THE BELL JAR

by Sylvia Plath

Chapter One

It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York. I'm stupid about executions. The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick, and that's all there was to read about in the papers—goggle-eyed headlines staring up at me on every street corner and at the fusty, peanut-smelling mouth of every subway. It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn't help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves.

I thought it must be the worst thing in the world.

New York was bad enough. By nine in the morning the fake, country-wet freshness that somehow seeped in overnight evaporated like the tail end of a sweet dream. Mirage-grey at the bottom of their granite canyons, the hot streets wavered in the sun, the car tops sizzled and glittered, and the dry, tindery dust blew into my eyes and down my throat.

I kept hearing about the Rosenbergs over the radio and at the office till I couldn't get them out of my mind. It was like the first time I saw a cadaver. For weeks afterwards, the cadaver's head—or what there was left of it—floated up behind my eggs and bacon at breakfast and behind the face of Buddy Willard, who was responsible for my seeing it in the first place, and pretty soon I felt as though I were carrying that cadaver's head around with me on a string, like some black, noseless balloon stinking of vinegar.

I knew something was wrong with me that summer, because all I could think about was the Rosenbergs and how stupid I'd been to buy all those uncomfortable, expensive clothes, hanging limp as fish in my closet, and how all the little successes I'd totted up so happily at college fizzled to nothing outside the slick marble and plate-glass fronts along Madison Avenue.

I was supposed to be having the time of my life.

I was supposed to be the envy of thousands of other college girls just like me all over America who wanted nothing more than to be tripping about in those same size seven patent leather shoes I'd bought in Bloomingdale's one lunch hour with a black patent leather belt and black patent leather pocket-book to match. And when my picture came out in the magazine the twelve of us were working on—drinking martinis in

a skimpy, imitation silver-lamé bodice stuck on to a big, fat cloud of white tulle, on some Starlight Roof, in the company of several anonymous young men with all-American bone structures hired or loaned for the occasion—everybody would think I must be having a real whirl.

Look what can happen in this country, they'd say. A girl lives in some out-of-the-way town for nineteen years, so poor she can't afford a magazine, and then she gets a scholarship to college and wins a prize here and a prize there and ends up steering New York like her own private car.

Only I wasn't steering anything, not even myself. I just bumped from my hotel to work and to parties and from parties to my hotel and back to work like a numb trolley-bus. I guess I should have been excited the way most of the other girls were, but I couldn't get myself to react. I felt very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo.

There were twelve of us at the hotel.

We had all won a fashion magazine contest, by writing essays and stories and poems and fashion blurbs, and as prizes they gave us jobs in New York for a month, expenses paid, and piles and piles of free bonuses, like ballet tickets and passes to fashion shows and hair stylings at a famous expensive salon and chances to meet successful people in the field of our desire and advice about what to do with our particular complexions.

I still have the make-up kit they gave me, fitted out for a person with brown eyes and brown hair: an oblong of brown mascara with a tiny brush, and a round basin of blue eye-shadow just big enough to dab the tip of your finger in, and three lipsticks ranging from red to pink, all cased in the same little gilt box with a mirror on one side. I also have a white plastic sun-glasses case with coloured shells and sequins and a green plastic starfish sewed on to it.

I realized we kept piling up these presents because it was as good as free advertising for the firms involved, but I couldn't be cynical. I got such a kick out of all those free gifts showering on to us. For a long time afterwards I hid them away, but later, when I was all right again, I brought them out, and I still have them around the house. I use the lipsticks now and then, and last week I cut the plastic starfish off the sun-glasses case for the baby to play with.

So there were twelve of us at the hotel, in the same wing on the same floor in single rooms, one after the

other, and it reminded me of my dormitory at college. It wasn't a proper hotel—I mean a hotel where there are both men and women mixed about here and there on the same floor.

This hotel—the Amazon—was for women only, and they were mostly girls my age with wealthy parents who wanted to be sure their daughters would be living where men couldn't get at them and deceive them; and they were all going to posh secretarial schools like Katy Gibbs, where they had to wear hats and stockings and gloves to class, or they had just graduated from places like Katy Gibbs and were secretaries to executives and junior executives and simply hanging around in New York waiting to get married to some career man or other.

These girls looked awfully bored to me. I saw them on the sun-roof, yawning and painting their nails and trying to keep up their Bermuda tans, and they seemed bored as hell. I talked with one of them, and she was bored with yachts and bored with flying around in aeroplanes and bored with skiing in Switzerland at Christmas and bored with the men in Brazil.

Girls like that make me sick. I'm so jealous I can't speak. Nineteen years, and I hadn't been out of New England except for this trip to New York. It was my first big chance, but here I was, sitting back and letting it run through my fingers like so much water.
I guess one of my troubles was Doreen.

I'd never known a girl like Doreen before. Doreen came from a society girls' college down South and had bright white hair standing out in a cotton candy fluff round her head and blue eyes like transparent agate marbles, hard and polished and just about indestructible, and a mouth set in a sort of perpetual sneer. I don't mean a nasty sneer, but an amused, mysterious sneer, as if all the people around her were pretty silly and she could tell some good jokes on them if she wanted to.

Doreen singled me out right away. She made me feel I was that much sharper than the others, and she really was wonderfully funny. She used to sit next to me at the conference table, and when the visiting celebrities were talking she'd whisper witty sarcastic remarks to me under her breath.

Her college was so fashion-conscious, she said, that all the girls had pocket-book covers made out of the same material as their dresses, so each time they changed their clothes they had a matching pocket-book. This kind of detail impressed me. It suggested a

whole life of marvellous, elaborate decadence that attracted me like a magnet.
The only thing Doreen ever bawled me out about was bothering to get my assignments in by a deadline.
'What are you sweating over that for?' Doreen lounged on my bed in a peach silk dressing-gown, filing her long, nicotine-yellow nails with an emery board, while I typed up the draft of an interview with a best-selling novelist.

That was another thing—the rest of us had starched cotton summer nighties and quilted housecoats, or maybe terrytowel robes that doubled as beachcoats, but Doreen wore these full-length nylon and lace jobs you could half see through, and dressing-gowns the colour of skin, that stuck to her by some kind of electricity. She had an interesting, slightly sweaty smell that reminded me of those scallopy leaves of sweet fern you break off and crush between your fingers for the musk of them.

'You know old Jay Cee won't give a damn if that story's in tomorrow or Monday.' Doreen lit a cigarette and let the smoke flare slowly from her nostrils so her eyes were veiled. 'Jay Cee's ugly as sin,' Doreen went on coolly. 'I bet that old husband of hers turns out all the lights before he gets near her or he'd puke otherwise.'

Jay Cee was my boss, and I liked her a lot, in spite of what Doreen said. She wasn't one of the fashion magazine gushers with fake eyelashes and giddy jewellery. Jay Cee had brains, so her plug-ugly looks didn't seem to matter. She read a couple of languages and knew all the quality writers in the business.
I tried to imagine Jay Cee out of her strict office suit and luncheon-duty hat and in bed with her fat husband, but I just couldn't do it. I always had a terribly hard time trying to imagine people in bed together.
Jay Cee wanted to teach me something, all the old ladies I ever knew wanted to teach me something, but I suddenly didn't think they had anything to teach me. I fitted the lid on my typewriter and clicked it shut.
Doreen grinned. 'Smart girl.'
Somebody tapped at the door.
'Who is it?' I didn't bother to get up.
'It's me, Betsy. Are you coming to the party?' 'I guess so.' I still didn't go to the door.

They imported Betsy straight from Kansas with her bouncing blonde pony-tail and Sweetheart-of-Sigma-Chi smile. I remember once the two of us were called over to the office of some blue-chinned TV

producer in a pin-stripe suit to see if we had any angles he could build up for a programme, and Betsy started to tell about the male and female corn in Kansas. She got so excited about that damn corn even the producer had tears in his eyes, only he couldn't use any of it, unfortunately, he said.

Later on, the Beauty Editor persuaded Betsy to cut her hair and made a cover girl out of her, and I still see her face now and then, smiling out of those 'P.Q.'s wife wears B.H. Wragge' ads.

Betsy was always asking me to do things with her and the other girls as if she were trying to save me in some way. She never asked Doreen. In private, Doreen called her Pollyanna Cowgirl.

'Do you want to come in our cab?' Betsy said through the door.

Doreen shook her head.

'That's all right, Betsy,' I said. 'I'm going with Doreen.'

'Okay.' I could hear Betsy padding off down the hall.

'We'll just go till we get sick of it,' Doreen told me, stubbing out her cigarette in the base of my bedside readinglamp, 'then we'll go out on the town. Those parties they stage here remind me of the old dances in the school gym. Why do they always round up Yalies? They're so stoo-pit!'

Buddy Willard went to Yale, but now I thought of it, what was wrong with him was that he was stupid. Oh, he'd managed to get good marks all right, and to have an affair with some awful waitress on the Cape by the name of Gladys, but he didn't have one speck of intuition. Doreen had intuition. Everything she said was like a secret voice speaking straight out of my own bones.

We were stuck in the theatre-hour rush. Our cab sat wedged in back of Betsy's cab and in front of a cab with four of the other girls, and nothing moved.

Doreen looked terrific. She was wearing a strapless white lace dress zipped up over a snug corset affair that curved her in at the middle and bulged her out again spectacularly above and below, and her skin had a bronzy polish under the pale dusting-powder. She smelled strong as a whole perfume store.

I wore a black shantung sheath that cost me forty dollars. It was part of a buying spree I had with some of my scholarship money when I heard I was one of the lucky ones going to New York. This dress was cut so queerly I couldn't wear any sort of a bra under it, but that didn't matter much as I was skinny as a boy and barely rippled, and I liked feeling almost naked on the hot summer nights.

The city had faded my tan, though. I looked yellow as a Chinaman. Ordinarily, I would have been nervous about my dress and my odd colour, but being with Doreen made me forget my worries. I felt wise and cynical as all hell.

When the man in the blue lumber shirt and black chinos and tooled leather cowboy boots started to stroll over to us from under the striped awning of the bar where he'd been eyeing our cab, I didn't have any illusions. I knew perfectly well he'd come for Doreen. He threaded his way out between the stopped cars and leaned engagingly on the sill of our open window.

'And what, may I ask, are two nice girls like you doing all alone in a cab on a nice night hike this?' He had a big, wide, white tooth-paste-ad smile.

'We're on our way to a party,' I blurted, since Doreen had gone suddenly dumb as a post and was fiddling in a blasé way with her white lace pocket-book cover.

'That sounds boring,' the man said. 'Whyn't you both join me for a couple of drinks in that bar over there? I've some friends waiting as well.'

He nodded in the direction of several informally dressed men slouching around under the awning. They had been following him with their eyes, and when he glanced back at them, they burst out laughing.

The laughter should have warned me. It was a kind of low, know-it-all snicker, but the traffic showed signs of moving again, and I knew that if I sat tight, in two seconds I'd be wishing I'd taken this gift of a chance to see something of New York besides what the people on the magazine had planned out for us so carefully.

'How about it, Doreen?' I said.

'How about it, Doreen?' the man said, smiling his big smile. To this day I can't remember what he looked like when he wasn't smiling. I think he must have been smiling the whole time. It must have been natural for him, smiling like that.

'Well, all right,' Doreen said to me. I opened the door, and we stepped out of the cab just as it was edging ahead again and started to walk over to the bar.

There was a terrible shriek of brakes followed by a dull thump-thump.

'Hey you!' Our cabby was craning out of his window with a furious, purple expression. 'Waddaya think you're doin'?'

He had stopped the cab so abruptly that the cab behind bumped smack into him, and we could see the four girls inside waving and struggling and scrambling up off the floor.

The man laughed and left us on the kerb and went back and handed a bill to the driver in the middle of a great honking and some yelling, and then we saw the girls from the magazine moving off in a row, one cab after another, like a wedding party with nothing but bridesmaids.

'Come on, Frankie,' the man said to one of his friends in the group, and a short, scrunty fellow detached himself and came into the bar with us.

He was the type of fellow I can't stand. I'm five feet ten in my stocking feet, and when I am with little men I stoop over a bit and slouch my hips, one up and one down, so I'll look shorter, and I feel gawky and morbid as somebody in a side-show.

For a minute I had a wild hope we might pair off according to size, which would line me up with the man who had spoken to us in the first place, and he cleared a good six feet, but he went ahead with Doreen and didn't give me a second look. I tried to pretend I didn't see Frankie dogging along at my elbow and sat close by Doreen at the table.

It was so dark in the bar I could hardly make out anything except Doreen. With her white hair and white dress she was so white she looked silver. I think she must have reflected the neons over the bar. I felt myself melting into the shadows like the negative of a person I'd never seen before in my life.

'Well, what'll we have?' the man asked with a large smile.

'I think I'll have an Old-Fashioned,' Doreen said to me.

Ordering drinks always floored me. I didn't know whisky from gin and never managed to get anything I really liked the taste of. Buddy Willard and the other college boys I knew were usually too poor to buy hard liquor or they scorned drinking altogether. It's amazing how many college boys don't drink or smoke. I seemed to know them all. The farthest Buddy Willard ever went was buying us a bottle of Dubonnet, which he only did because he was trying to prove he could be æsthetic in spite of being a medical student.

'I'll have a vodka,' I said.

The man looked at me more closely. 'With anything?'

'Just plain,' I said. 'I always have it plain.'

I thought I might make a fool of myself by saying I'd have it with ice or soda or gin or anything. I'd seen a vodka ad once, just a glass full of vodka standing in the middle of a snowdrift in a blue light, and the vodka looked clear and pure as water, so I thought having vodka plain must be all right. My dream was some day ordering a drink and finding out it tasted wonderful.

The waiter came up then, and the man ordered drinks for the four of us. He looked so at home in that citified bar in his ranch outfit I thought he might well be somebody famous.

Doreen wasn't saying a word, she only toyed with her cork place-mat and eventually lit a cigarette, but the man didn't seem to mind. He kept staring at her the way people stare at the great white macaw in the zoo, waiting for it to say something human.

The drinks arrived, and mine looked clear and pure, just like the vodka ad. 'What do you do?' I asked the man, to break the silence shooting up around me on all sides, thick as jungle grass. 'I mean what do you do here in New York?'

Slowly and with what seemed a great effort, the man dragged his eyes away from Doreen's shoulder. 'I'm a disc jockey,' he said. 'You prob'ly must have heard of me. The name's Lenny Shepherd.' 'I know you,' Doreen said suddenly.

'I'm glad about that, honey,' the man said, and burst out laughing. 'That'll come in handy. I'm famous as hell.'

Then Lenny Shepherd gave Frankie a long look.

'Say, where do you come from?' Frankie asked, sitting up with a jerk. 'What's your name?'

'This here's Doreen.' Lenny slid his hand around Doreen's bare arm and gave her a squeeze. What surprised me was that Doreen didn't let on she noticed what he was doing. She just sat there, dusky as a bleached blonde negress in her white dress and sipped daintily at her drink.

'My name's Elly Higginbottom,' I said. 'I come from Chicago.' After that I felt safer. I didn't want anything I said or did that night to be associated with me and my real name and coming from Boston.

'Well, Elly, what do you say we dance some?'

The thought of dancing with that little runt in his orange suede elevator shoes and mingy T-shirt and droopy blue sports coat made me laugh. If there's anything I look down on, it's a man in a blue outfit. Black or grey, or brown, even. Blue just makes me laugh.

'I'm not in the mood,' I said coldly, turning my back on him and hitching my chair over nearer to Doreen and Lenny.

Those two looked as if they'd known each other for years by now. Doreen was spooning up the hunks of fruit at the bottom of her glass with a spindly silver spoon, and Lenny was grunting each time she lifted the spoon to her mouth, and snapping and pretending

to be a dog or something, and trying to get the fruit off the spoon. Doreen giggled and kept spooning up the fruit.

I began to think vodka was my drink at last. It didn't taste like anything, but it went straight down into my stomach like a sword-swallower's sword and made me feel powerful and god-like.

'I better go now,' Frankie said, standing up.

I couldn't see him very clearly, the place was so dim, but for the first time I heard what a high, silly voice he had. Nobody paid him any notice.

'Hey, Lenny, you owe me something. Remember, Lenny, you owe me something, don't you, Lenny?'

I thought it odd Frankie should be reminding Lenny he owed him something in front of us, and we being perfect strangers, but Frankie stood there saying the same thing over and over until Lenny dug into his pocket and pulled out a big roll of green bills and peeled one off and handed it to Frankie. I think it was ten dollars.

'Shut up and scram.'

For a minute I thought Lenny was talking to me as well, but then I heard Doreen say 'I won't come unless Elly comes'. I had to hand it to her the way she picked up my fake name.

'Oh, Elly'll come, won't you, Elly?' Lenny said, giving me a wink.

'Sure I'll come,' I said. Frankie had wilted away into the night, so I thought I'd string along with Doreen. I wanted to see as much as I could.

I liked looking on at other people in crucial situations. If there was a road accident or a street fight or a baby pickled in a laboratory jar for me to look at, I'd stop and look so hard I never forgot it.

I certainly learned a lot of things I never would have learned otherwise this way, and even when they surprised me or made me sick I never let on, but pretended that's the way I knew things were all the time.

Chapter Two

I wouldn't have missed Lenny's place for anything.

It was built exactly like the inside of a ranch, only in the middle of a New York apartment house. He'd had a few partitions knocked down to make the place broaden out, he said, and then had them pine-panel the walls and fit up a special pine-panelled bar in the shape of a horseshoe. I think the floor was pine-panelled, too.

Great white bearskins lay about underfoot, and the only furniture was a lot of low beds covered with

Indian rugs. Instead of pictures hung up on the walls, he had antlers and buffalo horns and a stuffed rabbit head. Lenny jutted a thumb at the meek little grey muzzle and stiff jackrabbit ears.
'Ran over that in Las Vegas.'
He walked away across the room, his cowboy boots echoing like pistol shots. 'Acoustics,' he said, and grew smaller and smaller until he vanished through a door in the distance.

All at once music started to come out of the air on every side. Then it stopped, and we heard Lenny's voice say 'This is your twelve o'clock disc jock, Lenny Shepherd, with a round-up of the tops in pops. Number Ten in the wagon train this week is none other than that little yaller-haired gal you been hearin' so much about lately ... the one an' only Sunflower?
I was born in Kansas, I was bred in Kansas, And when I marry I'll be wed in Kansas...
'What a card!' Doreen said. 'Isn't he a card?'
'You bet,' I said.
'Listen, Elly, do me a favour.' She seemed to think Elly was who I really was by now.
'Sure,' I said.
'Stick around, will you? I wouldn't have a chance if he tried anything funny. Did you see that muscle?' Doreen giggled.

Lenny popped out of the back room. 'I got twenty grand's worth of recording equipment in there.' He ambled over to the bar and set out three glasses and a silver ice-bucket and a big pitcher and began to mix drinks from several different bottles.
...to a true-blue gal who promised she would wait—
She's the sunflower of the Sunflower State.
'Terrific, huh?' Lenny came over, balancing three glasses. Big drops stood out on them like sweat, and the ice-cubes jingled as he passed them round. Then the music twanged to a stop, and we heard Lenny's voice announcing the next number. 'Nothing like listening to yourself talk. Say,' Lenny's eye lingered on me, 'Frankie vamoosed, you ought to have somebody, I'll call up one of the fellers.'
'That's okay,' I said. 'You don't have to do that.' I didn't want to come straight out and ask for somebody several sizes larger than Frankie.
Lenny looked relieved. 'Just so's you don't mind. I wouldn't want to do wrong by a friend of Doreen's.' He gave Doreen a big white smile. 'Would I, honeybun?'
He held out a hand to Doreen, and without a word they both started to jitterbug, still hanging on to their glasses.

I sat cross-legged on one of the beds and tried to look devout and impassive like some businessmen I once saw watching an Algerian belly-dancer, but as soon as I leaned back against the wall under the stuffed rabbit, the bed started to roll out into the room, so I sat down on a bearskin on the floor and leaned back against the bed instead.

My drink was wet and depressing. Each time I took another sip it tasted more and more like dead water. Around the middle of the glass there was painted a pink lasso with yellow polka dots. I drank to about an inch below the lasso and waited a bit, and when I went to take another sip, the drink was up to lasso-level again.

Out of the air Lenny's ghost voice boomed, '*Wye oh wye did I ever leave Wyoming*?

The two of them didn't even stop jitterbugging during the intervals. I felt myself shrinking to a small black dot against all those red and white rugs and that pine-panelling. I felt like a hole in the ground.

There is something demoralizing about watching two people get more and more crazy about each other, especially when you are the only extra person in the room.

It's like watching Paris from an express caboose heading in the opposite direction—every second the city gets smaller and smaller, only you feel it's really you getting smaller and smaller and lonelier and lonelier, rushing away from all those lights and that excitement at about a million miles an hour.

Every so often Lenny and Doreen would bang into each other and kiss and then swing back to take a long drink and close in on each other again. I thought I might just lie down on the bearskin and go to sleep until Doreen felt ready to go back to the hotel.

Then Lenny gave a terrible roar. I sat up. Doreen was hanging on to Lenny's left earlobe with her teeth.

'Leggo, you bitch!'

Lenny stooped, and Doreen went flying up on to his shoulder, and her glass sailed out of her hand in a long, wide arc and fetched up against the pine-panelling with a silly tinkle. Lenny was still roaring and whirling round so fast I couldn't see Doreen's face.

I noticed, in the routine way you notice the colour of somebody's eyes, that Doreen's breasts had popped out of her dress and were swinging out slightly like full brown melons as she circled belly-down on Lenny's shoulder, thrashing her legs in the air and screeching, and then they both started to laugh and slow up, and Lenny was trying to bite Doreen's hip through her skirt

when I let myself out the door before anything more could happen and managed to get downstairs by leaning with both hands on the banister and half sliding the whole way.

I didn't realize Lenny's place had been air-conditioned until I wavered out on to the pavement. The tropical, stale heat the sidewalks had been sucking up all day hit me in the face like a last insult. I didn't know where in the world I was.

For a minute I entertained the idea of taking a cab to the party after all, but decided against it because the dance might be over by now, and I didn't feel like ending up in an empty barn of a ballroom strewn with confetti and cigarettebutts and crumpled cocktail napkins.

I walked carefully to the nearest street corner, brushing the wall of the buildings on my left with the tip of one finger to steady myself. I looked at the street sign. Then I took my New York street map out of my pocket-book. I was exactly forty-three blocks by five blocks away from my hotel.

Walking has never fazed me. I just set out in the right direction, counting the blocks under my breath, and when I walked into the lobby of the hotel I was perfectly sober and my feet only slightly swollen, but that was my own fault because I hadn't bothered to wear any stockings.

The lobby was empty except for a night clerk dozing in his lit booth among the key-rings and the silent telephones.

I slid into the self-service elevator and pushed the button for my floor. The doors folded shut like a noiseless accordion. Then my ears went funny, and I noticed a big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman staring idiotically into my face. It was only me, of course. I was appalled to see how wrinkled and used-up I looked.

There wasn't a soul in the hall. I let myself into my room. It was full of smoke. At first I thought the smoke had materialized out of thin air as a sort of judgement, but then I remembered it was Doreen's smoke and pushed the button that opened the window vent. They had the windows fixed so you couldn't really open them and lean out, and for some reason this made me furious.

By standing at the left side of the window and laying my cheek to the woodwork, I could see downtown to where the UN balanced itself in the dark, like a weird, green, Martian honeycomb. I could see the moving red and white lights along the drive and the lights of the bridges whose names I didn't know.

The silence depressed me. It wasn't the silence of silence. It was my own silence.

I knew perfectly well the cars were making a noise, and the people in them and behind the lit windows of the buildings were making a noise, and the river was making a noise, but I couldn't hear a thing. The city hung in my window, flat as a poster, glittering and blinking, but it might just as well not have been there at all, for all the good it did me.

The china-white bedside telephone could have connected me up with things, but there it sat, dumb as a death's head. I tried to think of people I'd given my phone number to, so I could make a list of all the possible calls I might be about to receive, but all I could think of was that I'd given my phone number to Buddy Willard's mother so she could give it to a simultaneous interpreter she knew at the UN.
I let out a small, dry laugh.

I could imagine the sort of simultaneous interpreter Mrs Willard would introduce me to when all the time she wanted me to marry Buddy, who was taking the cure for TB somewhere in upper New York State. Buddy's mother had even arranged for me to be given a job as a waitress at the TB sanatorium that summer so Buddy wouldn't be lonely. She and Buddy couldn't understand why I chose to go to New York City instead.

The mirror over my bureau seemed slightly warped and much too silver. The face in it looked like the reflection in a ball of dentist's mercury. I thought of crawling in between the bed-sheets and trying to sleep, but that appealed to me about as much as stuffing a dirty, scrawled-over letter into a fresh, clean envelope. I decided to take a hot bath.

There must be quite a few things a hot bath won't cure, but I don't know many of them. Whenever I'm sad I'm going to die, or so nervous I can't sleep, or in love with somebody I won't be seeing for a week, I slump down just so far and then I say: 'I'll go take a hot bath.'
I meditate in the bath. The water needs to be very hot, so hot you can barely stand putting your foot in it. Then you lower yourself, inch by inch, till the water's up to your neck.

I remember the ceilings over every bathtub I've stretched out in. I remember the texture of the ceilings and the cracks and the colours and the damp spots and the light fixtures. I remember the tubs, too: the antique griffin-legged tubs, and the modern coffin-shaped tubs, and the fancy pink marble tubs

overlooking indoor lily ponds, and I remember the shapes and sizes of the water taps and the different sorts of soap-holders.
I never feel so much myself as when I'm in a hot bath.

I lay in that tub on the seventeenth floor of this hotel for-women-only, high up over the jazz and push of New York, for near on to an hour, and I felt myself growing pure again. I don't believe in baptism or the waters of Jordan or anything like that, but I guess I feel about a hot bath the way those religious people feel about holy water.

I said to myself: 'Doreen is dissolving, Lenny Shepherd is dissolving, Frankie is dissolving, New York is dissolving, they are all dissolving away and none of them matter any more. I don't know them, I have never known them and I am very pure. All that liquor and those sticky kisses I saw and the dirt that settled on my skin on the way back is turning into something pure.'
The longer I lay there in the clear hot water the purer I felt, and when I stepped out at last and wrapped myself in one of the big, soft, white, hotel bath-towels I felt pure and sweet as a new baby.

I don't know how long I had been asleep when I heard the knocking. I didn't pay any attention at first, because the person knocking kept saying 'Elly, Elly, Elly, let me in', and I didn't know any Elly. Then another kind of knock sounded over the first dull, bumping knock—a sharp tap-tap, and another, much crisper voice said 'Miss Greenwood, your friend wants you,' and I knew it was Doreen.

I swung to my feet and balanced dizzily for a minute in the middle of the dark room. I felt angry with Doreen for waking me up. All I stood a chance of getting out of that sad night was a good sleep, and she had to wake me up and spoil it. I thought if I pretended to be asleep the knocking might go away and leave me in peace, but I waited, and it didn't.
'Elly, Elly, Elly,' the first voice mumbled, while the other voice went on hissing 'Miss Greenwood, Miss Greenwood, Miss Greenwood', as if I had a split personality or something.
I opened the door and blinked out into the bright hall. I had the impression it wasn't night and it wasn't day, but some lurid third interval that had suddenly slipped between them and would never end.
Doreen was slumped against the door-jamb. When I came out, she toppled into my arms. I couldn't see her face because her head was hanging down on her chest and her stiff blonde hair fell from its dark roots like a

hula fringe.

I recognized the short, squat, moustached woman in the black uniform as the night maid who ironed day-dresses and party-frocks in a crowded cubicle on our floor. I couldn't understand how she came to know Doreen or why she should want to help Doreen wake me up instead of leading her quietly back to her own room.

Seeing Doreen supported in my arms and silent except for a few wet hiccups, the woman strode away down the hall to her cubicle with its ancient Singer sewing-machine and white ironing-board. I wanted to run after her and tell her I had nothing to do with Doreen, because she looked stern and hard-working and moral as an old-style European immigrant and reminded me of my Austrian grandmother.

'Lemme lie down, lemme lie down,' Doreen was muttering. 'Lemme lie down, lemme lie down.'

I felt if I carried Doreen across the threshold into my room and helped her on to my bed I would never get rid of her again.

Her body was warm and soft as a pile of pillows against my arm where she leaned her weight, and her feet, in their high, spiked heels, dragged foolishly. She was much too heavy for me to budge down the long hall.

I decided the only thing to do was to dump her on the carpet and shut and lock my door and go back to bed. When Doreen woke up she wouldn't remember what had happened and would think she must have passed out in front of my door while I slept, and she would get up of her own accord and go sensibly back to her room.

I started to lower Doreen gently on to the green hall carpet, but she gave a low moan and pitched forward out of my arms. A jet of brown vomit flew from her mouth and spread in a large puddle at my feet.

Suddenly Doreen grew even heavier. Her head drooped forward into the puddle, the wisps of her blonde hair dabbling in it like tree roots in a bog, and I realized she was asleep. I drew back. I felt half-asleep myself.

I made a decision about Doreen that night. I decided I would watch her and listen to what she said, but deep down I would have nothing at all to do with her. Deep down, I would be loyal to Betsy and her innocent friends. It was Betsy I resembled at heart.

Quietly, I stepped back into my room and shut the door. On second thoughts, I didn't lock it. I couldn't quite bring myself to do that.

When I woke up in the dull, sunless heat the next morning, I dressed and splashed my face with cold water and put on some lipstick and opened the door slowly. I think I still expected to see Doreen's body lying there in the pool of vomit like an ugly, concrete testimony to my own dirty nature.

There was nobody in the hall. The carpet stretched from one end of the hall to the other, clean and eternally verdant except for a faint, irregular dark stain before my door as if somebody had by accident spilled a glass of water there, but dabbed it dry again.

Chapter Three

Arrayed on the *Ladies' Day* banquet table were yellow-green avocado pear halves stuffed with crabmeat and mayonnaise, and platters of rare roast beef and cold chicken, and every so often a cut-glass bowl heaped with black caviar. I hadn't had time to eat any breakfast at the hotel cafeteria that morning, except for a cup of over-stewed coffee so bitter it made my nose curl, and I was starving.

Before I came to New York I'd never eaten out in a proper restaurant. I don't count Howard Johnson's, where I only had French fries and cheeseburgers and vanilla frappes with people like Buddy Willard. I'm not sure why it is, but I love food more than just about anything else. No matter how much I eat, I never put on weight. With one exception I've been the same weight for ten years.

My favourite dishes are full of butter and cheese and sour cream. In New York we had so many free luncheons with people on the magazine and various visiting celebrities I developed the habit of running my eye down those huge, handwritten menus, where a tiny side-dish of peas costs fifty or sixty cents, until I'd picked the richest, most expensive dishes and ordered a string of them.

We were always taken out on expense accounts, so I never felt guilty. I made a point of eating so fast I never kept the other people waiting who generally ordered only chef's salad and grapefruit juice because they were trying to reduce. Almost everybody I met in New York was trying to reduce.

'I want to welcome the prettiest, smartest bunch of young ladies our staff has yet had the good luck to meet,' the plump, bald master-of-ceremonies wheezed into his lapel microphone. 'This banquet is just a small sample of the hospitality our Food Testing Kitchens here on *Ladies' Day* would like to offer in appreciation for your visit.'

A delicate, ladylike spatter of applause, and we all

sat down at the enormous linen-draped table. There were eleven of us girls from the magazine, together with most of our supervising editors, and the whole staff of the *Ladies' Day* Food Testing Kitchens in hygienic white smocks, neat hair-nets and flawless make-up of a uniform peach-pie colour.

There were only eleven of us, because Doreen was missing. They had set her place next to mine for some reason, and the chair stayed empty. I saved her place-card for her—a pocket mirror with 'Doreen' painted along the top of it in lacy script and a wreath of frosted daisies around the edge, framing the silver hole where her face would show.

Doreen was spending the day with Lenny Shepherd. She spent most of her free time with Lenny Shepherd now.

In the hour before our luncheon at *Ladies' Day*—the big women's magazine that features lush double-page spreads of technicolour meals, with a different theme and locale each month—we had been shown around the endless glossy kitchens and seen how difficult it is to photograph apple pie *à la mode* under bright lights because the ice-cream keeps melting and has to be propped up from behind with toothpicks and changed every time it starts looking too soppy.

The sight of all the food stacked in those kitchens made me dizzy. It's not that we hadn't enough to eat at home, it's just that my grandmother always cooked economy joints and economy meat-loafs and had the habit of saying, the minute you lifted the first forkful to your mouth, 'I hope you enjoy that, it cost forty-one cents a pound,' which always made me feel I was somehow eating pennies instead of Sunday roast. While we were standing up behind our chairs listening to the welcome speech, I had bowed my head and secretly eyed the position of the bowls of caviar. One bowl was set strategically between me and Doreen's empty chair.

I figured the girl across from me couldn't reach it because of the mountainous centrepiece of marzipan fruit, and Betsy, on my right, would be too nice to ask me to share it with her if I just kept it out of the way at my elbow by my bread-and-butter plate. Besides, another bowl of caviar sat a little way to the right of the girl next to Betsy, and she could eat that.

My grandfather and I had a standing joke. He was the head waiter at a country club near my home town, and every Sunday my grandmother drove in to bring him home for his Monday off. My brother and I alternated going with her, and my grandfather always

served Sunday supper to my grandmother and whichever of us was along as if we were regular club guests. He loved introducing me to special titbits, and by the age of nine I had developed a passionate taste for cold vichyssoise and caviar and anchovy paste.

The joke was that at my wedding my grandfather would see I had all the caviar I could eat. It was a joke because I never intended to get married, and even if I did, my grandfather couldn't have afforded enough caviar unless he robbed the country club kitchen and carried it off in a suitcase.

Under cover of the clinking of water goblets and silverware and bone china, I paved my plate with chicken slices. Then I covered the chicken slices with caviar thickly as if I were spreading peanut-butter on a piece of bread. Then I picked up the chicken slices in my fingers one by one, rolled them so the caviar wouldn't ooze off and ate them.

I'd discovered, after a lot of extreme apprehension about what spoons to use, that if you do something incorrect at table with a certain arrogance, as if you knew perfectly well you were doing it properly, you can get away with it and nobody will think you are bad-mannered or poorly brought up. They will think you are original and very witty.

I learned this trick the day Jay Cee took me to lunch with a famous poet. He wore a horrible, lumpy, speckled brown tweed jacket and grey pants and a red-and-blue checked open-throated jersey in a very formal restaurant full of fountains and chandeliers, where all the other men were dressed in dark suits and immaculate white shirts.

This poet ate his salad with his fingers, leaf by leaf, while talking to me about the antithesis of nature and art. I couldn't take my eyes off the pale, stubby white fingers travelling back and forth from the poet's salad bowl to the poet's mouth with one dripping lettuce leaf after another. Nobody giggled or whispered rude remarks. The poet made eating salad with your fingers seem to be the only natural and sensible thing to do.

None of our magazine editors or the *Ladies' Day* staff members sat anywhere near me, and Betsy seemed sweet and friendly, she didn't even seem to like caviar, so I grew more and more confident. When I finished my first plate of cold chicken and caviar, I laid out another. Then I tackled the avocado and crabmeat salad.

Avocados are my favourite fruit. Every Sunday my grandfather used to bring me an avocado pear hidden

at the bottom of his briefcase under six soiled shirts and the Sunday comics. He taught me how to eat avocados by melting grape jelly and French dressing together in a saucepan and filling the cup of the pear with the garnet sauce. I felt homesick for that sauce. The crabmeat tasted bland in comparison.

'How was the fur show?' I asked Betsy, when I was no longer worried about competition over my caviar. I scraped the last few salty black eggs from the dish with my soup spoon and licked it clean.

'It was wonderful,' Betsy smiled. 'They showed us how to make an all-purpose neckerchief out of mink tails and a gold chain, the sort of chain you can get an exact copy of at Woolworth's for a dollar ninety-eight, and Hilda nipped down to the wholesale fur warehouses right afterwards and bought a bunch of mink tails at a big discount and dropped in at Woolworth's and then stitched the whole thing together coming up on the bus.'

I peered over at Hilda, who sat on the other side of Betsy. Sure enough, she was wearing an expensive-looking scarf of furry tails fastened on one side by a dangling gilt chain.

I never really understood Hilda. She was six feet tall, with huge, slanted, green eyes and thick red lips and a vacant, Slavic expression. She made hats. She was apprenticed to the Fashion Editor, which set her apart from the more literary ones among us like Doreen and Betsy and I myself, who all wrote columns, even if some of them were only about health and beauty. I don't know if Hilda could read, but she made startling hats. She went to a special school for making hats in New York and every day she wore a new hat to work, constructed by her own hands out of bits of straw or fur or ribbon or veiling in subtle, bizarre shades.

'That's amazing,' I said. 'Amazing.' I missed Doreen. She would have murmured some fine, scalding remark about Hilda's miraculous furpiece to cheer me up.

I felt very low. I had been unmasked only that morning by Jay Cee herself, and I felt now that all the uncomfortable suspicions I had about myself were coming true, and I couldn't hide the truth much longer. After nineteen years of running after good marks and prizes and grants of one sort and another, I was letting up, slowing down, dropping clean out of the race.

'Why didn't you come along to the fur show with us?' Betsy asked. I had the impression she was repeating herself, and that she'd asked me the same

keep track of all our activities, and we spent a lot of mornings and afternoons away from the office going to affairs in town. Of course, some of the affairs were optional.

There was quite a pause. Then I said meekly, 'I thought I was going to the fur show.' Of course I hadn't thought any such thing, but I couldn't figure out what else to say.

'I told her I thought I was going to the fur show,' I said to Betsy. 'But she told me to come into the office, she wanted to have a little talk with me, and there was some work to do.'

'Oh-oh!' Betsy said sympathetically. She must have seen the tears that plopped down into my dessert dish of meringue and brandy ice-cream, because she pushed over her own untouched dessert and I started absently on that when I'd finished my own. I felt a bit awkward about the tears, but they were real enough. Jay Cee had said some terrible things to me.

When I made my wan entrance into the office at about ten o'clock, Jay Cee stood up and came round her desk to shut the door, and I sat in the swivel chair in front of my typewriter table facing her, and she sat in the swivel chair behind her desk facing me, with the window full of potted plants, shelf after shelf of them, springing up at her back like a tropical garden.

'Doesn't your work interest you, Esther?' 'Oh, it does, it does,' I said. 'It interests me very much.' I felt like yelling the words, as if that might make them more convincing, but I controlled myself.

All my life I'd told myself studying and reading and writing and working like mad was what I wanted to do, and it actually seemed to be true, I did everything well enough and got all A's, and by the time I made it to college nobody could stop me.

I was college correspondent for the town *Gazette* and editor of the literary magazine and secretary of Honour Board, which deals with academic and social offences and punishments—a popular office, and I had a well-known woman poet and professor on the faculty championing me for graduate school at the biggest universities in the east, and promises of full scholarships all the way, and now I was apprenticed to the best editor on any intellectual fashion magazine, and what did I do but balk and balk like a dull cart horse?

'I'm very interested in everything.' The words fell with a hollow flatness on to Jay Cee's desk, like so many wooden nickels.

'I'm glad of that,' Jay Cee said a bit waspishly.

'You can learn a lot in this month on the magazine, you know, if you just roll up your shirt-cuffs. The girl who was here before you didn't bother with any of the fashion show stuff. She went straight from this office, on to *Time*.'
'My!' I said, in the same sepulchral tone. 'That was quick!'
'Of course, you have another year at college yet,' Jay Cee went on a little more mildly. 'What do you have in mind after you graduate?'

What I always thought I had in mind was getting some big scholarship to graduate school or a grant to study all over Europe, and then I thought I'd be a professor and write books of poems or write books of poems and be an editor of some sort. Usually I had these plans on the tip of my tongue.
'I don't really know,' I heard myself say. I felt a deep shock, hearing myself say that, because the minute I said it, I knew it was true.

It sounded true, and I recognized it, the way you recognize some nondescript person that's been hanging around your door for ages and then suddenly comes up and introduces himself as your real father and looks exactly like you, so you know he really is your father, and the person you thought all your life was your father is a sham.
'I don't really know.'
'You'll never get anywhere like that.' Jay Cee paused. 'What languages do you have?'
'Oh, I can read a bit of French, I guess, and I've always wanted to learn German.' I'd been telling people I'd always wanted to learn German for about five years.

My mother spoke German during her childhood in America and was stoned for it during the First World War by the children at school. My German-speaking father, dead since I was nine, came from some manic-depressive hamlet in the black heart of Prussia. My younger brother was at that moment on the Experiment in International Living in Berlin and speaking German like a native.
What I didn't say was that each time I picked up a German dictionary or a German book, the very sight of those dense, black, barbed-wire letters made my mind shut like a clam.
'I've always thought I'd like to go into publishing.' I tried to recover a thread that might lead me back to my old, bright salesmanship. 'I guess what I'll do is apply at some publishing house.'

'You ought to read French and German,' Jay Cee said mercilessly, 'and probably several other languages

as well, Spanish and Italian—better still, Russian. Hundreds of girls flood into New York every June thinking they'll be editors. You need to offer something more than the run-of-the-mill person. You better learn some languages.'

I hadn't the heart to tell Jay Cee there wasn't one scrap of space on my senior year schedule to learn languages in. I was taking one of those honours programmes that teaches you to think independently, and except for a course in Tolstoy and Dostoevsky and a seminar in advanced poetry-composition, I would spend my whole time writing on some obscure theme in the works of James Joyce. I hadn't picked out my theme yet, because I hadn't got round to reading *Finnegan's Wake*, but my professor was very excited about my thesis and had promised to give me some leads on images about twins.

'I'll see what I can do,' I told Jay Cee. 'I probably might just fit in one of those double-barrelled, accelerated courses in elementary German they've rigged up.' I thought at the time I might actually do this. I had a way of persuading my Class Dean to let me do irregular things. She regarded me as a sort of interesting experiment.

At college I had to take a required course in physics and chemistry. I had already taken a course in botany and done very well. I never answered one test question wrong the whole year, and for a while I toyed with the idea of being a botanist and studying the wild grasses in Africa or the South American rain forests, because you can win big grants to study off-beat things like that in queer areas much more easily than winning grants to study art in Italy or English in England, there's not so much competition.
Botany was fine, because I loved cutting up leaves and putting them under the microscope and drawing diagrams of bread mould and the odd, heart-shaped leaf in the sex cycle of the fern, it seemed so real to me. The day I went into physics class it was death.

A short dark man with a high, lisping voice, named Mr Manzi, stood in front of the class in a tight blue suit holding a little wooden ball. He put the ball on a steep grooved slide and let it run down to the bottom. Then he started talking about let *a* equal acceleration and let *t* equal time and suddenly he was scribbling letters and numbers and equals signs all over the blackboard and my mind went dead.

I took the physics book back to my dormitory. It was a huge book on porous mimeographed paper—four hundred pages long with no drawings or

photographs, only diagrams and formulas—between brick-red cardboard covers. This book was written by Mr Manzi to explain physics to college girls, and if it worked on us he would try to have it published.

Well, I studied those formulas, I went to class and watched balls roll down slides and listened to bells ring and by the end of the semester most of the other girls had failed and I had a straight A. I heard Mr Manzi saying to a bunch of the girls who were complaining that the course was too hard, 'No, it can't be too hard, because one girl got a straight A.' 'Who is it? Tell us,' they said, but he shook his head and didn't say anything and gave me a sweet little conspiring smile.

That's what gave me the idea of escaping the next semester of chemistry. I may have made a straight A in physics, but I was panic-struck. Physics made me sick the whole time I learned it. What I couldn't stand was this shrinking everything into letters and numbers. Instead of leaf shapes and enlarged diagrams of the holes the leaves breathe through and fascinating words like carotene and xanthophyll on the blackboard, there were these hideous, cramped, scorpionlettered formulas in Mr Manzi's special red chalk.

I knew chemistry would be worse, because I'd seen a big chart of the ninety-odd elements hung up in the chemistry lab, and all the perfectly good words like gold and silver and cobalt and aluminium were shortened to ugly abbreviations with different decimal numbers after them. If I had to strain my brain with any more of that stuff I would go mad. I would fail outright. It was only by a horrible effort of will that I had dragged myself through the first half of the year. So I went to my Class Dean with a clever plan.

My plan was that I needed the time to take a course in Shakespeare, since I was, after all, an English major. She knew and I knew perfectly well I would get a straight A again in the chemistry course, so what was the point of my taking the exams, why couldn't I just go to the classes and look on and take it all in and forget about marks or credits? It was a case of honour among honourable people, and the content meant more than the form, and marks were really a bit silly anyway, weren't they, when you knew you'd always get an A? My plan was strengthened by the fact that the college had just dropped the second year of required science for the classes after me anyway, so my class was the last to suffer under the old ruling.

Mr Manzi was in perfect agreement with my plan. I think it flattered him that I enjoyed his classes so

much I would take them for no materialistic reason like credit and an A, but for the sheer beauty of chemistry itself. I thought it was quite ingenious of me to suggest sitting in on the chemistry course even after I'd changed over to Shakespeare. It was quite an unnecessary gesture and made it seem I simply couldn't bear to give chemistry up.

Of course, I would never have succeeded with this scheme if I hadn't made that A in the first place. And if my Class Dean had known how scared and depressed I was, and how I seriously contemplated desperate remedies such as getting a doctor's certificate that I was unfit to study chemistry, the formulas made me dizzy and so on, I'm sure she wouldn't have listened to me for a minute, but would have made me take the course regardless.

As it happened, the Faculty Board passed my petition, and my Class Dean told me later that several of the professors were touched by it. They took it as a real step in intellectual maturity.

I had to laugh when I thought about the rest of that year. I went to the chemistry class five times a week and didn't miss a single one. Mr Manzi stood at the bottom of the big, rickety old amphitheatre, making blue flames and red flares and clouds of yellow stuff by pouring the contents of one test-tube into another, and I shut his voice out of my ears by pretending it was only a mosquito in the distance and sat back enjoying the bright lights and the coloured fires and wrote page after page of villanelles and sonnets.

Mr Manzi would glance at me now and then and see me writing, and send up a sweet little appreciative smile. I guess he thought I was writing down all those formulas not for exam time, like the other girls, but because his presentation fascinated me so much I couldn't help it.

Chapter Four

I don't know just why my successful evasion of chemistry should have floated into my mind there in Jay Cee's office.

All the time she talked to me, I saw Mr Manzi standing on thin air in back of Jay Cee's head, like something conjured up out of a hat, holding his little wooden ball and the test-tube that billowed a great cloud of yellow smoke the day before Easter vacation and smelt of rotten eggs and made all the girls and Mr Manzi laugh.

I felt sorry for Mr Manzi. I felt like going down to him on my hands and knees and apologizing for being such

an awful liar.

Jay Cee handed me a pile of story manuscripts and spoke to me much more kindly. I spent the rest of the morning reading the stories and typing out what I thought of them on the pink Interoffice Memo sheets and sending them into the office of Betsy's editor to be read by Betsy the next day. Jay Cee interrupted me now and then to tell me something practical or a bit of gossip.

Jay Cee was going to lunch that noon with two famous writers, a man and a lady. The man had just sold six short stories to the *New Yorker* and six to Jay Cee. This surprised me, as I didn't know magazines bought stories in lots of six, and I was staggered by the thought of the amount of money six stories would probably bring in. Jay Cee said she had to be very careful at this lunch, because the lady writer wrote stories too, but she had never had any in the *New Yorker* and Jay Cee had only taken one from her in five years. Jay Cee had to flatter the more famous man at the same time as she was careful not to hurt the less famous lady.

When the cherubs in Jay Cee's French wall-clock waved their wings up and down and put their little gilt trumpets to their lips and pinged out twelve notes one after the other, Jay Cee told me I'd done enough work for the day, and to go off to the *Ladies' Day* tour and banquet and to the film première, and she would see me bright and early tomorrow.

Then she slipped a suit jacket over her lilac blouse, pinned a hat of imitation lilacs on the top of her head, powdered her nose briefly and adjusted her thick spectacles. She looked terrible, but very wise. As she left the office, she patted my shoulder with one lilac-gloved hand.

'Don't let the wicked city get you down.'

I sat quietly in my swivel chair for a few minutes and thought about Jay Cee. I tried to imagine what it would be like if I were Ee Gee, the famous editor, in an office full of potted rubber plants and African violets my secretary had to water each morning. I wished I had a mother like Jay Cee. Then I'd know what to do.

My own mother wasn't much help. My mother had taught shorthand and typing to support us ever since my father died, and secretly she hated it and hated him for dying and leaving no money because he didn't trust life insurance salesmen. She was always on to me to learn shorthand after college, so I'd have a practical skill as well as a college degree. 'Even the apostles were tent-makers,' she'd say. 'They had to

live, just the way we do.' I dabbled my fingers in the bowl of warm water a *Ladies' Day* waitress set down in place of my two empty icecream dishes. Then I wiped each finger carefully with my linen napkin which was still quite clean. Then I folded the linen napkin and laid it between my lips and brought my lips down on it precisely. When I put the napkin back on the table a fuzzy pink lip-shape bloomed right in the middle of it like a tiny heart.

I thought what a long way I had come.

The first time I saw a finger-bowl was at the home of my benefactress. It was the custom at my college, the little freckled lady in the Scholarships Office told me, to write to the person whose scholarship you had, if they were still alive, and thank them for it.

I had the scholarship of Philomena Guinea, a wealthy novelist who went to my college in the early nineteenhundreds and had her first novel made into a silent film with Bette Davis as well as a radio serial that was still running, and it turned out she was alive and lived in a large mansion not far from my grandfather's country club.

So I wrote Philomena Guinea a long letter in coal-black ink on grey paper with the name of the college embossed on it in red. I wrote what the leaves looked like in autumn when I bicycled out into the hills, and how wonderful it was to live on a campus instead of commuting by bus to a city college and having to live at home, and how all knowledge was opening up before me and perhaps one day I would be able to write great books the way she did.

I had read one of Mrs Guinea's books in the town library—the college library didn't stock them for some reason— and it was crammed from beginning to end with long, suspenseful questions: 'Would Evelyn discern that Gladys knew Roger in her past? wondered Hector feverishly' and 'How could Donald marry her when he learned of the child Elsie, hidden away with Mrs Rollmop on the secluded country farm? Griselda demanded of her bleak, moonlit pillow.' These books earned Philomena Guinea, who later told me she had been very stupid at college, millions and millions of dollars.

Mrs Guinea answered my letter and invited me to lunch at her home. That was where I saw my first finger-bowl.

The water had a few cherry blossoms floating in it, and I thought it must be some clear sort of Japanese after-dinner soup and ate every bit of it, including the crisp little blossoms. Mrs Guinea never said anything,

and it was only much later, when I told a debutante I knew at college about the dinner, that I learned what I had done.

When we came out of the sunnily-lit interior of the *Ladies' Day* offices, the streets were grey and fuming with rain. It wasn't the nice kind of rain that rinses you clean, but the sort of rain I imagine they must have in Brazil. It flew straight down from the sky in drops the size of coffee saucers and hit the hot sidewalks with a hiss that sent clouds of stream writhing up from the gleaming, dark concrete.

My secret hope of spending the afternoon alone in Central Park died in the glass egg-beater of *Ladies' Day's* revolving doors. I found myself spewed out through the warm rain and into the dim, throbbing cave of a cab, together with Betsy and Hilda and Emily Ann Offenbach, a prim little girl with a bun of red hair and a husband and three children in Teaneck, New Jersey.

The movie was very poor. It starred a nice blonde girl who looked like June Allyson but was really somebody else, and a sexy black-haired girl who looked like Elizabeth Taylor but was also somebody else, and two big, broadshouldered boneheads with names like Rick and Gil.

It was a football romance and it was in technicolour.

I hate technicolour. Everybody in a technicolour movie seems to feel obliged to wear a lurid new costume in each new scene and to stand around like a clothes-horse with a lot of very green trees or very yellow wheat or very blue ocean rolling away for miles and miles in every direction.

Most of the action in this picture took place in the football stands, with the two girls waving and cheering in smart suits with orange chrysanthemums the size of cabbages on their lapels, or in a ballroom, where the girls swooped across the floor with their dates, in dresses like something out of *Gone With the Wind*, and then sneaked off into the powderroom to say nasty intense things to each other.

Finally I could see the nice girl was going to end up with the nice football hero and the sexy girl was going to end up with nobody, because the man named Gil had only wanted a mistress and not a wife all along and was now packing off to Europe on a single ticket.

At about this point I began to feel peculiar. I looked round me at all the rows of rapt little heads with the same silver glow on them at the front and the same black shadow on them at the back, and they looked like nothing more or less than a lot of stupid

moon-brains.
I felt in terrible danger of puking. I didn't know whether it was the awful movie giving me a stomach-ache or all that caviar I had eaten.
'I'm going back to the hotel,' I whispered to Betsy through the half-dark.
Betsy was staring at the screen with deadly concentration. 'Don't you feel good?' she whispered, barely moving her lips.
'No,' I said. 'I feel like hell.' 'So do I, I'll come back with you.'

We slipped out of our seats and said Excuse me Excuse me Excuse me down the length of our row, while the people grumbled and hissed and shifted their rain boots and umbrellas to let us pass, and I stepped on as many feet as I could because it took my mind off this enormous desire to puke that was ballooning up in front of me so fast I couldn't see round it.
The remains of a tepid rain were still sifting down when we stepped out into the street.

Betsy looked a fright. The bloom was gone from her cheeks and her drained face floated in front of me, green and sweating. We fell into one of those yellow checkered cabs that are always waiting at the kerb when you are trying to decide whether or not you want a taxi, and by the time we reached the hotel I had puked once and Betsy had puked twice.

The cab driver took the corners with such momentum that we were thrown together first on one side of the back seat and then on the other. Each time one of us felt sick, she would lean over quietly as if she had dropped something and was picking it up off the floor, and the other one would hum a little and pretend to be looking out the window.
The cab driver seemed to know what we were doing, even so.
'Hey,' he protested, driving through a light that had just turned red, 'you can't do that in my cab, you better get out and do it in the street.'
But we didn't say anything, and I guess he figured we were almost at the hotel so he didn't make us get out until we pulled up in front of the main entrance.

We didn't dare wait to add up the fare. We stuffed a pile of silver into the cabby's hand and dropped a couple of kleenexes to cover the mess on the floor, and ran in through the lobby and on to the empty elevator. Luckily for us, it was a quiet time of day. Betsy was sick again in the elevator and I held her head, and then I was sick and she held mine.

Usually after a good puke you feel better right

away. We hugged each other and then said good-bye and went off to opposite ends of the hall to lie down in our own rooms. There is nothing like puking with somebody to make you into old friends.

But the minute I'd shut the door behind me and undressed and dragged myself on to the bed, I felt worse than ever. I felt I just had to go to the toilet. I struggled into my white bathrobe with the blue cornflowers on it and staggered down to the bathroom. Betsy was already there. I could hear her groaning behind the door, so I hurried on around the corner to the bathroom in the next wing. I thought I would die, it was so far.

I sat on the toilet and leaned my head over the edge of the washbowl and I thought I was losing my guts and my dinner both. The sickness rolled through me in great waves. After each wave it would fade away and leave me limp as a wet leaf and shivering all over and then I would feel it rising up in me again, and the glittering white torture-chamber tiles under my feet and over my head and on all four sides closed in and squeezed me to pieces.

I don't know how long I kept at it. I let the cold water in the bowl go on running loudly with the stopper out, so anybody who came by would think I was washing my clothes, and then when I felt reasonably safe I stretched out on the floor and lay quite still.

It didn't seem to be summer any more. I could feel the winter shaking my bones and banging my teeth together, and the big white hotel towel I had dragged down with me lay under my head numb as a snowdrift.

I thought it very bad manners for anybody to pound on a bathroom door the way some person was pounding. They could just go around the corner and find another bathroom the way I had done and leave me in peace. But the person kept banging and pleading with me to let them in and I thought I dimly recognized the voice. It sounded a bit like Emily Ann Offenbach.

'Just a minute,' I said then. My words bungled out thick as molasses.

I pulled myself together and slowly rose and flushed the toilet for the tenth time and slopped the bowl clean and rolled up the towel so the vomit stains didn't show very clearly and unlocked the door and stepped out into the hall.

I knew it would be fatal if I looked at Emily Ann or anybody else so I fixed my eyes glassily on a window that swam at the end of the hall and put one foot in

front of the other.
The next thing I had a view of was somebody's shoe.

It was a stout shoe of cracked black leather and quite old, with tiny air holes in a scalloped pattern over the toe and a dull polish, and it was pointed at me. It seemed to be placed on a hard green surface that was hurting my right cheekbone.

I kept very still, waiting for a clue that would give me some notion of what to do. A little to the left of the shoe I saw a vague heap of blue cornflowers on a white ground and this made me want to cry. It was the sleeve of my own bathrobe I was looking at, and my left hand lay pale as a cod at the end of it.
'She's all right now.'

The voice came from a cool, rational region far above my head. For a minute I didn't think there was anything strange about it, and then I thought it was strange. It was a man's voice, and no men were allowed to be in our hotel at any time of the night or day.
'How many others are there?' the voice went on.
I listened with interest. The floor seemed wonderfully solid. It was comforting to know I had fallen and could fall no farther.
'Eleven, I think,' a woman's voice answered. I figured she must belong to the black shoe. 'I think there's eleven more of 'um, but one's missin' so there's oney ten.'
'Well, you get this one to bed and I'll take care of the rest.'
I heard a hollow boomp boomp in my right ear that grew fainter and fainter. Then a door opened in the distance, and there were voices and groans, and the door shut again.
Two hands slid under my armpits and the woman's voice said, 'Come, come, lovey, we'll make it yet,' and I felt myself being half lifted, and slowly the doors began to move by, one by one, until we came to an open door and went in.

The sheet on my bed was folded back, and the woman helped me he down and covered me up to the chin and rested for a minute in the bedside armchair, fanning herself with one plump, pink hand. She wore gilt-rimmed spectacles and a white nurse's cap.
'Who are you?' I asked in a faint voice. 'I'm the hotel nurse.'
'What's the matter with me?'
'Poisoned,' she said briefly. 'Poisoned, the whole lot of you. I never seen anythin' like it. Sick here, sick there, whatever have you young ladies been stuffin'

yourselves with?'
'Is everybody else sick too?' I asked with some hope.
'The whole of your lot,' she affirmed with relish. 'Sick as dogs and cryin' for ma.'
The room hovered around me with great gentleness, as if the chairs and the tables and the walls were withholding their weight out of sympathy for my sudden frailty.
'The doctor's given you a ninjection,' the nurse said from the doorway. 'You'll sleep now.'
And the door took her place like a sheet of blank paper, and then a larger sheet of paper took the place of the door, and I drifted toward it and smiled myself to sleep.
Somebody was standing by my pillow with a white cup.
'Drink this,' they said.
I shook my head. The pillow crackled like a wad of straw. 'Drink this and you'll feel better.'

A thick white china cup was lowered under my nose. In the wan light that might have been evening and might have been dawn I contemplated the clear amber liquid. Pads of butter floated on the surface and a faint chickeny aroma fumed up to my nostrils.
My eyes moved tentatively to the skirt behind the cup.
'Betsy,' I said. 'Betsy nothing, it's me.'

I raised my eyes then, and saw Doreen's head silhouetted against the paling window, her blonde hair lit at the tips from behind like a halo of gold. Her face was in shadow, so I couldn't make out her expression, but I felt a sort of expert tenderness flowing from the ends of her fingers. She might have been Betsy or my mother or a fern-scented nurse.
I bent my head and took a sip of the broth. I thought my mouth must be made of sand. I took another sip and then another and another until the cup was empty. I felt purged and holy and ready for a new life.
Doreen set the cup on the window-sill and lowered herself into the armchair. I noticed that she made no move to take out a cigarette, and as she was a chain-smoker this surprised me.
'Well, you almost died,' she said finally. 'I guess it was all that caviar.'
'Caviar nothing! It was the crabmeat. They did tests on it and it was chock-full of ptomaine.'

I had a vision of the celestially white kitchens on *Ladies' Day* stretching into infinity. I saw avocado pear after avocado pear being stuffed with crabmeat and mayonnaise and photographed under brilliant lights. I saw the delicate, pink-mottled claw-meat poking seductively through its blanket of mayonnaise

and the bland yellow pear cup with its rim of alligator-green cradling the whole mess.
Poison.
'Who did tests?' I thought the doctor might have pumped somebody's stomach and then analyzed what he found in his hotel laboratory.
'Those dodos on *Ladies' Day*. As soon as you all started keeling over like ninepins somebody called into the office and the office called across to *Ladies' Day* and they did tests on everything left over from the big lunch. Ha!'
'Ha!' I echoed hollowly. It was good to have Doreen back.
'They sent presents,' she added. 'They're in a big carton out in the hall.'
'How did they get here so fast?'
'Special express delivery, what do you think? They can't afford to have the lot of you running around saying you got poisoned at *Ladies' Day*. You could sue them for every penny they own if you just knew some smart law man.'
'What are the presents?' I began to feel if it was a good enough present I wouldn't mind about what happened, because I felt so pure as a result.
Nobody's opened the box yet, they're all out flat. I'm supposed to be carting soup into everybody, seeing as I'm the only one on my feet, but I brought you yours first.'
'See what the present is,' I begged. Then I remembered and said, 'I've a present for you as well.'
Doreen went out into the hall. I could hear her rustling around for a minute and then the sound of paper tearing. Finally she came back carrying a thick book with a glossy cover and people's names printed all over it.
'*The Thirty Best Short Stories of the Year*.' She dropped the book in my lap. 'There's eleven more of them out there in that box. I suppose they thought it'd give you something to read while you were sick.' She paused. 'Where's mine?' I fished in my pocket-book and handed Doreen the mirror with her name and the daisies on it. Doreen looked at me and I looked at her and we both burst out laughing.
'You can have my soup if you want,' she said. 'They put twelve soups on the tray by mistake and Lenny and I stuffed down so many hotdogs while we were waiting for the rain to stop I couldn't eat another mouthful.'
'Bring it in,' I said. 'I'm starving.'

Chapter Five

At seven the next morning the telephone rang.