned if I know." He got into the tub and kneeled over me so that I could take him all the way into my mouth.

We were going at it something fierce when Ma's cold, frantic hand grabbed my shoulder.

"SHAYNA PEARL, FOR CRYING OUT LOUD!" she screamed into my ear.

"WILL YOU STOP DAYDREAMING AND TAKE YOUR VALIUM?!"

"Jesus Christ!" I sat bolt upright.



"No, it's just me, your mother, sorry to disappoint you."

"Holy cow!" My eyes scanned the length of the tub. There was no one in it except me, thank God for small mercies. "Holy Moses!"

"I'm not surprised you're having trouble recognizing me! There's so much steam in here, I don't think I'd recognize my own mother if I fell right over her, may she rest-in peace." She waved her hand around in a vain attempt to clear the air. "These hot baths of yours are killing my wallpaper!"

"Ma!" I wailed. "What are you doing in here?"

"What do you mean, what am I doing in here?" She shoved a glass of water and two small green pills under my nose. "I said I was coming back with Valium, didn't I? It's not my fault you were a million miles away ... for a change."

"Well, couldn't you have at least KNOCKED first?!" I was furious. Furious with her for invading my privacy. Furious with myself for getting so carried away when I knew damned well that it's asking too much to have a sexual fantasy in peace around this house. But even more than being furious, I was mortified. Mortified because I suddenly realized that underneath the murky bathwater, my aching right hand was wedged up in between my legs. For all I knew, she'd been standing there the whole time ... watching my hand as it went through its fast and furious paces. Watching me play with myself. God, I wanted to die. No, I wanted a fate worse than death. I wanted the drain to open up and suck me into the Saint Lawrence River where I'd languish for all eternity while all the toilets and tubs of Montreal flushed an endless stream of filth upon my head. Because that's what I felt like. A piece of filth. "How long have you been standing there anyway?" I

couldn't bear to look her in the face. "I never even heard you come in!"

"I just walked in this second," she said. "Here now, take the Valium and get out of that GodFORSAKEN tub already!" She looked down at the water and made a disgusted face. "Just look at that. Feh, that bubble bath of yours made such a thick layer of soap scum, nobody would ever know you had a body under there."

Thank God for soap scum. I carefully withdrew my aching hand from my almost-raw vagina and breathed a huge sigh of relief. Obviously she didn't have a clue in hell as to what had actually been going on down there because if she did, she probably would have drowned me on the spot. Being the card-carrying member (in good standing) of the World-Wide Order of Prudes that she is, she holds Masturbation high on her 'Strictly Taboo' list. I mean, it's right up there with Oral Sex, Pre-Marital Sex and Sex in general.

"Shayna Pearl, please!" she pleaded. "Take the pills. The steam is ruining my hair. I just had it done today."

"I don't need Valium!" I pushed her hand away.

She looked at me and shrugged. Then she took the pills herself.

"Did you take care of Stanley, by the way?"

"Yes I did, by the way, how nice of you to ask!" She clucked her tongue in disgust. "A young woman of twenty-three shouldn't have to send her mother to make excuses for her, you know. Especially a young woman who's always burching about wanting to take responsibility for her own life!"

"Oh, brother!" Funny how she never seems to take the things I say seriously until it's time to throw them back in my face. "Gimme a break."

"The trouble is you only want to be grown up when it suits you ..."

"Save the lecture, Mother. What'd you tell him?"

"He wanted to pick you up at eight-thirty but I told him that would be impossible."

"Oh, Ma, thanks," I cried, "I knew I could count on you!"

"So he's going to be picking you up at nine instead."

"OH, MOTHER! I can't count on you for ANYTHING!"

"You have half an hour to get ready. Don't you think you ought to shake a leg?"

"No," I folded my arms across my chest and refused to budge, "I'm not going anywhere."

"ARNIE ... ARNIE!!!" she called out for Dad. "COME TALK SOME SENSE INTO YOUR DAUGHTER. SHE GETS HER MISHEGGAS FROM YOUR SIDE OF THE FAMILY!"

There was no response. There seldom is.

"Ooooo, that man!" she said between clenched teeth. "When he lies there in that GodFORSAKEN vibrating twenty-four position E-Z-Y chair with that damned newspaper over his face, the whole house could fall on him and he wouldn't notice!"

"The joys of marriage," I rolled my eyes around in my head. "I mean, there's just so much to look forward to."

"No man is perfect, Shayna Pearl."

"Well, Stanley isn't my idea of perfect, that's for sure."

"Okay, Miss Romantic Dreamer of the Decade, go ahead and wait for your Mr. Perfect. You'll wait forever!"

"I'm not looking for someone perfect," I told her, "just someone different. Someone sexy, exciting, good-looking and strong. Someone

who treats me like a person. Gives me space. Encourages my career. Values my opinions. Someone who makes me feel alive. Who turns me on!"

"Like who? Like that character with the long hair and the beard whom you think is so wonderful? You know, the one who starred with Barbra Streisand in that A Star Is Born movie you saw twelve times? The one whose posters you scotch-taped to the walls in your room and wrecked the paint! What's his name ... Kristofferson Kristofferson or something?"

"Kris Kristofferson."

"Yeah, that's what I said. Kristofferson Kristofferson. You think he's going to come galloping by on a white horse and whisk you off into the sunset?"

"Or a reasonable facsimile thereof."

"Take it from me, a woman who knows more about life than you do and save yourself a lot of grief ... Mr. Perfect does not exist. So Stanley's not exactly perfect? Who is? So he's not exactly Kristofferson Kristofferson."

"Ma, he's not exactly Kermit The Frog!"

She gave me a dirty look. "I know why you're doing this. You're doing this just to aggravate me. You're always doing things just to aggravate me! Why couldn't you be more like your wonderful brothers? They've never given me a day's aggravation."

"You can't win 'em all, Mother!" I glared at her. I felt like spitting up. I always feel that way when she reminds me (as she does umpteen times a day) of how wonderful my wonderful brothers are. At 31, identical twins Terry and David Fine, The Doctor and The Financial Consultant, respectively, are the closest things to perfection this side

of God. At least to her and Dad they are. And so are their wives, Arlene and Eva, respectively. And so are their children, Melissa and (Andrea, Victoria and Erin (plus one on the way any time now) respectively. And so are their semi-detached homes right down the street at 8675 and 8677 Blossom Road, respectively. And so on and so on and so on. They're all so wonderful, they make The Waltons look like delinquents. "What do you want from me, Ma? What?"

"I want you to wake up, that's what I want. A boy like Stanley is worth his weight in gold."

"In that case, you'll have to buy us Fort Knox for a wedding present!" I cackled facetiously.

"You think you're so smart don't you?"

"What's the matter, Ma?" I asked her. "Am I that repulsive, am I that sexless, dull and unattractive that I have to marry the first guy who shows an interest in me?"

"Don't talk nonsense! You're adorable and you know it. You've got an adorable face and an exquisite little figure and a terrific personality... most of the time."

"So?"

"So you also have a tendency to walk around with your head in the clouds. If we'd let you, you'd spend the rest of your life in a dream world ... pining away for Kristofferson Kristofferson ... waiting for some big-time movie producer to take you away from your job at the Cote Saint Luc Weekly Register and whisk you off to Hollywood to write screenplays!"

"Well I didn't get a degree in Communication Arts to spend the rest of my life as Chief Schlock Processor and Drivel Writer for some

two-bit suburban weekly! Or to be nothing more than Somebody's Wife! As soon as I get enough first-hand writing experience I'm going to move on to bigger and better things."

"See what I mean?" she cried. "You have absolutely no conception of reality. You've been working, what, ten whole months and already you're going on to bigger and better things. A headful of ridiculous schemes and impossible dreams -- that's what you've got. And I'm not the only one who thinks so. It's the consensus of this entire family that you're a romantic flake and that marriage to a nice, stable, down-to-earth boy like Stanley Drabkin is exactly what you need."

"Are you saying I'm unstable, Mother?" I cried. "Is that what you're saying?"

"Let's just say you're like a boat -- a beautifully-crafted, fully-equipped pleasure cruiser that's drifting aimlessly at sea."

"And Stanley's my twenty-four carat gold anchor, I suppose?"

"Bingo, Shayna Pearl," she said as she turned to go. "Now get out of that tub and get ready -- if you know what's good for you!"

SLAM!!!!

Shit, she's not for real that mother of mine! She's just not for real! I mean, she doesn't actually believe that I'm going to drift aimlessly through the sea of life if I don't have a husband to anchor me down, does she? Doesn't she know that her way of thinking went out with poodle skirts and Gidget movies? Hasn't she heard that this is the Age of the Cosmopolitan Woman?

Hell, I don't know. Is it so farfetched (to think that I, Shayna Pearl Fine, could be like those women I'm forever reading about in magazines? Those independent career women with their chic penthouse

apartments, titillating love affairs and multiple orgasms (or is that multiple affairs and titillating orgasms?). Is it so absurd to think that I could have my own life? My own money? My own place? A place where I could do what I want, whenever I want and with whomever I want? Where I could have titillating love affairs with men of my own choosing ... bearded, sexy men ... men who wear inviting smiles on their faces and towels around their waists ... or better still, nothing at all?

Oh, brother, who am I kidding anyway? Even a romantic flake like me who has no conception of reality knows that it takes money — LOADS of money to have your own place and the kind of life that goes with it. And the fact of the matter is ... I don't have enough money to keep me in dimes should I want to live in a pay-toilet. Hell, even if I saved every penny of my pitiful salary it would be a year, maybe two, before I could afford to live in a pay-toilet!

Trapped. That's what I am. Trapped! Trapped if I do marry Stanley and trapped if I don't.

God, Helen Gurley Brown, someone ... ANYONE ... HELP ME!

Ma was fit to be tied because the doorbell was ringing and I was just stepping out of the tub.

"For crying out loud, Shayna Pearl!" she cried, practically pulling my arm out of its socket as she stuffed it into the sleeve of my bathrobe. "Stanley's here and you're not even ready!"

"My, but you're observant."

"Never mind your sarcasm! Just hurry up and make yourself beautiful. I'll take care of your fiancé-to-be in the meanwhile."

"STOP CALLING HIM THAT, GODDAMMIT!" I yelled after her as she

ran off to answer the door. "I'M NOT GONNA MARRY HIM, DO YOU HEAR? I'M GONNA BE A FREE WOMAN EVEN IF IT MEANS SPENDING THE REST OF MY LIFE IN THE BATHROOM!"

My threats fell upon deaf ears. Not only did she let Stanley into the house but she fussed over him like he was Prince Charles or Frank Sinatra or somebody.

"Stanley, dear!" I could hear her voice squealing with delight. "It's so good to see you ... come in ... come in ... Shayna Pearl's dressing but she'll be down shortly."

"Evening, Mrs. F.," Stanley said. He always calls her 'Mrs. F.'. It drives me crazy. "You sure are looking beautiful tonight, Mrs. F. As beautiful as I feel. And I DO feel BEE-UU-TEE-FUL!"

"Oh, Stanley," she giggled, "flattery will get you EVERYwhere!"

"It's sure not hard to see where Shayna Pearl gets her good looks from."

"Well, you know what they say, don't you?" she giggled again. "The apple never falls far from the tree."

A shudder ran right through me. That had to be the most depressing thing I ever heard!

"I mean; they just don't make 'em cuter than Shayna Pearl, you know?" Stanley went on, sounding delirious. "I mean, those shimmering light brown curls! Those big brown doe eyes! That perfect little nose! That peaches and cream complexion! That petite but volup... I mean, curv ... I mean GORGEOUS figure! Hell, she may only be five foot nothing, but what a package!"

"You really love her, don't you?" Ma said, making one of her more astute observations. "You love her a lot."



"I can't tell you how much, Mrs. F.," he told her anyway. "I know Shayna Pearl, she, well, she doesn't exactly feel the same way about me just yet ... but she will ... especially when I give her this ..."

"OH, STANLEY! IT'S ... IT'S ..."

"Shshshsh ... not so loud, Mrs. F.!" he hushed her. "I don't want Shayna Pearl to know about this until the right moment."

"Oh, don't worry about her, she can't hear us," Ma reassured him. "She's up in her room getting dressed and if I know her, she's got that horrid rock music blasting in her ears ... Oh, Stanley ... it's ... it's ..."

"... a rock, isn't it?"

"It's a boulder!"

"It's a 3.5 Marquis diamond to be exact ... and that's not including the baguets. I'm going to take Shayna Pearl to this real swanky place tonight and spring it on her. Now you know what I meant before on the phone when I said tonight's going to be the first night of the rest of her life, eh?"

"Boy, do I ever!" Ma cried. "Shayna Pearl's going to flip when she sees this. It's exquisite!"

"You ... you really think she'll flip over it?"

"I don't think Stanley. I KNOW. Why, no woman in her right mind would turn down a magnificent ring like this. And if she does, she belongs in the booby-hatch!"

Another shudder ran through me. I had visions of Ma standing on our front steps shouting: "Don't forget the shock treatments ... she needs LOTS of shock treatments!" as two burly men in white coats hauled

me off, kicking and screaming, to that infamous Montreal mental institution known as 'Verdun'.

"I don't know," Stanley said, sounding worried, "Shayna Pearl's been having some pretty crazy ideas lately. Sometimes I ... well, sometimes I get the feeling that she fancies herself as one of those independent career-type women. You know, like the ones in Cosmopolitan Magazine?"

"Shayna Pearl is always fancying herself as something, Stanley," Ma sneered. "Tomorrow she'll be fancying herself as the Queen of England."

"Are you saying I shouldn't take her seriously when she talks, you know, that way?"

"Oh, please, Stanley," she laughed. "You just put that ring on her finger tonight and it'll be like she never even heard of her precious Cosmopolitan Magazine."

"Yeah, you're right, I guess. I mean, it's a known fact that women take to diamonds like flies to a No-Pest Strip. Especially women of the uh, Jewish American Princess persuasion."

I couldn't believe my ears. I mean, they were talking about me like I was some kind of diamond-crazy J.A.P. who would sell her soul for a couple of carats!

"Yeah, I don't know what I was worried about," Stanley went on, "no woman could possibly resist a beautiful ring like this. Not even Ms. WOEman's LiP Herself, Gloria Mayhem!"

"That's Steinem; dear."

"Yeah, these women of today, this so-called 'New Breed', they may call guys like me Male Chauvinist Pigs and they may burcheh about

how they need to have their OWN lives and their OWN space and their OWN room to grow and expand as self-supporting, self-respecting individuals and all that crap ... but when you come right down to it, they're really no different than women were twenty — or even a hundred years ago. Just slip a diamond ring on their fingers and they'll follow you anywhere!"

They both shrieked with laughter. I couldn't bring myself to join in on all the merriment, I'm sorry to say. I was too busy sitting on my hands to keep from tearing my hair out.

"Oh, Stanley, this is the happiest night of my life!" Ma gushed. No doubt she was hugging him and kissing him to boot. "I couldn't ask for a nicer son-in-law. And I just know my daughter's going to be in good hands."

"Thanks, Mrs. F., I won't disappoint you."

"Why don't you call me Ma? All my children do!"

A tidal wave of nausea swept through me. I thought for sure I was going to throw up.

"Why, Ma!" Stanley let out a gleeful laugh. "I thought you'd never ask!"

That did it. I threw up.

I was still throwing up when there was a knock at the bathroom door.

"Shayna Pearl?" It was Ma. "Don't tell me you're STILL in the bathroom?!"

"Go away," I retched, "you make me sick!"

"Sick?" Stanley was there too. "Did I hear her say she's sick?"

"Yeah," Ma sneered, "sick in the head!"

"She's not STILL taking a bath, is she?" he groaned.

"OH, WHY DON'T YOU GO TAKE A FLYING LEAP!" I shrieked.

"Aren't you happy to see me, Shayna Pearl?" he asked.

I retched twice more and then I flushed the toilet. Two retches plus one flush, I figured, was worth a thousand words.

"Shayna Pearl, are you alright in there?" Ma cried. "Was that vomiting I heard just a minute ago?"

"No," I took a swig of Lavoris and spit it into the sink, "that was my Sid Vicious imitation!"

"Jeez, what's with her tonight?" Stanley said. "Is it, uh, you know, THAT time of the month again or something?"

"OH FUCK A FLYING DUCK ... I DON'T BELIEVE THIS!" I cried.

"Shayna Pearl!" Ma gasped.

"Hey, Shayna Pearl, I'll bet you'll feel much better when you hear what I've got planned for us tonight," Stanley said. "I'm going to take you to this real swanky place in Old Montreal where they have soft, romantic music and candlelight and I'm going to order some Champagne and ..."

"I hate it already!"

"Okay," he cried. I could just picture him flinching. "Okay ... if you don't want to go there we can go somewhere else."

"Why don't YOU go somewhere else?" I sneered. I couldn't believe that he was just standing there and taking all that crap from me. Hell, if I were him I'd have told me to go screw myself and that would have been the end of that. But not Stanley. Not good old glutton-for-punishment Stanley. I can stand him up, shoot him down and walk all over him and he still keeps coming back for more. No

balls, that's his problem. I mean, how's a girl supposed to respect a guy with no balls?

"Hey, I know," he persisted, "why don't we go to that new club that just opened up on Stanley Street? Think of how great it'll be! Stanley on the inside ... Stanley on the outside ... SURROUNDED by Stanleys! I mean, what more could a girl possibly ask for?"

"A QUICK MERCIFUL DEATH BY FIRING SQUAD!"

"That does it!" Ma exploded. "Where's my knitting needle? I'm going to unlock that door and I'm going to go in there and MURDER that girl!"

"Why don't you just go away and leave me alone?" I plunked myself down on the toilet seat and buried my head in my hands. "Please."

"It'll be worth sitting in jail for the rest of my life, that's how much I want to murder her!" Ma ranted on.

"No, that's okay," Stanley told her, "if Shayna Pearl doesn't want to go there, we can go somewhere else."

"Don't be so good to her!" Ma practically bit his head off. "She only treats you like a shmata when you're so good to her!"

"I just want to make her happy."

"Suit yourself. It's your funeral."

"We can go wherever you want to go, Shayna Pearl," he told me.

"C'mon, you can't stay in the bathroom forever, you know."

The window, I thought. I could always jump out the window! I leaped up and tried to pry it open. It was stuck. It was stuck and so was I.

"WILL SOMEBODY PLEASE TELL ME WHAT'S GOING ON AROUND HERE?"

Stanley wailed.

"I'll tell you what's going on around here, Stanley," Ma said, "my daughter is nuttier than a fruit cake, that's what's going on around here."

"Yeah, well you ought to know, Mother! You BAKED me what I am today!"

"Oooo, you're just lucky your father was called out to deliver a baby a few minutes ago, let me tell you," she seethed, "because if he were here I'd have him go in there and THROTTLE you!"

"Ha! Don't make me laugh. You know damned well Daddy's never laid a hand on me!"

"Well, it's time he started. Maybe if he'd have given you a couple of good swats a day for the past twenty-three years instead of letting you get away with murder, you wouldn't be acting like the spoiled-rotten brat you are today!"

"Maybe if you'd get off my back and stop trying to run my life for me, I wouldn't be locked in the Goddamned bathroom like I am today!"

"Ha!" she cried. "If you think I'm on your back now, just go ahead and blow this you-know-what to you-know-whom and I'll make your life so miserable, you'll be sorry you were born!"

That did it. I had just about all I could take.

"Alright!" I unlocked the door and flung it open. "You win. I give up. If it means that much to you, I'll go through with this you-know-what to you-know-whom. But you'll be sorry." I glared at her. "Especially when this you-know-what to you-know-whom ends up YOU-KNOW-HOW!"

"You know who ... you know what ... what is going on?" Stanley looked totally clued out. "What are you two talking about?"

"Forget it, Stanley," I told him, "it doesn't matter anymore. Nothing does."

"If you say so," he shrugged. "Boy, you and your mother sure have some of the strangest arguments."

"I think I'll go to my room and get dressed now," I sighed. "I wonder if I have anything black to wear."

"How about something black and blue?" Ma shook her fist at me. "Like a bruise?"

"You just put on something real pretty, Shayna Pearl." Stanley grabbed me and hugged me, "I'm going to take you to the swankiest joint in this city."

"Do we have to go somewhere swanky?" I wriggled out of his grasp. "I'm not in a swanky mood."

He looked at me and shrugged. "Whatever makes you happy, m'dear. How about the Cock 'n Bull? I told Peter we'd probably be dropping by later anyway."

"Peter?" I said. "Who's Peter?"

"He's Peter Simon Freeman of "Peter Simon Freeman and The Extinct Species Band."

"Extinct Species Band?" Ma gaged. "Why, are they a bunch of Dodo Birds?"

"Actually, they're Canada's answer to The Eagles," he shot back. "They sing like canaries and look like wild animals. And talk about wild animals, you have to see this guy Peter. He looks just like the last American Shaggy Buffalo!"

My heart took a flying leap right into my throat. "A shaggy buffalo?" I cried. I could hardly conceal my excitement. "You ... you

mean, he's one of those long-haired, bearded types?" Stanley thinks all long-haired, bearded types, from Jesus Christ to Kris Kristofferson, look like shaggy buffalos.

"Boy is he ever!" Stanley rolled his eyes around in his head. "But who cares what the guy looks like as long as he can sing, right? And this guy can sing, let me tell you. It's only a matter of time before one of the biggest record companies out in L.A. signs him up."

"Peter Simon Freeman," I scratched my head, "have I ever heard of him before?"

"Probably not," Stanley said. "The Extinct Species is not exactly a household word around Montreal yet. They've been out on the road all year — playing the small towns from Chien de Bow Wow, Quebec, to Ruchasville, Ontario."

"How come you know so much about them?" I asked.

"Peter and I went to law school at McGill together before he dropped out to form the Extinct Species."

"Hmph," Ma made a sour face. Like she had swallowed a spoonful of sour yogurt or something. "If he were my son, I'd break his neck!"

"Anyway," Stanley went on, "he came by my office this afternoon for some legal advice and he told me he was opening tonight at the Cock 'n Bull and why don't I come down and catch his act?"

Peter Simon Freeman. Peter Simon Freeman. I chanted his name over and over again in my mind. I loved the way it sounded. Like a breath of fresh air. So unlike Stanley. Charles Drabkin. Peter Simon Freeman.

"So what do you say, Shayna Pearl?" Stanley nudged my arm.

"Does the Cock 'n Bull strike your fancy?"



"Huh?" I started. "Oh, yeah, sure ..." I said, wandering off to my room to get dressed, "... the Cock 'n Bull strikes my fancy just fine!"

PART II: KNIGHT RIDER

## CHAPTER 2

It was love at first sight.

The moment Peter Simon Freeman walked out onto the stage in his faded jean shirt and skin-tight beige Levis, I fell head over heels in love with him. I mean, the guy was a vision. A tall, lean and bearded vision with a soft, mellow voice that sharply contrasted with his rugged features. He seemed to be a unique combination of sensitive human being and wild animal. And his songs, mostly of the "Girl, Why Did You Leave Me?" variety, spoke of vulnerability and loneliness.

I found myself dying to keep him company.

"Please God," I prayed as the house lights went on after the first set, "please let him spot Stanley so that he'll come over here to say hello and I can meet him, PLEASE!" I prayed like I never prayed before. "If You do me this one little favour, God," I told Him, "I promise, I swear I'll become a better Jew. Just let me meet Peter and I'll never touch another bite of pork for as long as I live. Not even the ribs at the Bar-B-Barn -- and if You ever tasted the ribs at the Bar-B-Barn, You'd know what a sacrifice I'm making!"

Apparently God knows a good sacrifice when He hears one because the next thing I knew, I looked up and Peter Simon Freeman was standing there in the flesh and shaking hands with Stanley.

"Stanley, how ya doin', man?" he said. "Glad you could make it down tonight. Did you hear anything new on that recording contract"

business out in L.A. yet?"

"No, and I'm not here to talk business either," Stanley said, wrapping his arm around my shoulder and making lovey-dovey eyes at me. "This visit is strictly pleasure."

"So I just noticed," Peter looked at me and grinned. "Is this your old lady or what?"

"No, you turkey," Stanley snapped, "this is my great-grandmother!"

"You could have fooled me!" Peter threw his head back and laughed this wonderful crazy hoarse laugh. It sent shivers down my spine. "And I thought she was your mother!"

"This is my fian ... I mean, my girlfriend, Shayna P ..."

"SHAY!" I blurted. "My name is Shay." I never felt so strange in my entire life. My tongue felt too thick for my mouth; my skin too tight for my body. And my heart ... my heart, it was ticking away a mile a minute -- like a taxi meter or something. "At least that's what my friends call me."

"Shay, huh?" He sat down beside me. "Ya, I like it. It kinda suits you, you know? You look like a Shay." His eyes were riveted to mine. "Shay what?"

"Fine." I squirmed in my seat. No man ever gazed into my eyes like that before. Except for maybe the Man of My Dreams. "Shay Fine."

"Fine like the bakery?"

"Fine like the gynecologist."

"No shit?" he laughed.

"No shit." I laughed too, though I wasn't quite sure what the joke was. And anyway, who cared?

He was attracted to me I could tell. He couldn't seem to take

his eyes off me. Which was okay by me because I couldn't seem to take my eyes off him either. In fact, if he hadn't been called back to the stage to prepare for his second set, I think we might have spent the rest of the night just staring at each other.

Stanley was incensed. "Let's get out of this Cock 'n Bull dump!" he told me as soon as Peter got up from the table. "This place gives me the willies!"

I refused to budge. Peter said he was coming back to join us for a drink after his last set and nothing short of a four alarm fire was going to get me to leave the place beforehand.

"Please, Shayna Pearl," he pleaded, "I have something important I want to discuss with you. A matter of life and death!"

"Later, Stanley, later ..." I told him. I was too busy watching the way Peter's ass was wiggling around in those tight beige Levis of his as he headed back toward the stage. "Much later ..." It wasn't so much that I deliberately meant to be cruel to Stanley. It's just that once I laid eyes on Peter I couldn't seem to concentrate on anybody or anything but Peter. I was like a woman possessed. "Much, MUCH later."

"I want to discuss it NOW!"

"So discuss, Stanley, I'm listening," I said, my eyes riveted to Peter's behind. He had a very sexy ass, I thought.

"I can't discuss this with you while you're making goo-goo eyes at another guy, dammit," he fumed. "What the hell is there to look at anyway? He's nothing but a shaggy buffalo."

"He's the goddamn sexiest shaggy buffalo I ever saw!"

"Hmph, I ought to go over there and punch his lights out. Don't think I didn't notice the way he was staring down your cleavage while

he was sitting here."

"He was?" I couldn't help but smile. "And all along I thought he was merely gazing into my eyes!"

"What the hell did you have to go and dress so sexy for anyway?" he cried. "I mean, just look at you ... you're half naked for crying out loud! Can't you at least put on a bra when you wear those see-through blouses of yours? You ask for trouble when you dress like that." He grabbed my blazer from the back of my chair and draped it around my shoulders. "There now, that's much better."

Peter looked at me and grinned. I smiled back, my insides melting like mozzarella cheese on toast. "Pheeuuw, it sure is hot in here!" I shrugged the blazer off.

"Christ," Stanley put the blazer back around my shoulders again, "if your mother knew what you were wearing -- or rather what you weren't wearing under this blazer tonight, she'd never have let you out of the house."

"Who do you think bought this blouse for me in the first place, Stanley?" I shrugged the blazer off my shoulders again. "Anyway, what do you expect me to wear in the middle of July? A turtleneck and my raccoon coat?"

"Okay, okay, let's not make a big deal over this," he said, "I didn't bring you down here to discuss your clothes. I brought you down here to talk about us ... about our future together ... Shayna Pearl, are you listening to me?"

"Uh-huh." I said though I really wasn't. My attention was on Peter. He was standing up on the stage and talking to his drummer, a strange-in-a-wonderful-sort-of-way character whose head was as bald as

C  
a baby's tush, save for a bright orange fringe of hair. Like Bozo The Clown. "What's on your mind, Stanley?" As if I didn't know. As if I really cared. Up on the stage Peter and Bozo The Clown were being joined by the rest of the Extinct Species Band, a menagerie of exotic creatures not unlike that which you see at Parc Safari Africain. There was the tall, thin keyboardist who looked like a giraffe and the short, squat bass guitarist with the pushed-in face who looked like a gorilla in blue jeans and last, but certainly not least, there was the stout, hairy lead guitarist who easily resembled a wildebeest. It was a whole other world up there. A strange-in-a-wonderful-sort-of-way world. I felt myself being drawn towards it.

"Shayna Pearl," Stanley nudged my arm. "I'm talking to you!"

"I'm sure you are, Stanley," I sighed.

"Would it be too much to look at me when I'm talking to you?"

"I'm looking," I said though I was busy staring at Peter's magnificent jean-clad body. He must look très sexy in a towel, I thought with a smile, très sexy indeed.

"Dammit, Shayna Pearl, look at me, will you?!"

Reluctantly, oh-so-reluctantly, I tore my eyes away from Peter and I looked at Stanley. Stanley with his three-piece Pierre Cardin suit and patent leather shoes. Stanley with his Pierre Cardin tortoise shell glasses and pin-stripe tie. Stanley with his belly hanging ten pounds over his belt with the gold "G" on the buckle. Stanley with his thick Mick Jagger lips that are framed by a thin light blonde mustache which looks more like a third eyebrow. Stanley with his round Pillsbury Dough Boy cheeks and his short, dirty blonde hair that is rapidly disappearing at the temples.

It was all I could do to keep from throwing up.

"Couldn't we discuss this later, Stanley?" I said, my eyes roaming back to the stage. "There's just too many distractions around here to get into a heavy discussion." Up on the stage they were passing around a brown bottle of something. Whisky maybe. Whatever it was it sure looked potent. Peter took a swig, grimaced and then passed it on to The Giraffe who took a swig, grimaced and passed it on to The Wildebeest who took two swigs and didn't grimace. "What do you suppose they're drinking up there?" I asked Stanley who was sipping on a fluorescent orange Planter's Punch with two cherries and an umbrella. "It sure looks strong."

"I hope it's Hemlock," he sneered, spearing a cherry with his umbrella and popping it into his mouth. "Maybe if they all keel over and die up there you'll pay some attention to me."

Peter got up in front of his microphone and started tuning his guitar. My eyes followed his fingers as they slid down the long, slender neck toward the hole. There was something about the way his fingers glided over the frets. Something sensual. I could almost feel them on my skin. Gliding down my neck. Caressing my shoulders. My breasts. My nipples. My belly. My vagina. An intensely pleasurable shudder ran right through me.

"Why don't you put your eyes back into your head Shayna Pearl," Stanley said. "He's not your type."

"Is that a fact?"

"Do you honestly think I'd have brought you down here tonight if I ever thought, for one minute, that Peter was your type?"

"We all make mistakes."

"Oh, for crying out loud, you wouldn't want to fall for a guy



like that. He just happens to be Super Lech himself."

"Super Lech?"

"Yeah, he likes women and he likes 'em in bed."

"Is THAT a fact?"

"Yeah, well, you just happen to be Super Virgin, in case you've forgotten? I know I haven't."

"So?"

"So, you two don't have a single thing in common. He's a guy who's obsessed with sex and you're a woman who avoids it like the plague. That's hardly the basis for a meaningful relationship, wouldn't you say?"

"Whatever you say, Stanley." I looked up at Peter and smiled. He winked back to me. I felt something stirring up inside me. Up in between my legs.

"Do you honestly think a guy like that's going to take cold showers for months and months, like I've been doing?"

"I never asked you to wait around for me, Stanley. That was your idea, not mine."

"I'm an old-fashioned guy. I respect your virtue, I always thought you were worth waiting for. I still do. Besides, I haven't minded the wait. If anything it's made me want you that much more."

If anything, it made me want you that much less, I thought.

"Do you honestly think a guy like Peter's going to respect your virtue?"

God, I sure hope not, I thought.

"All he's going to want to do is get you into bed, you know?"

The lights went down and Peter started singing this beautiful song about a shattered love affair:

Even as I watched you leavin'  
I never stopped believin'  
Girl, I knew you'd come around

And as I sat there watching him, listening to him, experiencing him, I thought about what Stanley had said -- about Peter wanting to get me into bed and all.

In fact; I couldn't get it off my mind.

Peter Simon Freeman was the first real live guy I ever met who I could picture going to bed with.

No, that's not quite true. He was the first real live guy I ever met who I was DYING to go to bed with.

And the longer I sat there watching him, the more I was dying to go to bed with him. Hell, I think I would have gone up there and done it on the stage in front of the entire Cock 'n Bull if he'd have asked me to -- that's how much I wanted him.

When he finished playing and came back to our table, I forgot everything Ma ever taught me about being 'A Lady' and I did everything short of grabbing his balls to let him know exactly how I felt.

I complimented him on his music.

I told him how much I dig guys with beards.

I fingered the gold earring that was dangling from his left earlobe and told him how sexy I thought it was.

I leaned over as far as I could to give him a bird's eye view of the braless interior of my strategically unbuttoned shirt.

Stanley, of course, was throwing corruptions.

He kept kicking me under the table and muttering things like "let's go home!" and "you're drunk!" and "you're making a complete ass of yourself!" into my ear.

I ignored him though.

Peter was the only one whose opinion I was interested in and he didn't seem to think I was making a complete ass of myself.

On the contrary.

He just kept offering me sips of whatever it was in that big brown bottle of his -- "Fire Water" he kept calling it -- and telling me how "fucking adorable" I was and how funny I was and what a "breath of fresh air" I was.

I really had him where I wanted him, I thought.

And after a few sips of "Fire Water" I even got up the nerve to proposition him. Well, I sort of propositioned him. It was the only way I knew how.

He was in the middle of telling me how rotten it is being a musician in Canada, how the Canadian public and the Canadian press ignore you until you've made it big in the States "where it counts" -- when I stumbled on the perfect excuse to see him again.

"Hey, I work for a newspaper!" I blurted. "Why don't I do a feature story on you and your band?"

Bingo! Peter's face lit up and he told me to go on.

"I could do a piece on what it's like being a musician playing the clubs across Canada for a living," I said. "I could write about the hassles, the dreams -- hey, I could call it 'The American Dream of a Canadian Band!'"

I didn't know if I was going about it the right way. All those "How to Proposition Men" articles I'd read in Cosmopolitan and the like suddenly escaped me, so I was really relying on my instincts. But I guess I was doing something right because Peter was obviously impressed.

"Christ, that's good," he grinned, "you must be one hell of a journalist to think all that up on the spur of the moment! Christ, I like that -- 'The American Dream of a Canadian Band'. Yeah, I like that!"

"Yeah, she's really a terrific journalist," Stanley interjected. "You should have read her last article. A masterpiece! What was it called, Shayna Pearl? 'What's New at the Y?' or something?"

"Shut up, Stanley!" I muttered.

"What's with the journalist bit, anyway? You're a journalist like I'm Guy Lafleur! And how could you even call the Cote Saint Luc Weekly Register a newspaper? Most people use it as shmata paper to line their bird cages and housebreak their puppies ... and that's BEFORE they read it."

"Don't listen to him," I told Peter. "He just enjoys putting down my work for some reason. I've written some really good articles. Really I have. Sometimes people even call up and tell me so."

"Yeah and their last names are all Fine!" Stanley chortled. "The girl is suffering from delusions of grandeur, I tell you!"

"And you're a Male Chauvinist Pig with a capital 'Oink'!"

"Whoa there!" Peter cried. "I know the Cote Saint Luc Weekly Register ain't Time Magazine, but publicity is publicity."

Stanley gave him an incredulous look. "You ... you mean you're actually going to do it with her?"

"Oh, yeah," Peter looked at me and winked. "I can't think of anybody I'd rather do it with."

"If you've got the place," I smiled back at him, "I've got the time."

"Shayna Pearl," Stanley winced, "you don't know what you're saying!"

"Of course not, Stanley. I'm suffering from delusions of grandeur, remember?"

Peter threw his head back and laughed that wonderful, crazy hoarse laugh of his. "You're really something else," he told me, "I have a feeling this is gonna be one hell of an interview."

"Me too." I thought I was going to burst.

"How does tomorrow sound? Say, around noon? The band and I will be rehearsing here at the Cock 'n Bull and you can come down and get a feel of what we're all about. Or better still, why don't I pick you up on my Norton and take you out for breakfast first?"

"Your Norton?" I looked at him like he was nuts. "You call your car 'Norton?'"

This time Stanley threw his head back and laughed. He laughed and laughed and laughed. Snorting like a contented horse; acting like a horse's ass.

"What's so damned funny?" I fumed.

"You call your car 'Norton?'" he mimicked me. "Oh, brother, what a Woman of the World you are! Everybody knows that a Norton is a motorcycle ... not a car! Ha, ha, snort, snort!"

"Well, how the hell should I know that a Norton is a motorcycle?" I snapped. "I've never been on a motorcycle in my entire life!" Ugh, I could have kicked myself for saying that. It sounded so unworldly. So unsophisticated. "Uh, what I mean is, uh, well, I never knew anybody who had a motorcycle before, you know?"

"Well, you do now," Peter grinned at me. "What time should I

"pick you up for breakfast?"

"Oh, no!" I cried. "I mean, yes, I'll have breakfast with you but whatever you do — DON'T pick me up on a motorcycle!"

"Why not?"

"Because first you'd have to run over my mother and then you'd have to run over my father," I babbled, "they're always saying — 'over our dead bodies will you ride on a motorcycle!'"

Peter and Stanley fell down on the floor laughing.

It was all pretty unnerving since I wasn't even trying to be funny. I was dead serious.

"Look, why don't I just meet you here?" I said to Peter.

"Christ, you really are fucking adorable!" he hooted.

"How about ten?"

"Sure," he said, "sure thing. Hey, look, I've gotta go," he jumped up from the table, "I have some people waiting."

"You won't forget? Ten o'clock?"

"Are you kidding?" He took hold of a lock of my hair and gave it a twirl with his finger. "I wouldn't miss it for the world." And then he left.

Stanley whisked me into his Trans Am and drove back to Hampstead as fast as the car could carry us. Faster even. Only he didn't dump me on the curb in front of the house and screech off into the night, never to be seen again, like I expected he would. Instead he drove right past the house and pulled up in front of the big greystone cottage that's for sale down the street. Number 8683 Blossom Road. Three doors down from where my wonderful twin brothers and their respective families live in semi-detached splendour.

"What are you doing Stanley?" I cried. "I don't live here!"

"You're not going to that 'interview' tomorrow." He spoke for the first time since we left the Cock 'n Bull.

"See what I mean, Stanley?" I cringed. "That's why we haven't been getting along lately. You're always telling me what to do -- like I have no mind of my own. I DO have a mind of my own you know?"

"Boy, do you ever! And it's always getting you into hot water. That's why you need a guy like me around -- to take care of you."

"I can take care of myself!"

"You need somebody to look after you," he insisted, "and I'm applying for the 'job.'" He whipped out a boulder-sized diamond ring and shoved it under my nose. "Here's my credentials."

"God," I gasped, forgetting myself for a moment, "it is a rock!"

"Yeah," he smiled, "so put it on and own a piece of the rock, ha, ha."

"Oh, Stanley ... I ... I ..." All of a sudden I was at a rare loss for words. It's funny, you know. Despite everything I felt kind of torn up inside. This little voice inside my head (which sounded amazingly like Ma's) kept saying: "C'mon, Shayna Pearl, put the ring on your finger already. Stanley is a wonderful boy. He's going to take care of you. And GodKNOWS, if anybody needs taking care of, it's you. You just don't have what it takes to survive Out There on your own." But then there was this other little voice that said: "What, are you crazy or something? Are you going to settle for Gefilte Fish when you can have Shaggy Buffalo?"

"C'mon, Shayna Pearl, put the ring on your finger already!"

Stanley cried, pressing it close to my nose. For a moment there I

thought he was going to hook it right through my nostrils. "I'm asking you to be my wife. I'm offering you a lifetime of security. With me you'll have no worries, no cares, no struggles."

Just like dead people, I thought.

"What's the matter? Don't you like it? Isn't it big enough?"

"Oh, it's big enough, alright." It sure was a beauty. "In fact, it's so big, it would probably give me a hernia."

"Could you think of a better way to get a hernia?"

"It's a beautiful ring, Stanley, really it is ..."

"Are you afraid I can't take care of you, is that it? Are you worried that I'm going to hurt you? 'Cause if you are, let me set your mind at rest right now -- if you marry me, I promise, I swear I'll take good care of you. As long as I'm around, nothing will EVER happen to you!"

Well, he said it, I didn't. "I'm sorry, Stanley." I handed the ring back to him. "It'll never work."

"See this house?" He pointed to the big greystone. "I'm going to buy it for you. For us. You can furnish it any way you like. Chinese. Modern. Antique. I'll take you over to Fraser Brothers and you can buy out the whole place if you want!"

"God, Stanley, I don't want to live on the same street as my family! The way I feel right now, I don't even want to live on the same planet!"

"We'll park our 'His! and 'Hers' matching silver Mercedes in the driveway. And we'll plant tomatoes and zucchini in the back yard. And kids! We'll have at least three!"

"I'm not ready for kids yet!"



"And wait'll you see the inside," he whistled, "fifteen rooms! Five bedrooms, maid's quarters in the basement, a fully-equipped kitchen and laundry-room for you, a play room for the kids, a den for me. I can't tell you how much I've dreamed of having my very own den!"

"More than I've ever dreamed of having my own fully-equipped kitchen and laundry room, you can be sure of that!" Who would have believed it? A man and a woman having this conversation in this day and age?! "Look, Stanley ..."

"... And I'm going to put one of those vibrating E-Z-Y chairs in there, you know, one of those twenty-four position numbers your father has? And every night, when I come home after a hard day's work, I can lie back in my chair and relax while you, my loving wife, fetch me my slippers and my newspaper ..."

"God, Stanley, you don't want a wife, you want a Golden Retriever!"

He took my hand and brought it up to his lips. "I want you," he kissed the tips of my fingers, "you and only you."

"Yeah, well, what about what I want?" I pulled my hand away and put it in my pocket. "Has it ever occurred to you that maybe I don't want to live in Hampstead all my life?"

"Dammit, Shayna Pearl!" He banged his fist against the steering wheel. "When we first started seeing each other, you wanted the same things I did — at least, that's what you said."

"I thought I did — back then." I shrugged.

"So what made you change your mind? One day you just woke up and decided you'd rather be a Woman of the World instead of a Hampstead housewife?"

"Yeah, I guess you could say I woke up one day."

"What day?"

"I don't know, I guess it was one day this past March. I was sitting on the steps in front of my house, watching the snow melt on the lawns of Hampstead and all of a sudden I found myself holding my breath and screaming: SHIT — is this all there, is to life? Is Hampstead all there is to life? Is there life in Hampstead?"

"That's ridiculous!" he scoffed. "Hampstead is the ultimate!"

"My boss, Mrs. Finkelberg, she says I have no street smart like she had when she was growing up out in the East End. But she's wrong, you know. Because I know what's happening on the streets of Hampstead. In March the snow melts. Dog shit appears layer by layer. Swarms of Italian gardeners swoop down from atop their bright red trucks to clean up the dog shit and replace it with expensive sheep shit. Thousands of dollars worth of plants, shrubs, flowers and imported rocks are planted. Built-in lawn sprinklers are turned on. Signs go up saying:

Lawn Landscaping by Don Giovanni

&  
Sons

New cars bloom in driveways. Flashy blue and show-offy orange Corvettes or brassy gold and midnight black Trans Ams with obscene spread-eagles painted on the hoods spring up beside your basic Caddy and/or Mercedes. Sons of Hampstead come out to wash and wax their cars; fathers go off to play golf; daughters head for the hairdresser's to get the latest in perms, dyes and blow jobs; mothers ship the kids and their designer jeans off to camp or Europe or Out West. Mothers go off to play tennis and/or golf. Kids come home to bomb around the streets on their ten-speed bikes, Yamaha Chappys and fiberglass skateboards. Leaves fall.

Gardeners swoop down from atop their red trucks to rake them up. Brand new four wheel drives replace Corvettes sent into hibernation for the winter. Snow falls. Gardeners shovel ..."

"So what do you want?" he asked me. "What exactly do you want?"

"I only know what I don't want." I shrugged. "I don't want the same old shit. Now could you take me home? Please!"

"Okay," he said, putting the car in reverse and backing up to the house. "But as far as the marriage thing goes, I won't take 'no' for an answer."

"It'll never work, Stanley. We want different things out of life." 0

"I don't believe that for one minute! You're just going through some kind of phase or something."

"You can believe what you want to believe. You always do anyway." I opened the door and got out of the car. "Bye, Stanley."

"No, not goodbye, uh-uh, no," he said, "'cause you're going to feel differently after a good night's sleep. I just know you will."

"Don't hold your breath!" I slammed the car door behind me.

"That's exactly what I'm going to do," He popped up through the sun roof. "I'm going to hold my breath until you say 'yes!'"

"You do that Stanley. You just do that!"

"You can give me your answer when I pick you up for breakfast tomorrow, say around nine?"

"Damn you, Stanley, you've got to be the most exasperating person I know! You're even worse than my mother."

"See you in the morning, Shayna Pearl ... I love you!!!" He waved goodbye and drove off.

"The hell you will!" I muttered as I watched his car disappear around the corner. "Tomorrow I'm having breakfast with a shaggy buffalo."

### CHAPTER 3

The morning started off with a roar.

A deafening roar that shook my entire room.

An earthquake, I thought, sitting bolt-upright in bed. Montreal is having its first major earthquake and this is it!

I held my breath and braced myself for The End to come. Only The End never came. Just three more deafening roars. Then silence. Then Ma's anguished cry:

"OH, MY GOD, ARNIE, IT'S THE HELL'S ANGELS!!!"

I jumped out of bed and ran to the window.

"Oh, my God is right!" I moaned as I peeked out from behind my curtains. Parked over by the curb in front of the house was the biggest, blackest motorcycle I ever did see. And perched atop this biggest, blackest motorcycle, complete with silver-flecked helmet and mirror sunglasses, was one Peter Simon Freeman. "I'll kill him!" I cried. I was furious. For about half a second. Then I found myself smiling with delight. I just couldn't help it. I mean, he looked so wonderful sitting there on his motorcycle. Like a knight on a giant steed.

Nobody else seemed to think so though.

Ma, Dad, and Giovanni The Gardener, who just happened to be standing out front at the time, didn't seem to think he looked wonderful at all.

In fact, they didn't seem to be thinking much of anything.

They appeared to be, in a state of shock.

Over by the rock garden Ma was standing so still you'd have thought she was planted there. And Dad, who was in the midst of loading his golf stuff into the trunk of his Mercedes, was frozen in his tracks.

Even Giovanni The Gardener had stopped gardening.

An eternity passed by before anybody moved or spoke.

It was Peter.

"Hey there," he said, removing his helmet and sunglasses as he got off his bike and onto his feet. "Shay home?"

Nobody answered.

They all just stood there, bug-eyed, as if trying to convince themselves that seeing Peter was believing Peter.

And after the initial shock wore off, they just stood there, mouths agape, as if trying to figure out which part of him they found hardest to believe.

His gleaming black Norton Commando and accessories?

His unruly mop of curly light brown hair and his closely-cropped reddish-blond beard?

The gold earring that was dangling from his left earlobe and glittering in the morning sunlight?

The way his khaki army pants were tucked into his knee-high Frye boots?

The way he was naked from the waist up, save for a faded jean jacket that was hacked off at the sleeves and unbuttoned at the snaps?

The fact that at six-foot-something, he was a Gulliver among Lilliputians (the tallest of which was Dad, who barely reaches five-foot-six in his cleated golf shoes)?

All of the above?

"Shay Fine does live here, doesn't she?" he asked. He sure cut a formidable figure standing there. "You people DO speak English, don't you?"

"Oh, my God, Arnie," Ma suddenly snapped out of her trance, "I think he wants Shayna Pearl!"

"Yeah," Peter nodded, "that's who I want."

"Oh, God," I cried, "what the hell am I standing here for?" I threw on a tank top and a pair of jeans and after making the world's quickest pit stop at the bathroom to wash up, I flew out the front door and, as it happened, right into Peter's arms.

"Whoa, there," he said, "where's the fire?"

"What are you doing here?" I blurted.

"I came to ring the doorbell to see if you were home," he shrugged.

"Nobody down there would tell me if you were or you weren't."

"No, I mean, what are you doing HERE ... at my house?"

He just looked at me and laughed. "You know, I bet that wasn't easy."

"What wasn't?"

"Getting toothpaste on your nose like that." He rubbed the tip of my nose with his finger. "Either you've got bad aim or you get cavities in some pretty weird places."

"I was in a hurry."

"Mmm..." he licked his finger, "Crest?"

"It's Aim and you haven't answered my question yet!"

"About what I'm doing here you mean?"

"We were supposed to meet downtown at ten. You weren't supposed

to come HERE and pick me up at eight! Especially not on your motorcycle!"

"I just had to find out if we'd really have to ride out of here over your parents' dead bodies," he grinned.

"You're crazy!"

"And you love it:"

"You're freaking my parents out."

"And you LOVE it!"

I glanced over at Ma and Dad. There was smoke coming out of their respective ears. I swear there was. I didn't exactly love it. But I didn't exactly hate it either. Actually, it was all kind of exciting. "I don't think they like you."

"So I noticed!" He laughed that wonderful, crazy hoarse laugh of his. It sent shivers right through me. "And somehow I think the fun has just begun — 'cause here comes your old lady and she looks mean. Real meeeaaannn."

I turned around and sure enough there she was.

Mrs. Arnie Fine, M.D., Ob., Gyn.

Née Yenta Buttinsky.

And she looked mean. Real meeeaaannn. Her hands were firmly planted on her hips, her nostrils were flaring in and out, in and out; her eyes were ablaze with anger and her lips were all curled up in one of her notorious 'I'm Going To Eat You Alive' smiles. "Shayna Pearl, may I speak to you for a second — ALONE?" She grabbed my arm and pulled me aside.

"What is it, Ma?"

"Funny, I was just going to ask you that very same question!"

She looked from me to Peter and then from Peter to me. "What, in



God'sNAME is it?"

"That's Peter Simon Freeman, Ma. / Isn't he wonderful?"

"Where did you find him? At Granby Zoo?"

"Maaaa ..."

"Times sure have changed. In MY day we used to go to the zoo to visit the animals. The animals never came to visit us!"

"Very funny! It just so happens that I met him at the Cock 'n Bull. If you weren't so busy yelling at me last night for turning down Stanley's proposal, I might have told you about the interview."

"Interview?"

"First we're going to have breakfast and then I'm going to interview him for the Register. He's a singer. You know, the one Stanley was telling you about last night?"

"Oh," she breathed a sigh of relief. "If it's only an interview ..."

"Now, if you don't mind, we'd like to get going."

"Get going?" She almost threw a fit.

"Yeah; downtown."

"On that thing?!" She pointed to Peter's motorcycle.

"Ma, please!"

"Please nothing!" She went up to Peter and shook her finger at him. "Young man," she blasted him, "I did not spend twenty-three years of my life raising a daughter so she should go out and get herself maimed, or GodFORBID killed on one of those ... those things!"

"Ma, puleeese!" It's a good thing embarrassment isn't fatal or I would have died on the spot.

"Over my dead body will you go on that thing with him!"

I looked up at Peter and gave him a helpless shrug. I wouldn't have blamed him if he took off right then and there.

But he didn't.

He just stood there with his arms folded and he looked down at the puny little woman who was screaming blue murder into his belly button and he laughed that wonderful laugh of his. "You don't have to worry about Shay getting killed or maimed while riding on my thing!" he told her. He told her but good. "Ain't never been a woman yet who's been killed or maimed while riding on MY thing!" He winked at me.

We both cracked up laughing.

I laughed so hard I almost peed in my pants.

"I don't think this is a laughing matter." Ma was really rattled. "Those things are dangerous!"

"I'm not even gonna touch that one!" Peter muttered.

"It sure is a beautiful motorcycle," I told him. "I can't wait to go on it." I looked at Ma and gave her one of what she calls my 'Smart Alec' smirks. I couldn't get over how puny and ineffective she looked next to Peter. "I just can't wait."

"You're not going!" Ma said between clenched teeth.

"Oh, yes I am, Mother," I said, suddenly feeling ten feet tall.

"I'm over twenty-one, in case you've forgotten."

"C'mon, let's split," Peter took my hand and pulled me toward his bike.

Ma was fit to be tied. "Arnie! Don't just stand there like a dope, do something!"

Dad, forever lurking in the background, forever silent, finally

spoke his mind. "When are you going to learn to stop making a big issue, Sylvia?" he growled. "The minute you make a big issue these kids today go and do something out of spite. Christ, when are you going to learn?"

"Arnie," she pleaded, "do something. Stop her!"

"I'm late for my starting time, Sylvia ..." He slipped into his car and backed out of the driveway, giving me a stern look as he rolled by.

I got the message loud and clear. It meant:

"Stop aggravating your mother, will you? Can't you see she's driving me crazy?"

I blew him a kiss as he took off down the street and raced toward the peace and quiet of his beloved Elmsdale Golf and Country Club.

"Oooooo, that man!" Ma cried out in frustration.

"Well, see you around, Ma." I waved goodbye to her.

"You stay away from that thing!"

"There's nothing to worry about, really," Peter reassured her.

"Hell, I take my five-year-old son for rides all the time and he just loves it."

"Aha! He's married!"

My heart sunk to my feet. "M-m-married?"

"Don't listen to her!" He pulled me by the arm. "C'mon, you're gonna love riding on my bike. It'll blow your mind!"

"She'll blow nothing of the kind!" Ma grabbed my other arm and pulled me in the opposite direction. For a moment there I thought they were going to split me right in two. Like a wishbone.

"Ma, leggo of my arm!" I pleaded. "You're pulling it out of the

socket!"

She loosened her grip and I fell right into Peter's arms.

"How could you go with him?" she glared at me. "What will people think when they see you riding around on a motorcycle with a married man? What about his wife?"

"What about my wife?" Peter shrugged.

"What will she think if she finds out that you're riding around with another woman?"

"She couldn't care less."

"Ha! What kind of wife would have an attitude like that?"

"An ex-one. I'm divorced."

"Divorced?" Her whole face puckered. Like she'd just sucked a lemon or eaten a sour grape.

"Two years already."

"God, that's wonderful ... I mean I'm sorry!" I blurted, unable to conceal my joy. He's free, I thought, he's free! I was so ecstatic even my forehead was smiling. And my hands were laughing. And my tits were jiggling.

Ma was mortified. "Get into the house this minute and put on a bra before those bazooms of yours give you two black eyes!" she muttered into my ear. I could hear her teeth grinding. They were grinding something fierce. She should only have known that I got dressed in such a hurry, I wasn't wearing underwear either. "And from the way your nipples are jutting out, you're liable to poke your eyes out altogether!"

I ignored her. What she had to say was the same old thing. The same old shit. I was much more interested in what Peter had to say and besides, he didn't seem to mind the way my tits were jiggling around or

the way my nipples were jutting out of my rather skimpy tank top. He didn't seem to mind one bit. From the way he was eyeing them and grinning, I could tell he was getting really turned on. So was I for that matter.

"C'mon," he said, slapping a motorcycle helmet on my head, "let's get going. I have to stop by my apartment on the way. There's something I just gotta do there before I could even think of having breakfast!"

"Sure, anything you say." I found myself telling him.

"You're not taking her on that thing!" Ma warned him.

Peter ignored her and proceeded to do up the chin strap on my helmet.

"God, you're amazing," I whispered into his ear, "I never met anyone who wasn't afraid of my mother before."

"Just stick with me kid," he winked, "and I'll liberate you from all this shit in no time!"

"In that case, you must be the Knight In Shining Armor I've been waiting for!" I giggled. "The one my mother said didn't exist."

"Oh, she said that, did she now?" He grinned. There was a devilish gleam in his eye. "Well, we're just gonna have to show her!" He stripped off his faded jean jacket with the hacked-off sleeves and he smoothed it out on the ground next to his bike. "Sir Gallahad, your Knight In Shining Armor, at your service, m'lady." He took a deep bow. "My steed is awaiting." And then, much to my delight -- and Ma's horror -- he scooped me up into his arms and hoisted me onto the back of his bike.

"Put her down!" Ma yelled at him, "Put her down this instant,

you — you Svengali you!"

"Nice meeting you too," Peter told her as he snatched his jacket up off the ground and handed it to me for safekeeping. "We must do this again sometime."

"Shayna Pearl!"

"Bye Ma!" I yelled as Peter climbed aboard his bike and revved up the engine. "HAVE A NICE DAY!" I wrapped my arms around his waist and we sped off, with Peter half-naked, through the super-clean streets of Hampstead.

"SHAYNA PEARL, COME BACKKKKKKKKKKKK!!!!!!!!!"

Poor Ma.

Poor hysterical Ma.

No doubt, she spent the whole day worrying about what was going to happen to me while I was on the motorcycle with Peter. And it was all for no good reason too. I mean, she had nothing to worry about while I was ON the motorcycle with Peter.

It was when I got OFF the motorcycle with Peter that she should have started worrying.

I guess you could say Peter and I rushed into things if rushing into things means that we slept with each other before love went through its standard Six-Week Incubation Period, but once we got down to his apartment in the McGill ghetto there was just no stopping us.

We wanted each other so badly it hurt.

Anyway, it all happened so naturally — so beautifully — that it didn't feel cheap or anything like that.

It felt right.

Especially after we shared a couple of big, fat joints — Columbia's finest, Peter called them.

Especially after Peter put my favourite album on the stereo, the soundtrack to the movie A Star Is Born.

Especially after Peter pulled me down to the rug on his den floor and started kissing me like I'd never been kissed before.

God, he stirred up feelings inside me I never even knew I had. I didn't even know where they came from or why — all I knew was that there just seemed to be no end to them. They just kept getting stronger and stronger until I thought I was going to burst.

And then he pulled off my top and he started caressing my breasts.

Touching them.

Feeling them.

Kissing them.

Licking them.

Sucking and biting them.

My whole body seemed to come alive. Like there was an electric charge going through it. Suddenly I found myself breathing hard. And I started squirming uncontrollably. Like I had ants in my pants or something.

And then Peter undid my jeans and slipped them off.

And then he did the same with his.

And then we started rolling around on the rug — so excited; so naked! Barbra Streisand and Kris Kristofferson were singing "Lost Inside of You" on the stereo. Just like they did in A Star Is Born before they made love for the first time. It was all so perfect. So incredibly perfect. Especially when Peter's hand started caressing my

vagina. God, it felt good. Insanely good. I had to bite my tongue to keep from screaming out with excitement or whatever it was that was turning my body into an ever-tightening knot.

And then his mouth started travelling downwards.

Down.

Down.

Down.

Down to my vagina.

And his fingers spread the lips.

And his tongue started sliding up and down; up and down.

Exploring it. Kissing it. Licking it. Sucking it.

Until I thought I might jump right out of my skin. "Oh, God," I found myself moaning, "Ohhhh, Godddd ...."

And then we rolled around some more and I found myself reaching out for Peter's penis.

His hardened, pulsing penis.

My first.

I wasn't quite sure what to do with it though. So I just let my hands explore it. Caress it. Fondle it. The way my best — and far more experienced friend, Jo Ann Pecker, showed me how it was done on "Fluffy," the stuffed elephant's trunk one night in Camp Hiawatha many moons ago. The way I'd been doing it ever since — in all those fantasies about the bearded Man of My Dreams. Anyway, I must have been doing something right because Peter started writhing and moaning and groaning. Like he was really enjoying it.

And then I got on top of him and I started kissing my way down his body.



Down.

Down.

Down.

Until I came face to face with his penis. Boy, it sure did look big. Enormous even. Like one of those foot-long hot dogs they sell at La Ronde. For a moment there I was filled with panic. It just didn't seem possible that such a huge thing could fit into my tiny little mouth.

And then I remembered something Jo Ann once told me.

"Giving a blow-job is all very much like eating a popsicle," I could just hear her sing-songy voice saying, "you plunge it in and out of your mouth like you would a popsicle ... you lick it, suck it and slurp it like you would a popsicle ... you try to make it last as long as possible like a popsicle ... you do EVERYTHING you'd do with a popsicle except ..."

My mind went blank.

I couldn't for the life of me remember what came after 'except'. It was only after my teeth sort of clamped down on Peter's penis and he sort of cried out in pain that it came back to me.

"... You do everything you'd do with a popsicle," I could hear Jo Ann's voice loud and clear, "except take a bite out of it, of course."

Of course. After I remembered that vital tidbit of information it was smooth sailing. I followed Jo Ann's instructions to a "T" (I guess you could almost have called it a 'blowjob by numbers') and I just couldn't believe the effect my mouth was having on Peter's penis. On his entire body for that matter.

God, I was driving him berserk.

Hell, I've melted a few popsicles in my time, but this -- this was far better than any crummy old popsicle! I mean, the things a woman's mouth can do to a man twice her size!

The pleasure she can bring him.

The ecstasy,

I never dreamed.

I just never dreamed!

It was a whole new feeling for me. A whole new world.

I just kept licking, sucking and slurping away until Peter gently withdrew himself from my mouth and pulled me up toward him so that we were face-to-face, mouth-to-mouth and crotch-to-crotch.

And then the most wonderful thing of all began to happen.

The Moment of Moments.

The icing on the cake, if you will.

Peter rolled over on top of me and he started poking his penis up in between my legs.

Poking and prodding.

Prodding and poking.

"You on The Pill or something?" he whispered. His voice was hoarse; strained. There was a kind of breathless urgency about it. An urgency not unlike that of the throbbing penis that was poking its way up into my vagina.

For a second there I froze; tensed up.

I wondered if it was the right time to tell him I was a virgin. With him being twenty-seven and a father, I wasn't sure how he'd react if he knew he was about to take the first plunge into No Man's Land.

"Are you?" he whispered again.

Poking and prodding.

Prodding and poking.

"Yes!" I cried out. "OH, GOD ... YES!!!" I knew it was a risk -- lying the way I did. I knew it yet I lied anyway. I just didn't want to spoil something so beautiful -- something so natural with a pain-in-the-ass technicality. I wanted Peter to concentrate on all of me; on us. I didn't want him to be preoccupied with a technicality.

And then he reached down and guided himself inside me.

And then he was inside me.

And then it was definitely too late to scream: "STOP: I'm a Virgin!"

Because I wasn't one anymore.

And I was glad. Not to mention amazed. I mean, it didn't even hurt. And it just slid in so easily; so naturally, so painlessly!

It felt as if it belonged there.

I liked having it there.

And that amazed me to no end.

I heard you weren't even supposed to like your first time. Jo Ann didn't. A lot of the other girls I know didn't either. Time after time I can remember sitting over coffee and strawberry cheesecake at Nuddick's Restaurant and listening to my friends recount their first time horror stories. Each would take turns describing the first time horror she found to be the most horrible:

"The pain," one would grimace.

"The bloody mess," another would shudder.

"The guilt," a third would wince.

"The fear and the awkwardness," they'd all agree. "That's the

worst!"

But I felt none of those things.

I felt wonderful. Lying there with Peter inside me -- it felt right.

I started moving to his rhythm.

I caught on pretty fast too. Hell, it was as natural as trotting a horse. He pushed up; I pushed down. He pushed down; I pushed up. We really went well together, I thought. In fact we were downright perfect.

Even the music was perfect.

Barbra Streisand, the woman I admire most in the world, the woman who made it against the odds, my hero, was singing "Woman In The Moon" and it was like she was urging me onward.

Forward.

Upward.

It was like having my own cheering section.

God, how sweet it was, how exciting it was to feel a man's body -- Peter's body -- so entangled with mine. So entwined. Like two pieces of rope bound together and knotted as one.

And then the knot got tighter and tighter and tighter until we reached the point where we just HAD to unravel.

And we did.

Boy, did we EVER!

CHAPTER 4

"Man, am I starved!" Peter said over breakfast at Beauty's Restaurant. "There's nothing like one of Beauty's famed 'Mish-Mash' omelettes for the after-sex, after-grass munchies!"

"Uh-huh," I replied, picking at my food.

"What's the matter? Aren't you hungry? I thought you'd be starved after this morning. Christ, you must have had ten orgasms!"

"Peter?" I blurted. "There's something I think you should know." I had to tell him. I felt so dishonest. "I've never been, you-know, with a man before."

"You WHAT?!" I thought his face was going to crumble up and fall on his plate. "You mean ... you mean you're a virgin?"

"Not anymore, I'm not."

"A FUCKING virgin?"

"I -- I guess you could see it that way."

"But ... but there was no pain ... no blood ... no mess ... it was so clean!"

I let out a nervous giggle. "You sound like a Tide commercial!"

"But how?" he marvelled.

I shrugged. "I guess I broke more than my pelvis when I fell off that horse at camp ten years ago."

He shook his head in disbelief. "God, I thought you were kind of innocent, but I never dreamed ... nobody's THAT innocent anymore!"

"It wasn't like I was saving myself for marriage or anything corny like that," I explained, "it's just that I never met anyone before who I wanted to be that close to."

"But you knew what you were doing. I mean, your mouth, your hands, your body — hell, you sure seemed to know what you were doing!" I guess he forgot that I almost bit the tip of his penis off. "How'd you know what to do?"

"Jo Ann Pecker."

"Whose pecker?"

"Not whose pecker, silly!" I giggled. "Jo Ann Pecker. My best friend."

He gave me a strange look. "You a dyke?"

"No, of course not! Jo Ann is married. To Dr. Richard Pecker. He's a shrink. Or at least he will be as soon as he finishes his residency in psychiatry at the Jewish General."

He shook his head, as if he was trying to clear it. "What has THAT got to do with the price of rice in China?"

"Well, you see, it's like this," I explained, "Jo Ann and I have lunch a few times a week at Nuddick's — their strawberry cheesecake is out of this world — and she tells me, amongst other things, all about her sex life with her husband — that is whenever she has something new and improved to report — though lately all she seems to talk about is being pregnant — which is what she is. Oh, and I read Cosmopolitan, of course."

"Jesus!" He rolled his eyes around in his head.

"What's wrong? Did I go too fast for you? Sometimes I talk fast when I'm nervous — and right now I think I'm nervous."

"Pheeeuuwww," he sighed, tugging at his beard and shaking his head over and over, "when I came here to Beauty's to have a Mish-Mash omelette, I never dreamed I'd get a mish-mash conversation thrown in on the side!" He picked up his fork and plunged it, with a vengeance, into his omelette, a rather strange concoction of God-knows-what that tastes infinitely better than it looks. For the longest time he didn't say a word. He just sat there stabbing his omelette repeatedly with his fork while I sat there wincing and biting my lower lip. "Why didn't you tell me before?" he said finally.

"You didn't ask."

"I asked you if you were on The Pill ... oh, my God, you're NOT on The Pill, are you?"

"Uh-uh."

"You're not on anything?"

"Just FemERONS and the occasional Pamprin."

"Holy shit!" He smacked himself on the head with the palm of his hand. "Jesus Christ on crutches!"

"I'm sorry." Tears welled up in my eyes. I felt awful. Like a criminal or something. "Really I am." I tried to blink back the tears but they wouldn't stay put. They streamed down my face and splashed onto my Mish-Mash omelette.

Which was just, as well. As it turned out, Peter just happens to be one of those men who hates to see a woman cry.

"Aw, hey, c'mon, don't bawl." He reached over and wiped a tear away with his finger. "C'mon now, it's not the end of the world ... I hope."

"It's not?" I brightened.

"Nawww," he smiled at me, "just don't do it again, okay?"

"You must think I'm the world's biggest idiot," I winced.

"Naw," he reached out and stroked my hair. "Let's just say you got carried away in a moment of great passion."

"That's just what happened. Really. No shit."

"Okay, but from now on just be honest with me, okay? Lies have a way of catching up with you — especially when you lie about being on The Pill."

"It was really stupid of me, wasn't it? God, I could end up pregnant!" I shuddered at the thought.

"It's too late to worry about that now. C'mon," he grabbed my hand and pulled me to my feet, "let's go. We have things to do today."

"Like what?"

"Like going to the drugstore to buy some safes for one thing. Not that I'm crazy about using safes, mind you, but they'll have to do for now."

"Are we going back to your apartment to do it again?" I cried, unable to conceal my excitement.

"Later," he laughed, "MUCH later. Right now I have a rehearsal to get to. And then we're going to spend the afternoon with my kid. And then I have a show to do tonight. Think you could hold out 'till then?"

"I'll try." I gave him a look out of the corner of my eye.

"But it won't be easy."

"Cripes, I've created a monster!"

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Just this." He wrapped his arms around me and kissed me in



front of the entire restaurant. "There now," he grinned sheepishly.

"That ought to hold you 'till tonight."

"I don't have a choice, do I?"

"Nope. Anyway, you've got a story to do, remember?"

"A story?"

"Yeah, the one you're supposed to do on my band?"

"Oh, THAT story!" It had kind of slipped my mind.

"Yeah, that story. It WAS the reason why we arranged to meet today, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, but that was before I lost my Reporter's Impartiality -- if you get my drift."

"Oh, I get your drift, alright, Babe," he laughed, "and it's knocking me right on my ass!"

Talk about knocking someone right on their ass.

Everything Peter and I did knocked me right on mine. His rehearsal in the morning, his son in the afternoon, his body at night, the way he kept calling me 'Babe' -- it all just knocked me for a loop.

Peter Simon Freeman was the most incredible thing that ever happened to me.

And if there is such a thing as a 'moment' when you realize that you're really in love with someone, I think my 'moment' came in the middle of the afternoon. In the toy department at Eaton's. The thing that really grabbed me was the sight of Peter standing there amongst the Big Birds and the Cookie Monsters with his little son, Nicky, propped high atop his shoulders. I actually got the goose-bumps from watching them together -- the way Peter kept letting Nicky dip backwards

and hang upside down; the way Nicky would then shriek with laughter and drool all over Peter's backside; the way father and son were getting off on each other. It was all I could do to keep from running up and pinching them every minute to make sure they weren't just something that stepped out of a dream or a fantasy or a Coke Adds Life commercial.

And Nicky! Nicky with his curly mop of reddish-blond hair, pouting eyes, button nose and Pepsodent smile ... with his Miami Dolphin's football shirt, faded blue jean overalls and little Addidas running shoes ... with his tendency to mimic Peter's every gesture and every word -- including some of the bluer words like schmuck, cock-sucker and fuckin' bitch (which left more than a few passers-by red-faced with embarrassment) ... I mean, he was just too cute for words!

He was, in Peter's own words, a "gas."

"If I ever have a kid I want one just like him," I kept telling Peter -- much to his delight.

And I meant it.

I was head-over-heels in love with father and son. I could already picture the three of us playing touch football on The Mountain or skiing at Mont Tremblant or vacationing in a secluded little beach house off the coast of Maine.

I made up my mind right then and there: I wanted in. In for keeps. And you can't get in much deeper than I did when I went back home with Peter at the end of the night.

After we smoked some more grass and made love for a second incredible time, Peter asked me to stay over.

"The whole entire night?" I cried.

"Yeah, the whole entire night," he laughed. "What'd you think I

meant?"

I bit my lip. "I don't know."

"What's the matter. Don't you want to stay?"

"Oh, I do! More than anything. It's just that ..."

"Your mother again, huh?" he frowned.

"If I stay out all night; she'll send the entire M.U.C. police force after me. Maybe even the R.C.M.P. Quite possibly the C.I.A. If she hasn't already!"

"What do you mean — if she hasn't already?" he asked. "I thought you called her earlier this evening to let her know you were still alive or something?"

"No, I said I tried to reach her but there was no answer. She must be up at the club with my father. They always have a big deal up there every Saturday night."

He glanced at the clock. "It's pretty late. I'm sure they must be home by now. Why don't you try again?" He put on a robe and headed out the bedroom door. "I'm going to the kitchen to get some munchies."

"What the hell am I going to tell her?" I yelled after him.

"I'm sure you'll think of something!"

"Thanks a heap!!! I lay there panic-stricken. I knew I had to call Ma and tell her something. But what? That I'd just become a woman and she should wish me mazel tov? That I broke my hymen and couldn't be moved for twenty-four hours in case of hemorrhage? Or maybe I was supposed to ask her, Woman to Woman, if she wouldn't mind my sleeping through the night with the guy I'd already slept with? I could almost hear the conversation:

"You lost your WHAAAAATTTT????!!!!!"

"My virginity, Ma. My maidenhead."

"To that -- that animal?"

"Don't worry about it, Ma. He didn't tear me in half, if that's what you mean. Just because he's over six feet tall doesn't mean the rest of him is ..."

"Oh, God, Shayria Pearl, I think you lost your HEAD, never mind your maidenhead!"

"Ma, I'm a woman now, be happy for me."

"That Svengali -- I ought to have him arrested!"

"For what? Breaking and entering? I mean, really, Ma, I'm twenty-three years old!"

"Kurveh!" CLICK.

So much for that approach, I decided. I knew I'd have to come up with something a lot better than the truth if I wanted everything to work out happily ever after. If I wanted there to be an 'ever after' period. And then it came to me. Jo Ann! If anybody would know what to do, I thought, she would. She always has an answer for everything. I picked up the phone and called her. She answered on the first ring.

"Jo, it's me, Shay," I blurted, "did I wake you?"

"Uh uh," she replied, "Richard and I just got home from the club. It was 'Country and Western' night. How come you and Stanley weren't there?"

"It's a long story. Listen Jo, I ..."

"You should have been there, Shay. Everybody was there."

"Ya, well ..."

"Marsha Slutsky came with her A-rab boyfriend. Some nerve, huh? Showing up at a Jewish golf club like Elmsdale with an A-rab? Everybody

was talking about what a nerve it was. Oh, yeah, and you had to see Marcie Karpman. She was walking around with her tits hanging out from here to tomorrow. Flaunting them at everything in pants. Including the bartender. Oh, yeah, and this is the best! You've just gotta hear this. She kept ordering Pina Coladas and calling them PENIS Coladas -- especially when there were men around. That girl's really been hot-to-trot since her divorce, don't you think? Actually, that's probably why she's divorced. Oh, and by the way, I also saw your parents there tonight. Your mother was really packing in those Penis Coladas if I do say so myself ..."

"My mother?" I was taken aback. "But she doesn't drink! She pops Valium!"

"Yeah, well, if you think that's weird, wait 'till you hear the rest of it. When I went over and asked her where you were tonight, she got this funny look in her eye and she started rattling on and on about what a lucky woman my mother is to have a wonderful daughter like me -- you know, because I'm married to a doctor who looks like Warren Beatty if Warren Beatty had a Jewish nose and because I live in a brand new two-hundred-thousand-dollar home in Cote Saint Luc and because I'm going to have a baby and all that ... is there something going on that I don't know about?"

"Jo, I need your help!" I could hardly conceal my desperation.

"The most wonderful guy in the world has asked me to spend the night with him and I need an alibi -- you know, for my mother."

She tittered. "So you and Stanley are finally going to do it after all these months, eh? Well, what do you know?"

"It's not Stanley, Jo," I blurted.

"What?" she cried. "Who then? When? Where? What?"

"I can't get into all the details right now. He's waiting for me in the next room. I'll tell you all about it tomorrow. Right now, you've got to help me, please!"

"Okay, but at least tell me his name so I don't spend the whole night dying of curiosity."

"It's Peter. Peter Simon Freeman."

"Hey, that sounds familiar. Is his mother Bessie Freeman? Does he have a sister Nancy? If he does then I know who he is ... my mother plays canasta with his mother every week ..."

I thought I was going to blow a fuse. "Jo Ann, ~~this is~~ no time to be playing Jewish Geography for crying out loud!" Sometimes she can be so exasperating. "This is an emergency."

"Okay, okay, just tell me one more thing ... what does he do?"

"He's a rock singer."

"No, I mean, what does he do for a LIVING?"

"I just told you, he's a rock singer."

"Eeeuw! Isn't that an unusual occupation? For a Jewish guy, I mean?" There was a short pause. "He IS Jewish, isn't he?"

"I dunno ... I guess ... he never said he wasn't."

"You sleep with a guy and you don't know if he's Jewish or what?"

"Who cares? He's gorgeous!"

"Who cares? Your parents would — oh, God he's not an A-rab, is he?"

"JO ANN, PLEASE!" I wailed. "I have to call my mother yet!"

"Okay, okay ... how about Plan 'A'?"

"Plan 'A'?"

"Yeah, you remember? Whenever I used to spend the night at Richard's before we were married, I'd tell my mother I was sleeping at your house. And then if she needed to get in touch with me, she'd call you and you'd tell her I was in the middle of taking a shower or something. Then you'd call me at Richard's and I'd call her back."

"Oh, yeah," my head was reeling. "That Plan 'A'."

"It worked every time, didn't it?"

"Yeah, yeah, it's perfect, Jo. Let's do it!"

"Okay then ... give me the number where you are and then call your mother and tell her you're sleeping here tonight."

I gave her the number. "There's just one problem though. How do I come to be sleeping at your house all of a sudden? My mother knows I wasn't with you tonight. She saw you at the club."

She stopped to think for a moment. "No problem ... tell her we just bumped into each other at Nuddick's and I asked you to sleep over because ... because Richard was called out to the hospital on an all-night emergency and I was too petrified to stay alone in my new house. How's that?"

"God, you have the most devious mind of anyone I know!"

"Thank you. And speaking of my new house, you've got to come over and see my new living room furniture. It's for fainting!"

"I will. Soon. Oh, and Jo?"

"Yeah?"

"You sure she's going to buy it, eh?"

"Take my word for it. She'd much rather believe that you were sleeping at my house than spending the night with a man. There isn't a mother alive who wants to know from her daughter's sex life. It says

so right in that book I lent you awhile back. What was it called -- 'My Mother/Myself' or something? Anyway, it says right there in black and white that mothers HATE to think of their daughters as sexual beings. They don't want to know that we're doing It and they especially don't want to know that we're enjoying It. So just tell it to her the way we agreed and everything will be smooth sailing. You'll see."

Jo Ann was right of course, as usual.

Everything was smooth sailing as far as my phone call to Ma was concerned.

Sure she gave me a good blasting for going on that "monstrous thing" with "that hoodlum" and she was pissed off as all hell that I didn't bother to phone her all day to let her know that I was alive and well and still in one piece, but when I told her that I was spending the night at Jo Ann's, she was delighted.

"That's fine with me," she said, "Jo Ann's always been a good influence on you. Maybe SHE can talk some sense into you!"

And that was the end of that.

I felt a couple of twinges of guilt (accompanied by palpitations, sweating and appendicitis-like stomach cramps) after I put the phone down but then Peter got into bed with a cartonful of Kaluah and milk and a bag of Oreo cookies and pretty soon I was feeling no pain.

It's kind of hard to feel pain when you're having Kaluah and milk and cookies in bed with a naked man.

Especially when you're lying there, licking away at the cream centre of an Oreo, just like you always do whenever you eat Oreos, and he turns to you and says:

"Christ, did anyone ever tell you you're a very seductive eater?"



From that moment on I forgot I even had a mother, let alone that I had just told her the first major lie of my life.

"A seductive eater? Who me?" I giggled. The nicest thing anybody ever said about me and food was that I eat like a bird. "Really?"

"It must be the way you're lying there and licking away at that cream centre," he said. "It's almost as if you're giving head to that cookie."

"In that case," I gave him a look out of the corner of my eye, "do I swallow it or spit it out?"

"Swallow it," he grinned, "definitely swallow it!"

"Really?" Suddenly curiosity — or something — got the better of me. "Funny, I could have sworn you were Jewish!"

"I am. Why, does it make a difference?"

"I dunno. I guess not. I just didn't think Jewish guys expected Jewish girls to actually swallow it. Only shiksehs ..."

"Who the fuck told you that?" he cried.

"My friend Jo Ann ..."

"I don't think your friend knows her ass from her elbow!"

"Where do you think I learned how to eat Oreos?"

He laughed. "Well, on second thought ..."

"There's a real art to eating these things, you know?" I don't know what came over me but I was really getting turned on by the kinkiness of the whole thing. "A real art." I kicked off the covers so that we were both lying there stark naked and then slowly, oh-so-slowly, I raised a cookie to my lips and set my mouth upon that cream centre in the most cockteasing way I knew how — gliding my tongue over the smooth surface; making exaggerated sucking noises; smacking my lips

suggestively; smiling seductively.

Peter went absolutely bananas. He was literally panting; drooling even. His entire body seemed to be rippling with appreciation. Applauding my performance. Urging me on.

Even his penis sprang up to give me a standing ovation.

God, God, God.

I couldn't believe the effect I was having on him.

I mean, the things a woman can do to a man just by eating an

Oreo cookie!

The things she could do to his penis without even touching it.

The power she can have over it.

The awesome power.

The mystical snake charmer's power.

I never dreamed.

I just never dreamed!

"Jesus," Peter whispered hoarsely as he lunged at me, "sweet Je-ZUS!"

God, what a night! Peter taught me to screw in places I didn't even know you could screw. Like the bean-bag chair in his den. Like the shower. Sweet Je-ZUS what a night! I never felt so free in my whole life. So guilt free. So problem free. So family free. So absolutely and completely free. Hell, I was floating so high I didn't think I would ever come down!

Which just goes to show how little I knew about life.

Not to mention the Law of Gravity.

Because if I knew anything about either, I'd have known that nothing floats freely forever.

That whatever goes up has got to come down sooner or later.

And that if you're the only daughter of Sylvia and Arnie Fine, M.D., Ob., Gyn., chances are you're going to come down a lot sooner than later.

SpIashdown to planet earth came at approximately eleven A.M. on The Morning After.

Actually, it was more like a crash landing.

Or a scene from a 'Gidget' movie.

When I pulled up to the house in a taxi, I found the whole damn family sitting there on the front steps and waiting for me: two brothers, two sisters-in-law, four nieces, one grandmother, one father, one mother -- and Stanley, all on the verge of mass hysteria.

"WHERE WERE YOU????!!!" they all screeched in perfect unison, as if they'd been rehearsing all morning long.

"And don't tell me you were at the Peckers'!" Ma shook her finger at me. Like I was a naughty puppy that had just disgraced itself on the living room rug. Apparently she failed to notice that I was a New Woman -- footloose and fancy free. "It just so happens that I called the Peckers' first thing this morning and Jo Ann's husband told me that you weren't there. Nor, as far as he knew, did you spend the night in his guest room. In fact, he hasn't seen hide nor hair of you in weeks!"

My blood ran cold. "What were you doing calling the Peckers' anyway? Checking up on me?"

"Noooo, I wasn't checking up on youuuu!" she sneered. "It just so happens that I called there because I wanted you and the Peckers to join us for brunch. Your father, GodBLESS him, went out to the Brown

Derby this morning and bought enough bagels, cream cheese and lox to feed an army."

"I already ate!" I glared at her.

"I told you she probably already had breakfast!" my not-too-bright sister-in-law, Arlene said to my wonderful brother, Terry. "Everybody was worried for nothing. I knew she wasn't going to starve to death just because she didn't come home for breakfast."

"We weren't worried because of that, you pea brain!" my wonderful brother, Terry laced into her. "Honestly, Arl, you're not just getting older, you're getting dumber!"

"Shayna Pearl's gonna get a spanking, Shayna Pearl's gonna get a spanking!" my little nieces gleefully chanted in the background. "Grandma's gonna give her such a smack on the seat, she won't be able to sit down for a week!"

"You think maybe she spent the night with that Hell's Angels character Ma was telling us about?" I heard my other wonderful brother, David say to his incredibly pregnant wife, Eva, who was busy chomping on a bagel that was oozing cream cheese from all ends.

"Ohhhhhh!" Not-Too-Bright Arlene suddenly experienced a rare surge of brain activity. "Is THAT why we were worried?"

"Mmmmm ..." said Incredibly Pregnant Eva as she demolished the last remnants of her bagel and licked the cream cheese off her fingers, "all this talk about food is making me hungry. I think I'll go inside and get something to eat."

"And speaking of breakfast, Shayna Pearl," Stanley had to throw in his two cents worth, "we had a date for breakfast yesterday to discuss some very important matters. I don't appreciate being stood up;

you know."

"You're hungry, Mameleh?" gurgled Bobbeh Fine, who, owing to the fact that she's as deaf as a post, was totally oblivious to the goings-on around her. Lucky duck. "You want I should make you something to eat?"

"Look, I'm sure this is nothing but a big misunderstanding," Ma forced a smile to her lips, "I'm sure Shayna Pearl has a perfectly reasonable explanation, don't you, dear?"

"Ya," Bobbeh Fine nodded enthusiastically, "zi 1st a shayna maidelah ..."

"Don't you dear?"

"Such a nice girl ... such a good girl."

"Well, young lady," Dad fumed, "we're waiting for an explanation. What do you have to say for yourself?"

"YOU ALL DRIVE ME INSANE!" I burst into tears and ran upstairs to my room.

"Jeez, there's just no talking to you these days without you getting all hysterical!" Dad yelled after me. "What the hell is wrong with you anyway? Is it THAT time of the month again or what?"

CHAPTER 5

Ma shook me so hard my teeth rattled.

"Wake up, Shayna Pearl," she said, "we have to talk."

"Go away!" I buried my head under my pillow. "Christ, can't a person get any privacy around this place?" Stupid question. A person can get more privacy living in a toll booth on the Laurentian Autoroute. "Just leave me alone!"

"No, I will not!" She yanked me into a sitting position and propped me up against the wall. "I'm worried to death about you. First you take off on that motorcycle yesterday morning with that ... that hairy hoodlum! Then you spend the entire night GodKNOWS where doing GodKNOWS what. Then you come home this morning — looking like the Wreck of the Hesperus, I might add — and what do you do? You crawl into bed and go to sleep until ... until ... what time is it now?" She glanced at her watch. "Until five o'clock in the afternoon! This just isn't like you."

"Oh, give me a break, will you?" I groaned. I didn't feel so hot. My thigh and stomach muscles ached something awful. My vagina felt as if it had been scraped raw — like the time I slipped off the seat of Terry's ten speed bike and landed on the metal bar. My head was throbbing. Even my tongue hurt. But then I thought about last night and I couldn't help but smile. It was definitely worth every ache and every pain, I decided. "I mean, whose life is it anyway?"

"You know," she plunked herself down on the bed with a heavy sigh, "I don't even know who you are anymore. I look at you and I see a stranger." She shook her head. "A stranger."

"Yeah? Well, when I look at me, I see a woman!" I glanced in the mirror and smiled at my reflection. "And I like what I see. For the first time in ages I like what I see."

"And just what, exactly, is THAT supposed to mean?"

"You know," I glanced around my room with its baby pink walls and its frilly pink curtains and its fluffy pink and white carpet and its bright white furniture with the gold trim, "this room sucks!"

"What? What's wrong with it?"

"It's decorated in Early Barbie Doll, that's what's wrong with it!" My blood was boiling. Stupid woman, why couldn't she understand? "I outgrew it ages ago! But you — you've got this dumb hang-up about letting me redecorate it. Putting natural stain on the furniture was out of the question, you said, because brown furniture is for offices. Painting the walls white or blue was a no-no because pink is for girls; blue is for boys and white is for hospitals, you claimed. And those stuffed animals!" I pointed to the top shelf of my bookcase with its menagerie of Snoopy dogs and teddy bears. "Every time I put them away in the basement, you haul them out and put them back on the shelf!" I picked up my pillow and flung it at the bookcase. One of the Snoopy dogs careened off its shelf and landed on the floor with a thud. "I'm the only twenty-three-year-old woman I know who lays herself down to sleep each night with a giant Snoopy dog at her feet!"

"Are you quite through now?" she said, her eyes narrowing.

"Ha! I've only just begun!"

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I spoke to Jo Ann awhile ago. She said her husband was mistaken about you not being there when I called this morning. It seems he had just come home from an all-night emergency at the hospital and he wasn't aware of the fact that you were asleep in his guest room." She gave me a piercing look. "He WAS mistaken, wasn't he?"

"And what if he wasn't?" I glared back at her.

"What?" she stared at me in disbelief. Poor Ma. Poor pre-historic Ma. She still believes that a girl must play the Dating Game to get her man. According to her way of thinking, a boy must pick you up at the door and bring you home at a decent hour (GodFORBID the neighbors should see you walking in on the Morning After!) You must never chase him. You must let him do the chasing while you play Hard-To-Get. Act like a lady. Ladies never come on too strongly. Aggressive women turn men off. Never burden him with your problems — that's nagging. Always listen to his problems. That's life. Make sure you look your best at all times, even if death is only moments away (HINT: a little lipstick and paint makes a woman what she ain't). And above all, never, EVER, sleep with a man you're not married to. Women's Lib, Women's Shmib, you'll get a bad reputation. "Oh, dear ..." she sighed. Her whole body seemed to cave in. Like a deflated balloon. God, she looked so pitiful sitting there. So terribly distraught. Funny, I almost wanted to run and throw my arms around her and promise her that I'd remain her little girl for ever and ever, ah mehn. But of course, there was no turning back now. My days of playing 'Mother May I Take A Step' had run on too long as it was.

"Peter and I are in love." I blurted.



"In love?" she scoffed.

"Well, we are! And there's nothing wrong with two people spending the night together if they're in love."

"Is that a fact Ms. Know-It-All-With-The-Five-Year-Subscription-To-Cosmopolitan-Magazine?" She looked at me with pure disgust in her eyes. Like she'd just found out I was 'Ilsa -- She-Wolf of the SS' or something.

"Don't look at me like that, Ma!" I wanted to dig a hole and crawl inside. "You never looked at my brothers that way when they spent whole nights ... or whole weekends ... or even whole vacations with their girlfriends before they got married. Nobody expected them to be virgin grooms!"

"That's different! Boys have certain needs!"

"Yeah, well you tell me this!" I cried. "How the hell are boys supposed to take care of their certain needs if all the girls are supposed to remain virgins? Why are people still clinging to the double standard in this day and age? It's not fair!"

"Nobody ever said life is fair."

"Oh, forget it." It was like talking to a wall. "I can't talk to you. You don't understand."

"You're right!" she exploded. "I don't understand. There's a perfectly wonderful boy out there who's dying to marry you, a boy who can give you a good home and a good name and a good life and you just want to throw it all away! And for what? So you could tramp around with that ... that rude, arrogant, vulgar no-goodnik who's got nothing to offer you except a heap of trouble?"

"How the hell do you know what he has to offer me?" I cried.

"What do you even know about him anyway?"

She grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me. "Why are you so intent on ruining your life. Why?"

"I'm not ruining my life, for crying out loud! I just think there ought to be something in between Snoopy Dogs and Holy Matrimony, that's all. I need time to find out what I want out of life. I'd like to move out on my own and learn how to take care of myself. I want to try my hand at becoming a screenwriter ..." I looked up at her with tear-filled eyes. "Don't you understand? I just want to be somebody before I can even think of becoming Somebody's wife!"

"Yeah, well, I've got twenty-three years invested in your life and I'll be damned if I'm going to stand idly by and watch you throw it down the toilet!"

"It's my life. I'll throw it down the toilet if I want to!"

"Hmph, that's what YOU think!" She turned around and stormed out of my room.

"And just what is THAT supposed to mean?" I yelled after her.

I got my answer about two seconds later.

"Look, Shayna Pearl," she said, returning hand-in-hand with Stanley himself, no less, "look who I found watching the baseball game in the den with your father!"

"Well, well, well," he smiled at me, "I see Sleeping Beauty is awake at last."

"I don't believe this!" I almost hit the ceiling.

"I told you she'd be happy to see you," Ma told him. "Now, why don't I leave you two love-birds alone? I'm sure you have plenty to talk about." She rushed out and closed the door behind her.

"Are you satisfied now?"

"I don't believe you," he said. "Jo Ann SWORE ..."

"Jo Ann was covering for me."

"Why you little ...!" he blurted. "And I always thought you were different." He had the most pathetic look in his eyes. "Eight months, I waited for you. EIGHT months! And you just hop into the sack with a guy you picked up in a bar!"

"Peter and I are in love," I sniffed. "It was love at first sight."

He shook his head. "You don't honestly believe you're in love with that long-haired, bearded shmuck, do you?"

"Are you kidding?" I cried. "I love everything about him! And that includes his long hair and his beard. I've always wanted to go out with a bearded guy. Everybody in Hampstead shaves!"

"I don't believe it." He threw his hands up in the air. "I'm in love with a girl who thinks she's in love with a beard?!" He gave me an incredulous look and then he ran out of the house.

Alone at last,

Just me and my beloved blue marble tub.

C'mon Jean Naté bubble bath -- do your thing. Take me away from all this shit and corruption.

Shvitz me into oblivion.

GodHELP me -- I LIVE IN A CRAZY HOUSE!.

'So what if I did spend the night with Peter? So what if I did lose my virginity? Is that any reason for everybody to go all to pieces? I mean, whose virginity was it anyway? And as for me being a

Tiger in a three-piece suit.

"I promise I'll be very gentle," he reassured me, "I'll be so gentle you won't feel a thing!"

I looked at him and sighed. That's exactly what I was afraid of. But still. Everybody kept telling me what a great catch he was. Maybe it was just a matter of time before I, too, would come around. "I, uh, don't think I'm ready to go to bed with you yet, Stanley. I mean, we hardly know each other, you know?"

"It's okay. I understand. And what's more, I respect you for it."

"You do?" I'd heard that one before.

"And I promise I won't pressure you either. I'll wait until you're ready."

And that's all I kept hearing for the next eight months. Hardly a day went by when he didn't remind me about how much he wanted IT. Or how long he'd been waiting for IT. Or how good it was going to be once he had IT. God, you'd have thought IT was a national treasure or something!

So much for not pressuring me until I was ready.

And then there was the guy I went out with before Stanley...  
Jeremy Silverman. God, he was ...

"SHAYNA PEARL ... JO ANN'S ON THE PHONE!!!"

"I'M IN THE BATH, MOTHER! TELL HER I'LL CALL HER BACK LATER."

... Jesus Christ Almighty, is there no peace for the wicked?

Now let me see, where was I ... oh, yeah, Jeremy Silverman: Fuck, was

he gorgeous! Blonde hair, blue eyes, ski-jump nose -- the whole shpiel. I was really attracted to him. I might have even gone to bed with him if only he'd have asked me to. The only trouble was, he didn't want to go to bed with me! Not until after we were married anyway. He made that perfectly clear right from the start. On our very first date at Parma Restaurant he told me how sick he was of hanging out at the discos of Crescent Street. He claimed he was bored with picking up 'Lady Marmalades' and dancing to 'Voulez-Vous Couchez Avec Moi Ce Soir' every night. What he was in the market for, he said, was a Nice Jewish Girl who was not JUST another lay.

"You're a virgin, I can tell," he blurted over the cannelloni.

I almost choked to death on the spot. "You can tell?"

"Sure. It's as obvious as those cute little freckles on your cute little nose." He brushed the tip of my nose with his finger.

"Oh, God!" I clamped my hand over my nose. I wanted to die right then and there. I mean, there we were in a crowded restaurant where I knew practically everybody and my virginity was actually showing? I felt worse than naked. "I thought virginity was something you FELT. I didn't know you could tell just by looking!"

"Sure you can," he grinned. And then he went on to describe Penthouse Forum's 'Ten Sure Ways of Detecting Virginity Without Touching'. A dead give-away, for example, was when a girl walked with her legs close together.

After I heard that, I just had to confess.

After all, I did walk with my legs pretty close together.

"You're right, Jeremy," I blushed, "I am a virgin." "

"You're beautiful, you know that?" His whole face lit up: "I

can't wait to introduce you to my parents. They've been dying for me to get serious with a Nice Jewish Girl like you. I've been going out with shiksehs, kurvehs and Not-So-Nice Jewish Girls for so long, they were getting worried."

"You mean, you don't want to go to bed with me?" I was truly shocked. If not a little disappointed.

"Of course not!" he said. "Then you wouldn't be a Nice Jewish Girl anymore. No, you hang onto IT until we get married."

"M-m-married?"

"Sure. I'll introduce you to my parents when they get home from Miami next month and if all goes well, we'll announce our engagement."

"Shouldn't we fall in love first or something?"

"I'm already in love with you." He brought my hand up to his lips and kissed it. "I want you for my wife."

I'm ashamed to admit that I actually gave the matter some thought in the weeks to come. What the hell I saw in Jeremy Silverman, I'll never know. Sure, he was good-looking in a Robert Redford sort of way and everything, but yeeesh! What a horse's rear end! I mean, he was so obsessed with the fact that I was as pure as the driven snow that he made a complete wreck out of me. Every time we went out I lived in constant fear that he was going to introduce me to someone as Shay Fine — THE Virgin.

I guess I was more desperate than I thought. All my friends were walking down THE Aisle and Ma was doing her best to convince me that Jeremy Silverman was THE catch to end all catches.

But one night spent with his parents was all it took to convince me that I'd be better off catching pneumonia.

Taking a close look at Mr. and Mrs. Hy Silverman was like peering into a crystal ball and seeing Jeremy and myself in twenty-five years -- and not liking what I saw.

One incident in particular was a real eye-opener.

It was the night of Jeremy's cousin's bar mitzvah, a fancy shmancy affair at the Queen Elizabeth Hotel, and we were all standing in line in the lobby, waiting to have our coats checked, when this woman came over to admire the extinct species fur coat Mrs. Silverman was wearing.

"My husband made it," Mrs. Silverman was quick to point out as she gave a quick twirl. "He's a furrier, you know. Very exclusive. I'm sure you've heard of him. 'Hy Silverman and Son' on Saint Paul Street West?"

"Oh, I just love it!" said the woman, who happened to be about the same size as Mrs. Silverman. "It's exactly what I've been looking for."

The next thing I knew, Hy Silverman and Son were pulling the woman aside and making her an offer she couldn't refuse.

"This is an African Leopard," Mr. Silverman told her. "The Environmental Protection Agency is about to declare it an Endangered Species."

"So none of your friends can copy you," added Jeremy, who was the spitting image of his father.

"Madam, this coat was MADE for you."

"It's absolutely YOU!" Jeremy nodded and a five-minute haggale later the coat was sold right off Mrs. Silverman's naked shoulders.

I remember thinking to myself how lucky she was that those two

didn't manufacture evening gowns.

I also made up my mind right then and there: I could never make it through life as a walking showpiece for some poor ex-leopard.

Which was just as well, because Jeremy's father came to the same decision. I believe I overheard him use the term 'nonentity' to answer Jeremy's "so-what-do-you-think-of-her, Dad?"

Nothing personal against me, Jeremy later explained.

It's just that his father didn't think I could sell fur coats.

And that was the end of that.

Jeremy bought himself a white three-piece suit and went back to cruising the discos of Crescent Street for shiksehs, kurvehs and not-so-nice Jewish girls.

And where did that leave me?

It left me a twenty-three-year-old nonentity virgin dating the likes of Stanley Charles Drabkin, that's where.

Stanley with his hopes and me feeling hopeless.

Until Peter came along.

Jesus, it was like waking up from a coma, you know?

I mean, he was just so different from all the others. The first man I ever met who didn't have 'Cul de Sac' written all over his face. I know it was crazy, my jumping into bed with him the way I did, but I'm not sorry. And why should I be? He turned me on like I'd never been turned on before. And not just physically either. He really made me feel like somebody, you know? I could talk to him. Share things with him. God, I actually told him about how I'd like to be a Hollywood screenwriter someday and he didn't even laugh in my face! He thought it was a terrific idea. He admires a woman with ambition, he said.



He admires me.

And I'll be damned if I'm going to lie here feeling ashamed or guilty over what we had last night.

I'll just be damned!

I picked up the phone and called Peter.

I knew I'd feel much better once I heard his voice.

And I was right of course. The moment I heard his voice I was on Cloud Nine.

But then I heard what he had to say and it depressed the hell out of me.

"Hey, Babe, this must be E.S.P. or something! I was just about to call you."

"You were?"

"Yeah, I wanted to say goodbye. I have to go out of town for a couple of weeks."

"Out of town?" My heart sunk right to my feet.

"That's the life of a rock musician, I'm afraid. Here today ... gone tomorrow."

"For a couple of weeks?" It may as well have been a couple of years.

"At least. Me and the band are flying out to L.A. to lay down the tracks for our debut album. Isn't that something else?"

"It's terrific, really. I'm thrilled for you. I know how much you wanted it."

"Do I detect a 'but' in there somewhere?"

"I just wish I was going with you, that's all."

"Believe me, I'd like nothing more myself. But this trip is strictly business. I wouldn't have a second to spend with you. Maybe next time, huh?"

"Sure." I knew he was making sense and everything, but that didn't stop me from feeling like it was the end of the world. "I wish you were back already."

"I haven't left yet!" he laughed.

"Peter? Do you think I'm a wanton woman?"

"A wanton woman?" he laughed again. "I didn't even know there was such a thing in this day and age!"

"My mother, she found out about last night. She suspects what we ... well, you know what she's like?"

"She giving you a rough time?" He sounded truly sympathetic.

"Do you suppose there are Jewish nuns?" I was feeling truly sorry for myself.

"I don't know. I doubt it. Why?"

"I think she's going to put me in a convent!"

"Christ, what do you need that shit for?" he cried. "Why don't you just tell SMother Superior to stuff it and move out?"

"I can't afford it."

"What about a place around here — in the McGill Ghetto? It's not exactly the height of luxury but at least it's affordable."

"I don't have very much money in the bank yet. I've only been working a few months."

"Oh? Well, maybe we can put our heads together and come up with something when I get back, huh? Right now I've got to get going."

"I'll ... I'll miss you." I muffled a sob.

"Me too, Babe." See you in a couple of weeks, huh?" CLICK:

They say desperate people do desperate things.

So I went to talk to Dad' about a loan.

I should have known better.

"What?" he cried. "You want ME to give YOU money so that you could move into an apartment in the McGill Ghetto?" He dropped his newspaper and shut off the vibrating magic fingers on his twenty-four position E-Z-Y chair and glared at me. "Have you flipped your lid?"

"It's just a loan, Daddy!" I tried to explain. "I'll pay you back when I start making more money."

"But why would you want to move into a student ghetto? You're not a student anymore."

"You don't have to be a student to live there. The ghetto's full of young people like me who just need some space, you know?"

"FOURTEEN rooms in this house and you don't have enough space?" he laughed.

"That's not the kind of space I was referring to," I said between clenched teeth. "I just think I need to get out on my own. It's time."

"Out of the question! It's dangerous for a girl to live alone. And besides -- why should you pay rent and throw away good money when you can live in this beautiful house for free? Meals, laundry and maid service included? Anyway, I thought 'What's His Name wants to marry you?'"

I gave him an incredulous look. Good old oblivious Dad. He didn't have a clue in hell as to what was going on around him -- for a change. "His name is Stanley, Daddy. And I don't want to marry him."

"Oh, I see. You'd rather end up like my sister Dotty?"

"Oh, Daddy, how can you even think that?" A shudder ran right through me. Dotty Fine is one of those Maiden Aunt types that supposedly don't exist anymore. Her brittle grey hair is pinned up in a bun; her wrinkled face and neck sag like a Chow Dog's; her breasts are so shrivelled up they look like a couple of rejects from a box of Sun-kist prunes and the rest of her body is entirely devoid of any of those shapely curves that makes a woman. A WOMAN. Add to that the Hush Puppies on her feet, the white cardigan sweater draped over her bony shoulders and the ever-present wad of Kleenex stuffed up the sleeve of her Eaton's bargain basement dress and you've got a fate worse than death. "Single women don't end up like that in this day and age. You of all people should know that, Daddy. You're a gynecologist, for crying out loud! You must see plenty of single women who ..."

He gave me a dirty look. "I'd rather see you end up like Dotty!"

"But EVERYBODY ..."

"You're not everybody. You're my daughter!"

"I'm not going to turn into some kind of tramp, if that's what you're worried about."

He raised an eyebrow. "Should I be?"

I groaned. "If you're referring to last night, Daddy, I didn't do anything wrong!"

"Well, then," he shrugged, "in that case I have nothing to worry about." He reached for his newspaper but I stepped on it.

"There is a happy medium between Aunty Dotty and Looking For Mr. Goodbar, you know?" I said. "Look. All I want is to stand on my own two feet. Is that so terrible?"

"No, that's very admirable."

"So can't you just help me out a little? Just to give me a head start?"

"But that doesn't make sense!" he laughed. "In one breath you're telling me how you want to stand on your own two feet and in the next you're asking me to support you. Besides, you need a lot more than a little help. I mean, you're completely dependent on me. You make next to peanuts at that job of yours. You buy all your clothes and what-nots on MY Master Charge. You use MY Texaco card to fill up the car that I bought for you ... if you can't afford to pay your own way, you don't move out. And that's all there is to it!"

"Hmph, I'll bet if I was a boy instead of a girl you wouldn't be saying that. You'd be proud of me for wanting to stand on my own two feet. You're just a male chauvinist, that's your problem!"

He gave me a stern look over his reading glasses, which were teetering on the tip of his nose and then he pointed to the couch and ordered me to sit on it. "Shayna Pearl," he said, "have I ever told you how poor I was when I grew up on Saint Urbain Street — in the heart of the Jewish ghetto — the one Mordecai Richler immortalized in his novel The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz?"

"Oh, no, Daddy, not again!" I groaned. "Not the story of the 'Apprenticeship of Arnie Fine' again!"

He just ignored me and went on about his rough and tough days at Baron Byng High ("... the very same Baron Byng High that Mordecai Richler ....") He told me all about how poor little Arnie went to school all day (walked six miles, even in snow storms) and toiled all night in his father's shoe-lace factory for a dollar a week — just so

he could put himself through McGill Medical School. "And do you know WHY I worked myself to the bone, Shayna Pearl?"

"Because you had a dream," I moaned, "a dream about being a successful doctor who could afford to buy a nice piece of land in a beautiful place like Hampstead, so you could build your dream house and bring up your dream family ... BUT WHAT HAS ALL THIS GOT TO DO WITH ME, WANTING TO MOVE TO THE MCGILL GHETTO-OOOQOO?!"

To which he replied:

"Because I'll be goddamned if I finally made it to the richest suburb in Montreal so that MY daughter should run off to live in a Goddamned ghetto-OOOO!!!"

"Does that mean you're definitely not going to lend me the money?"

"Bingo!"

"I'll go anyway!" I threatened.

"Goodbye," he chuckled, "let your mother know when you're leaving and she'll pack you a sandwich."

"Oh, Christ on crutches!" I couldn't believe he had said that.

"That's what your mother used to do whenever you used to threaten to run away from home as a little girl, you know? She'd pack you a sandwich. And you, you were so cute the way you used to sit on your little suitcase and wait for her to spread peanut butter and jam on the bread and cut off the crust ..."

"Cut it out, Daddy!"

"... And then she'd cut it in quarters and put it in a little baggie and off you'd go!" He shook his head and smiled. "Of course you never went further than the back porch next door and you always

came home just as soon as your sandwich was finished. Yes sir, even then you knew where your bread was buttered!"

"You really think I'll starve to death on my own? Is that what you think?"

"Do women have ovaries?"

And that was the end of that.

Down went the vibrating twenty-four position E-Z-Y chair; up went the newspaper over his face; on went the Magic Finger switch and that was the end of that.

CLICK! Case dismissed.

"You're gonna be sorry!" I cried. "Because I'm moving out no matter what. EVEN IF I HAVE TO SELL MY BODY DOWN BY THE HARBOR TO PAY THE RENT!!!" I shrieked so loud I'm sure all of Hampstead and half of neighboring Cote Saint Luc heard me. But not Dad. Not dear old Dad. He doesn't hear a Goddamned thing when he has that fucking newspaper over his face. He doesn't give a shit for anyone when he's lying there and vibrating away in that damned chair of his. "I'LL FUCK EVERY SAILOR WHO COMES INTO PORT! I'LL GET FULL OF V.D. AND THEN I'LL GO TO THE JEWISH GENERAL FOR TREATMENT AND ALL YOUR COLLEAGUES, PATIENTS, FRIENDS AND RELATIVES WILL KNOW!"

It was no use though. He never even heard a word I said. He just lay there reading and vibrating; vibrating and reading ... totally oblivious to everybody and everything except that damned newspaper over his face.

"So long, Daddy-o!" I stomped off to my room, pulled my tote bag out of my cupboard and started packing. Not that I knew where I was going, mind you. But even the Old Brewery Mission seemed better

than this place.

"What's all the commotion about, Shayna Pearl?" Ma came running. "I could hear you screaming all the way down in the laundry room." She glanced down at my tote bag. "What on earth are you up to now?"

"I'm packing. What does it look like I'm up to?"

"Why? Where are you going?"

"I don't know. Somewhere. Anywhere!"

"Somewhere, Anywhere? Is that in Canada or the U.S.?"

"I'm moving out, Mother!" I threw some underwear into my bag.

"And if you dare say, 'Goodbye, I'll pack you a sandwich, I'll ... I'll ...'"

"Oh, dear, you're not thinking of going to HIM, are you?" she looked positively mortified.

"No, I'm not going to HIM!" I mimicked her. "You'll be happy to know, I'm sure, that HIM had to leave town."

"For good?" she perked up.

"You should be so lucky. Now, if you don't mind, I have to pack."

She shook her head. "What happened to us, Shayna Pearl?" she said in a grave voice. "We used to be able to talk to each other."

"Sure we used to be able to talk to each other. As long as you did all the talking and I did all the listening!"

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I always thought we'd grow closer as you got older. That we'd become good friends. Do things together."

"Become friends?" I didn't know whether to laugh or cry or what. "Do things together? How many times in the past couple of years



have I asked you -- no, begged you -- to go to New York with me so we could see some plays and do some shopping and just have a plain good time? Dozens, that's how many. Hundreds! But you were always too busy. Or too tired. Or too something!"

"Alright then, how about now?"

"What?"

"Why don't we take that trip to New York now? Just the two of us? I can make the arrangements right away. We could leave tomorrow."

I kept on packing. "Don't you think it's a little late for New York?"

"Don't you want us to be friends?"

I looked up at her. "Are you kidding? Do you think I like being enemies with my own mother?"

"So? This could be the perfect chance for us to get closer, don't you think?"

I sat down on the bed beside her. "I don't know."

"We could try."

"It sure would be nice if we could be friends for a change."

The whole idea was becoming more and more appealing by the minute. God, I thought, wouldn't it really be something if this trip could actually bring us closer together? Maybe we could even establish one of those intimate mother/daughter relationships where I could tell her personal stuff without worrying that she's going to have a stroke or something? And then maybe, just maybe, she wouldn't hassle me about my relationship with Peter? "Yeah, it sure would be nice." And besides, I reassured myself, if things don't work out for the best in New York, the Old Brewery Mission will still be here when I get back.

"So what do you say?" she nudged my arm. "Is it a date?"

I looked at her and smiled. "Let's do it!"

"Oh, Shayna Pearl!" she hugged me. "We're going to have a ball, you wait and see!"

"Things at the paper are kind of slow now anyway. Mrs. Finkelberg probably won't even mind giving me the time off,"

"See how it all works out?" She folded up a pair of underwear and tucked it neatly into the corner of my bag. "You go ahead and finish packing now," she said as she got up and headed out the door, "I'll go call the airline."

CHAPTER 6

The unthinkable happened.

Ma and I actually had a good time in New York.

In fact, we had a ball.

We were just like two girlfriends buying everything in sight that we could eat or wear.

And laugh. God, did we ever laugh! We laughed at the people, we laughed at the Broadway shows, we laughed at the price tags on all the designer clothes we bought and we laughed at the thought of Dad's face going into contortions when we presented him with all the Master Charge bills at the end of the trip.

"Christ, Ma," I'd tell her, "when Daddy sees how much money we've spent, he'll have heartburn for an entire year!"

"So?" she'd giggle. "We'll buy him a year's supply of baking soda!"

And then we'd go off to Fifth Avenue and shop like there was no tomorrow.

Ma would look at the label on a blazer at Altman's and say: "Oooo, look, Shayna Pearl — a Bill Blass! It'll go so well with the Ralph Lauren skirt from Sax and the Ann Klein sweater from Bergdorff's and the Louis Vuitton bag from Bloomingdale's!"

After awhile we just read labels and ignored price tags.

"C.O.D. — Call On Dad!" we'd cackle hysterically after each

and every purchase. "P.H.D. — Pa Has Dough!"

The best was last night though.

"We ought to do something really special before we go home tomorrow," Ma told me, "we ought to have a last fling."

So we went out and got snookered with a capital "S." God, I'll never forget it as long as I live. We had a blast. After a six-course meal at Mama Leone's that started with Dubonnet on the rocks, progressed to Champagne and ended with Harvey Wallbangers, Ma suggested that we head over to Times Square ("... to take a peek at all those perverts who dress up like women," she said).

It was right in the middle of Times Square that we laughed so hard we both peed right in our pants.

We were standing in front of the Eros Theatre, watching all the transvestites go by, when some poor old bum staggered up to Ma and asked her for a dime for a cup of coffee. The next thing I knew, she was grabbing me by the elbow and dragging me down the street screaming:

"POLICE! HELP POLIIIIIIICCCCCCCE!!!!"

I couldn't understand, for the life of me, why she was throwing such connotations. I mean, the poor guy was so decrepit, he could hardly walk. When she finally stopped to catch her breath, I asked her why she was so afraid of some poor wino who was so out of this world he still thought coffee only costs a dime.

"A dime? Money for coffee? Is that ALL he wanted?" She seemed almost disappointed. "I thought he was trying to pick me up!"

"Pick you up?" I giggled.

"I thought he said — 'Lady, do you have TIME for a cup of coffee!'"

"Oh, Ma, how naive could you possibly be? When a guy tries to pick you up, he doesn't ask you out for coffee!"

"What then?" she wanted to know. "A soda?"

"A soda?" I howled. "No, Ma, that's not the way it's done anymore. Things are much more straightforward these days. If a guy wants to pick you up, he'll walk up to you and say something direct. Something like: 'Let's screw, Baby!'"

"But when do you get your soda? Afterward?"

"Well, if he's a little bit kinky, you might get it during," I snickered, delighting in the fact that we could discuss the normally taboo subject of sex so openly, "bottle and all!"

"Shayna Pearl, that's disgusting!" she chortled.

"What's the matter, Ma? Haven't you ever had a bottle of soda up your knish?"

"No!" she gagged. "I have not!" She gave me a horrified look.

"And I hope to God you haven't either!"

"No, but I might try it someday. I hear it's supposed to be a real gas!"

Right then and there we sat down on the sidewalk and peed a river. God, it was wonderful. Just the kind of stuff intimate mother/daughter relationships are made of.

But the most wonderful part of all was yet to come after we got back to our hotel room at The Plaza.

"I'm having a fabulous time, Ma," I told her as we stood over the bathroom sink rinsing out our underwear. "In fact, this is one of the best times I've ever had in my life!"

"It sure has been wonderful, hasn't it?" she smiled. She was

bursting with joy. "It's nice when a mother and daughter can be friends, isn't it?"

"Yeah, I kinda like it, you know?" I laughed.

"Shayna Pearl, I have something I want to give you," she blurted. "Something special. I was going to save it for your birthday, but I want to give it to you right now. This very minute!" She ran to her purse and whipped out the exquisite watch with the thin black face and the gold mesh bracelet I had been drooling over at Cartier's earlier in the week.

"Ma!" I couldn't believe my eyes. "That watch cost almost THREE thousand dollars!"

"Three thousand, two hundred and eighty-nine — and seventy-five cents, to be exact," she said as she strapped it onto my wrist.

I looked at her like she had flipped her lid or something.

"What's the matter? A mother can't spend three thousand, two hundred and eighty-nine bucks — and seventy-five cents on her own daughter if she wants to?"

"Oh, Ma!" I gushed, suddenly overcome by an overwhelming feeling of love for this woman I haven't much liked lately. "I love you!" I threw my arms around her and hugged her to pieces. "I really do!"

"I love you too!" she cried. "And don't you ever forget it!"

"I won't, Ma."

"I'm only sorry we didn't take this trip ages ago. Before things got so bad."

"Ma, I ..." I wanted to talk to her about Peter and me.

"It's amazing what can happen between a mother and daughter in just ten days, isn't it? Before we left we were on the verge of World War III and now look at us! We're actually friends!"

"Ma ... I ..." I wanted to try and make her understand how I felt about him. How important this relationship was to me.

"Let's not let anything ever come between us again, never!"

"Ma, there's something ..."

"What is it, dear?" She gave me an anxious look. "Is there something troubling you?"

"Ma, I, oh, never mind, forget it. It's nothing." My instincts told me that it was not a good time to talk about Peter. This was something that had to be handled with care, I decided. One step at a time.

"It's nothing."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure." I hugged her.

"Oh, Shayna Pearl, I'm so happy I could cry!"

And then she burst out crying. And I burst out crying. And we both stood there in the bathroom sobbing in each other's arms and blowing our respective noses into wads of soggy toilet paper.

God, it was wonderful.

From the looks of things, Ma and I were going to be friends for life.

Nothing was ever going to come between us again.

But the moment we got home from that trip to end all trips, I found a telegram waiting for me on the hall table.

"I hope it's not bad news," Ma said as I tore it open, "the last time I got a telegram was when Aunty Gertie dropped dead while peddling one of those giant tricycles around Century Village."

"Oh, Mother, you're always such a pessimist!" I pulled it out of the envelope and read it to myself.

Shay: Take a chance. Come live with me. I'll be in Montreal Sat. to close up my apartment. Then I want to take you back to L.A. with me in 10 days or so: Think you could write screenplays in a beach-house overlooking the Pacific? So what do you say Babe? I need you. Love Peter. P.S. Arrive Dorval 10 a.m. Air Can. Fl. 124 from L.A. See you then.

it said.

"Oh, my God!" I cried, slumping into a chair. My knees were like water.

"What is it?" Ma gasped. "You're as white as a sheet for crying out loud! Is it bad news? What does it say? What?"

"Oh, my God!"

"At least tell me who it's from!"

I gave her an anxious look.

She frowned. "It's from HIM, isn't it? The Svengali!"

"Ma, don't call Peter that! He's really a very...."

"I knew it was bad news! Telegrams are always bad news!"

"But you don't even know what it says!"

"Anything that has to do with him is bad news as far as I'm concerned."

"Ma, I think we should sit down and talk about this. He's coming home the day after tomorrow and ..."

"You can talk until you're blue in the face but you won't change my mind about him. He's bad news!"

"At least let me try and make you understand how I feel about him."

"I really thought things were going to be different now. I thought you were going to stop doing all these things just to aggravate me!"



"You don't understand. I love him!"

She laughed. "Don't be absurd. You hardly know him!"

"I know enough!"

"I think you should stop seeing him before he gets you into real trouble," she said. "And if you care anything about what I think ..."

"Of course I do. But I have to live my own life too."

She massaged her temples. "I don't want to talk about this anymore. I'm getting one of my headaches." She reached into her purse and pulled out her bottle of Valium. "I think I'll take a couple of these and go upstairs to lie down for awhile."

"You're copping out on me!"

"I already told you how I feel."

"I thought we were supposed to be friends!"

"And we are, Shayna Pearl," she reassured me, "and we are. As long as you stay away from that boy we'll be friends forever and ever, ah mehn." She went up to her bedroom and closed the door behind her.

Oh, swell, I thought, sitting there in the hallway, unable to move, just perfect! I want to go to California with Peter more than anything else in the world but what am I supposed to do about Ma? She hates him. She hates everything about him. And if I move in with him she'll hate me too. Hell, even if she was crazy about him, she'd hate me for moving in with him. We could take a million trips to New York, she and I, and we could get as close as any mother and daughter could get, but she'd never approve of my living in Sin. No matter who the man was or what he did. Why, just the other month she practically had a cow because her friend Shirley Babushkin's daughter, Mimi, moved in with her boyfriend.

"If that was MY daughter," she wailed, "I'd run out to Fleet Road and throw myself in front of the first 161 bus that comes by!"

And Dad. He was disgusted. Not to mention incensed and outraged.

"That's the thanks Bernie Babushkin gets for working his tail off so his kids could have the best of everything," he fumed, "a kick in the teeth! If you ever pull a stunt like that, Shayna Pearl, I'll disown you so fast you won't know what hit you!"

Of course, Mimi Babushkin's boyfriend was as poor as a pauper and as black as Sydney Poitier — but still. The thinking around here is that twenty-three-year-old Jewish Princesses from suburban Hampstead marry Professionals and have security, not to mention babies. They just don't gallivant off to California with (GodFORBID) rock musicians and have success and happiness. They just don't!

Damn, damn, damn. Why does everything always have to be so bloody complicated? I don't want to give Dad a kick in the teeth and I'd sure hate to ruin things between Ma and me now that we've become so close and everything — but, I have to get on with my life, dammit! Going to California with Peter ... writing screenplays in a beachhouse overlooking the Pacific ... it's like a dream come true. I'd have to be crazy to say no. It's the chance of a lifetime. The chance of a lifetime!

Oh, God, what the hell am I going to do now?

PART III: CHICKEN SUITOR

## CHAPTER 7

What can you say about a Friday that starts off with a 7 a.m. phone call from Stanley Charles Drabkin?

Just that it's GOT to get better.

I'd been up all night thinking about the telegram. Worrying about Ma and Dad. Dreaming about Peter and California. Trying to put the two into perspective. Coming up with a nauseating migraine headache. But the Gravol suppository I had to take for the nausea was mild compared to the pain in the ass I got from Stanley. I know it's bitchy of me to say this, but Stanley is like a hemorrhoid that keeps coming back no matter how you treat it. Disgusting too. But true. God, is it ever the truth!

He called to tell me how much he missed me these past ten days while I was in New York with Ma; that he hadn't been able to sleep a wink since I left and that he may never be able to close his eyes again as long as something was missing from his bed. That something, which he proceeded to describe in graphic detail from mole to beauty mark, was my body.

"I memorized all your finer points that day we went swimming up at the club last month," he said. "You were wearing that skimpy blue bikini, you know, the one that looks like two Band-aids?"

"Why don't you just call up and breathe heavy, Stanley?" I cried. "That's what most perverts do!"

"Oh, c'mon; Shayna Pearl, give me a break, will you? I can't help it if I'm in love with you!"

"In love with me?" I couldn't believe my ears. "How could you still be in love with me after I spent the night with Peter and everything?"

"It's not that I want to be, believe me," he sighed. "GodKNOWS I tried to forget you while you were in New York with your mother but I couldn't. I just couldn't. What can I tell you? I'm hopelessly hung up on you. You're in my blood."

"Oh, brother." I grimaced. "I'm not even home twenty-four hours and already my life is turning into some kind of disaster movie!"

"I know it's crazy," he went on, "and don't ask me to explain it, because I can't -- but I want you more now than I ever did before. So you're a little used up, so what? I can learn to live with it."

"You've got bats in the belfry, do you know that?"

"I'm not going to give you up without a fight. From now on you're going to see a side of me that you never knew existed!"

"Agggggggghhhhh!!!" I grasped the receiver in my hands and, imagining that it was his neck, proceeded to wring it with all my might.

"Gaaaaaaaaa!!!!!!!!!!!"

"Shayna Pearl?" he cried. "Hello ... HELLO? Are you still there? Say something, will you?"

"You can't fight for me, Stanley!" I said in a strangled voice. "I'm not yours to fight for. I'm in love with Peter and there's nothing you can do about it. NOTHING!"

"We'll see about that." He sounded real smug. Like he knew something I didn't. Or at least that's what he wanted me to think. "Ha,

ha!"

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"You'll see."

"You're full of shit, Stanley. You don't have a hope in hell of coming between me and Peter. I know because ..." I almost spilled the beans about the telegram but I stopped myself just in time. My instincts told me that he should be the last person to know about it. It would only make him want to fight THAT much harder for me. "I just know is all."

"I've changed a lot, Shayna Pearl. I'm not the same person I was before you went to New York."

"Oh, for crying out loud!" I slapped an ice bag over the left side of my head, which was throbbing something fierce. "Nobody changes that much in ten days!"

"Boy, are you ever in for a surprise when I come over tonight."

"What do you mean — when you come over tonight? Who invited you?"

"Tonight IS Friday night supper, is it not? And where, might I remind you, have I been eating supper every Friday night for the past eight months?"

"Yeah, but that was before! Surely you don't think? Not after everything that's happened ..."

"I have a standing invitation, remember? Your mother's said so dozens of times."

"I withdraw the invitation!"

"Sorry, but it's not yours to withdraw. I'll be there around six. That is what time we usually eat, isn't it?"

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Wouldn't I?" he laughed. "Let's see ... it's 7 a.m. now. I'll see you in eleven hours and counting ..."

"YOU MAKE ME CRAZY!" I slammed the phone down and made a bee-line for the bathroom. The thought of Stanley coming to supper tonight sent me running for a second dose of Gravol.

Should a genie suddenly appear before me and grant me one wish, I think I'd ask him to cancel this day until further notice.

This is definitely not my day.

As if I didn't have enough problems already, that second dose of Gravol I took knocked me out and I ended up getting to work an hour late.

And it was just my luck too, that I got caught trying to sneak into the office through a rear exit by none other than Mrs. Yetta Finkelberg Herself, the owner, publisher, managing editor, editor-in-chief and chief delivery boy of the Cote Saint Luc Weekly Register -- affectionately known amongst her employees as the 'Wicked Witch of the West End'.

"Just what do you think you're doing, Shayna?" she snarled after I practically smacked right into her on the way to my desk. "Just what the hell do you think you're doing?"

I gave her a startled look. God, I didn't know what the hell I thought I was doing. I guess I just figured that nobody would notice I was late if I came in through the back way. Wishful thinking, I suppose. Pure stupidity, more likely.

"J.A.P.s!" she screamed in front of the whole office. "I don't know why I hire J.A.P.s! Not only do they take off for New York for almost two weeks on a moment's notice, but then they have the unmitigated

chutzpah to think they can get away with showing up late on their first day back!" Whenever she gets mad at me, which is often, she tends to refer to me in the plural. It's as if she holds me personally responsible for the sins of my entire generation. "A bunch of vegetables, that's what they are. Jewish American Princess VEGETABLES!"

"I ... I'm sorry." I wanted to dig a hole and crawl inside and never come out. God, did she have to make such a public spectacle of me? I didn't mean to be late, for crying out loud! "I'm really sorry."

"Before you left for New York I told you I'd need you back at work by today because Gita Betterman was leaving on her honeymoon and we'd be short-staffed, didn't I?"

"Yes, but ..."

"And you promised you'd be at your desk by 9 a.m. sharp, didn't you?"

"Yes, but ..."

"So would you mind telling me what you're doing creeping in through the back door at TEN minutes to TEN?"

"It's ... it's just been one of those mornings, you know?" I blurted.

"One of those mornings? And what was it, exactly that held you up, Your Majesty?" she cackled facetiously as she looked me up and down; up and down. "You couldn't find a Gucci belt to go with your Gucci outfit?"

Some of my co-workers tittered.

"What the hell are you all laughing at?" she yelled at them. Do you think I pay you to stand around and laugh?" She waited until they all went back to work, which took about one split second, and then she



started in on me again. "And as for you, young lady," she glared at me, "if you MUST get all Guccied-up for the office, try getting up an hour earlier!"

"I'm not all Guccied up!" I said between clenched teeth. It was all I could do to keep from reaching out and tearing every bleach-blonde hair out of her head. "I don't even own a Gucci outfit."

"Oh? Well, excuse me. My mistake." She reached for the Givenchi reading glasses that were hanging around her neck and she placed them on the tip of her nose. "Hmmm ..." she sneered as she inspected the designer labels on my clothes, "... so THAT'S why you were so late this morning! You had to call Vogue Magazine to see if it was okay to mix 'n match your Diane Von Furstenburg jeans with your Geoffrey Beene top!"

"I'm late because I had a headache," I winced. For some strange reason she always gets off on making fun of my clothes. I don't know. I guess maybe it's because she's jealous. Being the two hundred and fifty pound hippo that she is, it'll be a snowy day on the equator before she could fit into a pair of size twenty-seven Diane Von Furstenburg jeans and a Geoffrey Beene halter top. "A migraine ..."

"Hmph, a likely story!" She waddled into her office and slammed the door behind her. Obviously she liked her version much better. She always does.

"Stupid fucking bitch," I muttered under my breath, "who the hell does she think she is anyway?" I exchanged disgusted looks with everybody in the copy department and then I wandered over to my desk and sat down. "That bleach-blonde hippo! I don't have to take this shit from her." I pulled Peter's telegram out of my purse and I reread it for the zillionth time, relishing every word and every line, especially

the part where it says:

Think you could write screenplays in a beachhouse overlooking the Pacific?

Imagine, I thought, my whole body squirming with excitement. Imagine .... Writing screenplays by the ocean every day. Making love with Peter on a different stretch of sand each night. No Mrs. Finkelberg to make me feel like two cents. No parents to make me crazy with guilt. No Stanley to make me crazy, period. Just me and Peter and a beachhouse in Los Angeles, California. Imagine .... I closed my eyes and smiled. Imagine .... Freeways. Freedom. Freeman. Mine. All mine!

I could just picture it.

I could see myself soaring down the Pacific Coast Highway on the back of Peter's gleaming black Norton Commando ... hugging his black leather jacket ... the wind whipping our faces ... the sun beating down on us ... the powerful roar of the bike's engine vibrating through our bodies.

Just like 'Easy Rider'.

Just like Kawasaki Lets The Good Times Roll.

And then I could see us pulling up to this fabulous beachhouse in the middle of nowhere and tearing into each other like a couple of starving animals ... right there on the beach ... right under the setting sun ... with the roar of the waves for mood music and miles and miles of warm, golden sand on which to roll around.

"ARE YOU DAYDREAMING ON MY TIME?!" a voice came screeching into my ear, scaring the living daylights out of me.

"Huh? What!" I sat bolt upright in my chair. "Who, me?"

"No, Princess Grace! Who do you think?" It was Mrs. Finkelberg.

"Am I paying you to sit at that desk and work or am I paying you to stare out the window and daydream?"

"Work." I muttered, folding up Peter's telegram and stuffing it back into my purse. So much for California Dreamin'. "Work!"

"You haven't even taken the cover off your typewriter yet!"

I whipped off the cover and stuck a piece of paper in the carriage.

"Boy, are you ever out to lunch!" she snarled. "More than usual."

I looked at her and shrugged. She wasn't telling me something I didn't already know.

"The Mayor of Cote Saint Luc is in my office," she said. "I want you to go in there and interview him."

"Me? Interview the mayor?" I perked up. "Really?" I had never interviewed a mayor before. "Me?" Sensing that this might be a big story, maybe even the biggest of my career, I grabbed my note-pad and a pen and I headed toward her office, my head dancing with visions of bold, flashy, front page headlines:

REPORTER'S EXPOSE OF PAYOLA SCHEME TOPPLES ADMINISTRATION

WATERGATE COMES TO COTE SAINT LUC

MAYOR ROTSTEIN RESIGNS OVER LURID SEX SCANDAL

"Hold your horses," she grabbed me by the elbow as I whizzed past her, "you don't even know what it's about!"

"Oh, yeah, right!" I could hardly conceal my excitement.

"Do you remember when my Herb went jogging in Wentworth Park with our two sons a few weeks ago and he slipped in a pile of dog poop and ended up with a sprained ankle and a concussion?"

"Yeah," I groaned, "I remember." How could I forget? She bumped one of my best articles, an interview with one of the only women symphony orchestra conductors in the world, and replaced it with one of her infamous 'Kvetch and Retch' editorials, entitled 'We Must Get Rid of Dog Droppings In Our Parks NOW!' "What about it?"

"The mayor is finally going to do something about it, thanks to me," she smiled proudly. "By next week, Cote Saint Luc is going to have the stiffest 'Poop 'n Scoop' laws of any suburb in Montréal!"

"You want me to interview the mayor about 'Poop and Scoop' laws?" I stared at her in disbelief.

"It's about time people started cleaning up after their dogs! If I can clean up after my Ziggy, so can the rest of Cote Saint Luc!" At the sound of his name, Ziggy, her overweight, ill-tempered Pug dog, to whom she bears an uncanny resemblance, waddled over and plunked himself down at her feet. "Dog poop poses a major hazard to this community and it is our duty as this community's only newspaper to do something about it!"

"Our duty?" I thought I was going to be sick. What are you doing here, Shay, you idiot, you, a voice screamed inside my head. You should be home packing for California. Making plans for your future with Peter. Thinking up ideas for all those screenplays you're going to be writing in your beachhouse overlooking the Pacific. So why the hell are you standing here and taking all this crap from her? Dog shit, she wants you to write about, dog shit! Go on ... tell her you don't need this crummy job anymore. Tell her to go screw herself. Tell EVERYBODY to go screw themselves. Do it, damn you, why don't you just do it and get it over with, you wishy-washy little whimp ... you despicable little

nebbish. Can't you make a decision for once in your life?

"Nu shoin?" She nudged my arm. "You think the mayor has nothing else to do while you stand around with your head in the clouds? He's a busy man, you know?"

Just then the mayor came out of her office.

"What's taking so long, Yetta?" he asked her. "We have a brunch date with Harry Wasserman at Nuddick's in about fifteen minutes, remember?"

"Oh, don't ask, Irv," she glared at me, "these kids today give me a royal pain-in-the-you-know-what!"

"Tell me about it," he sighed. "Do you know where I have to go after brunch today? I have to go over to Harold Cummings to order my daughter a Corvette for her eighteenth birthday. All the kids are driving 'em, Daddy, she says. EVERYBODY gets a Corvette for their eighteenth birthday, Daddy!"

"Yeah, well we're not doing them any favours — spoiling them rotten the way we do, believe you me," she clucked her tongue in disgust. "By handing them everything on a silver platter, we've turned them into a generation of vegetables!"

"How true," he nodded. "How t-rue!"

For a moment there I thought they were going to spout top-hats and canes and burst into a song and dance rendition of "Kids -- What's the Matter With Kids Today?"

"I don't know, Irv," she went on, "these kids are definitely missing something. They just don't have our drive and ambition."

"They're not hungry like we were when we grew up on Saint Urbain Street. They're used to being spoonfed."

"A spoonfed, overfed generation, that's what they are!"

My mouth dropped open to my knees. I mean, I just couldn't believe what I was hearing. I weigh a whole ninety-seven pounds soaking wet and they had the nerve to stand there — a collective five hundred pounds of unsightly fat — and call ME overfed?

"What a waste!" Mrs. Finkelberg looked me straight in the eye. "Some of them have such potential and they just don't know what to do with it."

They both shook their heads and then they took their collective five hundred pounds of fat off to Nuddick's, no doubt to sit over a five-course meal and reminisce about the Good Old Days of the Good Old Jewish Neighbourhood where Poverty reigned supreme and Suffering was aplenty.

"Well, folks, it's finally happened," Meryl the receptionist said in her nasal, sing-songy voice, "the old witch has finally flipped her lid!"

"You know," I fumed, "she and my father would make a terrific pair. They ought to get together and form the 'Duddy Kravitz to Pepsi Generation Lecture Circuit'. They'd make millions!"

"I think it's disgusting the way she talks to you, you know?" Christine Desjardins, our token shikseh, said. "I'd die if she talked to me like that, you know?"

"You don't have to worry Chris," I told her. "She likes you. You don't know how lucky you were to be born poor."

"Yeah, it's true, you know? She's always bending over backwards to help me. Do you know I've had three raises in the past two months?"

"Threes? I've had one in ten! And when I asked her why, she said I didn't need it!"

"God, she's even harder on you than she was on me when I was

Chief Schlock Processor and Drivel Writer many moons ago," Karen Biskin, who now holds the positions of political reporter and supplement editor, gave me a sympathetic look. "But cheer up, kiddo," she winked, "sooner or later the old witch has got to promote you to feature writer and then she'll find herself a new schlock processor to pick on."

"I won't hold my breath," I said. "I mean, let's face facts'— she thinks I'm nothing but a good-for-nothing J.A.P."

"Don't you believe it!" Elaine Popkin, the lifestyles writer, reassured me. "The old witch may be a lot of things but she knows talent when she sees it."

"Yeah, and you've got loads of talent, kiddo," Karen added. "You're a natural."

"God, what would I ever do without you guys?" I couldn't help but smile. Good old Elaine and Karen. They'd been rooting for me since my very first day on the job. And having them in my corner has meant a lot to me too. I've always kind of looked up to them. They're both so together; so self-assured. Karen, she's twenty-seven, attractive, independent and gutsy. Very gutsy.. Once she even told Mrs. Finkelberg to fuck off right to her face — and Mrs. Finkelberg was the one who ended up apologizing! And Elaine, she's pretty special too. Besides being a damned good feature writer, she's a striking woman of forty with a husband, three kids and a brown belt in karate. The kind you read about in women's magazines. "I'd really miss you if I decided to leave this place."

Elaine raised an eyebrow. "Leave? You're not thinking of quitting, are you?"

"I almost did it this morning," I sighed. "I almost did it but

I just couldn't seem to spit the words out. I'm afraid of my own shadow, that's my problem. I've always been that way. Hell, I even slept with a Donald Duck night light by my bed until I was thirteen. And Huey, Duey, and Louey were placed in various strategic areas around the house just in case, GodFORBID, I should meet the Boogey Man on the way to the can in the middle of the night!"

"Ah, c'mon, Shay," Elaine laughed, "this is your first job and you've only been at it a few months. You're hardly broken in yet. Just give it more time. Mrs. F's bound to let up on you eventually. She can be pretty decent at times, you know? I mean, she hires women for all the key positions."

"Yeah," Karen said, "and she especially likes to hire 'Jewish Princesses' and whip them into shape. That's how she gets her jollies. She'll let up on you soon."

"Ha, believe it!" Dora Litman, our copy editor, sneered from the far corner of the room where she was hunched over her desk, editing copy with her ever-present squeaky red magic marker. "I've been here, what, five years now, and the old witch STILL sends me home in tears every night!"

"That's because you LET her walk all over you," Karen told her. "You and Shay both."

"What you guys need is a course in self-defence!" Elaine chopped at the air with her hands. "Ever since I got my brown belt, the old witch hasn't said 'boo' to me."

"Or better still, sign up for that Assertiveness Training program I took at the Women's Center," Karen said. "Guaranteed nobody will push you around after that. They teach you to stand up for your rights."



"Or even better still -- join the Wolf Pack at the 'Y'," Meryl the receptionist piped in. "Ever since I started running with them on my lunch hours, I've been like a new person. I feel like I could conquer the world. The old witch could yell at me until she's blue in the face and I don't even bat an eyelash anymore!"

"Oh, you people and your stupid courses," Dora sneered. "You think they're the answer to everything."

"Don't knock it 'till you've tried it," Karen retorted. "Assertiveness Training changed my whole life. Thanks to A.T., I have the guts to do things I could never do before. Like going to Mrs. Finkelberg to demand a raise. Or telling my parents that my new roommate's name is actually Frank -- not Francine. The un-assertive me would have lied to them, that's for sure."

My eyes almost popped out of my head. "You moved in with a man?"

"Yeah, that's right, you've been away the past couple of weeks. I guess you haven't heard."

I shook my head.

"You remember I told you about that terrific guy I met playing raquet ball at the Cavendish Club last month? Frank Shapiro? Well, last week he asked me to move in with him. And that's just what I did!"

"Just like that?" I snapped my fingers.

"Just like that!" She snapped hers.

"Hey, I know Frank Shapiro!" Meryl squealed with delight. "He belongs to the Wolf Pack. He's an orthopedic surgeon. Gorgeous, Divorced. No kids. Drives a BMW 320i. Lives in the Cavendish Club Towers ...."

"God, Meryl," Karen laughed, "do you know his prick size too?"

"You want, it in inches or centimetres?" Meryl shot back.

"I thought you never kiss and tell, Meryl!" I cracked and we all shrieked with laughter.

"Christ, this place is beginning to sound worse than a men's locker room!" Karen cried.

"I know," Elaine chortled, "don't you just love it?"

"Are you kidding?" I said. "It's the best part of the job."

"Job, oh, God!" Meryl jumped up and scurried off to the advertising department. "I have a ton of filing to do!"

"Yeah, I have to get going myself!" Elaine glanced at her watch. "I'm late for an interview and it's way-the-hell-out-east!" She grabbed her purse and flew out the door.

"I have to go too," Karen said, "I'm covering a fashion show at Holt's for the fall supplement."

"Karen," I said, "can I ask you something?"

"Sure, kiddo, just hang on a sec while I call a cab. Would you believe I actually got the old witch to spring for one?" She made a quick call to Diamond Taxi. "Now," she said as she hung up, "what is it you wanted to know?"

"Your parents — how'd they take it when you moved in with your boyfriend?"

"Well, they didn't exactly do a hora, that's for sure. But they're coming around. I think I've finally managed to convince them that I'm a grown woman and that I have the right to live my own life the way I see fit."

"How'd you manage that? What's the secret?"

"Assertiveness Training, of course."

"Do they have a crash program?"

"Nope, the introductory course is about ten weeks. Why? You thinking of moving in with a guy?"

"I guess you could say that." I showed her Peter's telegram.

"I met him a couple of weeks ago. It was love at first sight, you know?"

"Wow," she whistled as she read it, "no wonder you've been so pre-occupied this morning. This is some telegram!"

"I want to go with him, Karen," I told her, "but how am I going to break it to my parents? They'll have conniptions, I know them. They're going to feel rejected, dejected and FAR from objective. When they hear that I want to go and live in Sin with Peter, they're liable to have me kidnapped and brought to the Jewish Institute of Brides and Grooms for deprogramming -- ten free lectures by various esteemed rabbis and psychologists and hopefully I'll be cured of my misheggas!"

"Are you sure it's your parents you're afraid of?" she shrugged.

"Sounds to me like you're more afraid of yourself."

"Huh?"

"Just a few minutes ago you were telling us how afraid you were of your own shadow, remember?"

"Yeah, but my parents they ..."

"Listen, kiddo, it's very easy to blame other people for your problems, but that's a dead end. Believe me, I know. I've been there. You'll never get anywhere if you don't start taking responsibility for your own life."

"Yeah, but nobody let's me!"

"It's not something anybody can help you with. It's something you've got to do for yourself ... shit, there's my taxi! Listen, kiddo,

I'll see you later, huh? In the meantime, if the old witch comes back and starts hassling you, stand up to her. Let her know she can't push you around. Let her know you're a person too! If you can stand up to her, you can stand up to ANYONE! You got that, kiddo?"

"Person ... stand up ... ANYONE! Yeah, I think so," I said, savouring these crystal words of wisdom and hoping that eventually they might even come to make sense.

"Nobody's as formidable as they want you to think," she said as she headed out the door. "Even Mrs. Finkelberg has a heart somewhere under all that blubber!"

"Formidable ... heart ... blubber! Gottcha!" Oy veh!

Mrs. Finkelberg was in a rotten mood when she got back from Nuddick's — or 'Nudnick's' as she prefers to call it.

"Why the hell do I eat at that crummy restaurant? That zoo?" she grumbled to no one in particular. "The noise gives me a headache, the food gives me heartburn ..."

"One Cow Brand Cocktail coming up!" Meryl zipped off to the kitchenette as fast as her high-heeled clogs could carry her and returned with a tall glassful of what looked like dirty bathwater. "Here," she said, handing the concoction to Mrs. Finkelberg, "I put in two heaping spoonfuls of baking soda, just the way you like it."

"Damned heartburn," Mrs. Finkelberg grimaced, "it's going to be the death of me yet!" She drained the glass dry and banged it down on the reception desk. "And speaking of heartburn," she squinted in my direction, "where's Shayna?"

"Right here at my desk," I cringed. Formidable. Heart. Blubber.

"Hmmm," she put on her glasses and gave me a piercing look, "what are you doing there? Daydreaming for a change?"

"Proofreading!" I waved a stack of freshly-typeset articles in the air.

"Hmph," she snarled, "just make sure you catch all the typos this time. There were far too many in the paper last week."

Person. Stand up. ANYone. "I wasn't even here last week!"

"I don't care who's to blame. I'm just stating facts. And now, if it's not too much trouble, kindly get on the phone with the mayor's office and set up an interview for this afternoon."

I made a sour face. I was hoping she'd forgotten all about that stupid 'Poop and Scoop' business.

"Well, do it already! Before you forget!"

I reached for the phone. Person. Stand up. ANYone.

"My God, you move slowly!" she blasted me. "I've seen turtles that move faster than you do! What does it take to get a rise out of you, anyway? A lit firecracker up your ass?"

That did it. "I'M A PERSON TOO YOU KNOW!" I exploded.

"I beg your pardon?" She gave me a startled look.

"She said — she's a person too you know!" Meryl cried ecstatically, giving me a clench-fisted salute behind Mrs. Finkelberg's back.

"That's what I thought she said." Mrs. Finkelberg scratched her head. "Hold my calls, will you Meryl? Shayna and I are going into my office to have a little talk."

"Oh-oh," Meryl said, giving me a mortified look.

"Listen, Ms. Yenta Telebenta, if I want commentary, I'll turn on Howard Cossell!" Mrs. Finkelberg glared at her. "C'mon, Shayna," she

nudged me, "let's get this over with." We went into her office and she closed the door. I got the feeling that my career with the Register was about to come to an abrupt end. And I was almost relieved. One less obstacle between me and a new life in California. One less decision to make. "Shayna, Shayna, Shayna ..." She wearily plunked herself down at her desk and popped a Rol-aid into her mouth. "What are we going to do with you, Shayna?"

C'mon, fire me already, you bitch, I thought, get it over with so we can all get on with our lives!

"Sit down, Shayna."

"I'd rather stand." I folded my arms defiantly across my chest.

"Suit yourself."

"It's about time I did."

"You know, you're beginning to sound more and more like our friend Karen Biskin every minute."

"Thank you." I smiled.

"Yes," she nodded, "I suppose that is a compliment. In the three years Karen's been working here, she's evolved into quite a young woman. You know, she's even had a couple of articles published in Macleans recently?"

"I know. I read them."

"They were really quite good, you know. Karen's really going places. But she's worked hard to get where she is. She's paid her dues."

"So have I," I sniffed. "I went to McGill for five years. I got my B.A. in Communications."

"You know what a B.A. in Communications stands for in my books?" she hollered, the fat on her face jiggling like Jell-o. "It stands for

knowing Balls All about Communications. Not to mention life! Look at me, Shayna, look at me. I'm a self-made woman. I built this paper up from scratch. I'm a pillar in this community!" She popped another Rol-aid into her mouth. "And the only school I ever graduated from was the School of Hard Knocks."

I rolled my eyes around in my head. "I didn't ask to be born well off you know?"

"Yes, well, just because you were doesn't mean you're exempt from paying your dues like the rest of us. We all have to pay our dues if we're ever going to get anywhere."

"Yeah?" I cried, figuring I had nothing left to lose anyway. "Well, how am I ever supposed to get anywhere if I'm always doing jo-jobs like proofreading or helping Dora with the copy-editing or writing dumb little articles about things like dog shit?" I threw my hands up in the air. "Dog shit, yeesh!"

"But that's what paying your dues is all about, Shayna. You have to start at the bottom and work your way to the top. I told you that the very day I hired you, didn't I? And do you remember what you promised me in return? You promised to be the best damn Chief Schlock Processor and Drivel Writer I ever had — even though the job was a far cry from what you expected after graduation."

"Yeah," I almost laughed aloud. "I remember." I'll never forget that day as long as I live, I thought. I was so grateful to her for hiring me that I'd have agreed to clean toilets if she'd have asked me to. Six months I'd been looking for a job! Six months of nothing but disappointments. I must have applied to every film company, radio and television station and newspaper in the city. From the National Film

Board to the CBC. From the Montreal Gazette to the Midnight Globe. Nobody had any openings for recent graduates in Communication Arts though. Mrs. Finkelberg was the only one who would give me a break. The only one! "Yeah, I remember," I muttered, suddenly feeling like a total shtunk.

"And besides," she went on, "you don't always get the schlock jobs, you know? I sent you out to do that interview with that lady symphony conductor, didn't I? Oh, I know I haven't run it yet, but I will, it was too good an article not to. And how about those humorous articles of yours? I believe Dora told me that you write them in your spare time — sort of as a hobby? They were splendid, each and every one of them. Especially that last one you did — on that auto mechanics course for women you took? I laughed so hard I almost crapeered!" She shook her head and chuckled. "Ask my Herb." Herb, I told him, Herb — this kid could be the next Art Buchwald!"

"Me? The next Art Buchwald?" I was astounded. A compliment from Mrs. Finkelberg is about as rare as a total eclipse of the sun, and here she was giving me a whole flood of them? Naw, it couldn't be, I thought, reaching down and pinching myself on the thigh, this must be a dream. I took too much Gravol this morning and slipped into a coma and now I'm having a weird dream. The next thing I know, I'll be linking arms with a scarecrow, a tin man and a cowardly lion and we'll all take off — hopping and skipping down the Yellow Brick Road while a couple of thousand munchkins cheer us on.

"Don't look at me like that, Shayna! Plenty of famous writers got their start on small suburban newspapers like this one."

"The next Art Buchwald? Really?" I was floating two feet off



the ground. I never realized just how much that woman's approval meant to me. I just never realized!

"Not everyone can write humour, you know? It takes a very special gift — and I believe you've got it. That certain something."

"You do?"

"You know, Shayna, I could be the best friend you ever had. I could really help you make it. I have friends in high places. Including the wire services."

"You mean — my own syndicated column?"

"Egg-xactly!" She nodded.

"God!"

"But!" Her eyes narrowed. "Before I lift so much as one pinky to help you, you've got to give me a sign, some kind of concrete sign that you're ready — and willing — to go for it. Because talent is worth shnai unless you're willing to work your butt off. And that willingness can only come from within you. Nobody on this earth can help you unless you're willing to help yourself."

"But how?" I blurted.

"Prove yourself, that's how! Can you do that, Shayna? Can you prove to me — and more importantly, to yourself — that you're not just another Guccied-up J.A.P. who's content to coast through life on Daddy's Master Charge?"

"I ... I ... I ..."

"I have high hopes for you, Shayna. I hope you won't disappoint me."

"Oh, God." I slumped into a chair and buried my face in my hands. Shay, you turkey you, a familiar voice screamed inside my head,

why are you letting her get to you like this? You don't want to be the next Art Buchwald, for crying out loud. You want to write movies — like Woody Allen. You want to go to L.A. with Peter. The man you love! That is what you want, isn't it? Isn't it?

"Shayna?" A hand touched my shoulder.

I looked up. It was her! Go away, I wanted to scream, go away and leave me alone. You're making me crazy with all these decisions. You were supposed to fire me and make things easier, not more complicated. The last thing I need is more complications, damn you! But the words got stuck in my throat.

"Are you alright?" she asked. "You're as white as a sheet."

"I — I don't know." My head was reeling. I was so confused. I didn't know if I was coming or going or what.

"You look awful." She touched my forehead with the back of her hand. "And you're warm too. Maybe you should see a doctor?"

"Yeah, a doctor." Jo Ann's, I thought, I'll go over to Jo Ann's. She can help me sort things out. She always does. "I really think I should see a doctor."

"Go on then. I'll get somebody to cover for you. And don't worry about the interview with the Mayor. You can do it first thing Monday morning."

"Yeah, first thing Monday." I was ready to agree to anything just to get out of there. "Thank you." I got up and rushed out before she could change her mind.

## CHAPTER 8

Jo Ann, looking her usual exquisite, dressed-to-kill self, was walking out the front door just as I pulled up to her house.

"Hey, Pecker!" I honked my horn. "Where are you going?"

"Shay, it's you!" she cried as she ran down to the car to greet me. "Boy, are you ever a hard person to get a hold of. First I called your house and your mother said you were at work ... then I called you at work and they said you left for the day."

"I got the rest of the day off."

"I've been dying to hear all about your trip to New York. Your mother says you had a fabulous time."

"Yeah," I sighed, "we sure did."

"Well, don't sound too thrilled about it or anything!" She grabbed my wrist. "So where's the watch? Your mother says she bought you a real beauty at Cartier's."

"It's at home." I pulled my hand away. "I'm, uh, saving it for special occasions, you know?" Actually I couldn't bear to put it on this morning. It made me feel so ... so guilty! "Jo, I've really got to talk to you," I blurted. "I've been dying to talk to you ever since I got in from New York last night. I must have called your house a thousand times!"

"We took my in-laws out to Ruby Foo's for their anniversary -- why what's the big ... oh, I know. This has to do with that guy you

spent the night with a couple of weeks ago, doesn't it?"

"I'm so mixed up." I rubbed my throbbing temples. "You've got to help me sort things out before I explode!"

She gave me a pained look. "I'm afraid this isn't a very good time. Take a peek in my driveway."

I glanced into her driveway. Two girls I hadn't seen in ages, Sandy Kreisman and Brenda Frank, were sitting in the back seat of the Peckers' banana yellow Cherokee jeep. They smiled and waved at me. I waved back.

"Be there in a sec!" Jo Ann yelled to them.

"Jesus, I haven't seen them since camp," I said.

"Me neither," she shrugged.

"So what are they doing in Richard's jeep?"

"Well, you didn't expect me to fit them into the back seat of my Firebird, did you? They're both in their eighth month!"

"Both of them?"

"Yeah, they still do everything together -- just like they used to when we called them the 'Bobbsey Twins' way back when. Remember? They even used to go to the bathroom together!"

I strained to get a better look. They were pregnant alright. Very pregnant. They looked more like Tweedledum and Tweedledee than the Bobbsey Twins. "You having a baby shower on wheels or what?"

"They heard I was in my fourth month and they thought it would be fun if we 'pregos' got together and compared notes. So we're going to Nuddick's for lunch."

"Oh."

"Anyway, it's kinda nice to get together with people who are

going through the same thing as you, you know?"

"Sure." Suddenly I felt like the only person left on earth.

"Well, see you." I started my car.

"Hey, wait a minute, where are you going?" She reached over and pulled the keys out of the ignition. "Don't you want to come?"

"I don't know ...". The thought of sitting in that zoo of a restaurant all afternoon and talking 'Baby Talk' with Tweedledee and Tweedledum made me ill. "I'm not much into diapers, you know?"

"C'mon, they have to leave for a doctor's appointment at two. Then we can sit and talk about whatever it is you want to talk about. C'mon, I really want you to come."

"Well, I guess ... if they're leaving at two." I leaned over to take a look at myself in the rear-view mirror.

"C'mon, you're gorgeous!"

"Just checking." I fluffed my hair and smoothed on some lip-gloss. One can never look too good for Nuddick's. Every dressed-t-kill yenta telebenta and her buttinsky mother-in-law goes there for lunch. And when you walk through the door, they all look up from their diet plates of cottage cheese and Melba Toast to check you out. And if they don't approve of what you look like or what you're wearing or who you are, they set aside their diet plates of cottage cheese and Melba Toast and have YOU for lunch instead. "I look okay?" I asked her as I got out of the car.

"Perfect ... hey, look at her in the Geoffrey Beene halter top and the Diane Von Furstenberg jeans!" she cried as she gave me the once-over. "Part of your loot from New York?"

"Uh-huh," I winced. Sometimes I wonder if Jo Ann isn't getting

to be as bad as those yentas in Nuddick's.

"God," she gave me an envious look, "you're so skinny, I hate you! Look at me." She patted her stomach, which had a tiny bulge in it. Sort of like a radial tire. "I'm beginning to show already. Would you believe I can't even fit into my Sassons jeans anymore?"

"Yeah, but you can still get into your Calvin Kleins I see."

"Yeah, but the Sassons are my favourite," she sighed.

"Christ, will you just listen to us!" I cried. I really hated this conversation. "Sassons, Calvin Klein, Geoffrey Beene! God, we sound like such J.A.P.s!"

"That's 'cause we are!" she laughed. "C'mon," she took my hand and pulled me toward the jeep. "Brenda and Sandy must be plotzing already."

Nuddick's was packed as usual.

It was just wall-to-wall to ceiling with the usual assortment of dressed-to-kill yentas, buttinskis and J.A.P.s.

And Jo Ann, the Bobbsey Twins and I had to walk through the usual gauntlet of eyes to get to our table.

Shit: those eyes!

I don't think I'll ever get used to them. They made me so nervous that I kept checking my fly to make sure it was closed and I kept looking around to make sure there were no forgotten strands of toilet paper hanging out of my pants and schlepping on the floor behind me.

By the time we sat down at our table I was in a perfect sweat.

Not Jo Ann though. Jo Ann looked like she had just stepped out

of one of those beautiful people Arrid X-tra Dry commercials.

Jo Ann was cool, calm and collected.

And the Bobbsey Twins were basking in all the attention.

From the way they were sitting there, waving and smiling at everyone, you'd have thought they were on a float at the Grey Cup parade.

"What's the matter, Shay?" Jo Ann asked me. "You're all flushed."

"I just wish people would keep their eyes to themselves." I shook my head. "Sometimes I think they can see right into my soul."

"You'd think you'd be used to it by now," she laughed. "I mean, looking people over is practically a Jewish tradition, like having bagel and lox on Sunday morning or going to Miami for Christmas." She took a look around. "Though people do seem to be staring more than usual."

"It's because of us," Brenda said. "Ever since we started showing, people have been treating us like heroes."

"That's right," Sandy agreed. "In this day and age when more and more people are living together, getting divorced or choosing careers over having children, it kinda renews everyone's faith in humanity when they see a young pregnant woman go-by."

"Or two." Brenda patted her enormous stomach.

"Or three!" Jo Ann cried.

And they all cracked up laughing.

I, on the other hand, just sat there growing rings around my ampits. I mean, I really needed to hear this conversation. Like I needed to grow a third tit!

But whether I needed to hear it or not, I heard it anyway. For the next hour and fifteen minutes and forty-five seconds the three of them sat there over their chef's salads, strawberry cheesecake and tall

glasses of milk and talked nothing but baby talk. Everything you always wanted to know about pregnancy but were understandably afraid to ask. From Ultrasound (Jo Ann couldn't hold in the mandatory six glasses of water and peed on the table) to Internals (they kill). From Labour Pains (they kill more) to Episiotomies (they kill after the freezing wears off). From Epidurals (they're a blessing in disguise — if you have enough money to shmear the anaesthetist so that he'll show up on time, if at all), to Enemas (so that you don't shit in the doctor's face when you're pushing the baby out). Brenda even described, in graphic detail, how her sister-in-law's best friend's sister's water broke while she was grocery shopping at Hypermarché (it gushed all over a fellow shopper's brand new \$600 hand-made snakeskin cowboy boots and wiped out an entire shelf of Dare Chocolate Chip cookies before she even knew what hit her!).

It was definitely not one of the more appetizing lunches I have ever attended: My barely-nibbled tuna sandwich testified to that.

And then, as if all that wasn't hard enough to take, there was the endless stream of well-wishers who kept stopping by to rub things in.

"Mazel tov, dear!" a friend of Jo Ann's mother cried, her left tit sweeping across my plate as she reached over to feel Jo Ann's stomach. "Your mother tells me you're carrying a little bundle of nachas in there. And when's your turn?" she said to me.

"You're both going to have boys," a woman who knew Brenda and Sandy told them, "there's no doubt about it."

"You're both going to have girls," said another, "I'm willing to bet my life on it!"

"Keep on having those babies, ladies," a middle-aged man in a



three-piece suit told them, "and for GodSAKES, don't let those farbisseneh separatist frantzoin scare you off to Toronto!"

And in between all that, there were the bits and pieces of conversations from surrounding tables that kept filtering in.

In the booth to our right, four middle-aged busybodies were busy discussing Ruth Somebody-Or-Other's recently divorced daughter who goes down to Thursday's every night to pick up men. And to our left a couple of J.A.P.s were talking about some poor soul named Rhea Bibberman who got her boyfriend's safe stuck up her knish and had to be rushed to the hospital to have it removed with forceps. And in front of us a bunch of sixteen-year-olds (the kind Mrs. Finkelberg would call P.I.T.s, or Princesses In Training) were trying on each other's jewellery and discussing what they were going to wear to Patty Somebody-ski's upcoming 'Sweet' at the Hyatt.

It was enough to make a person want to get on the next plane to California and never come back.

By the time two o'clock rolled around and the Bobsey Twins got up to leave for their doctor's appointment, I was about ready to blow a gasket.

"I thought they'd never leave!" I cried as they waddled off, waving and smiling, like two movie stars at a premiere.

"God," Jo Ann sighed, "I can't believe I'm going to look like that in a few months. They're so big!"

"They were heavy to begin with," I reminded her. "Now could we ..."

"I'm happy I'm pregnant and everything," she rattled on, "I just wish I didn't have to get so Goddamned fat! I mean, look at me ... just

look at me ... my nose is swollen, my face is puffy, my tits are humongous, my middle is spreading ... did I tell you that I can't even fit into my Sassons anymore?"

"About an hour ago." I could feel my blood beginning to boil.  
"Now could we ..."

"Richard keeps assuring me that I look more beautiful than ever, you know? He's especially thrilled with my humongous tits. But still," she winced, "I could cry every time I look at myself in the mirror, you know?" She picked up a knife and studied her reflection in it. "I could just cry." She gave her streaked blonde hair a quick fluff, resurrected a drooping eyelash with the help of one of her inch-long 'Delightfully Red' fingernails, smoothed over her heavily glossed lips with an expert sweep of her pinky and then she set the knife back down on the table. "Miss Piggy, that's who I look like!"

That did it. "You're no help!" I fumed, throwing my share of the bill down on the table and getting up to leave.

"Hey." She suddenly noticed I was alive. "Where are you going?"

"You wanna know where I'm going?" I exploded. "I'll tell you where I'm going. To California to live with Peter, THAT'S where I'm going!"

"YOU'RE WHAT?"

About a dozen heads turned our way to check out the commotion. The four busybodies in the next booth shoved aside their diet plates of cottage cheese and Melba Toast and began licking their chops. "Gib a kik, Zelda!" they murmured in Yiddish as they poked each other with their elbows. "Kik ihr uhn, Frances!"

Oh, no, I thought, staring at Frances, I know that woman from

somewhere. But who is she? One of Ma's friends from Elmsdale? One of those distant relatives on Dad's side whom I only see at weddings, bar mitzvahs and funerals? Oh, no, what have I done?

"Sit down, will you?" Jo Ann said in a hoarse whisper. "Everybody's staring!"

"Oh, God!" I grabbed my purse and ran out.

Jo Ann caught up with me in the parking lot.

"What's going on?" she cried. "What is with you?"

"I can't believe I just did that!" I wailed. "I mean, there are three sure-fire ways of spreading news around this city: Telephone, Television and Tell It At Nuddick's. AND I JUST TOLD IT AT NUDDICK'S!"

"Calm down, will you?" she said. "Take it easy."

"Oh, sure, calm down! I just told half the world about something my parents know nothing about and you tell me to calm down? Shit, Jo Ann, I'd never have shouted it out that way if you hadn't been so wrapped up in your humongous tits and your fucking Sasson jeans!"

"I'm sorry, I had no idea it was that serious."

"I'm only on the verge of having a complete nervous breakdown, that's all! The Man of My Dreams wants me to come live with him in California ... my mother wants me to forget he ever existed because she hates his guts — not to mention his looks, personality and occupation ... Stanley wants to marry me and won't take 'no' for an answer, and Mrs. Finkelberg! Mrs. Finkelberg wants to turn me into the next Art Buchwald!"

"What about you?" she asked the Two Thousand Dollar Question.

"What do you want?"

"If I knew that," I threw my hands up to God, "would I be on

the verge of a nervous breakdown?"

"I just can't believe it," she shook her head, "he really asked you to move to California with him?"

"Yeah, he's there right now on business but he sent me this." I pulled the telegram out of my purse and handed it to her.

She sat down on a cement slab to read it. "God ... Gawwwddd!"

"What am I going to do, Jo?" I said, plunking myself down beside her. "I'm picking Peter up at the airport tomorrow morning and he's going to be expecting an answer. That means I'd have to break the news to my parents tonight — if some yenta from Nuddick's hasn't gotten to them first."

"God, your parents!" She gave me a mortified look. "They're going to KILL you!"

"Thanks, Jo Ann," I winced, "I really needed that."

"Well, I'm just being realistic. I mean, I know your parents. They're just like my parents. They'd rather see you dead than living In Sin!"

"Do you have to be so realistic?!"

"Look what happened to my cousin Meryl when she moved in with her boyfriend. Her parents pronounced her D.W.A. — Dead While Alive. They actually sat shiva for her!"

"God!" A shudder ran right through me. I had visions of Ma getting dressed in black ... of Dad having his tie snipped ... of the men from Paperman & Sons Funeral Home setting down a bunch of those little brown shiva chairs in the far corner of the living room ... of the family gathering around to mourn my 'passing'. "I'd just die if that happened to me!"

"That's the general idea, dummy!" she giggled.

"You know what I meant!"

"I know, I'm sorry. And besides, my cousin's situation was a little bit more extreme. After all, the guy was Greek and her father was a big-shot at the Shaar Hashomayim synagogue. But still, your parents are going to KILL you!"

"Do you HAVE to keep saying that?" I cried. "I came to you for comfort -- not potential headlines in the National Enquirer!"

"All the comfort in the world isn't going to change the facts. Your parents will never give you their blessing. They believe in marriage -- a lot."

"Tell me about it." I groaned. "My mother truly believes that my life will have no meaning until I register my silverware pattern and dinner set at Kaplow's Gift Shop. Her dream-come-true has always been to see my little white card up against the display of 'Bridal Selections':

Shayna Pearl Fine: Fiancée of  
Mr. Blankety Blank. Royal Doulton  
China. Moonlight Serenade -- white  
with gold trim. Service for 8.

You know how it is? When your card goes up in that Bridal Selection corner, you're a Somebody. It's like seeing your name up in lights. People suddenly know you exist. You become legitimate. And my mother is dying for me to become legitimate. It's killing her, it's really killing her because all my friends are heavily into sheets, towels and wall-to-wall carpeting and I'm still the fiancée of Mr. Blankety Blank."

"She's a typical mother, what do you expect? From the moment you were born she's probably been dreaming of the day she could make you

a fancy-shmancy wedding at The Ritz ... the whole shpiel. Just like I had."

"Yeah, well, a fancy-shmancy wedding at The Ritz doesn't guarantee happiness, you know? Hell, look at Sandy Bloomfield and Marcie Slutsky. They waltzed out of their respective weddings at The Ritz and bunny-hopped into their respective divorces in record time ... five months for Sandy; eight for Marcie." I shook my head. "And to think I once envied those girls. I mean, there they were, the Center of Attention. Center Stage. Their diamond rings were so huge that their bodies made a pronounced dip to the left when they walked. And bridal showers! Between them they must have had a dozen. Plant ... bathroom ... kitchen ... Tupperware! I thought for sure they were set for life. So did they, for that matter. But look at them now — stuck with all the props and no leading men."

"I guess this means I won't be making you a bridal shower," she sighed. "I thought for sure you and Stanley were going to get married and I'd get to make you one in my new house."

"Well, you could always make me a 'Living In Sin' shower," I cracked.

"Oh, that would be cute!" she giggled.

"I hate bridal showers anyway. A bunch of dressed-to-the-teeth women sit around your living room sipping sherry and stuffing their faces with cheesecake from Ethel Putchkeh caterers while you open their gifts and say truly profound things like, "Ooooo, a spatula!" or "Ahhhhh, an oven mitt!" or "Wowwww, a toaster oven!" Things like that set women back fifty years."

"But don't you ever want to get married and have a family?"

"Someday, maybe. I'm just not ready for that whole scene now. Maybe I never will be."

"Didn't you tell me that Peter has a kid?"

"Yeah, Nicky. He's really adorable too. I'm crazy about him. But that's different. He lives with his mother. He's not my responsibility."

"Yeah, well what happens if his mother, say, gets killed in a car crash or something and he has to come live with you?"

"For Pete's sakes, Jo Ann!"

"I'm just being realistic."

"I don't know. I'll worry about it if the time comes. In the meantime, it's just going to be me and Peter in our magnificent beach-house overlooking the Pacific."

"God, you sound like something out of Harlequin Romances!"

"Well, Peter's a pretty romantic guy."

"I can't wait to meet this Mr. Wonderful."

"Yeah, he's kind of anxious to meet you too. He thinks you give great blow job instructions."

"Ah, yes!" she laughed. "The old popsicle routine."

"It worked like a charm. By the end of the night I was practically a pro."

"Boy," she marvelled, "that must have been SOME night!"

"In the words of Kate Bush it was "Wow ... wow ... wow ...

UNBELIEVABLE!"

She smiled. "You're really crazy about him, aren't you? I can see it in your eyes, the way they light up when you talk about him. I've never seen you get this way over a guy before, that's for sure."

"I've never felt this way before. Shit, Jo Ann," I cried, "what do you think I should do? I mean, going to L.A. with him — it's such a big step. It's so scary."

"Hmmm ..." she toyed with the diamond-studded "J" around her neck, "... well, if you want my advice, I don't think you should decide right now. I think you need more time to get to know him better. After all, you did only spend one night with the guy."

"You think he'd understand?"

"If he's as terrific as you say, he will. Look, you've got ten days before you're supposed to leave for L.A. Why don't you just wait and see how it goes before you decide anything? And for GodSAKES, don't tell your parents yet!"

"I guess that makes sense," I shrugged. "It's funny you know, all your life you wait for your dreams to come true and just when they're finally about to, you become riddled with all kinds of doubts."

"I think it's only natural to have doubts," she reassured me. "After all, it says right here in the telegram: 'Shay — take a chance, come live with me'. And that's exactly what you'd be doing. Taking a BIG chance."

I shivered. "And that's what's so scary about this whole thing. I mean, what chances have I ever had to take in my whole life? Not telling Peter I was a virgin that first time, letting that first time happen altogether — that was Shay Fine at her chanciest!"

"I don't know about that," she giggled, "you told him you were on The Pill which you weren't — now THAT was certainly taking A chance!"

We looked at each other and burst out laughing.

"I can't believe you did that!" she howled, her voice echoing



across the parking lot.

"Neither could he!" I screeched.

"God!" She got serious all of a sudden. "I hope you're not pregnant!"

"Naw, I got my period the day after I got to New York."

"Pheuw," she fanned herself, "that's a relief."

"You're not kidding," I agreed whole-heartedly. "I think it's part of the reason why I had such a good time in New York. I was just so relieved that I got my period. So was my mother for that matter. I think it just confirmed her suspicions that my recent craziness was all because it was THAT time of the month."

"That's ridiculous," she scoffed.

"God, I sure hope so," I laughed. "I mean, I do get a little crazy before my period, but I'd sure hate to think I fell in love with Peter because my hormones were imbalanced!"

"Well, you have to admit the whole thing was a little crazy, for whatever reason. I mean, telling him you were on The Pill when you weren't!"

"He was pretty pissed off at first. But then he got over it and went out to buy some safes."

"Echhchchch! Safes are the pits!"

"Well, he wasn't too crazy about them, that was for sure. But what choice did we have?"

"C'mon." She grabbed me by the hand and pulled me toward her jeep. "You're coming with me."

"Where to?"

"To Dr. Yagod's to put in The Coil."

"Whoa!" I stopped dead in my tracks. "I don't know about that."

"Why not? It'll give you one less thing to worry about."

"I'm not crazy about having a piece of wire shoved up my knish, that's why."

"Don't be silly. It's a terrific gadget! They're not sure how it works, exactly, but it does. I used it for three years until I took it out to get pregnant. And the beauty of it is, you don't even know it's there. It just hurts a little when he puts it up and you get bad cramps during your period, but it's definitely the best of the bunch. You don't get fat like you do on The Pill and there's no potckehing around like there is with the other gizmos and doodads. And now's the perfect time to do it too. You're supposed to put it in right after your period."

"But I don't even have an appointment. I can't just walk into Dr. Yagod's office and ask him to shove me up a coil just like that. I mean, it's not like we're going to McDonald's to order a Big Mac!"

"You know his receptionist, Karen Gold?"

"Just from the few times I've gone there for check-ups," I shrugged. "Why?"

"Well, I took her up to my father's factory for clothes a couple of times. She owes me. Maybe I can get her to squeeze you in some time this afternoon. Here," she handed me her car keys, "you wait in the jeep while I go and call her from the pay phone in Nuddick's."

Five minutes later we were on our way to the Medical Arts Building on Cote des Neiges, home of Yagod, Spitz and Klein, Ob. Gyns. Inc.

"Karen put you down for 3:45 but she thinks you might have to

wait awhile," Jo Ann said, looking pretty pleased with herself. "Boy oh boy," she laughed, "having a father in the shmata business sure does come in handy sometimes, you know?"

I reached into her purse and pulled out a Rothman. My hand shook as I lit it.

"You're doing the right thing, you know," she told me.

"I just want to be sure," I said, blowing the smoke out slowly, "I mean, The Coil, it's risky, I've read things."

"Every contraceptive has its risks. Remember when I took The Pill a few years ago? My tits got so huge I practically needed a shopping cart to lug them around."

I squirmed in my seat. Sometimes I feel more like her child than her best friend. She's always so on top of things. So sure of herself. "I know I sound like a little kvetch and everything but ..."

"Look, I know this sounds very chauvinistic but like it or not, contraception is still a woman's responsibility. If we had to depend on the men of this world to take precautions, our lives would be one loooooong pregnancy."

"That stinks!"

"Stinks, shminks, it's a fact of life, kiddo. Anyway", she winked at me, "just think about how thrilled Peter's going to be when he comes home tomorrow and you surprise him with some 'No fuss/No mess' sex."

She had a good point there. I really did want everything to be perfect when Peter came home tomorrow. And besides, I decided, Karen was right. It's about time I started taking responsibility for my own life.

"So what do you say?"

I looked at her and smiled. "I say — goodbye safes, hello  
'No fuss/No mess' sex!"

## CHAPTER 9

Putting in The Coil was definitely a memorable experience.

I mean, it was right up there with two of the most unforgettable experiences of my life: fracturing my pelvis and shattering my kneecap.

The moment I laid eyes on it I practically went into shock.

"That's it?!" I gasped as Dr. Yagod reached into a box and pulled out a double-looped gizmo with copper wiring protruding from its stem like insect antennas. "That's what you're going to put up inside me?"

"Yep, this is it," he said as he held it up to the light for inspection. "The 'Copper 7'."

"It looks like a used-car part!"

He laughed. "In a way, it does work like one of the parts in your car. You know what a catalytic converter is?"

"Yeah, sure, I learned all about it in my auto mechanics course. It cleans up the pollutants."

"Well then, just think of the 'Copper 7' as a catalytic converter for sperm, heh, heh."

"Heh, heh." Just what I'd always wanted!

"Okay, take a deep breath and relax," he smiled reassuringly as he prepared to zero the gizmo in for a landing, "you'll feel a cramp or two and it'll be all over."

Oh, God, I thought, wrapping my toes around the stirrups for dear life, that's exactly what I'm afraid of!

"Hey, c'mon now, just relax," he said in a kind, almost syrupy-sweet voice. "I've put in hundreds of these things and I haven't lost a patient yet."

"I ... I'm sorry," I said, feeling like a total nebbish. I think that even my vagina was blushing. "I don't know what's gotten into me. Just give me a minute and I'll be alright."

"Sure thing, take your time," he said, glancing anxiously at his watch, as doctors often do whenever they tell you to take your time.

"Take all the time you need."

Damn you, Shay, grow up will you, I thought as I struggled to regain my composure, just grow the hell up! Do you always have to make such a big production out of everything? The guy says it's nothing. He's done hundreds. Millions of women go through it all the time. So grow up! "Okay, I'm ready." I took a deep breath.

"Okie dookie," he chirped cheerfully as he shoved it up and tore my kishkehs out.

I passed out twice from the pain.

When I came to — and stayed that way — he presented me with a doggie bag full of painkillers stamped 'Physician's Sample' and a pamphlet entitled 'Everything You Always Wanted To Know About The Copper 7' and he sent me on my way.

But not before he dropped a bomb on my head.

"You'll probably have some cramps and bleeding for the next few days," he said as he handed me over to Jo Ann, "so if I were you I'd take it easy until your symptoms subside."

I stared at him in disbelief. "You mean, like no sex?"

"That too."

"But you can't do this to me, I thought, Peter's coming home tomorrow!

"Just take two of those painkillers every four hours when you need them and I'm sure you'll be just fine," he reassured me in that syrupy voice of his. "But if the bleeding or the cramps get any more severe, call me immediately. Everything else you need to know is in that pamphlet I gave you."

Lucky thing I was feeling so weak and sickly. Otherwise I might have had a complete fit right then and there.

"Jeez, nothing like that happened to me when I put The Coil in," said a truly sympathetic Jo Ann on the way home. "Richard and I had sex that very night. The worst thing that happened was that he pricked himself on the wire a couple of times."

"Shit and I wanted everything to be perfect when Peter comes home tomorrow," I said, trying to blink back the tears, "perfectly awful, that's how it's going to be!"

"Look, I know you're disappointed and everything, but did you ever stop to think that maybe this is all for the best?"

"Nnnnnngggggg ...." I moaned as a coil cramp tore through me. For the best? Was she nuts?

"It'll give you and Peter a chance to get to know each other better. You know, find out if you have more between you than just sex."

"Hngggggggg ...." If she was trying to console me, she was doing a rotten job.

"These things happen," she shrugged. "I'm sure he'll understand."

I gave her a pained look. Suddenly I wasn't so sure of everything she was always so sure of.

"Hey, don't look at me like that! I was only trying to help!"

"I know, I'm sorry," I said, recalling the promise I had made to myself earlier. The one about taking responsibility for my own life from now on. "It was my decision to put it in. Nobody stuck a gun to my head. It's just that ...." I muffled a sob, "... it's just that nothing seems to be going right. All I want to do is handle things like a mature adult and ... and ... and ..."

"Aw, c'mon, don't be so hard on yourself," she handed me a Kleenex. "These things happen. It's not your fault."

"You know what I'm going to do the minute I get home?" I dabbed at my eyes with the Kleenex. "I'm going to crawl into bed and STAY there until it's time to pick Peter up at the airport tomorrow morning. If I stay in bed I can't possibly get into any more trouble, right?"

"Well, whatever you do, DON'T say anything to your parents about the telegram until you've talked things over with Peter and you know what you're getting into: Now THAT would be a disaster!"

"Yeah, well maybe I'll save myself a lot of grief and not tell them at all," I decided. "Maybe I'll just run off with Peter and ..."

"And what?" She gave me a disgusted look. "Do you really think running away will solve anything?"

Maybe it'll solve EVERY thing!" So much for being mature..

"Ah, you're just talking that way 'cause you're upset. If it's any consolation, things do have a way of working themselves out, you know. And they will ... in time."

"Next thing I know, you'll be telling me that someday I'm going to look back on all this and laugh!"

"That was my next line!" she laughed.



"I hope you're right," I said, feeling a little too queezy for comfort. "In the meantime, would you mind pulling over to the curb? I think I'm going to be sick ...."

Ma was in the kitchen preparing Friday night's supper when I got home.

The smell of chickens roasting in the oven turned my stomach. So did the thought of facing Ma for that matter. I knew how disgusted she'd be if she ever found out about my coil. To her an unmarried woman who inserts a contraceptive device with intent to commit sex is, beyond a doubt, a kurveh of the cheapest kind. And besides, Jo Ann told me that I walked like I had a hot potato between my legs. That's all I need, I thought with a shudder, is for Ma to see me walking like I had a hot potato between my legs!

I took off my clogs and tried to sneak upstairs unnoticed.

I should have known better.

Hardly anything ever gets by Ma unnoticed.

Sometimes I think she has a built-in fuzz buster or something.

"What's the matter?" she said as I started up the stairs. "Don't you say hello to your mother when you come in the house?"

"I, uh, I was just going upstairs to wash first," I said without turning around.

"Was it my imagination, or did I see you limping?"

Eyes like a sighthound.

"Limping?" My whole body stiffened. What the hell was I supposed to do? "Tell her" my catalytic converter for sperm was killing me? "I, uh, I uh pulled a muscle in my thigh," I sputtered. "Yeah, that's it," I

said, thanking God that mind-reading wasn't among her many talents, "I pulled a muscle!"

"Well, how'd you do a thing like that?" She wanted to know.

"I uh, I dunno, just one of those things, I guess."

"What? I can't hear what you're muttering there with your back turned to me." The persistence of an Avon Lady.

I turned around to look at her. The Coil burned through me just as surely as if it had been a live wire. I had to sit down on the steps to keep from losing my balance. "I said it's just one of those things."

"Oh?"

"It's no big deal, really." I couldn't bear to look her in the face. All I could think about was that lousy coil imbedded within my innermost parts like some deep, dark secret. I never used to have secrets from her, I thought, feeling terribly guilty. And now I'm just full of secrets. I'm just one BIG secret!

"Shayna Pearl?" A deep note of motherly concern. "Are you alright? You're acting awfully strange ..."

"I'm fine." I smiled so wide I thought my face was going to tear. "I think I'll go and take a shower." I got up and headed toward the bathroom. Anything to get away.

She followed me anyway. "You know, I haven't been able to stop thinking about New York all day long?" She plunked herself down on the toilet to pee. "We had quite a time, you and I, didn't we?"

"Yeah." I splashed some cold water on my face. "I kind of couldn't stop thinking about it myself."

"You know that Givenchi bag I got at Feiffer's on Grand Street last Sunday? I saw it at Boutique Lilly today and it was DOUBLE the

price. Can you imagine? Now that's what I call a bargain!"

"Ma," I was almost doubled over from the pain in my belly, "could we talk about this later? I'd, uh, really like to take a shower now."

"What?" She snapped out of her trance. "A shower? Oh, yes, of course. I have to get back to my cooking anyway." She got up from the toilet and proceeded to pull up her girdle. "Damn thing!" she cried as she struggled to get it over her behind. "And they have the nerve to call this the 'I can't believe it's a girdle' girdle?!" She squirmed and wiggled; wiggled and squirmed. Her face turned deep purple. "Damn thing is going to be the death of me yet!"

"What the hell do you wear them for?" I lashed out at her. "They stop your circulation and give you varicose veins, not to mention the fact that they're downright uncomfortable!"

"I have unsightly bulges!" She grunted as she finally eased the girdle over her behind. "What would your father think if I walked around with unsightly bulges?"

I might have known she'd say that. Everything she does she does for him. Never for herself, always for him. She pees for him. Shits for him. Cooks and cleans for him. Lives and breathes for him. No doubt she'd even die for him. And umpteen times a day she wiggles in and out of that fucking girdle — just for him. And for what? He's always so wrapped up in his work or his golf or his real estate investments or his newspaper that he wouldn't even notice if she dyed her public hair green and walked around stark naked! Doesn't she even know how trapped she is, I thought, shaking my head sadly, doesn't she even realize?

"Don't take too long in the shower now," she said as she turned

to go, "the whole family will be here for supper in less than an hour."

"I can hardly wait." I grimaced as a cramp took my breath away.

"Are you sure you're alright? You've been making some of the strangest faces."

"I'm fine." I was seeing stars already. "Never felt better!"

"If you say so."

As soon as she left I popped a couple of the pain-killers Dr. Yagod gave me and I crawled into bed — clothes and all. "Shit, what a day!" I moaned as I lay there writhing in pain. "I don't think it could get rotteiner if it tried!"

Which just goes to show how much I have yet to learn about life.

No sooner did those very words leave my mouth when the doorbell rang.

"SHAYNA PEARL!!!" I heard Ma beckon. "YOU'VE GOT TO COME DOWN-STAIRS AND SEE THIS WITH YOUR OWN EYES!!!"

From the way she was carrying on you'd have thought the Queen of England had dropped by for a visit — Prince Charles and all.

But what I saw when I got downstairs was not Bonny Prince Charlie nor his mother the Queen. What I did see were two delivery men with "Bloom's Flower Shoppe" printed on their t-shirts going back and forth; back and forth; carting tons of droopy blood red flowers into our living room.

"What's with all the flowers?" I cried. "Did somebody die?"

"Aren't they just lovely?" Ma gasped.

"Who are they for?"

"The men said they're for you — from a Mr. Stanley Drabkin!"

"I might have known." I groaned.

"Did you ever see so many flowers in your life?"

"Not since we visited Annie, the char's, husband's body at Wray Walton Wray." I shivered. Maybe I was just being paranoid, I don't know, but as I gazed into the dense jungle of droopy red flowers that was once our Better Homes and Gardens Chinese Modern living room, I got the eerie feeling that I was witnessing the preparations for my own funeral. I mean, it was like something right out of the Twilight Zone.

"Aren't they just breathtaking?"

Oh, yeah, they definitely took my breath away.

"That Stanley!" she gushed. "That Stanley!"

"That Stanley!" I fumed. "That Stanley!"

The delivery men set down the last of the flowers and one of them handed me a card. "This was in one of the pots." He winked at me. "I'll bet it's one helleva love note."

"Yeah, I'll just bet." I snatched it out of his hand and went up to my room to read it.

What better way to commemorate  
Tonight's meeting  
Than with a truckload of flowers  
Called 'Love Lies Bleeding'?

See you at supper

Love, Stanley

P.S. I know something you don't think I know ...

it said.

Suddenly I got a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. Oh, God, I thought, it couldn't be! He couldn't possibly have found out about the telegram unless ... no, Jo Ann would never ... naw, I'm just being paranoid again. There's no way he could possibly know that Peter's asked me to move to California with him.

I crumpled up the note and threw it in the garbage.

"There's just no way he could know," I reassured myself. "Could  
he?"

## CHAPTER 10

Although Sabbath dinner is by no means a religious occasion in our house, it is considered to be our most sacred ritual.

Friday night's supper is the bait Ma uses to bring the family together once a week. You don't dare miss one of her roast chicken and pickled brisket feasts unless you are gravely ill, out-of-town or dead — and even then you don't get off without feeling good and guilty.

We all know how Ma spends the entire day plucking capons, scraping springs, brewing chicken soup, chopping liver, simmering carrots in brown sugar, grating cole slaw and baking potato knishes and deep dish apple pie.

From dawn to dusk she bakes for us; stews for us; rolls for us; steams and cooks for us. She slaves over a hot stove, ruins her manicure, kills her feet and wilts her hairdo.

Just for us.

She sets the table in the normally off-limits dining room where she lays out a dozen or so House Beautiful place-settings upon a crisp, Chinaman-laundered tablecloth. Each setting is an identical configuration of silverware, fine crystal wine glass, Val Saint Lambert crescent-shaped salad bowl, white and gold Royal Doulton fine china dishes and hand-woven linen napkin. In front of Dad's place, at the foot of the table, is a bottle of Manischewitz red wine and a braided Challah bread. At the center of the table are the traditional pickles and cole slaw

and at the head, Ma's place, is an immaculately-polished silver tray with three sterling candlesticks and three white Shabbas candles -- one for each child.

It's all quite an elaborate spread for a family that couldn't care less about the Sabbath, but go and tell THAT to Ma. To hear her tell it, the hard work is well worth it because the family that eats together "does a mother's heart good."

So when I tried to get out of joining the family for supper tonight, it was like talking to a wall.

"But I don't feel good, Ma!" I insisted even though I was feeling no pain thanks to the pain-killers I had taken earlier. "I think maybe I'm coming down with something." Actually I was just ~~too~~ paranoid to leave my room. I was convinced that the disaster to end all disasters was Out There just waiting for me to happen along. A perfect end to a perfect day. "Something contagious maybe."

"Oh, pooh, you don't even have a fever!" She pressed her cheek to my forehead. "You'll feel much better after you come down and eat something."

"Ma, I won't starve to death if I miss a meal, you know?"

"But this is Friday Night's Supper!"

"If I go Out There it might be the Last Supper!"

"And just what is that supposed to mean?"

"Oh forget it, you don't understand."

"Stop your shenanigans, Shayna Pearl. The whole family is waiting for you."

"Is, uh, Stanley here yet?"

"Not yet."



"No?" I didn't know if it was a good sign or a bad one. "Hey," I brightened, "maybe he isn't coming?"

"He's coming. He called to say he was tied up at the office and that he'll be a little late is all."

"Oh." I shrivelled.

"He said we should start without him -- that he'll catch up when he gets here."

"I'm sure he will," I sneered, "he's got a mouth like a CuisinArt."

"Why do you say things like that?" She shook her head in disgust.

"All that boy has ever done to you is love you."

"I don't want his love. I'm in love with Peter!"

"Oh, for crying out loud, I'm not going to stand here and get into THAT argument with you now -- I've got a dozen hungry mouths waiting to be fed. Let's go!"

I didn't move.

"What are you waiting for?" She practically yelled. "An engraved invitation?"

"Couldn't I just eat up here in my room?"

"If you think I slaved over a hot stove all day so ..."

"Okay, okay," I gave in -- no use arguing with her, "let's not get into THAT guilt trip. I'm coming. I'm coming!"

I went down to the dining room and took my place at the table.

"There now, that's more like it," Ma beamed. She was in her glory. From her place at the head of the table, she could preside over her entire family and make sure everybody got enough of everything. At the foot of the table was her obstetrician-husband, making a rare supper-time appearance (since no baby dares to be born during Friday Night's

Supper if it knows what's good for it). On either side of her sat her twin sons (her Pride and Joy respectively), her two daughters-in-law (one of whom was a week overdue in giving birth to her fifth grandchild), her four granddaughters (her little 'Morning Stars'), and last, but certainly not least, her one and only daughter (her little 'princess' for whom she held the highest hopes). "Now that everything is under control, we can begin," she declared by the authority vested in her.

And we began.

Things started off just as they always do. Dad made the ritual blessings over the wine and the bread; Ma made her ritual blessings over the candles and the rest of us took this ritual time to discuss how well the Montreal Expos were doing this season.

Everybody except me that is.

My attention was upon Ma, who was lingering over my candlestick, the third unmatched candlestick that was bought when I was born and which sits behind my brothers' matching pair. The candlestick that was bought eight years after Birks Department Store discontinued the pattern of the other two.

"Thank You God," I heard her say through cupped hands, "thank You for letting Shayna Pearl and I have such a wonderful time in New York. Keep up the good work."

The flame on the candle let out a vicious crackle. I could swear I felt Peter's telegram burning a hole right through my back pocket.

"Ma," I squirmed, "could we eat already? I'm starved."

"Starved?" She looked at me like I was crackers for sure. "Two minutes ago you weren't even hungry."

"Well I am now. So let's eat already!"

"Honestly, sometimes I just can't figure you out," she said as she began dishing out the soup.

"I gave up a long time ago," Dad grumbled.

"Hey everybody," Ma chirped, "did you notice the flowers Stanley sent Shayna Pearl this afternoon?"

I rolled my eyes around in my head. "As if they could help it!"

"Aren't they just lovely?"

Everybody "Oooooed" and "Ahhhed" in agreement.

Everybody except me that is.

"They suck!" I cried.

"Shayna Pearl!" Ma gasped. "MUST you talk like that at the table? And in front of the children yet?"

"What's the matter little sister?" David said. "Did you two have another lover's spat for a change?"

"Yeah, right." I glared at him.

"Ah, she just loves giving the poor slob a hard time, that's all," Terry laughed. "Our baby sister likes to keep her men dangling on a string. It's probably a technique she picked up in the latest issue of Cosmopolitan."

"I think Stanley's kind of sweet," David's wife, Eva said, "I certainly wouldn't object to having him as my brother-in-law."

"Yeah, and isn't it a riot the way he chases after her while she plays hard to get?" my other sister-in-law, Arlene giggled. "The two of them remind me of Kate Hepburn and Cary Grant in the 'Philadelphia Story'!"

"Oh, yeah, he hangs in there alright," I cringed, "just like a penicillin-resistant strain of V.D.!"

"Shayna Pearl!" Dad cried. "Christ, the things that come out of

your mouth sometimes!"

"That's YOUR daughter!" Ma clucked her tongue in disgust.

"Jeez, what's with her tonight anyway? Is it that time of the month again or what?"

"Oh, for crying out loud, Daddy!" I could have just spit blood. "Why is it that when a man is in a bad mood, it's because he has REAL problems — but when a woman is moody it's automatically THAT time of the month?"

"Oh, I don't know, my wife hasn't had a THAT time of the month for nine months already and she STILL gets pretty moody!" David cracked as he patted Eva's enormous stomach.

Everybody burst out laughing.

"This place is a nuthouse!" I cried.

"That's enough, Shayna Pearl!" Dad warned me. "I've been doing 'C' sections and hysterectomies since six o'clock this morning and I'm in no mood for your shtick!"

"WHAT SHE NEEDS IS A HUSBAND TO PUT HER IN HER PLACE!" Stanley's voice suddenly boomed from behind.

"Oh perfect," I groaned as all heads turned toward the Botanical Gardens that used to be our living room, waiting for Himself to make an appearance. "Just swell." And there I was beginning to think that he'd be tied up at the office until hell froze over.

"Yeeesh," he cried, brushing off his suit as he emerged from the dense jungle of blood red flowers, "if I'd known that I'd sent these many flowers, I'd have brought along a machete!"

"And what lovely flowers they are!" Ma gushed. "And so unusual."

Once again everybody 'Oooed' and 'Ahhed' in agreement.

Everybody except me, that is. I was too busy counting to ten under my breath.

"Yeah, they really are exquisite if I do say so myself," Stanley marvelled. "And what a beautiful name too ..." he gave me a mournful look, "... 'Love Lies Bleeding'."

"Oh, brother." I made my eyes disappear inside my head.

"Sit down, Stanley dear," Ma said as she served him up a bowl of chicken soup. "You're just in time for the first course."

"Mmmmm ..." he said, taking a whiff of the soup as he plunked himself down at the empty place beside me, "thanks Ma."

"Do you have to call her that?" I said between clenched teeth.

"She is NOT your mother — in any way, shape or form!"

"Fine and you, Shayna Pearl?" He kissed the top of my head.

"You're looking as adorable as ever."

"How'd you get in here anyway?" I muttered. "Don't tell me they've given you a key to the house now?"

"Your mother left the front door unlocked so I wouldn't disturb anyone in the middle of supper by ringing the bell. Say, you never told me what you thought of my flowers?"

"Hmph!"

"And how about my little note, eh?" he whispered into my ear.

"I'd like to know what the hell you meant about you knowing something I don't think you know?" I whispered back. "That's what I'd like to know!"

He raised an eyebrow. "You'll find out soon enough."

"And just what is that supposed to mean?" I squirmed. If he was trying to worry me he was doing a superb job. "If you have something up

your sleeve you'd better not ...!"

"Aunty Shay, Aunty Shay," my niece, Erin tugged at my sleeve.

"What is it, sweetie?" I scooped her up into my lap. "What's on your mind?"

"Could you take me and Victoria and Melissa and Andrea to the Dairy Queen for chocolate dips and Mister Mistys tomorrow?"

"Yeah!" Melissa cried. "We have the best time when we go with you!"

"Yeah," Victoria nodded, "you always let us have whatever we want and you never yell at us."

"And you always make us laugh!" Andrea giggled. "Remember the last time we went and that strange man pinched you on the behind and you dumped a whole Tooty-Fruity sundae on his head?"

They all shrieked with laughter.

"You're the best aunt!" Erin hugged me.

"Careful girls," Stanley said, "you're spoiling her image!"

"Shut up, Stanley!" I muttered.

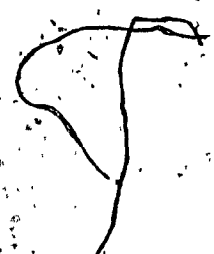
"Could we go tomorrow?" Erin pleaded. "Please, please, please?"

"Yeah, could we ... could we?" the others chanted. "PULEESE?"

I put Erin back in her chair. "I'm sorry, I can't tomorrow," I said, hating myself for having to disappoint them. If only I could tell them about Peter coming home tomorrow and everything, I thought, but of course I can't now. Not unless I want the Stanley Drabkin Fan Club to pounce on me like a bunch of piranha and eat me alive. "Some other time, okay?"

"Awwwwwww ...."

"I'm sorry."



"What, you're so busy tomorrow that you can't spare a few minutes to take them for ice cream?" Ma said.

"Yeah," Stanley butt in for a change. "what's so special about tomorrow that you can't take your little nieces for ice cream?"

"I'm busy."

"Just what ARE you doing tomorrow anyway?"

"Stuff!"

"Mysterious, aren't we?"

"Lay off, Stanley!" I muttered. There was something in his tone that was really getting me rattled.

"You wouldn't be trying to hide something from us, would you now?"

"And just what is THAT supposed to mean?"

"Hey, Stanley!" Arlene cried. "Is it my imagination or is there something different about you tonight?"

"At last!" He threw his hands up in the air. "SOMEBODY noticed!"

"Wait, don't tell me," Terry cracked, "you're in love!"

"Naw, that's old news," not-too-bright Arlene shook her head.

Bad news is more like it, I thought. "He looks the same to me!"

"Look more closely, Shayna Pearl." He stuck his face right into mine.

"Oh, for crying out loud!" I couldn't believe my eyes. There was a thin layer of wispy, whitish blonde hair covering his face. It was a beard. Or a reasonable facsimile thereof. Actually it looked more like a cobweb.

"I grew it while you were away in New York. I thought I'd surprise you." He ran his hand over his face. "So what do you think of the old fuzz, eh?"

"I think you should kill it before it multiplies!" I muttered.

"I thought beards turn you on," he whispered.

"Just what are you trying to prove anyway?" I whispered back.

"Now you can dump the rock star and marry me!" he cracked.

I shook my head. "Don't you ever give up?"

"I've also got a pair of skin-tight Levis and some cowboy boots out in the car," he said, his voice mocking, "I was going to wear them tonight but I'm saving them for a more formal occasion — like our wedding!"

"Oh, why don't you ..."

"Now, now, let's not get nasty."

"WE are going to get a lot nastier if you don't tell me what that P.S. in your note meant! Just what DO you know that I don't think you do?"

"Goodness, what are you two whispering about over there?" Ma wanted to know.

"Nothing!" I cried.

"Just like two lovebirds!" Arlene swooned.

"Lovebirds?" I gagged.

"Shayna Pearl here was just telling me what she, uh, thinks of my beard," Stanley said. "What do you think, Ma? You think it suits me?"

"I think it looks very distinguished dear."

"Me too," Arlene agreed.

"Me fwee ..." Eva said as she shovelled a forkful of cole slaw into her constantly busy mouth.

"Very lawyer-like," Ma added.

I gave her an astonished look. "Distinguished? Lawyer-like? I



thought you HATED beards!"

"Not necessarily."

"But you ..."

"It just depends on the man behind the beard." Stanley smiled like a Cheshire cat. "Isn't that right, Ma?"

"Why you ...."

"Stanley dear!" Ma came to his rescue, plunking down a plateful of food in front of him. "I baked your favourite tonight — potato knishes! Piping hot from the oven ... eat ... eat ... before it gets cold."

He picked up a knish and took a bite. "Mmmm ..." he gave me the eye, "... I just love piping hot knish."

Something told me that the knish to which he was referring was not the potato kind. "You pig!" I muttered, kicking him under the table.

"I thought pigs were your favourite animals," he muttered back. A piece of knish got stuck on his lip and his tongue snaked out to lap it up. "Mmm ..." he smacked his lips, "love that knish!"

Suddenly I got the feeling that he was having ME for supper. "I'm getting out of here!" I cried, pushing my chair back.

"You're not going anywhere, young lady!" Dad gave me a dirty look. "Your mother spent all day slaving over a hot stove to make this meal for you and you're not going to upset her!"

"Yeah, Shayna Pearl," Stanley pushed my chair back in, "you don't want to upset your mother now, do you? Or any other time," he went back to whispering, "like tomorrow?"

A shiver ran right through me. Did he know what Peter and I were

planning?

"What's wrong, Shayna Pearl — you're paler than the tablecloth. Did I say something to upset you?"

I gave him the coldest look I could muster. If looks could freeze he'd have been a popsickle by now.

"Ouch!" he winced. "I've seen some dirty looks in my time ..."

"Hey, don't mind her," Dad told him, "she's just in one of her moods tonight. You know how women are?"

Stanley sat there winking and smiling; winking and smiling. It was like sitting beside a flashing Mr. Muffler neon sign. "Oh, yes sir, I know exactly how women are."

"If you let 'em they can drive you crazy," said one World's Foremost Expert On Women to the other.

"Don't I know it!" said the other.

The rapport between them was uncanny. Not unlike that between ventriloquist and dummy.

Christ, I thought, is this meal EVER going to end?

"Alright, Shayna Pearl," Ma said, "everybody's been served their dinner except you. Which do you prefer tonight, chicken or brisket?"

"Huh? Oh, I'll just have a couple of wings."

"Two chicken wings?" she frowned. "What kind of supper is that?"

"I'm not very hungry."

"But two minutes ago you were starved!"

"Ah, she eats like a bird!" Dad said.

"Here," Ma handed me a big plate with two wings on it. "Don't overeat!"

"Maybe she plans on flying somewhere?" Stanley said.

"What!" I almost dropped the plate in my lap.

"God, you're as jumpy as a catfish tonight!" He shook his head.

"Even jumpier than when my Aunt Frances saw you today."

"Your Aunt Frances?" What the hell is he leading up to now, I wondered. My t-shirt was soaked with sweat.

"Yeah, she said she recognized you but that you didn't seem to recognize her." He gave me an intense look. "That was YOU she saw having lunch today at Nuddick's with a bunch of your pregnant friends, wasn't it?"

"Nuddick's?" I gulped. "Today?" Suddenly the whole room began to spin. Oh, no, I thought, oh, no ... that, that woman ... the one sitting in the booth beside us whom I thought looked so familiar but couldn't place, the one who overheard me telling Jo Ann about the telegram ... ~~kik ihr uhn~~ Frances ... that was Stanley's aunt!

"Tsk, tsk, tsk, Shayna Pearl," he whispered into my ear, "you should have known better than to discuss such personal stuff at Nuddick's. Someone you know or who knows you or your mother's sister's brother-in-law's great uncle might overhear!"

Oh, God, he really does know, I thought, my head reeling, he knows that Peter's asked me to go to California with him! That's why he sent me those Love Lies Bleeding flowers. That's what the P.S. in the note meant. That's why he's been tormenting me all night. He knows!

"It's funny you know," he went on, still whispering, "I really busted my keyster to get Peter that recording contract out in L.A. ..."

"You?" I gave him an incredulous look.

"I really thought it would get him out of your life for good so that I could have you all to myself ... you know, out of sight, out of

mind?" He let out a heavy sigh. His breath was hot against my ear. "I never dreamed the jerk would ask you to go with him!"

"Do we have to talk about this now?" I glanced nervously around the table. Everybody was staring at us. "They don't know anything about this!"

"They don't?" he rasped in mock surprise. "Don't tell me you were planning on running off to L.A. with good old Peter and you haven't told your family yet? What do you plan on doing? Dropping them a postcard?"

I bit my lip.

"I figured as much."

"Jeez, will you look at those two?" Terry marvelled. "One minute they're at each other's throats and the next they're whispering sweet nothings into each other's ears!"

"That's love!" Arlene gushed.

"What do you suppose the big secret is?" Ma asked.

"Are you going to tell them," Stanley whispered again, "or should I?"

"You wouldn't!" I whispered back.

"Try me."

"Why are you doing this?" My heart was beating so loud I was sure everybody could hear it. "What do you expect to accomplish?"

"It's for your own good, believe me."

"You mean -- for YOUR own good?"

"Look, you don't have to tell them right here at the table, we can go up to the den after supper and ..."

"WE?"

"I have a stake in this too you know?"

"Damn you, Stanley!" My hand jerked and I knocked over a glass of wine.

"What is going on over there?" Ma cried.

"Nothing! I just spilled some wine!" I blotted up the mess with a napkin.

"Oh, for crying out loud, and on my good tablecloth too!"

"It was an accident!"

"And you haven't even touched your food yet! Everybody's almost finished and you haven't even started eating yet! What is going on?"

"Nothing I told you!" I could feel the rage welling up inside me. The outrage. "Just leave me alone, okay?"

"Remember," Stanley whispered, "if you don't tell them tonight, I'll spill the beans myself!"

"Oh, will you buzz off already, Stanley!" I exploded.

"What is going on?" Ma's voice was getting more shrill by the minute. "I DEMAND to know what's going on!"

Everybody's eyes zeroed in on me. Like a couple of dozen spotlights.

"What are you all staring at?" I cried. "What am I? Some kind of freak show?"

"We just want to know what's going on, that's all," David said.

"None of your business!"

"Well, something's going on!" Terry cried.

"Oh, why don't you all just get off my back!" I got up from the table and stormed upstairs to my room.

It wasn't long before Ma and Dad came barging in after me — with Stanley wiping up the rear.

"What is this?" I fumed. "The Mod Squad?"

"That's enough smart talk out of you, young lady!" Dad cried.

"We're going to get to the bottom of this right now!"

I didn't answer.

"Well?"

"We're waiting!" Ma glared at me.

I glanced at Stanley and he at me. "Well, Shayna Pearl?" he said, real snarky-like. "Now's your chance to show us what a woman of the world you really are!"

That did it. "Alright!" I cried. I had just about all I could take. "Alright!" Living In Sin, I decided, was going to be heaven on earth compared to this place. "You want to know what's going on, I'll tell you what's going on!" I whipped Peter's telegram out of my pocket and I waved it in front of them. They flinched -- like I was threatening them with a loaded pistol or something. "You see this? It's from Peter. He's asked me to come live with him in a beachhouse in California. He's going to work on his music and I'm going to write screenplays!" There, it was out. It was out and I was glad. So why was I shitting bricks?

"You're what?" Ma gasped.

I glanced up at her and winced. Her face looked like it had about a thousand lines on it. And Dad. He was standing there and glaring at me, his lips pursed so tightly they were practically white. He didn't have to say anything. I could tell he was not thinking good thoughts. It was just as I had feared. They were not taking my news well.

"This child has lost her marbles!" Ma threw her hands up to God.

"I'm not a child, Ma!" I cringed. "And I know perfectly well

what I'm doing."

"That's debatable." Stanley butt in.

"Oh, shut up!"

"No," he said without flinching, "I won't shut up. Not until you've come to your senses about this thing."

"Excuse me," I said sarcastically, "I think we're a little mixed up here. I'M not the one who has to come to my senses."

"No," he shook his head, "no, I'm not mixed up. Eight months ago I fell in love with a sweet, adorable, SENSIBLE girl who wanted the same things out of life as I do. I just can't believe that you ..."

"People change, Stanley!"

"If you'd just sit back and think for a moment. Think of what you'd be doing to your family. To me. To yourself! I mean, you're ready to turn your back on the people who really care about you to run off to a strange place full of strange people with a guy you hardly even know!"

"Over my dead body she will!" Ma cried.

"I'm over twenty-one, Ma!"

"I know how old you are! I gave birth to you, remember?"

"Please try and understand," I said, struggling to get a hold of myself. "Peter and I are in love. We want to be together."

"Arnie, did you hear that? They want to be together!"

"I heard her," Dad said between clenched teeth. "That's the thanks you get for busting your butt all your life to give your kids the best of everything. They turn around and spit right in your face!"

"Oh, Daddy!" I wanted to tear my hair out. "Don't lay that guilt trip on me! I'm not doing this to hurt you! I'm doing this because ..."

because living with Peter and writing screenplays is what I want to do!" It all made such perfect sense to me. Why couldn't they see it that way?

"What is it with you and this screenplay business all of a sudden?" Stanley said. "What do you even know about writing screenplays anyway? You've never written one in your entire life!"

"I DID take screenwriting courses all through college, in case you've forgotten."

"Yeah, but you don't have any experience. I mean, you can't go out to Hollywood and expect Barbra Streisand to hire you to write her next picture just like that! It doesn't work that way."

"Yeah, well Peter believes that I can make it. And that's good enough for me!"

"God, where did we go wrong with her?" Ma let out an exasperated cry. "All her friends are getting married, settling down and having babies and SHE'S going to Hollywood with Mr. Rock And Roll?!"

"Oh, c'mon, Mother!" I bristled. "You make it sound like I'm actually doing something wrong! This is the 1980s, for crying out loud! Plenty of people are living together. It's as acceptable as blue jeans!"

"I don't care what OTHER people are doing!" Funny how she always manages to twist things around to suit her meaning. "No daughter of mine is going to live with a man she's not married to. It's unthinkable!"

"Yeah, well, I don't care what you think!" Of course that was a ridiculous thing to say. If I didn't care what they thought, why was I standing there trying to get through to them? Damn parents anyway. They can be such a pain! "Look," I said, fighting to regain my composure, "couldn't we just sit down and talk about this like mature, rational human beings?"



"Unfortunately, we're ONE MATURE RATIONAL HUMAN BEING SHORT!" Ma screeched in a frequency that could have opened electric garage doors for miles around.

"Damn, there's no getting through to you people, is there?" I cried, losing control again. "You're all a bunch of dinosaurs!"

"So now we're dinosaurs, are we?" Dad seethed.

Ma looked at me and shrugged. "I don't understand. A couple of days ago we were the best of friends. Didn't we have a good time in New York? Don't you like all the things I bought you? The watch?"

She was really hitting below the belt. Which only made me angrier. "Here," I pulled the watch out of my drawer and handed it back to her, "I didn't want it anyway!"

"Good, because you don't deserve it!"

"Listen to me all of you, cool down and listen to me," Stanley pleaded, "I'm the only one with a cool head around here."

"Oh, yes, listen to the legal beagle!" I laughed. "He's going to handle everything! As if he belongs in this conversation in the first place!"

"Oh, but I do," he insisted, "you may not realize it right now but I am going to be a member of this family someday."

"Why, are my parents planning to adopt you?"

"Look, Shayna Pearl ..."

"No, YOU look!" I was livid. "You can't tell me how to live my life!"

"I'm not trying to tell you how to live. All I ask is that you think about this first. You never know -- you might feel differently in a few weeks. Look, if you still feel the same way, in say, a month or

so, I promise I won't stand in your way. Just don't rush into this."

"I'm not listening to you!" I brushed him off. Damn him anyway, did he have to act so bloody noble? "I know what I want. I know what I feel!"

"I know what I want — I know what I feel." Ma mimicked me. "Just listen to her!"

"Why don't you listen to me for once?"

"C'mon, Ma," Stanley said, "all this bickering isn't going to solve anything. You'll never get through to her this way!"

"Get through to her?" she cried. "I'm going to break her neck! I'll KILL her first before I let her go and live with that ... that singer!"

"Fine!" I yelled. "I'll call Paperman's right now and order the shiva chairs for you! Maybe they have something in Chinese Modern to go with the living room!"

She shook her finger at me. "I'll give you a shiva chair in a minute!"

"What is it that you're afraid of? Are you afraid of what people will say? What? I mean, it's not like he isn't Jewish!"

"I don't care if he's a Rabbi! You're not going and that's final!"

"Try and stop me!"

"If you dare go through with this I'll ...."

Just then David came bursting into the room. "Ma, Dad, come quick, it's Eva!"

We all ran downstairs to the dining room. Eva was standing there by the table and clutching at her swollen belly, her face contorted in pain. "I think we better get me to the hospital," she gasped.

The next thing I knew the whole house went into absolute chaos and everybody was rushing out the front door and so was I.

"You're not going to the hospital!" Dad grabbed me by the arm at the top of the stairs.

"But that's my godchild!" I cried. "David and Eva promised that if it's a boy ..."

"I don't give a damn!" His face turned borscht red and the veins were bulging right out of the middle of his forehead. I don't think I ever saw him so angry. "I don't want to see your face again tonight. I want you to sit home and think about what I'm going to tell you right now: you are not going to California with that bum with the guitar and if you ever pull a stunt like this again, I swear I'll hit you so hard, you won't be able to see straight! And one more thing ... it's either him or us. Choose him and you are no longer a member of this family. If you can't live by the rules of this house, then get out ... TONIGHT!"

I stared at him in disbelief. "Are you giving me an ultimatum?"

"That's exactly what I'm giving you," he said, "you can't have your cake and eat it too!"

"Fine!" I was incensed. "If that's the way you want it, then I choose HIM. At least he treats me like a person!"

I never even saw it coming. I just felt his hand whacking across my cheek and it almost knocked me right off my feet. "You -- you hit me!" I gasped as I covered my burning cheek with my hand. "You hit me!" I just couldn't believe it. He never laid a hand on me before. Not ever.

"Christ," he said numbly as he stood there staring at his hand, "Christ." His expression was not unlike that on Eva's face when she was seized by that labour pain back in the dining room.

A horn blew and we both jumped.

"I — I have to go now," he started to babble, "I have a simcha to get to. The birth of a child is a real joy ... a cause for celebration. It's a pity," he winced, "it's so ironic that such joy can only come after so much pain and suffering!"

I looked at him like he was nuts for sure. From the way he was acting, you'd have thought HE was the one who was going through childbirth!

The horn blew again. He shook his head and looked at me kind of blankly. As if I was someone he thought he recognized but couldn't quite place. And then, without saying another word, he turned around and rushed off.

I was really confused as I stood at the top of the stairs and watched them all drive away without me. So confused that I instinctively raised my hand to wave. All I managed was a pathetic little jerk of my wrist though. Only Peter's telegram, which I had been holding in my hand, flapped up and down in the breeze.

I stood there at the top of the stairs for what seemed like an eternity.

And then, suddenly, something yanked at my hand and I heard a tearing sound.

I turned around to find Stanley standing behind me. He was tearing up the telegram. Into itty bitty pieces. "You got what you deserved, you know," he said, tossing the pieces of paper in the air like they were confetti or something. "I always thought you needed a good belt in the chops to knock some sense into you; put you in your place!"

"Go on — they'll calm you down ..."

"G-go awayayay ..." I sobbed, "... leave me alon-~~nnn~~-ne ..."

He shrugged and took the pills himself. "I'm glad everyone's gone," he said as he sat down beside me, "now we can really talk."

Really talk? What the hell was there left to say? "What do you want from me?"

"I love you. I think I proved that tonight."

"If that's what you do to people you lo-ove, I'd hate to see what yo-ou do to people you despi-i-ise!"

"Remember what I said before? In front of your parents?"

"Former parents!"

"That I'd be willing to let you go," he went on, "if you decided, after a month or so, that you still wanted to leave? Now if that isn't love!"

Either the guy had seen too many Tracy/Hepburn movies or else he was some kind of masochist. "How could you? After everything I've done how could you say you still lo-ove me?"

He shrugged. "You don't just stop loving someone because they're having problems. And besides, I really believe we could work this thing out if you give it half a chance." He reached over and stroked my hair. "You don't have to go with him, you know. You could patch things up with your family and ..."

"Forget it!" I rubbed my cheek, which was (still smarting from Dad's slap. I'll show him, I thought, I'll show them all! "I'm going upstairs to pack."

"C'mon, Shayna Pearl, you're not thinking rationally," he said, "you don't want your family to disown you!"

"I'll pack what I can now and send for the rest of my things later."

"You don't have to go to California to write screenplays you know," he said as he followed me up to my room, "Montreal has a booming film industry. 'The Hollywood of the North' they call us in the trade papers. In fact, you stand a better chance of making it here than you do over there. In order to qualify for the tax-writeoff the government offers, producers have to hire a certain number of Canadians to work on films. Screenwriters are in very big demand. Believe me, I know. I AM a show-business lawyer. In fact, I can introduce you to all the right people ..."

"I thought all women belong in the kitchen?"

"Well, if you're really serious about this screenwriting business, I could learn to live with it."

"You make it sound like I have a chronic disease!" I cringed. "Anyway, Peter says that you never really make it until you've made it in the States."

"Peter says ... Peter SAYS!" He threw his hands up. "You quote him like he's Confucious or something!"

I pulled my tote bag out of my cupboard and tossed it onto my bed.

"Oh, go ahead, pack, you spoiled little J.A.P.!" he cried as I started throwing my things into my bag. "Spend your life wandering around, shopping for the perfect existence which doesn't exist. You'll put yourself through hell and end up in the kitchen anyway!"

"I've heard of a Wandering Jew, Stanley," I burst out laughing, "but never a Wandering J.A.P.!"

"C'mon, Shayna Pearl," he pleaded, "put the suitcase away. You're acting like a child."

"A Wandering J.A.P.," I repeated over and over again, "a Wandering J.A.P. ... You know, I kind of like the idea, Stanley. It's very romantic. A Wandering Jewish Princess: a modern, disillusioned young woman like myself who rebels against life in the kitchen so that she could search for a more fulfilling existence. "Just think," I giggled, "I'll be getting back to my roots; leading the life of my nomadic forebears!"

"Cut it out, Shayna Pearl, you're not making any sense!"

"Sure I am." Suddenly I was feeling extremely giddy. Almost intoxicated. Freeways. Freedom. Freeman. Mine. All mine! "Let me explain it to you."

"I don't want you to explain it to me. I want you to stop packing and ..."

"A Wandering J.A.P.," I went on to explain as I continued packing, "is one who rejects the traditional Jewish woman's role of Baleboosteh, the role of ideal homemaker in which our mothers, our grandmothers and Jewish mothers for all time have taken so much pride and put in so much passion. I guess Baleboosteh-hood all started with Eve," I cracked, "she kept her house in such perfect order, they called it Eden!"

He buried his face in his hands and let out a strange noise.

Kind of like a horse whinnying.

"Now that I think of it, Stanley," I went on, getting giddier by the minute, "my being a Wandering J.A.P. will bring history full circle."

"You've flipped your lid!" he cried.

I ignored him and went on with my story anyway. "It seems to me," I told him, "that Eve was not only the First Baleboosteh of Eden but she was also the first Wandering Jewish Princess in history. By daring to

serve one rotten apple, she fell out of Grace with the Supreme Male Chauvinist Himself, the Man of THE House who insisted on being referred to as Him with a capital 'H'. Because she displayed symptoms of developing a mind of her own and because she broke the sacred Covenant she had made with Him (in which she had promised to be a good Baleboosteh to Mankind for All Eternity -- nothing more, nothing less -- and which they sealed with the very first 'Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval'), she became a threat to His Supreme Male Ego. Hence she committed the Original Sin and was banished from her blissful 'au naturelle' existence as Chief Homemaker and Top Kitchen Aid of Eden.

"As punishment for trying to wear the pants in her family, the Almighty 'He' created the long-line panty-girdle and forced Eve to wiggle her somewhat plentiful ass into it. And as if that wasn't enough torture, He made her put on a brassiere with 'Cross Your Heart' supports and wire reinforcements.

"She must have really summoned all His wrath because before He banished her, He created a second set of underclothes for her to take along: nylon pantyhose that tore at the most inopportune of moments and polyester bikini underwear that caused unsightly bulges and which didn't breathe at the crotch. He camouflaged all this unsightliness with a smashing flared skirt and a soft, feminine peasant blouse. Before He rested, however, He threw in a pair of six-inch high-heeled pumps with pointed toes and arches that curved like the Golden Gate Bridge.

"Then He tossed her out to wander the earth for all eternity -- and on foot yet!

"The Sins of the Mothers, Stanley," I told him as he sat there



on the bed, shaking his head over and over, "The Sins of the Mothers."

"Eventually," I continued, "Eve died alone, crippled and neurotic. Some say it was the freedom that did her in. Others say it was the severe case of vaginitis, more commonly known as 'Polyester Bikini Underwear-Induced Crotch Rot', complicated by ruptured corns of the toes and infected bunions of the feet. Still others say she drove herself mad as she walked around in circles exclaiming over and over again:

• 'Well, Cross My Heart, I can't BELIEVE it's a girdle!!!!'

"But somehow, possibly because all roads for women eventually lead back to their roots in the kitchen, Eve's descendants managed to find their way back to a land of Better Homes and Gardens. Women once again became die-hard Baleboosters-in-residence. And just to make sure they didn't go off and do something terribly brilliant, original or creative, charge accounts were invented. Women could then make generous contributions to society while remaining happily and gratefully interned with their heads in a dirty oven.

"I'm picking up where Eve left off, Stanley, did you ever think of that?" I cried as I finished packing and zipped up my tote bag.

"Only no one is going to put a girdle on me. And I'm going to be happy, Stanley, happy and creative, original and brilliant, Stanley, because I'm going to keep growing and changing and trying new things. Yeah, I'm going to be happy, Stanley, eternally HAPPY!"

"AND YOU'RE AS LOONY AS A BED-BUG, SHAYNA PEARL!" he cried, his eyes practically popping out of his head. "DO YOU KNOW THAT?!"

"I've never felt better," I said, stuffing some things into a garment bag, "or saner."

"Tell me something, Ms. Wandering J.A.P.," he sneered, "if you

plan on staying out of the kitchen for the rest of your life, just how are you and Peter going to eat? You going to live on Big Macs three times a day?"

"I'm not worried about Peter. He's a very liberated guy. We'll work something out."

"Boy do you ever have a lot to learn about life."

"I aim to do just that."

"Damn you!" He grabbed my elbow and squeezed so hard that I cried out in pain. "You stupid ..."

"Owww, leggo of my arm ... you're hurting me!"

"Not half as much as you're hurting me!"

"Let go!"

He shoved me away. "Oh, go on then," he said, his voice cracking, "go on and ruin your life. Just don't come running back to me when things don't work out with that son of a bitch rock singer of yours. Because I won't be here! Do you hear me? I WON'T BE HERE!!!"

I picked up my things and left.

PART IV: SPAGHETTI JUNCTION

## CHAPTER 11

You'd think Peter would be a cinch to single out in a crowd.

A guy who is six-foot-two, lean, bearded and extraordinarily sexy tends to stand out among the mundane folk milling about his waistline.

So it was only natural that I became slightly hysterical when the passengers of Flight 124 from L.A. began filing into 'Arrivals' at Dorval Airport and I couldn't spot him anywhere.

Maybe I've got the wrong flight number, I began to think. Or the wrong day? Or the wrong time? No, no, this has got to be it. I'm sure his telegram said he'd be arriving at Dorval this morning at ten. Or was it Mirabel? Oh, God, maybe I've got the wrong airport! Damn Stanley, anyway! Why'd he have to go and tear up the telegram last night? Now I'm not sure of anything anymore.

A second batch of passengers came filing through.

Then a third.

When the bearded likes of Peter Simon Freeman failed to emerge with the fourth batch, my imagination really began to run wild. Maybe he forgot about me? Maybe he changed his mind? Maybe he met another woman on the plane and they flew off into the sunset together?

I was just about to become totally unglued when I heard someone call my name. I looked up to find a tall, jean-clad figure pushing its way through the crowd, heading toward me. It couldn't be, I thought, my hysteria suddenly turning into shock, it just couldn't be! Could it?

"Peter?" I gasped as he stopped in front of me.

"No, Paul McCartney!" he laughed Peter's wonderful, crazy hoarse laugh. "Who'd ya think?"

My head reeled with confusion. It sounded like Peter alright. But it sure as hell didn't look like him! "Your hair ..." I blurted, "... your BEARD!"

"Oh, that," he said, grinning. "The guys in my band bet me a year's supply of grass that I wouldn't get a shave and a haircut. It was an offer I just couldn't refuse, if you know what I mean?" He stroked his chin, which had a deep cleft in it. Like a miniature rear-end. "Whad'ya think?"

I didn't answer. I just stood there blinking my eyes, trying my hardest to absorb the fact that this clean-cut, naked-faced stranger with skin like a baby's tush was the same wild'n wooly Peter Simon Freeman I had fallen so madly in love with. No wonder I had trouble finding him!

"Yeh, it's a shock, I know," he laughed at my stunned reaction. "I'm not even used to it myself yet. But what the hell, it's only hair right?" He dropped his suitcase and pulled me toward him. "C'mere you ..." He scooped me up into his arms and gave me a whopper of a kiss.

A deep sense of shame flooded through me as I kissed him back. He's right, I thought, revelling in the closeness of his body, it's only hair for crying out loud. I mean, it's not as if he had lost (GodFORBID) an arm or a leg or (double GodFORBID!) some other fundamental part of his anatomy. Beard or no beard, long hair or short, Peter is still Peter!

"Hey, I really missed you," he stroked my hair, "you know that?"

"Hold me," I said, clinging to him for dear life. God, I just wanted everything to be alright. "Just hold me!"

He gave me a funny look. "What's wrong? You okay?"

Okay? No, I wasn't okay. I had just been through the worst night of my life. First I was screamed at, humiliated, belted in the chops and disowned. Then I spent half the night on an airport bench and the other half with one part or another of me hanging over the toilet with coil cramps. Blood was pouring out of my vagina like there was no tomorrow, my head ached and I was so exhausted I could hardly keep my eyes open. But how could I tell him all that without making him think I was ready for the Hospital of Hope instead of a meaningful relationship? Damn Cosmopolitan magazine anyway, it never prepared me for anything like this!

"PLANET EARTH CALLING SHAY ... COME IN SHAY!!!"

"Huh?" I started. "Oh, yeah, I'm okay. Just tired."

"It's my telegram, isn't it?" he said, his eyes narrowing.

"You're not coming with me when I go back to L.A.!"

"Oh, no! I mean, yes!" I cried. "That is, if you still want me to," I added cautiously.

"Alright!" He scooped me up into his arms and kissed me again.

"Fan-TAS-tic!"

"Fantastic? Really?" I wasn't feeling too insecure or anything.

"Are you kidding? It's more than fantastic!" he reassured me.

"It's perfect! You're perfect! WE'RE perfect!"

I was all smiles as we headed for the parking lot. Who could ask for more than perfect? "Hey, I didn't even ask you how your trip

was. Did you really record an album out there?"

"Yep," he beamed, "and that's not all. I also managed to line up a couple of other projects too. Back-up work and stuff. The big money won't be rolling in for awhile, but at least we'll have enough to live on."

"Well, of course I plan to contribute my share ..."

"You just stay home and write screenplays. That's good enough for me."

"Really?"

"Really."

"But what if I don't make money at it for a long time? I mean, I want us to be equal partners. Fifty-fifty."

He shrugged. "You'll do your share. I'm not worried. Do I look worried?"

"No, but ..."

"Then there's nothing to worry about, right?"

"I -- I guess not."

"Then stop looking so worried!"

I let out a nervous giggle. "I can't help it. Ever since I got your telegram, my mind -- it's been doing crazy things!"

He laughed. "I knew that telegram would blow you right out of your clogs! I'll bet you never expected it to say what it did in your wildest dreams."

"What, are you kidding? I only had a minor stroke, that's all!"

He laughed again. "Well, if you dug that little surprise, wait'll you see what else I've got up my sleeve."

"What?" I winced. Surprises make me nervous. Especially his kind.

"You'll find out later on. God, I love surprises! C'mon!" All of a sudden he picked up speed. Like a turbo-charged race car. "I practically had to run to keep up with him. "Let's hurry up and go back to my place. I don't know about you, but I'm horny as all hell."

"Oh-oh." I said aloud without meaning to.

"Oh-oh what?"

"Peter, I -- we need to ... there's something ..." Oh, God, how do you tell a guy who's horny for you that you can't sleep with him for the next few days because sex may be hazardous to your health? Very gently, I supposed. "Nothing, never mind. It can wait ... I guess." Damn pain-in-the-ass coil! "Say," I quickly changed the subject, "are we really going to be leaving for California in ten days, like your telegram said?"

"More or less."

"God!" I stopped dead in my tracks.

"What is it now?" He sounded a little exasperated.

"It just dawned on me. There must be a zillion things we have to take care of before we leave! We have to pack! Make plane reservations! And visas! Don't we have to apply for visas or something? And what are we going to do with my car and your motorcycle? And my job -- I have to quit my job. And what about finding a place to live out there ..."

"Whoa, there!" He cut me off. "Take it easy, will you? We have at least two weeks to take care of all that stuff. So calm down, okay?"

"I -- I guess I'm just trying to make sure this whole thing's for real, you know what I mean?"

"Yeah, I know." He put his arm around me and we started out for the parking lot once again. "I find the whole thing kind of hard to



believe myself. And speaking of the unbelievable — you never told me how your parents are taking all this. Wait, don't tell me!" he snickered. "They said — "over our DEAD bodies will you go to California with that Svengali!! — right?"

I stiffened. Just thinking about them made my blood boil. "Parents -- who needs them anyway?" I grumbled, though deep inside I knew that it was just my anger talking. "They're nothing but a pain!"

"Especially yours," he agreed whole-heartedly. "To tell you the truth, I'm surprised they haven't locked you up in a tower somewhere — like a modern-day Rapunzel or something. What'd they do anyway? Threaten to take away your credit cards?"

"Do you think it would be okay if I stayed at your place, you know, until we're ready to leave for California?"

"That bad?"

"Worse." A tear trickled down my face. I wiped it away before he could see it. I didn't want to give the impression that I was some sort of crybaby. "My parents and I are no longer related. I've been pruned from the family tree."

"You're kidding?"

I shook my head. "I spent the whole night in the airport."

"Christ! Hasn't anyone told them that this is the 1980s?"

"I tried to," I shrugged. "But somehow they wouldn't believe it coming from me."

"Ah, they'll come around," he reassured me. "Right now they're just pissed off."

"You — you really think so?" I said, feeling hopeful for the first time since the whole ugly mess started.

"Yeah, they're just playing games with your head, that's all. In the meantime, I suppose I can find room for you at my place." He looked at me and grinned. "Do you do windows?"

"Fun-ny!" I whacked him on the arm.

"Nope," he pinched my ass, "hor-ny!"

Oh-oh,

Who would have dreamed that on my very first day of liberation I'd be faced with the monumental task of cleaning up an entire apartment?

Not me, that was for sure. Simple, naive me. I actually thought Peter was kidding when he made that crack about me doing windows!

But the moment we walked through the door it was hard to ignore the fact that the place was crawling away.

Especially when a brown bug the size of a hamster popped out of a Chinese take-out carton on the den floor and scurried across my feet.

"What is THAT?!" I screeched, jumping up onto a chair. I'd never seen anything like it before in my life.

"Damn roaches!" Peter said as he stomped on it with his foot. It made a hideous crunch.

"I think I'm going to be sick!" I retched.

"I guess I left here in such a hurry, I forgot to clean up. Christ!" He ran his hand over the coffee table. "There must be three inches of dust in here!"

"God!" I was mortified. Cockroaches aside, I couldn't even remember the last time I saw one clump of dust, let alone such a ton of it. In our house, "Germocide-Sylvia" always kept that unsightly problem

well under control. If ever a clump of dust dared to rear its ugly head, Ma would be quick to whip out the Lemon Pledge and shpritz it before it multiplied. As far back as I could remember, our house always reeked of Lemon Pledge. "This place is Shmutz City!" I gagged. "And the smell!" It was like a cross between wet clothes and used Kotex pads. "What are we going to do?"

He opened a window. "What do you mean, what are we going to do?" He looked at me like I was nuts or something. "What do you usually do when you find yourself in a dirty apartment?"

"Buy a couple of cans of Lemon Pledge and call a charlady in the morning?"

He laughed. "Cute."

I wasn't trying to be cute. I was dead serious. "Look, I know this terrific char. I bet if I called her right now she'd come right over."

"What's the going rate for charladies these days?"

"Annie charges thirty plus carfare."

He whistled. "Forget the charlady, lady. We need our bread for more important things. Like food."

"I'd rather starve," I wanted to say, but I didn't. I didn't want to sound like a nag. Or a spoiled brat. Or both. "I know you probably think I'm over-reacting a little," I told him, "but this is my first cockroach."

"Well, cheer up, kid, it could have been worse. We could have had rats."

"Swell." I didn't know if I should have jumped for joy or out the window. "I can't tell you how relieved I am."

"Just looking on the bright side." He emptied the infested containers into a bag and took them out to the incinerator. "There," he returned, looking pretty pleased with himself, "that takes care of those little buggers."

I shuddered.

"By the way, you can come down off the chair now. The coast is clear."

I stepped down, reluctantly. "You sure?"

"Would I lie to you?"

"Probably!"

He laughed. "If you don't bother them, they won't bother you ... unless, of course, they get hungry ..."

"I'm getting out of here!" I bolted for the door.

"Come back here." He grabbed me by the hand and pulled me towards him. "I was only kidding."

"Well, how should I know?"

He took me around and hugged me. "That's what I love about you, you know? You're soooo innocent!"

"I know things!"

"Sure you do," he nuzzled my neck, "when I need the number of a good char, you'll be the first person I ask."

"I'm good for more than that you know?" I said, getting really flustered.

He kissed me. "Mmmm ... let's go to the bedroom."

Oh-oh! "Now?"

"Mmmm ..."

"But ... but we can't! You see I ..."

He stopped nuzzling me and looked around. "Yeah, I guess you're right," he frowned, "this place ain't exactly conducive to the more romantic things in life, is it?"

"Not exactly," I said, though the messy surroundings were beside the point. Little did he know that the state of his apartment was nothing compared to the state of my body. Lousy coil, I thought, it better be worth all the trouble! "Peter, there's ..."

"Hey, I know what!" he cried. "There's a couple of things I've gotta do anyway. Like stopping by to see my son and picking up some groceries. I'll tell you what. Why don't I go out and do that now? It'll give you a chance to clean up a little."

"What?" I wasn't sure I'd heard right.

"Yeh, that's what we'll do," he said, taking the keys to my car. "That way we'll have a clean place and something to eat for later on."

"What!" I thought he had a lot of nerve to assume that housework was going to be my domain. "I can get groceries too, you know?" Damn, that's not what I meant to say at all. Why can't I ever say what I mean?

"I know you can, Babe. But this way we'll be killing two birds with one stone."

How'd he figure that? I wondered. "But ..."

"Yeh, this place could really use a woman's touch, you know?"

I shook my head to clear it. Was there something wrong with my hearing? Did that 'woman's touch' crapola really come from the very lips of the guy who I thought was going to be the epitome of the Liberated Man?

"The cleaning shit's under the sink. And there's a vacuum cleaner in the hall closet. See you later."

Before I could open my mouth to say another word, he kissed me goodbye and took off.

"WHAT JUST HAPPENED HERE?" I threw my hands up to God.

Somehow, some way, I had managed to convince myself that living together meant never having to do housework. Of course, the more I thought about it, the more I realized how unrealistic I was being. After all, I'd never been one to live in a pigsty -- and I wasn't about to start now. Besides, it wasn't as if housework was going to be my main occupation in life. Once we got to California I'd be writing screenplays and Peter ... well, maybe then I'd know how to handle him a little better. We're two fairly modern, sensible people, I thought, surely we'd be able to work something out?

Feeling somewhat bolstered, I took a closer look around the apartment to see what had to be done. God, what a mess! Newspapers everywhere. Clothes all over the floor. Enough hair in the sink and bathtub to make a toupe for Kojak. A gross layer of filth on the kitchen floor. Dust on the counters. Dust on the window sills. Enough mold in the fridge to start a penicillin supply house. Sour milk. Was the place really like this when I was here before, I asked myself, or was it that I was just too -- too blind to notice? Could it be that Ma was right all along? That all men are alike? That they were put on this earth to mess up while women were put here to clean up? No, no, I refuse to believe that of Peter. He's not like other men. He's different. It's just that we're new to each other. We need time to feel each other out. Yeh, that's it. Of course, that MUST be it.

A cramp almost took my breath away. Damn coil. How, I wondered, was I supposed to get anything done with this bloody gizmo tearing at my

kishkehs every five minutes. Housework! Where the hell was I supposed to get the strength to do housework? All I felt like doing was lying down and dying.

"ANNIE? WHERE ARE YOU ANNIE?" I cried out for the faithful Polish charlady who's been cleaning our house — or rather, my former house — every Monday, Wednesday and Friday for the past ten years. "HELP ME ANNIE!!!"

Okay, okay, I admit it. I was finding it difficult to adjust to life without a charlady. In Hampstead, charladies are a fact of life. Just like Italian gardeners, Corvette Stingrays and mid-winter Florida suntans.

Each weekday morning between the hours of eight and nine the 161 bus comes down Fleet Road and deposits small armies of these robust creatures at every corner.

You can see them coming a mile away, a mixed ethnic bag of Poles, Hungarians, Ukrainians and Blacks sporting cheap K-Mart coats, Cancellation Shoes and vinyl purses of the Eaton's bargain basement variety.

As they march down the streets in groups of twos and threes, gabbing away in strange, exotic languages, they sure don't look like anything special. But once they get to cleaning the inside of your house, you have to wonder if you haven't been visited by angels from heaven.

"A Godsend, that goyeh of mine," Ma would often say of Annie, "she cleans a house like nobody's business."

Annie cleaned my room three times a week (whether it needed it or not). She changed the linens on my bed, washed my underwear and bras, ironed my clothes and hemmed my jeans. She Ajaxed my bathtub,

scooped my sink, scrubbed the corners of my bathroom with a toothbrush, rinsed out my hairbrush and kept my toilet free of unsightly rust spots.

So who could blame me for being upset when I realized I'd have to clean up Peter's filthy apartment with my own two untainted hands? With my ten virgin fingertips that had yet to be touched by common housedirt?

It was only after I recalled a recent conversation I had had with Ma that I stopped being upset and started feeling ridiculous.

The subject was charladies.

"When you get married, I'm going to send Annie to clean your house twice a week as a wedding present," she told me. "A house can never be too clean, you know?"

"Is that why you clean the house BEFORE she comes?" I replied.

"Don't be such a smart alec! You'll need a char, believe me."

"Don't tell me what I need. I know what I need."

"You'll sing a different tune once you have to clean your own house. Then you'll beg me to send you Annie. Everybody knows she's the best goyeh in town. A treasure like no other!"

"Sure she's a treasure like no other," I shot back, "who else would eat your stale hot dogs or your eggs with the bloody yolks?"

"Maybe I should feed her steak on top of her thirty dollars a day plus carfare?"

"Maybe."

"I'll tell you what. When you're married and Annie comes to work for you, you can give her filet mignon on top of her thirty dollars a day plus carfare, okay?"

"I'm never getting married and I'm not taking in no charlady!"



"We'll see, Lady Godiva, we'll see. No daughter of mine is going to be a sloppy housewife. Anyway, you couldn't survive without a char, you're such a princess."

"Fat chance. I'm gonna be independent. And being independent means never having someone to do your dirty work for you!"

"Ha!"

"Ha!"

"Ha, ha!"

After I recalled that conversation, I went straight to the kitchen cupboard and whipped out the Lemon Pledge and a dust cloth. Coil cramps or no coil cramps, there was no way in hell I was going to let Ma have the last laugh!

I started off by dusting the smaller things -- like the turntable. Once I did that, it was a snap to move onto bigger and dustier things -- like speakers, end-tables and lampshades. Before I knew it, WHAMMO, I was overcome by this irrepressible, insatiable urge to clean. Dusting furniture, I discovered, is like eating peanuts. It's impossible to stop at just one.

I don't know what came over me. Maybe I just got a second wind. Or maybe I was just so overtired that I was bordering on insanity. But the next thing I knew, I was putting "Saturday Night Fever" on the stereo and boogying around the apartment, giving a Spray 'n Wipe here, a Clean 'n Shine there and a shpritz of Lemon Pledge everywhere. The place just didn't smell like home until the aroma of Lemon Pledge permeated the air.

After that, I really got into the swing of things.

I Hoovered to "Stayin' Alive"; Mop 'n Glowed to "Jive Talking";

Spic 'n Spanned to "More Than A Woman" and Windexed to "You Should Be  
Dancin' (Ya!)"

Who would have dreamed?

CHAPTER 12

The afternoon just flew by.

I got so lost in the music and the housework that I never even heard Peter come in.

"If I can't have YOU ... I don't want NOBODY, BABY, Ya!" I was singing on the top of my squeaky, off-key voice as I bumped and grinded my way around the bed, laying down fresh sheets. "If I can't have YOU-OU-OUOUOU!!!"

I wanted to dig a hole when I looked up and saw him standing there. Arms folded across his chest. Watching. Grinning.

"What are you doing here?" I cried.

"I live here, remember?" he laughed.

"Oh yeah." He did have a point there.

"You really must have been in another world. I've only been standing here for the past five minutes."

"Oh, that, heh, heh," I could feel myself turning purple. "Would you believe I got bitten by a Cleaning Bug and developed Saturday Night Fever?"

"The place sure is spotless," he marvelled, "I see you've got a real domestic streak."

"Yeh, well don't get too used to it!" I cried, afraid he was getting the wrong idea. "From now on, we share the housework!"

"Yes sir!" He saluted me.

That was simple enough. "And one more thing," I decided to take advantage of my bold streak, "I don't intend to spend my life in the kitchen either. Planning meals! Cooking meals! Cleaning up from meals!"

"Jeez," he flinched, "what brought all this on?"

"I just want to let you know where I stand, that's all."

"Aye, Aye, Mon Capitaine," he saluted me again, looking amused, "read you loud and clear."

"I'm serious!"

"I know, I know. Don't worry about it. We'll work it out, okay?"

"Okay."

"Fine."

"Fine."

"Could we change the subject now?"

"Sure." I was feeling pretty cocky.

"HEY TIGER, COME ON IN HERE A MINUTE, WILL YA?" he yelled.

"Tiger?" I didn't know what was coming off. "You brought a wild animal home with you?"

All of a sudden Peter's son, dressed in full Darth Vader costume and yelling something about dead Wookies, came tearing into the room and began slashing at me with a plastic sword. "Take that, you Wookie!" SMACK! "Take that!" WHACK!

"Whoa there, Tiger." Peter had to pry him off me. "She's one of us!"

Just the same, 'Tiger' gave me another good slice across the stomach and then he hopped up onto the freshly-made bed, shoes and all, and burst into an imaginary sword-fight with Luke Skywalker. "Take

that, you Wookie-lover!" he screeched. "Take The Force and shove it!"  
WHAM!

"You okay, Babe?" Peter asked me. "I guess he got a little carried away."

A little carried away? "I think he wanted to kill me!" I gasped, rubbing an ugly red welt on my arm where the sword of Darth Vader had left its mark.

"He's really into Space these days. He eats, drinks and breathes it. Wait'll you see the rest of his stuff." He disappeared into the hall and came back with a suitcase in tow. "Just look at what's in here!" He opened the case and we both peered inside. There was a Star Wars glass. A Star Wars lunch pail, Star Wars pajamas, sheets and pillow cases. An 'I Love Mork From Ork' button. A 'Mork For President' poster. A 'Shalzbut!!' t-shirt. "Do you believe what five-year-olds are into these days?"

"What is all this stuff?" I said, bewildered. "Pajamas, sheets, pillowcases ..."

His whole face lit up. "Remember at the airport I told you I had a couple of surprises for you? Well, this is one of them. Nicky's gonna be staying with us! Isn't that too much, Babe?"

I ducked out of the way just as Nicky's sword was about to slice my head off. "You mean, like for the weekend?" The sword pierced my left tit. Oh, God, I found myself praying, let it only be for the weekend!

"For the weekend, hell no!" Peter let out a gleeful laugh. "For keeps!"

"What?" Surely he was kidding? "You're kidding?"

Just then Nicky tugged at his father's sleeve. "Daddy, I have to pee!"

"You know where the bathroom is, Nicky," Peter told him.

"Dad-DY-YY, take me to the bathroom; I have to PE-EE-EE!!!" He clutched himself between the legs and did a bizarre little dance around the bed. "I've got to make Number Two too!"

"I'd better take him," Peter said, and the two of them took off for the can, lickity-split.

When Peter got back to the bedroom I was still in the same place, frozen in space and time. Shock does that to me.

"Nicky had a good shit," he reassured me. As if the state of Nicky's vital functions was foremost on my mind! "Now he's watching the tube. 'Mork and Mindy's' coming on soon. That'll keep him quiet for awhile." He pulled me down to the bed and kissed me. "Isn't it exciting? About Nicky coming to live with us, I mean?"

"I ... eh ... uh ... ga ..." I was having trouble getting my mouth in working order. Shock does that to me too.

"I knew it would blow your mind!" He hugged me. "I know how crazy you are about that kid. I saw it with my own eyes that day we all spent together a couple of weeks back. And you did say, about a dozen times, how you'd love to have a kid just like him someday."

Oh, Lord, I DID say that, didn't I? "I -- I never dreamed 'someday' would come so soon!" I blurted. Oh, please tell me this isn't happening, I thought. Please wake me up and tell me I've been dreaming all this!

No such luck.

"To tell you the truth," he went on, "I didn't think 'someday' was

going to be this soon either. Actually, I planned to spend the whole weekend alone with you and then pick him up on Monday. But when I dropped by to visit him this afternoon, my 'Ex' told me that her flight's been moved up and that she's leaving tonight."

"Leaving? For where?"

"Japan, of course. I told you about it."

"You did?" That was news to me.

"Sure. You were lying here in this very bed a couple of weeks ago and I told you how my 'Ex' was thinking of going to some institute over there to study the art of Japanese Flower Arranging for a couple of years. And I also told you that if that happened, Nicky would be coming to live with me."

I looked at him like he was nuts. "I don't remember that!"

"Of course it was all very tentative then," he explained. "We didn't know if she'd be accepted."

I tried to think back, but still the conversation eluded me. Maybe it just never sank in. Or maybe I was deaf and dumb as well as blind that night. My mind had painted such a perfect picture, GodHELP me!

"Anyway," he continued, oblivious, "I know we won't be married in the traditional sense — since neither of us believes in that lousy institution — but at least the kid will have a mother-figure around. It'll be healthy."

Suddenly I got a sick feeling<sup>o</sup> in the pit of my stomach. Oh, no, I thought, please don't let me think what I'm thinking! "Peter?" I had to ask him. I had to know. "Would you have asked me to come to live with you even if ... if Nicky ..."

"Whoa there!" He cut me off. "Hey, you don't think ..."

I shrugged. I didn't know what to think anymore.

"Hey," he propped himself up on his elbow and looked me straight in the eye, "you gotta know that I'm crazy about you. Kid or no kid, I'd never ask you to come live with me if I didn't love you!"

"You -- you really love me?"

"Of course I do! I mean, I know we haven't known each other very long or anything, but hell, I know what I feel. I'm a firm believer in love at first sight. Anyway, I thought you felt the same way about me?"

"I did. I do! It's just that ..."

Just then Nicky came rushing in. "Daddy, Daddy, 'Mork's' coming on soon. You and the lady come watch!"

"The lady's name is Shay," Peter told him, "and Shay and I are kinda busy right now. We'll join you soon, okay?"

"I'm hungry," he pouted, "I want some Ketchup Chips and a Mr. Slurpee ..."

"It's almost suppertime. Can't you wait?"

"Can we go to McDonald's?" His eyes got as big as Quarter Pounders.

"We'll see."

"Oh, boy!" He ran over and threw his arms around Peter. Then he planted a big, wet kiss on my cheek and skipped out of the room. It was hard to believe that this was the same little monster who had tried to hack me to pieces only moments before.

"He really is adorable," I said, my heart melting. "I wonder if he understands -- about his mother going off and leaving him like she did, I mean," I added, still trying to make sense of it all myself.



Peter shrugged. "Look what can I tell you, Babe? She's been taking care of Nicky all these years while I've been out chasing my dreams. Now she figures it's her turn. I dunno, maybe she's right. Who's to say? Look, what can I tell you? It's a sign of the times." He shrugged again. "I guess some women feel they just can't do justice to a kid and a career."

"And you think I can?" I said in a strangled voice.

"Hey!" He hooked his finger under my chin and tilted my head back. "What's this all about?" He gazed intensely into my eyes. "What happened to the lady with the 'I can conquer the world'! attitude I met a couple of weeks ago?"

Funny, I was wondering the same thing myself. Conquering the world, it seemed, was turning out to be one of those things that are easier said than done. "I — I just always thought that I'd establish myself first, you know, before having kids. So that I don't end up like your ex-wife."

"You can handle it, Babe, I know you can. I mean, sure you may be innocent about a few things, but you have a hellava lot more on the ball than my 'Ex' does. Besides, there are plenty of women in this day and age who manage a career and a family. It's just a matter of pacing yourself."

"You — you really think I could do it?" He was definitely beginning to get to me. Nobody had ever believed in me like that before. "Really?"

"Hey!" he said, his eyes burning into mine. "Do you really love me?"

"Of course I do!" I cried. "I left home to be with you, didn't I?"

"Then trust me. You can handle it. You can handle anything if you set your mind to it."

"Yeah?"

"Give yourself a little credit, will ya? You didn't think you could handle the housework either and just look at this place -- man, I've never seen it so fucking spotless!"

"Yeah," I found myself agreeing with him, "sometimes I amaze myself, you know?"

"There you have it, Babe. And if you give yourself half a chance, you're gonna find that you're just full of surprises."

"You think?"

"I know!"

Dale Carnegie himself couldn't have been more persuasive. Maybe he's right, I began to think, maybe I can do it all. I mean, every time I pick up a newspaper or a magazine I read about all these women who pursue fascinating, demanding careers yet still manage to have terrific sex lives with their husbands and/or lovers, spend 'quality' (as opposed to 'quantity') time with their kids AND keep their homes looking like Decor Mag's 'Feature of the Month' to boot. If they could do it, why couldn't I? "Yeah," I blurted, getting carried away with myself for a change, "I could handle it!"

"Now that's the way I like to hear you talk!" he cried, taking me around and hugging me half to death. "You can do it, Babe, no sweat."

"Yeah ..." An alarm bell suddenly went off in my head. "... No sweat ..." My God, what am I saying, I thought, could it really be THAT easy? Hell, my very own sister-in-law once told me that bringing up a kid changes your whole life -- drastically. That it demands all your

time. Zaps all your energy. God, God, God, what the hell am I getting myself into here? A five-year-old child is such a big responsibility. I've never been responsible for anything more than a turtle -- and even then I blew it. Not that I'm worried about flushing little Nicky down the toilet, mind you, but still. Me, a mother? I haven't even learned to take care of myself yet!

"Hey!" He suddenly jumped up from the bed. "I almost forgot. I have another surprise for you."

"Another one?" I stiffened. I didn't think I could live through another one of his surprises. "What is it?" I was almost afraid to ask. "Did you invite the President of the United States home for dinner?"

He laughed. "You'll see ..." He rushed out of the room.

The phone rang.

"Get that will you, Babe?" he shouted.

I picked up the receiver. "Hello?" I said meekly, afraid it might be Ma calling up to make a scene. Another perfect end to another perfect day.

"Shay, thank God!" It was Jo Ann. "I thought I'd find you there."

"What's up?" I asked. There was something in her tone of voice that set me on edge. "Is something wrong?"

"I don't know, you tell me. When I called your house to speak to you just before, your mother -- well, she refused to even discuss you. It was almost as if you were dead!"

"Dead?" The hairs on my arms stood up on end. "Oh, God, you don't suppose they're sitting shiva?"

Just then Peter came into the room, carrying his guitar. "Dead?"

Who's dead?"

"I am," I said numbly.

"What?" he cried. "Who the hell is that? Gimme the phone!" He grabbed the receiver out of my hand in that protective, take charge way of his. My knight in shining armor to the rescue once again. "Who the hell is this? Who? Oh, yeah, right, Shay's friend. Yeah, yeah, nice to finally meet you too. Listen Jo Ann, can Shay call you back later? We're kinda busy right now." He gave me a concerned look. "Yeah, she's upset. Her parents? They had a big fight. Yeah, yeah, she moved in with me. No, no, I'm sure she'll be just fine. California? In about two weeks or so. I have to sublet my place and stuff. Huh? Really? No, I don't think she does. Eight pounds, seven ounces? Yeah, yeah, I'll tell her. Uh-huh, uh-huh, uh-huh, I'll tell her that too. Bye." He rolled his eyes around in his head as he hung up. "If I didn't know better, I'd swear I was just talking to Rona Barrett herself."

"Eight pounds, seven ounces?" Suddenly I snapped out of my semi-stuporous state. "The baby!" I had forgotten all about the baby. "Is it okay? Is it healthy? Is everything ..."

"Just take it easy. Your sister-in-law had a very easy labour. The baby's fine. The bris is on Wednesday morning."

"It's a boy then," I sighed.

"At least until the bris."

"Huh? Whad'ya mean?"

"Nothing. Never mind. Just a little circumcision humour."

"Oh, yeah, right ... heh, heh." There was a heavy feeling in my chest. Like I get every year at Passover from eating Bobben Finel's matzo balls. "Did you know I was supposed to be his godmother?"

"No, no I didn't."

"Hey!" I brightened. "You don't suppose that by Wednesday my parents will have realized how wrong they've been and I could still be ..."

He made a face.

"Yeah, you're right," I said glumly. I already knew the answer. "Who am I kidding anyway? I'd be about as welcome at that briso as a staph'infection."

"Hey, this thing is really tearing you apart, isn't it?"

"No!" I cried. Suddenly I got very angry. "I'm not going to let them get to me like this! I was right and they were wrong and I'm through letting them run my life for me. They're not going to get me in their clutches again. No sir. No way. And I don't even want to talk about it anymore! Okay?"

"You're not going to get any arguments from me," he shrugged.

"I don't even know how you stayed with that loony-tune family of yours this long. As far as I'm concerned you did good."

Then how come I didn't feel so good, dammit! "Peter?"

"Mmm?"

"You — you don't think they're actually sitting shiva ..."

"Ah, c'mon," he scoffed, "now you're letting your imagination get carried away with you! And anyway, I thought you didn't want to talk about it anymore?"

I was getting on his nerves, I could tell. Which was kind of understandable really. I was even getting on my own nerves. "I'm not handling this very well, am I?"

"Hey," he smiled and stroked my hair, "nobody said it was gonna

be easy." He sat down beside me on the bed and started tuning his guitar. "That's how come I wrote you this song."

"You wrote a song for me?" I almost floated two feet off the bed. It was like something out of a movie.

He plucked and strummed. "That's the surprise I was telling you about just before. It's still a little rough though. I wrote it on the plane."

"God," I almost floated away completely, "nobody ever wrote a song for me before!" It was a fantasy come true. "What's it called?"

"'Can't You See?'" He hummed and twanged; twanged and hummed.

"Here goes nothin' ..."

I'd like to show you things  
And take you places  
You never dreamed you'd go  
I want to take you up so high  
If you'd only let me know  
That you'll spend your life with me  
Hey, won't you move on in with me?

For those back home a-worryin'  
That I'll taint your virgin mind  
They gotta let you go through life and love  
And leave them all behind  
It's time they stopped protectin' you  
You'll learn from your mistakes  
I'm willin' to let you find yourself  
However long it takes

So won't you ...

Pack up your things  
Say your goodbyes  
Tell them you're leavin' home for me.  
Girl, I need you in my life  
Can't you see, oh,  
Can't you see?

The times keep changin'  
It's near impossible  
For woman to know her own mind  
She's gotta take a chance on life and love  
And keep growin' all the time

No, I don't have all the answers  
I can't teach you wrong from right  
But lady, when the whole world comes crashin' down  
I'll be 'round to hold you tight

Commitment is a funny thing to want  
In this here day and age  
When casual affairs and bein' free from ties  
Is more the goin' rage  
Hey, life's just a crazy game we play  
There ain't no guarantees  
But Babe I'm offering you my love  
I'm beggin' you please ...

Pack up your things  
Say your goodbyes  
Tell them you're comin' home to me  
Girl, you need me in your life  
Can't you see  
Hey can't you see?

"Well?" he said, putting his guitar down on the floor.

"It's beautiful!" I melted into his arms. Like a gooey marshmallow. "The words ... the melody ... it's the most beautiful thing in the world!"

"No, you are." He pressed his body against mine, his hands caressing me all over. Suddenly it was like we were the only two people left on earth and nothing — or nobody could come between us. Just like the first night we were together. "Mmm ..." I found myself writhing under his touch, "... unhhh ...."

Before long my shirt was unbuttoned; my pants unzipped. His hands were everywhere; stroking my breasts, rubbing my back, massaging my clit. More, I thought, spreading my legs wider and wider, more, more, more! A finger plunged up inside me. Then another.

Then it happened. A hideous cramp.

My whole body went rigid. I had to bite my tongue to keep from screaming blue murder. The Coil — I had forgotten all about it!

"Is something wrong?" he asked, hoarsely. "Don't tell me you've got your Period?" He pulled his hand away as if he had burned it on a hot stove. "I thought I felt a Tampax string!"

"You did. But it's not because I have my period. I had The Coil put in yesterday."

"Well, that's great, Babe!" He nuzzled me. "So what's the problem?" Nuzzle, nuzzle.

"I was waiting for the right time to tell you about it," I sighed, "I guess this is as good as any."

"Tell me what?"

"Well, you see, I'm kind of bleeding from it and the doctor — he said that I shouldn't you know, Do It for the next few days or so. And I've got these cramps ..." I held my breath as another one passed through me. "They come and go."

"But I can't stop now!" he groaned.

I could feel his hard-on pressing up against my leg. "I'll vouch for that!" it seemed to say. I have to do something, I thought, he just wrote me a song!

I slid down to the floor and knelt in between his legs, running my hands over the bulge in his pants.

"Take me inside your mouth," he groaned, "before I come right in my pants!" Without further ado, he arched up, unzipped his jeans and whipped them down in a flash. His position was such that his erection sprang right into my face and landed just about lip level. My tongue snaked out to caress it.

All of a sudden there was a loud THUMP! Then another. And another.



"Nicky!" I cried, jerking away. I had forgotten all about him too.

We both stopped to listen. We could hear nothing except peels of laughter coming from the den.

"He's glued to the T.V.," Peter reassured me, "don't worry. He won't come in."

"You sure?" I said. "I'll die if he walks in and ..."

He pressed his penis to my lips and cut me off in mid-sentence. "I'm sure," he rasped as he poked and prodded my lips apart, "I know my own kid."

On that reassuring note, I opened wide and took him inside, my mouth and tongue sliding up and down; up and down. Fast and furious. Probing and sucking. Licking and slurping. Bobbing and weaving.

Peter was pretty close to coming when there was another THUMP! I started to jerk away but he put his hands on top of my head and held me down.

"You can't leave me hanging like this," he pleaded in a hoarse whisper. "You can't!"

My eyes bulged out of my head as I cast a worried glance toward the bedroom door.

"Don't worry about Nicky," he reassured me once again. "Nothing can tear him away from 'Mork and Mindy'! Nothing!"

Without wasting another precious second, he rammed himself down my throat and started pumping away like there was no tomorrow.

"Nothing ..." he grunted.

"Nothing ..." he groaned.

"Noth ..." he gasped.

"... ing ..."

"...ng ..."

"... egg."

"... g"

"..."

Famous last words if I ever heard any.

Just as Peter's semen came spurting into my mouth, 'Mork and Mindy' paused for station identification and little Nicky came charging into the bedroom, full speed ahead.

"MAKE WAY FOR MORK FROM THE PLANET ORK!!!" he yelled as he took a flying leap onto the bed and proceeded to jump up and down; up and down. "NANNOO-NANNOO!!!"

What happened next shouldn't have happened to a bitch in heat.

As Peter jack-knifed to his feet, he jacked-off all over me.

What I didn't swallow got sprayed all over my face and hair.

I wanted to fold up and die.

"Oh, shit, Babe, I'm sorry," he said as we exchanged mortified looks. "Here," he reached for a Kleenex, "let me ..."

I didn't wait around for his help. I zipped up my jeans and, pulling my unbuttoned shirt into some semblance of togetherness, I ran into the bathroom and locked myself inside.

"Hey in there, are you alright?" Peter knocked on the door a few seconds later.

I didn't answer. I just stood there with my back against the door, tears streaming down my face; my lower lip trembling uncontrollably. Call me ridiculous for being so upset, but that's the way I felt. I just wasn't used to a five-year-old kid screaming 'Nannoo-Nannoo!'"

into my ear while I'm busy sucking his father's cock!

"Shay?" Peter knocked again.

I reached up and touched the front of my hair. It was all stuck together. Like overcooked spaghetti. And as for the mouthful I had swallowed — I was sick about it! Not that it tasted so bad, mind you. In fact, it didn't taste bad at all. Sort of like the sauce on a Big Mac. But the fact that I actually LIKED it made me feel even worse. 'Swallowing It' is considered to be a very unJewish thing for a Jewish girl to do. But 'Liking It' Liking it is strictly Whore City! Semen is just one of those exotic delicacies that our culture deems unkosher. Strictly unkosher. I mean, it's right up there with Pig's Knuckles, Calf's Brains and Sheep's Kidneys. According to Jo Ann anyway. The fact that I never had a kosher day in my life didn't seem to appease my anguish though. It wasn't one of my more rational moments.

"Shay? Why don't you answer me?"

Go away, I thought, go away, go away, go away! Just leave me alone!

"C'mon, open the door!" he pleaded. "You're making a big deal over nothing. C'mon... this is childish."

That's all I needed to hear, even if he was right. Furious, I grabbed a magazine from the rack by the john and I flung it at the door with all my might. Part of it tore off in my hand. It was a center-fold. A full-blown colour picture of a very voluptuous, very nude young woman, who was lying on a white bearskin rug and playing with herself. One hand was up her vagina; the other was rubbing her size 44D breasts and there was a half-peeled banana protruding from her cherry-red lips.

"WILLOWMEENA BEATTS", the caption read, "MISS MARCH '79."

Underneath was a detailed biography which said she was a twenty-three-year-old pre-med student with a 'promising' career in Neurosurgery who, in her spare time, cooks gourmet meals for her live-in boyfriend and then gives him "Gourmet Blowjob" for dessert. Of course Willowmeena, busy as she was, was kind enough to take time out to share one of her 'recipes' with her starving readers:

I start off by covering my lover's beautifully thick uncircumcised ten-inch cock with Dream Whip. Then I sprinkle on chopped nuts, syrup — usually chocolate or strawberry — and top the whole thing off with a maraschino cherry. I call it "Willowmeena's Concocktion!"

After I lick off the whipped cream and everything, my lover's hot poker is usually ready to spurt its burning lava into my awaiting mouth. And that's when I give him the biggest treat of all. I wrap my trembling, eager lips around his throbbing tip and I hum a song — usually the Ketchup Song (the one that goes: 'Anticipation ... anticipation is making me wait'). The vibrations drive him wild and when he finally does spurt his luscious cum into my mouth — it's slowww good!

After I read that, I didn't know whether to laugh or cry or what. I mean, God, she could do all that and brain surgery too?!

"Open the damn door, will ya?" Peter was really pounding by now. "Open it or I'll bust it down!"

I reached over and unlocked the door. I'd already had my fill of high drama for the day without him having to come crashing into the bathroom like something out of 'Starsky and Hutch'.

"Christ, I was really getting worried about you!" he said, looking truly exasperated. "Why didn't you answer me?"

I plunked myself down on the toilet, still clutching Willowmeena.

"What's that in your hand?"

"The Woman of Your Dreams," I replied, feeling terribly sorry for myself. "Here," I handed her over to him, "take her, she's yours."

He looked her over from head to toe — and everything in between. "Not bad," he said, his voice filled with admiration. "But what does she have to do with anything?"

"Nothing ... never mind. Forget it. It doesn't matter."

"Look," he said, "I know what happened just before was a bad scene and I'm sorry about that, really I am. If I could go back and prevent it from happening, I would. But I can't. So let's just put it behind us and chalk it up to experience. From now on we'll just lock the bedroom door, okay?"

"Yeah, sure." I forced a smile. How the hell could I expect him to understand what was going on inside me if I didn't even know myself? There were so many feelings. All jumbled up there in the back of my mind. I wondered if I'd ever get them all sorted out. "From now on we'll just lock the bedroom door." Simple enough. One step at a time.

He reached out and touched my crusted-together hair. "Christ, you really are a mess, aren't you?"

"Ah, it's nothing, really." Liar!

Just then Nicky came into the bathroom.

"Daddy," he tugged at Peter's pant leg, "I'm hungry!"

"We're on our way, kid." Peter snatched him up and hoisted him onto his shoulders. "Look, why don't you get cleaned up;" he told me, "and then we'll go out and grab a Big Mac or something?"

Ugh. I didn't think I could ever look at a Big Mac again! "You two go on without me," I blurted. "I'd really just like to take a nice hot bath and relax a little."

"You sure?"

"Positive. An hour in the bath and I'll be a new person."

GodWILLING.

"Want me to stop by Pines and bring you back a pizza?"

"Sure, thanks." Anything, just go!

"Enjoy your bath, Babe."

"Enjoy your bath, Babe!" Nicky echoed, and the two of them took off, laughing hysterically.

Another first for the kid.

A nightmare in the bathtub.

I don't know. I guess all the heat and steam got to me while I lay there soaking and I just drifted off to sleep. Suddenly I found myself running along a beautiful, sunlit beach with carefree abandon. My jeans were rolled up to my knees; my shoes were in my hands. The feeling of wet sand squishing beneath my feet was glorious. Seaweed wrapped around my ankles like velvet ribbons. The roar of the waves as they came crashing to the shore was like nothing I'd ever heard before.

"I love you California!" I shouted gleefully. "You're everything and more than I'd ever dreamed you'd be!"

But then, all of a sudden, it grew terribly dark. And cold. God, was it cold! And there was putrid-smelling water swirling all around me. I looked down at the ground and let out a blood-curdling scream. The wet sand squishing under my feet wasn't wet sand anymore. It was shit! And the seaweed around my ankles was actually soggy strands of toilet paper. And the roar of the giant waves crashing against the shore sounded more like the non-stop flushing of toilets.

"No!" I cried. "I don't like it here anymore. I'm going home!" I turned around and started to run. I ran and ran and ran until I got

to my former house. "Ma, Daddy, I'm back!" I shouted as I burst through the front door: "Your Shayna Pearl's back for good!" The house was full of people yet nobody seemed to notice my presence. It was like I was invisible. Then I spotted Ma standing by the main powder room. She was talking to Rabbi Blier, whose services she religiously attends each and every Saturday (when she isn't playing golf) and who usually presides over all our family bar mitzvahs, weddings and funerals. "Ma!" I cried, rushing up to her. "What's he doing here?" I pointed to the Rabbi. "What's going on?" But they didn't seem to see or hear me either. They just went on with their conversation. Like I wasn't even there.

"I'm sorry," said the Rabbi, "I'll perform the service, I'll get up and say wonderful things about her, but I won't allow her to be buried in a Jewish cemetery. She died unclean." He shook his head gravely. "You can take your daughter out of the sewer, but you can't take the sewer out of your daughter."

I stood there frozen with horror. They were talking about me!

"Don't worry about it, Rabbi," Ma pooh-poohed him, "when it comes to cleanliness, I'm an expert. I'll have her cleaned up and smelling sweet as Lemon Pledge and then we can bury her in the Jewish cemetery. Who's to know?"

The Rabbi pointed his finger skyward. "HE will."

"Oh, don't worry about Him. I can take care of Him!" Ma said.

"We're very tight, you know? We have a tremendous rapport, He and I."

"It won't help." The Rabbi shook his head gravely again. "Look, I didn't want to have to tell you this, but when I say your daughter died unclean, I mean she really died UNCLEAN. You see, her insides were contaminated. We found traces of semen in her throat and belly."

"No!" Ma gasped. "You ... you mean ..."

"Exactly." The Rabbi nodded. "Your daughter Swallowed It like a shikseh, so she has to be buried like one -- in a goyishe cemetery!"

"No!" I cried to deaf ears. "Don't tell her that. I didn't Swallow It on purpose. It was an accident! AN ACCIDENT!"

"Why, that ... that ...." Ma wailed, "... if she weren't already dead I'd KILL her!"

"It was an accident! An ACCI ...."

Suddenly I felt myself slipping down. My mouth filled with water. My lungs felt as if they were going to burst. I'm drowning, I thought, oh, God, I'm really drowning!

And then, all of a sudden, a pair of hands grabbed me and pulled me to my feet.

"SHAY ... SHAY ... are you alright?" It was Peter.

"What happened?" I coughed and sputtered.

"You almost drowned in the fucking bathtub, that's what happened!" he cried. "If I hadn't come in when I did ..."

Suddenly it all came back to me. That hideous nightmare! "Oh, God, Peter, I just had the most awful nightmare. Everybody wanted me dead!"

"Hey, c'mon," he said, wrapping a towel around me and helping me out of the tub, "don't turn into a basket case on me now. I really need you!"

"Need me?"

"I'm afraid Nicky OD'd on McDonalds and he puked all over the place. I'd clean it up myself but the smell makes me retch, you know?"



## CHAPTER 13

"Hey, Sleeping Beauty," Peter nudged me, "wakey, way-kee!"

"Huh? What?!" I sat bolt upright. "What's wrong now?"

"Nothing's wrong!" he laughed. "I just brought you some breakfast in bed, that's all." He set a tray down on my lap. "Orange juice, coffee, bacon and eggs, toast ... go on, eat, eat, eat, it's getting cold!"

I took a sip of the juice. "Ooop," I made a sour face.

"What's wrong?" He looked insulted.

"I can't ..." I pushed the tray away.

"Go on, eat it, it's delicious." He pushed the tray back.

"I'm sure it is." I pushed it away again. "It's just that everything smells like vomit, you know?"

"I know, but you've got to eat something or you'll ... Christ, will you just listen to me?" he winced. "I'm beginning to sound like a Jewish SMother!"

"Good," I snuggled up to him, "I could use one right now."

"Yeah, this was really some weekend, wasn't it?" He popped a piece of bacon into his mouth. "I didn't think that kid was ever going to stop puking! All night Saturday ... all day yesterday ... that's the last time I ever let him have two hot fudge sundaes on top of a Quarter Pounder, you can be sure of that!"

"Not to mention the fries and the Ronald McDonald cookies!"

"I just hate saying 'no' to the kid, you know?"

"So I've noticed." I yawned. God, was I exhausted. I couldn't ever remember feeling so exhausted. Even my hair felt exhausted. "Is he okay this morning?"

"Oh, yeah, he's back to his old self alright. He's busy turning the den into a disaster area."

"Swell," I said with mixed feelings.

"And it's all thanks to you, Babe. I don't know what I would have done without you this weekend." He kissed the top of my head. "You were terrific. Where'd you learn to take care of a sick kid like that anyway?"

"I dunno," I shrugged. "I guess I just did whatever my mother ... whatever my mother used to do for me when I was sick ..."

"You sound amazed!" he laughed.

"I don't think I ever really gave her credit before, you know? Being a parent is hard work!" Ma, Ma, what are you thinking now, Ma, I wondered, feeling a sudden twinge of sadness, do you hate what's happened between us as much as I do? Will you and Daddy ever understand that I just need to make my own choices -- good and bad? "She's really not such a bad person, my mother, you know?" I said, trying to unscramble my feelings. "I mean, sure, she has her shtick and everything. She and my father both. But they mean well. You know?"

"Sounds to me like you're mellowing a bit. A couple of days ago the mere thought of your parents sent you into a complete rage."

"Yeah, I guess I have mellowed, haven't I?" I scratched my head, wondering what it all meant. Was I having a change of heart? Did I make a mistake -- turning my back on my family the way I did? Was I doing the right thing? I looked up at Peter, my eyes searching his face,

For what, I wasn't sure. All I knew was that I loved him and that I was prepared to follow him anywhere. Or was I? No, of course I was!

"Hey, what are you staring at?" he wanted to know.

"Huh? What?" I started. "Oh, I ... I ..." I couldn't think straight. My mind was all fogged in. God, I thought, letting out a huge yawn, I'm so tired I don't know if I'm coming or going anymore!

"Hello?" He waved his hand in front of my face. "Is there anybody home?"

"Huh? Oh, God, I'm sorry!" I shook my head in a vain attempt to clear it. "I guess I'm just pooped out, you know?"

"I know. That's why I let you sleep in this morning. I would have let you sleep even longer except that we have an appoint ...."

"Oh, no!" I cried. "What time is it?"

"Eleven-thirty. Why?"

"Eleven-thirty? I was supposed to be at work two and a half hours ago!"

"Jeez, I forgot all about your work ..."

"Mrs. Finkelberg's gonna KILL me! I promised her I'd be at work at nine sharp. I had an interview to do and, oh, God, she's gonna KILL me!"

"Take it easy, will ya? You spent the entire weekend taking care of a sick kid ... you've hardly slept in two nights ... and the night before that you spent on an airport bench. You were in no shape to go to work anyway."

I gave him a piercing look. Is that the way it's going to be from now on, I wondered. Will I ever have time for my work? Is that what I want? Is it? Is it? "Shit, I can't believe this is happening!"

"Hey, give yourself a break, will ya? You're not Superwoman, you know?"

My eyes almost popped out of my head. "I can't believe you just said that! You of all people ..."

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about ... I'm talking about ... oh, hell," I found myself all in a muddle for a change, "I don't know what I'm talking about!" I reached for the phone. "I've got to call Mrs. Finkelberg and explain ... oh, God, she's gonna KILL me!"

It was just as I suspected.

Mrs. Finkelberg was furious.

"How nice of you to call!" she said. There was so much acid in her voice I thought it was going to eat right through the phone. "I'm almost sorry you didn't decide to show up in person instead. Because then I'd have the satisfaction of WRINGING YOUR LITTLE NECK!"

Did I call it or did I call it?

"Mrs. Finkelberg, if you'll just let me explain ..." I was in a complete sweat. Mrs. Finkelberg does that to me. "I can explain ..."

"Oh, good," she sneered, "I knew there was a perfectly good reason why you're not sitting at your desk writing up that interview with the mayor as you promised!"

"Oh, there is! You see I ..."

"And don't tell me you've been ill!" she barked. "Because I know better! When you didn't show up for work this morning, I got concerned — you weren't feeling well on Friday and I thought maybe you might be dying or something — so I called your house. Not only were you not sick, but you weren't even there! 'Gone bye-bye with boyfriend' is the

way your charlady put it, I believe."

"Please," I winced, "you don't understand ..."

"Oh, I understand alright," she fumed, "I understand that our little chat on Friday didn't even penetrate one little hair of your high-priced La Coupe hairdo, that's what I understand! You sure have a strange way of proving yourself, young lady. A very strange way indeed!"

"But Mrs. Finkelberg ..."

"I don't know why I bothered wasting my breath on you! You're nothing but a frivolous, ridiculous little J.A.P.! You always were and you always will be!"

"No, you've got it all wrong!" I tried to tell her. "Look, I could be there in a half hour and ..."

"Don't bother!" she exploded. "YOU'RE FIRED!" CLICK.

"But you don't understand ..." I sat there numbly, talking to the dial tone, "... it's not like you think. You see I ..."

"Forget it, Babe," Peter took the phone out of my hand and hung it up. "There's no point."

"You -- you heard?" I said, blinking back tears.

"Are you kidding? The way that witch was yelling, I'm sure the entire McGill ghetto heard!"

"I ... I can't believe she fired me ..." The tears began to flow forth. I really and truly felt awful. Like I had let the whole world down -- and myself along with it. "She wouldn't even let me explain ..."

"Hey, c'mon, don't cry," he said, brushing a tear away with his finger, "you're well rid of her, believe me. Jeez, what a witch! I'll bet she comes to work on a broom!"

"I ... I know she's a w-i-itch," I sniffled. "But, but I, she

and I -- we had this talk on Friday and ... and ... and ..."

"But you were going to have to quit anyway. We're leaving for L.A. in a few days, remember?"

"Yeah, California," I sighed. Ever since that nightmare I had in the tub the other night, I was left with this strange, uneasy feeling about California. Sitting there like a lump in my gut. Somebody up there was trying to tell me something. But what? I looked up at Peter, my eyes searching his face again. But then again, that little nagging doubt ... "Everything's going to be okay once we get there, isn't it?"

"Are you kidding?" He took me around. "You just wait and see that little beachhouse I rented. It's only a stone's throw away from the fucking Pacific ocean, man! I mean, little Nicky's gonna have all that fresh air and sunshine to play in. And we're gonna take long, romantic walks in the surf every night -- just like in the fucking movies! And I'm gonna write hit songs and you're gonna write smash screenplays ... now what does that sound like to you? Does it sound like heaven or does it sound like heaven?"

"God, you make it sound so wonderful!" I cried.

"That's 'cause it's gonna be!"

"God!" I hugged him with all my might. How, I found myself wondering, could I not love this man? He's so exciting! So romantic! So strong! So sure of himself! And yet ... and yet .... Suddenly I found myself searching his face again .... And yet I couldn't help feeling that something was missing.

"Do I have dirt on my face or something?" he asked me.

"Huh?"

"You keep staring at me ..."

"Peter?" I just had to get it off my chest. Superficial though it may have seemed, it was bugging the hell out of me. "Are you going to grow your beard back?"

"I dunno. Why? Do you think I should?"

"It's not that you don't look good without it, because you do. Really you do. It's just that, well, it's just that you don't look like you!"

"Well then," he laughed, "I better grow it back fast. We can't have going to bed with a stranger every night, can we?"

"Hell no," I laughed too, "I'm just not that kind of girl!" I was beginning to feel better already. Maybe things were beginning to look up after all? "You know, you haven't kissed me in ages!" I blurted.

"How clumsy of me!" He gave me a whopper of a kiss. "Now," he whacked me on the ass, "hurry up and get dressed, will ya? Like I was about to tell you before, we have an appointment in a half hour."

"An appointment?"

"Yep — we're going to the American Consulate to see a Miss Kraut about some visas."

"God, it's really happening, isn't it?"

"You better believe it, Babe!" he grinned.

"You know, I can't believe how fast it's all going. I mean, I always thought it took months to get a visa."

"Not when you've got one of the biggest record companies in the good old U.S. of A. behind you. And anyway, this appointment at the consulate is nothing more than a formality. The whole thing is pretty much all in the bag already."

"Well then, what are we waiting for?" I said with renewed

vigour as I slipped into a pair of jeans. "You know," I marvelled as a swishing sound caught my ear, "I could swear I hear the ocean already."

He threw his head back and laughed that crazy hoarse laugh of his. "And I always thought that those were just the pipes gurgling!"

A funny thing happened during our visit to the American consulate.

I became patriotic.

For Canada, that is!

I don't know. I guess it was the way Miss Kraut, the 'Processor of Visa Applications', kept referring to us as "You aliens" and "You immigrants" (which she pronounced "ali-uns" and "immig-runts"). God, she made it sound like we were about as welcome in the United States as an epidemic of Legionnaire's Disease!

"You ali-uns will have Landed Immig-runt Sta-tus," she drawled on and on, "... and you ali-uns must register as such each and every January ... and you ali-uns must have Green Cards to work in these here United States ... and you ali-uns this ... and you immig-runtz that ..."

Obviously Miss Kraut is extremely good at alienating future immigrants to the United States, because by the time she was through with me, I didn't ever want to set foot in the United States again. Not even to go shopping in Plattsburgh!

But go and tell THAT to Peter.

He was in Seventh Heaven.

"Did I tell you it was gonna be a snap or did I tell you it was gonna be a snap?" he babbled excitedly in the car on the way home.

"We're almost there, Babe, can you believe it? Isn't it incredible?"

I couldn't bring myself to agree so I didn't answer. Instead I



busied myself with the removal of the wad of Double Bubble Nicky had somehow managed to grind into the back seat of my car. "Look at this mess will you?" I cried, knowing deep inside that it wasn't really the mess that was bothering me. It was something much deeper. A change of heart, maybe? What was I doing -- moving to California with this ... this man?! Who was he anyway? I ... I hardly even knew him! Could you love someone and not even know him? Everything was happening so fast. So fast! "Just look at this mess ..."

"Hey, what's eating you?" Peter wanted to know.

"NO, NICKY, DON'T DO THAT!" I wailed as he stuck his fingers into the wad and then wiped them on the carpet, not to mention his hair and clothes. "You're making everything all sticky!"

To which he responded by pulling another wad out of his mouth and imbedding it into the ashtray.

"That does it!" I fumed. "That just does it!"

"Hey, take it easy, will ya?" Peter said. "I'm gonna give the car a good cleaning this afternoon anyway. It'll look as good as new by the time people come around to look it over tomorrow."

"People? What people?"

"Oh, didn't I tell you? I put an ad in the Gazette this morning. For your car and my bike."

"Sell my car?" I got a lump in my throat. My mind flashed back to the day Ma and Dad surprised me with it. I could just see it sitting there in the garage, a gleaming white Camaro with a huge blue velvet bow wrapped around it. 'To our darling daughter on her 21st birthday', the accompanying oversized card read, 'we love you, Mom & Dad'. "But this car is like a part of me," I said, my eyes clouding over with misty

water colour memories of the way we were. Sometimes. God, I really did love my family! Despite everything, I still loved them. "It's a part of me ..."

"Hey, look, I know you're not crazy about giving up your car," he said. "I feel the same way about my bike. But what the hell, right? It's a small sacrifice to make for what we're gonna end up with, isn't it? And besides, we're gonna use the bread to buy us a nifty set of wheels out in L.A. Maybe even a second-hand Jeep ..."

"You mean a flying saucer, don't you?" I bristled.

"What?" he cried.

"Isn't that what most ali-uns use to get around?"

He gave me a strange look. "Have you flipped your lid?"

"Didn't it even bother you at all?" I asked him.

"Didn't what bother me?"

"The way that horrible Kraut-person kept calling us ali-uns. I don't know about you, but she made me feel like something out of 'Mork and Mindy'!"

"Nan-noo, nan-noo!" Nicky gurgled.

"Yeah, my sentiments exactly!" I sneered.

Peter scratched his head. "Were we just at the same consulate? Anyway, who the hell cares what they call us? The point is, — we're going to the United States. The United States! The place where we can achieve the ultimate in fame and fortune in our respective professions. The American Dream is all ours, Babe, all ours!"

It was beginning to sound more like the American nightmare if you asked me. Or maybe even like the nightmare I had in the tub the other night. Or maybe they were one and the same thing! An alien is

an alien is an ... my God, Shay, I thought with sudden horror, will you just listen to yourself? You're beginning to sound nuts! "Damn!" I rubbed my throbbing forehead. "I'm getting a splitting headache from that stupid consulate!"

"Jesus, what's with you anyway? Why are you blowing this whole thing out of proportion?"

Funny, I was wondering the same thing myself. What was really eating me anyway? Was it California? Or Peter? Or his son? Or my family? Some of the above? All of the above? What? What? WHAT?!

"You haven't answered my question, Shay. Why are you making such a big deal out of this alien business? It's just a term they use for your official status ..."

To which I responded with an explosion that startled even me: "Yeah? Well, I already feel like a goddamned alien right here and now. I don't have to move three thousand miles away just to make it OFFICIAL!"

"Then don't!" he snapped. "Nobody's sticking a fucking gun to your head, you know?"

"Fine!" I cried, wondering what the hell was with me. "Then maybe I won't!"

"Fine!"

"Fine!"

And we drove the rest of the way home in complete and horrible silence.

Whoever coined the phrase, "silence is golden", obviously never spent an entire afternoon getting nothing but dirty looks from their live-in lover.

By the time evening rolled around I couldn't take it anymore.

I just couldn't bear having Peter so angry with me, what with the rest of my loved ones already having that market cornered.

Remembering what that esteemed centrefold and future brain surgeon, Willowmeena Beatts had said about gourmet meals being the way to a man's heart (not to mention his prick!) I, Shayna Pearl Fine, being of unsound mind and neglected body, decided to make the supper to end all suppers.

"Hey, guys!" I cried, bursting into the den where Peter and Nicky were watching T.V. "How would you like a delicious home-cooked meal tonight?"

They slowly turned their heads away from the tube and stared at me with unblinking eyes.

"I, uh, noticed a box of spaghetti in the kitchen," I babbled on, determined to make peace. "And I found a scrumptious recipe for 'Meat Sauce Marinara' in the latest issue of Playboy. Just give me, uh, a few minutes and I'll whip you up an Italian feast you're never gonna forget!" I crowed, despite the fact that I had never whipped up anything more than Lipton's Cup-a-Soup. "So whad'ya say guys? Sounds out of this world, doesn't it?"

They looked at me as if I was something that had just stepped out of "Invasion of the Body Snatchers."

"So whad'ya say?" I glanced at Peter. Was that the way he was going to react to every little argument? Like a sulky child? And I thought I was the immature one. "Well, you can sit here and sulk if you want to, I've got things to do." I did an about face. Will the real five-year-old please stand up?

"Hey," Peter caught up with me in the kitchen, "what's going on?"

"Nothing," I said, hunting through the cupboards for pots and pans. "Can't a woman make a meal for the men in her life without facing an inquisition?"

"I thought you said you were never gonna cook?"

"I say a lot of things I don't mean. I just like to kvetch a lot. Ask my moth ... ask anyone who knows me. They'll tell you. I'm 'Queen of the Kvetches'."

"Oh, I see," he said, "and this afternoon you were just living up to your reputation?"

"Egg<sup>c</sup>-xactly." I pulled out a huge copper-bottomed pot and placed it on the stove. "This looks spaghetti-ish, doesn't it?"

"Spaghetti-ish?" He burst out laughing. "You know, something tells me you don't know meat sauce marinara from clam chowder."

"Look, I'm just trying to say I'm sorry, okay?" I bristled. "I acted like a real shit this afternoon and now I'm trying to make it up to you. Is there anything wrong with that?"

"No, of course not. But are you sure ..."

"I think this should be a celebration dinner, don't you?" I rattled on. "I mean, in a few days we'll be getting our visas in the mail and then we'll be off to California to start a whole new life. Now if that doesn't call for a celebration dinner ..."

"Hey." He grabbed hold of me. "Why don't you just tell me what it is, exactly, that's bugging you?"

I lowered my eyes. "I -- I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because ... because I'm not sure myself ... exactly," I told him

truthfully. 'Mixed up' were not the words to describe my state of mind. 'Scrambled' might have been more accurate. "Look, it's just something I have to work out for myself. It's not your problem, okay?"

"No, it's not okay! It's ..."

"Listen!" I cut him off. "I really have to get my cooking started here. I have a zillion things to do."

"Okay, okay," he relented, "I get the message. We'll let it go -- for now. You need any help?"

"We could use some wine. Oh, and maybe a French bread."

"Okay, I'll run down to the corner grocery and pick some up. Anything else you need?"

I rummaged through the pantry for things Italian. "We have Parmesan cheese. And oregano. . . And ... do we have any marinaras?"

"Marinaras?" He exploded with laughter. "You're kidding, right?"

"Did I say something funny?" I gave him a puzzled look.

"Did you actually read that recipe?"

"I just sort of glanced at it, why?"

"Because there's no such thing as a marinar ... oh, look, why don't you forget about the sauce ~~for~~ tonight? I'll pick up a jar of Ragu at the grocery."

"Well, what am I supposed to do then?" I pouted.

"Make the spaghetti," he said, looking amused. "You do know how to make spaghetti, don't you?"

"Well, of course I do! What's so hard about boiling up a bunch of noodles?"

#### FAMOUS SECOND TO LAST WORDS

"Sorry I asked!" He turned to go.

"Peter?" I blurted. "Don't hate me, okay?"

"Hate you?" He came back and put his arms around me. "You could never do anything that would make me hate you, don't you know that? I love you!"

"I -- I -- I -- love you too ..." I said, hesitantly. Oh, God, wasn't I even sure of that anymore? Suddenly I was filled with panic. Do I? Don't I? Don't I? Do I? And the next thing I knew I was crawling all over him; my hands groping him everywhere; my mouth sweeping back and forth across his face; my lips sucking hungrily at his; sweeping and sucking; sucking and sweeping. Like a Hoover out of control. I do love him, I thought, my mind whirling, I do, I do, I do!

"Mmmm ... hey, what's this all about?" he said, sounding surprised.

"It's a preview of what's gonna be for dessert," I said in my huskiest voice. Willowmeena would have been proud. "Tonight," I went on, stroking him, "tonight I'm even gonna 'Swallow It' ..."

"Hey," he looked at me rather strangely, "you don't have to do that. I mean, only if you want to ..."

"I want to!" I said, almost believing it myself. "And then afterwards ... afterwards we're gonna screw our brains out!"

"What about your coil?" he said. "Doesn't it hurt you anymore?"

"Hurt me? Nawww ...." Only when I moved! But what the hell, right? If I could cook spaghetti .... "In fact, I can't wait to try it out ..."

"Funny, I could swear I saw you popping those pain pills only this morning ..."

"I said it doesn't hurt anymore!" I burst out. "And what's with

all the questions anyway? Do you always turn a proposition into an inquisition?"

"Okay, okay, take it easy ..."

"Look, will you just go to the store already? It's going to close soon and then we'll be out of luck."

He raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure you're alright? You sure are acting strange ..."

"I'm fine! Just go, will you?"

Just then Nicky came into the kitchen. "Is the pizgetti ready yet?" he wanted to know.

"Uh-uh, not yet," Peter told him. "I'm just on my way to the store to pick up some groceries. Wanna come?"

"Uh-uh," he shook his head adamantly, "I wanna stay here and play with my 'Big Mo'," he said, referring to the toy dump truck in his hand.

"You sure?"

"MMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM ...." he got down on the floor and pushed the truck around, "... RRRRRRRRRRRRRR ...."

"You can leave him here," I said, "I'll keep an eye on him."

"I just thought ... okay, yeah, why not?" Peter shrugged. "No reason why you can't boil spaghetti and keep an eye on him at the same time." He turned to go. "I won't be long," he said sounding uneasy.

"Don't worry about a thing!" I yelled after him. "I've got everything under control!"

#### FAMOUS LAST WORDS

Trying to boil spaghetti and keeping an eye on Nicky, I soon discovered, was like trying to mix burning charcoal with gasoline.

In both cases you end up with the same, rather explosive results.



Nicky, who had been as quiet as a churchmouse all afternoon, suddenly decided to choose the moment of my cooking debut to reinact the Reign of Terror.

"I wanna drink!" he cried as I tried to absorb the instructions on the back of the Valencia Spaghetti box. "I'm thirsty!"

"In a minute, Nicky, just let me get this done and..."

"I'm thirsty!"

"Okay, okay, I'll give you a drink." I went to the fridge to pour him some apple juice. "Here now, be a good boy and let me make the spag ... oh, no, Nicky NOT ON THE FLOOR!" Somehow, while my back was turned, he had managed to get hold of a box of cherry Jell-o to use as "sand" for his "Big Mo" dump truck, and then he proceeded to "dump" the "sand" clear across the kitchen floor.

I hardly got that mess all cleaned up when he knocked over the Philodendron in the hallway with his Mighty Mite bulldozer.

That I managed to boil the spaghetti at all in the midst of such goings-on was a major miracle.

That I boiled it right out of this world was no small wonder.

But go and tell THAT to Peter.

He really threw a fit when he came back from the grocery store and saw what had become of his supper.

Actually, he wasn't as pissed off about the spaghetti burning to a crisp as he was about the pot melting all over the stove.

Hell hath no fury like a man whose spaghetti pot has been scorched.

"HOW THE FUCK DID YOU MELT THE POT???" he hollered as he inspected its remains, which looked to be about the size of a slightly undersized quarter. "HOW THE FUCK DOES ANYONE LET A POT MELT????!!!"

"It ... it was an accident!" I sobbed. "First there was the apple juice ... and, and, then the Jell-o-o-o ... and then, oh, God, it was all over the place! And then he, he, he bull-dozed the plant and before I knew it — KABOOM! -- the spaghetti caught fire and then the pot caught fire and then ... and then it just sort of ... caved in!"

"Oh, my God, Nicky!" His face turned white. "He wasn't in the kitchen ..."

I shook my head. "He's okay. He's in his room."

He breathed a huge sigh of relief and then he went back to hollering at me. "YOU'RE JUST DAMN LUCKY THE WHOLE PLACE DIDN'T GO UP IN FLAMES!"

"It's okay ... I put it out with the extinguisher before it could spread." I pointed to the little red extinguisher on the counter. "I just pulled it off the wall, pulled the little pin and gave it a couple of squirts and ... and the fire went out."

"Well, thank God you can do something right!" He wasn't too impressed. "Fuck, I just don't believe this whole thing!" He picked up the remains of the pot with a pair of tongs and flung it into the sink. "Goddammit, Shay!" He turned to me with fire in his eyes. "How the hell could you let something like this happen? I thought you said you had everything under control!"

"I — I thought I did." I stood there quaking in my clogs.

"I — I thought I did!" he mimicked me. "Shit!" he smacked himself on the head. "I musta been crazy to leave my son in the hands of a ... a Goddamned J.A.P.!"

Oooo, that hurt. Coming from him that really hurt. "A Goddamned J.A.P., am I?" I exploded. "And what the hell makes you think you're

such a Goddamned prize?"

"Oh," he seethed, "now I suppose this is all my fault!"

"You!" I cried. "You!" Suddenly it was all beginning to pour out. Four days worth of bottled up anger, frustration, confusion and disappointment. "You promise me beachhouses! Fun in the sun! Romance! Freedom! Liberation! The career of my dreams! And what do I end up with? I'll tell you what I end up with! Housework! Motherhood! Male Chauvinism! I MAY AS WELL HAVE GONE AND MARRIED STANLEY!"

He grabbed my Louis Vuitton purse, which was hanging on the back of one of the kitchen chairs, and then he took my car keys out of his pocket and dropped them inside. "Here!" He stuffed the purse into my arms. "I hope you and Louis Vuitton and Stanley will be very happy together. You deserve each other!"

"Yeah?" God, I hated him at that moment. I hated him more than I ever hated anybody in my whole life. "Well at least with Stanley I know what I'm getting!"

I swung my purse over my shoulder and stormed out of the apartment.

V: HOME FREE

CHAPTER 14

Suddenly I was in limbo.

What to do post-Peter & Son? Where to go?

Return home and throw myself upon the mercy of my family? No, I couldn't possibly! Going back there would have been as good as admitting that I couldn't handle my own life. I'd never have lived it down.

Go back to Stanley like I told Peter I would? Yes, yes, the more I thought of it, the more it seemed like the right choice. And anyway, I somehow reasoned, it wasn't as if I'd be giving in to the whims of my family. I was, after all, going to him of my own free will. Nobody was pushing me into it. It was my choice now. And you never could tell. Maybe Stanley would open his door and suddenly I'd see something in him that I'd never seen before. And sparks would fly. And we'd rush into each other's arms ....

'I must have been out of my mind.

Stark-raving mad.

I didn't even begin to come to my senses until a tall, gorgeous (and I mean gorgeous!) blonde answered his front door, wearing nothing more than a bathrobe and a pair of earrings.

"Oh!" She gave me a startled look. No more startled than the look I gave her, rest assured. "I thought you were the delivery person from Nuddick's with our supper."

"I'm sorry," I blurted, "I must have the wrong apartment."

"Well, who d'ya want?"

"Stanley. Stanley Drabkin."

"Oh, yeah, this is his place alright," she said, much to my surprise, "hold on a sec, I'll get him for you. Oh, Stanley, Hon!" she called out in a sickly sweet voice. "There's a little girl here to see you."

Little girl, she said, could you believe that? Of all the nerve! "Just tell him it's Shayna Pearl!" I bristled.

"It's a Shayna Peel."

"Pearl!"

Just then Stanley came to the door, reeking of 'Mon Triomphe' cologne and wearing a pair of bright yellow Pierre Cardin pajamas with royal blue trim around the edges and creases down the middle of his bottoms. Like slacks.

"Shayna Pearl?" His eyes almost popped right out of his head.

"What are you doing here?"

Funny, I was just asking myself that very same question. How did I ever let myself think that Stanleyhood was going to be an improvement over Motherhood?

"What's wrong? Why are you looking at me that way?"

"My, God, Stanley!" I didn't know whether to laugh or cry or what. "You look like a banana in a tuxedo!"

"What did you do?" His eyes narrowed. "You came here to insult me or what?"

"I — I don't know why I came here." My head was reeling. "I have to go now." I made a bee-line for the elevator.

"Wait a minute!" He came after me and grabbed me by the arm.

"I get it now. You came back because ... because you finally found out that Prince Charming isn't so charming after all!"

"Please, Stanley, let go ..."

"That's it, isn't it?" He hung onto me. "Things didn't work out with him so you came crawling back." He threw his head back and laughed that irritating horse's laugh of his. "Oh, wow! The Wandering J.A.P. has come wandering back!" Ha, ha, snort, snort.

"Please ..."

"Not so fast, Shayna Pearl. I have some good news of my own that I'd like to share with you." He pulled me inside his apartment and shut the door behind us. "You see, Bunny here," he wrapped his arm around the blonde and nuzzled her neck, "is no ordinary woman. Bunny and I are sort of engaged to be engaged."

"It was love at first sight," cooed Bunny, nuzzling him back.

"He's just about the greatest thing that ever happened to me."

"Engaged to be engaged?" I muttered.

"What's the matter, Shayna Pearl?" Stanley had to ask. "You look stunned."

Stunned was not the word.

I mean, I just couldn't believe the whole thing.

Bunny towered over Stanley by at least a head; maybe more.

She could easily have passed for a Dallas Cowboy's Cheerleader.

Or a Charlie's Angel. Or a Muriel Cigar Girl.

She could have had her choice of the crème de la crème of men — from Prince Charles to Warren Beatty.

She ought to have been in pictures.

So what the hell was she doing with a guy like Stanley?

Pot-bellied, balding, myopic Stanley? Stanley who wears bright yellow perma-press pajamas to bed and does the top button up at the top? Did she see something in him that I had missed?

"Why don't you go and warm up the bed for me Sweet Pea," Stanley said to Bunny, "I'll be there in a sec. Shayna Pearl here was just leaving."

"Nice meeting you, Shayna Peel," she said.

"That's Pearl!" I cringed.

"Don't be too long now, Hon." She blew Stanley a kiss. "It gets awful lonely in there without you." And then she turned around and hippity-hopped back into the bedroom from whence she came, no doubt to prepare herself for that which bunnies are reputed to do best.

"She's really something, isn't she?" Stanley swooned. "We met the other night at the Polo Club. It was love at first sight — for both of us. She works as a receptionist at Place Bonaventure but she's eager to give it all up to be a full-time housewife. She wants the same things out of life that I do — a home, kids, membership at Elmsdale — the works. Cerebral, she isn't, but frankly I consider that a plus in a wife. And you know what else? She makes me feel good. That gorgeous creature in there makes me feel like a million bucks!"

Something told me that when she looked at him she saw a million bucks too. But then again, maybe he knew that for himself? Maybe he knew it and didn't care. After all, she could cater to his ego the way I never could. Tricky thing that Make Ego. Tricky and almost impossible to figure out. Like Calculus. And I flunked Calculus. "It happened awfully fast, didn't it?" I said finally. "I mean, only a few days ago you wanted to marry me."



"Oh, I know what you're thinking!" he cried. "You're thinking that this is some kind of rebound thing, aren't you?"

I shrugged. The thought had occurred to me.

"Boy," he shook his head, "you really think the sun rises and sets around you, don't you? I'll bet you came here expecting to find me pining away for you like some lovesick cow, didn't you?"

"I -- I -- I -- oh, God, this has all been a terrible mistake." I didn't know what I was expecting to find. Certainly not Bunny. One thing was for certain though. Stanley was still Stanley. And I was still me. And Bunny aside, we still went together about as well as milk and orange juice. Which wasn't as comforting a discovery as one might have thought. Now, it seemed, I didn't belong anywhere. "I -- I have to be going now." I turned to go. Where to, I didn't have a clue. Anywhere but there.

"Look," his voice suddenly softened, "you didn't honestly expect me to wait around while you tested other waters, did you? I mean, I have feelings too, you know. There's only so much a guy can take. You blew it, not me."

I don't know if it was my imagination or what, but suddenly the whole room began to reek of 'Mon Triomphe'. I thought I was going to stifle for sure if I didn't get out of there in a hurry.

"Look, I'm sorry, Shayna Pearl," I heard him say as I flew out the door, "but you can't have your cake and eat it too!"

It was Richard Pecker, husband of Jo Ann and chief psychiatric resident of the Jewish General Hospital, who found me wandering aimlessly through Cavendish Mall (that gargantuan shopping plaza in the

heart of Cote Saint Luc which some people facetiously refer to as "J.A.P. City" -- after those who hang out there).

"Shay, what brings you here so late at night?" he wanted to know.

"I, uh, I dunno," I shrugged. "Nowhere else to go, I guess." I glanced around the nearly-deserted mall. "Besides, this place has always been like a second home to me."

"Yeah, you and my wife both!" he laughed.

"Jo Ann, is she with you?"

"Uh-uh. She's at an ORT meeting somewhere out in Dollard Des Ormeaux. I just came here to buy some milk and cigarettes at the bakery. Then I'm going over to Nuddick's to pick up a strawberry cheesecake for Jo Ann. She gets these weird cravings ... well, you know how pregnant women are?"

"Yeah," I sighed, "so I've heard."

"She's been very worried about you, you know? You haven't returned her calls all weekend ..."

"Yeah, well, I was busy."

"Mmm ... I heard about your new boyfriend. Say, where is he anyway?"

"At home, I guess. Crying over burned spaghetti."

"Listen," he gave me a concerned look, "are you alright? You're acting awfully weird."

"Don't start analyzing me, Richard!" I practically bit his head off. "I couldn't stand being analyzed anymore tonight!"

"Well, I am a trained psychiatrist, you know? And if there's something bothering you ..."

"I'll tell you what," I said glibly, "why don't I just take an

overdose of sleeping pills and call you in the morning?"

"Hey! You're not thinking of doing anything crazy, are you?"

"Oh, don't get so excited, Richard," I sighed, "all I have in my purse is a bottle of Pamprin. With my luck, the worst that would happen to me is that I end up peeing in my pants."

"Look, why don't you just tell me what's bugging you? Maybe I can help. Did you and your boyfriend have some kind of fight?"

"I guess you could say we had a parting of the ways," I sighed again.

"Any chance of getting back together?"

"Naw, the princess has been banished from the kingdom forever more." I let out a bitter laugh. "In fact, the princess was banished from two kingdoms tonight! Now I know what the Shah of Iran must have gone through ..."

"Has the princess given much thought to going back home to her family?"

"Ha!" I sneered. "For what? To listen to a lifetime of 'I-told-you-sos'!?"

"Well, you can't stay here for the rest of your life!"

"Why not?" I was just wallowing in self-pity. "I'll become the 'Phantom of Cavendish Mall.' GodKNOWS I've spent enough money in this place to own shares in it. I ought to be able to spend the rest of my life here, don't you think? Who knows? Maybe I'll even become famous and somebody will write a book about me. 'The Scarlet J.A.P.', they can call it."

He raised an eyebrow. "Sounds to me like the princess is feeling terribly guilty about something ..."

"Not something, Richard. EVERYthing. I mean, I can't seem to do ANYthing right. Twenty-three years old and already I've flunked life!"

"So you're just going to run away from it all, huh?"

"I think it'll be kind of fun living here in the mall, don't you? And besides," I wiped a tear away from my eye as I thought back to that nightmare I had in the tub the other night — which seemed to be haunting me like a bad smell, "my parents have probably already had me cremated and buried — at least in their minds anyway."

"Oh, I don't know about that," he told me. "Jo Ann spoke to your mother only yesterday and your mother, well, all she could talk about was how much she missed you."

"She said that?" My heart leaped right into my throat. "You mean, she doesn't hate me?"

He shook his head. "I'll bet that if you went home right now, everything would be forgiven and forgotten."

"You — you mean, go back to my same old house and my same old room and my same old life?"

"If that's what you want," he shrugged.

"I — I don't know." My head was reeling for a change. "I need time to think."

"I'll tell you what. Why don't you spend the night over at my house? You look like you could use a good night's sleep, quite frankly."

"Well, I am kind of tired," I said. God, I must have walked the mall a hundred times after I left Stanley's. "To be honest, I don't know if I'm coming or going anymore."

"Sure, you get a good night's sleep and then you can talk things over with Jo Ann in the morning. After all, who knows you better than

Jo Ann, eh?"

I looked up at him through tear-filled eyes. "I don't think even she can help me out of this one."

"Now I know you're tired!" he laughed, putting his arm around me. "C'mon, let's get you to bed, huh?"

I slept like a log through the entire night.

In fact, I probably would have slept through the entire next day too -- and maybe even the rest of my life, if it hadn't been for Jo Ann.

I guess in her own stupid way she really did help me get back on the right track.

"OH, NO! SHIT, SHIT, DAMMIT, FUCK!" Her cries of anguish awoke me as I lay there in her guest room. "OH, GOD, NO!"

Oh, God, I thought, sitting bolt upright in bed, something terrible has happened! Maybe she's having a miscarriage or something! I flew out of bed and ran down to the kitchen, where the cries were coming from. "Jo, are you alright?"

"Oh, Shay!" she wailed, standing there by the kitchen table with the most hideous expression of pain on her face. "I just can't believe it!"

"What is it? Is it the baby?"

"Look!" She held up the middle finger of her right hand. "Look what I did to my nail. I broke it. And it was my nicest one too!" She cast a mournful look down at the table, where her decapitated piece of Delightfully Red fingernail was lying in state on a napkin. "My longest!"

"It's only a nail, for crying out loud!" I looked at her with pure disgust. "From the way you were carrying on I thought you were

losing the baby!"

"Well, you know how I am about my nails?" She pulled an emery board out of her bathrobe pocket and waved it frantically in the air.

"And Richard and I have a dinner party tomorrow night to top it all off!"

"It's still only a nail," I sighed, wearily plunking myself down at the table, "and nails do grow back."

"Sure that's easy for you to say!" she pouted. "You bite yours!"

"I don't bite mine. I just don't ... oh, never mind, let's just forget it, okay?"

She didn't answer me. She was too engrossed in wrapping an oversized Band-aid around the unsightly nakedness of her fingertip.

"Say, is Richard still around? I've got to thank him for being so terrific last night. I don't know what I would have done without him."

"Oh, he left awhile ago ..." She unwrapped the Band-aid and then re-wrapped it again. "Some emergency at the hospital. Some loony jumped out of a fourth floor window and landed on some doctor's Lambourghini."

"Euwwww," I winced. "That's awful!"

"Yeah, you'd think the jerk could at least have landed on a Honda or a Volkswagen."

I gave her an incredulous look. "I was talking about the guy who jumped out of the window!"

"There," she finished bandaging her finger, "that's better."

"It must be awful for Richard to have to look at such a hideous spectacle."

"Yeah, well, I'll go over to Tiffany's in the mall and get it fixed before he comes home. Jeez, I only hope they can fix it though."

It's broken right down to the quick!"

"Jesus!" I cried. "What's gotten into you anyway?"

"Nothing's gotten into me." She looked at me like I was nuts or something. "I'm the same old Jo Ann I always was!" She scribbled a note down on a piece of 'Dumb Things I Gotta Do Today' stationary and then she pinned it to her yellow bulletin board that says 'PRIORITIES' across the top.

Get third nail, rt. hand fixed!!!

it said in bold red letters.

Underneath it was a list of about a half a dozen other PRIORITIES which I read with a mixture of horror and yes, revulsion:

Call char — can she come 3X this wk?

Hair trim — Renaldo of Westmt. Sat.  
10 a.m. Ask Renaldo to touch up streaks

Pick up plane tickets for Miami!

Pick up new A.K. suit at Lily Simon in  
Westmt. Sq. Thurs. Also shoes at Holt's!!!

Call Silverman Furs to see if skins are in  
for coat

"Okay," she poured us a couple of cups of coffee and sat down beside me at the table, "now that we got all that out of the way, let's get down to brass tacks. What the hell is going on with you? You were already asleep when I came in from my meeting last night, but Richard told me that you've left Peter and that you're thinking of going back home?"

"You know," suddenly I felt as if someone had put smelling salts under my nose and awakened me from a dead faint, "ever since I can remember, there's always been a part of me, a very BIG part of me, that

always wanted to be just like you?" But no more, I thought giddily, no more! "No matter how much I wanted to be a writer, no matter how much I wanted to have my own place and my own style, there was always this part of me that used to believe I'd be a complete and utter failure in life if I didn't end up just like you."

"Well, it's not too late, you know," she replied, misinterpreting what I had said -- for a change. "First you'll go back home and kiss and make up. Get yourself back in Mommy's good graces and Daddy's credit rating. Then we'll go see Renaldo about a new hairstyle -- maybe some streaks ... fix up those, ugh, nails of yours ... get you hitched up with a decent guy ... marry you off .... Don't worry, we'll make a real mensch out of you yet!"

I shook my head. "Since when do some streaks and a husband make you a person? A real person? Who made up that rule anyway? My mother? Your mother? Who?"

"Wha?" She looked at me like I had a screw loose.

"Well, thanks for putting me up." I got up to go. What was the use anyway? We may as well have been talking different languages. How could I make her understand? "See ya."

"Going home?"

"Uh-uh," I shook my head vehemently, "no! Going back there to live would definitely be a big mistake. Sort of like jumping from the ... the mix-master into the CuisinART."

"You mean you're NOT going home?" she said, amazed. "After everything you've just been through? Haven't you learned anything from this whole mess?"

"Don't you understand?" How could I get through to her? "It's



because of everything I've just been through that I can't go back there to live."

"Don't be silly. You've GOT to go home!"

"Oh, no," I was never more sure of anything in my whole life, "I don't."

"You're heading for trouble again, Shay. I can see it coming."

I went over and kissed her on the cheek. "I love you, Jo Ann Pecker, really I do. And I know you care about what happens to me. But you're you and I'm me and I really think we can still be friends as long as we don't mix the two up."

"Wha?"

"I have to go upstairs and get dressed now ..."

"But where are you going?" she yelled after me as I headed up to the guest room.

"To see a lady about a job!"

I had a hunch that if anyone was going to give me the break I needed, it would be Mrs. Finkelberg.

After all, during our last little 'chat', she did claim, in that endearingly snarling way of hers, to be on my side. Now it was time to find out for sure.

"Mrs. Finkelberg!" I burst into her office like I was Peter Pan or something. "I want to talk to you about my job!"

"Oh, really?" She looked up from her mid-morning coffee and cheese danish and glared at me. "I didn't know you had one!"

"Maybe I don't now." I shut the door behind me and then I sat myself down in front of her desk, arms folded across my chest. "But I

aim to before I leave here."

"Oh, really?"

"Really!" Even I couldn't believe my own chutzpah. But what the hell, right? I had nothing left to lose anyway. You can't fire someone who's already been fired. "Listen, Mrs. Finkelberg, I'm not going to pussy-foot around. I need my job back."

"What's the matter?" she said with mock horror. "Don't tell me Daddy's taken away the Master Charge?"

"As a matter of fact, I don't even live with Daddy anymore. And I need my job back so I can pay the rent on the apartment I'm going to be moving into — just as soon as I find one. Not that the salary you've been paying me would be enough to live on, but I'll manage somehow, dammit, even if I have to live in a pay-toilet!"

We exchanged startled glances. I guess neither of us could believe what had just come out of my mouth.

"Shayna!" she gasped.

Oh, oh, I thought, bracing myself for the worst, here it comes: Hurricane Yetta.

"Shayna, Shayna, Shayna." She shook her head over and over.

"What has gotten into you?"

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Look, I'm sorry if I shock you. But it's sink or swim time for me, and if I'm gonna sink, I'm not gonna go down without a fight!" Okay, okay, so I sounded like something out of an old Knute Rockne film. But it was hard enough trying to be assertive without having to be original too. "I'll fight 'till my very last breath!"

"Shocked is not the word, Shayna!" she cried, her seaweed-coloured

eyes popping right out of her head. "The word is de-lighted."

"Yeah, well I ... delighted?" I did a complete double-take. I thought for sure she was getting ready to throw me out on my behind.

"Really?"

"I don't know what's come over you, but whatever it is — it's an improvement."

"Really?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Why do you keep saying that? I told you the other day that I'd be on your side if you proved to be worth siding with."

"I know you said it but I just wasn't sure ..."

"If you believed it or not?"

"Well, after everything that's happened to me the past few days, I've learned not to expect too much of anybody — or anything for that matter."

"The past few days?"

"It's a long story."

"Hmph, aren't they all! I don't suppose this long story has something to do with your failure to show up for work yesterday?"

"Look, I know my charlady told you that I was with my boyfriend — and it's true, I was ... but well, that's all over with now. I just want to pick up the pieces and go on, you know?"

She raised a pencilled-in eyebrow. "And how do I know that you and this ... (this boyfriend of yours won't get back together and that the same thing won't happen all over again?"

"Because I wouldn't go back to him if he were the last ...." I sat back in my chair and managed to get a hold of myself. "Because I

"Just want to get my job back, work hard, get ahead in my writing career and earn enough money to support myself ..."

"Do tell?" Her phone rang and she picked it up. "Yeah?" she snarled. "No! I told you I don't want that colour for the front page!" SLAM! "Incompetence!" She banged a fat fist on the desk. "If there's anything I can't stand it's incompetence!" She took a nosh of her danish. "Now," she growled, spitting food everywhere, "where were we?"

"We were talking about giving me my job back," I said, trying not to look as intimidated as I felt.

"Oh, that," she lapped up the remnants of her danish from her fingers, "there's just one problem with that. I already hired a new Chief Schlock Processor and Drivel Writer this morning."

"Oh." My face almost fell on the floor.

She gave me a piercing look. "I guess this means we'll just have to give you a different job. From now on, you'll be our 'Resident Columnist and General Reporter'."

"Are you serious?" I cried.

"The starting salary is \$250 a week. Do you think you could manage to support yourself on that?"

"Are you kidding?" I just couldn't get over it. "That's almost a hundred dollars a week more than I was making before!"

She grinned. "That's because you're going to be working a hundred times harder!"

"Oh, yes, ma'am!" I could have just burst.

"I expect your first column by the day after tomorrow. And it better be funny!"

I let out a gleeful laugh. "It'll put Art Buchwald to shame!"

"Hmph, let's not get too cocky, shall we?" she scowled. "And by the way. You have some unfinished business to take care of. I haven't been able to assign someone else to that 'Poop 'n Scoop' business with the mayor. Get on it right away, will you?"

"Sure thing," I said without hesitation.

"What, no complaints from the peanut gallery?"

"Don't worry," I reassured her, "when I have something to complain about I'll be sure to let you know."

"And don't think I'm handing you this job on a silver platter! I'm giving you a one-month trial ..."

"Look, Mrs. Finkelberg, I'm not gonna screw up this time. I really need this job."

"Hmm, yes," she nodded, "and that, I think, is going to make all the difference in the world. Up until now, you needed a job like you needed another pair of designer jeans!"

"I dunno," I shrugged. "I guess ... maybe." It did kind of make sense.

"Well, anyway, you get on that interview with the mayor right away and then you can take the next two days to find yourself a place to live and all that. I'll be glad to lend you some money if you need it. But you'll have to pay it back -- with interest."

"No, that's okay. I have a little money saved up in the bank. I'll manage ... somehow."

"Yes ... yes. I think you will. Tell me something, how are your parents taking this sudden surge of independence of yours?"

"They don't really understand it. I guess you could say that they made their Shayna Pearl a cozy little oyster bed and they kind of

expect her to lie in it and cultivate -- "if you know what I mean?"

"Well, maybe you ought to tell them that cozy oyster beds do not produce very 'shayna' -- very nice -- pearls. In fact, if you want to get really technical, a pearl doesn't grow at all unless it has the constant irritation of a grain of sand in its oyster bed, if you know what I mean?"

"Yes, ma'am. I think I do."

"Hmph, I doubt if you do. But you will!"

I got up to go. "I'm gonna go call the mayor now."

"Oh, and Shayna? I don't know where you picked up that disgusting habit of saying 'gonna' all the time, but drop it, will you!"

"Yes, ma'am," I sighed, shaking my head sadly. I knew perfectly well where I picked up that habit. Peter Simon Freeman. Despite everything, it seemed, he was still very much under my skin. Was I crazy to let him go? Sure, okay, he hadn't lived up to my expectations, but then again, what mere mortal man could?

"It's hardly becoming for the next Art Buchwald to go around saying 'gonna', if you know what I mean."

But then again, I had made my choice and now, dammit, I was going to stick to it. Come hell or high water!

"Shayna? Will you try to remember that?"

"Huh? Wha? Oh, yes. And thank you. Thank you for everything."

"And remember!" she said as I headed out the door. "You've got one month to prove yourself. One month. Don't blow it!"

I had barely put the finishing touches on my 'Poop 'n Scoop' scoop, when I heard this deafening roar.

"Damn!" I muttered as I looked out the window and saw Peter pulling into the Register parking lot. "What the hell is he doing here?!" But still, I couldn't seem to take my eyes off him. God, he looked magnificent sitting there atop his gleaming black Norton Commando. Like a knight on a giant steed.

"Who on earth is that?" cried Dora, the copy editor, whose ever-present squeaky red magic marker suddenly stopped squeaking.

"Looks like Satan's Choice!" snarled Mrs. Finkelberg, who just happened to be standing by the window at the time.

"What a hunk!" drooled Meryl, the receptionist. "I don't care whose choice he is. I'll take him!"

"I think that's Shay's ex!" gasped Karen 'Assertiveness Training' Biskin, who by now knew the whole story of my 'long weekend' and who had thought that I was handling the 'situation' like a real 'trooper'.

"What do you suppose he wants?"

"Oh, oh," murmured Elaine 'Brown Belt' Popkin, who also knew the story and who agreed with Karen (and even went so far as to say that I had scored a touchdown for all Womankind!). "Trouble ..."

He gestured for me to come outside.

I hesitated. It was almost as if I was afraid to get too close to him. Like I didn't trust my own feelings.

He gestured again.

I could feel everybody's eyes on me.

He looked at me and shrugged. Then he made a move to start up his motorcycle.

No, I thought, no. I'm not going to run away anymore!

I grabbed my purse and ran outside. "Wait! Don't go!"

"I didn't think you were gonna come out," he said.

"How — how did you know I was here?" My heart was thumping like a herd of horses' hooves.

"Just a hunch," he smiled awkwardly. "I called your friend Jo Ann to find out if maybe she knew where you were, and she told me that you went to see a lady about a job. So I just kinda figured ..."

"How come you were looking for me?"

He reached around to the carriage in the back of his bike and pulled out my tote bag. "I thought maybe you'd be needing this," he said, handing it over to me. "You forgot to take it with you last night."

"Oh." I wasn't sure if I was relieved or disappointed. "Thanks."

"So," he drew a deep breath and let it out slowly, "how've you been? You alright?"

"Fine," I replied, fidgeting with his handlebar. "You?"

"Fine, just fine."

"And Nicky?"

"Fine too. How are those pains of yours?"

"Pains? Oh, you mean the coil cramps? Better. Gets better every day, you know? I think maybe I'm probably getting used to it being there, you know?"

"Yeah, I mean, no, I couldn't possibly know! I could only imagine ..."

There was a long, awkward moment of silence.

"Hey, listen ..." we both blurted at the same time.

"You first," I conceded.

"Look, all I want to say is I'm sorry I blew up at you last night. I shouldn't have said what I did. I was just angry. I didn't



mean to say those things."

"Well, maybe you did, maybe you didn't, but you were right," I admitted, more to myself than to him, "I was acting like a J.A.P.! I was obnoxious, self-centered -- acting like the whole world owed me a living ..."

"Hey, no," he waved his hand in the air, "don't go blaming yourself like that. Like you said, I was no prize either. I mean, I really laid a heavy trip on you. Hell, I led you to believe that we were going to have the most romantic life since Gable and Lombard and then I saddled you with a kid and housework and all these heavy responsibilities. If anybody was self-centered, it was me."

"Yeah, well I shouldn't have had all those ridiculous expectations. I mean, deep inside I know you're not Prince Charming Personified, yet I let myself get so carried away sometimes ..."

"Yeah, well I had some pretty ridiculous expectations myself ..."

"Not half as ridiculous as mine!"

We looked at each other and burst out laughing.

"Let's just say we both screwed up, okay?" Peter offered me his hand to shake.

"Deal!" I put my hand in his and he squeezed it tightly.

"You're okay, Shayna Pearl Fine," he grinned at me.

"You're not so bad yourself," I smiled back.

"You know what the funny part about all this is? Underneath it all, I think we really care about each other."

"I know I do," I said from the bottom of my heart.

"Well, what do you think we oughtta do about that?"

"I dunno. What do you think?"

"I think," he frowned, "that there are about a dozen pairs of eyes staring out at us from behind that window over there ..."

"Oh, that!" I laughed. "Those are just my co-workers and my boss, each of whom has a different idea about how I should run my life."

"And you? How do you think you should run your life?"

"Oh, I have a few ideas of my own."

"Do any of those ideas include us getting back together?"

"You mean, to live?"

"To live."

I looked from him to the eyes in the window and from them back to him.

"Well, what are you looking at them for?" he asked me. "Don't you know the right answer yourself?"

I stopped to think about it for a moment. I did know the answer. That it was the right answer, I couldn't be sure. But deep inside I knew it was the only answer. For me. For now. The thought of losing Peter forever hurt like holy hell, but it was just a chance I was going to have to take. "I can't go back to live with you!" I spit the words out real fast, knowing it would be less painful that way. Like when you tear a Band-aid off a sore at lightning speed.

"Was that a 'no'?" he said. "You said it so fast, I'm not sure I heard you right."

"Yes! I mean, no ... it was a 'no'!" I forced myself to go on. "Look, I know this is going to sound corny and cliched and very Cosmopolitan magazine-ish but I really want to live on my own for awhile. Find out if I can really take care of myself. Don't get me wrong. I don't even know if I can do it. And quite frankly, the whole thing

scares me to death. But if I keep running away from everything that scares me, I'll be running my whole life. And then I won't be good for anything -- or anybody, including myself. Does that sound so wrong?"

"Hell, no," he grinned, "it sounds honest. And that's all I wanted to hear -- an honest answer!"

I breathed a huge sigh of relief. "Really?"

"Really. And maybe what you say about yourself applies to me too. Hell, I don't know. But I do know one thing -- I think it's a good idea that we give each other some space for awhile. Maybe things did happen too fast ..."

"I -- I guess you'll be leaving for California soon, huh?" I said, trying to swallow a gargantuan lump in my throat.

"He nodded. "And you? You'll be moving into your own place, I guess ..."

"As a matter of fact, I'm going apartment-hunting right now. Mrs. Finkelberg -- she was very understanding. She gave me a new job AND a raise. So now I can afford to pay the rent on a studio or maybe even a small one-bedroom."

"You're not giving up on your screenwriting career, I hope?"

"Oh, no! That's still one of my goals in life," I reassured him. "But right now I'm just going to take things as they come. You know, one step at a time. I'm no Superwoman. I admit it. And anyway," I babbled on, trying to postpone the inevitable, "who would want to be? It's impossible to be perfect at everything you do. I mean, you're bound to do some things better than others ... oh, hell," I grimaced, suddenly realizing that I was only making things harder, "why don't we just say goodbye and get it over with?"

"Is that the way you want it?" he asked.

"Huh?"

"Well, just because we can't live together right now doesn't mean we have to lose touch. I mean, you know what they say about long distance being the next best thing? And anyway, you could come out to L.A. to visit us on your next vacation. That is, if you'd want to ..."

"Are you kidding?" I cried. "Just try and keep me away!"

He smoothed his hand over his face. "Maybe I'll even have my beard grown back by then--unless, of course, you don't care anymore?"

"I'm not that mature yet," I laughed.

"Hmph," he grinned, "women!"

"Think you'll be back in Montreal at all?"

"I might be. Why? Are you planning to invite me over to your new place for a romantic, candlelight dinner?"

"You're kidding, right?"

"Yeah, right! I'll tell you what. I'll bring the dinner -- you light the candles. Fair enough?"

"Safe enough, you mean!" I chortled.

"Oh, hey, that reminds me." He reached into his pocket and pulled out an exquisite silver chain -- upon which was hanging a rather funny-looking piece of metal about the size of a quarter. "Look familiar?"

"No," I shrugged. "Why? Should it?"

"Wanna take a guess?"

I ran my hand over the smooth, shiny surface. I'd never seen anything quite like it in my whole life. "I give up."

He gave it a twirl. "Believe it or not, this used to be my

spaghetti pot ... once upon a time ..."

"It's not!" My eyes almost popped out of my head. "I can't believe it." I didn't know whether to laugh or cry or what. "You made a necklace out of it? For me?"

"Yeah, for you. Who'd you think?"

"It's ... it's ..."

"You like it?"

"Like it? I LOVE it! And it's so original too. I mean, nobody's ever given me a spaghetti pot necklace before!"

"Well then, we're even." He laughed that wonderful crazy hoarse laugh of his. "'Cause nobody's ever melted my spaghetti pot before!"

He took the necklace and hung it around my neck. "Go get 'em, Babe!"

He gave me a whopper of a kiss and then he started up his motorcycle and took off.

"Hello, Ma? It's me!"

BLANK.

"You know, your daughter?"

An audible GASP! "Shayna Pearl?"

She remembered my name. Good sign. "Yeah, it's Shayna Pearl, Ma."

"Where ... where are you?" Audible weeping.

"In a phone booth on St. Paul Street."

"What are you doing there?"

"Calling you!"

Audible nose-blowing.

Ditto at my end.

"Jo Ann ... Jo Ann tells me you and him are no longer ..."

"No, Ma, Peter and I aren't living together anymore, if that's what you mean."

A huge sigh of relief. Could be heard all the way down St. Paul Street.

"But we're still going to keep in touch. We just won't be living together ... for now anyway." Presenting: the New/Assertive/Honest/Non-Whining Me.

"I'm sure you did whatever you thought was right, dear." Presenting: the New/Calmer/Non-nagging/More Tolerant Mother.

"In fact, I may be going out to L.A. to visit him next Christmas."

"Over my dead bod ..."

"Maaaaa!"

Okay, okay, so nobody's perfect.

Count to ten and start again. "Ma, listen, there's something you should know ..."

"When are you coming home?"

"Ma, this may come as a shock to you but a lot has happened to me these past few days. I guess you could say I've grown up overnight ..."

"What do you mean, you've grown up overnight?" She wanted to know. "When are you coming home?"

"Ma, I think I'm grown up enough to be on my own now ..."

"What do you mean? What are you talking about?"

"Ma, listen, I'm not coming back there to live."

"What? But where else do you have to go?"

"Well, like I said before, I think I'm old enough to be on my

OWN now ... so I went out this afternoon and found myself an apartment.  
Signed the lease and everything!"

BLANK.

"Ma, c'mon, deep inside you've got to know it's the best thing  
for all of us ..."

A heavy sigh. "Where ... where is it?"

"Here on Saint Paul Street. As a matter of fact, I'm standing  
in front of it right now. My phone hasn't been connected yet so that's  
why I have to use the phone booth out front."

"What? You rented an apartment in Old Montreal? With all the  
separatists and what-nots?"

"Oh, Mother, really! All kinds of people live around here, not  
just separatists. It'll be a real experience, don't you think?"

"But Old Montreal of all places! Couldn't you at least have  
found something a little closer to home? How about those lovely apart-  
ments around the Cavendish Mall? Now there's ..."

"Ma, I'm only twenty minutes away by car. Ten if I take the  
expressway. It's not like I'm out in James Bay or something! Don't  
worry, I won't be a stranger."

"I worry ... I worry ..."

"Oh, Mother, just wait until you see it! It's a fabulous little  
studio in this renovated warehouse and ... and it's got wall-to-wall  
carpets and a red brick wall, and even a fireplace! Oh, Mother, it's so  
beautiful — and the rent isn't as bad as you'd think. Of course, it's  
a small place but, oh, Mother, I just fell in love with it at first  
sight. I mean, it was only the second apartment I looked at, but the  
moment I saw it I just knew ..."

"But how are you going to support yourself?"

"I knew you were going to ask that! And you don't have to worry. Mrs. Finkelberg gave me a big raise. Of course it'll be a while before I can afford to fix up my apartment the way I'd like to, you know, brass bed ... roll-top desk ... stuff like that. But I can wait. I'll do it a little bit at a time."

"And just how, might I ask, do you plan to live in the meanwhile? You can't live in an unfurnished apartment. At least a bed!"

"Don't worry. I'll manage."

"At least ... at least let me ship over the furniture from your room. I know how much you hate it, but ..."

"Hey, great, Ma!" Beggars cannot afford to be choosers. "That's a terrific idea. I can strip it down and stain it dark brown -- if that's okay with you?"

"That's ... that's a very sensible idea. I'll have it shipped over as soon as possible. Maybe even tomorrow ..."

"Well, thanks Ma!" I don't know if it was my imagination or what, but there seemed to be a new note of respect in her voice. Suddenly she was talking to a person instead of a Betsy Wetsy doll. She was trying. She really was. And while I didn't dare delude myself into thinking that everything was going to be hunky-dory from now on, I did feel as if I had overcome a hurdle of some kind. It was a beginning anyway. "Say, you wouldn't happen to know of a place where I could buy a cheap set of dishes and some cutlery, would you?"

"Sure, Kaplow's always gives a good deal on di ... only one set?"

"Oh, Ma, you don't expect me to keep kosher, do you?"

"Well, why not? You were brought up in a kosher home!"



tub. Yeah, sure, sure, I had my own tub now. But there was something about that blue marble tub. Something secure.

Another creak.

I bolted for the door. I was half way out before I managed to get a hold of myself. What was I doing? Was I really going to let a couple of creaks and a little loneliness spoil everything I had fought so hard to gain? No, I couldn't. I was going to tough this thing out, dammit! I wanted to. God, I really wanted to. Maybe if I just had some company .... Jo Ann! I could call Jo Ann and ask her to come down and ... no, no, I was through being so dependent on her for every little thing. And besides, Jo Ann had her own life. I couldn't expect her to come and babysit with me every time I heard a noise. I had to get used to being alone if I was going to live in my own apartment. Living alone was probably an acquired taste, I decided. Like caviar or beer. Or 'Swallowing It'. After all, this was only my first night in my apartment. I had to give it time. Maybe I'd get used to it once it was all fixed up. Maybe I'd never get used to it. But I had to try.

I went back to the couch and sat down. My stomach growled. God, I was starving. My mouth was watering for some of Ma's barbeque chicken. It was tempting. Very tempting. But of course I couldn't run home every time my stomach grumbled either. And so, feeling somewhat apprehensive, okay, okay, a lot apprehensive, I went down to the corner greasy spoon for a sandwich. As hard as it is to believe, I had never eaten alone in a restaurant before. This was definitely a first for the kid.

"A grilled cheese sandwich and coffee please," I said, smiling timidly at the proprietor as I sat down at the counter.

"Huh?" Bec ... bec. What the hell was a bec? Some kind of Québecois dessert he wanted me to try? Maybe he thought I was a tourist and he was just trying to be hospitable?

"Oui?" he coaxed me..

"I, uh, okay, oui," I found myself saying, not wanting to seem like an idiot.

All of a sudden he grabbed me and gave me a big kiss. Right smack on the lips.

"Ah! Hey! What, are you crazy?!" I cried, feeling a mixture of rage, fright and humiliation. "What did you do that for?"

He shrugged. "I h'ask you if you want h'a kiss, h'and you say yes!" he replied in broken English, and he and his friends burst out laughing.

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry or have a nervous breakdown or what.

"C'était un grand plaisir de faire ta connaissance, mademoiselle!"

He gave me a deep bow and then he returned to his table, looking mighty pleased with himself.

A hand touched my arm. I almost jumped right out of my skin.

"Mademoiselle?" It was the proprietor. "Est-ce que tu manges ta sandwich ici ou bien que tu l'emportes avec toi?"

"Huh?" I glanced over at the workmen, who were looking at me, still grinning. I started to shake.

"Ca fait rien," the proprietor reassured me, "ils juste font du fun avec toi." Dey juste make de fun wid you."

I tried to smile, only it came out more like a nervous twitch. I knew he was right. They were just having a little fun at my expense.

But somehow I didn't find that very consoling. If anything, the whole incident made me realize how vulnerable I was. A woman on her own. No Peter or Stanley or any other knight in shining armor to come to the rescue. Fair game to anyone and everyone. Suddenly I felt as if I had regressed ten years. Oh, God, I thought, wanting to run home to my family as fast as my legs could carry me, am I kidding myself or what? Do I really have the stuff it takes to survive out here in the Real World?

"Mademoiselle?" The proprietor nudged my arm. "You h'eat da sandwich 'ere or you want h'i should wrap h'it to go?"

For a second I looked at him, wondering. "Here," I said.

"Ici."