

RECEPTION

Laurie Henry, award winner

DIANE ASKS ME where I want to sit at *The Merry Wives of Windsor*; I suggest the upper middle of the left side of the auditorium. The play starts at seven forty-five but we agree to meet at seven fifteen: we desire the most possible from this evening. We agree to walk together to the library before splitting up; Diane wants to see if Ray Wallace is working this afternoon. He has told her she needs psychiatric help, that he would be willing to give it to her.

I don't expect to see my former employers Sheila and Mr. Wilson because they have been transferred to the branch library. Diane has been good about mailing me news of people I show an interest in; in turn, I have told her what I know about Christine Small, whom Ray has told Diane he loves. I still haven't told Diane what I know about Dorothy Mueller.

Ray is not at the reference desk so Diane leaves; she knows she will have other chances. I remember the phallic-shaped zucchini she carved with original pornographic poetry and mailed him anonymously this summer.

I try to phone Laurie Schnatter, my best friend though she hasn't written in three months—or I would be staying with her instead of with Diane. I look in the phone book but her name isn't there; I call the operator, but she has no information. I go to the post office and look in her box; it's full of letters, as if not checked for months. I suppose her to have quit school and left town; she's full of shit, I think. And I'd had her down for six hours; Diane's former boyfriend Andy maybe one and a half hours; my old boyfriend Jerry Roche maybe one hour; Sheila and Mr. Wilson, my former employers, twenty minutes—more if I'm lucky. Dorothy Mueller I hope to pass in the street or at a store. Now, I think, I will have to spend even more time than I had planned in the library, rereading old issues of *Esquire*, or something.

On the sidewalk I notice Jack K., a friend of Jerry R.'s. Before I can decide whether to speak to him he sees and approaches me; though relieved, I can't help noticing his long filthy red hair, that he is barefoot despite the cool weather. He has sacrificed his normal appearance, I think, which used to make him stand out among his friends in the Poetry Group. He used to write answers to Adrienne Rich from the man's point of view: "Dear Adrienne / But you don't know how it feels / To ache as a man, hard with lust . . ."

Jack tells me what Rodger Marshing, the founder and leading member of *L'arc en Ciel*, has been doing:

"After graduating, Rodge couldn't find a job, so he had to live at his parents' house for an incredibly long time until he got his first job as a briefcase salesman, but he didn't sell anything, except one he mailed to me. He kept trying but one day he felt his back give out, and called an ambulance to take him to the hospital. The doctor said there was nothing wrong with him, but that he shouldn't go door to door anymore. So he made out a new resumé, listing his employment history as:

Walden Briefcase Distributor, Norton, KS

Dates: 6/9-11/30, Commission basis.

"Norton was the home office of the briefcase company, although Rodger had never had any reason to go there. So he applied for a job at his old high school and the superintendent there took him on a trial basis as a sort of guidance counselor. He just wrote me yesterday. Would you like his address?"

"We weren't actually that close, but thank you anyway," I say to Jack as if I were admitting it grudgingly. To myself I think, Stop showing off!

Jack and I walk to his apartment to get the book I lent him last year, *Flowers in the Attic*, not that I want it, but the half-hour walk might entertain me, I think. Jack is now a non-lacto vegetarian: his kitchen has a refrigerator and a microwave, but only the bathtub for a sink. He lives with his creepy girlfriend, met through the Poetry Group. I remember seeing her signs all over town last year, "LOST!!! DIARY!!!" Laurie, Diane, and I spent hours looking around town for it, without success. I think about the many hours Laurie and I spent drinking Diet Pepsis and eating popcorn at the "Rat." Where can she have gone?

It's clear that Jack and his friend never do the laundry, clean the bathroom, or wash dishes. He asks if I've had dinner; I say yes unthinkingly, then think how every conversation I have will make my trip seem less pathetic. Well, we will see each other at the reception for the actors following *Windsor*.

I take *Flowers in the Attic* to the library and put it in the spot where it would go if it were a library book. I try to read *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. I am lucky the library has such long hours; it's Mr. Wilson's innovation, I think. I look out the window, seeing familiar but not interesting faces.

I know from Diane that my former "boyfriend" Jerry Roche is acting as the jealous husband in *Windsor*. How odd, I think, if pleasant, it would feel to have a boyfriend again. I know that Dorothy Mueller will be at the play because Diane is now a telephone operator and listens in. I ask her now, "Will Jerry's brother Stuart be there?"

“Yes, he’s the assistant stage manager.”

“Will your ex-friend Andy be there?”

“He hasn’t bought a ticket, but he probably will be at the door; he hasn’t been yet, I know. He’s so stupid and disorganized.”

“Chris Small?”

“Yes, that dickhead. She, Ray Wallace, and Dorothy Mueller go everywhere together.”

“Ménage à trois?”

“Sometimes a woman who looks like a . . . goony-bird joins them.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know.”

I was stupid to have asked about Chris Small’s presence; she is the stage designer for *Merry Wives*, and did *Pericles* last year. Dorothy played Lychorida, the nurse. I remember Dorothy’s comments in the newspaper interview:

I’ve never acted before in my life, since sixth grade.

I never knew I *could* act, but Ray Wallace is a wonderful director. In fact, he’s one of the most wonderful *people* I’ve ever met.

Why didn’t Dorothy try out for *Wives*, I wonder—or did she try out and not make it? Why hadn’t Ray wanted to direct again?

“What interests you so much about Dorothy Mueller?” Diane asks me. I still haven’t told her what I know, though have coyly hinted at it so many times that the truth is bound to disappoint her. I look around Diane’s attractive studio apartment. Her books are all alike: *Murderers, Sane and Mad; The Patty Hearst Story; Jim Jones in Guyana; John Lennon’s Murder; The Sharon Tate Massacre*. It’s become colder and I want to wear socks with my sandals but notice I’ve brought only dirty ones. It’s a measure of my empathy with Diane that I don’t ask to borrow a pair; her feet can only be as dirty as mine.

Diane and I are almost the first people in the theatre and have our choice of seats. I suddenly realize that the two opposing quarters of my life, the Jerry Roche faction and the Dorothy/Sheila/Mr. Wilson faction have now rehearsed and spent time together, perhaps becoming friends! I want to hit my forehead with the heel of my hand! I see that I have abandoned a non-sinking ship, Jerry, by mistake—neglecting to throw good money after what I thought was bad, but now realize possibly to have been good money. I have switched horses mid-stream, or rather jumped off what I see now to have been a perfectly good horse. I wonder if he attributes my move to California as coming from a broken heart. I am unhappy at the way we “broke up,” after five months of constant “intimacy.” The phone rang, as it did every night. The idea of his two-hour phone calls would once have been a joy for me, and would be now, and would have been then, except for the implied complaints of my many housemates. Only that morning I

had decided to phase him out. Only later did I become sorry to have scorned his boring yet time-consuming interests: astronomy, foreign cooking, painting, space technology, and square dancing.

"I wanted to tell you that I'm not sure I want to see you again," he said.

"Yes," I agreed. "I guess you're right. We really don't have any common interests."

"Common interests? *That* has nothing to do with it! You're a stupid bitch whom no one will ever love. I've tried to make you see that, but I guess it's too late."

Stuart Roche, Jerry's older brother, sees me and turns toward me with enthusiasm. "Heather!" He stands up and expects me to run to him; I do. He takes my hands; I have my watch in my hand and for a minute it passes into his beefink-like hand, as if it were a secret message. "Jerry will be so pleased!" he says. He's always been fond of me, staying in the kitchen, dining room, bathroom, or legal offices when Jerry and I would sleep together in the bedroom. "You came back just for this?" We laugh at the implied absurdity of the idea. We chat; he hopes I can come to the reception. Other people he must greet come in. I return to Diane; we beam at each other, continuing to look around the room.

"Andy's not here."

"Joe Cassidy is."

"Oh really?" I want to discourage her new interest in this new guy. I think it is a shame that her real boyfriend Tom has to work as an usher at night and can seldom go places with her in the evening.

Dorothy Mueller enters, first standing in the doorway as if about to jump from a spacecraft, then entering the theater. I swivel my head back to seem interested in Diane's conversation. Dorothy makes her way down the aisle. Where will she sit? She's closely followed by Christine and then by Ray. They go down the center aisle and sit two rows ahead of us. Dorothy is two seats in front of me, one empty seat between us. My conversation switches to plant decay, Dorothy's thesis topic.

"Did you know there is no such thing as a 'flawless diamond'?"

"Do you think we picked good seats?" Diane asks me, in a normal tone of voice. I say I think these are good, but two rows down would be better.

She starts to say, "I don't see why you're so—"

"Shh!"

Ray sits in the middle of the threesome, embarrassing to my view with his knee-length leather boots up over the tops of his jeans. Still, there is no accounting for taste. I see him talk to Dorothy more than to Chris. An old woman comes to talk to Chris.

"That's the goony-bird!"

"Diane! She's not a goony-bird, she's just really old."

"Hmm. Yeah, you're right. I guess I didn't see her carefully the other time."

A goony-bird. She is so imprecise. My friends are straws. I watch Dorothy's hands, clasped in her lap. Instead of perfectly alternating, left thumb, right thumb, left index, right index, left middle, right middle, etc., she has them unevenly mixed: left thumb, left index, right thumb, right index, then normal the rest of the way down. Why?

The play begins; I trace the line formed between Dorothy in the audience, and Jerry on stage. I look into Dorothy's black hair, leaning sideways so not to see Jerry through her head. He seems to be a good actor—no forgotten lines as Dorothy had in *Pericles*. Certainly he is making everyone laugh at his loud, falsetto voice.

The reception will be held in another building, they announce, a half hour later; the actors want time to remove their make-up. Diane and I wait in the Square, where there are rocks and trees, the atmosphere of a national park in the middle of town. I run to a stump and jump on top of it. On her hands and knees with the coordination of a reptile—she's a real athlete with many trophies for all sports—Diane passes me to the biggest rock. She doesn't care about dirtying her clothes; they're old and unfashionable anyway. She stands up to hug the rock; it's so big her hands don't circle the whole thing. I don't move for a minute, then crash my head into an elm trunk past the rock, my hands spread above my ears like antlers. Stealthily Diane and I proceed around the square, stopping at last behind the reception building. She uses spit to clean her hands. Other people gather, taking long routes from their cars to avoid embarrassing early arrival; at last we see the actors begin to arrive as well. Diane and I enter the room with the end of the crowd. Inside the door Jerry is being talked to by Dorothy and Ray. Christine, I think, must have "split" with the "Goony-Bird."

And these would have been my friends, I think.

"Let's get some wine," Diane suggests. The wine table is far away from Dorothy and Jerry; at first I think Diane's being sensitive to my shyness, then I see Joe Cassidy standing by the wine bottles.

Dorothy has given Jerry Roche three yellow tulips, which surprises me; I remember overhearing a conversation between Dorothy and Sheila not long before Jerry and I "broke up." "Most lawyers don't have what could be considered appealing personalities," Dorothy said.

"From his ads Jerry Roche seems different, though," Sheila said. They'd both noticed the sign for his legal clinic, "The Prospect Street Legal Clinic," finding it incongruous because it was actually on College Street.

Dorothy made a sarcastic noise. "He's *different*, all right."

Different.

Has Dorothy changed her opinion of Jerry, or is the bouquet only an indication of her good-natured generosity, I wonder. A lot of people in the room have similar flowers; were they all given by Dorothy?

Diane and I pour ourselves some wine and speak to Joe Cassidy; he and Diane are both interested in baseball. As Joe goes out for more to drink,

Diane says she knows where Joe's team practices; I wonder if she is preparing to do something self-defeating. I take another look, and see that one group has formed around Dorothy and Ray, and another around Jerry. There are many actors and their guests around, but I don't pay attention to them. I go up to Jerry's group and see they are creeps and assholes, Jack K. included plus his girlfriend. Jack's hair seems unnaturally thick and limp. The girlfriend opens her mouth and I can see her bleeding gums.

"Hi Jerry," I say to Jerry after smiling at Jack and saying hello to his girlfriend. Jerry turns to me and hugs me tightly, manipulating my spine with one hand in the way I remember. Chiropractice is another one of his interests.

"All through the play, I thought it was you," he says. "I'm really glad to see you again. Did you notice I kept looking at you? I thought it was somebody who just looked like you, but nobody looks like you."

"Oh, God."

I tell him he did a good acting job; he asks me how I am and I tell him, "fine." Other people join our group. Jerry's star has risen. He holds the flowers at his chest. Like Ray he wears cowboy boots, but he hasn't tucked in his pant legs. Jack K. and his girlfriend want to talk about theories of acting, but Jerry ignores them; I am amazed at how much he has improved.

"Dorothy didn't know these were tulips," he comments, smiling at us all. "Hi, Dorothy, I'm a little tulip," he says in a squeaky voice, moving one of the tulip's petals as if it were the tulip speaking. I look to see if Dorothy is nearby but I don't see her anywhere. "I'm a little tulip too," he says in another squeaky voice, speaking from the petals of a second flower. "So am I," he adds, speaking from the third. We agree to meet Sunday at four thirty.

Joe Cassidy leaves after a while and Diane suggests we go also. We've been at the reception for about two hours, me standing near Jerry; Diane talking to Joe by the wine; D. and R. in a corner, then leaving. Their separation at the corner will be so poignant, I think. "So long, Dot," "Bye, Ray-ey." Walking home, Diane and I discuss the evening with approval. We're both not tired so we walk by the houses of various people: Ray, Chris, Jerry and Stuart, not Dorothy because she lives next door to Diane's actual boyfriend, Tom. Diane doesn't feel like talking to Tom, she says, though I suggest it. Back at her house she takes off her shoes and gets beneath the bed covers. I put on a nightie in the dark and remove my make-up with cotton in the bathroom, appreciating the clean sheets she's thoughtfully put on the sofa for me, as if she respects the way I live my life. How different we are.

In the morning Diane goes to work; my job is to look for people to talk to. I don't have to call anyone; walking around is enough to run into Diane's former boyfriend Andy and also my acquaintance Allison from the Women's Collective. It's Friday; I plan lunch for Friday with Andy at a restaurant; Sunday brunch at the collective with Allison; that's two meals taken care of,

one free. I find Jack K.'s girlfriend by accident; she tells me they still have the Poetry Group even with Rodger gone, and she asks me to it on Saturday afternoon. These things last six or seven hours, so that will fill all day, including preparation and later review. With some time with Diane and drinks with Jerry, my time is now taken care of legitimately despite Laurie Schnatter's annoying disappearance.

I drop by the branch library but see only Ray Wallace behind the desk; he works part time at the branch and part time at the main library. I remember that the professional staff meetings are Friday mornings and realize Sheila and Mr. Wilson have gone to the main library. Talking to Ray alone would be awkward; he must know I'm Diane's friend. I hope he won't see me leave—and he doesn't look up as I pass the desk.

At lunch Andy wants to talk about Diane; I want him to bring up and refute comments of a year ago—that a mutual acquaintance has called me “pathetic.” I bring it up but Andy only mentions that a second person, my former next door neighbor, whose name I never knew, has used that phrase also: he says my former neighbor said I am the most pathetic person he has ever met! I can't see how this is possible, since we've never met, and he must have known Rodger M., or at least seen him around, for example.

Andy says he and Monica want to be friends with Diane again. Diane has scorned Monica for flunking out of college so many times and now working only as a restaurant cook, but I can tell she is hurt that her boyfriend and her best friend would have an affair, first behind her back, and then openly.

I suggest that Andy come along with Diane and me to the movie we want to see tonight, where a woman is supposed to be seen eating shit straight out of a dog. Andy agrees, though at first not sure, now seeming to think himself somehow above seeing a movie “like that.” “It will be good,” I assure him. “I will be like a buffer zone between you and Diane, making conversation to fill in loose spots, even if it's pathetic conversation—but hey, that might even be the best thing, uniting you and Diane together in sympathy or in annoyance.”

“I shouldn't have told you either of those things,” Andy apologizes. “I can see that now.”

“That's not the point.”

“Is Diane seeing anyone these days?”

“You mean—I know what you mean.” I pretend at first not to understand the construction “seeing anyone.” “Yes, she is. Tom something, who works at the *Apollo*.”

“Oh, Tom from the *Apollo*—you're kidding. Yes, I know Tom; I've met him. He's nice. Ha ha.”

“Well, I've never met him.”

“Somehow I never really thought of him as being capable of having sex. Is this a real affair, or one of those Ray Wallace things?”

“Well, I haven’t met Tom but they seem, you know, to really, like, like each other.”

“That’s good. That’s really good. I’m glad she’s found somebody.”

“He sounds like a nice person.”

“Did I tell you about the letter she wrote my mom after we broke up? It was disgusting. She told her I’d never amount to anything, because she had raised me all wrong. Diane doesn’t know my mom showed it to me.”

“I wish there were someone who didn’t think I was living a low-quality life,” I say aloud. “Who thought my actions perfectly legitimate, maybe feeling free to disagree or disapprove of them, but in any case finding them motivationally conceivable.”

“My mother is glad I’m going with Monica. She isn’t pressuring me, but I know what she thinks.”

I go back to Diane’s and leave a note on her door. “Dear Diane,” I write. “Andy wants to come along to *Pink Flamingoes*. If it is okay with you, come to the theater at seven fifteen and Andy will arrive at seven twenty-five. If you don’t want to see Andy, tell me at seven fifteen; I will wait outside and tell him to leave when he arrives.” I dress well and head again for the branch library, fortified by the thought of my scheduled meetings throughout the weekend. The doors open easily; across the counter I see the backs of both Sheila and Mr. Wilson. Mr. Wilson is closer but I whisper “Sheila!” to prolong the moment; Sheila waves and comes over to the desk.

“Adam,” she says to Mr. Wilson. I see they are on a first-name basis now. Mr. Wilson turns toward me, leaning backwards from the waist and holding his hands up in the air to indicate surprise; he comes forward to shake my hand. I see he’s abandoned the dignified black suits he wore when he first moved here; he’s wearing gray pants now, and a blue, short-sleeved shirt. Though perhaps more appropriate for summer than for spring, there is really nothing remarkable about his outfit, I see. With a certain amount of pleasure I note that his chest is as sunken as ever. This is a long-anticipated moment for me.

“Well, ahhh, Heather! I’m certainly surprised to see you here!”

“I just came for a visit.”

“A visit! And you dropped by to see us! How thoughtful.”

Sheila mentions what a good worker I was. “Ferocious, too. So good about recording and collecting fines.”

“I guess I was maybe to an excessive degree exercising an unnecessarily embittered aspect of my nature.”

They laugh; see, they like me. They ask about me; they don’t exactly ask, but I tell them, sort of. I say I don’t like to deal with the public when I’m not collecting fines.

“I have a friend in the geology department at the college who feels the same way,” Sheila comments sympathetically. “She calls her bad students ‘blockheads’.”

I know her to be talking about Dorothy—oh, yes, this trip was not a mistake! I say, “I sympathize with your friend.”

Someone speaks to Mr. Wilson at the desk and he answers. The girl who replaced me is included in the conversation. They’ve changed for the worse, I see. Ray’s not here, and not mentioned.

I say I don’t like where I’m living because I have so little money and have to commute such a long way by bus.

“But Los Angeles is a beautiful city. The Los Angeles County Art Museum!” Mr. Wilson says. “The Music Center. The Getty, in Malibu.”

“You’re right, there are many beautiful areas and wonderful cultural opportunities available to those who can afford them.” At least here is someone who cares about cultural opportunities, I think.

“Many people don’t enjoy the Getty, I’m afraid,” he says sadly. “They find it inaccessible and gaudy. My opinion is ahhh that they don’t understand what they are seeing. They are seeing art as it appeared in its indigenous setting.”

“I like the Getty a lot,” I say. I’m anxious to appear intelligent in hopes of possibly being offered my old job back—also I really do like some museums. “I’d go there more often if I had a car; if I could live in Malibu I’d be happy. Instead I live in a bad neighborhood, the only place I can afford. Places to live are much more expensive than here,” I continue. “I’m thinking of going to library school in a couple of years, when I have some money saved. I think I’d really like that.”

Mr. Wilson rises on his toes and waves his arms in the air as if for balance. Though about six feet tall, I notice he weighs only about a hundred and twenty pounds; maybe he has tuberculosis. To me, he says, “Don’t ahhh do that. I’m speaking emphatically. There is a ‘glut’ of librarians on the market. That means that there are more people who want to be librarians than there are jobs to be had. It may sound strange that I am ahhh discouraging you from entering my profession.”

I expect him to joke about not wanting job competition, but he doesn’t.

“To ahhh be hired as a librarian,” he continues, “you ahhh must have a reading knowledge of two or more languages, and a graduate degree in an academic subject from an accredited college, in addition to the graduate library degree. You must also have experience. Even then, the competition is fierce, and the salary is only in the thirteen to seventeen thousand range.”

And I thought him genuinely interested in books, but all he’s doing is complaining about his salary, which is actually very good! And doesn’t he think I have experience? And don’t I have all the qualifications except the library degree and one foreign language?

“Well, thank you for your advice.”

“It’s more than advice. It’s ahhh the way things are.”

“Well, thank you.”

Sheila says, "I'm going to the slide room now. Can I walk you downstairs?" At the door she seems to try to make amends for Mr. Wilson's insensitivity.

"There's room in any profession if you work hard enough and have ability."

"I'm not, like, stupid."

"No, no. Ha ha. I have a friend who graduated from Princeton University with a Ph.D. in geology who had to work at Macy's for two years because she couldn't find any jobs."

"That must have been very depressing!" I am so excited by this sudden second reference to Dorothy Mueller that I can hardly speak slowly enough to be understood; maybe I am picking up Mr. Wilson's speech impediment. "I hope, oh God, that doesn't happen to me! But hey, I don't even have a Ph.D., so, oh God!"

Sheila doesn't speak and my enjoyment ends. I go to the main library to wait for it to be time to meet Andy and Diane. A better person would—but I guess that's obvious.

In the library I lose track of time and don't reach the theater till seven twenty-five. Andy is there but Diane's not. We wait for her till the movie starts, then go in.

"Maybe this wasn't such a good idea, you coming along," I admit. "I shouldn't have suggested it."

"I think this movie is disgusting."

I like the movie but now see there's one less person I can admit it to. Andy and I go to Diane's house to see what's she's doing; there's a note from her to me on the door: "I'm going to dinner with Tom; probably won't make it to the movie. See you later, Diane." Andy follows me into Diane's room. "So this is her idea of interior decoration."

We go to the Tap House; I was scared to go in here when I lived here; am I improving? We drink several pitchers of beer. Andy and Diane are the only people I know who can keep up with me, although Diane sometimes does lose control of herself.

I think how Diane and Andy used to be the perfect couple, ever since high school, though she'd periodically fallen in love with other people also. They'd stolen Monica's family's garbage together and analyzed it in Andy's car, stolen and read *The Joy of Sex*, ruined parties with violent but soon (then!) resolved fights.

"I still haven't told Monica about the garbage incident," Andy tells me. We notice that Diane has come in; she's sitting in another part of the room with a female friend. We discuss whether or not we should go by Diane's table to say hello; we decide it would be good for Andy but pointless for me as I'm going to be at her apartment in a few hours anyway. He does go to her table, but comes back quickly.

“I shouldn’t have done that.”

“No?”

“She wasn’t rude, exactly. I said hello and she said hello, but she didn’t seem happy to see me.”

Andy explains how my friendship with both him and Diane had helped hold their relationship together artificially because they hadn’t wanted me to take sides; I am impressed to have held such power. “I told Diane when I first met you that you were the only girl besides her I had ever met who seemed different from most of the other girls around her.”

What a, sort of, nice thing to say! We go to his place; he shows me his poems about Diane and Rodger Marshing. On the Diane poem someone has written, “Pretty dead stuff!” There is no criticism on the Rodger Marshing poem; it is so tasteless that it would be degrading even to admit having read it.

I go back to Diane’s at about one a.m., a good hour, but she’s not there to see. I wonder if it was insensitive of me to arrange a meeting between Andy and Diane without Diane’s consent. She comes home while I’m just getting up in the morning. She’s not mad at me; I let her think the meeting at the theater was Andy’s idea.

“That’s just like Andy,” she says. “He doesn’t have any idea why I’m mad at him. Did you tell him about Tom?”

“No, I didn’t know if I should.”

“I bet he’d have said something like, ‘I’m glad she’s found someone,’ if you had told him about Tom. I hate him.”

Diane leaves and I take a shower. I blow-dry my hair and go through Diane’s pile of papers. I see a poem she’s written that can have no one but me in mind as a subject; she has exploited our friendship. I’m too distressed to want to try to hurt her. She comes home and I persuade her to come to the Poetry Group with me. I want to see her humiliated by assholes. We go to the library and I announce a contest about who can find the worst poems to take along to the Group, but we soon see that the really bad books are gone; everything not checked out since 1950 has been sent to storage: it was Mr. Wilson’s last idea before being transferred, I’m told by a former co-worker who doesn’t remember me. The shelves are half empty, pointlessly now. Thanks a lot, Mr. Wilson.

I decide I will not stoop so low as to attend the Poetry Group. I call Jack K. to express regret; he’s forgotten I was coming at all. Diane and I go to Tom’s. Tom does his laundry in the basement of Dorothy Mueller’s building next door, Diane’s told me. Diane once watched a load of Dorothy’s for me—she is not such a bad friend despite the insulting poem, I guess—blue jeans, a white t-shirt, a multi-colored wool sweater, a black skirt and blazer, all mixed in together. Her haphazard way of doing the laundry is the first indication I’ve had that we might have something in common—or Diane could have been wrong or made the story up.

Tom's not home but his door's not locked. We have some beers, then some cognac. From the window we can see the parking lot that Tom and Dorothy Mueller share with other residents of the two buildings. We open Tom's dresser and go through his tapes and records. We do something to the stereo needle so it scratches every time we walk; Diane assures me Tom won't care. We have a sixpack of Genessee Ale. He has two rooms, including the bathroom. There's no bed, only a mattress, no pillow or blankets. The only furniture is the dresser and a board across the radio for a bookcase. The books are seven Snoopy cartoon books, and a book about Joe Namath. I'm so embarrassed for Diane.

"Did you really go out with Tom last night?" I ask her.

"Yes, we went to Wendy's," she says. "Tom is really a nice guy. I don't deserve him at all; I'm nothing but a pile of shit."

I confide in Diane and we have a good conversation. She tells me about her break-up with Andy. "I was working at the switchboard and Andy called to tell me to tell the police that Monica's car was parked on his street, so that if anyone called to report an unusual car, the police would know not to tow it away. And I thought Andy and I were still going together, and that Monica and I were best friends! It was four o'clock in the morning, and I kept ringing his number, over and over, for several hours. Sometimes they'd try to talk to me; sometimes they just hung up. Because I was at the switchboard I could ring Andy's number even though the receiver was off the hook. At one point I asked Monica how she could do a thing like that to a friend, and she said why did I consider her a friend—we had only done stuff together a couple of times.

"I guess I told Andy I was going to kill him. He went to a neighbor's that I wasn't monitoring—stupid me—and called the police. I was really afraid they were going to make me lose my job when they came over. I guess I went a little berserk."

"That's really awful, Diane."

Tom, a nice fellow, comes home, sees we're out of beer, and drives away for more. It's about five o'clock and getting dark. Out the window I notice the new blue compact station wagon I had first mentally assigned to Dorothy, but on second thought had realized she would have no use for.

Tom comes back; we make popcorn for dinner. Diane doesn't know to shake the pan and a lot of kernels burn. Tom shows us his bong collection. Afterwards Diane goes to sleep on the mattress. She won't get up for the concert they'd planned to go to, so I go with Tom, and almost fall asleep also. If Diane had stayed awake, what would I have done after dinner? At the concert I meet acquaintances and speak to them, to my relief.

In the morning Diane asks me if I think Dorothy and Chris Small are clones; I say "no."

It's a temptation to spend the morning planning conversation for my

afternoon with Jerry, but I don't. I go to sleep again after Diane goes to work. I go to the Collective for lunch, but the friendly questions that worked on Diane and Andy don't interest Allison. Her friends and the other women from the Collective wander in and out of the room and Allison greets them, expecting us all to talk together. The other women keep introducing themselves to me, as if they were members of a religious cult.

"So how are you doing?" I ask Allison.

"I'm happy . . . happy. I'm really happy."

"Well, that's good. That's really good."

"Say, Andrea," Allison calls to another woman in the large unclean kitchen. I know Andrea from the laundromat but she's forgotten me. I can't wait to leave, but must stay until the omelettes are finished. Allison excuses herself to make some phone calls. The cat walks on the table, brushing her tail through the molasses.

I think of what I know about Dorothy, how she was about to turn on the gas at her cabin for the last time, but decided to let the cat out to spare him a premature death, at least. But the cat ran so quickly through the house that Dorothy couldn't catch him no matter how hard she tried. Silently, she chased him unsuccessfully for what seemed like hours. At last Dorothy decided not to take her own life after all, taking this as a sign to try to keep on hoping, no matter how futile it may have seemed.

Andrea tells me to get the coffee; I can't find it. She finds it and shows me how to drain the non-instant coffee through a sock.

"Relax," Allison tells me. The chairs are taken and I'm leaning against the sink. My nervousness is none of her business; nevertheless, I'm moved and almost start to cry. Capriciously paying attention to me at last, though not understanding my thoughts, she asks me, "Are you happy?"

"No, I'm afraid of having to work at Woolworth's and living in a pathetic boarding house with cats." There, I've said it. Luckily, she stops paying attention. "What have you been happy because of?" I ask her as she walks me to the door, not noticing that my eyes are filled with tears; she says it's because of her wonderful life.

Diane tells me Andy has left a message for me; he wants me to meet him and Monica for sundaes at the pancake house at eleven. I now have plans to meet Jerry Roche at four thirty; Diane for drinks at the Tap House at eight; and Andy and Monica at eleven. I leave tomorrow at six a.m. I go to the library to await four thirty. I thumb through bound congressional records that nobody ever reads in search of letters I used to write and hide there for amusement, but can't find them. It starts to rain on the walk to Jerry's so I take paper from the trash to cover my head on the five block walk. Stuart's ten year old son is there, putting down linoleum in the kitchen. I remember Jerry once suggesting he and I do it together some weekend. "It's fun doing work together."

"Not when it's you telling me what to do and criticizing when I mess up."

"You don't remember me, but hello," I say to the child.

"Actually I do remember you."

"Thank you."

Jerry already has his coat on; we run to the car. I feel shattered because he is such an asshole. "I enjoyed you in the play," I tell him.

"Thank you."

Jerry is a lawyer; I ask about his clients. He loses most cases, but his very poor clients usually come to see they deserved to lose, and return after their next crimes. I'd ask after Dorothy but don't want to depend on him for information.

"I heard from a friend of yours a few months ago," he says. "Wow, first Rodger Marshing writes, and then you show up. What's next?"

"Rodger and I were never really that close," I say.

"You haven't changed," Jerry says.

"How is Rodger?" I ask. "I mean, we don't correspond or anything."

"Well, he's found a good job—he's now a writer for an important north-eastern poetry magazine. He finally feels like he's doing something that matters."

"Why that's wonderful. I'm so glad that he seems to be doing so well. Do you still have the letter?"

"No, I never keep things like that. But I know, you think Rodger's a jerk. But it's you who are the jerk."

"Has he had this job long?"

"You're jealous, aren't you? Jealous. Come on, admit it."

I become more cheerful as I realize I did the right thing by breaking up with Jerry. "I'm not doing so badly."

"When I was your age, I had a government scholarship to go to one of the best law schools in the country. In the summer, I had another government grant to study the effects of stimulants on Siamese cats. Unfortunately, they became hyperactive and escaped their cages. I lost the grant because of that. But Rodger got his job immediately after graduation; he was snapped up right away."

I ask Jerry how he likes living with his brother's three children. We are at an out-of-town bar, nicer than the Tap House, but he says he has to be home to cook dinner at six. I'm not surprised to be disappointed; I know myself that well.

"Stuart's practice takes a lot more of his time and energies than mine does of mine. Lately I've been doing a lot of the shopping, cleaning up, and washing. Sometimes I go in for him and see his clients. We're not a partnership though—we have a framed deposition to that effect on the office wall."

Jerry describes the three hundred acres he's bought in Virginia, and his plans to have the timber there chopped down for firewood at five dollars a cord, to be sold for eighty-five in the city. He looks thinner than I remember; maybe he's lost some weight. I try to confide in him.

"I don't want to have to work at a K-Mart and live in a pathetic boarding-house with cats. You know, the library I'm working at in Los Angeles is closing soon, and my employers are really too flighty to bother writing references. Since I asked for references from the library here to go there, I'd feel funny asking for more now. I don't know. Maybe I could be a secretary or something."

"To be a secretary you have to have very good typing skills."

"This whole trip, I don't know. Maybe it was futile. I should have saved my money. I certainly don't have any to spare."

"Why did you come?"

"I just felt, I don't know . . . my life was in a rut."

"You should do what my friend does. She lives here now, but she wants to move somewhere else. So she *auditions* cities. She subscribes to the local newspaper for a few months to get the feel of the place, then she gets in her car, or on a plane, checks into a hotel, and just breathes the ambiance for a week or two. Sees if there is theater. Goes to different bars. You should do that. Just go somewhere and spend an afternoon bar-hopping."

I am happy again because his suggestion is so impractical; I am amazed also at his misinterpretation of my character, then wonder who his friend is.

"She thought about San Francisco, but decided not to go there because—"

Dorothy Mueller, I know, is afraid of earthquakes! "Because of the earthquakes?"

"No, because it's too popular, not unusual enough. She's thinking of Atlanta."

Not Dorothy.

He has to go home to make dinner; the whole afternoon has lasted less than two hours. We agree to "keep in touch."

Diane and I meet at the Tap House, my second time this weekend. I'm still mad at Diane for her unflattering interpretation of me in her poem, but give her a chance to redeem herself. "What are your poems like?"

She redeems herself by telling the actual story of a real woman from her childhood who lived a pathetic life. "Please tell me about Dorothy Mueller," she begs, adding that she went over to the baseball field on her bike after work but didn't see Joe Cassidy.

"It would seem anti-climactical now."

She tells about her "break up" with Ray Wallace. "I used to go by his house at about midnight; I'd get really drunk first. The first two times he was glad to see me. He said I was 'remarkable.' Later, though, when I'd go over, he'd be really rude to me. One night he asked me, 'Why do you do this?' I said, 'Do what?' He said, 'You know, come over here all the time.' I said, 'Well, I respect you and like your company.' He said, 'No, I don't think that's the reason.' I tried to act like I thought he was crazy. It was so

embarrassing. Then he told me about Chris Small, but without mentioning her name—but I knew who he was talking about. Then he said, ‘We’re never going to have a relationship.’ I said, ‘*What?*’ as if I thought he was insane. That was in October. Even now, it’s hard for me to tell this story. Man, that was the absolute worst thing I’ve ever done.”

“*Wait!*” I say, “*Diane!* You say he never mentioned Chris’s name. Are you sure it *was* Chris?”

“Well, yes, by his description of her, unless it was her clone or something.”

Clone! Dorothy Mueller! Suddenly it dawns on me that perhaps Ray Wallace is as much in love with Dorothy as she is with him. The reason I see him spend more time with Dorothy than with Chris is because he really loves Dorothy, and not Chris. I should never have believed Diane’s original report without demanding details. Well, I have learned my lesson.

I’m tired from the weekend by ten forty-five. Diane and I have been talking enthusiastically; she says she’ll come into the pancake house with me to wait for Andy and Monica. “They’re always late,” she says.

“Andy’s kind of a jerk, isn’t he,” I comment to Diane, and she smiles happily.

The waitress is a friend of Rodger Marshing, though not in the Poetry Group; in her false British accent she says she hasn’t heard from him in a year. When she leaves I mention Andy’s Rodger Marshing poem to Diane; she’s upset by the imagery, saying he stole it from her life. Monica and Andy arrive.

“Hi, how are you?” Monica asks Diane.

Diane gets up and starts walking away. “Fine, thank you, man. And you?” she says in a normal tone of voice, and goes out the door.

Andy and Monica hold hands across the table from me. I’m surprised how much like Diane Monica looks, neither better nor worse. We play in the salt and pepper poured on the table, joking about our similar nervous habits.

“She was really happy to see me, wasn’t she?” Monica asks sarcastically. They’re disappointed I won’t talk about Diane’s remaining feelings for Andy, as I did earlier. Monica seems pleasant and boring, not exactly “flaky” as Diane described her. I ask Monica about herself, though Diane and Andy have written me all the facts many times—quitting school, being a cook, being four years older than Andy. After driving me back to Diane’s they will go to the golf course and have sex, they tell me. I’m too tired to make cheerful jokes; they may be disappointed; I don’t care.

In the morning Diane tells me what she did after leaving the pancake house: “I went to Joe Cassidy’s. He was really glad to see me, but then some of his friends came over and made me feel kind of out-of-place, so I left.”

Diane walks me to the bus station at five thirty, though it will make her late for work.

My bus gets to Grand Island at five o'clock of the second morning. There is a fifteen minute break and I go to the bathroom to put in my contact lenses and make-up; it's probably about sixty-five degrees. I get into line to get on the new bus in the main part of the terminal, tenth or so in a line of about twenty. Suddenly a woman my age at the very front of the line faints, convulsing slightly before regaining consciousness. I can't tell what has happened, though I tiptoe to see. She is helped to her feet and says she is all right, but after only about a minute falls down again. The ticket taker helps her into a chair.

Another young woman in line suddenly falls on the ground also, and has to be helped to a chair. The ticket taker shouts "Call Security!" to the man behind the counter. The two girls who have fainted sit next to each other, talking; I become less concerned, thinking they may be sisters or friends traveling together. I think they may have been taking drugs and begin to feel scornful; perhaps there was "angel dust" in their quaaludes. Then suddenly I begin to feel dizzy too. Within a few seconds I am hyperventilating and sweating. I go to sit down, leaving my suitcase so not to lose my place in the line and put my head in my lap. "Security" is with the other two girls.

"Does anyone else feel ill?" he asks.

"Yes," I shout, but he doesn't hear me. The line begins to move, and I resume my place, but before long I know that I'm going to faint too. I do faint, careful to fall backwards in order not to damage my nose, as one of the others did. The man standing behind me catches me and pushes me out the door. The other two girls are standing outside, saying they feel all right. I squat on the pavement, my head between my knees. I feel a little better, but am still dizzy. An ambulance comes and we get inside. The man who caught me says he will come in with me so I won't be alone; the other women also have new-found male companions, but there's no room; I'm glad. Our blood pressures are taken and we take turns with the oxygen mask, me third. The ambulance man says, "You girls were probably just hot and tired. There wasn't much moving air in there."

In the terminal people are saying things like, "Falling down all over the place."

I don't understand how we could have fainted, with the doors open. One of the other girls, the more intelligent one, says she and the other girl had been standing under an air vent, but she is ignored. I don't understand why no one else passed out.

The ambulance man asks me, "Are you a jogger?" and I say "no." He says my pulse is dangerously low, fifty over eighty. He wants to take me to a hospital but I sign a release saying I've refused help.