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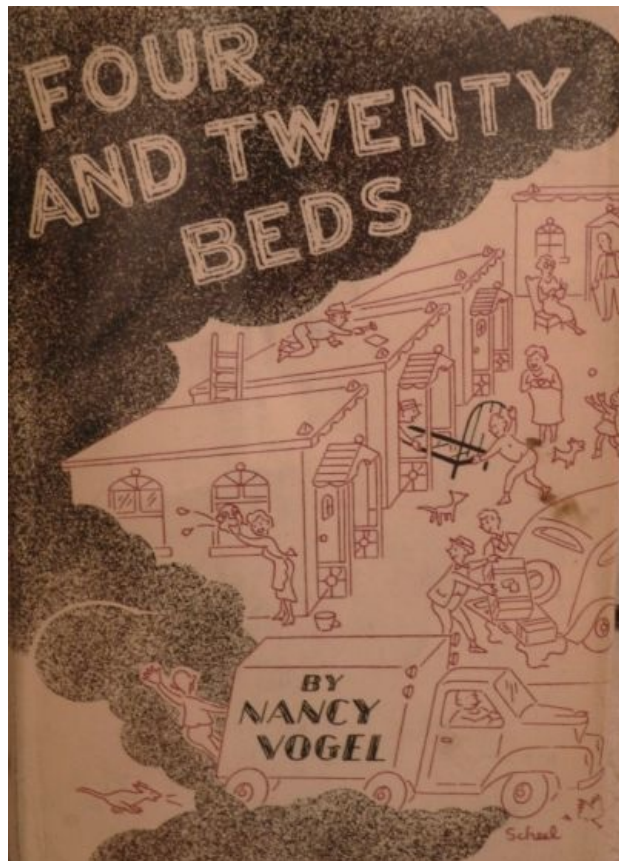
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FOUR AND TWENTY BEDS

By

Nancy Vogel

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CHAPTER ONE

ANYONE CAN MANAGE a motel successfully--anyone who can subsist on meals snatched a mouthful at a time, and requires no sleep; anyone who is a mechanic, gardener, publicity agent, handyman, psychologist, carpenter, and midwife combined; anyone who can cheerfully greet as "Mrs. Beulabottom" each of the various women who accompanies salesman Mr. Beulabottom on his frequent trips; anyone who is gregarious to the point of welcoming the strangers who will witness, interrupt, and discuss the intimate details of his life.

I'm shy, poor at dealing with people, helpless, lazy, and definitely the clinging vine type. The extra-curricular activities of the average husband shock me. I like to eat leisurely meals, and to sleep nine or ten hours a night; and the prime requirement of my soul is privacy.

I love the motel business.

My husband, Grant, is the one who possesses the qualifications that make our partnership in this business a success. He is efficient, patient (if there is money in it) and ingenious--and buying a motel was his idea in the first place.

It was all very sudden.

For a month Los Angeles had been having the kind of weather the Chamber of Commerce members mention only in whispers. Grant and I and our two children had colds, already a month old, which the fog and dampness were cherishing lovingly. Memorial Day and a weekend had been courteous enough to get together and arrange a three-day holiday; and so we decided to take a trip to the desert.

We stopped in Banning, a little town on the edge of the Mojave desert which boasts both altitude (2350 feet) and dryness, and which is popular with sufferers from all kinds of bronchial and respiratory troubles. Banning is about ninety miles from Los Angeles, and has a population of under eight thousand. It has a lot of motels, and of these we selected the one we considered the most attractive, and engaged a cabin for the next three nights.

The Moonrise Motel was a big, new, sparkling-white, green-shuttered structure, shaped a little like a horseshoe with its open end toward the highway. Wide graveled driveways curved in front of the cabins and around three central islands of grass. The interior of our cabin--artistically plastered, carpeted, well-furnished, and with superlatively rich details--was in keeping with the exterior. From the beginning I was awed by the beauty and the size of the motel, but no premonitory tickle hinted to me the incredible fact that within two months it would be ours. After unloading the car, we put David and Donna into the back seat again and drove around idly exploring Banning. Trees and flowers flourished everywhere, and high, rocky, beautiful mountains towered close toward the north and south and more distantly in the east.

"Let's move to Banning," I said. "Perfect scenery, perfect climate--what more could we want?"

Grant looked at me. He has a habit of simply looking at me on the occasions when he thinks I am more stupid than usual--a look that any fair-minded judge would consider ample grounds for divorce. Fortunately his endearing qualities so far outweigh his annoying ones that I have never considered testing any judge's fair-mindedness. The last time Grant gave me that look was when I came home from an antique shop with five perfectly matched silver deer bookends. The deer were bent forward in attitudes of straining, so that when their antlered heads were placed against a row of books they appeared to be holding them up by sheer force of muscle.

"But why five bookends?" Grant had asked, exasperated.

He is very unimaginative and practical. There's no use in trying to explain to a person of his type what effect the contents of an antique shop can have on a susceptible browser. Besides, I always get too mad to say anything at all when he looks at me like that.

And now he was giving me that same look.

"I'll speak to the manager of General Motors about moving the Los Angeles factory to Banning," he said.

It was hot, but there was a cooling wind all afternoon, and when we went to bed it was so chilly that it felt good to snuggle under the blankets. The children were asleep in their bed, and we lay there and talked--or, rather, I did.

"How much do you suppose a motel like this is worth?"

"Uh . . . uh . . . mm h'm."

"Let's see, they have fourteen cabins," I went on. "I counted them. The owners live in one, so that leaves thirteen to rent. There are eight other cabins that seem to be as big as this one, with two rooms, and they must get six and a half dollars a night for them, like they do for this one. And then those four cabins in the back; they seem to be smaller, just one room and one bed, probably, but they must bring in at least three or four dollars a night. Why, this place must earn about seventy dollars a night! Why, that's over two thousand a month!"

"Uh."

"And what wouldn't I do with two thousand dollars a month," I went on reverently.

Grant, it seemed was more than half awake, after all. "I don't know what you wouldn't do," he said, "but I know what you would do. You'd quick go to some junk shop and buy three earrings. You'd come home with half a pair of scissors, or one giant size bronze shoe tree."

"Seriously, though," I said, "Why don't we buy a motel--this very one, maybe? It would pay for itself in a few years, and then--"

"Uh. Mm h'm."

While he slept, I lay there and thought about going into the motel business. Grant could quit his job at General Motors, and together we could keep the cabins clean and the place looking its best. The more I thought about it, the more excited I became.

In the morning we drove into the business district of Banning, about a mile from the Moonrise Motel, and went into Pillyer's cafe, for breakfast. Pillyer was a thin, stooped old man with an embittered expression and a few lonely hairs on a broad expanse of skull.

"What's he mad about, Mama?" David whispered, when Pillyer had taken our orders and disappeared into the dim regions beyond the counter.

"Probably because everyone calls him Pill," I ventured.

Grant shifted Donna onto his other knee, feeling her diaper gingerly. He took a sip of water, and drummed his lean fingers on the counter.

"How would you like to go into the motel business?" he asked me.

I gasped for air.

"I've been figuring," he said. "Why, I'll bet a horned toad the Moonrise takes in two thousand a month. Say they want fifty thousand for the place, it would just about pay itself off, interest and expenses and all, in three years. It sounds pretty good to me. What do you think--shall we look into it?"

As I said, our going into the motel business was all Grant's idea.

While Donna took her nap that afternoon, and David alternately dug in the gravel and drew out from his mouth for inspection a long string of gum, we lay in the sunshine on one of the green

islands and talked feverishly. Grant had been wanting to get away from factory work; for a year he had been looking around in his spare time for a profitable business. He had wanted an automobile agency or a farm implement agency, but now he was willing to give up those plans in favor of getting a motel. Ever since our marriage six years ago we had saved our money; aside from our house and furniture, our only big expenses had been David, born five years ago, and Donna, born one year ago. We hoped that what we had saved--five thousand dollars--would be enough for a down payment on a motel.

When I saw the manager of the motel digging weeds out of the gravel I sauntered up to him and engaged him in a long conversation that dealt with everything from black widow spiders to the cost of living, and worked itself slowly to the subject of motels.

I told him frankly that we were thinking of going into the motel business, and asked if the Moonrise happened to be for sale.

He was a handsome, stocky man whose face dripped water continually. Sweat rolled in oily beads from his eyebrows, from his chin, and from the end of his nose, and it ran in a rivulet down the vertical wrinkle above his nose.

"Yes," he said, wiping the perspiration from his forehead with the back of his hand. "We've just decided to put it up for sale. The income varies from fifteen hundred to over two thousand, depending on the season. Wonderful climate, here in the San Gorgonio Pass, even if it is a little windy sometimes. It's a new motel, six months old; all the furniture is maple, everything brand new. Sixty-seven thousand."

I gulped. "And--how much down?" I asked timidly.

"Thirty thousand."

It was my turn to wipe away perspiration.

We spent the remaining days of our vacation haunting real estate offices and discovering that there was nothing new and nice for less than thirty thousand down.

We went back to Los Angeles, but we hadn't given up the idea of getting a motel. Every day for nearly a month, while Grant was working, I studied the classified sections of the papers and called real estate brokers. We even went to look at a few motels that were within our means, but they didn't seem to be worth the money--and, after the Moonrise, everything looked cheap and shabby and old.

It was exactly a month after we had first seen the Moonrise that we left the children with Grandma and took another trip to Banning. Perhaps somewhere in that lovely little city, we thought, we might find another motel that would satisfy us--and that we could afford.

But first, before driving around, we had to see the Moonrise again. Grant drove slowly as the Moonrise Motel came into view, and I looked wistfully out the window. The sun gleamed on the white stucco, and the bright green shutters were magnets to the eye.

"Isn't it beautiful?" I asked sadly.

"Look!" Grant exclaimed. "There's the manager, out digging weeds! Let's stop once and talk to him."

Grant is of Holland Dutch ancestry, a fact which shows itself principally in his tendency to insert a "once" or a "quick" into as many of his sentences as possible. He doesn't fall back on the superfluous "yet's" and "already's" that sprinkle the speech of his relatives, but his method of expressing himself is rather quaint.

(It was in a very quaint way, in fact, that he proposed to me. "Let's get married once," he said. I was so intrigued by his way of putting it that I agreed.)

The manager of the motel took out a large, clean handkerchief and mopped his face and neck when we drove in.

"You folks bought a motel yet?" he wanted to know.

"Nope," Grant said. "We've been looking around, but we can't find anything we like as well as this."

The stocky man wiped his face again, and I noticed that under the moisture of his skin there was a yellowish pallor.

"Got to sell now," he said. "I'm sick; going to a sanitarium the minute I get this place off my hands. You can have it for sixty-three thousand, five hundred."

"But the down payment ..." I said.

"You got fifteen thousand?"

Grant and I looked at each other. During the last month we had asked a real estate broker what we could get for our home, if we wanted to raise some money in a hurry. Eight thousand, he had told us.

That, with the five we had saved, would make thirteen thousand. Our furniture should bring close to a thousand, and we could borrow the rest from Grandma.

After six years, we were able to read each other's thoughts pretty well.

"Yep, we could raise fifteen thousand," Grant told the motel manager.

And that was the beginning.

When the deal was in escrow we advertised in the local newspaper that we had furniture for sale. The manager's apartment at the motel was completely furnished, and we intended to keep only our washing machine, our book-case, and the children's beds.

It was to be a thirty day escrow, but we wanted to begin selling our furniture immediately. Last minute sales usually bring low prices, Grant pointed out, and we needed every penny we could get. We could only hope that non-essential furniture, like rugs, end tables, and lamps, would be the first to go.

When I was a child--a typically selfish and demanding one--Grandma used to remind me "it ain't what you want that makes you fat, by gorry, it's what you get."

What we got, immediately after our ad was printed, was a fat, heavily perfumed woman who bought our dining room set and our kitchen table--items which we had hoped to keep until the last week before we left. Her husband, she said, would bring a trailer and get the tables later in the afternoon.

I stood in the doorway a while after she had gone, looking at the quiet little street where we had lived for six years. Palm trees rose majestically from the parkways, one in front of every house. The houses were neat, stucco squares set close together behind green lawns, and a brooding afternoon quiet hung over the neighborhood.

Our own house, too, was white stucco set behind a green lawn. The white stucco was trimmed with violet where Donna had rubbed it with a crayon, and there were patches of dirt in the grass where David and his friends had staged a "rasslin match." But it was home; I had come here as a bride, and my babies had been born here. Life at the motel would never be as smooth and peaceful as life here had been.

A wail from the bedroom announced that Donna was awake. It was time for David to come crashing home from kindergarten. I was busy with the children for about an hour, and then I heard heavy footsteps on the porch.

A round little man was standing there. "I come for the tables," he explained, taking the cap off his small basketball of a head.

"Oh, yes--come in."

He clumped into the house and began loading the two tables and the chairs onto a trailer. When he had gone Donna pointed to the spot where the kitchen table had stood.

"All gone," she mourned.

"All gone is right," I said grimly. "But at least we still have your high chair." I lifted her into it and tied a diaper around her fat middle, pulling it around the bars of her chair so that she couldn't climb out.

The doorbell rang.

"Hawve you a bedroom set for sale?" asked the tall, thin woman who stood at the door.

I showed her the bedroom set. She examined it through a lorgnette, thumped the mattress with a long, bony hand, and demanded to know how much I was "awsking" for it.

I told her.

She bought it.

"The moving wawn will be along in an hour," she informed me briskly, and she was gone.

I addressed the kitchen sink bitterly. "Is there any particular reason," I inquired of it, "why they have to buy our most necessary possessions first? Somewhere in this city are the people who are going to buy our lamps and end tables; what are they waiting for? I suppose they're going to be sweet about it and let us have the use of them until the day before we leave."

I was in a bad mood when Grant got home from work. He started to put his lunch bucket

where the kitchen table should have been. He put it on the sink instead and asked me why I looked so unhappy.

"They bought our kitchen table and our dining room set and the bedroom set," I wailed.

"For the price we wanted?"

I nodded miserably.

"Wonderful!" He seized me in his grease-stained hands and swung me above his head.

"You won't think it's so wonderful after you've slept on the floor a few nights," I prophesied grimly.

The doorbell rang. "Ah," I said, "it must be the moving vawn."

While two muscular men dismantled the bedroom set and carried it out, I prepared dinner. I had no idea how or where we were going to eat it, but I decided not to face that problem until it came.

It came soon enough. The moving van had gone, taking with it all hope for the next month's nocturnal comfort, and the potatoes were done. The pork chops were brown and sizzling, and the peas were steaming.

I pondered.

Should we put the plates on the kitchen floor and squat around them?

That wouldn't be very comfortable.

I could put the breadboard over the bathroom sink, making a small table out of it. David and I could sit on the edge of the bathtub, and Grant could sit on the--

No, that wouldn't do.

I settled it by filling our plates and carrying them into the living room. Grant's and David's plates I set on each arm of the davenport. I put my own plate on an arm of the overstuffed chair. The salt, pepper, bread and butter were in the middle of the living room floor.

"Are you still glad we sold our tables?" I asked Grant, when we had started eating.

He's always willing to put up with a little inconvenience if there's profit in it.

"Yep," he said. "If we hadn't quick sold them the first day, it might have turned out that no one would want them at all, and we'd have to come way down in the price. Please pass the bread."

"Just the same," I said, getting down on my hands and knees to get him a piece of bread, "I'm going to add twenty dollars to what we planned on asking for the living room set. If anyone wants it tomorrow they're going to have to really pay for it!"

"You split your infinitive, Mama," David said.

There's one thing that must be said for David. Maybe he does usually sound more like a herd of elephants than like one small, agreeable little boy, and maybe he does create a very reasonable facsimile of chaos when he gets hold of a piece of gum--but he recognizes a split infinitive when he hears it. My friends all think he's an infant prodigy--in that one respect, anyway. But sometimes I wish I'd never taught him anything about grammar. I didn't know what a split infinitive was until I was in high school, and I got along just as well without knowing. I never made Grandma want to swing me by the heels and smack my head against a wall, either.

"I'm very sorry I split an infinitive," I told David. "I'll try to be more careful in the future. But just the same," I went on, turning back to Grant, "whoever buys that living room set is going to really pay for it!"

"Fine," Grant said, getting up and going into the kitchen; "the more money we can raise, the better." He came back carrying a jar of horseradish; he sat down and put some horseradish on his plate, and proceeded to mix it thoroughly with his peas.

One of the strangest things about Grant, hardly compatible with the efficiency and practicality of his nature, is his passion for weird combinations of food. I have learned to look the other way while he improves upon what I have prepared; if I were to watch while he mixes and eats his little gastronomical horrors, I doubt if I'd be able to do much eating myself.

I slept--or, rather, spent the night--on the davenport, and Grant slept in David's twin-size bed with David. In the middle of the night I sat up and felt the welts across my back that the ridges in the davenport cushions had made. I went through the empty bedroom where our lovely, comfortable bed used to be, into the children's bedroom.

Grant was lying slantwise across David's bed, with David draped across him. The baby was sleeping peacefully on her stomach in her crib. I considered crawling in with her, but I was afraid the crib wouldn't hold an additional hundred and twelve pounds.

I went back into the living room, put another blanket over the davenport cushions to cover the ridges more thoroughly, and lay down again.

After breakfast I felt more kindly toward the davenport, though. In our hour of need it was serving as table, chairs, and bed. What were a few welts in the face of all that?

Just then the doorbell rang. It was a short, dark, bristling man who actually tinkled whenever he moved. I was so fascinated by this discovery that he was inside the house punching at the davenport before I realized that he wanted my precious living room set.

"How much?" he shot at me suddenly.

I told him, adding twenty dollars to the price we had originally planned to ask for the set.

"Fine! Sold!" he barked, tinkling as he peeled off crisp green bills into my hands.

"What are you staring at?" he cried.

I backed away timidly. "It's just that--that noise you make," I said. "I was just wondering--"

He put a thumb under the watch chain that was draped against his vest and thrust it out where I could see it. There was a tiny golden bell attached to the chain.

He let go of the chain suddenly and strode to the overstuffed chair, picking it up as though it had been a child's chair.

"Open the door, please."

He loaded the chair and davenport onto his pickup truck and drove away.

I sat down in the middle of the living room floor, my hands full of the crisp green bills, and burst into tears.

The rest of that month crawled by. I visualized the angel in charge of time chortling and slowing down the time machine so that he'd have longer to watch us sitting on boxes and eating from boxes, and to watch me sleeping on the floor--which I chose in preference to sleeping with David and being kicked all night.

The general inconvenience, and living in such a state of upset and excitement, didn't seem to bother Grant very much. What annoyed him most about the whole proceeding, I think, was the fact that since a part of our savings was in small government bonds that had to be cashed, he'd had to sign his name and address seventy-five times. He learned from experience what the term "writer's cramp" means.

We had sold our home, of course, getting all cash for it and retaining possession of it until the day we were to take over the motel. Actually it was the real estate broker whose advice we had asked about its value, who bought it. The rise in prices that followed the war had made it worth a lot more than we paid for it, and we knew that the realtor too would make a profit on it. But we needed the cash in a hurry, so we were glad to sell it to him.

Grandma had lent us two thousand dollars. Grandma is a short, sturdy widow without a lazy bone in her body or a wrinkle in her face. Her eighty-year-old "boyfriend," Hellwig, had offered us five hundred dollars more, but we thought we'd be able to get along without the bachelor's mite.

That made our fifteen thousand. What we got for the furniture, and Grant's weekly paychecks from General Motors, would have to see us through the moving and whatever extra expenses might come up.

Our furniture kept selling steadily, and I put a lot of our accumulated, surplus household goods on display, too. We wouldn't have room for it in the new place; I was resolved to get rid of as much of it as I possibly could.

The woman who bought our lamps and rugs, a Mrs. Alexander, kept coming back to see what else I'd brought out from closets and drawers in the way of household goods. Every time she came, she bought several armloads of things. Toward the end of the month, when nearly everything was gone, she even bought our half-empty cans and jars of spices and cereals, and on her next trip she bought Grant's rusty tools and half-used cans of paint. She bought at least twenty dollars worth of junk that we would otherwise have thrown away. I couldn't help wondering what her house must look like. She had probably been acquiring things as avidly as this ever since she got married. I even sold her the five silver deer bookends!

We were all getting very tired of eating and sitting on boxes.

"I never want to see another box, once we get away from here," I said. "Just think, some day

all of this will be only a memory. Some day I'll sleep on a bed again, and we'll have chairs to sit on, and a real table to eat from. Someday, this will all be over."

And then, suddenly, it was. Suddenly it was the day before we were to leave, and there was a flurry of last minute packing to do, and a last night of sleeping on the hard floor, and then it was the Saturday we were to take possession of the motel.

Grant hadn't given up his job. Our monthly payments on the first and second trust deeds were to be three hundred dollars each (one of them would be four hundred after the first of the year) and he didn't dare to quit his job until we had a little money saved. We'd get settled this first weekend, and after that I'd have to manage the place alone, while he came back to Los Angeles to work. He would live with Grandma, in her apartment.

I had been so busy selling things and packing, all month, that I hadn't had time to become frightened at the prospect, but now, putting the last of our things in the two-wheeled trailer Grant had borrowed from a friend, I found myself dwelling upon it more and more, and feeling more and more certain that I'd never be able to do it. Even the average woman might not succeed at a new job of such proportions, and anyway, the resemblance between me and the average woman is purely superficial. I am the type who would call in a plumber to put a new washer in a faucet. I remember that on one occasion when, with unusual brilliance and energy, I tightened a screw with a knife, it was weeks before I finished telling people about my exploit.

When everything was packed on the trailer and squeezed into the back seat of the car, I took the camera out of the glove compartment. I handed it to Grandma and told her to take a picture of us, with the loaded trailer as background.

Grant is inclined to be a little impatient when he has a big job ahead. "Come on, come on, we haven't got time to be fooling with pictures," he said.

"Oh, yes we have," I said firmly. "This is a historic occasion, and we must have a picture of it."

Grumbling, he came to stand beside me. I held Donna in my arms, and David stood beside Grant. Grandma focused the camera and took our picture.

I put the camera back into the glove compartment, and kissed a weeping Grandma goodbye.

"They wun't nothing seem right, with you folks gone!" she exclaimed.

I told her to say goodbye to Hellwig for us, and I climbed into the front seat with the children. I took a last look at our prim white house, gleaming in the morning sunlight, and at all the other prim houses on the palm-lined street.

Then Grant started the car, and we were off!

CHAPTER TWO

IT WAS A long, hot, uncomfortable ride. The children, who ordinarily ride in the back seat, had to ride in front because the back seat was piled to the ceiling with clothes, pans, boxes and suitcases.

Grant had fastened an old blanket over the trailer to protect its contents from dirt and wind. It wouldn't stay fastened, though, and when we were on the highway headed toward Banning he had to stop the car and get out about every ten minutes to adjust it and to see how the things in the trailer were riding. The ironing board was slowly working its way loose from the ropes with which he had tied it to David's bed. Several books had slid forward from the crevice where I had tucked them, and their pages were fluttering and waving as though, I thought sentimentally, in farewell to the life we had known.

"Those mmm things," Grant mumbled.

I had put a lot of the odds and ends we hadn't been able to sell, and that Grant wouldn't let me throw away, into some small cardboard boxes. I had packed these onto the rear of the trailer with my own little lily-white hands, giving Grant another occasion for disgust at my inefficiency. For now, one by one, they were freeing themselves and plopping onto the road. After a few stops, to pick up the boxes and try to repack them in a trailer that was so loaded there was no room for them, Grant gave up the time-wasting game. When one of the cardboard boxes dropped off, slapping itself against the highway, he'd just let it go, and keep on driving.

I was very happy over the situation. I hadn't wanted to take all those unnecessary articles along with us to our new tiny living quarters anyway. Every time a box fell off, I looked back to be sure it wasn't something else--something we'd have to stop for. "This is just like Hansel and

Gretel," I told Grant cheerfully.

The baby got tired of being so crowded, and she began to cry. David was restless, and Grant was getting more and more provoked with the way the things on the trailer were unpacking themselves. We were driving through beautiful scenery--orange groves and tall palm trees with their dead branches drooping like old-fashioned pantalettes, and mountains in the background--but none of us paid much attention to it. We were too anxious to get the trip over with.

When we got to the Moonrise Motel, after a three-hour drive, the manager and his wife were ready to leave. They gave us the keys, and showed us briefly how they registered guests and how they kept track of the laundry; and, assuring us that people wouldn't start coming for cabins until evening, they got into their car and left. A lost, scared feeling spread from my chest to my stomach as I realized that from now on, what ever might happen, we ourselves would have to handle it.

A hot, hot wind was blowing from the east, across the desert. Perspiration dribbled down our faces and necks as we got to work.

When we had unpacked the trailer and had lunch, Grant set up the baby's crib and I put her to bed for her nap. Then I went outside to see if the place looked any different, now that it was actually ours.

The motel is built in three sections, which are arranged in the shape of a square-cornered U, with the open end toward the highway. The angles of the U are disconnected; the three sections are separate buildings. The back section, parallel to the highway, consists of four single, externally joined cabins without garages.

The other two sections of the motel, facing each other across the wide driveways and the islands of cool-looking grass between them, are identical. Each consists of five double cabins with garages between. There is no cabin number 13, and for some strange reason, no number 5; so our fourteen cabins are numbered up to 16. Cabin 16 is the one directly opposite the one we live in, which is number 1. Cabins 16 and 1 are the closest to the highway, only sixty feet from that roaring, screaming wide ribbon that is flung across the burning desert and stretches clear through to the coast.

The three islands of grass are surrounded by white cement curbs, and the graveled driveways curve around and between the islands as well as in a direct path in front of every cabin. Each island of lawn has three small Chinese elm trees, and the nine trees form a prim, straight row.

In front of the motel is a big green and red neon sign which says "Moonrise Motel." Directly beneath that is a smaller sign saying "no vacancy," or, if the metal cover is over the "no," saying "vacancy." The sign is double; each "no" has a cover.

Behind the four rear cabins which face the highway is half an acre of rocky, desert ground, with a bumpy private road on one side leading from our driveways back through one of the open angles of the U to the dirt road, Williams street, at the end of our property line, which runs parallel with the highway and leads into town.

I wandered out behind the rear cabins and looked at our big back yard. After six years of living in the crowded outskirts of a big city, that barren half-acre looked like a little chunk of heaven. It was a safety valve as far as the busy highway was concerned. We would fix it up so that the children could play out here happily and safely. We could plant an orchard. We could even build a little house out here for Grandma. The opportunities presented by that half acre of ground were limitless. But that would all come in the future. Right now, there was the present to consider.

I stood at the edge of the highway and looked in each direction. We are nearly a mile from the business district of Banning, and that mile is thick with motels. Directly west of us is a new restaurant, and east, toward the desert, there are only a few motels between us and the Mojave. Across the highway are a cocktail lounge, several small motels and two service-station markets. Beyond those, I saw the beautiful ranges of mountains, with the afternoon sun forming little cups of shadow, like dark dimples, on their steep sides--Mt. San Gorgonio towering on the north, and Mt. San Jacinto rearing its lovely head on the south.

I breathed deeply. Banning had a scent all its own, one I had noticed before--a scent compounded of freshness and clear skies and blossoms, and the essence of the mountains. My tour of inspection completed, I went back into our cabin. It was small, but so attractive and so new that living in it, I thought, should be more pleasant than in our old home in Los Angeles. There was a large living room, which contained, besides the usual amount of living room furniture, the bed we would sleep on; a small kitchen, and a bathroom and closet; and the adjoining garage at the time was half converted into a bedroom--that is, two windows and a cement floor had been put in it, and a door connected it with the living room. Unfinished as that bedroom was, the children would have to sleep in it.

The office was actually the partitioned-off front part of the children's bedroom. It was completed, and plastered to match the rest of the interior, with dull red broadfelt carpeting like that in all the cabins. There was a large built-in desk in the office--chest high, to be stood at

rather than sat at--with registration cards and a desk set on top of it.

We finished unpacking and storing our belongings in the few inadequate drawers and shelves. Donna was still asleep in her crib, and David was out exploring.

Grant and I sat down and looked at each other.

Grant has blue eyes and coarse brown hair, just as I do. Our children never had a chance to have different coloring; they, too, have brown hair and blue eyes. David has long black curly lashes, and thick hair, while Donna's hair is so fine it won't even hold a bobby pin or a ribbon. It grows straight forward on her head, and usually hangs down over her face. We call her "Little Chief Hair-in-the-Face." I have consistently refused to have her hair cut into bangs, in spite of the arguments of Grant and Grandma. "It'll grow long enough to curl or braid one of these days," I always tell them.

"Well," Grant said, "it's five o'clock--about time we were getting our first customer."

He is tall and slenderly built, and so wonderfully competent--even if he isn't very systematic--that I always feel awkward by contrast. But I never in my life felt so helpless as when, just as he finished speaking, we heard the scrunch of tires on the graveled driveway outside.

"Oh, someone's coming," I said nervously. "You go see who it is. You go."

I sat in a corner of the living room where I could hear and not be seen from the office. I alternately twisted my hands and bit my nails as Grant opened the office door and stepped out to meet the driver of the car. This was a momentous occasion. I strained to hear as the men began to speak.

"This motel's just changed hands, hasn't it?"

"Yep, that's right."

"Well, I've got something here that I know will interest you, as the new owner. A revolutionary kind of vacuum cleaner ... cuts your work and your cleaning bill in half ... no motel owner should be without one."

I sighed and relaxed.

If the rule is true that women are the worst gossips, Grant must be the exception that proves that rule. He can outtalk any woman; he has more endurance, more lung power, and far more enthusiasm, when it comes to a prolonged conversation on any subject, than any avid old lady, or any young girl draped about a telephone. This habit of his annoys me, partly because he usually indulges it just when I have some work for him to do, and partly because I am jealous of his ability to get along well with everyone. I have such a shy nature that I am seldom able to get past the polite amenities with anyone whom I have known less than three years ... a great disadvantage for anyone as extremely inquisitive and curious as I.

Being so talkative, and so unable to end a conversation, Grant is easy prey for salesmen. That is, although he seldom buys what they are trying to sell, he lets them waste hours of his time.

When Grant finally got rid of the vacuum cleaner salesman, I went in to get the baby. The conversation about vacuum cleaners had awakened her. It wasn't, I realized, the last time that noises from the office, so close to her bed, would awaken her.

I fixed dinner, clumsy in a new, differently arranged kitchen. While I washed dishes, Grant dried them, and there followed an uneasy evening during which we both pretended to read, but actually sat straining to hear above the children's voices the sound of a car driving into our driveway.

The sun was sinking, and the mountains were clothed in soft shadows. I stood looking out the kitchen window, which faced the darkened east, and I saw the neon sign of the second motel from us turned on. It was a big, impressive sign, with the name of the motel--the Peacock--in bright red letters, and a green "vacancy" sign above it. There was the likeness of a huge, stately, graceful peacock above the name of the motel, blazoned in bright blue and red neon.

"Our sign!" I exclaimed suddenly. "It's time to turn it on!"

Grant had thought of it the same instant I had, and, like greedy children with a new toy, we rushed to the dark office. The light switches--five of them--were side by side in a neat and very confusing little row on the wall behind the desk.

I yanked Grant's outstretched hand aside. "I want to do it!"

He offered a compromise. "We'll take turns once."

"All right. Me first!"

I hovered over the switches with loving indecision. Finally I pushed up the one on the

extreme right.

The office light beamed suddenly on us from the ceiling. "Oh, that isn't fair!" I cried. "I didn't know that was the office light--I didn't--"

"You had your turn," Grant said firmly. He reached out one thin brown finger and flipped up the switch that was second from the left. I looked out the window woefully. Sure enough, he had lit up the "Moonrise Motel" part of the sign.

"You've been experimenting," I accused him. "You knew that was the right switch."

I should have realized he'd know all about the switches. He always investigates everything, and if there is something he doesn't know how to do, he learns how. He's a jack of all trades--and a master of all of them, too! Usually that makes me very proud of him, but right now I was just exasperated. "Now I'm going to turn on the 'vacancy' sign," I said, jabbing grimly at another switch.

Grant laughed. "You turned on the porch light outside the office door." He put his finger on a switch. "Now look out the window."

I looked out, and saw the green "vacancy" spring into brilliant being.

Furiously I flipped up the other switch. That, it developed, lit up the red "office" sign outside and above the office door.

It was a beautiful evening. After the hot day the breeze was cooling and refreshing. The branches of the slender little Chinese elms waved gently.

When I had put the children to bed Grant said, "It's too nice to be inside. Let's go outside once." We sat on the curb of the front island of grass and watched our sign proudly. The island in which the sign stood was planted in myrtle and bright Martha Washington geraniums, and now, with the reflection of the soft neon light on them, they were a mass of color.

Cars were thick in front of the cocktail lounge across the street. Every once in a while a car, leaving, would make a turn in the highway preparatory to going back to the business district, and we'd catch our breaths.

"I thought sure that one was coming in," Grant remarked, at intervals, about five times while we sat there. And then suddenly the neon lights flickered and went out, leaving a complete and utter blackness.

We sat there, horrified. Without a neon sign, there wasn't the slightest possibility that any of the cars on the highway would stop at our motel . . . indeed, their drivers couldn't possibly realize that there was a motel here at all.

By the light of a match. Grant called up the electricity company. No doubt twenty other people were calling them, too, but he wanted to be sure they'd have the lines repaired at once. I happened to remember that I had put some candles on one of the shelves under the kitchen sink. We lighted two candles, setting one in a saucer on the desk in the office, and the other in the living room.

The electricity was off until after eleven-thirty. It wasn't the whole city of Banning that was affected; just an area of about two blocks, starting with us and extending west, toward the business district. The Peacock's sign was blazing twice as brightly beside all that darkness, and every once in a while a car left the surge of traffic and slipped into the Peacock's driveway.

And then, at nearly midnight, our sign flashed on again. Of course all the other signs did too, but ours was the only one we saw, even though its modest, steady colors were put to shame by the flashing red, white and blue eye of the Winking Eye, the second motel to the west of us. The lights hadn't been on ten minutes when a sleek black sedan nosed into our driveway.

"A customer!" Grant exclaimed.

"You go, you go," I chattered, wondering how on earth I'd manage when he went back to Los Angeles and I'd have to overcome my shyness and talk to our customers myself.

But Grant was already approaching the driver.

I was sitting on the curb of the island, and I couldn't quite hear their voices. But after a few seconds of conversation the man got out of the car and followed Grant into one of the cabins. Then he went back with Grant into the office. "He's registering!" I thought with awe.

Presently the man came out of the office, got back into his car and drove into the garage adjoining the cabin he had looked at. I could see now that there were two people in the back seat.

I hurried into the office, where Grant, with a dazed expression, stood looking at a five dollar bill and a fifty-cent piece.

"Our first money from the motel," he said. "Shall we frame it?"

There was no door between the office and our living room. The whole interior of the cabin was lighted up by our neon sign. When we lay in bed we could see the desk in the office; and, conversely, people standing in the office would be able to see us.

Grant hung a filmy curtain over the doorway, fastening it at the top with thumb tacks. When the office light was on and the living room light was off, we discovered by experimentaion, it was possible to see from the living room into the office, but not the reverse.

That, I reflected as I lay in bed, would be very cozy. I'd be able to lie in bed and watch while people filled out registration cards (which would be a soothing agent to my rather abnormal curiosity)--but they wouldn't be able to see me. This seemed like the ultimate in privacy. And to have a real bed, a soft comfortable bed again, seemed the ultimate in luxury.

After we went to bed people began driving in, thick and fast. Grant had to hop out of bed so many times that finally he decided to stay up. He put on his robe and slippers and sat in a chair in the office doorway. I watched avidly as he rented cabins, admiring again the ease and sureness with which he did something he had never done before.

I had dozed off, in spite of the lumbering of trucks and the zipping of traffic along the highway. I felt someone shaking me. "Come and look once," Grant said.

I followed him sleepily and looked out the window where he pointed.

Our sign proclaimed, "No vacancy!"

"You mean they're all rented?" I cried.

"Every one. It's three o'clock; we rented them all in a little over three hours."

"How much did we take in?" I asked.

"Over sixty-five dollars," he said smugly. "I guess it's a good omen, the cabins being full the first night."

He got into bed and, with his customary annoying suddenness, fell asleep.

I was too excited to sleep. I padded happily around the room in my bare feet. I went into the children's bedroom to see if they were covered. The light from the highway, and the glow from neon signs, made the room so light that I could see them clearly.

David, as sound a sleeper as his daddy, was asleep and covered with a thin blanket. Donna was wide awake, motionless, her big blue eyes watching me fixedly behind the screen of hair that hung over her forehead, as I approached her crib. The traffic, the lack of her accustomed bedtime darkness, and the voices of people in the office, had apparently kept her awake ever since I put her to bed.

I patted her head, pulled the thin blanket snugly around her plump neck, and went back to bed. At five, awakened by the rumble of an unusually noisy truck, I went in again and looked at her. She was still gravely awake. I'm sure she didn't sleep at all that first night.

That ended her tendency to be a light sleeper, though. Since that first night she has slept as well as David.

Sunday is supposed to be a day of rest, but the next day was one Sunday when rest was the most remote possibility in the world for us. The people in our cabins were checking out one after the other, leaving their keys in the doors of the cabins or coming into the office and tossing them on the desk. (One man, leaving early, had got Grant out of bed at five-thirty just to hand him a key!)

Now, after a happy, exciting night of renting cabins, we were faced with the result--thirteen dirty cabins to be cleaned.

We had contacted Mrs. Clark, the strongly-built, dark-haired cleaning woman who did the work for the former owners, but she wasn't coming until Monday. She would work for us only every other day, because we were too low on funds to dare spend any on having work done that we could do ourselves.

I put the baby in her playpen, reminded David again not to play near the highway, and Grant and I set to work on the cabins. We were tired anyway after a day of moving and a night of very little sleep, and whenever I happened to catch a glimpse of myself in one of the little round mirrors that hung on the wall of each cabin as I worked, I was shocked. My thick, long hair was tangled and untidy, because of Banning's cooling but too incessant wind. My eyes looked sunken, and my face pale. (With so much work before me, I hadn't taken time to put on any makeup.) I tried to avoid looking in mirrors, because it made me feel twice as bad to realize how tired and bedraggled I looked.

Grant cleaned the bathrooms, scouring until every fixture shone, while I stripped the cabins of their dirty towels and sheets, brought clean ones, and made the beds. I emptied ash trays and wastebaskets and dusted while Grant vacuumed the floors. That may sound simple, but, multiplied by thirteen, it becomes drudgery. We plodded along, almost without hope that we would ever finish. Emptying and polishing the twentieth ashtray, I cursed the day that cigarettes had been invented. My hands grew rough and sore from tucking in so many sheets and blankets, slipping so many pillows into clean cases, and adjusting and smoothing so many spreads. My back ached. I began to wish I was in Los Angeles again. I wondered dully how I could ever have considered it work to clean up just one five-room house, with only two beds in it to be made.

Every once in a while I had to stop and see that the baby was all right. David helped by playing in our cabin near her playpen, so that she wouldn't get lonesome and begin to cry.

At lunchtime there was just one cabin left to clean. Grant said he'd clean that one, while I fixed lunch. I carried in clean sheets and pillowslips, hand towels, bath towels, wash cloths, and a bath mat, and went in to prepare lunch.

I was too tired to do anything but open a can of soup; we were both too tired to appreciate anything more elaborate, anyway.

Just one task remained for Grant before his return to Los Angeles--to put up David's tent, in the back yard. I hated to insist on his putting up the tent when he was so tired, but I knew that having the tent up back there would be the only thing that would keep David away from the front of the motel, occupied, and out of mischief. We had agreed to keep the children as invisible from the front of the motel as possible; the sight of children is too likely to suggest to travelers that here is a place where their cars and belongings might be tampered with, and where there will be so much noise that sleeping will be difficult.

About nine o'clock that night Grant went back to Los Angeles. He rented three of the cabins before he left, and we agreed on a method of keeping books.

Grant would come back each weekend and possibly once during each week, although to drive ninety miles each way just to be here for a few hours would hardly be worthwhile. He wouldn't quit his job until our income from the motel was consistently so good that we knew we'd be able to make our payments and repay Grandma.

I'd have all the renting to do, I'd have to supervise and help the cleaning woman, on alternate days I'd have to do all the cleaning; I'd have the two children to take care of, I'd be completely responsible for anything that might go wrong with the motel. The lights might all go off again, or the plumbing might get stopped up. I had visions of careless customers tossing towels and hairbrushes blithely down the toilets.

Many authors mention, when they want to portray intense feeling, that their heroine views a certain happening with "mixed emotions." Well, my emotions as I watched Grant drive off the gravel onto the highway weren't mixed in the least. They were all the same. I was scared to death.

CHAPTER THREE

FORTUNATELY I HAD the children in bed, where I didn't have to worry about them, when the next customer drove in. He was a brisk-looking, gray-haired man in a new coupe.

Often during my life I had heard people speak of "buck fever." It had seemed strange to me that any hunter should, at his first sight of a deer, tremble and shiver and find his fingers too numb and unresponsive to pull the trigger.

Now, though, I understood. With no capable, confident husband to talk to the man, I would have to do it myself. My fingers were icy as I opened the door, and I forced my lips apart in what I hoped looked like a pleasant smile of greeting.

My knees were quivering (visibly, no doubt) and my voice, when I squeaked "hello" to the man, was so like the sound of a rusty hinge that I glanced around in surprise.

The tall, gray-haired man looked at me strangely and asked if I had a vacancy.

I throttled the moronic impulse to gibber "I feel like there's a great big one in my head!" and carefully mouthed the words I had rehearsed for such an emergency as this.

"Yes, I have," I chirped. "Would you care to see it?"

"Please," he replied, with a pained expression that seemed to say, "Well, what in hell do you

think I'm here for?"

I led the way to one of the single cabins in the rear. He followed close behind me. It was about three hundred feet from the office to the single cabins--much too far for two people to walk together without saying a word. Coyotes were howling in the blackness of the hills, and I felt like howling with them.

I was hot with embarrassment as his footsteps padded along behind me. I cast about frantically in my mind for a topic of conversation. If only I had noticed the state on his car license I could ask him how the weather was where he came from. But I couldn't risk saying merely, "How's the weather where you came from?" He might sneer, "Same as it is here. I just came from the other side of town."

He tramped along close behind me, without saying a word. We still had more than half the distance to go to get to the cabin. Suddenly I had an idea. Maybe something in his costume, or an emblem or pin he might be wearing, would give me a topic for conversation. I turned and looked back at him, searching for pins or ornaments in his lapel and working slowly up to his face, which was ten or twelve inches higher than my own. The yard lights, bright lights on a pole on one of the grass islands, made the details of his clothing visible. Just as I got up to his eyes I was struck by his expression. He didn't say it, but I could literally feel him thinking it: "Well, what the hell are you staring at?"

We went the rest of the way in silence--still more of it. I sighed with relief as we reached the door of the single cabin--at last the ordeal was over.

And then I realized I had forgotten to bring the key!

His eyes were on me, impatient, obviously bored with my stupidity and slowness.

"I--I forgot the key. I'm very sorry. I'll go get it," I stammered.

Throwing dignity to the Banning breezes, I broke into a run as I headed back toward the office. Not only was I in a hurry to get away from the pitying contempt in his expression, but I was afraid that if he didn't get a little satisfaction soon he'd just get into his car and drive away. It would be terrible if I lost my first customer, especially after such a bad start. I'd never have the courage to tackle one again.

Seizing the master key out of the desk drawer, I rushed back and opened the door, snapping on the light and motioning him into the cabin.

His eyes flicked over the maple furniture, the red carpet, the Venetian blinds, and back to me.

"Well, the cabin's okay," he said.

We embarked on the trip back to the office, while I pondered over the inflection of his words.

He filled out the registration card, paid me four dollars, accepted the key from my frigid hand, and turned to give me one last contemptuous glance before he stepped out of the office.

I sank onto the davenport, weak with relief that my initiation into the horrors of cabin-renting was over.

I suppose the affliction from which I suffered would be called customerphobia. Such a word, if it existed, would be defined in the dictionary as "a morbid fear of customers." No doubt in extreme cases the victim would run shrieking at the sight of a customer. (As a matter of fact, I had had to exert a lot of self-control to keep from doing that very thing!) I grace the ailment by the coining of a name only because I discovered others can suffer from it too. Grandma, later, was to go through a violent attack of it, with much more disastrous results.

The next car that drove in that night disgorged a dark, trim looking man with big ears who demanded, "How mocha get two people?"

"Four dollars," I said.

"How mocha get three people, four people?"

"Five dollars and a half; six-fifty for four people," I said. "I wanna to buy it," the man declared.

"All right," I said indulgently. "Just fill out this registration card."

"No, no--no, no no!" he cried, shoving the registration card away in horror. "I means, I wanna to buy it, I wanna to buy it to belong to me. I got thirty thousand dollars down pay. You wanna to sell your motel?"

"Well," I hedged, "we hadn't really thought of selling. How much did you want to pay?"

He fingered one huge ear, and I saw the glitter of a diamond on his finger. "Let's let me look at it, first. Then I make you offer."

I showed some of the empty cabins to him and his wife, a meek little woman who clambered out of their car and trailed along after us. I led them out to the land behind the back row of courts. It was just a gigantic splotch of blackness at this time of night, but I described it to them. They were very much impressed.

When we were back in the office Mr. Gorvane--for he had introduced himself by now--said, "I been looking around, this is nicest court in Banning. I wanna it to belong to me. I offer you seventy-five thousand."

I gasped. By selling, we would make eleven and a half thousand dollars profit. That was a lot of money, especially considering the short length of time involved.

I promised him I would talk it over with my husband the following weekend. I took his address--he lived in Los Angeles--and told him that Grant would stop in to see him in a little over a week.

Every once in a while during the rest of that evening, I caught myself almost on the verge of tears. I tried to figure out what was the matter with me, and I realized that I was unhappy because I was afraid Grant would insist on selling the motel. I wanted to keep it, no matter how much we might be offered for it.

Still, I was glad Mr. Gorvane had made the offer. My relatives and the few of our closer friends to whom we had told the price we were paying for the motel had insisted that we were being fools, that the motel couldn't possibly be worth it; that the business about the owner being sick and having to sell was an old, old gag, that we'd lose every penny. I had never really doubted the wisdom of our course, but it was nice to have my faith in the value of our motel upheld. And if some one offered to buy it for seventy-five thousand the day after we took possession, probably in a couple of months, with the beginning of the season at Palm Springs, (a popular winter resort twenty miles from us) and the influx of winter tourists into California, we'd be offered even more.

After those two encounters, the edge wore off my customerphobia. I rented two more cabins before I went to bed. I checked carefully to be sure that all the neon lights were on. Then I locked the office door and the door that led outside from the living room, and lay down on the bed with my clothes on.

The scrunch of wheels on gravel brought me off the bed several times, but it turned out to be cars going into the restaurant next door. The beam of the headlights of cars turning around in the restaurant parking lot shone between the cracks of our Venetian blinds, casting stripes of light against the wall, and made me think cars were coming into our driveway.

There was no doubt, though, that the next car I heard was in our driveway. Besides the agitation of the gravel, there was a thud, and then loud, excited male voices.

I hurried to the door and looked out. A battered roadster, which had apparently come from Williams street along our private road and entered the graveled driveway from the rear, had banged up against the curb of one of the grass islands. Two young men in the roadster were arguing in a heated and highly alcoholic manner.

The idea of approaching two angry, unpredictable drunks didn't appeal to me, but I knew I couldn't let them stay there, making a disturbance that would be sure to annoy our customers. "Thish ish too the highway!" one of the men roared.

"No, it ish not! Thash the highway over there, where the lightsh are! You better let me drive, you're drunk, don't even know where the highway ish."

They struggled for a moment over possession of the steering wheel. Finally the one who had been driving said, "You're drunk yourshelf. Here, you better drive."

They traded seats, with painstaking clumsiness. Then they sat quietly for a moment, apparently about to go to sleep.

I was trying to coax my reluctant legs to carry me fiercely toward them when, to my relief, the new driver started the car and pulled out onto the highway. I hoped they would get safely wherever they were going.

At last I relaxed and went to sleep. Anyone who drove up wanting a cabin would ring the bell by the office door, anyway.

I couldn't have been asleep more than five minutes when the bell rang for the first time. I rented four more cabins during the night, each about an hour after the other. Nervousness and excitement kept me awake about half an hour after I rented each cabin, and I'd just be drifting into the sounder stages of sleep when the bell would ring again.

It wasn't a very restful night.

In the morning Mrs. Clark, the husky maid, came to work in the cabins. She was, in a bristling way, proud of her dark complexion and her Irish-Italian ancestry, and contemptuous of "them funny-lookin' foreigners that's always stayin' in your cabins," but she seemed to enjoy the work of cleaning the cabins, and did it with a zest and speed I could never have equaled. When I got the children fed and dressed and the baby in her playpen, I decided to tackle the mountainous heap of laundry. The laundry truck was due in a couple of hours; and I felt sure that, on the first day at least, it would take me almost as long to sort and count and list the dirty things as it would have to actually wash and iron them myself.

In the garages between cabins number 2 and 3 there were several strips of leftover linoleum standing against the back wall. I rolled these flat on the floor and brought armfuls of dirty linens from a compartment in the linen closet, putting them on one side. Then I sorted the things into six different piles--sheets, slips, hand towels, bath mats, wash cloths, bath towels. My arms began to ache from lifting each sheet and shaking it to be sure no smaller articles were wrapped up in it. Then I stuffed the sheets into a laundry bag, counting them carefully. There were sixty sheets, and I had to get a second laundry bag out of the linen closet.

The linen closet was a huge, roomy affair built against the back of the garage adjoining cabin 2, and it left plenty of room for a car in the garage. There were three gigantic shelves in it. On the bottom shelf were extra blankets and bedspreads, cleaning equipment of all kinds, and supplies such as soap, toilet paper, small boxes of matches, and water pitchers. On the middle shelf were stacks of clean linens--about two hundred of each item. On the top shelf we had stored as many of our personal belongings as we could get along without temporarily, since there was no room for them in our cabin.

I was exhausted by the time I had counted all the laundry, stuffed it into bags, and listed it in the laundry book. Just as I finished, the laundry truck roared into the driveway and stopped suddenly in front of the garage where I stood, gravel flying in all directions. The driver got out. He was a likeable, lanky, red-haired youth with a very few tiny patches of white skin showing between his freckles.

"How d'you like the motel business by now?" he asked me, as he lifted the heavy bags into the back of the truck.

"It's fun," I said, "all except cleaning cabins, and sorting laundry, and keeping books, and getting up in the night to rent cabins!"

He laughed, and rubbed his brown-speckled nose. "You'll get used to it," he said.

That night wasn't as bad as my first night alone had been. I rented five cabins before I went to bed, and I did it with so much nonchalance that I was proud of myself.

Once I got into bed, though, reaction from two days of worry and hard work and a night of very little sleep set in. I slept deeply, dreamlessly, without moving, until the shriek of the office bell shattered my sleep.

Dazedly I went into the office, snapped on the light, and unlocked the door. Two young men came in. "We want a cabin with two double beds," the taller man said.

He filled out the registration card which I shoved sleepily toward him. "How much?" he asked.

"Five-fifty," I replied. Our rate for a double cabin with two double beds was five and a half or six and a half dollars, depending on the number of people that were to occupy it. We had decided to charge that much or less, depending on the demand for cabins and the number of "vacancy" signs along the highway, following the custom of the former owners.

Each of the young men laid a five dollar bill on the counter. I looked at the bills groggily. I was still half asleep.

"Just one of those will do, with fifty cents beside," I said.

"We want to pay separately," said the shorter man. "Give us each change, please."

I missed Grant, with his quick mind and his easy competence, more intensely at that moment than I missed him yet. I smothered a yawn and tried to concentrate on the difficult task before me. My reasoning, if you could call it that, was hazy and confused.

"Well," I thought, opening the cash drawer and looking at the array of five and one dollar bills, and fifty cent pieces and quarters, "they're each paying half of five and a half. How much is half of five and a half, anyway? Half of five would be two and a half, so half of five and a half would be a little more than that. How much more? Well..." At that point I lost the thread of the whole thing and had to begin over. "Suppose," I thought, starting on a new tack, "I would give each of them a dollar. That would mean they each had paid four dollars, which would be too much. Well, then, suppose I gave them each three dollars. That would mean they had each paid me two dollars, which wouldn't be quite enough. But how much would it lack of being enough?"

Arithmetic had always stirred up a swirling fog inside my head. My eyelids were drooping more and more, and yet I was beginning to feel beneath my drowsiness a desperate panic. The men were growing impatient.

I frowned and stared more sternly at the money in the cash drawer. I summoned all my powers of concentration. I handled the money in the drawer ostentatiously, as a bluff, so that they would think I was beginning to go into action.

I still don't remember how I did it--unless maybe it was by doling out the money slowly and watching their faces until their expressions suggested they had received the full amount--but somehow the awful situation ended and the men went to their cabin.

The following morning when I did the day's bookkeeping I found that there was fifty cents too much in the cash drawer. Still, I didn't feel that the system I had used the previous night had much to recommend it, and I resolved not to try it again.

Traffic noises along the highway were loud and almost ceaseless--they quieted down a little just often enough to give the next crescendo the greatest possible impact. Planes roared up and down from the airport which was about a block to the southeast; trains whistled and roared along the track that was a block to the south; cars and trucks and busses roared along the highway. The whole highway, in fact, was one big, solid roar.

After the first few days, though, the noise faded to the back of my consciousness. The peal of the office bell would rouse me instantly, even if I were working in a cabin several doors away, but the sky-shattering whine of jet-propelled planes made no impression on me at all.

Travelers and newcomers to the vicinity nearly always commented on the noise. Often they'd have to raise their voices to be heard above it. I got so used to the noise that when someone would yell above the din, "What an awful racket that train makes'." I'd shriek back, "What train?"

I was beginning to become acquainted with some of our neighbors. Moe, the bald, thick-set, beak-nosed man who owned the restaurant next door, had a son, Moejy (no doubt a corruption of Moe, Jr.) who was about a year older than David. The first moment I laid eyes on Moejy I had a premonition that he would turn out to be the most obnoxious child I had ever encountered--a premonition which, as later events were to prove, was correct.

He was a wiry boy with a small head, close set ears, and eyes that darted about continually in search of insects to be dismembered or walls to be scribbled on. He was about a head taller than David, and in the second grade. For the first few days after we took possession of the motel, he and David were inseparable.

Directly to the east of us, between us and the imposing Peacock, was a four-unit motel that was unfinished and had no neon sign. The owner of the place was a tall, gaunt black-haired old man with a curiously pink chin. His name, I had learned, was Featherbrain; and I reflected that he must possess more sterling and endearing qualities than were immediately visible, to have inspired in the woman who married him such affection that she was willing to accept him, name and all.

He worked each day on his little motel, painting and hammering, while his wife, always with a cigarette in one hand, planted shrubs, lined the driveways with big rocks which she painted white, and did the watering--an important job in this part of the country. Our own shrubs, the islands of grass and the geraniums beneath our sign needed a thorough watering every day. We discovered that watering every other day was not enough; the grass would turn brown and die in spots unless it received a daily watering.

There were advantages to the heat and dryness, though. Besides being contributing factors to what must be one of the most healthful climates in the world, they made it possible for one to hang clothes up on a line, stand and wait a few seconds while the things were whipped by the wind, and take them down, completely dry.

I never had to worry about not having enough clothesline space, even though there were only three short lines between the posts Grant put up behind the rear cabins a few weeks after we took over the motel. When the three lines were full, the first line of clothes was ready to be taken down, making room for the rest of the wet things.

Donna, even though I had less time to be with her, and she had to remain in the safety of her playpen for the greater part of the day, was growing and developing rapidly. She was becoming more agile, and she could climb on and off the furniture--something she hadn't yet been able to do when we left Los Angeles. It was a problem what to do with her when a customer came while she was out of her playpen. I never dared leave her alone in the house on such occasions, for fear she might somehow get outside and onto the highway. If I chucked her suddenly into her playpen, though, and went to talk to the customer, she would howl with indignation. Since her playpen was in the unfinished bedroom right behind the office, where her howls would be plainly audible, that had to be prevented. So I put a bag of cookies on the bookcase, and whenever I had to rush her to the playpen suddenly, I gave her a cookie in each hand. She became too absorbed with enjoying her feast to protest over where she had it.

I bathed her sometimes in the kitchen sink, sometimes in the dishpan. Our cabin, like the other thirteen, had a lovely tile shower, but no bathtub. One morning I had just set her in the dishpan of warm water on the kitchen table when the office bell rang. It must be a salesman, I reasoned; we very seldom had customers this early in the morning. I'd get rid of him in short order. I picked up the baby's celluloid duck, which was on a chair beside the table, and gave it to her to keep her entertained. Then I hurried into the office.

Three very distinguished looking men stood there. They introduced themselves; they were representatives of some motel and apartment house association, which they wanted us to join.

They launched into an exposition of the various benefits connected with belonging to their organization, and described the exalted position of the member. The principal spokesman of the group, a dignified creature with a glistening bald head, was waxing very eloquent indeed when suddenly he stopped, coughed, and delicately adjusted the white handkerchief in his pocket. Obviously he was rattled about something, and behind his close, even shave a faint red was rising. The other two men laughed uncomfortably, and I realized they were looking at a point behind me. I turned, to see what they were looking at.

There, with her celluloid duck in one hand, stood Donna, as naked as the spokesman's head, beaming graciously and impartially upon the three men.

It was so hard to handle the baby and the motel, doing half of the work of cleaning cabins, taking care of the laundry, answering customer's questions and listening to their views on life when there were a dozen other things I should be doing, that I persuaded Grant to quit his job. Business was good, even better than we had hoped it would be, and every night our garages were filled with sleek, shiny automobiles from every part of the country. The income from the motel was almost as much in one night as Grant was earning in a week. Unless something went terribly wrong, there was no reason why we wouldn't make a financial success.

So Grant left Southgate (the suburb of Los Angeles in which the General Motors plant was located) and came to Banning, bag and baggage; and I shucked my new capability, that had been born of necessity, and reverted to being my old helpless self, which was more natural--and a lot more fun.

Grant and I had discussed Mr. Gorvane's offer to buy the place, and had decided that we wanted the motel more than we wanted the quick, easy profit.

That is, Grant decided that--I had known all along that that was how I felt about it.

CHAPTER FOUR

THERE'S A LOT of work to running a motel, and no matter how many people there are to do the work, there's never a moment when they are completely caught up. Always there are the big jobs awaiting any rare moments of leisure--digging out the insidious weeds that thrust their way through the gravel, planting flowers and improving the external appearance of the place, utilizing the extra land, and repairing the inevitable damage done by careless customers.

Mr. Featherbrain, the old man next door--whose black hair, I suspected, was dyed--finally got his motel finished to the point where it was ready to operate; and one day some men came and installed a big neon sign (Palace Motel--Vacancy) in front of his place. It was a great day for him. He came over to talk to us about it. He leaned his tall form against our office door, stroked his rosy chin, and said, "Well sir, I'm a goin to have muh 'no vacancy' up tonight afore anybody else. Yep, two hours after dark, and we'll be full."

"Good for you," I said. "With only three cabins to rent, you should be able to do it, too!"

"Durned old fellers that put up the sign," he grumbled, "they went'n knocked all muh white rocks out of line with theit truck. I shoulda busted evvy bone in their head."

A customer drove into our driveway, and the irascible old man went home. A middle-aged woman in a mouse-colored dress got out of the car, and just as she began to speak another car, a green coupe, whirled up on to the gravel. A well built, fiftyish man with his dark hat at a rakish angle stepped out of the car and said, "Do you rent any of your cabins by the week, madame? I've got some work to do in Palm Springs--I'm a contractor, don't know just how long I'll want to stay, but--" Realizing suddenly that he had interrupted the middle-aged woman, he swept off his hat and bowed before her.

"I apologize deeply, madame," he said. "It was unforgivable. Pray go ahead and do your business with this young lady, while I wait my turn."

The woman smiled timidly, first at him and then at me. She was a dainty, plump, small-boned

creature with white, slightly rouged skin and tiny white hands. Her blue eyes, underlined with a criss-cross of faint wrinkles, sparkled behind rimless glasses.

"Bon jour," she said. "I'm Miss Nestlebert. I, too, was wondering if you rent cabins by the week or month. I have to live in this climate for my health for a few weeks ... the doctor says I'm just on the verge of asthma, and a few months of desert air should prevent it from developing."

"We usually rent our cabins on an overnight basis," I said, "but there's no reason why we couldn't rent them by the week."

"Of course I know it will be simply terribly expensive," she said, "but I want a nice place like these you have here, and I'm willing to pay for it." She took a deep, rattling breath.

"Come on, I'll show you what we have," I said, my smile including the man with the dark hat. His eyes, I noticed, were sparkling with love of life and a private amusement.

Miss Nestlebert and the man, whose name turned out to be Hawkins, were both pleased with the newness and the cleanness of the cabins. I gave them cabins 7 and 8, and as they left the office after filling out registration cards he set his hat back on his head in order, apparently, to be able to lift it gallantly.

"May I call upon you tonight?" I heard him ask. A truck thundered past and I couldn't hear her reply, but I watched them as they walked together toward their cars. Her birdlike head was fluttering in agreement with the remarks he was making, and his steps were jaunty.

I turned my attention to the desk, to put the date and the cabin number on each of the two registration cards. About to pick up a pencil, suddenly I gasped and jumped backward. There, leering at me with strangely human eyes, was an enormous black spider, motionless on one of the registration cards.

I would have called Grant, but I knew he was behind the rear cabins, cleaning out the incinerator. I was on my own.

I picked up a newspaper that was on one edge of the desk, moving quietly and carefully, and folded it until it was narrow and stiff.

I hated to think of having squashed spider all over the top of the desk, but I hated even more to think of letting the huge, loathsome creature escape. I raised the folded newspaper, with grim slowness, and then I brought it crashing down on the registration card.

I sighed with relief. There, that would fix him! I lifted the paper, preparing to clean up the mess.

There, still watching me mockingly, sat the spider, still motionless--and completely unharmed!

About that time it began to dawn on me that this was a very strange spider, indeed. I had seen every imaginable sort of insect since we came to Banning, including black widows, but I had never in all my life seen anything resembling this.

I moved a little closer and, bending down, looked the spider over carefully. Then I laughed and picked him up in my hand. He was made of rubber. Either Miss Nestlebert or Mr. Hawkins must have left him there, since he was on top of the registration cards.

I put him in the cash drawer, where he would give Grant a shock.

I went back into our cabin and set to work on a "Vacancy" sign I was making, to hang up just outside the office door under the neon sign that said "Office."

We had been thinking of getting a neon "vacancy" sign, but we were afraid it would be too expensive. One night the "Moonrise Motel" sign had begun to flicker on and off, so we telephoned Oian Rosco, the only neon expert within fifty miles. Grant was disgusted at the idea of having to hire anyone to fix something for him, but neon signs are one thing--probably about the only thing--he doesn't know how to fix.

While Rosco, a small man with an innocent-looking round face, was fixing our sign, we asked him how much a neon "vacancy" sign would cost. He told us he'd figure it out and let us know when he brought back the parts for our broken sign.

When he returned with the parts, he not only gave us an estimate of the cost, but brought along a penciled sketch of the sign as he planned it, in its full size.

It was very attractive, and he could make it for us in a very short time, but it would cost a little more than we wanted to spend, with what neighboring motel owners called the "late summer slump" due at almost any time. We'd think it over, though, we told him.

He left the penciled sketch for us to consider, assuring us, his round eyes guileless, that he had no use for it.

We decided that, even though we didn't feel that we could afford a neon sign, we should have a "vacancy" sign of some kind to hang under the "office" sign. It would catch the eyes of the minority of people who look toward the office, instead of at the big sign in front of a motel, to determine whether or not accommodations are available.

"I'll get a board the size of the 'office' sign," Grant, the ever resourceful, said: "I'll paint it white, and you can put the letters on carefully with pencil. Then we'll paint the letters black."

"A good idea," I agreed, glancing at the paper Rosco had left, and at the beautiful, perfect lettering on it.

When Grant put the dry, white-painted board before me a few days later, I had a battle with my conscience. Should I take a ruler and painstakingly create my own letters, or should I cut out Rosco's letters and trace them onto the board?

The latter course seemed the most practical. Still, a stern inner voice told me, Rosco had put his time and work into that sample sign with the hope of selling us its counterpart in neon, not so that we might make use of his labor by tracing his letters and making a sign ourselves, thereby pushing ourselves still further out of the market for the neon sign he might have sold us.

I finally decided that the only honorable thing to do would be to start from scratch. Pushing his sign aside, I set laboriously to work making new letters. If I cast an occasional glance at the formation of his lettering as I worked, it was accidental.

I was intently studying the proportions of his "Y" when the office bell rang. I put aside my work guiltily and hurried to the door.

It was Miss Nesdeburt. She gave me a timid smile.

"My cabin is just lovely," she said, her tiny white hands fluttering up to her glasses. She took them off, as though she could see me better without a barrier of glass between us; "it's really lovely," she continued. "I was wondering if I could borrow a pencil? I'd like to write some postcards and tell every one I've found a cabin, and I seem to have forgotten to bring a pen or pencil."

"Certainly. We've got dozens of them," I said lightly. I opened the cash drawer and put my hand into it.

Then I shrieked and leaped backward. There, in the drawer, sat a huge black spider!

Then I remembered, and I could feel the color flooding into my face. I had been taken in by my own trick--and before an audience, too!

"It's just--just an artificial spider, made of rubber. I forgot, for a minute, that I'd put him in there. I was going to play a little joke on my husband, you know. But I guess the joke was on me." I produced a laugh that was meant to be hearty, but which actually was sickly and aggrieved.

Miss Nestlebert's sparkling blue eyes had never left my face. Her expression was sad and horrified. "Et tu, Brute?" she asked, with more pathos than Caesar could possibly have squeezed into the three words.

"What do you mean?" I asked uneasily.

"Why, what kind of a den of practical jokers have I gotten myself into?" she wanted to know. "First Mr. Hawkins, now you."

"Oh, but I'm not really a practical joker," I assured her hastily. "In fact, it must have been Mr. Hawkins who left this spider to scare me, and I just thought as long as I had it anyway I'd scare my husband. I'm not in the habit of doing things like that. Did Mr. Hawkins scare you with a spider too?"

She shuddered daintily. "Mais non! It was worse than that."

I leaned across the desk eagerly.

"I'll--I'll tell you when I know you better," she said in confusion. "Really, it was quite a dreadful thing. Maybe I shouldn't let him come to call tonight after all."

She took the pencil I handed her, smiled her thanks, and went thoughtfully out the office door.

We hadn't been in the motel business long before we discovered that the proper name for customers is "clients" or "guests"--not the common, vulgar "customers" that came so naturally to our lips. In spite of the good example set by practically all the other motel owners we knew, who were careful not to use the uncouth word, we continued calling our customers what they were--customers.

Grant, falling as easily and competently into the role of motel owner as he had into his many

former roles, must have convinced our customers from his very first day that he was a veteran of the motel business. His every action, his every remark led people to believe he had been in this part of the country, at this work, for years. He freely employed such words and phrases as "usually," "generally in the summer here," and "every winter." If a customer were to ask him, "Isn't it warmer than usual here?" he'd reply something like, "Nope, it always gets pretty hot here, this time of year. In a month or so it'll get cool, though; there'll even be snow on those mountains."

The sweating customer, glancing at the close, towering mountains to the north and south, would mention that it didn't seem possible, and Grant would say, "Yep, it's a surprise, every winter, when the desert heat turns into snow and cold wind. It happens, though." Of course it does happen, too, but at the time he had only our neighbor's word for it. Snow near Banning was something as incredible to us as it was to any traveler across the hot desert.

When I was still in the last stages of customerphobia, Grant was dealing with the people who stayed in our cabins, and their often outlandish requests, with ease and confidence. He had at his fingertips the answers to the amazing array of questions customers put to him, and the distances between most of the fairly well known cities in the country. If anyone who had rented a cabin wanted to know the distance to Los Angeles, Grant told him: eighty-nine miles. But if someone who hadn't yet registered wanted the same information, Grant would tell him that it was "almost a hundred miles" (merely another way of putting it) and the prospective customer would usually decide, since it was so far, he might as well stay for the night instead of driving on in.

Grant could describe the location of the nearest (or best-in-Banning) bar, restaurant, skating rink or lumber yard. He could get rid of the west-bound, cross-country truck drivers who, preparatory to going to the bar across the highway for a quick beer, parked their long, two-sectioned trucks so that the rear section blocked one of our two driveways. We had one driveway on each side of our sign; they led from the highway and were the initial source of all our income.

Getting rid of truck drivers was one thing I could never do; and there had been many occasions during the time Grant was still working at General Motors, and later, when he was away during the day on business, that it had been necessary for me to try. I had two approaches, one stern, the other sweet, which I varied. Actually, I guess I alternated them, on the theory that last time one hadn't worked, so this time I'd try the other! My stern approach called forth two general reactions on the part of the drivers, who were always about to descend from their puffing, steaming contraptions as I ran up. My tough expression and sharp, short order to the driver to get his truck away at once!--would bring forth (a) an amused "Look who's talkin'" smile, and a significant glance from the lofty perch of the truck seat, at my slender height of slightly over five feet; or (b) it would kindle an equally warm response, and I'd find myself showered by abuse, epithets, and threats from a mouth twisted frighteningly sidewise, full of tobacco juice, and topping off a frame composed of so much bulging muscle that I'd start back to the cabin without arguing.

My "sweet" approach was just as unsatisfying. There were two reactions to it, too, and neither resulted in the removal of the truck.

"I know you don't realize it," I'd say, my voice dripping saccharin, "but your truck is blocking our driveway. I wonder if you'd mind moving it?" And I'd smile and flutter my eyelashes.

Either the truck driver would exclaim something like, "Well, hi there, honey! You just forget about the truck and think about who's drivin' it. How about givin' me your phone number, honey, so's next time I come through here--"

Or else he'd reply in a falsetto imitation of my too-sweet voice, "Oh, dearie me, is that dreat big bad truck really block ing your itsy bitsy driveway? 'oo just stand there and pout at it while I go get me a itsy bitsy glass of beer."

Both these types of reply were quite beside the point. Truck drivers are one breed of men with whom I can't commune.

Grant, of course, never has any trouble with them. Whenever possible, I watch out the window as he runs up to whatever truck is the offender at the moment and speaks with the driver a few moments. He smiles, the driver waves a hand good naturedly, and the truck moves off. I have never been able to understand how he does it.

Grant is so irritatingly competent, in fact, that I can't help being secretly overjoyed about his one weak point. He has no sense of system or organization, and he can seldom make the money in the cash drawer, when he takes out the day's profits, add up to exactly the amount our penciled list, filled in customer by customer, says it should. When I was running the place alone it always balanced out to the penny, with the exception of that one morning when I found fifty cents too much. When Grant left General Motors and came to Banning, he began adding money to the cash drawer if there weren't enough small bills, taking money out of the drawer on any pretext, and in general getting things so confused that I wiped my hands of the whole affair.

"You handle the money," I said. "I'm tired of trying to keep it straight, with you dipping into it and adding to it all the time. From now on it's your job to make it come out right."

And from that day on I have never worried about the amount of money in the drawer.

Grant's lack of system concerning book-keeping and handling money is characteristic of his general lack of system in regard to everything; with so little sense of order and preciseness, it amazes me that he can always get so much accomplished, and so well. He's always starting something that he knows perfectly well he won't, due to other obligations, be able to finish. And then, of course, so that his initial effort won't be wasted, I have to stop whatever I'm doing and finish what he started. Perhaps, on second thought, I do understand how he gets so much accomplished.

When the broadfelt carpet in one of the rear single cabins--number 9--began to wear out, we bought a new one, a gorgeous thing with a swirling dark red pattern. We would have liked to add a final note of luxuriousness to the cabins by substituting lovely new carpeting for the plain red broadfelt in each--but that would have cost a penny that would be not only pretty, but downright beautiful.

When Grant tried to get the old carpeting up, he made the discovery that it had been glued to the cement floor. He would have left it there to serve as a pad for the new rug, but he wanted to keep the good portions of it to substitute for parts of the other carpets that were on the verge of looking too shabby to be in keeping with the rest of the furnishings.

The glue with which the old carpet had been secured to the floor must have been the strongest in the world. Or perhaps, as Grant suggested, the builders of the place had laid the carpet before the cement of the floor had dried, and the cement had hardened with a firm grip on the fabric of the rug.

Anyway, it took us, working together, about an hour to get each square of the old carpet up. Grant chopping at it from underneath with a sharp, knife-like tool while I pulled as hard as I could on the part that was loose, so that the free parts would be lifted out of the way and he could see in just what spots the rug was still attached to the floor.

My hands ached before I had been on the job long. "I wasn't raised to be a carpet yanker," I remarked at frequent intervals; but Grant, steaming and clenching his teeth, his brown hair hanging over his forehead like Donna's, wouldn't let me escape. "I'll never get the mmm thing finished," he grunted, "if you don't help me."

I tried standing while I pulled, and then sitting in various positions to relieve the strain on various parts of my body. I tried leaning backward and pulling with all my might, relaxing all the other muscles of my body and depending on the rug to hold me up. Of course the inevitable happened; Grant struck an area where the rug wasn't attached so firmly to the floor, the part I was holding yielded suddenly to my pulling, and I sprawled backward with my legs in the air.

When Grant was through laughing we began again. My thumbs were getting sore, and my whole hands ached. I glared out the open door of the cabin at a fat couple sunning themselves indolently on one of the grass islands. That's what's wrong with this country, I thought darkly--too many loafers.

When at last the rug was completely pried and hacked loose, Grant began cutting the new rug to fit the room, while I went up front and administered poison verbally to Moejy, who had brought an armful of glass jars from his father's restaurant next door and was breaking them on our sidewalk. Moejy, in my opinion, had only one redeeming feature: a tendency to spend most of his time at the Auto Haven Motel half a mile west of us. The Bradleys, who owned the court, must certainly be lovers of childhood in general--and in the raw--to be able to endure him.

Miss Nesdeburt fluttered into the office the next morning before I was through bathing the baby. Grant had started cleaning cabins.

I could tell she was in a talkative mood, so I invited her to sit in the kitchen while I scrubbed Donna.

"I had the nicest dream last night," Miss Nesdeburt began. "And I believe people should share their dreams, don't you? I dream nearly every night, and I have a little book I write the dreams in. I do it the first thing when I wake up, because you know how dreams slip out of a person's mind. And if I forgot them I wouldn't be able to share them with other people." I smiled vaguely.

"Dreams are important, you know," she said, lowering her voice mysteriously. "Much more important than most people realize. Anyone who can interpret them correctly can forecast coming events. I'm learning to interpret them."

"Oh, you read those dream books?" I asked, rinsing the soap off Donna's plump, firm little body and brushing the hair away from her eyes.

"Oh, no!" Miss Nesdeburt cried. "I was studying under Eimo, who is known as the famous somnologist, until I started getting this asthma. His method is entirely new. Why, he--"

"Tell me about your dream," I interposed hastily.

She clasped her little white hands. "Well, it was like most of my dreams. I was alone, walking through a big empty place, and then all of a sudden there were a lot of other people, couples, all around me, but they stayed just beyond me, and I couldn't reach them, no matter how I tried. Now, I'll interpret that for you, according to Elmo's teaching. It means that I'm going to make a trip soon and go where there'll be crowds of people!"

I don't pretend to be a dream interpreter, but her dream sounded to me more like the dream of a frustrated, man-starved old maid than anything else I could think of.

That line of thought prompted me to ask whether Mr. Hawkins had called on her the previous night.

Her blue eyes brightened, and she took off her glasses. She smiled, and her smile had lost its first timidity.

"Yes, he did," she confessed. "He's a very nice man, really, even if--well, he does have a strange sense of humor." She flushed a little, apparently remembering whatever it was he had done soon after they met, and I ruefully remembered the black spider. (I had left it in the cash drawer, but it didn't draw even a gasp from Grant. Reaching into the drawer for some money, he had said, "Well, look here once! Someone's left a fake spider in the drawer! Lucky I found it instead of you. You'd have been running yet.")

"I hope Mr. Hawkins was more gentlemanly last night," I said. I am, I must admit in all modesty, an expert at drawing forth information without appearing to pry. Actually, I employ this gift principally because a writer needs to know as much as possible of the thoughts and actions and experiences of other people. What many of my friends and relatives call my accursed curiosity has dug out for me plots which eventually, garnished a little, appear in magazines. I suppose I should confess that my curiosity isn't completely scientific, though; a fraction of it--(about nine-tenths) is just the plain old garden variety.

"Last night . . ." Miss Nestlebert began reminiscently, wheezing a little. "Well, I don't know whether you'd say he was gentlemanly or not. He--he brought me a large bag of tomatoes, which I thanked him for and put on the bed. Then, just as I was sitting down on a chair, he grabbed the bag and shoved it under me, like lightning. I couldn't help sitting on it and squashing the tomatoes."

Miss Nestlebert sighed and replaced her glasses. "He laughed and laughed, and then he said in that gallant way of his, 'I apologize deeply, madame! I had no idea you were going to sit in that particular chair! It was a most unfortunate coincidence!' And then, while I stood there dripping tomato juice, he started laughing again, and he laughed until the tears rolled down his face." The fine lines under Miss Nesdebert's eyes crinkled with reluctant amusement.

I finished drying Donna and began pulling her tiny gingham dress over her head. Miss Nestlebert rose.

"Well, I must go lie in the sun for a while," she said. "It's such a fine, bright day, n'est-ce pas? Be sure to remember your dreams from now on, and I'll interpret them for you."

I assured her that I would, although I seldom had a chance to get more than a third of the way into a dream before some cabin-hunter rang our bell.

I went out to help Grant clean cabins. He was working in the rear group, in number 9, at the moment. Donna pulled newspapers out of the wastebasket while I set to work making the bed for which Grant had just brought clean sheets. We "bolster" the pillows by smacking an arm down the middle of each pillow when the clean slip is on it, folding it back over the arm. This gives a stiff, smart appearance to the bed when the spread is drawn taut around the pillows. There's all the difference between pillows au naturel and pillows bolstered, that there is between a slovenly woman without a brassiere, and a sprightly one who is wearing the latest style uplift.

Although I bolstered the pillows faithfully, I never put the sheets on the beds in accordance with the rules. I never bothered with "square corners," but simply tucked the sheets in all around in my own speedier, although slightly less neat, way.

Grant was just finishing the bathroom when I saw, through the slats of the Venetian blind, that a car had pulled up in front of the office.

"You go," I said. "I'm tired of galloping way up there just to tell people we don't have any cabins with kitchens."

Grant set down his bucket of soapy water, and through the slats I watched his tall figure hurrying toward the car. He talked a few seconds to the man and woman who were standing by the car; then, preparatory to leading them to a cabin, he turned and started away from them. But he had been standing just off the sidewalk, which jutted up an inch above the gravel. He caught his toe on the sidewalk and thrust his other foot forward quickly to regain his balance. He half ran, half staggered, in a crouching position, for several grotesque, humiliating steps, until at last he recovered his equilibrium and was able to stand upright.

I howled with laughter. If I had been closer to him I would have pretended not to notice his lack of dignity, but I was so far away--completely out of earshot--that I knew I could enjoy myself without causing him further embarrassment. I bent double, clutching my aching sides. I took a step backward, and stepped against Grant's bucket of soapy water.

In my struggle to extricate myself from the unexpected situation I flailed the air wildly with my arms, and concluded the performance by falling flat on the floor, tipping the bucket so that its contents surged all over the brand new rug.

Donna looked up from the newspapers she was taking out of the wastebasket. "Mama down," she stated, a little superfluously.

CHAPTER FIVE

GRANDMA COMES OUT from Los Angeles to see us every other Friday, and returns the following Monday morning to her job as fancy presser in a cleaning plant, and to her small apartment, which is a ten-minute streetcar ride from Hellwig's apartment. She is a creature of such infallibly regular habits that I sometimes wonder if there isn't a small, precise clock or calendar, or some mechanism for keeping track of time, tucked away inside her.

She works hard whenever she comes. If there's work at hand to be done, she plunges into it. If there isn't any, she creates some, or snoops around the various cabins and garages and the grounds until she finds something we have neglected.

It was she who made Donna's little play yard habitable, after Grant had put up a white picket fence around a patch of ground at the end of one row of cabins. "The little stinkpot has to have a place to play!" she exclaimed. She painstakingly cleared the stony ground of Russian thistles, embryo tumbleweeds, stickers, and rocks. She hosed the ground, spaded it, and planted devil grass seeds. In a few weeks Donna had a lawn to play on; during the time before it grew, she dug in the loose dirt with a spoon, and required three complete baths every day. (A big disadvantage to the yard, though, was that it was so inaccessible; it was a nuisance to take her all the way out there, and to go out to check up on her every once in a while. Knowing that she couldn't get back into the house until I came for her, and knowing how far from it her yard was, Donna began to develop symptoms of loneliness which became more and more acute, and gradually I gave up taking her out to the yard at all.)

"My land, you know what a woman that's staying in one of your cabins told me?" Grandma asked, looking up from a lapful of mending the day after she met Miss Nestlebert. "She told me that a dream I had last week, about a fire, meant I would soon be injured." Grandma held up one finger, on the end of which glistened a tiny pinpoint of blood. "And I'll be swear'n if I didn't prick myself just now, on this needle! Ain't she good? Maybe she'll be able to tell me if I'm ever gonna marry Hellwig! Ayah, she's just like a fortune teller--a sight better than one, even! I never see anything like it!"

Something else Grandma "never see anything like" was the number and variety of articles left behind in their cabins by our customers. Nearly every morning we find something. We have a big box in which we put them all, and there they stay until they are called for--which is almost always never--or until their owners write, giving an address to which to send the objects, and requesting that they be mailed. Usually such requests are accompanied by a dollar for our trouble and for postage. If every article left behind would cause one letter with a dollar in it to be sent to us, we'd have a very nice little business on the side, wrapping and mailing packages. Most of the things, though, lie quietly forgotten, and accumulate. After about six months we paw through the pajama tops, bottles of shaving lotion, slippers, garter belts, cosmetic jars and hair nets, and salvage whatever we think we can use. The rest we give to Mrs. Clark, who bears it triumphantly home in the manner of a hunter returning with an elusive and long-sought deer. What she ever manages to do with it all, I have never asked her.

To Grandma, the conglomeration of left-behind articles is "one H. of a mess," and I am inclined to share her view.

Mr. Featherbrain's little motel, next door, didn't do very well for a couple of months after it opened. It was in a bad spot, between us and the Peacock. Whenever I went to the store across the street and looked at it from that vantage point, I couldn't help thinking of a tiny, pale, bashful man squeezed to insignificance between two fat, husky, rouged and mascara-ed women. One day while I was waiting for Mr. Bertram, the plump grocer, to finish making a sale to someone else, I leaned back against the counter and gazed dreamily across the highway, at our motel. (I never got over the thrill of pride I felt every time I reminded myself that those beautiful buildings were ours--or would be, when we had paid about fifty thousand dollars more on them!) The high, mistily blue mountains rose behind the motel, reaching into the dimmer blue of the sky.

And then I looked at Featherbrain's small place, which--new and nice though it was--appeared to have a wistful, bewildered air about it. I smiled, and the thought about the little man between two huge gaudy women must have been written on my face, for the customer on whom the grocer had been waiting snarled suddenly, "Just wait'll the summer slump comes. You're a goin' to have your "vacancy" sign on all night, every night, and it ain't a goin' to do you no good, neither. Durned old cars won't stop, any more'n they're a stoppin' at my place now."

It was Mr. Featherbrain, his chin pinker than ever now with indignation. I flushed guiltily, and tossed him an airy, "Oh, I wasn't thinking what you thought I was thinking!" smile. I turned to the grocer, whose jaws were clamping spasmodically upon a wad of something in his mouth, as the gaunt old man stamped out of the store.

At least once every day since we have been in Banning, a dark-skinned man or woman with straight black hair has strolled through the grounds of our motel. Sometimes they come in groups of three or four, coming from the little country road--Williams street--to which the back portion of our land extends, and ambling on out to the highway. These, I learned, are Indians. There is an Indian reservation a mile or so north of us, in the first hills that comprise the sloping upward into the mountains. Jed, our freckled laundry truck driver, told me as much as he knew about them, one day after he had finished lifting our heavy sheet-filled laundry bags into his truck. They still hold their tribal ceremonies at regular intervals far back in the hills and, according to legend, no white man has ever witnessed any of these ceremonies.

The principal pastime of these Indians, according to Jed, is to maintain and increase their fearsomeness and mystery. They give special attention to fostering awe of themselves in those people, most of them from the Eastern parts of the country, who believe that Indians still go on the warpath and scalp people--or that, if they haven't actually done either of those things recently, they are quite capable of doing either at any moment.

"Far as I'm concerned, they're just a bunch of showoffs," Jed said, rubbing his nose. "D'you know what they did? They even put a curse on Banning in 1935. You'd be surprised how many people were terrified, and left."

"Why did they put a curse on the city?" I wanted to know.

"They were mad because so many curious white people kept coming out and snooping around their reservation."

"H'm." It would be interesting to look an Indian reservation over, especially if the inhabitants--or inmates--or whatever you'd call them--were the curse-putting kind. My own curiosity, seldom dormant, was definitely aroused, and I promised myself that the Indians would have one more white person to be angry at, as soon as I could possibly arrange it.

The ubiquity of the Smiths never became a personal thing to me until we moved to Banning. Never a week goes by that a car doesn't drive up in a flurry of gravel and belch forth a person who rings the bell and inquires, "Have you a party staying here by the name of Smith?" The only variation in this routine is the wording. Sometimes it's "Is dere a guy, name a' Smith, stayin' here?"

It happens so often that, if there weren't so many different people involved, I'd think it was some kind of a gag. As it is, whenever a Smith actually registers to spend a night with us, I can hardly resist telling him, in a coy and enigmatic manner, that someone has been looking for him.

With two children playing noisily and constantly, and customers ringing the office bell blithely at the most inconvenient moments, and Grant coming into our cabin every now and then to ask me where's that mmm screwdriver, it was impossible for me to be able to concentrate enough to do any writing. Therefore, each day while the baby took her nap, when the cabins were cleaned up, the laundry sent out, and everything as nearly under control as possible, I loaded up with paper, pen, a reference book or two, and the partially done article or story I had been working on, and went to cabin number 15, which is almost directly across from the cabin in which we live. There, in glorious solitude, I wrote, interrupted only by the occasional intriguing sight of customers driving up to the office, ringing the bell, and being confronted by Grant. Whenever such an event occurred, I had to stop my work, go to the window, and peek breathlessly between the slats of the Venetian blind at all that went on. This is always an unnecessary distraction from my work, and I know I should have more will power and self control; but there is something in me ('your damn curiosity!' I've heard it called by irritated objects of it) that won't allow me to sit by, quietly absorbed in something that can wait, when things are happening which I might just as well be investigating.

I did my writing in longhand, although I had always used the typewriter before we came to Banning. I wrote longhand now because, with all my other paraphernalia, I didn't want to haul the typewriter back and forth all the time. To relieve the boredom which frequently attacked me, while I was writing, I used different colored ink on different days. My original manuscripts were gorgeous things of purple, green, red and blue. I couldn't leave my writing equipment in any cabin overnight, naturally, because we hoped to rent every cabin every night--although we weren't at all sure of filling up, except on Saturday nights.

That's why, also, when Grandma comes to visit us every other week, we don't give her one of the cabins. She can sleep in our cabin, even if it is a little crowded; but, obviously, the customers can't. She sleeps on David's bed, and David sleeps on the floor, using Donna's playpen pad for a mattress; and everyone is happy--except, possibly, David.

Grandma suffers from customerphobia far more acutely than I ever did. The trembling and quivering I suffered were mild compared to the tremors, amounting practically to convulsions, she goes through at even the mere thought of waiting on a customer. I know better now than to attempt to break her in to the gentle art of renting cabins, but there was a time when I was not so wise. That was on one of her first visits, when I thought I'd teach her to be a substitute motel manager, in much the same manner of the man who teaches his little boy to swim by throwing him shrieking into six feet of cold water.

Grant had tossed David and Donna into the back seat of the car and taken them along for the ride on a trip to the drug store. They were going to buy a jar of salve for David's nose, which sunburns, peels, and sunburns all over again, with painful persistence. Grandma and I were alone. I hoped that a customer would come during the brief time that Grant would be gone, for I had mapped out a campaign for ridding Grandma of her fear of customers for once and for all.

I was sitting in the kitchen reading, wearing a dress that had a zipper all the way down the front. Grandma, unsuspecting and happy, was bustling about the living room with a dustcloth, searching for dust.

It wasn't long before I heard the sound I had been hoping for--the scrunch of tires on the gravel, and a squeak of brakes. Faster than I had ever done it before, I stood up, zipped down my dress, took it off and tossed it under the table.

About that time Grandma noticed that there was a car outside, and that a fat, middle-aged couple were getting out of it. She came rushing into the kitchen with that near panic that always overcomes her when customers approach, even when she knows perfectly well she won't have to talk to them.

"My land, here's a customer! Come on, come on!" She hurried into the kitchen, her black eyes sparkling with excitement in her unwrinkled face.

I gasped with what I hoped sounded like dismay. "A customer? Oh, dear, and I was just getting ready to take a shower! See, I'm in my slip. I can't possibly wait on them like this. You'll have to do it, I'm afraid."

"Good Godfrey Mighty," Grandma breathed. "I can't--"

The doorbell pealed a strident summons.

"My God!" exclaimed Grandma. "What am I gonna do?" Grandma, to my great regret and mortification, swears. She insists that she doesn't, and that she hasn't uttered a single word that would be inappropriate at a Ladies' Aid meeting, since two years ago when she made a New Year's resolution to stop swearing. Actually, that resolution proved to be only the mildest sort of damper on her powers of expression; but she maintains that she no longer swears. The only time she'll admit it is when she's caught in the act, and confronted with the echo of what she has said. And even at such times, she tries to persuade me that, with the exception of that one time ...

The doorbell rang again, more insistently. Grandma's black eyes darted around with lightning speed. Whether she was looking for my dress, or for a means of escape, I didn't know.

"Go ahead," I prodded. "I've explained to you how to do it. You know where the keys are, and what we charge for each cabin."

Grandma gave a low moan and started for the office. I sat down again, still in my slip, and chuckled. I glanced at the book I had been reading, but I strained to hear what was going on in the office. I could hear only a low rumble of voices.

Well, she could tell me all about it afterward. I tucked one leg under me on the kitchen chair, fingered the satiny material of my slip, and began reading my book again.

I was absorbed in a faintly lavender passage in the book when suddenly I realized that I was not alone. There, in the doorway of the kitchen, stood a middle-aged couple, their eyes busily engaged in examining my slip and the broad expanses of skin above and below it.

"There she is," Grandma, behind them, was saying weakly. "I'm new here--she knows how to rent cabins--she's the owner--I ain't--Godfrey, I don't know how--" Her voice tapered off. She gave a despairing little bleat, and disappeared.

I clutched the book to my bosom, and began moving my feet under the table, hoping perhaps I could hook my dress on one of them.

"Er--uh--you wanted to rent a cabin?" I asked, with as much poise as I could muster under the circumstances.

"Well, I must say!" exclaimed the middle-aged woman, finding her voice at last. "Well, I never. Indeed, no, we do not wish to rent a cabin. Come, Horace."

And she swirled out the door, Horace behind her.

Grandma was abject. We had quite a discussion while I put my dress back on.

"You wouldn't come," she kept protesting, rather feebly. She rubbed the burn scars on her arms--scars that, in spite of her years of experience with irons and mangles and press machines, she reinforces frequently with fresh burns. "I see you wasn't coming, so--"

"Something on the order of 'Mohammed won't go to the mountain, so the mountain must come to Mohammed'?" I asked bitterly.

But I couldn't be too harsh with her. After all, it was due to my own scheming that she had found herself in a position so terrifying that she had put me in a worse one. However, as I zipped up my dress, I made a little promise to myself that I would never again try to make Grandma do anything she didn't want to do.

One thing she never minded doing was taking care of the children whenever I wanted to go anywhere. Or, when all the cabins were filled and our "no vacancy" sign was on, Grant and I could go away for one of our rare respites from the motel business.

Unless the cabins were full, and Grant could leave also, it didn't do me much good that there was someone to take care of the children, unless I felt like walking in the hot sun three quarters of a mile to town. I didn't know how to drive the car. There was no reason why I shouldn't learn, though, I decided. Now we were out of Los Angeles with its traffic and its careless drivers; there was a little, seldom-used country road--Williams street--way out behind our cabins, at the end of our land, which had probably been designed specifically for beginners to practice driving upon.

Grant explained the rudiments of driving to me. I learned to tell the gear shift lever, the clutch and the brake apart. All this, and my first experiments with making the car go, had to be done in the driveways leading to our various cabins, since a customer might arrive at any moment--and Grandma, as I well knew, would not be able to cope with such a situation. Obviously, my opportunities for practicing there, with Grant beside me to instruct and to point out my errors, were limited. When I thought I had the idea pretty well, I drove alone out our rocky driveway that extended along the side of our land behind the cabins, onto Williams street.

It was my first solo flight, and I was full of pride as the car bounced over the rocks. A glimpse into the mirror showed me that Grant and Grandma and David were standing in front of our cabin, watching me, their eyes shaded from the hot sunlight by their hands. Their faces, I assured myself smugly, were alight with admiration--although of course I couldn't see their expressions that far away.

At the end of our little private road there was a small ditch, and just beyond it was a sudden steep rise. I'd have to get out here and do some hoeing, I reflected, clinging desperately to the steering wheel as the car forged ahead over the obstacles.

And then I was on the road. I turned the car to the left, waved airily so that my tiny, faraway audience could see how well I was doing, and stepped harder on the gas until I was racing along at eighteen miles an hour.

Well, so far so good. But I recalled what I had said to Grant just before taking off--"In order to really learn to handle the car, what should I do besides just driving down the road?"

"You split an infilitive, Mama," David said reproachfully.

"Back it up, turn around in the road, pretend you're parking between two cars," Grant said.

I considered his three suggestions now. I could have done any of them to an airplane or to a steamship as easily as to our suddenly formidable automobile. I knew that shifting into reverse would make the car go backward, but I had no idea how to steer or control it under such circumstances. Well, all that was rather advanced anyway, I comforted myself; for this first time, just driving around the road, going around a few blocks and coming home would be enough.

I looked ahead on the road, trying to figure out where the first cross street was. All I saw was a huge house at the far end of the road. I hadn't realized the road ended there, but there was a house, so it must.

I drove on. The house was growing larger rapidly, much faster than it should, considering the rate of speed at which I was creeping.

Maybe the house was moving toward me, while I was moving toward it! I laughed gaily at my own whimsy, but I began to watch the house more sharply.

I wondered if the excitement and nervous strain of driving had made me suddenly delirious. That house was coming toward me.

Sweat broke out in drops on my forehead, and my palms were clammy on the steering wheel. Was this a nightmare? There was no doubt whatever now that the house was approaching me rapidly. And did I imagine it, or was there a malevolent gleam in its windows?

When it was only a couple of blocks away I realized suddenly that there was a truck under it. Obviously the house was simply being moved to another location. But in spite of the renewed faith in my sanity this discovery brought me, I kept right on perspiring. There was no side road into which I could turn off, and there probably would be none before I met the truck. Since it is, naturally, easier for a car to turn around and go back the way it came than it is for a house-laden truck to do so, the driver of the truck was undoubtedly entertaining the foolish notion that I would turn my car around.

We drew closer and closer together. There was no possibility of my squeezing by; the house stuck far out, even over the edges of the road, on each side of the truck.

I was in despair. Why had this happened to me on my first time out alone with the car?

But I didn't have much time for dramatic, rhetorical questions. Hoping for a miracle, I had continued slowly along the road, until now the truck and I were face to face. We both stopped. I sat there and pondered, my face growing hot with embarrassment. The driver of the truck honked, and the unshaven man beside him yelled, "Turn it around! Get it out of here, sister!"

I sighed. There was no other way out of the mess, I realized. It might take me all afternoon, but I'd turn the car around--if it killed all of us!

Knowing that they were waiting impatiently didn't add anything to the grace and sureness of my movements. I yanked alternately at the choke and the throttle, between bouts with the gear shift lever and the gas. In my confusion, I forgot which of the various gadgets was which, and it was by a process of wild experimentation that I finally got the car to back up. I turned the steering wheel all the way to one side, and found myself careening backward in a violent arc. I stepped on the brake abruptly, assaulted the choke once more while I tried to remember just how to start the car, and finally I got it going forward again. Just as I got the back of the car turned squarely on the truck, and heaved a sob of relief, I realized that the car had ceased to respond to my pushing on the gas.

Finally one of the men in the truck, the one who was sitting beside the driver, clambered out of the truck and came over to me.

"What's a matter, sister?" he demanded.

"My house won't go," I explained. "I mean, my truck won't go."

"You mean your car won't go?"

"Yes, yes," I said feverishly. "That's it. My car won't go. I must be out of gas."

"Lemme in."

I was too far gone to question the propriety or the safety of letting a strange, unshaven man get into the car with me. I moved meekly aside, and he sat behind the wheel and tried to start the car.

"You flooded it," he stated.

I tried to look as though I knew what he was talking about.

"You just learnin' to drive sister?" he wanted to know. I nodded unhappily.

He must have pitied me in my obvious misery. He smiled, patted one of my cold hands, and climbed out of the car. "Don't you worry none," he advised. "We'll give you a push."

He climbed back into the truck, and pretty soon I felt the car being shoved firmly forward. The entire mass of gadgets, pedals and levers before me were by this time as incomprehensible to me as a Hebrew essay on the fourth dimension. I knew that the men in the truck expected me to get the car going under its own power soon, but I didn't even try. When we approached our private road behind the cabins I signaled (that much, at least, I knew how to do) that I was about to make a right turn. I turned onto our road; the momentum and the slight downgrade combined to let the car slide ahead along the road, onto the driveway that led around to the cabins, and to the front of our own cabin. I emerged from the haze long enough to identify and apply the brake. Then I lay back in the seat like a dead woman until Grant and David, who were still outside, came running up.

"How come you pulled a house almost all the way home?" David demanded, moving his loose lower teeth back and forth with grimy, gum-stuck fingers.

"Was I dreaming," Grant asked, "or--"

I waved my hand at them by way of answer, staggered out of the car and into our cabin,

where I flung myself upon the bed.

CHAPTER SIX

EVERY NIGHT WHEN Grant goes to bed he lays out his clothes in exactly the places and positions where they will be easiest to get into in a hurry. (Except on the nights when all the cabins are full by bedtime; then, knowing he won't have to get up to answer the doorbell, he reverts to type and tosses all his things in a heap on the floor!)

But on the nights when our "vacancy" sign is on, he likes to be prepared for the inevitable summons. He wears his underclothes to bed. His trousers hang over a chair beside the bed, and are the first garment he grabs when the bell rings. He thrusts his legs into them quickly, hobbling across the room toward the office at the same time. In the middle of the room is his shirt, hanging on another chair which has been carefully placed halfway between the bed and the doorway to the office. Halting his clumsy gait long enough to seize the shirt, he puts it on and tries to button it with one hand while he zips his trousers with the other. By this time he has reached the doorway which separates the office from the living room; and there wait his slippers. He steps into them hastily, hurries to the outer office door, and opens it--to face a customer who is on the verge of giving up and leaving.

I've often tried to talk him into going to the door in his robe, which wouldn't take a tenth as long to slip into. But he insists that that would look sloppy.

"Any sloppier than going with your pants half zipped, and your shirt buttoned into the wrong buttonholes?" I ask. I don't complain or make suggestions too much, though, because I realize how lucky I am that he takes it for granted it is his job to wait on the customers who come during the night.

Mr. Featherbrain probably never had to untangle his tall frame from the bedclothes to wait on nocturnal customers for the first couple of months after he opened his place. The people who were attracted by his little place were very few and far between. One morning, though, Mrs. Featherbrain called me over, and I sat with them in their nicely furnished living room. It was the day after a highly advertised celebration had been held in the desert northeast of Banning, to which movie stars and humbler creatures had flocked to watch the laying of the cornerstone of what was to be Pioneertown, the future setting of the cream of Hollywood's horse opera crop. Every motel in town had been full.

"We wented four cabins last night!" Mrs. Featherbrain told me ecstatically, waving one of her ever-present cigarettes. She is a plump, dark woman with a very mobile face. She smiles, frowns, raises and lowers her eyebrows, and blinks rapidly while she talks. She is probably twenty years younger than Mr. Featherbrain.

"That's wonderful!" I said warmly. And then I realized what she had said. "Four?" I repeated. "Why, you only have three units to rent."

"Of course, but one couple left about eleven last night, and we wented their cabin over again."

"Really? What time had they come?"

"About ten."

"You mean they left the key, and took all their stuff, and really checked out?"

"That's wight," Mrs. Featherbrain replied, the wrinkles in her forehead appearing and disappearing.

"Did they ask for part of their money back?" I persisted.

"No."

"Well--that's odd," I said.

"Why, that must have happened at your court lots of times!" she protested, a cloud of smoke pouring out from her fluttering nostrils. "Hasn't it? Do you ever go out and look, about midnight, to see if some of the cars haven't pulled out?"

"Why--why, no," I said. "I can't imagine why they would leave. After all, they've paid their money, and if they didn't want to spend the night before traveling on, why would they--"

Mr. and Mrs. Featherbrain exchanged glances. "Have you ever seen any of the motels on Ventura Boulevard, in Los Angeles?" Mrs. Featherbrain asked.

"Mmm--yes, I think so," I said. "There are quite a few of them, aren't there? I remember wondering, in fact, how they could possibly get enough tourists to keep them filled up, right in a big city like that."

My hostess shot a look at her husband, and blinked rapidly several times.

"Well, sir," Mr. Featherbrain began, speaking with apparent difficulty, "Yuh know, not ewybody that stays in motels is tourists."

I looked at him blankly.

His chin was growing red.

Mrs. Featherbrain's features were moving violently, and all at the same time.

"You never were in the motel business before, were you?" she asked.

I shook my head.

She sighed. "Well, you see," she explained, "sometimes young couples that are out together--well, they don't have any place to go, and so--of course it isn't wight, and the sort of people we know don't do it, but--and of course the motel owner isn't to blame if some people, instead of using the cabins to spend the night and sleep in, use them to ..." Her eyebrows were leaping wildly, and she turned to Mr. Featherbrain. "You tell her, dear," she begged him.

But at last I understood. I got up, embarrassed partly at the conversation and partly at my own display of stupidity, and went home.

This was an aspect of the motel business which was new to me, and I resolved to find out whether such use of motels on the highway was common. I had developed a library-born friendship with Mrs. Barkin, the owner of the rather shabby Sylvan Motel toward town, and I planned to bring up the subject at our next meeting.

I didn't let my unhappy experience with the house movers prevent me from learning to drive. "Twice in a lifetime it couldn't happen!" I told Grant; and I took the car out on Williams street day after day, sometimes staying out only ten minutes, and other times staying half an hour or more; and finally I was so adept at handling the car that I went to the Banning police department on a day when driving tests were being given, took the test, passed it, and received my driver's license.

I clutched the slip of paper proudly to my bosom. This, I knew, rated a special little trip. I must try my wings--or my wheels, rather--somewhere besides on Williams street and the downtown block around which the driving examiner had just accompanied me.

Grant was taking care of the motel; Grandma was taking care of the children; everything had been arranged so that I'd be sure to have enough free time to take both my written and my driving tests, and to get my license. Duty wasn't calling me back to the motel; now that I was a licensed driver our insurance would fully cover any accident I might have. (Not that I contemplated having any; but visions of liability suits had danced through my head every time I had been inspired, by my growing aptitude at driving, to take a little spin away from the dull safety of Williams street.)

So now I had some free time and a driver's license. And there was no place better to explore, I decided, than--the Indian reservation.

"I hope they don't put a curse on me," I thought, zipping along the highway to, and past, our motel at twenty-five miles an hour. I turned left on Hathaway, the cross street east of our motel; Mrs. Clark had told me Hathaway led back into the hills where the reservation was.

Less than a mile from the highway, Hathaway rose to a small peak on top of which was a cow guard, with metal grillwork extending across the road, the bars--between which cows would catch their hooves if they tried to cross--at right angles to it. A fence divided all the land past the cow guard from that on the side I was coming from; except for the open gateway at the road, there was no entrance to the land which a formidable-looking sign declared to be the Indian reservation.

The sign thrust its large white face forward pugnaciously as it stated:

WARNING!

INDIAN RESERVATION

The introduction of

INTOXICATING LIQUOR

into or its possession within this reservation,

or its sale to Indians, is

FORBIDDEN BY LAW

under a penalty of fine and imprisonment

NO TRESSPASSING OR HUNTING

The fact that "trespassing" was misspelled made the sign a trifle less awesome and pompous than it had seemed at first glance, but I brought the car to a complete stop and pondered for a while.

Well, I wasn't "introducing" any liquor (from what I'd heard, most Indians didn't need an introduction) but to go into the reservation would be trespassing, I guessed. Still, the gateway was open and white people, I knew, drove through it frequently. Maybe by "trespassing" in this case, they simply meant getting out of the car and going off the road.

Anyway, I had looked forward to this a long time, and, having come this far, I wasn't going to let a misspelled sign stop me.

I drove over the cow guard, my heart bumping as hard as the car. Strangely enough, the character of the land inside the reservation didn't change; it was the same as it was everywhere else, dry, flat until it began to roll up toward the mountains, covered with bristly bushes and a few stunted trees.

A peculiar lump beside the road far ahead turned out to be a fat brown woman sitting huddled inside a soiled shawl. An Indian! In her native habitat! I put on the brake, rolled down the window and called, "Want a ride?"

My temerity amazed me. This would be something interesting to tell people about, though. I was glad I had followed my impulse to stop, because if I had taken time to think it over I would probably never have done it.

The woman's bright dark eyes slid over me and the car in amazement. Afraid that this exotic prize would escape me, I pushed open the car door on her side and smiled invitingly.

After a moment of contemplation, she wrapped the dingy shawl about her broad shoulders more tightly against the wind, struggled to her feet and lumbered toward the car. She sat beside me, her thighs under the cheap cotton dress spreading so that the car seat between me and the right hand door was completely smothered in soft fat flesh. I lowered the window on my side before I started the car.

I glanced at the Indian woman as I pressed on the starter. Her face was round and greasy. Her eyes were like shiny black buttons, and her straight black hair was stringy. Her full, untinted lips did not move in response to my smile.

The road, which deteriorated rapidly from pavement to dirt once I was inside the reservation, led past occasional brown shacks that seemed made of weary old boards leaning against each other for support. A few of the houses, though, were made of stone, and fairly attractive. No doubt the chief and his relatives lived in these ... if the Indians still had chiefs. I recalled what the laundry truck driver had said about the Indians--that those who wanted to collect money from the government had to live on the reservation in order to be entitled to it, and that those who were willing to forfeit their right to the money could live away from the reservation and engage in any type of work they chose.

Livestock of various kinds and sizes meandered about most of the dwelling places. Some of the horses were beautiful, graceful brown creatures with jet black manes and tails that tossed in the wind. There were squat, heavy set cattle with broad heads and broad bodies. Except for the fact that they each displayed a few unmistakable signs of femininity, I would have sworn that they were all bulls.

"You live around here?" I asked, with a circling sweep of my hand, turning toward my obese passenger.

The black button eyes stared at me, not with hostility, but obviously without any particular liking for me.

The dirt road curved slowly back toward the highway. There were innumerable bumpy little roads leading off the dirt road toward primitive looking parts of the lower mountains, but I was afraid to follow them. I didn't want to get too completely into Indian territory!

When we came to a fence broken only by an open gateway across the road, I stopped the car and leaned across the Indian woman, opening the door.

"You'd better get out here," I said.

She didn't move.

"Listen, I don't dare to take you out of the reservation. It might be a violation of the Mann act, or something. Goodbye," I said suggestively.

The fat squaw rolled out of the car, and stood staring at me, her glittering eyes speculative as I started the car.

I bumped across the cow guard, which was a twin to the one I had crossed when I entered the reservation, and glanced into the mirror to see what she was doing. As the dust from the tires settled I saw her squatting beside the road, adjusting her filthy shawl as it whipped in the wind, and settling herself comfortably.

I drove along the stretch of pavement that led to the highway with a vague sense of disappointment.

I hadn't expected to find a bunch of Indians in full war dress, yelling and whooping; I hadn't expected to see any venerable, feather-headdressed chiefs smoking long pipes of peace; and I certainly hadn't expected to be scalped. And yet I left the reservation with a vague sense of disappointment.

I have always worn my hair, which is quite thick, at shoulder-length, curly and with a bunch of little curls at the top. It used to be a fairly attractive and flattering style, but Banning's whirling wind has played havoc with it. I can spend half an hour combing it, smoothing it and adjusting the brown curls; then, after walking across the driveways to one of the cabins, I look as though I not only hadn't combed it for several days, but had lost a piece of thread in it and had allowed the children to search thoroughly for it for several hours. My hair style became what a fashion magazine might charitably christen a "windblown long bob." Whenever I brave the blasts that sweep across the open fields behind the motel, where I hang up clothes on washday, I wear a snugly tied bandana--but I can seldom get it tied so securely that the wind doesn't whip it off several times.

Strangely enough, other Banning women have neat, precisely waved hair which is seldom untidy or out of place. That is something I have never been able to figure out.

In the wintertime, it's people who swarm over Banning and the surrounding vicinities; in the summer, it's bugs. Every imaginable kind of bug spends the summer in Banning; bugs with wings, without wings, with and without antennae, and some with strange appendages whose uses, if any, seem hazy to the bugs themselves. Besides the common black widows, which are so plentiful that people simply ignore them, there are peculiar worms with large, mischievous eyes; there are beetles equipped with hard shiny hoods and galoshes, in case of rain; there are grasshoppers whose heads, instead of being in the place customary for grasshoppers' heads, pivot at the end of long, sticklike necks.

Before we came to Banning, and for a short time after our arrival, I wore open-toed sandals. But an uneasy knowledge of the desert's strange fauna, coupled with the loose gravel, the stickers rampant in the weeds, and the huge flesh-hungry black ants, to whom the presence of stockings were merely a snickerprovoking challenge, soon converted me to oxfords--and, if I hadn't been afraid of seeming too eccentric, I would have worn hip-length boots.

Banning has such hot summers, and such a dry, hot wind blowing continually off the desert, that I, like practically every other woman under seventy who weighs less than three hundred pounds, wear shorts. To this, Grant sometimes pretends to attribute our success.

"Yep, half of our customers just come in here because they see you running around in shorts," he says.

He can be very sweet at times, particularly when he has to go downtown and wants me to sort and count the laundry, or when he is hungry for a home made apple pie. One day--I believe it was a helping hand with some weed-pulling that he wanted--he had complimented me until I was beginning to believe I was rather a femme fatale in shorts. He had gone into the house to make a phone call, and I continued pulling weeds from around the geraniums in the little island under our big neon sign.

Suddenly I noticed a shiny car going past on the highway very slowly. It was full of well-dressed, distinguished looking men who were staring in my direction with absorbed interest. I pretended not to notice, and went on with my weed-pulling. But I was pleased. Maybe I wasn't so bad after all!

The car turned around in the highway, about fifty feet past our place, and cruised slowly by again. I was careful to stoop as gracefully as possible when I lunged for the weeds, and I tucked a geranium, that I had broken off by mistake, into my hair.

The car went more and more slowly, and finally it stopped right in front of the island. I stood up and went closer to the car, smiling graciously. I pretended to think the men wanted to rent a cabin.

The man in the front seat nearest the window cleared his throat, grinned sheepishly, and said:

"Say, ma'am, I wonder if you could tell us what kind of trees those are, in that row down the middle of your place? We've been having a little argument about it."

My smile faded. I was furious. "They're Chinese elms!" I snapped, and I stomped away.

It was that same night that Grant, leaving for the postoffice, told me to be sure to get at least three customers while he was gone.

"Don't worry," I said sarcastically, "I'll just sit out here on the curb around the lawn where they can see me. I'm so beautiful they won't be able to resist driving in. If they try to escape I'll lure them right in."

I was standing idly at the office door about twenty minutes later when I saw our car, a blue sedan, slow down as Grant waited for traffic to clear so that he could make the left hand turn into our place. I smiled suddenly. I'd show him what I meant by luring them right in.

Pretending to assume that he was a prospective customer, I stepped out in full view and made elaborate motions of adjusting my hair, rolling my eyes, and making come-hither gestures with my head. I thrust out one leg and ran my hands over it as though I were pulling up a sheer stocking; I smiled in an over-exaggerated way that would have, I felt, put to shame any of the old time movie vamps. My legs were in a coy Betty Grable pose, and as Grant pulled into the driveway I repeated my gestures of eye-rolling and of motioning seductively with tosses of my head.

"You got a cabin for four people?" asked a woman sitting in the front seat. Why, who--(I would have thought whom, but I was too excited)--had Grant brought home with him? I looked at the man behind the steering wheel questioningly. It wasn't Grant.

The car--well, obviously, ours wasn't the only blue sedan of that particular make and age.

"A--a cabin?" I asked finally. "Sure, of course. Would you--uh--like to look at it?"

Two half-grown boys, in the back seat, were staring at me pop-eyed, their mouths half open.

I'll never forget their expressions, or my own humiliation.

My friend from the Sylvan motel, Mrs. Barkin, stopped in a few days later to give me a library book she wanted me to read, and she laughed heartily when I told her about my experience. She had managed a motel in Riverside, I knew, before she came to Banning after the death of her husband, and when she was through laughing I brought up the subject of motel cabins being rented by the hour instead of by the night.

"Short stops?" she said. "Oh, yeah, we used to get lots of 'em, when we were in Riverside. You get that in any big city, yeah. Lots of money in it too if you have a good location for it--you can rent each cabin several times a night. Only thing is you have to do a lot of work cleaning cabins in the night then, yeah, that is if you're gonna rent 'em again."

Mrs. Barkin was a very short, squat woman with broad hips and enormous arms. Her fat legs, which she had managed to cross, looked uncomfortable. There was a faintly shabby air about her wilted blue organdy dress.

"Ten minute quickies, my hubby called 'em," she giggled. "Yeah, we got lots of 'em. Yeah, the good old days. We don't get many of 'em here. I remember one fella used to come there--it was during the war, and he worked swing shift--every night after work, right after midnight, yeah, he'd come. Five nights a week. Every night he had a different girl with him, too. You know, he--" Mrs. Barkin went off into spasms of laughter--"he came to my hubby one time and says, 'Say, don't I get a weekly rate here?' Yeah, he came so often he wanted a weekly rate!"

I laughed with her.

"You're shocked, yeah, I can see that. Well, you're young yet, you'll learn. It shocked me too when we first got that place in Riverside and I saw what was going on. I used to watch the people come in, and I'd try to pick those kind from the ones who really wanted a place for the night. I'd pick out a nice, respectable looking couple, middle-aged, and say to my husband, 'Now, there's a couple that's married, that's been married a long time, and that's on the square.' And then, maybe an hour later, we'd see them come out of their cabin and drive off, leaving the key sticking in their door for us to pick up. Why, you just can't tell who'll do it. In this business you have to keep your mouth shut, yeah--but you can keep your eyes open if you want to. You'll see more'n you'd believe. Why, I got so I wouldn't have trusted my own grandmother not to rent a room with some fella for an hour!"

She uncrossed her legs with difficulty. "You'll see. One of these days even your Miss Nestlebert you were telling me about, and her boyfriend, yeah, the one that's always playing practical jokes--they'll be doubling up, and you'll have an extra cabin to rent!"

Miss Nestlebert and Mr. Hawkins were getting very friendly, all right. (But not that friendly!) Every afternoon she waited until he came back from his work in Palm Springs, and then they

strolled together next door to Moe's cafe for dinner. On Saturdays and Sundays they went for long drives together in his car. Her incipient asthma seemed to have disappeared--she told me herself that the desert air had cured her completely--but she stayed on.

I was beginning to think that the desert air had even more marvelous properties than those that had been claimed for it: Mr. Hawkins hadn't played a practical joke in weeks, not since the time he poured a bottle of ink into Grant's bucket of soapy cleaning water. Whether it was the desert air, or the influence of his dainty companion, I didn't know.

One Saturday morning while Mr. Hawkins was getting his car filled with gas at the service station across the street, Miss Nesdeburt waited in the office. She was wearing a dull, inconspicuous dress. She watched Grant, who was putting a door between the office and the living room--to take the place of the filmy curtain that had been there. We had had very little privacy, with only a thin bit of drapery separating our living room from the office. We still wouldn't have complete privacy, since there was a window in the top half of the new door--but as soon as I made little curtains for the window, no one would be able to look into our living room.

When Grant laid down his tools and went out to the garage, Miss Nesdeburt smiled at me, and two delicate fans of wrinkles appeared about her eyes.

"I had a dream," she told me, "and I think people should share their dreams, don't you, ma cherie?"

"Absolutely," I agreed. I was at the desk in the office, catching up on the previous day's bookkeeping.

"I dreamed I was a beautiful young girl," she said, taking her glasses off with one tiny hand, and holding the other hand up, letting it droop gracefully at the wrist. "My hair was fiery red, simply terribly red, and so were my lips. I was built like a goddess. My bosom was high and proud, my waist was just the right size for a strong man's hands to encircle." She stopped, and stood there in ecstatic reverie.

"And then?" I prodded.

"Ah, and then. There was a prince--a gallant, polite prince with the most wonderful sense of humor. He wore a suit of armor and rode a white charger and went out to do battle for me--"

"Wasn't he a knight?" I interrupted.

"No, no, a prince; or at least, he said he was. And I see no reason to think he wasn't being truthful about it.... Anyway, he loved me more than anything else in the world, and he wanted me to marry him."

I finished adding a column of figures. "And did you do it?" I asked, writing down the total.

"No." Miss Nesdeburt's blue eyes were sad, and she replaced her glasses. "I got all dressed up in my hoop skirt and leg o' mutton sleeves, but when it was time for the ceremony it turned out he had worn just red flannel underwear to the church as a joke. He had such a sense of humor, you know."

"Mm hmm. And how do you interpret the dream?"

"Oh, I've figured it all out very carefully, according to Elmo's teaching, and there's only one possible meaning. I'm either going to inherit a large sum of money soon, or else it means a close relative of mine will inherit some."

I laughed as she went out to get into Mr. Hawkins' coupe, which had just driven up onto the gravel. The idea of Mr. Hawkins as a prince or as a knight amused me, and I was still smiling about her obvious little dream when the telephone rang, about half an hour later.

It was a gentleman who, in short, clipped phrases, wanted to reserve three cabins that evening, for a large party of people who were going to spend a few days in the desert.

I had hardly finished writing the name in which he made the reservations after the numbers of the three cabins on that day's list, when the telephone rang again. This time it was a clerk from a Banning hotel, who said that the hotel was full already. Could we accommodate three ladies who wanted separate beds?

We could, and I took the reservation. Then I surveyed the list happily. A few of our customers were staying over from the day before, and with all these reservations, we had only four vacancies left. At that rate we'd be full tonight--and early enough so that we could have one of our rare evenings away from the place.

I started joyously outside to tell Grant, who was cleaning cabins. Just as I shut the door, though, the telephone rang. It was the owner of the Crawley Motel, on the west edge of Banning, calling for "some clients he couldn't take care of"; did we have a cabin that would accommodate five?

No, but we could give them two separate cabins.

That would be fine; they'd be over within half an hour.

That left two vacancies, and it wasn't even noon yet! There must be a rodeo or celebration around, or the season for hunting some kind of animal which lived around here must have just opened; or else it was a holiday that had escaped my notice. According to the calendar, though, neither that day nor the next was a holiday; I couldn't quite figure out the rush for cabins.

I wasn't much surprised, though, when the telephone rang twice more in the next hour. I took the two reservations and went out to uncover the "no" of our sign.

"No Vacancy," our sign proclaimed; and the owner of the Blue Bonnet Motel directly across the highway hollered across wonderingly, "We haven't got a one! How'd ja do it?"

"Oh, you just have to know how," I laughed. Then I went inside, picked Donna up out of her playpen, and hurried out to help Grant finish cleaning the cabins.

All afternoon occasional cars slowed down by our motel, until their drivers noticed the "no vacancy" sign hanging there grandly. Then they picked up speed and drove on down the highway, turning into the driveway of one of the other motels.

By late afternoon I was beginning to get uneasy. Not one of the people for whom the cabins had been reserved had shown up. It was conceivable that one, or even two, might be late or might disappoint us altogether; but for all of them to do it--! I didn't dare, though, to cover the "no" again and start renting cabins. I'd be in a terrible spot then if--

Suddenly a brown roadster swung out of the lane of cars and drove up to the office. At last! I thought, they had started coming. If the rest of them would only hurry, maybe Grant and I and the children could still go out--at least for a little drive.

But the women in the car didn't have a reservation. They didn't even want a cabin. All they wanted to know was, did we have a man named Smith staying here?

"We don't have hardly anybody staying here," I told them savagely, if not very grammatically.

One of them laughed, and indicated our sign.

"Then why do you have your 'no vacancy' sign on?" she asked.

"I'm beginning to wonder about that, myself," I replied.

Mr. Hawkins and Miss Nestlebert drove in about seven-thirty. I was standing in the office doorway.

"Not very busy tonight, are you?" Mr. Hawkins called, his car slowing down. I had the familiar, uncomfortable feeling that he was secretly laughing at me.

"We're full already," I said, motioning unhappily toward our sign.

They drove on back toward their own cabins.

I stood thoughtfully in the doorway for a while. There had been something in that man's expression . . .

I walked furiously toward the "no vacancy" sign, and put the cover back over the "no." It would be Mr. Hawkin's idea of a good joke, I knew, to disguise his voice and call up several times for reservations. I was positive now that it had been he who had made all those phone calls.

Because of our late start, all the motels in our end of town filled up before we did. It wasn't until four-thirty the next morning that Grant could uncover the "no" again.

CHAPTER SEVEN

IN THE MIDDLE of September school started, and David, who was a little over five and a half years old, entered the first grade of the Banning grammar school. And with the start of school came the "summer slump" that our irritable neighbor, Mr. Featherbrain, had been forecasting.

Business was terrible. The highway was almost deserted, and of the few cars that did appear, most of them plowed right on toward their destinations. The occasional customer who rang our bell professed to be shocked at our rates, and it was only by lowering our rates that we were able to rent any cabins at all. There were many nights during that period that only two or three of our

cabins were occupied; and I remember one night when we had only one customer, a young man who slept in his single cabin in solitary splendor all night.

Obviously, the income from the place wasn't enough to meet the payments and the expenses. We were beginning to think Grant had been premature in leaving General Motors, and to wish that he were still collecting his weekly check from them. Like a stone over our heads hung the realization that there was a possibility we might lose the motel--and all the money we had put into it.

Jed didn't come every day for our laundry now; he came only once or twice a week. I asked him if the motels all over town were doing as badly as we were, or whether it was just us.

"The motels that have kitchens are still doing all right," he said, smoothing his fingers over his nose as though trying to find a spot where there were no freckles. "One whole side of the Peacock, eight of its cabins, have kitchens, and I still get two big sacks of laundry every day from there."

"I guess we need kitchens," I said. I had known that all along, of course. When we first came here, when business was still good, we had turned away four or five would-be customers every day because they had wanted kitchens. Even now, with business so poor, hardly a day went by that one or two groups of people didn't ask us if we had kitchens. And most of those who required kitchens planned on staying anywhere from a week to three months--and were willing to pay the standard rate for cabins with kitchens: twenty-five dollars a week.

Yes, six or eight kitchens would fix us up. Those would be rented all the time, and even in the summer slump each year there'd be at least two or three new customers for the other cabins. And a year or two of being in business would begin to bring us an increased amount of repeat trade, so that we could look forward safely to a profitable business--if we could just hang onto the motel right now!

We didn't have enough money to put in kitchens; each kitchen, we figured, even if Grant did all the labor himself, would cost four hundred dollars. They would have to be nice kitchens, to be in keeping with the cabins; ranges and refrigerators and steel cabinet sinks were expensive. Since it would be the second bedrooms in the double cabins that we would convert to kitchens, the carpeting would have to be replaced by linoleum, and the plastered walls redone, so that they would have a smooth, painted surface. Pipes would have to be connected.

It would be a lot of work and a lot of expense, and we resolved not to consider beginning until early the following summer, before the next slump.

In the meantime, something must be done. We had very little money in the bank; we owed nearly fifty thousand dollars on the motel, and two thousand to Grandma. Our income had become insignificant.

Grant got a job digging ditches.

That job was symbolic, I suppose, of the depths to which we had sunk. But it wasn't a regular ditch-digging job; he was working for a contractor, and the ditches were preparatory for construction work, on which Grant would be employed when it was begun.

Those were hard days. Grant worked ten hours every day, and after work he came home and helped me finish whatever part of the motel work I had been unable to complete. We didn't dare to hire Mrs. Clark even occasionally, with business so poor. We did all the work ourselves, so that we wouldn't be spending an unnecessary penny. Not only were we working hard, but we weren't getting much sleep--we had to get up nights to rent cabins, and often a customer would request to be called at four or five or six the next morning, which meant setting the alarm for whatever hour he specified, crawling out of bed and plodding over to his cabin to knock on his door. We couldn't simply lend him the alarm clock, because we didn't dare be without it--there was always the possibility that another customer might want to be called.

Grant's salary, plus the low income from the motel, wasn't enough to make our payments and to take care of our laundry and utility bills. We had to draw on our tiny, dwindling reserve in the bank. We hoped that we would be able to hold out until Palm Springs opened, and the winter season got under way.

Winter always brought travelers to the southern route, we knew, where they hoped to avoid the greater cold encountered along the northern route. The slackening off of the good season, in the early summer, is due to the understandable desire of many tourists to avoid the desert heat. And the "summer slump" that Featherbrain had forecast, with a knowledge born of previous summer visits to Banning, was due also to the fact that school and business vacations were over, and travelers were getting back to their offices and factories, and sending their children back to school.

The few customers who did stay at our motel during this slump came usually very late at night--or, rather, early in the morning. Two, three, and four were common hours for our office bell to startle us out of sleep. Now that Grant was working, I shared with him the unpleasant duty of getting up in the night to go to the door. The circles under our eyes were a little darker every

morning. Just getting up out of a sound sleep to rent a cabin was bad enough, but often we'd have a customer inconsiderate enough to mention that he'd be back "in ten minutes, soon as he'd washed his face", to use the telephone. So whichever of us had gotten up to rent him a cabin would have to stay up, since it wouldn't be worthwhile to go back to bed for only ten minutes. More often than not, too, the ten minutes would stretch into half an hour or more, or the customer would forget about the phone call and not come back at all. If the one of us who was up went back to bed, though, after half an hour or so of fruitless waiting, the jangle of the bell almost invariably dragged us up again out of the just-attained depths of sleep, and the customer, "so sorry he had kept us up," came in to make his phone call.

The majority of customers, of course, are very considerate, however. In fact, so many of those who came late at night or toward morning were profuse in their apologies for waking us, that Grant began to ponder.

"If the ones who do come late hate it so much to wake us up, then there must be a lot who quick pass us by because they don't want to wake us."

We were sitting at the kitchen table, having a council of war. The children were in bed.

Grant spread mustard thoughtfully on a cracker, and sprinkled sugar over the top. "If we had the light on inside the office, and people could see that someone was up, then they wouldn't have to worry that they'd be getting anyone out of bed, and they wouldn't be afraid to come in."

He crunched his cracker, while I watched with the horrified fascination his strange tastes still inspired in me, even after six years.

"I'm going to stay up tonight," he announced. "I'll sit in the doorway or walk around just outside the office door where they can't help seeing me, and I'll bet a horned toad I can bring us in three or four extra customers!"

And he did. His theory had been correct; people who hesitated about selecting a motel after midnight, who hated to rouse anyone from bed, came to our motel like flies to a dish of honey when they saw that our inside lights were on and there was someone up and moving about.

Grant kept that up for three nights, sleeping from dawn until it was time to go to work, and sleeping again from the time he got home until about ten o'clock. And for those three nights we averaged fifteen dollars more per night than our average for the previous nights had been. Our motel was catching at least ninety per cent of the late travelers who stopped on the east side of the business district. (During his night vigils, Grant saw what a small percentage of them went into any of the other motels around us.)

Of course, Grant couldn't keep that up, though. He was earning less than fifteen dollars a day digging trenches for the contractor; obviously, then, since he could do only one, the most sensible course would be for him to quit his job, sleep days, and spend the night pulling customers in off the highway.

So he quit his job, and began to stay up every night, sleeping seven or eight hours during the day. That left him time to help me clean the cabins, and to do the watering. Business continued substantially better, and life began to look brighter. We were afraid that neighboring motel owners, suffering from the slump as we had done, would imitate our methods and so distribute the customers more evenly and more thinly. But perhaps they never realized what we were doing; the weeks slipped past, and still Grant was the only one up during the tiny hours; and our motel continued to get more night business than all the others put together.

Grant was still as full as ever of good ideas. The walls of the showers in two of the cabins were beginning to get moldy, and even after he had scraped off the mold and painted them with a special damp-resistant paint, there was a faintly musty smell lingering in those cabins.

He took a bottle of my perfume and put a little on the back of each chair and on the drapes. Although the perfume didn't obliterate the musty odor, it blended with it--as Grant had hoped it would--so that the result was far from unpleasant. We tested the scent by going out of the cabins and coming back into them from the fresh air outside after a few minutes. The cabins had a faint, warmly sweet fragrance. Grant touched them up with additional drops of perfume for a few days until the musty odor wore off.

Most customers didn't notice the perfume, or at least didn't comment upon it. But to the few who remarked with pleasure about it. Grant said, "Yep, I guess there were some pretty sweet girls staying here last night"; and to those who didn't seem to like the odor, he said, "I guess the people that stayed here last night must have spilled some perfume."

Although, with my help, Grant was getting a lot of work accomplished these days, he was getting a lot of talking done too. Every time he "stopped in to see" another motel owner, I knew he'd be embroiled in conversation for at least two hours; and he was still as helpless as ever in the hands of a salesman.

One late afternoon right after dinner a salesman came into the office laden with descriptive literature about a well-known set of books--a set we already had, as it happened. I went into the

kitchen to wash the dishes, thinking that here at last was a salesman Grant would be able to get rid of, since we possessed the product he was selling.

The rumble of voices in the office continued, and I began to get provoked. I wanted Grant to dry the dishes. I went into the living room and stood by the closed office door, listening.

"It's a great bargain, really a great bargain," the salesman was saying. So--evidently Grant, in his love of conversation and his inability to end one, hadn't yet broken the news to the salesman that we already had a set of the books. Well, I'd take care of that.

I opened the bookcase, took two of the books from the set and went into the office, laying them on the desk where the salesman could see them.

Then I went back and finished washing dishes. And in about two minutes Grant was beside me drying them, a sheepish expression on his face.

Winter came to Banning with grace and beauty. First the most distant, highest ranges of mountains were covered with snow. The majestic San Gorgonio range, to the north of us, looked gigantic and pure under its spotless woolly white blanket. Later in the season the closer mountains were sprinkled with snow, until all the mountains pressing in on the north and the south were white. The wind that still blew continually was crisp, and bright, and cold; and the heat from our little gas wall-heater was a welcome luxury after working outside.

Miss Nesdeburt stopped in one cold morning to pay her rent.

Her blue eyes were sparkling, and I knew she was eager to tell me something. She was humming beneath her breath as she started to write a check.

She hesitated, and pulled off her glasses. "Sometimes I can't see so well through these things!" she confessed. She signed her name on the check, blotted it, and replaced her glasses.

I took the check, thanked her, and gave her the opening she was obviously hoping for by saying, "Well, what did you dream about last night?"

"Oh, I dreamed I was peeling potatoes, wearing an apron, and there was a baby crying."

"And what do you think that dream signifies?" I asked, wondering if she could still be blind to the meaning of her dreams.

"According to Eimo, it means I must beware of a train accident," she said absently. "But that isn't what--I mean--"

"Something has happened," I broke into her confusion. "Tell me about it."

"Well . . ." Miss Nestlebert looked around to be sure there were no eavesdroppers. She leaned her plump little body partially across the desk. "Mr. Hawkins has proposed!"

She clasped her tiny white hands in joyous anticipation of my reaction.

"No!" I exclaimed. "When? How did he lead up to it? Are you going to accept him?"

"Je ne sais pas! It was last night. I--I really don't know if I will or not. Do you think I should?"

"Why, of course! That is, if you love him. And," I added, remembering the transparent dreams to which she had applied such painstakingly roundabout interpretations, "I'm sure you do."

"Yes, I'm sure, too," she admitted. "It's just--"

"Just what?"

Her laughter tinkled uneasily through the office. "Well, it would look so funny, wouldn't it, if he should come to the wedding wearing just red flannel underwear?"

The word "sudden" must have been coined to describe Banning's rainfall. One moment, it isn't raining; the next moment, the ocean itself seems to be streaming down from a sky that's not only weeping, as the poets have it, but actually howling with despair. Lightning etches a crazy brilliant pattern across the path of the rain, and thunder rumbles through San Gorgonio Pass.

It's awe-inspiring and very beautiful--except for the fact that when it rains, the wind-driven water is beaten through the cracks under the doors of the cabins, making a big puddle on each carpet, and unless the windows happened to be shut when the onslaught began, the beds and bathrooms are soaked within three minutes.

Before I understood the character of these abrupt downpours, I stood about on one occasion enjoying idly the few drops that spattered down in warning. It was early in the day; most of the cabins were unoccupied, and I had left all the windows of those cabins wide open that morning to give the cabins an extra-special airing out.

An extra-special watering out was what they got, though. About the time it dawned upon me

that it was really going to rain hard, it did. I grabbed my pass key out of the office drawer, not awakening Grant, who was sleeping soundly after a long night of pulling customers in. I dashed out into the downpour and hurried along the slippery walk to cabin 2, next to ours, where I yanked the windows shut. The bed in the second bedroom of that cabin was a little damp already.

I took the other cabins, except for the back row of singles, which were occupied, in rotation. I rushed around frantically, the rain beating my face and whipping my hair into my eyes as though it had a personal grudge against me. I was beginning to wish I had awakened Grant so that he could help me close windows, for the beds in several of the cabins were soaked clear through to the mattress pads. I knew, though, that I could finish them now myself sooner than I could go and get him. So I swam grimly to the remaining cabins, closed windows, snatched bath mats from bathrooms and tucked them around the bottoms of the front doors.

At last my battle with Nature was over. I was far from being the victor, but I had done all that I could do for now. I had stripped the more thoroughly soaked beds of their spreads and blankets, and in some cases even of their sheets and mattress pads, to keep the mattresses dry. As I dashed through the pelting water back to our cabin I knew I looked as though someone had taken me by the heels, dipped me into a deep well full of water, squished me about for several minutes, and pulled me out.

I had just gotten inside our cabin, in the blessed dryness and quiet, and was beginning to rip off my wet things, when I realized David wasn't inside. He had been out in the field behind the rear cabins, playing in his tent.

Grant, incredibly, was still sleeping. I felt an overpowering feminine urge to be protected, to stay where it was warm and calm and let him go chasing around out in the storm. But my common sense came to his rescue. After all, I was already dripping; a little more water, and a little more being beaten around, wouldn't make much difference.

I plunged out into the swirling water again. It was hailing now, and little chunks of ice were plopping onto the walk and bouncing up again, and then being rushed away in the streams that swept toward the highway.

I bent my head as I ran along the sidewalk, so that I could breathe what little air there was. If I walked upright, or dared to look toward the furious sky, I was afraid I would drown. Before I got to the end of the sidewalk I collided with David, and I turned around and we both shot toward our cabin.

"It was raining so hard, I couldn't see!" David cried, when we were inside. Water was dripping from the end of his sunburned nose and from his thick black eyelashes. "And big things kept falling out of the sky and hitting me. I didn't think I'd ever get home again."

"You should have stayed in your tent once," observed Grant, who was awake by this time.

Just then the office bell rang. We saw two cars waiting outside the office; the storm had driven the people off the highway, and they wanted cabins.

Grant took pity on me. While I answered the door and let the man who was ringing the bell into the office, Grant put on his raincoat.

"You're wet enough," he remarked to me, as he started out to show the people to their cabins. "I'll take over now."

Fortunately, rains like that didn't come very often. If they had, one of Grant's most effective methods of pulling in customers during the night would have been very uncomfortable.

This method was one that he evolved after the first few nights of staying up. Almost all of our customers came from the East, since the coast was so close to the west of us that people coming from the coast weren't yet ready to stop for the night when they reached Banning. Not until the Palm Springs season opened, when there would be a lot of travel to that resort and to adjacent cities from Los Angeles and Hollywood, would we get any appreciable trade from the west.

A few nights' experience had taught Grant that the cars which were going fast were those whose drivers had no intention of stopping for the night in the vicinity. Therefore, he reasoned, all he had to do was to watch the East for cars that were moving at a moderate or slow rate of speed. Whenever he saw one he went outside quickly, so that he could be strolling back into the office, without seeming to notice them, about the time they reached the motel. That method of getting them in was far more successful than just sitting in the office where they could see him. Besides, the door of the office faced west, and tourists from the east were nearly past before they caught a glimpse of him.

There seemed to be something about the sight of him walking into the office that affected everyone who had any idea of stopping for the night, about the way a kitten is affected by the sight of a piece of string being dragged along in front of it. They couldn't resist coming into the driveway, getting out, and following him right into the office.

Grant's technique developed until it was practically perfect. He never looked directly toward

the car he was trying to pull in; that would be too apt to scare the occupants away. For some reason, people don't like to be watched when they are considering stopping at a motel. If they are watched, or even glanced at, they're just as likely as not to drive on to the next motel.

Timing was important. He had to get outside before they saw him, and stroll back into the office so that they could see him in time to turn into the driveway.

His methods were effective only after dark. While it was daylight, the sight of anyone hanging around the office actually seemed to discourage people from coming in. We never could figure that out. Unless, I thought whimsically, daylight afflicts travelers with bashfulness. Whenever a car would slow down during the day, as though it might come in, when I was in or near the office--if I'd glance up at it, it would quicken its speed; and I could almost hear the driver saying, "Oh, horrors, they've noticed us! Come on, let's get going!" Sort of a customerphobia in reverse, I mused.

Our kitchen window faces east, and Grant usually stayed in the kitchen nights, standing by the window watching the highway and passing time by eating various strange concoctions that would be enough to gag a normal person. Whenever he saw a car that looked like a prospect, he hurried outside and went into his act.

I usually began the nightly watch at the kitchen window, being "on duty" from about nine to ten while Grant relaxed and read the paper, or took a little rest in preparation for his long vigil.

Standing at the kitchen window looking at the blackness, broken only by the lights of the service stations, the beacon of the airport, and two motel signs, grew tiresome; and I didn't care to copy Grant's method of entertaining himself by indulging in gustatory nightmares and inviting actual ones. For the first night or two, I contented myself with studying the Peacock's beautiful neon sign--a huge stately blue and red, haughty peacock. That began to pall, though, and my legs got tired. I felt sorry for Grant, who put in hours of this each night after I was in bed. I also felt sorry for myself.

Sitting in a chair, while it would have been far more comfortable than standing, was impossible because of the height of the window. When I sat down, no matter at what distance from the window or at what angle to it, all I could see was a sparkling array of stars. We had no books large enough to build the seat of a chair appreciably higher; and to sit on our thick medical book and a stack of smaller ones would be to ask for a couple of broken ribs.

The typewriter seemed to be the perfect solution. It's a portable, and, enclosed in its case, makes a solid seat. I put it on the chair in the kitchen, sat on top of it, and found that I could see the highway. Whenever I saw headlights of a car coming slowly I told Grant, and he put down his paper to go out after it. During the average early evening--the part that was my shift--there weren't, usually, more than two or three coming slowly enough to rate any attention, so Grant's reading or resting wasn't much disturbed. Of the two or three, he usually managed to get one, so I couldn't use the excuse that it didn't pay, to resign from my boring job.

Even though I was more comfortable, now that I could sit down, I was still bored. I decided to try to read. The impracticality of such frivolity became apparent at once. If I let the book rest on my lap, I had to look downward at it in order to read it. And if I looked downward, I couldn't see the flash of headlights on the highway. The only way I could keep watch on the highway as I read was to hold the book up in front of me, so high that the light of headlights would be visible beneath it, or, for variety, a little lower, so that the headlights would appear above it.

My arms began to ache before I had done that very long. Finally I put my feet on the typewriter case and rested the book on my knees. Except for the fact that I had no backrest, since the typewriter case came most of the way up the back of the chair, I was quite comfortable in this position. The only flaw in the arrangement was that every few seconds I'd catch a glimpse of lights down the highway, and I'd have to stop reading and gauge the speed of the car.

If it was a fast one, I could return to my reading; if it was a slow one, I yelled, "Eep!" at Grant, and he'd go into action. At first I had said to him, when I saw a slow car, "Better go outside, dear. Here comes one that looks like it might stop."--or, "Hurry out there! Here comes a slow one!" But I reasoned that all that was a tremendous waste of energy. After all, he knew perfectly well I wasn't sitting in front of the kitchen window in such an uncomfortable position because I thought it would improve my complexion. He knew why I was sitting there, and there was no need for me to launch into detailed explanations whenever I saw a slow car. So I saved time and energy by simply remarking "Eep"; and he always knew exactly what I meant.

Cars came dribbling along the highway every few seconds, and although the actual prospects were few, the interruptions to my reading were many. I seldom was able to finish two consecutive sentences before the twinkle of headlights dragged me away from the printed words.

Sometimes I thought it might be easier just to give up the idea of reading.

It was difficult, too, to keep up with my writing. If I tried to write in our own cabin, the proximity of Grant and the children, and their noise, made it impossible for me to concentrate. And Grant didn't like having me go to cabin 15 for a few hours at a time, since that left him with a lot to handle. For a time I kept my writing to a minimum, neglecting every phase of it except a

monthly feature I was doing regularly for a women's digest magazine. I grew very dissatisfied with the unproductiveness of my daily routine, though, and told Grant I must start writing again. He agreed to take over the entire responsibility of the place and the children during the baby's afternoon nap if I'd be gone only an hour; at any time after an hour, the baby might wake up and it was difficult for him to manage her and wait on customers at the same time.

The children were both in bed by seven-thirty every night, and each night at seven-thirty-five I went back to cabin 15, with my writing paraphernalia and my watch and a match to light the heater, to stay until nine, when I'd go back to look out the kitchen window for slow cars. (On the nights when we didn't have many vacancies left at that time, and it looked as though number 15 might be rented soon, I went into our kitchen to write, after first extracting a solemn promise--a new one each night--from Grant that he would keep out.)

Sometimes after I'd get across the driveways and the grass islands into number 15, it would start to rain. There was something wonderful about that, and yet it gave me a lost feeling too, knowing that my family was snug in a cabin across the chasm of downpour, while I was here alone. When it rained I usually spent as much time watching it as I did writing. I opened the door to a blast of cold air, and the sight of a lead-colored, darkening sky. Or I looked through the slats of the Venetian blind. I could see the sparkle-spattered highway shimmering like a smooth sheet of glass, glittering with the reflection of lights from the service stations, and rippled by the gusts of cold wind that danced continually across it. There were pools of black water in the gravel of our driveways, and the Chinese elms waved their wet, lacy branches mournfully. The neon signs glowed through the rain, and water trickled off the curbs of the islands of grass and the island of geraniums beneath our sign. Thunder shook all of San Gorgonio Pass intermittently, and lightning flashed the trees to a wet, brilliant green. The fury of it, and my own solitude, filled me with a kind of exultation.

Rainy weather never interfered much with David's school. We always drove him to the school, which was about a mile away, and got him after school. I usually drove him to school in the morning with Donna sitting primly in the back seat; by afternoon Grant was awake, and he picked him up after school.

David was experiencing the usual juvenile difficulties in learning to spell "cat" and "dog" and in mastering the shape and sounds of the multitude of confusing squiggles that made up the alphabet. During the first few weeks of school his class learned the first half of the alphabet.

One day David came home and told me happily that he was getting ahead of his class. Moejy, who was in the last half of the second grade, was helping him, he explained.

He exhibited a sheet of hieroglyphics, and said proudly, "I've memmerized every one of them! Moejy told me how each one sounds. This one, like a 'S' with a tail, is a 'doo'. And this one here's a 'sof'."

The marks on the paper were meaningless lines and curlicues; yet, to the untrained eye of a child they might look as much like letters as real letters do, I realized.

"I'm afraid Moejy has been fooling you," I said gently. "Those aren't real letters. They're just scribbling. They aren't anything at all."

David was furious. He pulled a long string of gum from his mouth, drawing it out so far that it broke. "All that memmerizing for nothing!" he wailed, picking the sticky gum from his chin. "Just wait'll I get my hands on that Moejy! I'll--"

"You'll what?"

He must have remembered then that Moejy was quite a bit bigger than he was.

"Oh--nothing, I guess," he said, nibbling gum from his dirty fingers.

But I knew exactly how he felt about Moejy. I felt the same way, myself.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"MADAME, I WONDER if you would be so gracious as to do me a favor?" Mr. Hawkins, coming through the office door, put his dark hat on quickly so that he could remove it in a sweeping, deferential gesture.

"Of course," I said automatically, looking up from my morning's bookkeeping. "That is, maybe," I added warily.

His brown eyes, as usual, were sparkling with a private amusement. He always gave the

impression that he loved people, but couldn't resist a few chuckles at their expense.

"I fear the matter of the black rubber spider has caused you to mistrust me," he said. "Ah, madame, I apologize deeply if my little joke frightened you. Pray have the kindness to forget it long enough to do for me something for which both my fiancée and I will be grateful."

"Your fiancée!" I exclaimed. "You mean Miss Nestlebert has--you're going to be--"

"Yes, she has done me the great honor of consenting to become my wife. Our nuptials will take place a week from today, when my work in Palm Springs will be done. And today, if your husband can spare you, I would be most happy if you would come with me and help me select a small gift for my bride-to-be."

Grant was just finishing a late and solitary breakfast. (A fried egg, smothered in applesauce.) He could manage, he told me sleepily. David was in school and the baby was playing quietly in her playpen; and not many customers come in the morning as a rule. I got my coat and purse while Mr. Hawkins waited, and then he helped me gallantly into his green coupe.

We stopped at a drugstore on the corner of San Gorgonio Avenue, in the heart of Banning. A sweet smell, compounded of fragrant cosmetics and candy and soda fountain concoctions, met us as we went in.

The drugstore was crowded. Children and a few men were clustered around the comic books at the magazine stand; the seats in front of the soda fountain were full of workers having a morning coke or cup of coffee. Matrons and business men thronged the store, and the clerks were rushing about busily.

We strolled farther into the drugstore, Mr. Hawkins' broad shoulders clearing a path for us, and finally he touched my arm respectfully. He had stopped at a table laden with merchandise. The table held everything from toothbrushes to expensive cosmetic sets. Probably, I thought, he wanted my opinion on whether one of the cosmetic sets would be an appropriate gift.

I was standing there in the crowd, smiling amiably, when suddenly he picked up a toothbrush, waved it in the air, and bellowed,

"What--you mean to say you actually haven't brushed your teeth for three years? Well, COME ON, I'm going to buy you a toothbrush!" And he took me by the elbow and herded me ostentatiously through a staring, shocked, and slightly revolted crowd, to the nearest clerk.

He put some coins into her hand and said loudly, "Don't bother to wrap it up, I'm going to get her home and make her use this toothbrush right away. Did you ever hear of anyone going three years without brushing their teeth? Why, the Board of Health ought to get after people like that!"

I was scarlet with rage and mortification. I summoned up a sickly smile for the benefit of the curious eyes that were around me. But then those eyes all darted down toward my mouth, eager for a glimpse of my teeth. I pressed my lips tightly together--a move which, I realized later, must have convinced everyone that my teeth were covered with enough film to shoot another *Gone With the Wind*.

I stalked out of the drugstore, and Mr. Hawkins, the toothbrush in one hand, followed, shrieking with laughter.

I got into the car silently and grimly. When he had controlled his mirth enough to start the car I said with venom, "Now don't give me any of that 'I apologize deeply, madame!' stuff."

I glanced sidewise at him. His cheeks were still quivering, and wet with tears.

Chuckling intermittently, he drove the car to a candy store a few blocks away.

He got out and made a flourish as though to help me out of the car. I sat there and stared at him stonily.

"I'm not going into another store with you," I stated. "If you really want my advice on a gift, just bring it out here to the car and I'll tell you what I think about it. I'd even tell you what I think about you, if I weren't a lady."

"Madame, I assure you--" he protested. Then, his words apparently evoking the memory of my expression in the drug store, he turned away quickly. His shoulders were shaking as he went through the doorway of the candy store.

Presently, followed by an anxious salesgirl, he came out, carrying several attractive, cellophane-wrapped boxes. With a regal disdain that must have puzzled the salesgirl, I indicated that a box of chocolate covered dates was the choicest delicacy of the lot.

I was still in a bad mood that evening when I came back from cabin 15 and climbed up on the typewriter case on the kitchen chair, after sprinkling a clothesbasket full of clean clothes and getting them ready to iron. The difficulty of reading, and the headlights which clamored for my attention and turned out to belong to cars which were going so fast that it was obvious they

weren't likely to stop, began to irritate me more than they ever had before.

Finally, after I had made three unsuccessful attempts to read one sentence through to the end, I snapped my book shut, sighed loudly for the benefit of Grant, who was reading on the davenport--and leaned hard, with violent disgust, against the back of the chair.

My disgust was much more violent when I found myself sprawling helplessly in the clothesbasket, like a huge turtle on its back. I had forgotten that the height of the typewriter case was enough to make the chair back--short enough to start with--practically nonexistent.

Grant came running to help me out of the clothesbasket. I looked at him sharply. Yes, he was smiling a little.

That settled it! The idea, him sitting and reading, and then laughing at me when I injured myself after working about fourteen hours in one stretch!

I'd fix him. I thanked him graciously for his help, smoothed the clothes in the basket, replaced the typewriter, and resumed my watch.

I glanced around at Grant, after a few minutes. He was immersed in his newspaper once more, and looked very comfortable.

I smiled diabolically. "Eep," I said.

Startled, he leaped up and dashed for the door. I chuckled as he hurried out to put on his act for a car that was going at least sixty miles an hour.

As soon as he returned, acknowledging defeat, and grew absorbed in his paper once more, I cried "Eep!" again. I kept that up until at last he came back wearily into the house and said,

"None of those cars were going slow! Are you getting so you can't tell a slow one from a fast one?"

"It's funny," I said, "but I've been noticing that they all begin to speed up just about the time you start out there."

He looked at me suspiciously and resumed his reading without saying anything. I was jubilant. It was illogical, of course, but somehow this was making up for what Mr. Hawkins had done to me.

Suddenly I noticed two cars creeping along the highway, one behind the other. They were past the Peacock and almost in front of Featherbrain's little motel.

This was too good to miss. Surely one of the two, at least, could be led in here.

"Eep! Two slow ones! Get out there!" I called excitedly to Grant.

For a moment he didn't move, and I was afraid I had cried "wolf!" (pronounced "eep!") too often. But he finally decided I was telling the truth, and hurried outside.

I had followed, to stand in the doorway between the living room and the office to watch. Those cars were going so slowly that they must be going to stop--either at Moe's restaurant or at whatever motel they might select.

Grant was outside, walking back toward the office, rustling his newspaper so the occupants of the cars would be sure to see him. The light of the neon "office" sign shown full on him. The first car turned into our driveway, its headlights silhouetting Grant's tall slender form. The car behind it had turned into Featherbrain's driveway.

I went into the kitchen and looked out the window. The car that had gone into Featherbrain's driveway, I saw now, was Featherbrain's own car. Mr. Featherbrain had stopped his car in his driveway and was getting out.

As soon as I realized he was heading for our place, I went back toward the office. Grant had finished renting a cabin to the driver of the car which had just come in, a man alone who hadn't cared to inspect the cabin before accepting it. The man had left, taking the key of his cabin, when Mr. Featherbrain came charging into the office. His ruddy chin was quivering with indignation above his long, skinny neck.

"That car oughta been mine!" he snarled. "If it hadn't a been for you and your durned old newspaper that anyone could see a mile away, they'd a come in my driveway! You allus been doin' that way, ewy evenin', I bet. No wonder I ain't been gettin' anybody. I oughta bust evvy bone in yer head!"

Grant pointed out logically that a man had a perfect right to stroll about on his own property, with or without a newspaper. He added that if, at any time, Mr. Featherbrain had an inclination to do likewise, he would have no objection whatever.

The old man stormed away without saying another word. And it was to be a long time before he would speak to either of us again.

After that, I felt a little guilty about pulling the customers in. Grant agreed with me that we shouldn't take Featherbrain's potential customers away from him; neither of us had looked at it in exactly this light before.

For two nights we let the slow cars approach unchallenged. A few of them came into our driveway; none at all went into Featherbrain's. The majority went at a turtle's pace past our place, undecided whether or not to stop, and ended by turning into one of the motels nearer town or continuing on through Banning.

After two nights we were convinced we weren't robbing Featherbrain of anything; no one stopped at his little Palace Motel anyway. And it was heartbreaking to let all those prospects go by without doing anything to bring them in. So Grant resumed his old tactics, and business improved again after its two-day slump within a slump.

Grant was full of plans for what we would do when we had saved a little money. We'd put in kitchens; we'd have a bigger, more eye-catching neon sign; we might make the back half acre into a deluxe trailer park. With all that and the repeat trade bound to come to a new motel that's clean and well-managed, we'd never suffer another summer slump like this one, he prophesied. And, knowing him and his ability to devise ways of doing what he wants done, so that the ultimate results on which he sets his mind are achieved, I knew that his prophecy was right.

Miss Nestle Burr came into the office three days before the date set for the wedding, to pay up her rent for the remaining days.

"We got our license this morning," she told me tremulously, taking the bills I gave her in change, and tucking them into her purse--a new, shiny black purse that glittered against the pale blue of her suit. Her entire outfit was new, and in contrast to the dull, unnoticeable clothes she had always worn before. The fine network of wrinkles beneath her eyes was almost hidden by a well-applied layer of pancake makeup, and the whole office tingled with the scent of her perfume.

"I made a simply wonderful discovery while I was filling out the blank for the license," Miss Nestle Burr said. "I happened to take my glasses off just before I started to write, and--" she paused impressively. "I don't need glasses at all!" I laughed. Everyone but Miss Nestle Burr, apparently, had known that all along.

In the few days that intervened before the wedding, we had a lot of bad luck--so much, in fact, that I began to get discouraged.

"Maybe this motel is jinxed," I said to Grant. "Maybe we were never meant to be in the motel business."

First it was our electricity. A high truck, going to the parking lot directly behind Moe's restaurant next door, tore down the wires that led from the row of cabins beside the restaurant to the main lines. One whole side of our motel was without electricity, and therefore unrentable, for two days and two nights, until the understaffed electrical department could send some men out. And Grant had a battle on his hands to keep from being stuck with the expense. The truck driver who had done the damage was gone; if Moe knew who he was, he wouldn't admit it. Truck drivers gave him the better part of his income, and he didn't want to anger any of them.

Finally, on the grounds that the wires must have been strung dangerously low in the first place, Grant succeeded in making the electric company repair the damage free.

I hadn't worried that we would have to pay for repairing the wires, even when I knew that there was no trace of the truck that had done the damage. I knew Grant would work out some way to get them fixed, without its costing us a cent. I had no idea how he'd do it, but I knew he would do it.

Grant can always figure a way out of anything. He is so ingenious that I see no reason why, someday, I shouldn't be swathed in emeralds and diamonds. (None of these have materialized as yet, though.) For instance, one night when he ran out of gas, being able barely to coast into a station before the car stopped, he made the dismaying discovery that the station was closed. Refusing to be cast into the gloom that would have overcome an average person, he got out of the car and emptied into the gas tank the dregs of gasoline remaining in the hoses attached to each pump, amounts which totalled up to enough gas to get the car to a station where he could order, "Fill 'er up!"

On another occasion, after getting a flat tire when we were on an open stretch of highway near Hemet, he changed the tire for his spare, only to discover that there was no air in the spare. He had no pump. There was no civilization around, except for some old ramshackle barns near the highway, beside one of which was a sort of spray gun for painting. It was a huge container with a hose attached. The container was empty of paint, fortunately, and, after toying with the hose awhile, Grant discovered how to make it shoot a jet of air--air that would have been paint, if the container hadn't had the courtesy to be empty. Grant moved the limping car close to the paint sprayer, and after repeated efforts somehow succeeded in getting quite a bit of the squirted air

into the soft tire.

I sometimes think that if an earthquake should suddenly shatter our motel to a level with the ground, if I should run away with another man, if David should put all our possessions into a glorious bonfire, and Donna should get her hand caught in the wringer of the washing machine--all simultaneously--Grant would be able, by a few incisive words or actions, to bring the entire situation back to normal. In case, since he is my husband, this sounds like bragging, let me add that there is nothing so deflating to the ego, so utterly crushing to one's sense of having any worth or value, so completely paralyzing to one's latent, potential abilities, if any, as being married to such a paragon of accomplishment.

After our electricity was fixed--on the house, as it were--our neon sign went bad again. It flickered uneasily for a while, and finally went off altogether. We called the cherubic-faced Oian Roscoe again, and he fixed it for us promptly; but we were beginning to get disgusted. This neon sign was costing us a lot of money.

And business hadn't yet picked up to a point where we were taking in much more than enough to make our payments. Then some boys stole David's red wagon--a shiny, deluxe job we had given him for a Christmas present, when we were still in Los Angeles.

David had left it out behind the single cabins, by his tent. He and Moejy, who had been throwing gravel at each other behind Moejy's father's restaurant, came running in to tell me that they had seen a bunch of big boys pulling the wagon away.

Grant had gone to the bank. I knew that if the wagon was to be recovered, it was up to me to do something--and do it quick.

Donna was in her playpen. Telling David to stay with her, I loped out toward the tent. Sure enough, there in the distance, across Williams street, and with what seemed like a mile of fields between them and me, were the boys with David's wagon. It looked like a tiny toy, sparkling red in the sunlight.

I ran determinedly toward the boys, and I could see them pulling the wagon after them as fast as they could go.

I was soon out of breath, and nervous at the thought of leaving the motel and the baby for so long, but I plugged on. I couldn't see that I was gaining on the boys, but they must have thought I was, because finally they let go of the wagon and ran on without it, disappearing behind a group of houses.

Then I still had to trot the remaining quarter of a mile, or however far it was, get the wagon, and trudge wearily homeward with it.

When I got home I discovered that Moejy, who had stayed with David, had locked the office doors and the bathroom door, and hidden the keys. When I tried to make him tell me what he had done with the keys, the wiry little creature ran outside and down the edge of the highway toward the Peacock. David had been giving the baby a piece of bread, he said, when Moejy hid the keys; he hadn't seen where he put them.

I was frantic. If a customer should come, what would I do? With the outer office door, and the one leading to the living room, locked, I wouldn't be able to get the keys to the cabins or a master key. I wouldn't be able to show a cabin to a prospect; even if I could, I wouldn't be able to get at the change or the registration blanks. "I won't be able to even show one cabin!" I wailed.

And as for the bathroom being locked--well, that situation, too, might become acute. But so far I wasn't worried about that.

Just then a bright red roadster pulled into our driveway. I opened the living room door and stepped out, so that they wouldn't go to the office.

"Gotta single?" asked the driver.

I gulped helplessly.

Just then David nudged me from behind, and handed me the three keys Moejy had hidden.

"I just remembered," David hissed, "Moejy was fooling around by the fork drawer in the kitchen. I looked, and there were the keys! And you split your inflitive a minute ago."

That wasn't the end of our run of trouble. The night before the wedding, the fields out back caught fire. Someone driving along Williams street must have thrown a cigarette or a lighted match from a car window. Any fire in Banning is a menace because of the brisk, whipping wind, and this one was no exception.

Grant was shaving when David clattered in to tell me about the fire. I called the fire department quickly, after a glance out the door; the licking flames were dramatic and beautiful out there in the blackness behind Moe's restaurant.

I ran toward the fire with David, beating Grant to the draw. One of us, naturally, had to stay with the baby and the motel, and I knew I'd be the one if I didn't hurry!

The fire department was there within five minutes, and before long they had the blazing weeds under control. The next morning we went out to inspect the path of the fire, marked by black weeds and burnt earth, and we saw that the fire had come up almost exactly to our property line, where it had been stopped.

"See, we aren't jinxed, after all," Grant said.

We realized how lucky we had been. If the wind had been blowing in another direction, or harder, and if the fire department hadn't been so prompt, the rear section of our motel--the four single cabins--might have burned.

Thursday was the day set for the wedding. Mr. Hawkins' well-built body was encased rakishly in a striped suit, and his brown eyes were sparkling with his characteristic sly amusement when he came into the office. I smiled, remembering Miss Nestlebert's remark about hoping he wouldn't embarrass her by playing a practical joke or doing something eccentric at the ceremony. I couldn't blame her for not quite trusting him.

Mr. Hawkins swept off his hat. "I know, madame," he said, "what you think about me. I know what you're thinking right now. It is my fond hope that I can at least partially obliterate the bad impression I have made upon you. There are two hours yet before the ceremony, and in those two hours I propose to work for you. If you will give me cleaning equipment and fresh linens I shall clean my cabin from ceiling to floorboard, until it is so spotless it will look as though it had never been occupied."

Since Grant, who cleaned each occupied cabin each day, whether or not the occupants were staying over, had cleaned Mr. Hawkins' cabin the previous morning, it wasn't as much in need of a thorough cleaning as he implied.

We hadn't cleaned his cabin yet today, though. Since this was to be his last day here, we planned to wait until he left, and then to get it ready for a new customer.

I had tried to persuade the pair to stay at our motel for their honeymoon. Mr. Hawkins, though, insisted that they should travel for a few weeks, and then settle down in Burbank, where he had a nice home that had been rented out since the death of his first wife five years ago. Mr. Hawkins would have liked to spend a comfortable honeymoon in Banning, probably, but he didn't trust me. He knew that, although I had laughed off the rubber spider and several other of his little whimsicalities, I had never forgiven him for the tooth brush incident. He was afraid that I would seize upon his wedding night as an opportunity to revenge myself in full.

If he really wanted to clean up his cabin in readiness for a new occupant, I certainly wasn't going to stand in his way. I led him out to the linen closet, where I loaded him with a bucket of soapy water, disinfectant, a broom, a dustcloth, and clean linens.

"Don't get that gorgeous new suit dirty!" I called after him as he carried the load back toward his cabin.

Grant was mowing the grass on the last of the three white-curbed islands. The approach of winter had slowed down the growth of the grass, so that it didn't need as much mowing as it had a few weeks earlier. It didn't need so much watering, either. Some of the leaves of the Chinese elms were turning golden or red and dropping to the ground. It was the basis of a prolonged debate between Grant and me. Would the elms, or wouldn't they, lose all their leaves for the winter? "Yep," said Grant.

No, said I. With all the varieties of non-shedding trees in California, the people who built the motel wouldn't have been so foolish as to plant trees that would be bare sticks all winter long, when business was heaviest and it was most important for the motel to look attractive.

Whenever we couldn't think of anything else to talk about, we argued about that. And every day there were more leaves on the grass, and the trees were in a more advanced phase of their strip tease.

Mr. Hawkins returned the cleaning equipment about an hour after he had taken it, and invited me to inspect his handiwork. He had done a good job, all right. The place was spotless; the furniture all shone as though it had been polished, and even the Venetian blinds seemed cleaner than we had ever been able to get them. A new book of matches was in the ashtray; two new, fragrant little guest-size bars of Cashmere Bouquet soap were on the sparkling sink. The bed was made perfectly, without a wrinkle in or under the spread, and the soft, blue woolly extra blanket was folded precisely at the foot of the bed, as neatly as any of the extra blankets on the beds in the other cabins. The cabin would be ready to rent to the most discriminating customer as soon as Mr. Hawkins removed his suitcases and a few of his clothes that were hanging in the closet. They would return and get all their belongings after the ceremony, he said.

"The cabin looks wonderful," I said sincerely. "You've certainly saved us a lot of work." And I was beginning to think that I had perhaps misjudged his basic character, when he produced the

piece de resistance. "A gift for you, madame," he said grandly, taking a small box from his pockets. "A little token of my regard for you and my appreciation for your forbearance."

Overcome, I was about to open it when Miss Nesdebert fluttered into the cabin. She was resplendent in a pale blue satin dress, with four strands of pearls around her neck. Rhinestone earrings rivaled the pearls for glory, and her eyes rivaled the rhinestones.

"I can't get this dress zipped! Will you zip up the back of it?" she appealed to me.

I zipped it for her, and said, "Isn't it supposed to be bad luck to let the groom see you in your wedding dress before the wedding?"

"Bad luck? Mais non!" she scoffed. "I'm not superstitious."

She must have seen my incredulous smile. "I don't believe in dreams any more either," she went on. "I've decided Elmo's teachings about the meaning of dreams is just a lot of nonsense. None of the things that my dreams prophesied, according to his teaching, came true. I think," she confessed, her fair skin turning pink, "I just had all those dreams because I wanted to marry Mr. Hawkins!"

"Well, I suppose that's possible," I conceded.

They were married at the home of one of Banning's ministers. I was a witness; and after the brief ceremony (during which Mr. Hawkins behaved like a perfect gentleman) they drove back to the motel, to let me off and to stow their luggage in the car. Miss Nestlebert's car was stored in a garage; they hadn't figured out exactly how or when they were going to get it, but they didn't want to go on their honeymoon in separate cars!

They let me off at the office, and drove back toward the cabins they had been occupying. Fifteen minutes later they drove out, paused by the office to honk a raucous farewell, and began to edge into the line of traffic on the highway. Grant and I went outside to wave at them; Mr. Hawkins waved back, and from his hand hung what looked like the corner of a woolly blue blanket.

I stared after the car as it swung onto the highway, and then I said to Grant, "Did you see what I saw?"

But Grant had already started toward the back row of cabins. I followed him, and we burst into the spotless cabin that Mr. Hawkins had lived in. It was still beautifully neat, especially since his luggage and his clothes were gone--but now the extra blanket was gone from the foot of the bed! "He took our blanket!" Grant exclaimed.

"Let's be sure," I said. "Maybe it's just another of his jokes. Maybe he just wanted us to think he did." We searched the place thoroughly; we looked under the bed, in drawers, on the closet shelf. We even glanced into Miss Nesdebert's cabin. We couldn't find the blanket.

"I guess he took it, all right," I said at last. "Well, he isn't going to get away with it. I'll go after him."

I would have let Grant, as a representative of the sterner, stronger sex, handle the situation, except that I was so furious with Mr. Hawkins that I couldn't bear to let anyone else have the pleasure of dealing harshly with him.

I got into our car, backed it out of the garage, and drove quickly to the highway. I turned left, in the direction in which Mr. Hawkins had gone, and pressed my foot down hard on the gas.

Mr. Hawkins must have been driving fast, too. I didn't catch up with them until we reached the side road that led to Twenty-Nine Palms. They were hesitating there, apparently trying to decide whether to go straight ahead or to have a look at Twenty-Nine Palms. About the time they decided to go straight ahead, I drove up beside them. "Pull over!" I yelled.

"Look, dear, a lady traffic cop," I heard Mr. Hawkins observe loudly; but he pulled meekly off the highway, near some clumps of sagebrush. The desert rolled in swells around us, its sands sparsely covered by cactus plants and by an occasional grotesque Joshua tree. Sharp mountains, partly covered with snow, walled us in, and ahead of us the highway disappeared into sloping hills.

I parked behind them, and got out of the car. I felt selfconscious as I stalked toward them. I was acting just like a traffic cop.

Mr. Hawkins narrow brown eyes were laughing at me as I said icily, "I'd like to have that blanket back, if you don't mind."

Miss Nestlebert drew in her breath in a sharp gasp. "What do you mean?" she asked, her tiny white hands going to her mouth.

"What blanket, madame?" Mr. Hawkins inquired courteously.

"The blanket you took from our motel!" I snapped. "There it is! Right on the seat between you!"

Mr. Hawkins didn't glance at the blanket. "Your suspicious nature grieves me," he stated. "Why, simply because I have a blanket, do you assume that it is your blanket?"

"Because the extra blanket is gone from your cabin, as you know."

"Madame," he replied, "I fear that you are mistaken. I am quite positive that the blanket to which you refer is still in the cabin it has been my happiness to occupy for awhile. Why don't you hurry back and look more thoroughly?" He started the motor of his car.

"Give me that blanket!" I cried.

"This blanket," he said, "is mine. It was a--a wedding present." His eyes shifted as he spoke, and his face wore a furtive, guilty expression.

Angrily I stepped on the running board, put my arm through the window and reached across him, seizing a corner of the blanket. I pulled. Mr. Hawkins held the rest of the blanket, and he pulled also.

Miss Nestlebert--she would always be Miss Nestlebert to me, even though she had made the mistake of marrying this sly, underhanded thief--clasped her little hands in distress.

After a brief tug of war Mr. Hawkins made what came as close to being a courtly bow as possible, under the conditions and in his position. He released the blanket, and I gathered it into my arms triumphantly. Mr. Hawkins sighed.

"If you are so determined to have my blanket, all right. I suppose, in the motel business, you must get supplies in any way you can. But there's just one thing," he said mildly. "Before you take it, will you identify it, or try to? I just want you to admit, before we part, that you know it isn't yours."

"But it is!" I cried. "Do you think I'd be so interested in getting it away from you if it weren't?"

"Frankly, yes."

Fuming, I held up the satin edges of the blanket. "It has 'Moonrise Motel' stamped on the edges somewhere," I said. "All of our blankets do. Just wait. I'll find it right away."

I searched fruitlessly for a few minutes, while Mr. Hawkins sat watching me, a widening grin on his face.

I kept on hunting for the "Moonrise Motel" stamp. I couldn't find it.

Finally I looked up at Mr. Hawkins. If I had been angry before, I was raging now. He had made a fool of me again.

"You knew perfectly well that wasn't my blanket!" I accused him.

"My dear madame, that's what I've been trying to tell you all along," he pointed out reasonably. He took the blanket from my numb hands, and they drove off, leaving me in a shower of sand.

When I got back to the motel I went again into the cabin Mr. Hawkins had occupied and looked about thoughtfully. Where could that blanket be?

It must be on the bed, smoothed out under the spread with the other blanket. I peeked under the spread, but the extra blanket wasn't there. Nevertheless, I felt that it must be secreted about the bed somewhere; there absolutely wasn't any place else in the cabin it could be!

I gazed at the bed for a while, and then, moved by some unaccountable impulse, I lifted one side of the mattress and peered under it. There, between the mattress and the box springs, was the blanket. .

I pulled it out, smoothed the bedspread, and put the blanket neatly at the foot of the bed. I left, making a mental note that the cabin was ready to rent.

After I went back into our own cabin and told Grant ruefully what had happened, I noticed the little package Mr. Hawkins had given me, still on the desk by the telephone where I had put it before going to the wedding. I picked it up warily.

"I wonder what is his idea of a gift," I mused. "'A little token of his regard for me.' Is it more likely to be a baby rattlesnake, or a tear gas bomb?"

"Open it and see," Grant suggested, brushing back his brown hair with his thin fingers.

I tore the wrappings off the package gingerly, perched on the edge of my chair ready to throw the whole thing away quickly if necessary. I held a small, innocuous-looking box in my

hand. Slowly, carefully, I opened the box.

Inside was the silver figure of a nude man, about four inches high, standing on tiptoe with his arms upraised. On the tips of his fingers was a balloon, with which he was, apparently, supposed to be playing.

"H'm," I said, "Rather immodest, and I don't know what it's for--an ornament, maybe--but I guess I didn't have to be so nervous about opening it."

Grant, with his quick perception, had figured out exactly what the thing was for before I had even completely made up my mind that it was harmless.

"It's an atomizer," he said. "The balloon is the bulb. It smells like there's perfume in it right now. Squeeze the bulb and see."

I squeezed the bulb, and we were sprayed with fragrance.

I stood the little silver man on top of the bookcase. He's there right now, the object of the admiration and titters of those who visit us. His silvery body still gleams brightly, he is as merrily nude as ever, and a little pressure on the balloon he is playing with still brings forth a gentle squirt of perfume--but where the perfume squirts from, I refuse to say.

CHAPTER NINE

THERE IS AN indefinable air about every motel cabin that is felt, I imagine, by all but the most insensitive of motel owners. It's the composite spirit of all the people who have slept in that cabin. It's nothing more tangible than memory, actually, yet it's very real.

Miss Nestleburt and Mr. Hawkins had been with us so long that their presence still seemed to cling to their cabins. I felt almost guilty the first time I rented their cabins to other people after they left. A stern, rigid old couple fell heir to Mr. Hawkins' cabin, and I couldn't help contrasting their stiff seriousness with the sly humor of the former occupant.

Grant and I sat on the davenport that night after the children were in bed, and discussed the motel business. It was raining, so he wasn't going to go outside to bring any customers in.

"What we need is a rifle," Grant observed, lifting up the top slice of bread of his sandwich to make sure that the peanut butter, Worcestershire sauce, and apple jelly were still there. I averted my eyes, and asked him what we would do with a rifle if we had one--shoot people who tried to go into any motel but ours?

"Shoot out all the signs around us," he replied, his cheeks bulging. "Then we'd fill up right away. As soon as we filled up we'd quick shoot our own sign out, so the other motel owners wouldn't get suspicious the next morning because ours was the only sign that hadn't been shot out. We'd make twenty or thirty dollars extra that way; we'd pay Rosco seven-fifty to fix the sign, and that's all there'd be to it."

"You're wonderful," I said admiringly.

"We should at least change our own sign once," Grant went on, licking his lips. "The Winking Eye's sign, with its big eye flashing on and off, is almost as much of an eyecatcher as the Peacock's. Here we are between them with a sign no better than Featherbrain's."

"Maybe we could have a picture on top of the word 'Moonrise,'" I suggested. "A big orange moon--only half of it showing because it's supposed to be rising--all made out of bright neon."

Grant took another bite of his sandwich. "Have to talk to Oian Rosco about that," he observed. "He'll know if it can be done, and how much it would cost. I'll have to find out about neon myself one of these days. I don't like to have to hire anyone to make repairs."

We were silent for a while. "Another way to get customers," Grant mused, "would be to put up a sign outside: 'Limit--one cabin to a customer.' They'd come rushing in then, I'll bet."

We talked for a while about what different characters and personalities people possess--differences evidenced by the very manner in which they ask for cabins. There are several general types of opening remarks. There's the one that goes something like this: "Have you a nice, soft bed for a poor weary traveler to lay his tired body in?" The person--almost invariably a man--who asks for a cabin in this manner is without doubt good-natured, easy-going and generous, and has a good sense of humor. Then there's the thin-nosed man who thrusts that slender appendage a cautious inch inside the office doorway and demands, "Whatcha get for your cabins?" And there's the woman--too many of her--who inquires thoroughly into every detail before she will

condescend even to examine a cabin.

"Have you bedbugs?" she inquires. There are two appropriate responses to such a query that, so far, I've been able to hold back. One is, "I'm sorry, we haven't any, but I think you can get some at the little store across the street." The other response would be a sigh, a confidential motion to her to come closer, and the words: "No, but I'm eaten alive by lice. Have you found any good ways to get rid of lice?"

Not only is a woman of this type not satisfied with asking about bedbugs, but she must also ask whether there is hot water (really hot?) and whether we actually wash the sheets, or whether we just iron the wrinkles out each time they are used and put them back on the beds.

But the most common four words--I've heard them so often I can almost tell by a prospective customer's expression when I am about to hear them again--are: "Have you any vacancies?"

Obviously, since our sign is proclaiming to all the world that we have, the question seems superfluous. The question irritated me at first, until I realized that everyone who asks it knows perfectly well that we do have a vacancy, but can't think of a better way to start the conversation.

The telephone interrupted our discussion and reverie, and Grant answered it.

"A reservation for two?" he said presently. "Yep ... I got that . . ." He began writing on a piece of paper by the telephone.

"The twin beds!" I hissed. "Ask them if they want twin beds!"

Our two twin bed cabins often seem to be a drug on the market, even though, except when business is rushing, we lock off the back bedroom, with its double bed, and rent the twin beds for only a dollar more than the price of a regular single cabin for two. When we remind people that we have twin beds, or ask them as they register if they wouldn't prefer them, we have better luck in getting rid of those cabins.

We often have trouble remembering to ask them, though. I prodded Grant in the back and hissed again, "Ask them if they want twin beds!"

"Do you want twin beds?" Grant said into the telephone mouthpiece. And then, to my amazement, he began to blush. He concluded the conversation hurriedly and with confusion, and then he turned to me.

"After this, will you leave me alone once when I'm telephoning?" he asked. "The man told me right away he wanted to reserve a cabin for his honeymoon. And then you quick pester me into asking him if he wants twin beds!"

Grant rented a cabin to a gushy, heavily upholstered woman, and we picked up our conversation where we had left off. "People certainly have a lot of different subjects to talk about while they register," I remarked.

"She certainly did have," Grant replied. "More than most." The principal topics of conversation are weather (both "here" and "where we came from") traveling conditions, and motels. Frequently an out-of-state customer will linger in the office to complain about the search that was made of his luggage and belongings at the border. And occasionally a customer will take the opportunity to expound his entire philosophy of life.

"We're missing a bet," Grant said, "by not having another business or two as a sideline. We could make a fortune selling the little things people leave behind and never call for--tooth brushes, bobby pins, things like that. And," he added bitterly, "we could sell wigs, and pillows stuffed with human hair."

His worst objection to cleaning the bathrooms in the cabins is the hair that is usually all over the sink and floor. He has often talked, in fact, of trying to get a law passed that would bar women from motels. Scattered bobbypins, lipstick smears on towels, hair and powder would be automatically eliminated in that way. (So would most of our income.)

Worse than hair, in my opinion, are ashes (the scattering of which is a pastime engaged in by more men than women.) Both sexes sprinkle them blithely all over the cabins--a trifle more thickly in the general neighborhood of ashtrays. That part of "ring a round the rosy" which goes "ashes, ashes, all fall down!" was probably written by a cabin-cleaner-upper as she fell down, exhausted, after removing the results of an average smokefest.

If ever the WCTU is supplemented by an organization to squelch dat ole debbil Nicotine, I shall join it. I shall be one of its most vociferous members, agitating violently for the suppression of tobacco, and for the relegation to dungeons of those whose lips, pockets, or thoughts are contaminated by cigarettes.

Grant and I had been in bed for about ten minutes when the doorbell rang. It was the male half of the rigid old couple to whom I had rented Mr. Hawkins' cabin. The door between the living room and the office was slightly ajar, and when Grant answered the bell I proceeded to engage in

my favorite pastime--eavesdropping.

The man's voice was as severe and unyielding as his face. "May I inquire, young man," he said, "what was the idea behind the way you fixed our bed?"

Grant, of course, didn't know what he was talking about, and said so.

"Perhaps it is your idea of humor," the icy voice went on, fading as Grant followed the man back to his cabin to see what was the matter.

I was uneasy while I waited for Grant. Obviously, whatever was wrong, it was Mr. Hawkins' doing. I should have known there was something behind his eagerness to prepare his cabin for new occupants.

Grant came back in about twenty minutes. "Apple pie bed," he said. "Your friend Hawkins got in a last lick."

And then we sat on the bed and laughed until our sides ached.

Business was beginning to pick up again, to such an extent that Grant stayed up to pull in customers only a few nights a week. The Palm Springs season was to open October first, and the motel owners around us who had been in Banning more than a year assured us that the eight-month Palm Springs season would guarantee our being full almost every night.

Grandma came up from Los Angeles toward the end of September, exactly two weeks--as usual--from her last visit, and we decided to drive the twenty miles to Palm Springs and look the place over on its opening day.

The first of October was a bright, sunny day. Grant wasn't feeling very well--he had overindulged, the previous night while pulling in customers, on "tomato rolls," his own invention. These were cinnamon rolls, pulled apart and with slices of fresh tomato inserted. Too many of them cause the complexion to assume a greenish tinge, as Grant discovered. (The mere contemplation of them had that effect on me.)

In spite of the uneasiness of his stomach, Grant assured me that he could manage all right, and he and Donna waved to us as we swung onto the highway and headed east toward Palm Springs. I had never driven the road before.

My driving was still far from perfect, and Grandma's habit of excitedly calling my attention to sights along the way was very irritating. My curiosity about everything she pointed out was very maddening and intense, but the highway was so busy that I didn't dare take my eyes off it, even though I wasn't driving very fast.

A few miles east of Banning we turned off the main highway onto the road that led to Palm Springs. Desert stretched and sloped around us, its sand dotted with cacti and sagebrush, and mountains towered almost menacingly above us as we drew closer to Palm Springs. Gleaming white sand, beaten into purity by months of insistent pounding wind, cascaded up the sides of some of the mountains.

The little city of Palm Springs seemed like something out of a fairy story as we drove into the outskirts--low pastel stucco dwellings, pink and blue and yellow and green, dotted the sides of the road. And the lush greenness of the lawns, and the brilliance of the flowers, made the spot seem like an oasis.

Almost anything will grow in the desert, if it gets enough water. The growth of well-cared-for grass in Palm Springs amazes even the natives. If the earth is spaded and the seed planted on a Monday, the green shoots will be up on Wednesday, and on the next Monday, one week after the planting, the lawn will be thick and luxuriant and badly in need of mowing.

Clouds were hanging low over the city--or the "village," as habitues call it. I parked the car on the main street, near the famous Desert Inn, and we got out of the car. We hadn't brought coats or sweaters, of course, since it had been warm in Banning, and Palm Springs is supposed to have a warmer climate than Banning's.

There was a dull chill in the air. The streets were busy with cars and pedestrians, but no one was wearing a coat. In fact, nearly everyone was wearing shorts, with brief tops or no tops, depending on their sex--scanty outfits that left their goose pimples plainly visible.

One very protuberant man, standing in front of a swanky little novelty shop, was wearing bright yellow shorts, with yellow bobby sox to match. White sandals completed the ensemble. The hair on his chest was curly and thick, but it couldn't have done much toward keeping him warm. On his fat, slightly blue face was an expression I had noticed already on several faces since we had arrived--an expression that seemed to say, "Well, I came here so I could wear practically nothing, and by golly, I'm going to do it!"

Shivering, we walked past him. The main street of the village was lined with low, expensive looking stores, with show windows full of merchandise that sparkled and beckoned. Bars with

extravagantly fancy interiors invited the thirsty into their dusky interiors. But we found the people more interesting than the surroundings. Not only were they determinedly wearing shorts and sun clothes, but many of them were wearing dark glasses--in spite of the fact that most of the low clouds were sitting on the ground now, and those that were still up in the sky were beginning to leak spasmodically.

"Godfrey Mighty, maybe they're movie stars!" Grandma exploded suddenly. "That's what they be, sure as anything."

"They couldn't all be movie stars," I protested. "Look at this dog coming, though--he seems to have gone Hollywood, all right."

We looked--or maybe we even stared. A plump, heavily jeweled woman wearing a silver fox jacket (the most appropriate garment I had seen here yet) was leading a tiny chihuahua. The creature was bundled into a bright green sweater, and around one of its frail forelegs was a glittering diamond bracelet.

"My God, that's the first time I ever see a dog with jewelry on!" Grandma hissed, as the pair met us and went on.

"I imagine we'd see a lot of things here if we'd hang around long enough," I remarked. "And incidentally," I added, "I want to congratulate you again for stopping swearing. It was a bad habit, and I'm glad you got over it."

About half of the hotels and apartment houses had "no vacancy" signs. If the accommodations were this nearly taken on the opening day, visitors would have a hard time finding a place to stay in Palm Springs a little later in the season. Besides, a night in a Palm Springs hotel would probably cost as much as a week at a motel in Banning. It looked as though Palm Springs would have a good season; and that would mean a good season for Banning. The overflow from Palm Springs, plus the usual number of winter tourists coming to California from the east, should mean a few thousand dollars extra knocked off our mortgage.

We crossed the busy street and paused in front of the window of a dress shop. There were wax models almost hidden under cascades of ruffles, models buried in layers of pleats and fluff. I had never seen such fancy clothes. There were elaborate dresses for tiny girls, and the prices calmly jotted on little tags attached to each were staggering. One little slip, for a girl of about three, was valued at nineteen dollars. The prices of the other garments were in proportion.

"Gee whittaker, I never see anything like it!" Grandma said, her small black eyes bright with amazement. "It's most a wonder it don't cost nothing to breathe here!"

"Don't worry, they'll give you the bill for that when you leave, they will all right!"

We turned around. There, behind us, stood a small, birdlike old man.

"This is Palm Springs," he chirped. "Nothin's free, not nothin', it ain't."

His lips closed tightly beneath his little beak of a nose, and he regarded us as curiously as we were looking at him.

"Have you been here long?" I asked finally, not being able to think of anything else to say.

"I've been here all day, I have," he stated. He resumed his scrutiny of Grandma, apparently pleased with her short, stocky figure.

"You ain't gonna stay here, be you?" Grandma asked him.

"Not here, I ain't, not for nothin'. I'm going back to Los Angeles tonight, I am, all right. Where you from?" he asked, indicating Grandma with a quick nod of his little head.

"I live in L.A. too," Grandma said, adding modestly, "I'm a fancy presser. I'm going back in a day or two."

The man seemed to be lost in thought. "If everything wasn't so expensive here, I'd buy you a meal, I would all right. But I'll tell you what. Give me your address, and I'll buy you a dinner next week in Los Angeles."

Grandma gasped and looked at me, half thrilled and half dismayed.

"Good Godfrey Mighty," she murmured.

"Go ahead," I whispered, knowing what she was worrying about. "Hellwig won't have to know anything about it."

"He'd be madder'n a wet hen," she hissed back.

"Well," chirped the old man, "does that sound all right to you? It does to me, all right."

Grandma said, "Ayah," feebly, and wrote her name and address on a piece of paper he handed her.

"A week from tonight I'll be there, I will all right," he said, examining what she had written on the paper. "Seven o'clock. Goodbye!" He turned abruptly and walked away.

We strolled on in the opposite direction, and paused outside a real estate office. I read the placards in the window while Grandma discussed our birdlike friend.

"He's a odd critter, awful odd," she said. "But he ain't bad looking. I knew pretty plaguey well he was interested in me. Just so Hellwig don't find out, ding bust it. He'd be madder'n Fury."

"Look," I interrupted, pointing out to her one of the signs in the window. I read it aloud. "Unfinished residence. Situated on large lot. Twenty-nine thousand. Another good buy: A choice business lot, ninety thousand down."

"Thunderation, we better get out of here. This land under us is too valuable for us to be walking around on it like this."

"Beg your pardon."

It was Grandma's little admirer again. "I forgot to tell you my name. I'm Ansil J. Wagonseller. Pleased to meet you ladies, I am all right. Goodbye."

We watched him walk perkily along the sidewalk. He got into a beautiful new car that was parked on a side street near the corner.

"Ansil J. Wagonseller," I remarked. "He must have sold a lot of wagons to be able to buy a car like that one."

"Gee cracky, I never see such a car," Grandma cried ecstatically. "Do you think he'll really show up? Or was that just a lot of talk?"

The rest of our stay in Palm Springs was lost upon her. She worried about whether or not Mr. Wagonseller would actually call on her, while we wandered about the streets. She accompanied me dumbly, paying no attention while I bought a delectable white ivory Chinese backscratcher. As we strolled back toward the car I told Grandma more about Palm Springs, from the store of wisdom presented to me by Jed, the laundry truck driver. The whole area, it seemed, was divided up into squares, like a checkerboard. Alternate squares were Indian land. It seemed too bad that, with miles of worthless desert land all around, the precious--although actually, equally worthless--land of Palm Springs should have been given back to the Indians. Of course, all this was arranged long before Palm Springs began to ascend toward its zenith of exclusiveness and popularity. Although the land now belonged irrevocably to the Indians, it was possible for white people to secure ninety-nine year leases from the Indian agent. These leases were fragile and precarious things, though, containing a clause providing for cancellation at any time. Houses built upon land so leased, therefore, were quite literally built upon stilts, ready to be moved on short notice. And since no one cared to put much money into the building of a house that might have to be removed at any time, these houses were hovels indeed compared to the sleek, expensive, modern pastel stucco creations that abounded in all the streets of Palm Springs--all the streets, that is, except those that went through Indian land.

Grandma paid no attention to my discourse. She only roused from her reverie when I pointed out to her a rotund, slightly bald man who, I said, was without doubt Bing Crosby.

Bing Crosby is her favorite actor. She clutched me feverishly as we neared the man, who was leading a sad-eyed collie.

Our mouths hanging open, forgetting to keep on walking, we watched the man approach. Behind his dark glasses, he seemed to be returning our stares with interest.

To our amazement, he stopped in front of us and said, "Beg pardon, ladies, but is you all goin' to de annual Palm Springs dog show? It's gonna be de bigges' thing evah hit Palm Springs, dis yeah! Mah li'l poochie, here, is gonna be in it, and if he don' win every ribbon, Ah'll eat mah dark glasses!"

He sauntered on by us then, without waiting for us to reply. Grandma and I looked at each other.

"That was Bing Crosby," I stated, my tongue assuming a time-honored position in relation to my cheek.

"Pshaw, 'twarn't neither," Grandma replied. "Bing Crosby ain't bald headed. Besides, 'taint likely he'd be talking to us."

We argued about that until we got back to the car.

"Anyway, they wun't nobody come to his dog show if he don't take off his glasses and let 'em see who he is!" Grandma declared.

As we left the village she sighed and said, "So that's Palm Springs. It's a H. of a place, if you ask me. I swear'n, I like Banning a sight better."

There was one thing, though, that I liked about Palm Springs very much--and that was the effect the opening of the season there had on our business. People flocked toward the desert from Los Angeles, and those who couldn't afford to stay in Palm Springs stayed in towns that were close to Palm Springs. Besides this overflow from Palm Springs, we had the regular tourist trade, and October wasn't very old before our motel began to be full every night by nine.

It would have been full earlier if we had rented a cabin to everyone who applied for one. People have an annoying habit, though, of traveling in pairs or even singly, and now we always saved our nine double cabins until three or four people together appeared who wanted accommodations. Naturally, the rate for three or four is much higher than the rate for one or two. Until recently, on nights when couples wanted a cabin after our singles were full, we had been locking off the back bedroom of double cabins and renting the remainder of each as a single.

When our rollaway bed and the army cot were in use, we could accommodate a grand total of forty-seven people. And, since the parents of large families frequently put two children in each of the twin beds, and couples with one child often rented a single cabin and let the child sleep between them, there were many nights when our motel sheltered more than fifty persons besides ourselves.

There is often a lot of confusion among customers about the word "double" as applied to cabins and beds. A double cabin is, of course, a cabin with two rooms, each of which has a double bed. A single cabin is a single room with a double bed. For short, these are called "doubles" and "singles."

About half of the people who come into the office ask if we have a "double" available. Whenever anyone asks me that, I glance out at his car, which usually contains just one other person, and show him a single, without comment. People like this mean, of course, double bed. I've thought of explaining to all these people the difference between "single" and "double", but decided that a one-woman educational campaign of such magnitude would be too much for me.

Occasionally, though, the customer is more right than I give him credit for being. Sometimes two people request a double, and really mean it--they each want a bed and a separate room. In such cases, if I show them a single after they have asked for a double, they often make it a point to inquire if I have been in the motel business long.

The motel business must be one of the best cures known for shyness. Before we came to Banning the sight of a stranger used to make me ill at ease, and the idea of an introduction sometimes almost paralyzed me. All this culminated, of course, in my first bad attacks of customerphobia. After that I grew braver and braver until now, after meeting travelers from all parts of the country and even all parts of the world, I can actually be the one to begin a conversation with a stranger.

The lessening of my shyness is very fortunate, since many of the conversations and monologues that take place in a motel office are not the sort that would be accepted by the most lenient censor. I still find it hard to keep from withering with embarrassment, though, at the things some of our customers say when they register. The men, for instance, who casually describe other places they have stayed in--places where more of their desires have been taken into consideration than simply the desire for a shower and a place to sleep.

"Last place like that I was in," one male customer said, "They said, 'Y'wanta girl?' I said, 'Naw, I just wanta sleep.' Y'know what I mean? So they showed me my room and left me alone, and I wenta sleep. Guess I didn't get my money's worth at that, ha ha ha ha, y'know what I mean?"

Customers who came from Los Angeles were enthralled by the clear, pure air, so different from that big city's foggy, smokeladen air. Customers from the east were amazed at the daytime warmth and sunshine, and the fact that flowers were blooming and practically all of the trees still had their full foliage. (Our little Chinese elms, though, by this time were nine nude sticks all in a row, and I had to concede to Grant that he had been right in our argument about them.) Natives of California and Easterners alike were struck by the beauty of the surrounding mountains. They looked like high, jagged cakes now, to which white icing was being added, a new layer each night, till the frosting was thick and pure.

Mr. Gorvane's offer to buy the Moonrise Motel wasn't the only offer we received. There were quite a few others, ranging from his sublime one to several which were very ridiculous. (One man offered us two hundred dollars down, and half the motel's monthly income until the purchase price--whatever we might ask!--should be paid.) But, in spite of the fact that we had several opportunities to make a nice, easy profit and go back to a smoother, if duller, way of living, we had both become so attached to our motel and the steadily increasing repeat business that we were building up, that we decided to put out of our minds any thought of selling.

During the slack period, when we stayed up late and had customers coming in at all hours of the night, Grant and I had been so tired that we never had any difficulty in sleeping when we had

the opportunity to do so. But now that it was suddenly possible for us to go to bed early and get long nights of undisturbed rest, I found suddenly that I was out of the habit. I couldn't go to sleep at night. I'd lie awake for an hour or more, envying Grant his faculty of becoming unconscious as his head first sank against the pillow.

I tried all the trite old remedies for insomnia, without success. I made my mind a blank; I counted sheep; I tried mentally adding huge numbers. It was no use. My mind was as alert and bright as a sunny morning. Finally, though, I discovered a method of inducing sleep that has been--for me--infallible ever since.

I think of a particular cabin, selecting any one of the thirteen at random. Then I visualize the people who stayed in that cabin most recently; then I try to remember who occupied the cabin the night before that, and the night before that. A typical night's session of luring the sandman goes something like this:

"Let's see ... last night in cabin 10 there was that funny old couple who haggled so about the price. They insisted they wouldn't stay unless we'd let them have it fifty cents cheaper, and they even went back and got into the car. Then, when they saw we didn't care, and weren't going to follow them out and tell them they could have it cheaper, they got back out of the car and came into the office and registered without saying another word about it. The night before that there was that very tall old man who mentioned, while he was registering, that he had a "little pup"--would that be okay? And then the next morning he strolled out of his cabin being led by a majestic, gigantic St. Bernard. . . . Um . . . and the night before that--let's see. Oh, yes, the woman who had asthma. She was here three days, and before her there was--let's see. That was the old, old man who assured me over and over again that the old woman in the car was really his wife, and that he 'didn't go in for that sort of thing'. And before that--mm--was that those pilots who had to stay over a night because it was raining? Or--no, it's been longer than that since it rained last. Well, then, it must have been--well--um . . ."

Usually I can't think back any further than that. But by that time I'm usually asleep.

CHAPTER TEN

EMBARRASSING MOMENTS ARE the rule, rather than the exception, around a motel. If, as Grant puts it, he had a dollar for every time he has gone busting, with his cleaning equipment and fresh linens, into a cabin he thought was empty, only to find the cabin still occupied, he'd be able to buy a new neon sign that would make the Peacock's big blue and red bird gallop away in shame. With so many strangers about the place almost constantly, embarrassing incidents are inevitable.

I never did get over my hatred of walking back with a prospective customer to show one of the rear cabins. Weather is such a trite, obviously last-resort topic of conversation that I determined never to descend to using it--but it's hard to begin a conversation on any other subject with a person you've never seen before. And to walk with such a person all the way back to the rear cabins in a stony silence makes me overly conscious of little things like my gait, my posture, and the corner of my slip that may be showing. The customer probably is no more happy than I over the situation. If ever I figure out a solution to this problem, I'll write another book about it.

For Grant, of course, that particular problem is no problem at all. Before he and the customer are a tenth of the way out to the rear cabins, they are usually laughing and talking together as though they had known each other all their lives. Grant's competence in everything from mechanics to human relationships can be very irritating.

One night a rather inebriated gentleman opened our living room door instead of the office door, and swayed on into the room. It was about ten o'clock. I was in bed, and Grant was reading the comic section of a newspaper that had been left in one of the cabins that morning.

"I wanna rent a cabin," the man informed Grant. "I'm all alone, all alone. You oughta have an office, so everybody wouldn't disturb mama in the bed there when they wanna rent a cabin."

"We do have an office," Grant pointed out. "Right over there."

The man's gaze followed Grant's gesture carefully. "Well," he said indignantly, after a moment, "why don't you use it then?"

That alcohol scented gentleman wasn't the only person who ever mistook our front door for the office door. Every few days we found a confused, apologetic stranger in the process of backing hurriedly out. For awhile we kept the door locked, in such a way that a turn of the knob would open it from the inside, but not from the outside. That meant, of course, that I had to let David in approximately twenty times every hour of the time that he was home. Also, it meant that

we locked ourselves out once in a while, and had to lift David through the window so that he could unlock the door. I dreaded the day we'd lock ourselves out when David was in school, and I'd be the one to be lifted through the window. Finally we decided we'd save ourselves a lot of worry by just leaving the door unlocked all day, and by not being surprised or upset if an occasional stranger joined our family group temporarily. I made a mental note, though, never to run around in my slip or to get dressed anywhere except behind the locked door of the bathroom.

Incredibly enough, there is a mistake that Grant makes far more often than I do--that of going into an occupied cabin, thinking it's vacant. Almost invariably if the car of the occupants of a certain cabin is gone, and it is nearly checking out time (noon) it is safe to assume that the occupants of the cabin have gone. Most of our customers are gone, anyway, before ten o'clock. If there is any doubt, of course, we can knock before entering; but after you knock, and wait before entering, upon about fifty different occasions when you're positive anyway that the cabin is empty, only to find that it is, as you had supposed, quite empty, you become less careful.

The keys, if not returned to the office, are left either in the doors of the cabins, or--more often--inside the cabins. Therefore, of course, the fact that a key is not at the office or sticking out the keyhole of the cabin to which it belongs does not necessarily indicate that the people are still in the cabin.

Grant was particularly embarrassed on one occasion when he walked into an occupied cabin. We had seen the car drive out of the garage adjacent to the cabin, and it was ten minutes before noon.

Grant told me later that he entered the cabin, set down his cleaning equipment, and went toward the bathroom to get the dirty towels. Just as he reached there a woman backed out toward him, saying,

"Here, honey, fasten my brassiere, will you? Goodness, you made a flying trip. I didn't expect you back so soon." Paralyzed, not knowing what else to do, Grant numbly fastened the hooks of her brassiere. Then he turned and bounded out of the place, gathering up his cleaning equipment as he fled.

Occasionally, too, through some mixup it happens that we try to rent the same cabin to two different groups of people. If several cars drive in at once, whichever of us is taking care of them might, in the confusion, forget to write down on the daily list that a certain cabin is rented to a certain party. Then, later, finding the space still blank after the cabin number on the list, one of us is apt to try to give that cabin to someone else. What usually stops the error before it has gone too far is the fact that the key for that cabin has, of course, been given to the first customer, and its absence makes us remember the unrecorded transaction. Sometimes, though, in such a case, we pick up a master key, and take the prospective customer to look at a cabin without noticing that the key to that cabin has been given out.

This results in a lot of confusion, needless to say, and to break ourselves of the carelessness which brings it about, Grant and I have worked out a system of penalizing each other for making the error of trying to rent a cabin twice, or for laying the groundwork for the other to make the error. If he is the guilty one, he has to wash the dishes for one day; if I'm at fault, I have to mow the lawn the next time it needs mowing.

One night after renting a cabin, Grant came out of the office and said, "There's a couple that won't stay long, I'll bet a horned toad. We'll be able to rent their cabin again in a couple of hours."

Sure enough, an hour later we saw their car, a cream-colored coupe, grinding along the gravel and swinging into the line of cars on the highway.

"I'm getting so I can spot a short stop pretty well," Grant bragged. "Guess I'll go get the cabin cleaned up once so we can rent it again."

Five minutes later he came back, his skin flushed and his blue eyes sheepish.

"The girl was still there," he said. "She was in bed. I guess the fellow--maybe it's her husband after all--just went out to get a paper or something. They seem to be planning on staying all night. She let out a scream when she saw me, and I had a lot of explaining to do. I had to pretend I got their cabin mixed up with another one. She would have been insulted if I told her the real reason why I was there."

It was surprising what a substantial proportion of our real short stop customers were sedate, respectable looking couples of middle age or even past. I couldn't help remembering, on several occasions, what Mrs. Barkin had said: "I got so I wouldn't have trusted my own grandmother not to rent a room with some fella for an hour!"

Although I am not a prude, I am glad our motel has more than a ninety-five percent tourist trade, rather than a big short stop trade, as many motels have. Even though there is more money involved where there are a lot of "quickies," since the cabins occupied can be rereanted, there would be little satisfaction to me in carrying on a business of that type. And certainly it would not promote a wholesome atmosphere in which to raise children.

Grandma telephoned me from Los Angeles the night after her date with Mr. Wagonseller. Her call interrupted hostilities between me and Grant, who was pointing out to me carefully--for about the twentieth time--just why the lovely Chinese backscratcher I had bought in Palm Springs the time Grandma and I went there together was an unnecessary extravagance.

Just before the telephone rang he had brushed aside my arguments in favor of the backscratcher ("What would you do," I had asked him sensibly, "if your back tickled and you were alone in the house with no one to scratch all the places on your back that you can't reach? You should give a little thought to things like that.") He had brushed that aside, and given me that infuriating, withering look he is so expert at, and made his final remark on the subject (one that I'm sure it had taken him days to think up):

"If you ever had DT's you wouldn't see pink elephants--you'd see white ones!"

I was very pleased that the telephone rang just then, making what he probably considered his great wit fall rather flat.

I realized as I lifted the receiver that it was the day after the date Grandma was supposed to have had with Mr. Wagonseller. I suspected that this might be a report on the date; and sure enough, it was.

"He took me to dinner," Grandma burred, "and Thunderation! You should have see the way he spends the dough. Money ain't nothing to him. I got a notion he was a awful tight old bird, the way he talked in Palm Springs. Well, I swear'n, I got fooled that time! We had the most expensive dinner on the menu, and then we went to the Paramount. And blessed if he didn't even buy me a big box of chocolates!--He's a odd critter, though, awful odd. Last thing he says to me was, 'I'd like to do this again a week from tonight, I would all right.' It beats anything the way he talks--it's a scream to hear him."

I smiled, and asked her if she was going to go out with him again.

"Ayah, I sure am, all right," she said. "Godfrey Mighty, he's got me doing it now--sticking a 'all right' on the end of everything. Sure, I'm going out with him again, you little stinkpot. If he's got all that dough, he might's well spend some of it on me. Just so Hellwig don't find out about it, damn it all."

"Grandma, please," I said. "You shouldn't swear over the phone. The operator might not like it."

"I didn't swear!" she exclaimed indignantly. "I just said, 'I hope Hellwig don't find out, darn it.'"

"That reminds me," I said, "How would you like it if I'd invite Hellwig up here for a weekend some time? I've been meaning to do it ever since we came here. He must get lonesome all alone there in his apartment."

"Ayah, he don't have brains enough to get married so's he wouldn't be alone," she interrupted. "You mean, you'd ask him to come sometime when it's my weekend to come there too?" she added doubtfully. "Plague take it all, just so they ain't no old man in one of your cabins that takes a shine to me--that'd make Hellwig pretty mad."

"Oh, don't worry about that. He can have a cabin all to himself, too--he won't have to pay anything for it, of course--and during the day you and he could walk around, maybe even get as far as the bottom of the mountains and start climbing them."

"Well, I guess he'd like that pretty well," she conceded.

David and Donna had always been normal, well-adjusted children, but my busyness with the motel, taking care of customers and the endless inevitable details connected with the business, led to a few minor behavior problems. The baby, soon after she learned to feed herself efficiently, went on a hunger strike. If a psychiatrist were to have one meal with us I am sure he would have figured out that her sudden refusal to eat was her unconscious way of protesting against the fact that either Grant or I got up to answer the doorbell three or four times during every meal. I could see her point; sometimes I myself, after going on one of these little jaunts to rent cabins or to describe the service and the bill of fare of Moe's restaurant, for the benefit of doubting souls who weren't quite sure whether they should eat there or drive on downtown for a meal, felt like tossing my cooled food into the garbage can.

Anyway, Grant finally figured out a way to get Little Chief Hair-in-the-Face started eating again. Before each meal he captured a small black ant (either outdoors or on the sink, depending on the efficacy of our current ant poison) and imprisoned it on the tray of her high chair beneath her plate--a transparent glass plate, purchased especially for the experiment. Then, after allowing her one fascinated glimpse of the little creature, he filled her plate with food.

The first time that happened. Donna ate frantically, to get the food out of the way so that she could see the ant. After that, I expected the game to pall, but it never has. Since the first week or two Grant hasn't often put an ant under her plate, but she invariably cleans her plate, wipes off

any remaining food particles with a piece of bread, and peers carefully through the glass. After all, she is obviously thinking, there might really be an ant this time! She has never tried, since the first day we played the game, to lift the plate and look under it. The first day, though, she was prepared to whisk the plate out of the way so that she could see what was going on under it. I brushed the forever-straggling brown hair out of her eyes and told her she must eat the food all gone--then she could see the ant.

She made one last, hopeful attempt to remove the plate. "Nope," I said sternly, "that wouldn't be cricket."

She shook her head vigorously. "Not cwicket," she corrected me. "Ant!"

David, about this time, developed the habit of coming home with the pockets of his overalls stuffed full of dry bread. I grew tired of finding bread crumbs all over the house, but nothing I could say would prevent him from coming home the next day with his pockets full again. He was extremely reticent about the matter, but we finally discovered that the teachers in the cafeteria watched the children to be sure that they ate their lunch, and that David, not inclined to eat his bread, jammed it into his pockets so that the teachers would think he had eaten it.

After weeks of trying unsuccessfully to prevent David from bringing home pocketsful of bread crumbs, I sighed and gave up. I decided to be philosophical about it--to be glad it was the bread, and not the main course, he got rid of in that fashion. Some things, after all, could be worse than a pocketful of bread--a pocketful of spaghetti with tomato sauce, for instance!

Our first Hallowe'en in Banning was spent in fear and trembling. Pranksters could do us so much damage! We had tormented visions of fourteen cabins with windows smeared and streaked with soap. Each cabin has at least four windows, and we weren't at all eager to clean soap off that many windows.

Anything that children or ruffians might do would be inevitably worse than anything that could have been done to us in Los Angeles. We had, as a matter of fact, the normal citizen's amount of risk--multiplied by fourteen!

We were lucky, though. Aside from a few "trick-or-treaters," on whom we lavished candy and cookies in fervent gratitude that they were hungry, rather than full of mischief, no one bothered us except little Moejy, he of the small ears, the close-set eyes, and the tiny head with nothing in it.

What Moejy did was a masterpiece of malevolence, even for him.

We went to bed about ten o'clock. There were still two vacancies, but we were sure they would be filled within a couple of hours at the most. We slept through the night, though, without once being roused by the bell. And in the morning, we saw why no one had disturbed us.

There, draped grotesquely over our neon sign, and obscuring it completely from sight, was David's tent.

We still haven't figured out how Moejy did it. In fact, we have no proof that it was Moejy who did it. I just know that it was.

Our stout, olive-skinned helper, Mrs. Clark, began working for us fulltime when the winter season got well under way--seven days a week, three or four hours a day, cleaning the cabins and getting them ready to be occupied again. Every cabin was cleaned every day, including those whose occupants were staying over, except that the sheets weren't changed daily in a cabin which a customer rented for more than one night. I have never spent much time cleaning cabins since that first bad summer, except when people don't vacate their cabins before Mrs. Clark is through with all the others and ready to go home.

Grant kept busy every day for five or six hours making repairs, redecorating, keeping up the grounds, and figuring out ways to make more money and pay off our debt faster.

The first year we were at the motel, he decided to try selling Christmas trees. We had heard of several acquaintances who had made four or five thousand dollars a season with them. He wasn't going into it in a very big way, though; he was too cautious to do that until he found out if it were really as profitable a seasonal business as he had heard. If it were, he planned, he'd go into it more thoroughly the following year.

He ordered a small batch of trees from a firm in Oregon. While he was waiting for them to be delivered, he cleared off part of the land behind the cabins, where he would put the trees, and started painting the big sign that would, he hoped, lure purchasers off the highway.

He discussed his order with Mr. Bertram, the chubby man who owned the service station, grocery store, and small adjacent cabins across the street. Mr. Bertram, too, had ordered a few trees to sell, but he declared that he had never heard of the firm from which Grant had ordered his trees. And he had had to pay nearly twice as much for the trees he ordered. "It looks like I got a bargain," Grant remarked.

"Or else you got stung," Mr. Bertram said, rolling a wad of snuff around in his mouth. "Maybe they're running some kind of a racket, and your trees won't come at all!"

The trees came, though. They came at the time we had expected them, and in the number we had expected. But in appearance they weren't what we had expected at all.

"Something's wrong with them," Grant stated unnecessarily, when the truck had gone.

"They aren't even green. They're sort of--sort of--yellow", I said.

"They're funny," said David.

"They're dead," said Mr. Bertram, when he saw them. "Or--well, darned if I know. Maybe they just got some kind of disease that turned 'em yellow. If they were as dead as they look, I don't know why the needles wouldn't be falling off. Maybe they got dropped in a vat of yellow paint by mistake. Well, the people got your money and they've delivered you some trees, so I guess there's nothing you can do about it." Which proved that he didn't know Grant.

All over town, where Christmas trees were being sold, there were red ones, blue ones and white ones, as well as the more prosaic natural green.

"Nobody seems to want green trees any more, anyway," Grant mused, that evening after the children were in bed. Sitting at the kitchen table, he placed on a slice of bread the egg he had just fried, added a lavish knife-ful of peanut butter, and munched thoughtfully.

"Where's that sign I painted?" he asked finally, drumming his fingers on the table.

I brought it to him quietly, not wanting to interrupt the obvious churning of his brain by telling him it was right where he had left it, on the desk.

He stared at it a while. Finally he rose, went back to the desk with the sign and sat down. He turned the sign to its blank side and began sketching letters with a pencil. Curious, I got up and looked over his shoulder.

"Snow Saffrons for sale," he wrote. And then, in smaller letters: "Try a new color this year for your tree--Sunlight Yellow!"

Our little crop of Christmas trees was completely sold the next day.

Students of behaviour--and of marital relationships in particular--should have, as one requisite to a diploma, a period of managing a motel. The simple business of engaging a cabin for the night reveals a composite picture of all the quarrels a couple has ever had, highlights their differences and their individual idiosyncrasies, and stamps the dominant one as boss.

A couple named Mr. and Mrs. Godwin stayed with us for a week, waiting for their promised job in Palm Springs to open up. She was small and round and good-natured; he was big and round and good-natured. She was definitely the boss. It was she who, when they first came, registered and paid me; it was she who overrode his feeble protest about "changing motels."

"Y'see, we always stayed at the Peacock, before, whenever we were traveling through here," she explained. "Me, though, I want to try a new one."

"Variety is the spice of life," I remarked brilliantly.

"Y'know, we both like this place of yours better than the Peacock," Mrs. Godwin told me, one night when their week with us was about half gone. I noticed again her curious, confusing habit of stressing her most unimportant words. "Y'know, you people have the nicest court in Banning. I always thought the Garner's place, the Peacock, was supposed to be the nicest one, but me, I don't think it can compare with this one."

"We certainly wouldn't trade with them," I said; and I realized that I really meant it. Perhaps the Peacock had done a better business during the slack season; after all, though, it was an older motel than ours, with a greater number of regular customers. And the imposing external appearance of the place, with its white surrounding walls and its paved driveways, was something we could match, in time, if we were willing to go to the expense.

We were talking over cups of hot chocolate at Moe's. Our cabins were full, and Grandma was staying with the children. Grant and I had gone to the restaurant for a hot drink, and a few minutes later Godwins had come in.

Mr. Godwin sat down, shivering, beside Grant, at the circular counter of shining ebony, and they were quickly absorbed in a conversation which dripped with such phrases as "cylinder head," "transmission," and "propeller shaft." Grant mentioned that he needed a new gasket.

"A little yellow gasket?" I put in frivolously.

"Yes, it's the nicest motel we've stayed in," Mrs. Godwin, sitting beside me, went on. "Me, though, I'm not crazy about your heaters."

"Why--don't you like wall heaters?" I asked, surprised.

"Wall heaters are all right," she conceded.

"You mean you prefer electric heaters to gas?"

"No, gas is all right. Maybe I should say it's the cold weather I'm not crazy about. It made us stand too close to the heater. My husband scorched the seat of his pants tonight, and that wasn't enough to warn me, I had to go and do practically the same thing. I had a satin slip--y'know how they shrivel up if you try to iron them with your iron too hot? Well, I was standing close to the heater, with my back to it, when all of a sudden it felt like there was something crawling up my--well, my back. It was my slip, shrivelling all up short because I was so close to the heat. You should see it now--it looks like it was made out of crinkly crepe, with accordion pleats!"

She paused, aghast, and stared across me at Grant. The waitress had just brought him the tuna sandwich he had ordered, and he was lifting the top slice of bread and spooning sugar lavishly onto the tuna.

Her plump face looked shocked, but she glanced quickly away and began to talk politely about Palm Springs.

"Er--this sun time, y'know, that they have in Palm Springs--it's confusing, isn't it? Me, I think it should be the same time everywhere."

"It does seem silly for one little town to have its own time," I said.

"The whole idea," she went on, "is to save hours of daylight so the millionaires that go down there will have more time to spend their money. I guess they figure they're giving them more for their money that way too--they go down there for sunshine after all, and if daylight saving can give them more hours of sunshine . . ." her round, plump face looked suddenly perplexed. "How can it, though? How can it really make any difference? I've never been able to figure that out. Anyway, the only really nice thing about it is that the bars can stay open till three, instead of closing at two like the bars in Los Angeles, and around. Palm Springs time, three o'clock, that is--of course, y'know, that's really two, after all. I don't know who they're fooling, unless it's just themselves."

She sipped some of the coffee the waitress had brought her, made a wry face, and set the cup down.

"When we were in Palm Springs seeing about this job we're getting--I'm to be a maid at this resort, y'know, and he's to be a sort of handyman--we happened to see Van Johnson and Errol Flynn--together! Y'know, they're a couple of good looking boys. I wish I'd waited for something like that instead of grabbing the first man that asked me."

She smiled and took another sip of coffee.

"Y'know, the rents in Palm Springs are unbelievable," she said. "The place where we're going to work charges a hundred and fifty dollars a night for two people." She laughed. "That's why we're waiting in Banning for the job to open up!"

Mrs. Godwin wasn't the only one who considered the Palm Springs rates of rental too high. One night a thin, brisk little man came into the office and asked mildly what our rates were. As soon as I told him he began to fill in a registration card, and while he wrote, he talked.

I had become expert at reading names upside down as they were being written, partly so that I could flatter and surprise customers by calling them by name immediately, and partly so that I could write down at once on my list which cabin had been rented by whom.

This, I learned, was a Mr. Frank B. Shannon, and I wrote his name after the number of the cabin he would occupy that night.

"I've just come back from a vacation in Florida," he said. "Thought I'd stay in Palm Springs, but I'd have had to mortgage my home, sell my car, and take all my money out of the bank, just to stay there one week."

His tone wasn't particularly bitter, but, for the sake of making conversation, I remarked,

"You don't seem to care much for Palm Springs, Mr. Shannon."

He laughed, and replied, "Well, I am rather tired of the place. I was mayor there for seventeen years!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

PEOPLE WHO MANAGE motels shouldn't throw stones, for they live in glass houses just as surely as does any goldfish. In fact, a goldfish in a bowl placed in the center of Grand Central Station would live a life of privacy and seclusion, compared to the life of a motel owner.

I am so inured, by now, to the lack of privacy, that I can calmly continue dusting furniture or changing Donna's clothes if a couple of strange men barge into the living room, mistaking it for the office. I am not in the least upset if, after I have gone to bed, someone rings the bell and asks to use the telephone. Since the telephone is in our living room, the person who makes the call cannot help seeing that I am in bed. The fact usually proves more embarrassing to him than to me. Repeated occurrences have toughened me to the sight of a stranger telephoning a few feet away from my bedside, and regarding me curiously or nervously.

Having a normal amount of feminine vanity, I like to cream my face at night, and do up stray wisps of hair in curlers and bobby pins, after removing every trace of makeup. That same feminine vanity, though, makes such a praiseworthy routine impractical. If people must see me after I'm in bed, I like to look as attractive as possible. So, after conscientiously removing all my makeup, I add a quick dab of lipstick. I rub the face cream into my skin until it disappears. And if any stray locks of hair need doing up, I fix them the following morning, when they can be hidden under the confining bandana that Banning's whirling, incessant wind makes a desirable accessory anyway.

Grant wants to get an extension cord for the telephone, so that when customers want to use it it can be taken into the office. Whenever he brings up the idea, though, I discourage it. I don't mind the intrusion of strangers nearly as much as I would mind missing the chance to overhear their conversations! When people make calls in the daytime, I yield to the dictates of etiquette, and ostentatiously absent myself. (Sometimes I go only as far as the next room, however, where, if I try hard enough, I can usually hear most of what is being said.)

At night, though, when I am in bed, of course there is no question of my leaving politely so that the person who is telephoning can talk without being overheard. However private the nature of the conversation--and there have been some ear-sizzlers!--Emily Post herself could find no fault with my remaining to listen.

Continual interruption has become as ordinary, and usual, as the sight of strangers in our living room. The doorbell and the telephone ring intermittently all day long. Customers who are staying over want ice cubes, information, or an audience for the recital of their grievances, successes, or favorite jokes. Prospective customers want to know if we have kitchens, and if not, whether we'll show them a cabin anyway, so that in case they come out this way again in a year or two, as they may quite possibly do, they'll know exactly what they have reason to expect. Salesmen try to sell us weatherstripping, paint, fire extinguishers, rugs, lawn furniture, and DDT. Neighboring motel owners drop in to discuss business. Bees in their hives have nothing on us.

Nothing reveals just how impossible it is to do one thing from start to finish without interruption (unless it is a thing that takes only a split second to do) more accurately than a letter I wrote to Miss Nestleburst a few weeks after she had left. (I knew their honeymoon must be over, and so I sent the letter to their Burbank home, the address of which she had given me before she was married, before she had ever seen the place.) Rereading it, when at last I had signed my name to it, I felt that it was a masterpiece of revelation of our kind of life.

"Dear Miss Nestleburst--or, rather, Mrs. Hawkins," I had written. "It's ten o'clock, a beautiful morning, and I hope that

10:25. To resume, I hope that you and your husband

10:45. Twice now I have been interrupted by people who wanted to look at cabins, so they'd know what we have to offer in the way of accommodations in case they ever come through here in the future and need a place to

11 a.m. I'll write a few more lines before I have to feed the baby and put her to bed. The weather has been

11:45. She was too hungry to wait any longer, so I had to

12:15 p.m. Grant has been helping Mrs. Clark clean cabins. He just came in to tell me he's taking her home now, and to ask what we need from the store. We always buy our groceries in town because these little highway markets are very

12:25. Well, I just took a reservation by phone, for next Saturday night. Business is certainly

1 p.m. I was just cornered by a long-winded salesman. I would have sent him on his way sooner but

1:10. I just rented a cabin, to a man who's going to spend the day in Palm Springs and wants to be sure he'll have a place to sleep tonight. As I was about to write a few minutes ago, business

1:30. I just had to leave that time, I thought it was a wreck. A screeching of brakes outside--turned out to be just a dog run over. He didn't seem to be hurt very

2:30. I had to take time out to make lunch, as Grant came back. Our hours of eating and sleeping are certainly erratic. Grant has gone now to pick up David from school. I hear the baby waking up now so I'll have to close. Please write to us."

At the same time I mailed the letter to Miss Nestlebury, I mailed a small box to her husband. The box contained a cockroach David had found outside and borne into the house triumphantly. I thought of Mr. Hawkins the moment I saw the creature. "Two can play his game," I thought to myself.

I had put the cockroach carefully into the well-padded box, not really expecting it to be still alive when it reached its destination, but satisfied that, dead or alive, it would be a handsomely macabre gift.

I didn't make a practice, of course, of sending out such incoherent letters as the one to Miss Nestlebury that accompanied the cockroach. Usually after an interruption I returned to the letter I had been writing, picked up the thread of what I had been saying, and resumed as though there had been no interruption. But occasionally it amused me to let evidence of each interruption appear in the letter.

It's so customary to find strangers in the living room, talking or using the telephone, that when I am ready for bed at night I don't dart out of the bathroom and leap into bed as I did at first. First I press my ear against the door, so that I can hear the rumble of voices if anyone is in the living room. If I don't hear anything, I open the door slowly and stick my head out. If only Grant is in the living room, and if the door between the living room and the office is closed, so that no one can suddenly open the outer office door and see me in all my pajama-ed glory, I rush across the floor and jump into bed.

When winter was well under way, our irascible old neighbor Mr. Featherbrain still had not spoken to us since summer, when he had been so incensed at Grant's pulling in off the highway customers that might have been his. Whenever I met him in the grocery store across the street, I smiled up at him sweetly, only to be rewarded with a tightening of the thin line of his mouth and a slight quivering of his roseate chin.

One night when Grant was in Arizona on a business trip, the office bell rang. I put on my robe sleepily and went to the door. Our "no vacancy" sign had been blazing for hours, so I was surprised to hear the bell.

It was the young sailor to whom I had rented the last cabin that night.

"We was just gettin' ready to turn in," he explained, "and we was gonna take a shower, but there wasn't any water. Not even enough for a drink. We can get along okay, we'll just turn in without a shower, but I thought I oughta let you know, so you could maybe get it fixed by morning so we could take a shower before we pull out."

I thanked him feebly, a little stunned at the realization of what a calamity had befallen me. I tried the faucet in our kitchen; there was a hiss of air and a dispirited gurgling, and three large drops fell into the sink.

It lacked ten minutes of being midnight--hardly a time to be making phone calls. Anyway, I didn't know whom to call. All the service shops were closed, and the workers home in bed.

The office of the Blue Bonnet motel, across the street, was dark. All the motels in town were full by now, of course; therefore the owners would all be asleep.

Oddly enough, though, there was a light at the Palace Motel, in the room that I knew was Featherbrain's living room.

Well, I wasn't going to ask them for help, I resolved. Mr. Featherbrain would be very pleased to know that I was having trouble.

I tried to figure out what Grant would do about the situation if he were home. Of course, he would have the difficulty resolved, and everything going smoothly, in less than twenty minutes--but how would he do it? And why couldn't I myself do whatever it would be that he would do?

I drew my robe more tightly around me, and sat down on a cold kitchen chair. I thought.

Dimly I recalled hearing something about the water having been turned off, before we bought the motel, by a bunch of mischievous Indian boys. I knew that the meter was out back in the field, near the deserted road where I had learned to drive. Maybe there was a handle out there with which our water could be turned on and off.

My duty was clear. I put my coat on top of my robe, took a quick glance at David and Donna to be sure that they were sleeping soundly and wouldn't be apt to awaken before I came back, armed myself with a flashlight, and set forth into the frigid night.

Nothing can describe the utter blackness of a midnight in Banning, six hundred feet from the highway and civilization. When my back was turned to the few neon signs that were still shining, and the intermittent flash of headlights, it was as though I were alone in a cold, windy world of pressing, almost tangible darkness. There was no moon to point up the ghostly, shadow-like mountains--lowering shapes that I felt, rather than saw--and the stars, so many and so brilliant that they looked like glittering jewels that had been tossed up there by a lavish, wasteful hand, selfishly drew their light closely around them.

All I knew about the water meter was that it was somewhere toward the back of our land, near the road. The smug certainty of men in general that men are superior to women in every respect, except possibly motherhood, has always annoyed me. However, I admitted to myself as I stumbled over the rocky road toward the back of our land, the chances were excellent that no man who had lived at the motel as long as I had would fail to know the exact location of the water meter, and what to do to it if the water suddenly refused to come into the cabins and be sociable. I resolved, feeling my way along with tentative, reluctant toes, that from this bleak hour forward I would take an efficient, masculine attitude toward everything that had bolts or screws. I'd show the world that it's due to early training and environment that women aren't mechanically inclined or good fixers, and not to any lack of brain power; while it is mostly the pressure of public opinion that makes the average boy grow up to be a minor mechanical genius.

I turned the flashlight on only intermittently, only at the moments when the darkness was pressing too forcibly upon me. I felt the presence of ogres and banshees (whatever they are) and even a few werewolves. I didn't want to make myself conspicuous by shining the flashlight any more than necessary; if all these horrible things could hide from me in the dark, then I could just as well hide from them, too, instead of lighting myself up so they'd know exactly where to pounce.

When at last I reached Williams street, which marked the end of our property, I turned the flashlight on bravely and began to search for the water meter. Coyotes were howling close in the hills to the north, which didn't help matters any. All of the land around me was settled by fat, stickery bushes which regarded me stolidly, defying me to dispute their squatters' rights or to try to get any information from them. They knew where the meter was, all right, but they had no intention of letting me in on the secret.

I stood on our private road, in a rocky tire-rut, and began to flash the beam of the flashlight systematically across the field in such a way that the light had finally covered every foot of the area in which I thought the meter must be. There was no sign of the meter, though. I wasn't really surprised, because the wind-battered, huddled-together bushes, which by now wore faintly mocking expressions, were high enough to obscure the meter from any eye except that of the person who knew exactly where to look.

I waded a few feet into the despicable little bushes and repeated the process of flashing the light around systematically. No soap. No water meter.

After a lull the cold wind was coming up again, and the bushes began to move and whisper among themselves. I could almost make out what they were saying.

"Can you imagine," one seemed to hiss indignantly, "Thinks she can find the meter we've got hidden!"

"Yeah, look at the fool," another replied with derision. "Trying to find it with just a little flashlight. Think we ought to trip her up and stick a few thorns into her?"

Apparently they decided against it, and perhaps they even took pity on me, because eventually I found the meter, about ten feet from Williams street and twenty feet from our private road.

When I found it, of course, I didn't know what to do with it. It was a small, complicated structure of curving pipes and gadgets and smooth, leering faces of glass. One round handle was particularly conspicuous, and I felt certain that it was with this handle that I must commune. I turned the handle cautiously. It seemed agreeable, so I turned it still further. And then I came upon another hurdle I must jump: no matter with how much firmness and artistry I turned the handle, I wouldn't know what effect it was having, if any, until I trotted back the whole cold, black, dismal distance to the house and tried the faucets. I girded up my loins, grasped the flashlight grimly, and started back.

I was approaching the rear cabins, which were silhouetted against the occasional headlight-glow from the highway, when I remembered that there were faucets spaced regularly in the field. I captured the nearest one with the flashlight beam, went up to it and turned it on. To my joy, water gushed out--the loveliest, most sparkling, most appreciated water in the world.

The children were still asleep when I got back, and all seemed to be well. I went to the kitchen, to try the water at the sink. It spurting forth as gloriously as had the water from the faucet in the field. I looked out the kitchen window at the drowsy highway. The two service-station markets were closed, their lights out. There were no cars on the road at the moment; no lights except the rotating beacon at the airport. The Peacock's sign was out, Featherbrain's sign

was out--but wait! There was still that light in Featherbrain's living room.

Even as a horrible suspicion was crawling over me, Mr. Featherbrain's gaunt shoulders and head appeared in his window. A smile (probably ill at ease in such an unaccustomed place, I thought) was on his face.

Mr. Featherbrain shoved up his window and thrust out his head. I opened our kitchen window so that I could hear what he was going to say.

"I betcher durned old water wouldn't turn on!" he cackled. "Durned old Indians are allus turnin' it off, ain't they? Yuh oughta put the Indian sign on 'em, that'd fix 'em!" He chortled at his own wit.

I was quivering with reaction, cold, and indignation. I realized that the "Indian" who had turned off our water tonight had been a tall, thin black-haired one, with a white stubble sprouting over a pink chin. But I couldn't think of an appropriate, biting enough retort.

I didn't know exactly what I was going to say, but I leaned forward, waiting for the enraged words to come.

They did. "I oughta bust evvy bone in yer head!" I snarled.

One day the grapevine which twined around the various motels in town, linking them together, vibrated with the information that Mr. and Mrs. Garner had sold the Peacock. And for one hundred thousand dollars!

"One hundred thousand. A tenth of a million," we said, rolling the words around on our tongues and tasting them critically.

They tasted wonderful to Grant. "A hundred thousand," he mused. "Do you suppose, if we advertised once and really tried, we could get anything like that for this place?"

"Well, this place is worth more than the Peacock," I said cautiously. "But we don't want to sell, do we?"

"No--o--o, I guess not," he said; but the thoughtful expression didn't fully leave his eyes for several weeks.

When, after the period of escrow had passed, the Peacock was taken over by its new owners, Mr. and Mrs. Needham, it was fun to stand by the kitchen window as dusk crept through the Pass and watch them struggle with their neon sign switches. It was a gaudy sight. First the green "vacancy" sign would flash on and off; then, gaining certainty, it would go on and stay on. Then the lamps at the highway end of the white walls surrounding the motel would light up brilliantly. Then the "vacancy" sign would go off. Then the peacock would burst into glorious color, only to leap back into darkness again. Next, the bright red words "Peacock Motel" would flare out of the blackness like a splash of red paint, followed by the green "vacancy." Then, one after another, all the signs would be turned off, as the new owners sought, by the trial and error method, the switch that turned on the little light outside the office. And by the time they located that switch, they turned the office light off again hunting for the switch that turned on the big white "vacancy" sign on their lawn, between the rows of units, or for the one which turned the ordinary-looking, roof-sheltered little well between the office and the highway into a blazing, neon-outlined wishing well that could have dropped out of a fairy story.

I knew exactly what the new owners of the Peacock were going through. I remembered how hard it had been for us--or for me, rather--to know which switch would turn on which light or sign. And the Peacock, obviously, had a lot more switches than we did. But even though I sympathized completely with their bewilderment, I never missed standing at the kitchen window in the early evening when the contagious wave of sign-turning-on began to sweep along the highway through Banning.

The aurora borealis had nothing on the Peacock, for a couple of weeks.

When we left Los Angeles we brought with us two radios, one of them the small white one Grant had given me before we were married, and which I had, in Los Angeles, kept on the kitchen sink so that music could mingle with the splashings of dish water. We planned to rent it now, at fifty cents a night, to our customers.

We put the radio on the desk in the office, but for some reason we didn't get around to putting on it a sign that would apprise our customers of the fact that it was for rent. Naturally, no one asked to rent it, and when we had been there for several months it hadn't earned us a penny.

Fixing a sign to put on the radio was one of those things that seem inexplicably to suggest procrastination, like changing the lining paper in bureau drawers, or like writing to your husband's Aunt Minnie and inviting her to come out for a few weeks.

One day, though, when I had a few minutes to spare and was wondering what useful thing I should do during that short time (and afraid I would think of something pressing enough to get

me out of the chair where I was lolling) I decided to make a "for rent" sign for the radio. I printed the words neatly on a piece of white cardboard and stood it up against the radio.

Within a few days I was beginning to think that magazine editors who pay ten cents a word for manuscripts were cheapskates. Those two words I had written began to bring in fifty-cent piece after fifty-cent piece, until at last the radio had paid for itself over and over again.

We discussed getting a few more radios, but that, too, was easy to put off. Occasionally one of the many motel-to-motel salesmen with whom we were blessed would want to install in our cabins, at no expense to us, coin-operated radios, from which we were to have a percentage of the take. I felt that such radios in the cabins would put our motel on too obviously commercial a basis, while Grant was beginning to toy with the idea of putting ordinary little radios in each cabin for the free use of our customers, as a deluxe touch to the accommodations. Unaccustomed to such luxurious details as free radios, many of the people who occupied the cabins would be sure to choose our motel in preference to any other if they ever went through Banning again. However, putting a thirty dollar radio in each of thirteen units would cost nearly four hundred dollars--a large sum to pay for the good will of customers who already seemed pleased with our motel. We filed both that idea, and the idea of letting a salesman install coin-operated radios, away in our minds for future reference.

Grant, after working on the children's bedroom so long that I had really given up any idea that it would ever be completed, finally finished it. The walls and ceiling were covered with cedar siding, the floor with linoleum of a swirling green color, and we hung crisp white curtains at the windows. I put one of the motel spreads, a green one, on David's bed.

I had converted into draperies a matching green spread which had been burned by a smoker-in-bed, and these I hung over the closet doorway and in front of a big cabinet of shelves Grant had made. After I had cut away the burned parts and made the draperies, there were still several fairly good-sized pieces of the material left, and of these I made scarves for the two small chests in the room. (From remaining scraps I made little curtains for the window of the door between the office and the living room--curtains that would be easy for me to move slightly in order to peek into the office to see what might be going on there.)

The total effect was very pleasing. The room looked a lot different than the ugly garage into which we had put the children's beds the day we arrived.

I had been in the habit of hurriedly shutting the bedroom door whenever anyone came to visit or to telephone, so that they couldn't see into the upset, unfinished room. Now, however, I always made it a point to see that the door was boastfully, confidently ajar.

I gestured vaguely toward the telephone one evening when Grant ushered in a man who wanted to make a long distance phone call. I pulled the bedroom door open with an unostentatious gesture, and sat down, apparently to read a book, but actually to study the man and listen to what he would say. If you were to stand on the corner of a busy street and watch the hordes of people hurrying past, you'd mark them off as just ordinary, unoriginal, all-alike people, none of them possessing noticeable peculiarities or even individuality; but if those hordes were to separate and come singly into your living room, to sit for five or ten minutes using your telephone, the realization would slap you in the face that people are different from one another, that they do possess amazing or amusing idiosyncrasies, and that whatever scientist it was who stated that every human being has a counterpart somewhere, must have had his fingers--or his wires--crossed.

There couldn't have been, anywhere on the face of the earth, a counterpart of the man whom Grant had just brought in. He looked like an expectant elephant, nearing the end of a two year pregnancy. His long nose, which drooped a little at the end, was a dull violet color; and the skin of the surrounding rather insignificant face was a brilliant shade of peach--occasioned, I guessed, by either dipsomania or habitual bad temper. His ears were deformed; they were simple holes in his head, with a small external bulge of flesh to indicate the location of each. His small eyes were obscured by horn-rimmed spectacles. The glasses were apparently held up by some natural law (seemingly in conflict with the law of gravity) which my high school science teacher had neglected to explain. Certainly those impotent little bulges of flesh that masqueraded as ears couldn't have had anything to do with supporting the glasses.

The man, putting in a long distance call, was trying to make the operator understand his unusual name. The back of his fat neck was getting redder and redder. It wasn't surprising, though, I thought, that she found it hard to understand his name.

"No, not Dugan!" he spat at her. "Dubaf! DUBAF!" He moved his bulk heavily on the chair, and I half expected it to fold under him. His free hand, drumming irritably on the desk top, was shaking with rage, the veins knotting up as he shouted "Dubaf! Dubaf!" into the mouthpiece. "I didn't say Dusle!" he screamed. "Dubaf! D-U-B-A-F. No, I said D-U-B-A-F!" He mopped his forehead. He clenched the telephone tighter, his eyes distended.

"D as in dammit!" he roared. "U as in you silly slut--"

I retreated hurriedly, throwing down my book and rushing into the kitchen to see whether I

had remembered to wash yesterday's breakfast dishes.

CHAPTER TWELVE

BANNING'S WEATHER COMES assorted, like a box of chocolates. Some of the tidbits are sweet, some have a bitter tang; some, wrapped in glittering tinsel, turn out to be not as nice as you expected them to be. But they are all delicious, once you have developed the taste for them.

When winter is barely under way in Banning, suddenly it's spring. In mid-January, when the enclosing mountains are still shivering and huddled under their white fur coats, spring tiptoes through the Pass, breathing warmly upon the wind-swept grass and tossing handfuls of popcorn onto the branches of the almond trees. Vast orchards bloom, a paradox of nature, with the giant snow-covered mountains leaning over them.

I used to worry about those first frail, brave blossoms. I worried about them, and about the possibility of a frost, as industriously as though I were a mother almond tree.

One night late in January there was a shower of hail that lasted for about half an hour. The little hailstones splattered and clanked against the windows, and chattered on the little cement porch and on the door, pounding for admittance. When at last the shower subsided, we opened the door to look out, and saw that our entire driveway, even the islands of grass and the sidewalk in front of the cabins, were white with a thick layer of hail. It looked like snow.

The morning after the hail storm, when the solid layer of ice the hail had formed over the ground was melting, and crackling like a huge bonfire, we found that our neon "office" sign had a tiny hole in the top of it. About the time Grant was telephoning Olan Rosco, I happened to think of the almond blossoms. If hail could do this to our sign--and presumably it had been a hailstone, a particularly aggressive one, that had done it--what might it not have done to those delicate blossoms?

The next afternoon I drove to David's school, picking him up and bringing him home. Williams street, which led straight to David's school a mile away, was lined with almond trees. I looked at the trees anxiously. I was amazed to see that the branches were as fluffy as ever with their heavy load of bloom.

After that, I never worried about the almond blossoms any more. If the trees the following year had begun to bloom on Christmas day, and Christmas had been followed by twenty successive days of frost, I wouldn't have given it a thought.

Before our second summer at the Moonrise Motel Grant, by dint of much telephoning, exhorting, explaining, pleading, and even threatening, organized the motel owners in Banning into what started out as the Banning Motel Owners' Association, and later grew more inclusive and changed its name to the Banning Hotel and Motel Owners' Association. The purpose of this organization was to advertise Banning so thoroughly and so blatantly, principally by means of highway advertising signs, that even during the summer there would be more eager tourists than there were accommodations.

Banning had two small weekly newspapers, and ever since we came to the motel I had been toying with the idea of working for one of them on a part-time basis, if I could get the editor's approval. At least ninety percent of the wrecks that occurred in Banning happened right in front of the Moonrise Motel; there couldn't be any question about that. I could write up the story of each wreck for the paper; and maybe the editor would have some ideas as to further work I could do.

A few days before the first meeting of the new motel owners' association was scheduled, I bearded the editor of one of the Banning papers in her den. The story of the association's first meeting would be, I figured, a good opening wedge.

I had always had a yen to work on a newspaper. It had struck me that in nearly every biography of great writers there was a sentence or two testifying to the fact that the writer had at one time been a newspaper reporter. And since, of course, I hoped some day to be listed among the great, I should attend to that little prerequisite.

Reporting for a country paper would be an interesting experience, and with Grant home all the time, Donna would be able to spare me for two or three hours each day.

The editor of the paper, a pleasant-faced woman of about forty, with short, curly dark hair, was very interested when I revealed my background of magazine writing, and the fact that I had written a regular column in a Los Angeles newspaper until we left that city. Her present "reporter," the most literate she could find in this small town, was a recent high school graduate who used such sentences as "he capitulated through the air," and "the drunk driver was

convicted of auto-intoxication."

We argued for about an hour. She'd like to have me work for her, all right, but she wanted me to work full time.

Her office was large, airy and cluttered. Two huge old desks stood against each other, their battered tops nearly obscured by a litter of papers, pencils and telephones.

A door at one end of the office led into a much bigger, still more cluttered room. From that room came the crash of machinery, and the voices of the men who were setting type, reading proof, putting the paper to bed, or whatever the technical terms are for whatever they do in such places. It was confusing, noisy, and somehow delicious.

By the time I had worn the editor down to a point where she was willing to let me work just part time, at a salary surprisingly large for a small town newspaper to offer, my natural laziness woke up with a start to the fact that I was actually about to let myself in for regular hours of extra, unnecessary work, and I took advantage of woman's privilege. I changed my mind.

"I don't want to tie myself down to definite hours after all, I guess," I said. "I'll work on sort of a free lance basis. I'll bring you several news stories every week."

I promised to be back with a story on the first meeting of the motel owners' association in time to meet her deadline.

The meeting was held at the Auto Haven, the big, rather old motel about half a mile from us, farther toward town, where Moejy spent what part of his time he wasn't devoting to harassing us or David. Grant and I, having engaged Mrs. Clark to take care of the children and rent the one cabin that was not yet occupied, were the first ones there.

Mr. Bradley, our middle-aged host, motioned us to chairs. He was an ordinary-looking, likeable man; the only thing about him incomprehensible to me was his toleration--his apparent liking--for Moejy. Well, I philosophized, we all have our little eccentricities.

And then the motel owners began to arrive. Mr. Buxley of the Westward; Mr. Vernon of the Bon Ton; Mr. Featherbrain of the Palace; Mr. Renault of the Mountain Lodge; Mr. Dale of the Cherry; Mr. Anderson, of the Desert Breeze. All misters. It began to look as though I would be the only woman present. This bothered me a little, particularly after Grant's broad hints that this was to be a businessmen's meeting, and his slightly more veiled ones that women don't know much and should try not to get into situations where their ignorance will be conspicuous. It would have pleased me very much if the majority of the people at the meeting had been women, very intelligent ones who thought of and discussed and settled every problem before the few men present could get their inferior minds to functioning. However, such was not to be; after the last of the twenty-eight arrivals had come there was only one other woman, and that one was my plump, shabby friend Mrs. Barkin, of the Sylvan Motel, who had, obviously, no husband to come in her stead.

I couldn't help feeling rather superfluous. I sat there seething, as many feminist-minded women have done before me, at the age-old theory of masculine supremacy.

Assuming that I must feel out of place, the kind Mr. Bradley--who took charge of the first meeting, pending election of regular officers--remarked at one time during the evening, "Of course, we'll be glad to have the wives of the motel owners attend the meetings too."

This irritated me still further, and while the meeting progressed I considered drowning Grant, so that, like the owner of the Sylvan motel, I'd be treated as an individual rather than as the ineffectual shadow of another. (I decided, though, that there'd be too much work for me to do alone.)

"Or if ever one of the owners is unable to come, his wife can come alone to represent him," Mr. Bradley went on.

After that, I seethed much more violently. Why was it taken for granted always that the man was the owner, and that his wife was simply "the owner's wife?" But, while Mr. Bradley's remarks were accepted quite naturally, how unheard of an occurrence it would be for a remark like this to be made: "Husbands of the owners are invited to come to meetings too; or if necessary the man can come alone to represent his wife."

How unheard of, even, that it be assumed that property owned by a married couple is owned mutually, and that whichever partner attended a meeting, it needn't be in order to represent the other.

Equality of sexes, and equality of races, are two points about which I have carried on so many arguments and written so many articles--many of which have never seen print--that I have almost admitted defeat. Stupid prejudice is virtually invincible, and not worth battering one's head against. But it's very, very maddening all the same.

It was a subject I had discussed several times, heatedly, in the small bi-weekly Los Angeles

newspaper, called "Now," in which, as I told the pleasant editor of the Banning paper, I had had a regular column. In this column I could disport as I pleased, provided I stayed within the bounds of propriety and common sense, and all my favorite subjects got a thorough airing. "Now" folded up its tents and quietly stole away into oblivion about the time we left Los Angeles. Writing for "Now" was my first venture from the medium of magazines into that of newspapers, and I have always felt a little guilty about its demise.

I had brought along to the motel meeting a little notebook and my fountain pen, so that I could record pertinent facts about the meeting for the newspaper article I would write. Trying to be as inconspicuous about it as possible, I opened the notebook and wrote in it the names of the men arriving as Mr. Bradley introduced them.

Mr. Bradley spotted my notebook and pen, though, and almost before I knew what was happening, he had me sitting beside him at the table in the center of the room, taking notes on the meeting and acting as temporary secretary.

At one point in the meeting, after many methods of advertising had been discussed and rehashed, and it had been my job as secretary to read aloud a great deal of explanatory literature from advertising sign companies, I became very thirsty. During a dull, lengthy free-for-all about the relative merits of the different companies whose literature had been read, I acquainted Mr. Bradley with the fact that I was nearing death from acute dehydration.

Mr. Bradley waved toward a doorway at one end of the big, people-cluttered living room.

"Kitchen's right in there," he informed me. "Go along the hall and turn left. Go on in and help yourself."

I weaved my way between the chairs toward the doorway. The smoky air was heavy and thick and reluctant to let me through. I closed the door behind me and found myself in a murky hallway. The only light was that which seeped under the door I had just shut, and the glow from a partly open door at the end of the hall.

There was an open doorway at the left of the hall, and I was about to enter the kitchen through it when I heard a whisper.

"Pssst! Come in here, in here a minute."

My curiosity was stronger than my fright. I tiptoed slowly along the hall toward the partly open door and toward the whisper. Outside the door, I hesitated.

Then I heard the whisper again. "Come on in here, in here."

Timidly, I pushed the door open farther. The room was illuminated by a big, old-fashioned lamp that stood in a corner, its shade dripping with fawn-colored fringe. There was a large four-poster bed covered with a patchwork quilt, an old wooden rocking chair, and a heap of clothes on the floor beside the bed. The heap of clothes turned out to be a wizened old lady. Her frail body was swathed in layer after layer of garments, and her small head was covered by a black cloth, under which her bright eyes sparkled up at me.

"Come on in and close the door, come on in," she hissed. I closed the door and stared at her. But I knew I shouldn't just stand there and stare; I had to say something.

"What on earth are you doing down there on the floor?" I asked. It wasn't the type of thing I had intended to say, at all.

The old lady proudly smoothed the thick layers of material that surrounded her. She reminded me of a hen preening, fluffing out her feathers.

"I'm going to have a baby," she confided, still in a whisper.

"Well--" I gulped. "That's--that's fine. Motherhood is so--" I felt behind me for the doorknob. "Motherhood is so--well, so--"

"So broadening! Just like travel!" Her loud, sudden cackle was startling. "And how it is broadening!" she hissed. "But not the way I'm doing it. I've got a better way. Chickens have a better way than humans. All they do is sit on eggs. That way they don't get fat, they don't suffer, it's very simple. So I'm profiting by their example. See?"

The old lady half rose, lifting her voluminous skirts, revealing skinny, knobby legs and--an egg!

The egg, a large white one that looked almost as though it were made of china, rested on a pile of old dresses. After allowing me one quick glance, the old lady ruffled her clothes about her again and sank down gently onto the egg.

By this time I had found the doorknob, and I hurried out of the room. The old lady's stage whisper followed me: "I'm Mrs. Bradley. You must come back to see me soon, when my baby is born."

The election of officers was held later that evening. Mr. Cruz of the Rosarita Motel was to be president and I, it developed, was to be permanent secretary. I was relieved to hear that the next meeting was not to be at the Bradley's motel.

Every evening while we are eating dinner we keep the light turned out in the living room. My chair is placed at the end of the kitchen table nearest the range and sink, so that I am in the most strategic position possible for mopping up whatever food Donna spills, for catching David's plate on one of its sudden trips to the floor, and for serving hot second helpings from the covered pans that are simmering on the stove. (I never put all the food on the table; it would just get cold before we would be able to finish eating it, because of our many interruptions.) My position at the table is strategic in another way, too. I face the door to the living room and the moment a car drives in its lights shine through our Venetian blinds and form stripes on the wall of the darkened living room. (Months of experience have taught me the difference in angle and appearance between the stripes cast by the headlights of cars going into Moe's and those driving into our driveway). When a car drives in I tell Grant, who sits in the chair nearest the doorway, with his back toward the living room. As long as we have been at the Moonrise Motel, I don't believe Grant has eaten one evening meal without having to get up and rent a cabin or talk to someone, while the food on his plate loses its heat and its savor.

As for me, I don't believe I have ever washed dishes after dinner without having to stop once or twice, dry my hands, answer the doorbell and be a gracious landlady, and then go back and dip my dry hands into the unappetizing dish water again. Grant usually chooses this period of the day to shave, and it is easier for me to go to the door in the middle of dishwashing than it is for him to wipe off every trace of shaving cream and go.

The actual work connected with the motel seems easier now than it did at first--and, of course, that isn't surprising, since we do very little of it ourselves. Mrs. Clark cleans the cabins thoroughly every day, and after she has stripped all the beds Grant and I whisk through the laundry, getting it sorted and ready to go in about half an hour. About once a week Grant works with Mrs. Clark, and they give the cabins a very thorough cleaning, vacuuming under the beds, washing windows, and doing all the other little jobs that don't have to be done every day. Occasionally he does a little redecorating, painting a bathroom or repairing the damage done to the side of a garage when a car was backed out carelessly--and on such days it is my job to get the laundry out alone.

Watering, a big job in the summer time, can be practically forgotten about during the winter.

The last task before bedtime is to go around and check all the license numbers, to be sure that we have the correct ones. This is a safeguard in case of theft or damage to the cabins.

A typical day, with enough work of different kinds to keep us busy, but seldom enough to make us tired, and with the opportunity for meeting people from all parts of the country, is very interesting. The typical customer, however, is not. He is, in most cases, rather boring--not through any fault of his own, but because I know in advance exactly how he is going to behave and what he is going to say.

He comes in saying, "Got a vacancy?" After seeing and approving the cabin, if he wanted to look at it, he fills out the registration blank, omitting everything but his name and city and state. Prodded, he adds his address, fuming with belated alarm over the fact that he has written his home state immediately after the name of his town, in the blank left for "city," instead of putting it in its own blank space, labelled "state." Assured that it doesn't matter, he proceeds to the greatest hurdle of all--his car license. Laughing apologetically, he fingers through the papers in his wallet, trying to find it recorded on one or the other of his papers. Giving up at last, he darts outside, looks at his license, darts back in and writes it down quickly before he can forget it. Then he comments at some length on his persistent inability to remember his car license. I always smirk and assure him that I've never been able to remember ours, either (a lie). Having paid and obtained his key, he lingers a few minutes to comment on the travels he has made, the distance he has covered, and how tired he is; and to ask where's a good place to eat.

That's the typical customer. But there are a lot of unusual, amazing, intriguing, uncouth, and even frightening customers, and it's in the hope of encountering one of these that, when neither of us is busy, I fight to beat Grant to the door when a car drives in.

One night after we had gone to bed, expecting a night of good, uninterrupted sleep guarded by our bright "no vacancy" sign, someone rattled the knob of our door and then began to knock furiously. Grant pulled on a robe and went sleepily to the office door, so that the person who had been knocking on the living room door would go to the office to talk to him.

A few seconds later he was neck-deep in argument with the possessor of a shrill, strident, powerful voice. Prodded by my seldom dormant curiosity, I crept out of bed and slightly moved the curtains that hung over the window of the door to the office. I peeked into the office; there, confronting Grant, stood a behemoth of a woman who matched the voice in every respect. Her massive chin stuck out aggressively; and she was the possessor of a bosom that, if it could have been divided up among the female population, would have put several false manufacturers out of business.

"You get out of that bed!" the woman shrieked--a rather pointless command, since, obviously, Grant was not in bed. "Get your clothes on," she went on relentlessly, "and get out of that bed, and out of this cabin. They rented it to me and my husband, less than an hour ago, and I paid for it, and I intend to stick up for my rights. We rent a place, and then go out for a malt, and drive around a little, and what happens? They rent the place to someone else. I suppose they think they'll get double rent. Well, I hope they'll give you your money back, and of course you can't be blamed for renting a cabin when you didn't know it was already rented, but I'm telling you, I won't stand for it, so now hurry and get up and get out."

The woman folded her arms, with difficulty, around her jutting bosom, and stood waiting for Grant to slink away. When he didn't slink, but began to explain to her in a reasonable tone that she was mistaken, she howled with anger.

"No excuses," she screamed. "And I don't care if your wife has ulcers and can't be moved, or whatever corny excuse you're going to pull."

"Look," Grant said patiently. "We live here. We own this motel. Nobody rented us a cabin tonight, and what's more, we didn't rent you a cabin here at all. Now, if you'll excuse me once, I'll go back to bed--my bed, not yours."

But the woman's huge body remained planted in the doorway. She was quivering with determination. "My husband and I are going to have our cabin," she bellowed. "I'll call a cop."

"Fine. Would you like to quick use our phone?"

I leaped back into bed, just in time. The woman came into the room like a rhinoceros on the warpath, and glowered at me until I was almost ready to get up, apologize for sleeping in her bed, and creep away.

Grant handed her the telephone.

She glanced toward the kitchen. "I didn't--I didn't notice before that the place had a kitchen." Her voice was a little less like a foghorn.

"Nope. You've never been here, before," Grant said. "The number of the police department is 3322."

Her bosom seemed to shrink a trifle.

"And I don't remember any Venetian blinds in the place. Maybe we got twisted, driving around in a strange town, you know, when we got our malt. Maybe it was the front cabin of another motel. I--well..." She eased her bulk back toward the door. "I guess I made a mistake."

"Yep. But not such a big one as your husband made," Grant said, as he shut the outer door.

My first story for the newspaper was an account of the initial meeting of the Banning Motel Owners' Association. (I omitted the encounter with the host's wife!) The editor, Grandma, Grant, and most of the members of the association were pleased with the quality of my first venture into newspaper reporting.

I had closed the article with a list of the names of the motel owners who had attended the meeting, and it turned out that one member of the organization was not in the least happy over the situation.

I found that out the afternoon of the day the paper was published. Mr. Featherbrain stormed into the office, spluttered for a while, and finally came to the point.

"Durned old paper," he raged. "Durned old article. Who writ it, anyways?"

I still remembered acutely l'affaire de water faucet. "I wrote it," I replied coldly. "So what?"

He towered above me, thin and menacing, his chin quivering with violent emotion. "So what!" he repeated. "So what? Ain't it bad enough to have a name that sounds like 'Featherbrain' without spellin' it 'Featherbrain'?" His bony hand rasped across the white stubble of his beard. He seemed about to break into tears.

"It's too bad, all right," I said, softening a little. "But lots of people have funny names."

"I don't have a funny name!" he wailed. "You're just a-tryin' to make evvybody think I have. I oughta--why--" he paused, trying to think up an awful enough fate for me, and finally fell back on his old standby: "I oughta bust evvy bone in yer head!"

I was bewildered, and finally he saw that I didn't know what he was talking about. He checked his fury long enough to explain that his name was, always had been, always would be, Featherbren, Feather b-r-e-n, not Featherbrain.

He stalked away.

I ran outside and called after him, "Mr. Featherbrain!--I mean, Mr. featherbren!"

He stopped haughtily, and waited for me to catch up with him.

"I'm really sorry," I said. "Maybe this makes us even now, even though what I did wasn't intentional. Let's be friends again, shall we?"

A smile spread over his face like the sun bursting out from behind clouds. His chin flushed rosy with pleasure. He grasped my hand and pumped it up and down vigorously. "I been awful sorry, what I done about yer water. I ain't been mad at yuh noways for a long time now," he said. "But a course I couldn't admit it."

A bout with housecleaning having kept me in the house most of the day, I beat Grant to the office one evening when the bell rang.

"I haven't set eyes on a customer all day," I told Grant.

"You go read a book; I'll take care of this one."

'This one' was a lanky, nice-looking man of about forty.

"That radio on the desk there," he said without preamble. "I noticed it's for rent. Guess I'll take it."

"Okay. Fifty cents," I said.

He flipped half a dollar toward me, picked up the radio, and exclaimed, "Sold!"

"No, just rented," I answered wittily.

We laughed, and he went out, carrying the radio. Grant had been listening.

"Who was that?" he asked casually as I came into the living room.

"A man from one of the cabins."

"Which cabin?"

"Well--well, I don't know. I've been cleaning house--you did the renting today."

"Did you make sure that he really was staying in one of our cabins, and wasn't just someone off the highway?" Grant pursued relentlessly.

"Of course. Well, that is, naturally he's not just someone--I mean, after all, he said that it was when he was renting a cabin that he noticed the radio."

Grant was silent, for the obvious purpose of giving me a chance to find the flaws in my reasoning. He went into the kitchen, where he stripped the outer leaves off a head of lettuce, rinsed it, and began cutting it into shreds.

"Where did you get the lettuce?" I asked, partly from curiosity and partly from a desire to change the subject.

"From a truck driver," Grant said, putting the shredded lettuce into a bowl and spooning honey over it. "Truck parked in front of the driveway--I asked the driver to move the truck once. He had a big load of lettuce, said he'd give me some if I'd let him stay there long enough to run across the street and get a beer." Grant opened the cupboard door and inspected the cans of seasoning critically. After some deliberation he selected nutmeg, and sprinkled it lavishly into the bowl. Then he got a fork and began to eat.

I was hoping he had forgotten about the radio, but after he had swallowed a few mouthfuls he continued, as though he hadn't drifted off the subject:

"I'll bet a horned toad any stranger could pull in off the highway and ask you for a roll of toilet paper and you've quick give it to him."

There are times when I wonder what, exactly, it was that I saw in Grant that made me want to marry him.

It was one of these times, when I was standing at the office desk chewing a pencil and dwelling morbidly on the things about Grant that I didn't like, when a young woman stopped in and asked if we had cabins with kitchens. She was a very vivacious creature, with dark eyes and sparkling hair and a body that all seemed touched with electricity. Even my glum negative reply to her question seemed to bounce off the aura of her gaiety. She was so full of life that some of it had to spill out; apparently she couldn't pass up a human being without talking, happily and loudly, for a while.

She was one of those women whom, after a very short time, you feel as though you had known for ages. Suddenly, when she seemed on the verge of leaving, shrieking with laughter

after telling me about a joke she had once played on someone, I gave birth to an idea that positively scintillated. Since she had a sense of humor and wasn't above a harmless joke herself, she'd enjoy this as much as I would. I'd show Grant he wasn't as smart as he thought he was!

I explained to the lively young woman what I wanted her to do. She agreed, her eyes dancing.

Grant, I knew, was sorting and putting away clean laundry. I led her out to the garage of cabin number 2, then I stood back so that Grant wouldn't be able to see me.

"My husband just rented cabin 16 from your wife," she said to Grant. "Now he's gone downtown and I seem to have locked myself out. I wonder if I could borrow your pass key?" Just then the telephone rang. I went inside to answer it; it was someone calling from Los Angeles, wanting to reserve a cabin for a week from Saturday night. There was a great deal of confusion, repetition, and mind-changing; and by the time I hung up and looked outside, I saw that the vivacious young woman had driven away.

I smiled as I went out toward the linen closet to bring my joke on Grant to its climax.

"Who was that woman talking to you just now?" I asked.

"Oh, she's the wife of the guy you rented 16 to," Grant replied airily, lifting an armful of neatly folded snowy sheets onto a shelf of the linen closet. "She was locked out. She just borrowed the pass key; she quick brought it back again."

I tried to look shocked as I said, "Sixteen! Why, I didn't rent sixteen to anyone! Here, let me have your pass key!"

I seized the key and dashed across to 16. Grant, by the linen closet, couldn't see me. I unlocked the door of 16, slammed it loudly for his benefit, and raced back to him.

"She's cleaned the place out!" I cried, with a malicious enjoyment of the expression on his face. "Lamp, throw rugs, ash trays--everything's gone! And you're the smart boy who's been bawling me out for not checking up on people before I give them what they want. I'd give toilet paper to a stranger off the highway, maybe, but believe me, before I'd give anyone a pass key I'd be pretty sure--"

Grant was getting up slowly, starting toward the cabin. I leaned against him, giggling.

"It's all a joke!" I gasped. "I fixed it up with that woman to ask you for the key--she didn't really take those things out of the cabin--so I'd be able to get back at you for all the things you said about me. I wanted you to feel foolish, for once. It was just a joke!"

A few minutes later Grant strode into the living room, where I was reading a magazine Mrs. Clark found in one of the cabins.

"A joke, eh?" he said grimly. He was giving me that withering look again, and this time I had a peculiar feeling that I deserved it. "Well, if it was a joke, your peppy little girlfriend was the one who played it. Both of the wool blankets are gone from the beds in 16!"

The influx into Banning of people with asthma, bronchitis, sinus trouble, arthritis, and common colds continued into the spring. Cultivated sweet peas were appearing in the wake of the almond and peach blossoms, wild flowers were spreading themselves extravagantly over the whole desert, and the fields behind our motel were splashed with color. Some careless giant had trailed dirty fingers across the snowy mountain tops. A pair of plucky birds were busily building a nest in the rear of garage 16, almost directly above my washing machine. The days were so breathtakingly lovely that it was hard to believe that less than ninety miles away there were fog and cloudiness, and people with persistent coughs and sniffles.

Nature's springtime orgy made us feel as though we should do a little to keep up with her. So, the first time Oliv Snyder came around, we made a deal with him.

Oliv Snyder was a gardener, obviously, and--so he said--an ex journalism teacher.

The latter epithet I doubted. I never heard him saying "you was" or "I seen," and David never caught him splitting an infinitive, but somehow I couldn't visualize him lecturing to an absorbed audience on the intricacies of slinging the English language around.

He was a short, moody little creature with white hair which curled at the ends. He wore a cap with a frayed, mothbeaten brim, and his elbows and knees, and various other portions of his anatomy and underwear, were visible through the holes in his clothing. His theme song, patterned after that of Snow White's seven dwarves, must have been "Hiccup while you work," for on the several occasions that he worked around the grounds of the motel he devoted fully as much energy to his gusty staccato hiccups as to his gardening.

Although he himself didn't seem to be much of a bargain, his proposition was.

"Five rosebushes--hic!--the very finest Talisman, to be planted on out to the highway and divide your property from the motel next door. And then all in front of the motel to the highway

planted in calendulas. All for--hic!--ten dollars. You just clean the--hic! weeds out and get the land ready and I'll--hic! do the rest."

Two days later Grant had cleared out all the puncture vine, Russian thistles, and the other defiant weeds that never let up their efforts to regain the tiny percentage of territory they had lost to civilization. The wild flowers that bloomed with such mad splendor on the fields behind us stayed bashfully back where they couldn't be seen from the highway, and added nothing to the front view of our place.

Oliv Snyder appeared at the appointed time, his car loaded with boxes of plants, rose bushes, and a box of rich mountain-dug dirt which had its particular merit, he assured us, in the fact that it was "hundreds of thousands of years old."

Personally, I doubted that it was any older than any other dirt.

I raked away a few loose weeds while Mr. Snyder began digging holes in the rocky, hard ground. He paced out the distance between the holes so that the rose bushes would be properly spaced; then he placed the bushes in the holes, and poured the ancient dirt around their roots. While he worked he talked, letting drop occasionally a four or five syllable word that sounded affected and unnatural.

"Even though I am a very well educated man, and have had several books published, I have--hic!--a few little idiosyncrasies," he confessed, darting his bright, wrinkle-surrounded eyes at me.

"You're kidding!" I protested. "Surely you're too normal, too well balanced for anything like that."

"No," he said seriously. "Of course I am--hic!--exceptionally well balanced, but about even me there are--oddities, shall we say?"

"Yes, let's," I agreed.

Flailing his arms, the little man threw himself upon one of the newly planted rose bushes, trampling it with his feet. Or so it appeared. I was about to yank him back indignantly when I realized that his tattered shoes were adroit in avoiding the bush.

"I'm just stamping the--hic!--stamping the dirt down," he explained. "The roses like it better that way. Hic! They like things just so. They have their own little idiosyncrasies, you know."

"Even the well-educated, well-balanced ones?" Then, afraid that sounded too flippant, I said, "But what are your idiosyncrasies?"

Oliv seized a hoe from his car, leaned upon it, and said, "Look at me. I'm--hic!--the man with the hoe, stolid and stunned, brother to the--hic!--the ox."

I must have looked rather vague, for he explained, "That's from one of the poems I use--hic!--to teach my journalism classes."

He began chopping at the ground. "One of my peculiarities," he said, "is that I can't resist buying the bottles of things the--hic!--apothecaries sell. Those rows and rows of neatly labeled bottles on the shelves in drug stores--hic--they do something to me. I don't know what it is exactly, but practically all the money I earn doing gardening--hic--and odd jobs goes into the apothecaries' pockets. You ought to see my domicile--it's just like being in a--hic!--a drug store. Every shelf and drawer is loaded with bottles of pills and tablets and--hic!--capsules."

"Well, that's--interesting," I remarked, not being able to think of a more satisfactory adjective. "Sort of a hobby."

"But that isn't the sum total of my idiosyncrasies," he said, his face, under its thatch of white hair topped by his frayed cap, turning a mottled pink. He stopped, thrusting a small plant into the trench he had dug.

"No, I--hic!--regret to say, that isn't all," he went on. "It's--well, it's women. I can't resist them either."

I clicked my tongue sympathetically. "Lots of men are like that," I comforted him.

That night, though, I awoke and sat upright in bed. Oliv Snyder couldn't resist bottles of pills, so every drawer and shelf in his house was loaded with them. He couldn't resist women, so ...

I was so overcome with curiosity about his home life that it took me an hour to get back to sleep.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

GRANT GREW VERY tired of the conscientious customers who made a point of delivering the keys to one of us personally before leaving. It was annoying enough for us to have to interrupt breakfast or a bout with the razor or the dishpan to answer the bell and accept a key; but it was infuriating to be called out of bed unnecessarily in the wee small hours. Most of our customers, of course, sensibly left their keys inside the cabin, or sticking in the keyhole of their cabin door; but for the maddening few who insisted on seeing the keys safely home, Grant bought a silver mailbox and nailed it just outside the office door. He was in such a hurry to get the thing finished, now that he had actually started, that he didn't even take time to put exact, measured lettering on it. He simply dipped one of David's slender paint brushes into a bottle of black ink and wrote in shaky letters on the face of the mailbox "Please return keys here."

With a big safety pin Grant secured the front of the mailbox, so that people wouldn't pull it down and let the keys fall out.

Practically all of our customers put their keys dutifully into the little slot in the top of the mailbox when they were ready to check out, but there were always a few who were bewildered by the whole setup. This type would study the mailbox for a long time, read and reread the words on the front of it, ponder the safety pin, and peer into the slot to see whether there actually were any keys there--and sometimes, even after all these preliminaries, would ring the bell and hand one of us the key.

One morning I was dusting the Venetian blinds in the office when a plump woman in cerise slacks, with a hat that looked like a ring mold of feathers, minced toward the office door. A key was dangling from her hand, and I moved away from the window to watch her unobserved. She didn't look very intelligent, and I wondered how long it would take her to figure out how to dispose of the key.

She studied the mailbox, the words painted on it, and the safety pin, for several minutes. Then she moved her arm upward determinedly--and just as she did, Donna, in the living room, let out a piercing shriek.

By the time I had dashed into the living room, located Donna, whose head was stuck between the davenport and the wall, extricated her head and secured for her the ball she had been chasing, the cerise-slacked, feather-hatted woman was gone.

I was curious, though, to see whether she had put the key into the slot, so I stepped outside to look in the box. I was reaching for the safety pin so that I could let down the flap when I noticed something hanging from the pin. It was the woman's key!

There are people who can get into all kinds of difficulties over such an apparently harmless and simple an object as a key. Nearly every day some brilliant soul, after opening the door of his cabin and deposing one suitcase (and his key) inside, locks himself out when he starts back to get the rest of his belongings from his car. I have so thoroughly learned the expression that accompanies this predicament that when anyone wearing it comes into the office I hand him a master key before he speaks, and say "This key will open it."

Then there are the people who look at their key tags upside down. The key to cabin 2, upside down, can be mistaken for that of cabin 7, and vice versa; and, of course, 6 and 9 are always easy to confuse. Every once in a while a customer who has been assigned to cabin 7 comes to the office in a huff because he can't get into cabin 2.

The thirteen keys, one numbered for each cabin, were somehow the tangible symbol of our work. They were woven into the very fabric of our lives. Early in the morning, before daylight, Grant usually got up to see if anyone had left a key and checked out. If there were an empty cabin, he cleaned it up and rerented it.

It was the keys which absorbed Mrs. Clark's first attention every morning when she came to clean the cabins. A quick perusal of them told her which cabins were ready for her to go into. It was the remaining keys we surveyed each night as a quick way of knowing how many vacancies were left. Frequently a key that a customer had carried away by mistake would turn up in our post office box, having been dropped in "any mailbox" in accordance with instructions stamped on the metal tag attached.

And it was one early afternoon while I was hanging up the keys, after Mrs. Clark had finished cleaning the cabins and Grant had left to take her home, that there occurred one of the most frightening episodes of my motel career.

We kept the keys hanging on hooks on a large board placed under the office desk, where customers could not see them and where it was necessary to stoop only slightly, to slip one of them off its hook.

Just as I finished hanging the last key the office door opened and a pale, rabbit-like little man walked in. I smiled to myself at the whimsical notion that he seemed out of place in skin and cheap, striped shirt and trousers. He should have been clothed in soft white rabbit fur. He was

probably, I thought, the type who would prove almost too timid to ask for a cabin.

I was to learn, though, that he wasn't too timid to ask for a great deal more than that.

"Yer husban' home, sis?" he squeaked, sounding like a smart-alecky, frightened child.

"No, he isn't," I confessed, "but he'll be back in about fifteen minutes. If you'd care to wait--"

"That's all I wan'ed t'know," he said, his nose twitching like the nose of an Easter bunny Hellwig had given me when I was ten years old.

"Gimme yer money," he said, standing directly in front of the desk and staring at me with terrified, pink-rimmed eyes.

"My--my money?" I repeated.

And now I was the one who sounded like a frightened child.

There was a hundred and fifty dollars in the house, about sixty of it in the desk drawer--too much money to be bluffed into handing over to a--

And then I saw his gun.

He held it in one trembling white hand.

My mind was suddenly a maelstrom, offering up weird, useless suggestions for tricking or attacking the man, reasons why I should or shouldn't hand over every cent quietly, and churning with totally unrelated thoughts and ideas--with a bit of a review of my past life thrown in for good measure.

I wouldn't give him the money. I'd pretend not to understand and he'd get exasperated and go away, to come again some other day, that was that old nursery rhyme I used to sing or something. The telephone, that was it, the telephone, if I could get to the telephone I could call the police and then stall him till they got here. I'd say excuse me, I have to make a phone call, and then ... His eyes. The rims are red, like he'd been crying, or rubbing them, or hadn't had enough sleep. They're funny eyes--scared to death. I'm scared to death too. Maybe I should give him the money. When people are scared and upset they're apt to pull the trigger. Maybe I should do what he wants. After all, it wasn't the brave-looking tortoise who finally won the race, it was the hare, even if he did look pretty rabbity and scared. He had a gun, after all, and who wouldn't win a race if he was carrying a gun? Or wait--wasn't it the tortoise who won? While I was trying to figure this out I saw far below me, as though through a mist of clouds, a pair of hands stuffed with money.

I watched these hands curiously as they thrust the money into one of the trembling white hands across the office desk. The trembling hand grasped it convulsively, thrust it into a pocket, and then fluttered nervously around its owner's twitching nose.

"Gimme the rest of it, sis," the little man piped. His nose was wiggling harder than ever now, the muscles around his mouth and eyes were jerking, and he looked as near to a nervous collapse as I was. The more he twitched, the worse I felt. If that twitching should get as far as his trigger finger . . .

It isn't a pleasant thing to look into a narrow tube of metal, at the back of which lies potential oblivion. I was relieved and numb when the little man put the gun into his pocket. Apparently he was in such a panic to get away that he wasn't going to argue or wait for more money.

I poked my head cautiously out the office door when he had gone, my terror ebbing. I hoped that I could get his license number.

His car, though--toward which he loped and bounded like a jackrabbit--was parked facing east, in front of and across from the Peacock, so far away that I couldn't read his license number. I did a little loping and bounding myself, certain that in his frenzy to get away he wouldn't notice me--until, as he was getting into the car, I was close enough to read his license number.

34X768.

Three-four-ex-seven-six-eight! 34x768. I repeated the numbers to myself, I whispered, sang and chanted them as I ran back toward our motel. I mustn't forget them; 34x768--34x--

"Pardon me, ma'am, could you tell me how far it is to Riverside?"

"Thirty-four ex seven sixty-eight miles!" I panted, brushing past the tall soldier who was blocking my path.

I rushed into the office, hunted frantically for a pen, and wrote the license number down on a registration blank. Then I telephoned the police department.

I was just hanging up the receiver and mopping the perspiration from my forehead when

Grant returned. Abruptly all my resourcefulness and courage melted away, and I flung myself howling into his arms.

"A rabbit held me up and took all of our money!" I wailed.

It was about ten minutes before Grant could soothe me to a point where he could get a coherent explanation of what had happened.

The police caught the terrified thief before he was twenty miles out of town. When they stopped at the motel so that I could identify him, and to check on the money which had been stolen, I was busy writing the story of the holdup for the Banning paper.

Grant, of course, didn't know how much money had been in the drawer; and I had been in no condition to count the money as I handed it to the frightened desperado. I didn't know how much had been in the drawer because Grant's airy carelessness about money, once earned, had led me to put cash in and take it out from the drawer with as much nonchalance as his, and as little regard for amount. I was pretty sure, though, that it was in the neighborhood of sixty dollars that the little man had taken; and that was the amount they found on him. They gave us a little advice on keeping better track of the money we took in, which left me with a momentary glow of triumph, and an excuse for being on the delivering instead of the receiving end of one of those maddening, superior, meaningful glances--but I knew that neither the advice nor the glance would have any effect on Grant.

My career as a part-time newspaper reporter was thriving, and without my ever finding it necessary to go out looking for news. Highway accidents, which were an old, old story to us by now, occurred frequently in front of our motel. It was usually easy for me to get the names, addresses and ages of the occupants of the involved cars while the police were asking their routine questions. I simply wrote the facts, dramatizing them a little, and the editor of the paper accepted them eagerly.

The frequent wrecks, and the fact that in two of them the cars had come right off the highway onto our land, made me very glad that the front of our motel was sixty feet from the highway. A hundred and sixty feet would have been safer! And after a truck, struck by a car when it was trying to make a left turn into Moe's restaurant, rammed into the garage of cabin 16--which corresponded to the children's bedroom on the other side--I rearranged the furniture in their room, in such a way that neither David's bed nor Donna's crib was near the side of the wall that was closest to the highway.

Watering the calendulas and the roses that Oliv Snyder had planted in front of the office was, I felt, one of the most hazardous jobs connected with running the motel. The flowers in the tip end of the rock-enclosed triangle were only about six feet from the edge of the highway. And six feet from the edge of a highway where busses hurtle past and trucks roar by and there is no speed limit, and where cars are continually cutting in and out of traffic to go to the cafe or to the bar or to one of the motels, and where wrecks are a common occurrence, is a locality that not even Lloyds of London would care to insure against anything, at any premium.

But it wasn't only highway accidents as prospective items for the Banning paper that clamored for my attention. Things happened all the time, with our motel usually the geographic center. There was the civic news picked up from gossip around the motel and at meetings of the motel owners' association. There were the miscellaneous odds and ends about fires, sicknesses, promotions, and so forth, that drift naturally through a busy, public place like the office of a motel. And there were the trivial "personals" so dear to the heart of a country paper editor. I had developed such a nose for news that I couldn't let any of these pass by without dashing to the typewriter and slamming out a few paragraphs about it. If David so much as mentioned that a certain playmate of his had to hurry home from school because an uncle from Michigan was coming to visit, I had to find out about it, even if it meant tracking down the child's parents through his address at school, and asking them point-blank if they had a visitor--and if so, how about a few details. At first I fought against this compulsion to track down every potential however-minor story. But, for hours after I conquered the urge to follow a certain lead, I would feel a gnawing sense of guilt, a feeling of having left something unfinished. It was a familiar feeling; I have experienced it many times after failing to turn back a page of a magazine to see whether that ad read "You must try Whippersnapper's Mange Medicine" or "You should try Whippersnapper's Mange Medicine." I've experienced it after failing to count the exact number of stairs I climb in a given flight. I always experience it if, after idly making creases in one side of my skirt, I neglect to make an equal number of identical creases in the opposite side of my skirt. Psychologists call it, I believe, a compulsion neurosis.

Whatever it is, I've got it.

I always give in finally and go back to count the stairs, check on the exact wording of the ad, or belatedly crease my skirt in the required manner; and I always wind up by tracing the news item to its lair. Sometimes I wish I had never heard of newspapers.

Tyrone Power had once stayed at the Peacock, and I waited eagerly for him, or some equally famous personage, to spend a night with us, so that I would have a really worthwhile story for the paper--one that would make Banning's citizens sit up and gasp--and, incidentally, give the

Moonrise Motel a little good publicity. I turned over in my mind the few famous people I had met, wishing I knew them well enough to be able to write a casual note suggesting that they take a vacation in Banning. I had interviewed Margaret Lee Runbeck and Rupert Hughes, before we left Los Angeles, but of course neither of them would remember. And I had met Dick Powell one Sunday afternoon. I was introduced to him by Virginia Gregg, a radio actress I was interviewing who was working with him on that afternoon's broadcast of "The Rogue's Gallery." Dick Powell, I'm sure, will always remember the day--not because of meeting me, but because of the fluff he made. Closing the drama in a narrated summing up of the afternoon's story, he let the radio audience in on the fact that the villain had been convicted of "robbery and murder."

A green coupe drove into our driveway with a swish of gravel. I sighed. I felt almost too tired to cope with customers. Grant, with his usual lack of system, had started the big job of washing all the soiled bedspreads, doilies and dresser scarves--forgetting that he had an appointment with the dentist in half an hour. Remembering the appointment just in time to keep it, he left me to finish the job he had started.

The spreads, scarves and doilies were hanging on the line now. I opened the office door and walked wearily out toward the green coupe.

The middle-aged driver reached onto the seat beside him for his hat, put it on quickly and removed it with a courtly gesture. His narrow brown eyes were amused.

"Mr. Hawkins!" I exclaimed. My first impulse was one of joy at seeing him again, but then I remembered the blanket he had made me think was stolen, and the apple-pie bed he had made for the new occupants of his cabin the day he left on his honeymoon.

Miss Nesdebur's plump little body was already halfway out of the car. She hugged me, tears running down over the fine wrinkles around her eyes.

"Ma chere amie!" she exclaimed, dabbing daintily at her eyes with a lace-edged hanky. Her fair skin was flushed with emotion. "It's simply terribly good to see you again, and to be back at the sweet little motel where I first met my Herbert! We just thought we'd drive out this way for old times' sake! After all, it's only a few miles from Burbank, n'est-ce pas?"

When we were all seated in the living room Mr. Hawkins caught my eye almost guiltily and said, "I apologize deeply, madame, for any unpleasantness that may have occurred during my stay at your charming motel. I seem to recall something about--ah--a blanket, wrongly supposed to have been stolen, and--ah--"

"An apple pie bed?" I refreshed his memory.

"I'm sure," he said gallantly, "that you are too sweet and fair-minded a young lady to hold grudges. Let's let bygones be bygones, shall we?"

"I'm willing," I laughed. And he held out a big, strong-looking hand for me to shake.

I shook my head, instead. "I'm willing to let bygones be bygones," I said, "but that doesn't mean I have to trust you. I'm afraid if I shake hands with you I'll either find a spider in my hand, or glue all over my fingers, or maybe you'll try some kind of a jiu-jitsu trick on me. We'll be friends--but at a distance, if you don't mind."

Mr. Hawkins laughed and sat down again. "All right--but you must at least let me thank you for the cockroach you sent me. You'll be happy to hear it's in perfect health, and we've made quite a pet of it. We named it 'Ermintrude.' A neighbor is taking care of it for us today while we're away from home."

Miss Nesdebur was quivering with eagerness to get into the conversation.

"There's so much to tell you, I simply don't know where to begin," she said. "We've sold my car, and we've moved into Herbert's lovely little place in Burbank, and we had a long, wonderful honeymoon. We camped in the mountains near Big Bear Lake for a few days--we got a tent and Herbert put it up all by himself. He's so strong and wonderful. One night we woke up and heard something scratching at the flaps of the tent. We were miles from anywhere, and we were simply terrified. I thought maybe it was one of the big bears the lake was named for. It was pitch black outside, no moon or stars, and we got out of the tent and started to run. One shouldn't become so frightened, of course, but anyway we ran--for miles, it seemed, and all the time this bear, or whatever it was, was right behind us. And then, of all things to encounter in the mountains, we ran up against a fence! It was really dreadful, with the big old creature gaining on us and ready, for all we knew, to kill us the moment he caught us. We scrambled over the fence as best we could, with dear Herbert risking his life by helping me over. It took us quite a while to get across, and we were all scratched up by wire and frightened half to death. The animal had apparently given up in the meantime, because we didn't hear him any more. We didn't dare to go back to our tent, though, so we stayed out there until morning. We were half frozen."

"Well, that was quite an adventure," I exclaimed. "When it was daylight, did you climb back over the fence and go back to your tent?"

Mr. Hawkins and Miss Nestlebert exchanged rueful glances.

"No," she laughed, one of her tiny white hands fluttering up to adjust a blue brooch at her neck. "We didn't climb over the fence when daylight came. We simply walked around it. You see, it was just about five feet long--a remnant of an old fence that had apparently been torn down for years."

When I could stop laughing I said, "What about the animal that had been chasing you? Did you ever find out what it was?"

"No--o," Miss Nestlebert said. "But we looked at the tracks, and Herbert said they couldn't have been made by anything else but a cow!"

"Speaking of cows, my dear," said Mr. Hawkins, brushing a speck of dust off one neatly pressed, striped trouser leg, "Why don't you give her the present we brought for David? And then we must leave."

"Mais oui! I must go out to the car and get it! I almost forgot all about it!" exclaimed Miss Nestlebert. "Where is David?"

"Grant went to the dentist, and he was to get David from school as soon as he was through. They should be here any minute," I said.

Mr. Hawkins sprang to his feet and held the door open for Miss Nestlebert. Then he closed the door and sat down again.

"Ah, my dear madame," he said to me, "marriage is indeed wonderful. Since Miss Nestlebert did me the great honor of becoming my wife, I have been the happiest man alive."

His brown eyes were full of laughter, as they had been every time I had seen him.

"You never struck me as being a particularly unhappy type," I said.

"No, how true that is, madame! I'm full of joie de vivre, as my dear wife would say."

Just as Miss Nestlebert tapped lightly at the door and came in again. Grant drove up with David. They came in behind her, David making as much noise as a calliope.

"I have a present for you, little David!" Miss Nestlebert said; and she handed David what she was carrying--a large, soft black cat.

David was ecstatic. "Is it really mine? Can I really keep it?" he demanded.

I eyed the cat's bulging sides askance. "I think it's about to calve," I whispered in an aside to Grant.

"Yep, you can keep it," Grant said good-humouredly. "We'll quick fix it a bed in one of the garages."

"Is it a boy cat or a girl cat?" David asked.

"A girl cat, dear," I replied drily.

Miss Nestlebert's blue eyes sparkled as she watched David's joy in his new pet. "Let's go out now and see where the cat wants his bed to be," David cried, pulling a dried piece of gum off his cheek; and Grant and Mr. Hawkins followed him outside.

"Such pretty black, curly eyelashes the boy has!" Miss Nestlebert exclaimed.

I was about to ask her where she got the plump cat when I remembered that there was something else I was curious about.

"A long time ago Mr. Hawkins did something that embarrassed you--one of his practical jokes, I suppose--and you said you'd tell me all about it when you'd known me longer. Do you remember?" I asked. "And do you think you've known me long enough now?"

Rosy color flooded her fair skin, and I saw that she remembered what I was talking about.

I knew I shouldn't have brought up the subject again, but I reasoned that I would suffer more from curiosity if she never told me than she would suffer from embarrassment if she did.

Her bright blue eyes darted around the room, to avoid meeting mine.

"Yes, I remember. Of course I've known you long enough. It's just that one has difficulty in talking about such things ..."

"I suppose he played a rather crude joke on you?" I prodded.

"No, it--it wasn't a joke. It was something he gave me. It was--oh, dear, I don't know how to

say it. I suppose he meant well, but it was really a most embarrassing gift . . ."

She clasped and unclasped her tiny hands. "It really shocked me, especially since it had been only a few minutes since we had met. You see, he gave me a little undressed--that is, actually nude--ooh!" Miss Nestlebert gasped. Her eyes, in their uneasy jaunt around the room, had caught sight of the bookcase and what was on top of it--the perfume atomizer Mr. Hawkins had given me.

"He--he gave you one too?" she asked weakly. I nodded, and we dissolved into helpless laughter.

Our merriment was cut into abruptly by a loud crash and splintering outside.

"A wreck!" I exclaimed, dashing through the door and forming the first catch sentence for the story as I ran.

It wasn't exactly a wreck. A heavy truck, loaded with grapefruit, had been parked on the highway in front of Moe's cafe while the driver went in to eat. The brake had failed to hold, and the truck had slid backward, gaining momentum until it crashed heavily into one of the small cabins across the highway behind Mr. Bertram's grocery store. Fortunately, no one was in the cabin, which was half destroyed.

I knew Mr. Bertram would take time out from his snuff-chewing to get all the details about the incident, the name of the truck driver and everything else that I'd need in order to write up a story for the paper. I didn't have to wade into the mob of curious people that had collected. I'd just go over and talk to Mr. Bertram in an hour or so.

Someone had called the truck driver's attention to what had happened. He came dashing out of Moe's, his eyes wild, a doughnut clutched in one hand. He went galloping across the highway toward his truck.

"And look at the bar across the street!" Miss Nestlebert cried, her little hands going to her mouth in dismay. "The front of it is smashed in a little bit too!"

"Oh, that happened last week," I said airily. "A man who was going to go in for a drink couldn't stop his car in time. We're so used to accidents like that that we hardly notice them any more."

Grant and David and Mr. Hawkins appeared from the direction of the garages, where they had been arranging for the black cat's living quarters.

Grant went across the highway to see the excitement and, I suspected, to get a few of the crushed or slightly damaged grapefruit that the truck driver would have to discard.

I was right. Miss Nestlebert and Mr. Hawkins had a big sack of slightly crushed grapefruit in the car with them when they left, and as for us--for three weeks we dined on sliced grapefruit, halved grapefruit, peeled grapefruit, grapefruit salad, grapefruit a la mode and grapefruit au gratin.

One morning as I placed grapefruit halves before Grant and David, Grant caught my expression. He said something that sounded like, "Don't feel that way. Grapefruit is good for hales."

"What?" I asked.

"I said you shouldn't feel that way. Grapefruit is healthy."

"No, that isn't either what you said. You said something that sounded like 'Grapefruit is good for hales.'"

"Well, I don't remember exactly what I said, but that's what I meant. Grapefruit is healthy."

"I knew what you meant; what I wanted to know was, what did you say?"

Grant sighed. I know my curiosity exasperates him, but it annoys me for hours if I can't discover exactly what a word was that I didn't quite get.

"Why do you always have to change the wording of what you say when I say 'What?' instead of actually repeating what you say, which is what I want you to do?" I railed at him.

This argument of ours, which has come up over and over again, grows very involved if we don't drop it in its earliest stages--and sad experience has taught me that Grant can't, or won't, recall and tell me the exact word he used, anyway.

I was clearing away the remains of the sugar-sprinkled grapefruit slices we had had for dessert one evening, and Grant was in the office assuring some man that we hadn't found his toupee in the cabin he had occupied the previous night, when a lanky, thin-faced, big-eyed boy opened the living room door and walked into the living room.

"Oh, I guess I musta got the wrong door," he said, twisting his dirty handkerchief nervously between skinny fingers. "I'm sorry, maam, but I thought I oughta tell you--I guess my ma is gonna have a baby."

I remembered renting a double cabin, number 3, earlier in the day, to an extremely pregnant woman and her son.

I stared at the pale boy. I must have been rather pale myself. "You mean--right now?" I gasped.

He nodded shamefacedly.

"Oh, dear. Well, sit down on the davenport there. Don't be nervous. What's your name?"

"Eugene."

"Well, well. And how old are you?"

"Ten."

"Ten? Well. That's a nice age. And what kind of work does your daddy do?"

"He's a salesman. He travels. On'y gets home once in a while."

"And do you have any brothers or sisters?" I asked. It was as though, by stalling and refusing to face what was happening in one of our cabins, I could postpone it, or make it not so. I was coming out of my first condition of shock and realizing that I must call a doctor, and tell Grant what was happening, immediately, when the boy answered my last question.

"Yes, ma'am," he said. "I got six brothers and five sisters. My littlest sister is still a baby. On'y one and a half. My oldest sister is takin care of the kids now while Ma and me was gonna visit Gramma in Frisco. Ma didn't think she'd have this new baby for awhile yit. But I guess she's gonna, though. She's got pains somethin' awful."

Numbly I seized the telephone book and looked up the number of one of the town's three doctors. There was no answer when I dialed his number. I dialed the number of another; he was, a crisp feminine voice informed me, out on a call. I dialed the number of the residence of the third doctor. I heard a ringing sound, and I prayed that this doctor would be avail able. The suspense of waiting for someone to lift the receiver at the other end of the line was terrible, and I tried feverishly to occupy my mind. Doctors ... doctors . . . how many famous ones could I think off? I kept my mind off what was happening in cabin 3, and concentrated on doctors. Famous doctors; well, there were the Mayo brothers, of course, and Dr. Kildare. He's pretty famous, I mused, even though he is just a figment of someone's imagination.

Imagination . . . some philosophers think everything is a figment of people's imagination--or would it be figments? Figments, pigments, pudding and pie; babies are cute, but they sure do cry. And here I was back on the subject of babies again.

The ringing at the other end of the line stopped (although the ringing in my head continued) and the doctor himself answered. I said,

"I'm calling Dr. Kildare! I mean--" I laughed apologetically, "I'm calling Dr. Adams. Is this Dr. Adams?"

When he gave me a curt, affirmative reply, obviously bored with what he considered my facetiousness, I told him what was going on; and he said he'd be over at once.

By that time Grant, having convinced the man that we hadn't found his toupee, came back into the living room, and I told him about the impending blessed event. His complexion took on a hue to match mine and that of the skinny boy.

"I've called the doctor," I said. "What do we do in the meantime?"

Grant, the ever resourceful, the maddeningly efficient, was stymied for once.

"Well..." he said uncertainly.

"That's how I feel about it," I said. "But we can't just--sit here."

"You're a woman," Grant pointed out cruelly, passing the buck to me. "You've had two babies."

"Yes," I came back at him, "but I just had them--I didn't deliver them."

"Well, you won't have to deliver these either. I mean, this one. The doctor will be here in a few minutes."

"I know, but--what about in the meantime?"

"Well," Grant said uneasily, "I suppose you should go in once and see how she's getting along. Maybe you can give her some aspirin or something."

"Aspirin!" I snorted.

Donna was playing contentedly in the bedroom, stacking blocks, knocking them over, and stacking them up again. David was outside adding another worn-out baby blanket to the bed he had made in the garage of cabin 6 for his new black cat. With the children occupied, and the dinner dishes done, obviously I couldn't claim any pressing domestic duties.

"Well... come on," I said.

The door of cabin 3 had never looked so forbidding. While we were standing in front of it, wondering whether or not to knock, little Eugene brushed past us and opened it. He went to stand beside the bed, where he looked from his mother to us with big, dark eyes.

"You had the baby yit?" he asked her anxiously.

"You don't see it nowheres, do you?"

Grant and I edged into the cabin. "How do you do," I said. "We heard--that is, your son said--you were--well, having a little difficulty."

"That ain't the half of it, honey," the woman remarked, biting her lower lip until there was a row of neat little white teeth marks printed upon it.

She was a huge woman, broad-shouldered and big boned, and her body rose like a small mountain beneath the blankets. Her greying hair was long and untidy on the pillow. Her dark, beautiful eyes were like jewels in a crude setting; they were surrounded by flushed, large-pored flesh, and complemented by a large, misshapen nose. Her teeth were pretty, but they were too much in evidence when she talked, as were all the other details of the interior of her mouth. The brazen display of such an expanse of gums and tongue made me feel ill.

"I'm Mrs. Watkins, you prob'ly know that. Cripes, I'm sorry if I was rude when you come in, but I was havin' a pain. Say, didja call me a doc?"

I nodded, and she went on, "Ain't it a fit, me havin' a kid in a motel? I never thought I'd have it so soon, but you sure can't tell noways, can you?"

She took my feeble smile for agreement that you sure can't tell noways, and laughed heartily, slapping a swelling under the blankets that was presumably her thigh. Her laugh was of a size to match her body; it boomed and bounced through the room until the pictures on the walls quivered.

Grant and I were so relieved at finding her in good spirits and not in much pain that we began to giggle, too; and a moment later the three of us were laughing uproariously at nothing, while Eugene stared at us with wide, solemn eyes.

Mrs. Watkins was the first to regain control of herself.

"I'll bust a gut if I don't quit laughin'! Ain't it about time for the doc?" she asked, dabbing at her moist eyes with a handkerchief she took from under the pillow.

"Yes," I said. "He lives only about a mile and a half away. He'll be here any minute."

"I wouldn't care," she said, "On'y I have my kids pretty sudden. It'll be that way for you too, honey, after you've had eleven, like me."

I couldn't think of an appropriate reply to that one. Grant looked at his watch anxiously, shook it and held it to his ear.

"Eleven!" I exclaimed after a moment. "You've had twelve, haven't you? At least that's what Eugene--"

"Sure, ma, you know, there's Ruthie, and Lyon, and Ernest, and--"

"Well, I guess I know my own kids' names!" she interrupted. "Yeah, that's right, twelve. So many I can't remember noways! My husband don't git home very often, but he sure gits home often enough! I musta forgot about the littlest one. Seems like I ain't got used to havin' her yit."

I couldn't keep my eyes off Mrs. Watkins' large, flapping red tongue when she talked. The crease down the center of it seemed to separate two smooth pieces of raw meat.

Suddenly her teeth clamped down on her lip again and she turned her face away from us, moaning.

I looked at Grant. He looked at his watch again. We were still standing, stiff and uneasy, beside the bed.

When Mrs. Watkins' pain had ebbed, she put one hand into her mouth, took out her false teeth, and stared at them.

Grant and I stared at them too, fascinated. They were even and pretty, a fragile pink-and-white toy in her big, roughened hands.

"Seems like it makes me feel better to look at 'em," she confessed. "Makes it so I ain't so lonesome for Rodney. That's my hubby. He gave me these teeth, for our tenth weddin' anniversary. I was gonna get some cheap old ugly things, but he said no, the best wasn't none too good for his girl, and so he bought 'em for me. They're the--the nicest thing I ever had in my life!"

Tears were pouring out of Mrs. Watkins' lovely dark eyes, streaming over the flushed, coarse skin of her cheeks. "Cripes, I wisht Rodney was here!" she sobbed.

"I'd settle for Doctor Adams," Grant said. He glanced again at his watch. "'He should be here by now. I wonder if his car could have broken down?"

"Maybe--maybe you should go look for him," I said hesitantly.

"I think I will." Grant moved toward the door. "I'll call his home first, and if he's been gone awhile I'll start out looking for him."

Mrs. Watkins replaced her teeth, wiped her eyes, and beamed at me.

"I'm awful moody, an awful sentimental," she admitted.

Eugene edged to the door behind Grant.

"I'm gonna go with him, ma. 'Bye, ma'am."

"The kid's gittin' scared," Mrs. Watkins remarked, chuckling, when the door had closed behind them. "So's your hubby. Men are all alike, ain't they? Pantywaists, when you git right down to it. Pantywaists!" Her great booming laugh filled the cabin, while I tittered politely and wondered where she got the idea that men had exclusive rights to the term. My legs felt as though they were made of jello that hadn't quite set, and my hands were useless, quivering hunks of ice.

"How long do you think it will be," I began; "I mean, you've had so many, maybe you can almost tell..."

"How soon I'm gonna have the kid? Cripes, it ain't gonna be long, honey, I can tell you that! Wouldn't it be a fit if I had it before the doc come?"

I collapsed onto a chair.

Mrs. Watkins looked at me sympathetically, and clucked her huge red, wet tongue. Her tangled grey hair formed a rough halo around her face.

"Don't you worry none, honey," she comforted. "The doc'll git here all right."

Then she had another pain.

Watching her, I thought I had never felt so alone in my life--dreadfully alone, although there was one human being in the room with me and strong indications that there would very soon be another.

I began to review the pitifully little I knew about officiating at births--just in case. First, you had to be sure the baby cried, so it could start breathing properly. Second, you had to tie its umbilical cord. That was as much as I knew.

I wiped my forehead and glanced at Mrs. Watkins. She was gazing at me now, her dark eyes full of compassion. I had a feeling that if a stove and a pan had been handy, she would have climbed out of bed to make me some hot tea.

For her benefit, I summoned what I hoped would pass for a brave smile. "I'll be right back," I said. "I'll just get some string and--can you think of anything else I might need?"

"You look like you might need a good stiff snort, honey!" Her merriment thundered behind me as I slipped out to the linen closet.

On the bottom shelf of the linen closet was a pile of string, salvaged for months past from neatly wrapped and tied packages of clean laundry. I gathered great handfuls of the string, thrusting it into the curve of my arm. Then I happened to notice the heavy, folded rubber sheet that we lend to customers with small children. That, I reasoned, might come in handy.

A large round head appeared in the doorway of the garage, announcing itself with a cough. "You the lady that rents cabins? I want a cabin. How about renting me a cabin?"

"Not now!" I snapped. "I'm busy! Can't you see I'm having a baby?"

After the head had disappeared I surveyed the linen closet distractedly, wondering what else I should take. There were stacks and stacks of snowy sheets, pillow slips, towels, bath mats and wash cloths. There was the untidy pile of tooth brushes, pajama tops, slippers, hot water bottles, blouses, and odds and ends that customers had left and failed to come back for. There were extra blankets, pillows, boxes of toilet paper and soap, coat hangers and water pitchers. None of it seemed especially appropriate for the occasion.

I went back into cabin 3. I threw the string onto a chair and held up the rubber sheet, not knowing how to suggest, in a delicate way, that it might be wise to put it on her bed.

She got the idea immediately. She replaced her false teeth, from which she had been deriving solace again, and said, "I'm glad you thoughta that, honey. I don't wanna cause you no more trouble than I got to."

She heaved up her mountainous body while I slipped the rubber sheet under and adjusted it so that it would be smooth and comfortable for her to lie on.

A horrified expression shot over her face. "Cnpes! I hadnt ought to've pushed myself up like that. I'm afraid we're in for it now. I--oh, cripes!"

My heart pounded in my throat as I realized that I was about to become a midwife, whether I wanted to or not.

"Oh, wait!" I pleaded. "Please wait! The doctor will be here in just a few minutes."

"Honey," she gasped, "I can't wait. You oughta know that. Cripes, I wisht Rodney was here! That man ain't never around when I want him, only after the kids is born, and then all he does is git me that way again!"

"Can you wait just one minute?" I beseeched. "I'll get my medical book--I didn't think of it till just now--please, oh, please wait!"

I staggered out the door and along the sidewalk until I reached our door. I threw myself into the living room, tore open the door of the bookcase, and snatched out our heavy, important looking medical book.

I was starting back toward cabin 3 when I heard the anguished shriek of a very young human being. I froze in horror.

"Already?" I must have said it out loud because David, who had appeared from nowhere, said, "Huh? You better take care of Donna, Mama. She's sure crying--don't you hear her?"

"Oh, is that Donna?" I was so relieved I could have kissed him. I hurried into the children's bedroom, David jabbering about something loudly and excitedly behind me.

Donna was holding up one small fat hand. "Donna hurta finger!" she wailed. "Mama kiss it."

Apparently she had hit her finger with one of the blocks she was stacking into piles. David was still talking excitedly.

"Oh, be quiet!" I said. "Whatever it is you're talking about, it can wait. I'm very, very busy. Now hush and go play."

I kissed Donna's upraised finger and, turning to leave again, noticed that she had been stacking more than just blocks. Her soft, stuffed dolls and teddy bears formed the base of a pyramid of toys that culminated, two feet up, in her little rocking chair.

I charged back to cabin 3, clutching the heavy medical book.

As I opened the door Mrs. Watkins shoved her teeth back into her mouth. "Did the doc git here?" she gasped.

"No!" I snapped. "Now just don't be so impatient. I've got this medical book. We'll get along without the doctor." I was unreasonably angry at her.

I snapped on the light and opened the book at random. I tried to concentrate on the print that swam and bounced before my eyes.

Mrs. Watkins was breathing hard, and grunting spasmodically. I decided to read aloud, to keep Mrs. Watkins' mind off her troubles and to reassure her that I was capable and efficient, that I was doing something, that I wasn't just sitting idly by.

A few of the words finally detached themselves from the swirling pages. "Whenever material from the bile, called bilirubin, gets into the bloodstream, it is followed by a yellowish discoloration of the skin." Maybe, I thought, there was some bilirubin loose in my blood right now. Goodness knows I felt bad enough for there to be quarts of it coursing around through my veins. And since yellow symbolizes cowardice and fear, what could be more appropriate than for

my skin to take on a virulent shade of that color?

Mrs. Watkins grunted, and caught her breath. "There ain't no use worryin' about anything like that now, honey," she panted.

She gave a longer, sustained grunt, and then she began to laugh weakly. "There ain't no use worryin' about anything. It's all over, honey."

"Over!" I threw the book onto the floor.

Mrs. Watkins pulled back the blanket, uncovering herself. For the next few minutes I was a very reasonable facsimile of a whirling dervish.

There was a tiny, obscenely red and gooey creature, howling till I thought my ear drums would break. Fighting to think in spite of the noise and Mrs. Watkins' uncontrollable laughter, I clung to the two things I could salvage out of the chaos that was my mind. The baby's umbilical cord must be tied and the baby must be made to cry so that he would start to breathe.

Well, there was no use in worrying about his breathing. His lusty howls were shredding the air all around us. That left only one urgent task--the tying of the umbilical cord. Throwing fastidiousness and delicacy to the winds, I seized the heap of string and tackled the job.

By the time I had finished, the baby was literally swathed in string, but his umbilical cord was tied. I wasn't exactly sure why a new baby's cord must be tied, but in order to be certain that I had accomplished whatever purpose the ritual serves, I had tied it in four separate places.

Just as I was washing my shaking hands in the bathroom, David burst into the cabin.

"Mama! A customer's waiting for you. And Donna's all bloody. I turned on the light and she's all bloody."

"I'll be right back," I told Mrs. Watkins, rushing through the door.

Judging by the wreckage and her bleeding upper lip, Donna must have tried to sit in the chair that was perched on top of the pyramid of her toys.

"Donna hurta mouf!" she wailed, when she saw me. I picked her up out of the mess and tucked her under my arm, heading for the bathroom to wash her lip. I glanced into the office on the way. A young man with a pale, quivering mustache was standing there. His expression stated plainly that he had been standing there for some time.

I was afraid I'd begin to gibber if I tried to explain the delay to him, so I waved my free hand at him in a ghoulish attempt at cheerfulness.

"Let's wash Donna's lip," I suggested, when we were in the bathroom. Donna sent up an immediate howl of protest, and I applied psychology--although I was tempted to apply something less abstract and more painful.

"Oh, yes," I crooned, "we must wash Donna's lip, and her hands, and her feet."

"Wash Donna's feet?" she repeated, her round blue eyes interested behind their veil of untidy wisps of brown hair.

I nodded, looking more closely at her lip. I decided the cut wasn't very serious. It had bled a lot, but it wasn't bleeding now. I'd wait on the impatient young man and get him out of the way before I took the time to wash her lip.

I left Donna in the bathroom and hurried back to confront the quivering mustache.

The prim, thin-lipped mouth beneath the mustache was opening to speak, when David hurtled into the office and clutched my dress.

"Mama!" he yelled. "She's having another baby!"

"Twins?" I shrieked. "Oh, dear, what'll we do?"

The mustache was twitching with shock now. "You'd better rent a cabin somewhere else," I said. "I'm--" I paused. What was that splashing noise?

I deserted the mustache and ran into the bathroom. "Donna washing hands and feet," Donna explained. She was standing in the toilet.

I looked at her dumbly, too confused to be able to decide whether to take care of her or to rush out and get to work on the second baby's umbilical cord.

David, who had disappeared, came excitedly up to me again. "I was just out there again," he cried, "and now she's got another one! And this newest one is solid black!"

I pulled Donna out of the toilet. Then I lowered the seat cover and sat down heavily.

"Black?" I repeated in a whisper. My lips felt dry, and my head was throbbing. "Oh, no, it couldn't be black. You must be mistaken."

"Nope, it's black, all right. And you should see the second one--all white, with black legs and ears! Well, I'm going back to see if she has any more. Gee, won't Miss Nestlebert be surprised when we tell her the cat she gave me turned into four cats?"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

AN AMBULANCE WAS to take Mrs. Watkins to the hospital in Loma Linda, twenty miles away. A few phone calls put in by the doctor at Mrs. Watkins' request had ascertained that Eugene's "Gramma in Frisco" would come the following day to get him and the car, and that arrangements could be made for the boy to stay at the hospital with his mother this first night.

The ambulance would arrive in about an hour. In the meantime, Mrs. Watkins and the baby were sleeping, the doctor had gone home, and Grant and I were sitting on the davenport.

"Aren't you proud of me?" I asked, for the twentieth time. "But what delayed you so?"

"Dr. Adams' car broke down, when he was about a block from his home. He was working on it when I got there. He quick got into my car and we were halfway here when we ran out of gas. We weren't near any service station, so I had to walk about a quarter of a mile to get gas."

"If he had just started out walking from his house it wouldn't have taken him any longer to get here," I remarked.

I picked up the medical book, which somehow had found its way from cabin 3 to our living room floor, and put it into the bookcase.

"I never did get to the part in there about how to deliver babies," I observed. "I must look it up sometime."

When David and Donna were in bed I went back to cabin 3 and peeked in the door. Mrs. Watkins and the baby were both awake now; they lay against the white pillow regarding me with big, beautiful, identical pairs of dark eyes. Eugene was sitting stiffly on a chair.

"Cripes, honey!" Mrs. Watkins exclaimed, motioning me into the cabin. "Ain't it a fit, me havin' the kid in a motel! Wait'll I tell Rodney, he'll bust a gut laughin'! An' look at the kid. Ain't he a smart one? Wouldn't you swear he was lookin' right at you?"

Her huge arm curled protectively around the red, wrinkled thing beside her.

"Cripes, I think the whole thing hurt you worse'n it did me!" she exclaimed, as I sat down in a chair beside her bed. "But you sure did great, honey, and I wanna thank you."

I watched her big, moist tongue flapping as she talked. Her body, under the blankets, was almost as mountainous as it had been before.

"What are you going to name the baby?" I asked.

"Honey, I just been lyin' here thinkin' about that. His middle name is gonna be Moonrise. Yessir, Somethin' Moonrise Watkins. That's the least I can do to show how much I appreciate what you done."

"Well . . . that's very sweet of you," I said. "It really isn't necessary, but if you really want to--"

"Oh, I wanna, all right; An' I'm gonna, honey, so just forget all about it. I can't figure out what I oughta give the kid for his first name, though."

Mrs. Watkins withdrew her teeth and stared at them dreamily.

"Why not name him Rodney?" I suggested. "Oh--no, you've probably already got one named for your husband."

Mrs. Watkins jammed her teeth back into her mouth excitedly. "Cripes, no, I never thought of it." Her sudden laughter shook the bed, and I turned my head slightly so that it wouldn't hurt my ears. "I bet that's what he's been gettin' at all these years--he wanted a kid named after him, but he wanted me to do it without him suggestin' it! He ain't never said nothin', but I'll bet that's it! He's been around plenty an' he coulda been more careful if he didn't want more kids, but we just kept on havin' em! Well, Cripes, this'n'll be Rodney, and then maybe I can quit havin' 'em an' rest for awhile!"

My last glimpse of Mrs. Watkins was twenty minutes later, when two husky, white-clothed young men were hoisting her bulk, on a stretcher, into the ambulance.

"Lots of luck with Rodney Moonrise!" I called, watching Eugene clamber awkwardly in beside her stretcher.

Her dark eyes flashed. "Thanks, honey, thanks so much for everything! I hope I didn' scare you too bad!" She, and the stretcher, shook with thunderous laughter. When the doors of the ambulance clicked shut she was waving her teeth at me in a cheery gesture of farewell.

Grant and I seldom got away from the motel together. But toward the end of March we put the dependable Mrs. Clark in charge of the motel and the children, and took an overnight trip to Los Angeles. A group of our friends were going grumon hunting, and it sounded very appealing.

Grunions are a particularly stupid kind of fish that run for a few nights in the full of the moon during certain months. They swarm up in the surf, coming so close to the beach that a lot of them get stranded on the sand when the wave they came in recedes. They come near to the beach to lay their eggs, which has always seemed rather foolish to me, since years of sad experience should have taught them that a bunch of grunion-happy human beings will be waiting to catch them.

On our way back to Banning the next morning, through Riverside and Colton, we came through miles of highway lined solidly with big, round, sturdy orange trees. The trees were white with bloom; the long stretches of highway were banked solid with fragrant walls of orange blossoms. As we came into Banning there were little boys stationed at intervals of three hundred feet along the side of the highway, selling bouquets of immense white and purple lilacs, and brilliant California poppies.

After a brief and beautiful spring, while it was still spring everywhere else, suddenly in Banning summer had begun again. When I stood out at the clotheslines behind the cabins hanging up clothes, the dried wild grain and weeds in the field whispered and rustled in the strong, persistent wind. The mornings and evenings, before and after the midday assault of the sun, were as lovely as only mornings and evenings on the desert can be. I loved standing, after dark, leaning outside against the corner of the office nearest the highway, where I could see in all directions. The warm, sweet wind blew off the desert, playful, never ceasing. The neon motel and cafe signs, some blinking and some glowing steadily, studded the night with a glittering and colorful beauty, making the whole effect that of an enormous big-city theater marquee. Trucks thundered by, outlined with red lights that were like jewels, and always there were the pairs of bright flashing eyes gliding steadily along the highway from east and west.

The streaks of snow remaining on Mt. San Jacinto and Mt. San Gorgonio were putting up a losing battle with the power-drunk sun. The black widow spiders, after their winter disappearance, were beginning to show their shiny black bodies here and there again, and the newspaper carried warnings that there were rattlesnakes in the fields. California poppies and brilliant wild flowers were still spreading themselves through the fields and the desert itself, and the cacti proudly showed their rare blooms--orchid-like, exotic flowers. All the orchards were at a height of thick green splendor.

The desert area lost its appeal as warmer weather set in, and business began a gradual decline.

Even on a dull night, though, a stranger to the vicinity might have thought traffic heavy enough to justify us in hoping to fill up; what a stranger wouldn't know would be that every night, every motel owner must take a little jaunt in the car from one end of town to the other, inspecting all the signs to see if any have their "no" uncovered; straining to see into the garages, in order to know how many customers the motel in question has hooked. The parade of motel owners alone, if they all happen to go on their tours of inspection about the same time, is enough to make the highway look busy.

Grant is one of those who can't rest until he has made his nightly tour of the town's motels. And he calls me curious!

We didn't try so hard to spot "quickies" when summer approached, except on weekends, because we were sure to have one or two vacancies anyway. During the winter, Grant had made a regular practice of setting the alarm for about three a.m., and getting up to see if any of our customers had checked out. Whenever there were vacant cabins he cleaned them up, turned on the sign, and had the cabins rented again within half an hour.

The extra sleep he got by not having to get up in the middle of the night to clean and reread cabins was canceled by the fact we could no longer go to bed at nine or ten with the "no vacancy" sign on. As long as our sign proclaimed that we had a vacancy, the doorbell might ring at any hour of the night. Grant had to renew his old custom of spreading his clothes at intervals between the bed and the outer office door, so that he could pull them on as he hopped toward the office when the bell rang.

During the winter, when we were turning away twenty or thirty cars a day, we had often commented that it was too bad there was no way of preserving some of this surplus for the lean

summer months ahead. My pet idea had been to put all the extra winter applicants for cabins into a gigantic refrigerator, thus preserving them on ice until we were ready to use them. Now that we were having vacancies again, we could open the door of the huge refrigerator each day, take out the desired number of customers, and fill our cabins up.

Grant wasn't amused by such whimsy, though. To him, life was real, life was earnest; and the fact that we still owed forty-five thousand dollars on the motel, payable at seven hundred dollars a month, customers or no customers, might have had something to do with it.

I refused to do any more worrying. We had paid off all that we had borrowed to make the down payment on the place, and in the lush winter months we had saved enough to carry us through till the next winter if we didn't take in another cent until then. And business now was bad only by comparison to winter's business; actually, if we took in every month of the year what our present monthly average was, we'd be paying off the mortgage rapidly and having money to spare.

"Air conditioning . . . that's the answer," Grant said one night as I was getting into bed. He sat down on the foot of the bed, drumming his fingers against his knee. He was eating a thick sandwich, and I delicately looked away from the conglomeration of its ingredients.

"The answer to what?" I asked.

"Business. Not one motel in Banning has air conditioning."

"They don't need it. That perpetual wind keeps the place cooled off. 'Air-conditioned by Nature.' That would be a good slogan for one of your advertising signs, wouldn't it?"

"Uh," he said absently. "Mm--hmm. What's the first thing people think of when they get in off the hot desert?"

"A glass of beer?" I asked drowsily

"Of course not! A cool place to sleep."

"Well, that's just what Banning's got."

"Sure it has! But they don't know it. They take it for granted the nights in Banning are just as hot as nights on the desert. They look for 'air conditioning' signs, and they don't see one. We don't need air conditioning, but people don't realize it. If we'd get air conditioning once, and a big neon sign to let them know we've got it, they'd come pouring in here all summer long."

With business slowing down, we resumed our old practice of renting doubles as singles whenever it was necessary. If, after all our singles were gone, a couple appeared who wanted a single, we locked the back door of one of the doubles (so they wouldn't think they were getting twin beds for the price of a single, and use both beds!) and rented them the front room as a single. If it were a man alone, however, we didn't bother locking off the back room, as there wasn't much danger that one man would occupy more than one bed. Once, however, we got fooled; after renting a double cabin to a man alone, we found in the morning that both beds had been slept in. We never were able to decide which was more likely--that he had gotten up in the night to go to the bathroom and, becoming confused, had returned to the wrong bed; or that he was an exceptionally delicate and finicky person whose esthetic senses demanded a change of linen during the night.

We began getting "day sleepers" again--people who traveled the desert by night, to avoid the intense heat, and came into the motel at dawn or before to sleep in the daytime. We couldn't help laughing to ourselves whenever such customers had small children in the car. We knew, even if it hadn't occurred to them yet, that their children had been dozing in the car all night, and would be refreshed and ready to greet the new day with the leaps, yells, and fights that distinguish children from the young of any other species. Any sleeping the adults might accomplish during the daylight hours would be purely coincidental.

The bigger and healthier and noiser our own children grew, the more cramped and tiny our living quarters seemed. Expansion, though, appeared to be almost impossible. To expand in a northward direction, by cutting a door in the wall of our living room that would lead into cabin two, would be the simplest method of adding two rooms, but it would also be very expensive, chopping down our income by about one thirteenth. To expand south, to the front, would be illegal. All the buildings for about half a mile on each side of us were set back sixty feet from the highway, and none were permitted to be built closer to the highway. To go west would be to protrude into the wide, inviting driveway that was supposed to lure customers in, and would destroy the symmetry of the motel. To go east, toward Featherbren's motel, would be futile, since our land extended only four feet past the sides of the buildings. "There are just two directions left," Grant said. "Down, and up. A cellar, or a second story."

A second story seemed to be our best bet, but it would be expensive to add a couple of rooms upstairs, and it might necessitate strengthening the present ceiling and roof in order to make them support the burden. We decided to file the idea away in our minds for future consideration.

We alleviated the space situation to some extent, temporarily at least, by getting bunk beds for the children and moving our bed into their room. That left the living room as a living room, not a combination playroom, living room and bedroom. The bunk beds were along one wall and our bed was along the opposite wall, with the foot of it near the east window that overlooked Featherbren's new lawn and his row of oleanders. Between his cherished, thrice-daily watered lawn and our window was the four foot expanse of land that the building code demanded should be left at the sides of the land when the buildings were constructed.

Grant finally got around to carrying out a plan we had made whereby Donna wouldn't be underfoot all the time, and whereby she could go outside in the sunshine without constant supervision. He fenced the whole four foot strip, from under the bedroom window clear along the cabins from number 2 to 6. Out in the field behind the cabins, he let the four foot strip widen into a fenced yard about twenty feet square. Later, when Donna was big enough to need a larger yard, but not yet big enough to be trusted to run around loose, he would fence our entire field behind the cabins for the children to play in.

The biggest complication now, of course, was that there was no back door through which Donna could go into her four-foot runway. Grant could have taken out the east window and substituted a door for it, but it would have been a lot of work and expense.

"She can climb up on the foot of our bed," I suggested, "and then---"

"And then what? Jump out the window?"

Grant has a low opinion, not only of my capability, but also, I'm afraid, of my common sense. I suppose in a way his attitude is justified: he is so capable, and his ideas are so good, that my feeble little brain children seem to him very poor by contrast. However, this time I felt that I had a good idea, and I elaborated upon it, in spite of the sense of helpless inferiority he always inspires in me.

"Well, there could be boxes outside for her to climb onto," I said. "You know, a big box on the bottom, with its closed, solid side up; another smaller box sitting right in the middle of it. You know, sort of steps."

They were "sort of" steps when Grant got through with them, all right. He followed my basic idea, nailing and pounding out there for about an hour, and finally he called me to look out the window at the finished product.

When I looked out the window it wasn't wooden boxes, nailed firmly together into the shape of a short stairway, that I saw; I saw blessed relief from the constant, demanding presence of a sweet little tyrant who was happy only so long as I was giving her my full attention.

"It's absolutely beautiful," I said fervently.

Donna learned very quickly to navigate on her new steps. For the first few days she came in the window and went out, over and over again, gurgling with glee at the unconventionality of this means of entrance and exit. After the novelty of that had worn off, she began making daring excursions along the entire length of the four foot strip, which Grant had cleared of weeds and covered with gravel. David's kittens usually scampered along with her.

My principal worry, after she had reached the point where she was playing out in her little yard for hours daily, was that she would see a black widow outside and pick it up. I tried to teach her to be afraid of all insects, but somehow the idea became twisted in her mind.

"Bug scarda Donna!" she would exclaim. "Bug see Donna, bug run way!" And she would rush ferociously at whatever bug had, by its appearance, inspired her remarks. Usually the insects could escape her small clumsy fingers, but occasionally she caught an unwary slug or ladybug.

I thought of warning her, "Bug might bite Donna," but it occurred to me that she might get that warning, too, twisted.

Anyway, the one crowning virtue of black widows is that they're as much afraid of people as people are of them; and I didn't think there was much danger that she'd ever be able to catch one. A glimpse of a child with a face apparently made of brown hair should have been enough to send any bug scurrying for cover, I thought. Donna's hair, although it was growing longer and thicker rapidly, was still too fine and soft to hold a bobby pin, or to submit itself to any kind of confinement that I had yet been able to discover. One day, though, I found that the front part of her hair--the part that screened her eyes from sight most of the time, the part that I had refused to trim into neat bangs--was long enough to braid. Since then she has had a prim little pigtail right in the middle of her forehead--drawn back and secured at the top of her head with a pert bow. She looks very chic now, and her nickname--Little Chief Hair-in-the-Face--has been tucked away into our mental chest of souvenirs.

Grant decided that a big window in the front of the office would do a lot to attract business. The south wall, facing the highway, was solid, and the occupants of cars coming from the east couldn't see the light inside the office until they had gone a little past, where they could see the window in the west wall above the driveway. For the daylight and early evening hours the

proposed window wouldn't have much value, but Grant figured that the extra nighttime business it would bring would pay for it in a week's time. Around midnight or later, travelers hesitated to disturb motel owners unless they could see that they were up anyway. The advantage of a window would be that Grant would be able to lure customers in by sitting comfortably in the office reading a paper, instead of having to run outside whenever a slow car approached, so that its occupants would be sure to see him. One summer of that had been enough for him, and I knew exactly how he felt. The idea of a huge window facing the highway appealed to me, too; never again would I have to perch on top of a typewriter case set precariously on a chair, while with one eye I watched out the kitchen window for slow cars from the east, and with the other eye tried to read.

Grant hired a man to cut away the wall and put in the window. He helped the man and watched every move he made, and if ever again in the course of Grant's life it becomes necessary for a window to be installed in a building that belongs to him, I know that he will install it deftly, correctly, and without assistance.

It was like stepping straight from a one-room prison on a desert island, to the geographical center of Times Square. I had never realized how much had been going on, or that we had been missing so much. When the window was finished, we could stand at the office desk and see life whirling by us on wheels; we could see life pulsing and throbbing in the accidents, quarrels, and petty encounters that were an inevitable part of a fast highway neighborhood; we could see life a trifle in its cups, staggering in and out of the bar across the street. We could see busses, cars, motorcycles, trains (on the track parallel with the highway, a block away) trucks, highway maintenance equipment, bicycles, and an occasional weird departure from conventional methods of transportation such as a covered wagon drawn by burros. Horseback riders cantered or galloped past daily, and it was a common, pleasantly exhilarating thing to see the great planes drifting down toward the airport, outlined against the sky and then silhouetted against the crowding mountains.

Even from the living room we could get a clear view of what we had, except when we were outside, been missing. I had never realized how many east-bound cars that had exceeded the speed limit going through town, were stopped almost directly in front of the bar, or how many minor fights originated in the bar and continued after the participants were outside. Major fights, of course, we would have gone out to see anyway, as they would have been announced by the customary loud threats and insults. But now we were able to enjoy the pantomime of these quieter fights also, which we would have missed entirely if the office window hadn't been there. It was like a movie, where the spectator is safe and comfortable as he watches gunfire and robbery or people struggling against blinding snow. In the office, we were close enough to get a good view of what was going on, but far enough away to avoid any danger of connecting with a poorly aimed left. It was better than a movie in one sense: it was real, and the angry expressions on the faces of the performers weren't assumed for the sake of a camera. But there was one thing which even the lowliest B movie has that I missed--explanatory dialogue. It was maddening to watch the quarrelers gesticulate and utter tantalizingly elusive sentences which were, even when I opened the door of the office in hope of eavesdropping, swallowed up in the roar of traffic.

"Why don't you shout?" I wanted to prod them. "If you're really mad, then yell, so you can hear each other--and so I can hear you, too!"

I guess I ought to take up lip reading.

Business did make a noticeable upswing after the window was installed. It wasn't much of an inconvenience for one of us to be in the office, reading or writing, until quite late every night, and the very visible presence of either of us seemed to act as a magnet to undecided drivers.

Grant's idea factory, however, was still producing; it was never slowed down by success. "Why don't we get a big picture of a man," he suggested, "life size, and hang it behind the office desk once? People will see it from the highway, and I'll bet a horned toad they'll think it's a real man. We could have a little calendar at the bottom, as an excuse for hanging it there. After the people ring the bell and we get up and let them inside the office, they'll see their mistake--but by that time we'll have them, so it won't matter."

He mulled over that a while, grinning, and then came up with something even better.

"Grandma's dress form!" he exclaimed. "Have her quick send it to us, and we'll put some kind of a head or hat on top of it and stand it behind the office desk." (Grandma's dress form has been through so much already that a little more wouldn't hurt it. Every few weeks its bolts and screws are loosened and Grant hammers it from a size forty down to a size twelve--or vice versa--depending on whether it's Grandma or I who wants to make a dress.)

"I know what we could do that would be a lot less trouble," I said. "Every night late, when all the motel owners around here are asleep, why not sneak out and take the covers off the "no" on each of their signs? Then this will be apparently the only motel that has a vacancy, and all the cars will come here. Then, after we have filled up, you can sneak out again and put the covers back on the signs, so that in the morning the other owners won't know they have been tampered with."

During the winter rush season, whenever we invited friends from Los Angeles to stay overnight at our motel, we always stipulated that they must come on a Sunday night, since even during the height of the busiest season there were almost always vacancies on Sunday nights. For most of our friends it was difficult or impossible to be away from home over Sunday night, since work, school, and the regular routine of living must begin again on Monday morning. As a result, very few of our personal friends had been to see us, except the several who came out the first summer. Now, though, with at least one vacancy every night except Saturday, we let them know that we would be "at home" any night except Saturday, and that they could have the use of a spotless, modern, new and well-furnished cabin--on the house! On an average of one couple or one family per week, our friends began making the pleasant, just-far-enough trip out to see us. This was very nice, but I couldn't pretend that it lifted the monotony or relieved the boredom, because around a motel there isn't any of either.

For months I had been resisting the mercenary advances of men who wanted to install coin-operated radios in our cabins. Grant and I had agreed that the commercial, cheapening effect of such radios would not be justified by the small revenue they would bring in.

One day, though, one of the salesmen whom I had turned away tackled Grant while I was downtown. For all his caginess and shrewdness, Grant becomes as limp and compliant as gelatin under the pressure of a good sales talk. And this man, a short, wiry creature with very intriguing mannerisms, was hard to ignore.

When I drove into the driveway the radio man was installing the last radio. He lifted his cap to me and wiggled his ears mockingly as I stalked past the cabin where he was working and into the house.

I sat down, seething, and mentally prepared some blistering hot coals to rake Grant over.

Having the radios installed turned out to be a pretty good idea, though. Our customers seemed to be pleased with the convenience of them, in spite of the fact that reception is poor in Banning because of the surrounding mountains.

The radios were attractive, with a walnut finish that blended with the maple furniture in the cabins. Each radio had a slot in the top where the noise-hungry customer could put his quarter for one hour of music, drama, comedy, quiz program, news or soap opera. Every two weeks the owner of the machines would come around with his keys, take off the backs of the radios, and unlock the coin boxes inside. Three fourths of the money he would keep; twenty-five per cent of it--"enough to pay mosta yer utilities"--would be ours.

As it turned out, our share of the take--about twenty dollars a month--was barely enough to pay for one utility, the electricity. But that, as Grant pointed out, with more spirit of self-defense than originality, was something.

And the customers did like having the radios in their cabins. We always gave them their change in quarters now instead of in fifty-cent pieces, so that if they wanted to play the radios they'd have the proper coins. And often a customer would come to the office and ask us to give him quarters in exchange for a fifty-cent piece or a dollar.

Our own little radio, that we had been renting out for fifty cents a night, was no longer in demand. And sometimes I pointed out acidly to Grant that eight separate quarters, for eight full hours of playing time, had to be dropped into the slots of the coin-operated radios before we'd make as much as by renting our own radio once.

The man who installed the radios in our cabins and came every other week to get the money out of them, became simply "the radio man" to us. I suppose he had a name, but if he did, I never discovered what it was.

"That radio man's the funniest guy I ever saw," Grant remarked, after the first time he had come to get his money. "He points his finger at you, with his thumb up in the air; then he quick bends his thumb, and the knuckle cracks, and it's just as if he's shooting at you."

"I know," I said. "He did that to me several times, to emphasize his arguments when he was first trying to make me let him install the radios. But," I added pointedly, "I didn't fall for it."

"And," Grant hurried on, "did you notice there are hinges tattooed on the insides of his elbows?"

"Mm-hm. I wouldn't be surprised if he had hinges tattooed on the backs of his knees, too. He's just the type."

The small cement block building that was being erected across the highway from us, west of the bar and the Blue Bonnet motel, turned out to be a bakery. "Purtel and Purstel" announced their big neon sign. "Doughnuts, pies, and pastry."

Grant went over to buy a pie the first day they opened. After talking to the Purstel brothers an hour--his absolute minimum for a conversation--he came back and reported that they had a nice place, that they were old men with beards, and that he had promised them that I would come

over soon and meet them.

We demolished the pie at dinner time, and after I had washed the dishes I decided to return the tin.

The front part of the bakery was clean and delicious-smelling. One of the Purtel brothers was putting things away, getting ready to close for the night. When I introduced myself he dashed away to call his brother, who was in the rear part of the building.

The brothers confronted me together then, the first beaming with friendliness and a tail-wagging anxiety to please, the second smiling in the manner of a movie actor meeting the president of one of his fan clubs. They were almost identical in appearance, and looked as though they had been cut off a cough drop box.

There was a long, uncomfortable pause then, while we all tried to think of appropriate remarks. I felt an insane impulse to murmur, "What nice big beards you have," and an equally insane fear that they would reply "All the better to tickle you with, my dear."

At last I said lamely, "Well, I brought your pie tin back."

"But I must introduce you!" exclaimed the first brother, clapping his hands together with energy. "This here is the wife of the nice young man who stopped in and talked to us for awhile this afternoon. We are the Purtel brothers."

He leaped toward a chair, sat on it and bounded up. He made wild gestures of apology and self-reproach and indicated that I should sit on the chair.

The second brother said languidly, "His name is Purtel, if he so chooses. But my name is Purtel. Please remember that." Mr. Purtel laughed heartily, wrinkles fanning out from his eyes across his cheeks. He smacked his fist into the palm of his other hand.

"Usually it's women that change their names when they get married, but Si here changed his when he got married. Always before, he was satisfied with Purtel, but ever since he got married it's had to be Purtel. That's why our sign says "Purtel and Purtel" instead of "Purtel Brothers"--so people can pronounce it Purtel and Purtel."

"Purtel and Purtel," corrected the second brother, brushing a speck of something daintily off his shirt sleeve. He lit a cigarette, and I watched in fascination as the flame curled near his long black fire hazard.

Mr. Purtel disappeared into the rear part of the building again, but Mr. Purtel gave me a refund for the pie tin, and then asked me if I had any children.

"Yes, two," I told him. "A boy and a girl."

He reached into the show case. "Take this for the boy," he said, bringing out a huge sugary doughnut. "And this for the girl." The second gift was a luscious cream puff. My mind's eye presented me with a swift foreglimpse of Donna, her hair stuck into thick strands, her face covered by whipped cream and a blissful expression.

I told Grant that one of the brothers was nice, but that I didn't care much for the other. And until bedtime I wondered why Mr. Purtel's marriage had caused him to become dissatisfied with the name he had grown up with.

At last, just as I was getting into bed, I thought maybe I had it.

"I'll bet," I thought happily, "his wife's name is Myrtle."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

WHEN BUSINESS SLOWS down for Banning motels due to the scarcity of tourists, it naturally slows down for the service stations and highway restaurants as well. Moe, the beak-nosed owner of the cafe next door, was very annoyed because business was so seasonal, and he decided to sell his place and take his family back to Los Angeles, where the demand for restaurant meals was more the same all year around, and where it wasn't necessary to comb the want ads and employment agencies for enough help part of the time, and the rest of the time to fire perfectly good employees because there wasn't any work for them to do.

The day after Moe put up a big "For Sale by Owner" sign in front of his restaurant, he stopped in at the office, and told us the place was sold. He was holding the sign, which he had just taken down, in his thick fleshy hands.

"Sold it just like that!" he exclaimed. "Fellow stopped in an hour ago, looked it over, liked it, and gave me a check for the full down payment. Just one catch--he insists on taking over right away tonight, even though we won't put it in escrow until Monday. I said okay, I didn't want to louse up the deal over a little thing like that. So me and the wife's going on a weekend trip, and he can run the darn thing all by himself."

It was five o'clock on a Saturday afternoon then; by nine o'clock that night Moe was gone, the new owner had taken over, and big hand-made signs tacked up all over the outside of the restaurant announced: "Opening Night. Everything on the House! Come in and have fun!"

People, in flocks and beves and droves, were thronging into the place to see if the signs really meant what they said. Apparently they did, because the people who went in stayed in, and reinforcements kept pouring in behind them. Cars that were speeding along the highway stopped and spewed out occupants who only a few moments before had been intent upon faroff destinations. The habitués of the bar decided to see the fun, and the customers of all the surrounding motels, having heard rumors of the gala--and free--opening night, straggled toward the restaurant.

I straggled toward it myself, after getting the children to bed and extracting a martyred statement from Grant to the effect that nope, of course he wouldn't mind in the least if I wanted to leave him all alone and go away and have fun without him. For moral support, I joined Mr. and Mrs. D'Aura, a quarrelsome couple who were celebrating their tenth anniversary with a short vacation in Banning. They had been renting one of our cabins for three days. From their attitude toward one another, it was hard to understand why they considered an anniversary an occasion for a celebration.

They were a medium-sized, rather nondescript couple. His main claim to distinction was the fact that nine or ten long coarse black hairs grew out of the very tip of his nose; and the only things outstanding about her were that her eyes did not seem to focus correctly or in unison, and that she had extremely broad, well-padded hips.

The night they first rented the cabin, they were arguing about her figure while he signed the registration card. "I tell you I've lost ten pounds," she crackled.

"Yeah?" he asked, casting a skeptical glance over her. "Where?"

"If I knew where I lost it, it wouldn't be lost, would it?" she snapped. "At least that's what you always say when you've lost something."

He chortled while he finished filling out the registration card. "Witty, ain't she?" he asked me. Reflectively he pulled the hairs on the end of his nose while he searched his memory for his license number. "She ain't much to look at, but she's smart, and she's got a well-rounded personality." He laid the pen down and smacked her hard, in the region of her lower back. "And that ain't all she's got that's well-rounded, bless her heart!" he roared.

I wondered if she was going to let him get away with that. I should have known that, being a woman, she'd have the last public word. She did, and it was rather a subtle last word. "My attitude toward you," she said icily as they went out the door, "is that of nature toward a vacuum."

I caught up to them now as they were opening the door of the cafe.

"You're certainly developing a beautiful head of skin," Mrs. D'Aura was saying scathingly to her husband just as I joined them.

"Bless her heart, she's clever, ain't she?" Mr. D'Aura asked me as we went in.

The air inside the restaurant was heavy with smoke and loud, hilarious conversation. Every available seat in the dining room and around the shining black counter was occupied by a thirsty, voracious human being; food and beer and wine were disappearing at such alarming rates that I wondered if the new owner wasn't regretting his impulse to throw an impromptu party.

I saw him standing in the doorway that led to the kitchen, beaming and genial, slapping waitresses and guests alike in hospitable good fellowship. His stance and expression proclaimed him to be the new owner, and he seemed to be having as good a time as any of his noisy guests. His plump face was red and his small eyes were shining. He saw me staring at him, and he waved at me over the sea of guzzling heads as though we were old friends.

Two men, making vulgar noises of satisfaction, left the restaurant, vacating two rickety chairs that were near the door. Mr. and Mrs. D'Aura slipped into the empty chairs and began to quarrel in low, intense voices.

There were no other empty seats, and more people kept crowding in behind me all the time. Having satisfied my curiosity as to what was going on, I decided to leave.

As I went out I met a plump, whiskered gentleman who stepped aside for me courteously and a little unsteadily. His bright beady eyes held me with an intent regard. I wondered how many of

me he saw, and I smiled.

He bristled. "You think I'm half drunk, don't you, lady?" he charged. "Well, you're wrong, absolutely wrong." He paused, for dramatic effect. "I'm not half drunk, I'm completely drunk!"

He bent double with laughter. "I jusht had to come out here for some fresh air. The air in theresh so smoky, itsh so crowded, itsh enough to drive a drinking man to sobriety!"

Seeing that I was about to go on, he clutched the sleeve of my dress. "You know what I am?" he demanded. "I'm a walking binge!"

He called after me, "That'sh pretty good, now, isn't it? A walking binge! You remember that and maybe sometime you can say it yourself and make people think you thought it up yourshelf. Yesshir, a walking binge. Pretty good!"

There were a lot of walking binges in and around the cafe before the night was over. Some of them, in fact, could hardly stagger. The supply of beer and wine must have outlasted the supply of food.

We had two reasons, though, to be glad that the cafe had changed hands. The first and most important reason was, of course, that we would at last be rid of Moejy--although actually the obnoxious little creature spent so much of his time at the Auto Haven visiting the Bradleys, that we weren't much bothered by him. The second reason was that our business, for this one night at least, was greatly improved. A lot of travelers who had been bent on making a hundred miles or more yet before stopping for the night, decided, after relaxing and eating and drinking in the restaurant, that Banning would be as good a town as any in which to spend the night. And, since our motel was next door to the restaurant, we got most of the extra business.

Sunday the cafe was closed--no doubt because everything but the furnishings had been consumed Saturday night, and new supplies couldn't be obtained until Monday.

Monday morning it was still closed. Monday noon we saw Moe unlocking the door and going in, walking as though thirty years had been added suddenly to his heavy-set shoulders. Grant went over to talk to him, and when he came back he told me what had happened. The check for the down payment on the restaurant had bounced. The man who had given Moe the check had disappeared after the hilarious opening night. The restaurant was a shambles, with everything eatable or drinkable gone, and Moe's large stock of beer and wine completely demolished.

When Grant left, Moe was sitting at the circular counter, rubbing his bald head and completely unable to see the funny side of what had happened, trying to figure up just how many hundreds of dollars his trusting nature had cost him.

In spite of Banning's superlatively healthful climate, and her own stalwart frame, Mrs. Clark was besieged and temporarily conquered by a horde of influenza germs--or viruses, whichever they are. Although we were having a few vacancies now, the new window in the office was keeping most of our cabins occupied, and the lush, idle winter had so accustomed us to loafing that we were horrified at the idea of doing our own work, even for a week.

A pretty Mexican girl had been applying, about once a month, for work. I had her name and address on a slip of paper in the cash drawer.

"How about this Veda Gonzales?" I suggested to Grant, pulling out the slip and showing it to him.

We knew it would be a lot of trouble breaking in someone new to clean the cabins--but it wouldn't be as much trouble as cleaning them ourselves!

West of the Blue Bonnet Motel, west of the new bakery, was a bunch of little brown shacks clustered forlornly on the edge of the highway like ragged children gazing into a window bright with toys and tinsel. It was in one of these shacks that Veda lived.

I showed her what her tasks would be, and she learned readily.

The first day she came to work her brown cheeks were rouged, her dark eyes were sparkling, her lips were cherry red. Her black hair was caught back by a white ribbon, and she wore a white peasant blouse, which drooped at the shoulders and had a low neckline.

I accompanied her through the first two cabins, advising and observing--and smoothing an occasional sheet. Veda went about her work willingly and efficiently, and after a while I strolled back into the house.

I picked up my copy of "War and Peace" which I had borrowed from the library on four different occasions, without yet having had a chance to read it. This time I was up to page fourteen.

I was so accustomed to frequent interruptions that I was becoming unable to concentrate even in their absence. Donna had gone outside her window and was playing; David was in school, and Grant was gone--talking, no doubt, with some motel owner he had found who was willing to

listen to him for a while. In the unusual silence I felt my mind drifting away from Tolstoy's closely packed pages.

The wheels of a car churned the gravel, and paused while the driver got out and dropped the key into the mailbox. I got up and stood by the window, watching wistfully as the car merged with the traffic on the highway. Every morning cars pulled out, full of people on their way to excitement and joy. Well, maybe they were just on their way back to dull jobs or nagging mates, but anyway, the whole process had the tang of romance and adventure. I always felt a little prick of envy, watching a car leave--a prick heightened, no doubt, by the rarity of our opportunities to leave the motel.

It was a beautiful morning, clear and sunny--the kind of weather that made people stream to the beaches, avoiding the desert and Palm Springs and the Moonrise Motel. Long stretches of good weather, coming in the Spring when there could just as well be lots of bad weather, are disastrous for business. Desert motel owners are among the very few people in business, besides umbrella manufacturers and salesmen of anti-freeze mixtures, who consider good weather a tragedy.

Still standing at the window, I glanced around at the different garages. Across the driveway, there were still cars in 16 and 14; and at the end furthest from the highway, there were cars in front of two of the singles--9 and 7. Two salesmen, I recalled, had rented those cabins.

As I stood there, Veda came out of 11 with her bucket, her mop, and her basket. She headed for cabin 9. I started toward the door, although I knew there wouldn't be time to warn her of the obvious fact that that cabin was still occupied; but by the time I got to the door, she was talking to the salesman.

After a moment she went inside cabin 9, leaving her cleaning equipment outside.

I closed the door slowly, deep in thought. Could it be he just wanted her to remove his used towels, or do some minor cleaning job? Or help him pack his suitcase? Or--?

Half an hour later the salesman came in and tossed number 9 key on the desk.

"I'll remember this here place," he said, winking broadly. "This here is what I call deluxe accommodations."

I watched out the window again. Veda was cleaning cabin 8. When I thought she must be about through, I strolled out in that direction. In a few minutes she came swinging out of the cabin, tossed her basket down beside her bucket, and raised her hand to knock on the door of cabin 7.

"Just a minute," I said. "There's still someone in that cabin."

"I know there is; a man," she said, speaking with that peculiar upswing at the end of her words that is characteristic of many Mexicans. "I just thought I'd see if he ain't about ready to leave."

"Mm. And if he 'ain't' about ready--?"

She tossed her head. "Well, there ain't any law against a girl picking up a little extra money."

There was no law, either, against motel owners' cleaning up their own cabins, so for the rest of the week Grant and I went back to the old routine of mopping, dusting, stripping beds, and making them. Mrs. Clark's dark skin was a little pale when she reported for work the following Monday morning, but to us she looked positively beautiful.

Meetings of the Hotel and Motel Owners' Association of Banning took place every other week. The organization had accomplished a lot before it had been in existence long, erecting signs at strategic points along the highways, advertising in magazines and newspapers, and in general calling the attention of the public to Banning as a health resort, vacation spot, and a pleasant place to interrupt a trip for a night's pause. Grant and I attended most of the meetings together, leaving Mrs. Clark in charge of the motel and the children. One meeting night, though, when Mrs. Clark was expecting company and didn't want to leave home, I drove alone to the meeting. It was held this night at the Linda Vista Motel; and after the meeting had been opened and I had read the minutes of the previous meeting, I looked over the assembled group while a committee member made a rambling and boring report upon a related meeting he had attended. Mr. Featherbren, his tall form draped over a straight chair, caught my eye and winked at me. After a bad start and a few misunderstandings, we were now the best of friends.

I was surprised to see Mrs. Bradley huddled snugly in one of the chairs in front of the table at which Mr. Cruz, the president, and I sat. She had never appeared at any of the meetings; in fact, I had never seen her since the night of the first meeting, when she showed me the egg she said she was planning to hatch.

I learned later that when Mr. Renault of the Mountain Lodge Motel had stopped in, a little earlier than planned, at the Auto Haven to pick up Mr. Bradley, Mrs. Bradley, announcing that

her husband was out of town and that she was going to the meeting in his stead, hopped into the car. Actually, though, her husband was taking a shower, and she had seized the opportunity to leave him home while she went to the meeting.

I didn't realize at the time how it happened that she was at the meeting, but I did know that she shouldn't be. As far as I knew, I was the only one present who knew of her eccentricity, and the fact made me feel an obligation to keep anyone else from detecting anything unusual about her.

The wizened, wrinkled little creature was almost buried in layer after layer of clothing that might have first been worn by Noah's wife. A black cloth over the top of her tiny head served as a hat, and her small eyes sparkled brightly as she glanced from me to Mr. Cruz to the speaker, and back to me again.

"Come on over here beside me, come on over!" she hissed, catching my eye and motioning toward the vacant chair on one side of her. The chair she was sitting in was at least ten feet from the table where I sat, and her stage whisper was clearly audible to everyone above the long-winded, dull report that was being given.

I shook my head reprovingly at her, frowned, and feigned an intense interest in the speaker. To my horror, I heard the old lady cackling with amusement. I was relieved when she turned her attention from me, but my relief lasted only for a moment. I noticed that she was whispering to Mr. Dale, the owner of the Cherry motel, who occupied the chair next to hers. Whatever she was whispering, I knew it would be something that shouldn't be heard. I was embarrassed at attracting so much attention to myself during a meeting, but I got up, as quietly as possible, and went to Mrs. Bradley. I told her, in a low voice, that I had to leave now, and that I'd like for her to come with me.

She got up with alacrity, her dark skirts falling in heavy layers down to her ankles. Just before stepping away from her chair she turned and whispered loudly to Mr. Dale, "I didn't finish telling you about my baby. It will be born any day now--and how, it will! You must come to see it. But I have to go now and find out how it's getting along--you see, I left it home in the oven!"

Mr. Dale was aghast.

I hustled Mrs. Bradley out, into the car, and back to the Auto Haven. I knew that Mr. Cruz would finish taking the minutes of the meeting for me, or arrange for someone else to do it. Getting the old lady away from the public, with its cruel curiosity, was more important than taking minutes, anyway. It was a warm night, and after I had seen Mrs. Bradley to her door I drove back toward the Moonrise Motel. I decided not to go back to the meeting; it was too nice out. The meeting would be half over by the time I could get back, anyway, and my reappearance would be anticlimactic.

I stuck my head in the door to tell Grant I had left the meeting early, and that I was going to water the lawn now. Grant was reading, and eating a graham cracker with sliced onion on it.

I was sprinkling the front island of grass when Grant came out and got into the car, calling to me that since I was home anyway, he was going to attend the last half of the meeting. I turned the nozzle of the hose so that the water came out in a steady stream. I flopped the stream up and down idly, trying to catch in it a reflection of the neon lights.

My mind drifted to an amusingly shocking window display I had seen at the opening of a new butcher shop downtown. On the opening day crowds had stood in front of the big window, gaping at the man inside who was operating a big, complicated machine. Into one end of the machine, up a little slanting ramp, walked small dogs--and out the opposite end of the machine popped neat, tautly-stuffed sausages.

The exit for the little dogs, and the point where meat was fed into the machine to be made into stuffed sausages, was concealed behind draperies. A few of the less imaginative people in the crowd were horrified and indignant.

Laughing over my recollection of the scene, I sat down on the edge of the grass island, adjusting the nozzle again until the water came out in a fine spray of mist.

All at once, I stopped laughing. I stood up gingerly. The back of my skirt was soaked. The water from the hose, coming out in a solid stream, had formed a huge puddle right in the spot where I had chosen to sit.

Just then a car drove into the driveway, stopping in front of the office, its merciless headlights on me.

I put the hose down and walked toward the car, keeping out of the beam of the headlights. With one hand behind me, I wrung some of the water out of my skirt, in what I hoped was an inconspicuous manner.

A very young, self-conscious couple sat in the car. They were too absorbed in their own embarrassment to notice mine. I guessed instantly that they were newlyweds.

The groom, a thin, blue-eyed fellow of about twenty, cleared his throat and asked, "Have you got a--can you put up me and my wife for the night?"

"I sure can. Would you like to take a look at the cabin?" In the glow reflected from the neon signs, I could see him blushing.

"Naw, naw, it'll be all right."

He climbed out of the car, and if he hadn't been in such a fog of bliss and confusion, would probably have wondered why I backed away from his presence as though he were royalty. I preceded him, backward, into the office, and ducked behind the desk.

When the young pair had gone to their cabin, I changed my dress. Going out to turn off the hose, I saw the groom driving away, and the bride standing in the doorway waving to him rather mournfully.

"Just one, now, remember," she called after him.

It was almost midnight when there came a timid tapping at our door. Grant, who had just returned from the motel owners' meeting, was in the bathroom getting ready for bed. I pulled my robe over my pajamas and went to the door. It was the bride.

"My husband hasn't come back," she said hesitantly. "He went out for a drink, to celebrate. I don't drink so I stayed home. I--I guess maybe he had more drinks than he should have. We--we just got married, this morning. I was just wondering--you haven't seen him anywhere around, have you?"

I assured the tall, pretty girl that I hadn't seen her husband. Her soft brown eyes filled with tears.

"He always drinks a little too much and then he can't find his way around very well. I know that's what happened tonight--he had too many drinks, and then he couldn't find his way back to me!"

The girl still stood there. "I wonder ..." she said uncertainly.

"Yes?"

"Well, I've always lived with my family, and I've never spent a night alone in my life. I'm sure my husband just gave up looking for me, and rented a cabin somewhere else. I wonder--would it be asking too much--I mean, I'm really scared, back there alone. I looked outside the window toward the mountains, and it's so black and uncivilized out there. I even heard some wolves howling up there in the hills."

"Coyotes," I corrected.

"Well, that's almost as bad. Anyway, I'm not used to being alone at night. I wonder if--well, if you'd let me sleep on the floor in here with you tonight?"

When Grant came out of the bathroom I explained the situation to him, and he set up the rollaway bed in our living room for the bride to sleep on.

Toward morning I heard muffled sobbing, as she apparently held the pillow against her face to avoid making too much noise. I stirred, and she whispered, "Are you awake?"

When I whispered back that I was, she lost control of herself, and began to sob audibly.

"For months," she wailed, "I've been dreaming about my wedding night, imagining it, trying to picture how it would be, but--ooh!--I never thought it would be like this!"

In the morning the wandering groom came back to claim his bride, and the marriage probably got off to a good start in spite of that first minor catastrophe.

To avoid any possibility of Jill's becoming a dull girl, I frequently go shopping or visiting when things at the motel are well enough under control for Grant to manage without me. I don't like the idea of going places alone, but it's better than staying home night after night. When I go shopping, though, I am very glad that Grant cannot be with me. He seldom approves of the occasional frivolous purchases I make, and never makes any attempt to conceal his opinion from salespersons, customers, passersby, and whomever else it doesn't concern in the least. One time when a new little curio shop opened in Banning, I browsed happily and thoroughly through it, and finally selected a small item made of what looked like beautiful, glossy petrified wood. It was shaped like an hour glass, with mysterious strings and turrets. It was a bargain, I thought, at three dollars.

Grant didn't see it that way, though. "But what's it for?" he demanded. "What is it?"

I don't see how anyone with such a prosaic, practical nature can get much joy out of life.

I couldn't figure out, myself, what the thing was for, though, so I set it on top of the bookcase beside Mr. Hawkins' nude perfume atomizer.

"It's an ornament, of course," I told Grant haughtily.

Whenever I help out with cleaning the cabins, I have a faintly guilty feeling about being in the cabins in which someone is staying over. The presence of clothes and suitcases, the casual disarray of magazines and cosmetics make me feel as though I am entering a private dwelling in which I have no business to be. And I, like Mrs. Clark and Grant, have often thought about the precarious position we would be in if any of the stay-over guests should complain that possessions left in the cabin while they were gone had disappeared. We are more fortunate than most motel owners, in that we have a maid whose complete honesty is as stanch and unassailable a fact as the existence of the Pyramids. If a guest should tell us that something of his is missing, we never have to deal with the nagging possibility that the maid might have stolen it.

Besides the many trivial things that have been left in the cabins, there have been a few things of real value, including a wallet containing six hundred dollars (which Mrs. Clark turned in to us the instant she found it) and a silver fox coat. We are always glad, in one sense, when such valuable things are left behind; the owners, when they get them back, are so grateful and so impressed with our integrity that they will probably patronize our motel loyally for years to come. The woman who came feverishly back for the silver fox coat was so overwhelmed with gratitude that she promised Grant a job, at whatever time in the future he might need it, at her husband's sanitary belt factory. So in case we ever go broke in the motel business. Grant will be able to go right to work.

One of us accompanies the radio man--at his tactful insistence--when he goes around to take the quarters out of the coin boxes in the radios. It's a task that wastes time, but in a very enjoyable manner. He always wears his shirtsleeves so high that the hinges tattooed on the insides of his elbows are visible, and he talks continually. This time, as we made the rounds of the cabins, he was telling me about a motel in Palm Springs where he had installed some of his radios.

"Ya oughta see the way the dames run around, there in Palm Springs," he said, busily taking the back off a radio. "They wear things they call brassieres with their shorts, see, but it don't do no good. What you can't see sure ain't worth lookin' for. An' most the guys runnin' around in shorts, they're such fat slobs, they need brassieres worse'n the women do. I been around a lot, see, but damned if it don't embarrass me to go to Palm Springs!"

The wiry little man unlocked the coin box and extracted a handful of quarters, dropping them into the cloth sack he carried for the purpose.

"At least, they've given up that silly 'sun time' they tried out a while back. They tried to cheat people out of an extra hour, see, or maybe they was tryin' to give 'em an extra hour, I never figured it out, but anyway it didn't work, so they gave it up."

He pointed his finger at me abruptly, popping the knuckle of his thumb. "Got ya!" he chortled, when I jumped.

He started fitting the back of the radio into its proper place again.

"There's a trailer camp right behind this Palm Springs motel, see, the one where I've got my radios, an' it's full of all these ritzy guys and dames, see. In the morning when they get up--an' that ain't early--you oughta see 'em, lined up to go to the bathroom. They just stand there an' talk, see, an' sometimes they get so interested in what they're sayin', that they just keep on standin' there for a long time, talkin' and talkin'."

The radio man got into his car to go, after all of the money had been divided; I glanced at him, on my way back to the house, when he didn't start up his car immediately.

He had a small can of oil in his hand, and, apparently assiduous and intent, he was oiling the hinges in his elbows.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I'M TOLERANT ABOUT it when men customers flirt with me, but when women customers flirt with Grant, that's different.

Grant and I had been pulling weeds from around the shrubs in front of cabin 3 when a lank, stick-shaped woman appeared by the office. Grant went to talk to her, while I stayed on my knees pulling weeds and wondering what it was about the woman that disturbed me. I had seen her before, I felt sure; no doubt she had occupied one of our cabins recently. But there seemed to be

something different about her now; all I could think of was that she seemed much thinner and more shapeless than she had been before. Perhaps at the moment she was simply wearing a dress that didn't flatter her.

I glanced up, studying her as she talked to Grant, trying to decide whether it could be her clothing that made that annoyingly intangible difference in her.

She was alternately smiling at Grant, and looking down toward her feet with apparent embarrassment; and she was making vague gestures toward her chest. I began to watch more closely. I couldn't quite hear what she was saying.

The woman was definitely blushing now, laughing and pointing toward her chest. I brushed the earth from my hands, stood up, and stalked over to where they were standing.

I didn't know exactly what was going on, but I felt that my presence would do no harm.

". . . you might call them eye-catchers," the woman was saying, cupping her hands at strategic points over the flatness of her dress.

I tucked my arm possessively through Grant's, and stood there tapping my foot.

To my surprise, the woman seemed glad to see me. "Oh, never mind, your wife will know what I mean," she said. With a dismissing sweep of her eyes she brushed Grant out of earshot. When he had gone back to his weeding she said, "It's so hard to talk to a man, isn't it? You can't call a spade a spade for fear of embarrassing them."

I was still a little suspicious of her. "What was it you wanted?" I asked, my tone aloof.

"I stayed here overnight last Tuesday, and my figure hasn't been the same since! I left my--oh, I can't think what they call them in the stores, but--you know, cheaters!"

The woman turned crimson again, as she saw that I didn't know what she meant. She glanced at Grant, busy pulling weeds out of the ground, as though she were afraid that he might overhear.

"I'm tired of trying to explain what I left!" she cried. "Have you got a mail order catalogue?"

I brought out our catalogue and handed it to her. She flipped through the unmentionably medical section, through the lingerie section, and finally pounced with triumph on a page that displayed brassieres. The color in her face deepened still more as she pointed to an illustration, at the bottom of the page, of bust pads.

"Have you found any of those, left in one of the cabins?" she asked.

I remembered vaguely that Mrs. Clark had mentioned, recently, finding a pair of "funny lookin' satiny things." I could well imagine that the robust cleaning woman would have had only a vague, thoroughly vicarious idea of their use.

When I had found the bust pads, which were in the linen closet in the stack of left-behind articles, and returned them to the woman, Mr. Buxley, the owner of the Westward Motel, stopped in to talk to Grant. I sat in the living room with them, working on a rag doll I was making for Donna's second birthday, and listening idly while they discussed business and advertising.

The conversation turned finally to short stops. Motel owners are so accustomed to short stops, and to discussing details about them, that they never consider mixed company a deterrent to such a conversation. Mr. Buxley, it seemed, had built up a small, substantial short stop trade. Far to the west of town, his motel offered the privacy and seclusion that most short stop customers wanted, and apparently the grapevine kept his lowered quickie rates on file.

Mr. Buxley was a short, plump, amiable man. Settled comfortably on the davenport, he polished his glasses with a hanky while he told us how his short stop customers, aware that they would get reduced rates if it were known that they wouldn't stay long, identified themselves.

"Most of 'em," he explained, "say they just want to clean up, and won't be there long. Some of 'em come right out and say they want a cabin for a couple of hours--how much?"

He held his glasses up, squinted through them critically, and huffed his warm breath onto them.

"Sometimes they come an' don't say anything. Maybe they don't want anyone to know what they're comin' for, maybe they just don't realize they'd get the cabin cheaper if I knew. I'd like to know so I can give 'em the reduced rate so they'll come back, but I don't dare give 'em the reduced rate if I'm not sure they'll leave, 'cause that might tie up a cabin all night for half price. Like one young fella last night, came in about ten, they sat out in the car for a few minutes before he came into the office, and when he came in he was all smeared with lipstick. Been drinkin' a little, too. Well, I figured sure that was a quickie, so I let 'em have the cabin cheap. Next morning they were still there, pulled out about noon, and I found out they were married and had a couple of kids with 'em. The kids had slept on the floor all night."

Mr. Buxley put his glasses back on. "I've got a new system I'm going to try, starting tonight," he said. "If I'm not sure if they want to stay all night or not, I'll just tell 'em I have two cabins left, but one's reserved for some people coming in at three a.m. An' I'll tell 'em they can have the cabin half price if they can manage to pull out that early. Otherwise they can have the other one, full price. That'll save their face in case they're only goin' to be there a little while and would like to do it cheap."

The office bell rang, and I left the men talking and went to answer it. A grey-colored, fat-cheeked man--a complete stranger to me--came breezing into the office.

"Hello, hello!" he cried. "Well, here I am back again! You didn't expect to see me again so soon, I'll bet!"

I forced a cordial smile. "No, I certainly didn't," I exclaimed, matching his tone.

This was an old, old refrain to me. The routine was so familiar to me I went into it automatically, straining my ears to catch any stray spicy bit from the living room. When the man asked if I could give him the same cabin again for that night, I said, "No, I'm sorry, but number 7 is already taken for tonight."

"Seven!" he exclaimed. "I had ten last time."

"You did? Well! I could have sworn we put you in 7. When you first came in I thought, 'Oh, oh, he's going to be disappointed that I can't give him 7 again!' We have so many people coming and going all the time, you know, I get mixed up sometimes about who has which cabin." And so on, ad nauseam, ad extreme boredom.

I slid a registration blank toward him, still acting as though I remembered him. Actually, though, as time goes on and we see more and more people, most of whom we have never seen before, it becomes harder and harder for us to recognize customers who have been here before--unless they come on several close-together occasions, or possess some unusual and striking characteristic; a white beard braided and tied with pink ribbons, for instance, or a tendency to stand with one leg draped across the desk while they fill out the registration card; or a pyramid of a hat which ends at the top in a bird's nest, complete with eggs and proud parent.

When I went back into the living room, Mr. Buxley was just taking his leave. "Those signs," he was saying, "read: 'We take your license number. If you leave something we send it to you. If you take something we send for you.' An' believe me, if one more towel gets stolen from my place, I'm going to buy some of those signs and put one up in every cabin."

We have been fortunate in that very few things have been stolen from our cabins. And the few people who do decide to steal something seldom set their sights on anything higher than a towel or two.

The Banning police, we discovered, are not willing to interrupt their checker games (or whatever it is that occupies their time in this peaceful little town) to recover anything so trivial as towels--even if they are notified of the theft while the culprits must still be in the vicinity. They can be freely quoted as saying, "That's one of the risks of being in the motel business. You've got to expect to lose a few towels now and then."

In view of their lassitude in this respect, I have composed a classic letter, designed to simultaneously make the thief ashamed, to save his face, and to persuade him to return at once what he has stolen. To make him ashamed, I lead off with a paragraph about how hard we are working to make our motel a success, and how vital our linens are in carrying on our business, and how expensive to replace; to save his face, I mention my certainty that no doubt the missing article was somehow mixed up with his own belongings and taken away by mistake. To persuade him to return what he has stolen, I insert a few casual sentences of highly unmerited flattery about the local police department.

This classic letter of which I am so proud has never, I might add, never once resulted in the return of a stolen article.

The weather was growing more and more summerlike, with the gaps between hot stretches fewer and fewer. The warm, indescribably sweet scent so characteristic of Banning grew stronger every day. Grant was finding out about the various types of air conditioning and their respective prices. He didn't want to install and advertise air conditioning until the summer was so well under way that we wouldn't be apt to get competition this year in that field from other motel owners who would notice the improvement in our business.

Palm Springs trade had fallen off because of the tapering off of cold weather, and the rental rates in that celestially exclusive village had been cut in half. The press agents of the little desert town were going wild cooking up rodeos, fiestas, and everything else they could think of. Big organizations were enticed, by various means, to hold meetings there that could be played up in the papers; the Shriners had an initiation ceremony there that was the talk of the surrounding cities for weeks. When John Payne and Gloria De Haven spent a weekend in the village they received enough newspaper mention to satisfy a conceited President, with their activities detailed, and the suggestion explicit that many other even more glittering Hollywood

personalities were about to descend upon Palm Springs, where the lowly vacationist could rub elbows with them at the neighborhood grocery store or bar. The cream of all the publicity stunts, though, was the appearance in Palm Springs of a "divine healer," the greatest on earth for centuries! Those who had feasted their eyes on his rotund majesty were whispering, it was reported, that he was Buddha reincarnated. Newspapers throughout the west carried stories of the marvellous cures he was effecting left and right (neglecting to list traceable addresses of the cures), and at last the whole publicity campaign built up to a crescendo of suspense when a "famous" European millionaire brought his adolescent daughter, supposedly afflicted with epilepsy since babyhood, to Palm Springs, to see whether the great healer could cure her. The healer didn't bring his divine powers to bear on the daughter until there had been time for the papers to play up the coming event and create suspense, and for readers of the papers to develop a proper attitude of interest and excited anticipation. When at last the case had aroused enough attention, the healer healed the "epileptic" girl, completely and dramatically, in one treatment.

That, as it was supposed to do, gave Palm Springs' trade a powerful shot in the arm. There were many skeptics, but also many who were awed by the healer's powers. Grandma was one of the latter. "I swear'n," she said defensively, "he's a sight better'n any fortune teller, that's a cinch." With the reduced rates, and the added attractions, Palm Springs built up a fairly good business again, in spite of the heat.

But there were still Palm Springers who stayed in Banning, where the climate was cooler and the rates were, even now, cheaper.

A middle-aged couple who had spent one night in Palm Springs and had, according to what they said, suffered from both the heat and the rate, came into the office one Saturday night when we had just one vacancy. All the other motels on our end of town happened to be full before us.

The woman, a slender, small-boned creature, stood in the office regarding me with somber eyes while her husband went outside to see what his license number was.

"Your cabins got a potty?" she demanded suddenly.

"Oh no," I said uncertainly. "We have well-equipped bathrooms, one to each cabin," I elaborated.

The woman was not appeased. Her gloomy eyes swept over the nearby "no vacancy" signs, visible from the office windows, and she sighed. "In Palm Springs, we had a potty, right outside da door," she stated.

Her husband came back to write his license number on the card, and she didn't say another word.

I felt a little uneasy after they had gone to their cabin. It is a policy of ours to give extra service and courtesy to every single customer, as the best insurance for our future business. Even to shoppers--those infuriatingly bland creatures who ascertain the price, inspect the cabin, and depart to look for something better--we are unfailingly polite.

The greatest strain on my politeness occurs when shoppers test the potential comfort of the bed by feeling it violently with their hands or by sitting on it and bouncing. To straighten up, before their eyes, the havoc they cause, would be too pointed a reproof; therefore, if they decide to "look around" a little, I must trot back later to the cabin to rearrange and smooth the bed.

One of my favorite daydreams is made up of the many satisfying retorts I could give to irritating customers and shoppers. When one of them is rude about our rates, it is an effort for me not to say something like "You'd better look for a cheaper place--a shack, in fact. You'd feel more at home there." But instead, habit and good sense force me to murmur something sweet and unresentful.

The only customers--or, rather, people--who unfailingly make Grant angry are those who use our driveway as a traffic circle. Several times a day a car from the east will swing into one of our driveways, making us think we have a prospect--only to swing out the other driveway and head back toward the east. Or a young fellow plummeting along the highway from the west will belatedly heed the words of Horace Greeley, and will splash gravel in all directions as he whirls into our driveway.

Such use of our driveways makes Grant seethe, but there doesn't seem to be anything he can do about it.

I knew that I could, if I wanted to, satisfy the strange longing of the woman who had just rented our last cabin. As I took the cover off the "no," fighting to keep my balance against the insistent thrust of the wind, I decided that I would do it.

I took Donna's little pink potty, and marched back toward their cabin. I set it just outside the door. I tapped on the door, and when the woman's voice called "Yes?" I answered, "Here's the potty you wanted!"

All evening I pondered the woman's strange whim, and in the morning when they brought the

key into the office I waited for her to thank me for accommodating her. She didn't speak, so as they were about to go out the door I called, "Was everything satisfactory?"

"All except we didn't have a potty," the woman replied glumly. "I wanted a sun bath this morning."

"My dahling, you mean a pahtio," her husband corrected her.

"Dat's vot I said--a potty!" she snapped.

If the potty incident made me feel a little foolish, I got over it quickly. Since we have been in the motel business we have learned to take everything in our stride. There is always something happening. During a typical one-hour period, for instance, a man--a suave, superior creature--tried to talk us into selling or leasing to him part of our land, so that he could put up a cold fruit juice stand on the highway; a carpenter came to ask permission to measure the exterior of one of our cabins because, he said, his client wanted a house built just like it; and we were embroiled in the first stages of what was to be a bitter commercial battle between the local laundry we patronized, and a laundry in Beaumont, a town six miles away.

Grant and I have almost never left the motel together that something didn't happen. Once it was the truck that swerved off the highway and crashed into the garage of cabin 16; once it was a careless smoker who, having fallen asleep with a lighted cigarette in his hand, set the blankets on fire. Another time there was an enormous oil tanker, Mrs. Clark related, which turned sharply off the highway to avoid hitting a child, and came plummeting up to within fifteen feet of the office before the driver could stop it. Another time we were driving home from a short trip we had made, during which we had left Mrs. Clark in charge. As we approached the motel we began talking about how something always happened while we were gone, and wondering whether anything had happened this time.

And then we saw, beside the edge of the highway in front of the motel, what looked like the smoking remains of charred furniture and mattresses.

Grant couldn't get out of the car fast enough, to run inside and ask Mrs. Clark how bad the fire had been, and in which cabin or cabins.

It turned out, though, that there hadn't been a fire in our cabins at all. It had been a house trailer that had caught fire on the highway, and the Negro family to whom it belonged had stopped their car quickly--directly in front of the motel, as it happened--to detach the trailer from the car.

Even when we stay home, there are innumerable small tragedies occurring on the highway. Dogs and cats are run over frequently, and--interspersing the few really serious accidents, there are many minor ones. Although a little further into town there is a twenty-five-mile an hour speed limit, there is no speed limit in our immediate neighborhood. There should be, because of the many motels, restaurants, and other places of business that make a great deal of turning in and out of the swift lanes of traffic inevitable. The scream of brakes has become a familiar part of the daily refrain of life.

I had been promising Grandma for some time that I would invite her "boy" friend, Hellwig, out to Banning. At last we settled on the time--it had to be a Saturday night because of his work. Although he is past eighty, he still works half-days in a printing plant.

Hellwig and Grandma arrived on the bus in the early afternoon, and Grant drove to the station to pick them up.

Hellwig was laden with several of the familiar brown-wrapped packages which, I knew, contained paper. His pockets were bulging with chocolate bars. Now that I have a family of my own, he brings three times as many chocolate bars when he comes to see us, knowing that if he brought candy enough for just me, David and Donna wouldn't leave me much of it.

Hellwig gathered me and Donna, whom I was holding, into his feeble embrace. The odor of mothballs was almost suffocating, but I was so glad to see him again that I didn't mind.

"So here is little Donna!" exclaimed Hellwig, his pale blue eyes twinkling. "Well, how do you do, what a nice little girl! And how she has grown!"

"Godfrey Mighty, but that's a long bus ride," Grandma exclaimed, shedding her purse and hat and sinking onto the davenport, her black eyes, bright in their setting of smooth, unlined skin, running over the house in a swift search for dust. I went out to wait on a customer then--a short, heavy set man whose glasses made his eyes look huge, misshapen and threatening.

"I'm driving on to Thousand Palms tomorrow," he remarked, as he paid me.

"Thousand Palms? That's going Twenty-Nine Palms one better, isn't it?" I said brightly.

His magnified eyes rested upon me for a moment.

"No," he replied, "that's going Twenty-Nine Palms nine hundred and seventy-one better."

When I went back into the living room Grandma was darting about with a dustcloth, peering into crevices and crannies, looking for dust. Hellwig was being entertained by David, who was showing him the report card he had just brought home.

"Well, how do you do!" Hellwig exclaimed. "An A in reading! Is that because you get so much practice reading the funny papers?"

David smiled, displaying the gap where his two center lower teeth had been. I watched Hellwig while he and David discussed David's school work. Although he had been "going steady" with Grandma for over twenty-five years, ever since her husband died, he had never popped the question. An unfortunate experience with a fiancée, when he was twenty (according to what he'd told Grandma, it was something about his advice concerning the use of cosmetics being scornfully rejected) had resulted in his snatching off her engagement ring, throwing it furiously into a river, and vowing never again to propose marriage to any woman.

It occurred to me suddenly that maybe a mere technicality stood in the way of his marrying Grandma. Maybe, since according to his vow he couldn't propose to her, he was waiting for her to propose to him. I'd have to suggest that to her before they left.

I told Hellwig that his cabin would be number 14. It was a double, but all of our singles were taken.

Picking his suitcase up carefully and slowly, he followed me to his cabin. He carried the suitcase into the back bedroom of the cabin, and announced that he was going to take a nap.

Grandma was sweeping around the edges of the carpet when I went back.

"Where in Tarnation's the vacuum cleaner?" she demanded. "I'll be swear'n if they ain't too much dirt here to get up with a broom. Them children must lug sand in all day."

"They do," I admitted. "Here, you sit down. I'll vacuum."

While I vacuumed, Grandma hurried about wiping fingerprints off the doors. Her energy inspired me, and we cleaned house for about an hour. Grant rented two cabins while we were working, and then he stuck his head in the doorway to inform me he was going across the street to talk to the owner of the Blue Bonnet motel.

"Old Wagon seller come over to see me twice last week," Grandma remarked, when we were alone. "He sure spends the dough, too. Both times he brought me a big box of candy, and the last time he brought me a real orchid! Thunderation, I never see anything like it!"

"He must like you," I observed.

"Ayah, he sure must. He must like me a sight better'n anyone else he ever met. Godfrey Mighty, I could catch him like a fly, if I was a mind to."

"Why don't you, then?"

"Well... Hellwig'd be pretty plaguey mad if I did anything like that!"

"He's had his chance. You've given him twenty-five years and he hasn't asked you to marry him. He hasn't any right to object now if you marry someone else."

"No..." Grandma said doubtfully.

And then I told her the idea I had had about Hellwig--that maybe it was his vow never to propose again that had prevented his popping the question; that maybe if she'd do the popping ... "He wun't never marry me," she said gloomily.

Grandma peeled potatoes while I added beaten eggs to a bowl of hamburger.

"Wagon seller . . . what a H. of a name," Grandma mused, scooping potato peelings into the sawed-off milk carton we used for a temporary garbage container. "An' he's the spittin' image of a pert little bird, ain't he? But he can sure spend the dough!"

"Oh, Wagon seller isn't a bad name," I said soothingly. "You should read some of the names on our registration cards. Last night, for instance, there were two or three outlandish ones. Let's see--well, Tinklingwhiskers for one. Mr. Tinklingwhiskers. How do you suppose the poor man ever gets to sleep at night?"

"Speaking of sleeping, I never see anything like the nap Hellwig's taking. Do you suppose we oughta go wake him up?"

"Oh, no. He's probably tired after the long bus ride. Let's just let him rest until dinner is ready."

Grant wasn't home by the time dinner was ready to put on the table. I went out into the office and looked through the window, across the street. He was standing on the porch in front of the

office of the Blue Bonnet motel.

I pressed the switch, turning the "Moonrise Motel" sign on and off several times rapidly. It was one of the systems I used to break up his talk-fests, which might otherwise last for hours and hours. When he was at the grocery store, immersed in conversation with the plump Mr. Bertram, I could motion to him through the kitchen window that I wanted him to come home. (If he happened to be looking toward the kitchen window!)

When Grant came in I called to him, "Go wake up Hellwig and tell him to come to dinner, will you? He's in 14, you know."

Grant picked me up and swung me into the air. "Dinner? Good! I thought you were calling me home because you had some work for me to do." Then he set me down abruptly.

"14! Nope, you must be mistaken. I rented 14 to two girls while you and Grandma were cleaning house."

Grant showed me the day's list of cabin numbers and people's names. "Scoville" was written after number 14.

"Oh, I did forget to write Hellwig's name down," I said. "Grandma asked me for the vacuum cleaner as soon as I came in, and I forgot all about writing his name after 14. But you must have rented some other cabin to those girls, and accidentally written their name down after 14 instead. You couldn't have rented them 14, because Hellwig was lying right there on the bed taking a nap."

"I rented the cabin as a single," Grant said. "The door to the back bedroom was shut, so I quick locked it--see, here's the key."

He brought a key out of his pocket. The little tag attached to it confirmed his story that this was the key to the back bedroom of 14.

We looked at each other in despair. "Are you sure you put Hellwig in 14?" Grant asked.

I nodded, and he sighed, pushing back his coarse brown hair.

"Well, I'll go see if I can get him out once."

We peeked through the slats of the Venetian blinds as Grant went across to 14 and knocked on the door. The door opened and after a few seconds of conversation he stepped inside and disappeared. Grandma rubbed the burn scars on her arms nervously, skirting around the newest, tender ones.

It wasn't long before Grant came back, escorting a pale, indignant Hellwig. An aura of mothballs entered the room with them.

"Fine nap I had," the old man spluttered. "A fine nap, with those--those hussies in the next room. Those baggages, those tarts, those--"

"Please," I murmured.

"Those girls were pretty mad," Grant said

"Mad because there was a man in their cabin?"

"Nope--mad because they hadn't found him!"

"Those hussies," Hellwig went on. "How do you do, they acted as if they didn't know what clothes are for, running around with hardly a stitch on."

"He's a old prude," Grandma whispered.

"You mean to say, when Grant went in there to get you, they didn't have much on?" I asked fiercely.

"No, they were dressed then. But earlier, when they first came, they took showers and then they just ran around with nothing on. Then finally they began getting dressed. But they stuck a quarter in the radio and how do you do, they danced all around while they got dressed. It was the most disgusting thing I ever saw."

"But how did you know what they were doing? I thought the door between the rooms was locked," I interposed.

A dull red began to creep up from Hellwig's wrinkled neck to his face, surrounding his faded eyes. "Well," he said, "I--I just glanced through the keyhole to see what was going on."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

OUR MOTEL HAS always had a high average, in comparison with other motels, of repeat business. Part of our success in drawing customers back again and again has been due to the fact that our motel is new and that we make a point of keeping it spotless; part of our success in this direction has been due to the deluxe service rendered by Grant, who acts the part of general handyman par excellence. The goodwill of the customers, that intangible thing so vital to any business, we make a special effort to capture. The customers are legion for whom Grant has fixed minor mechanical defects in their cars or traveling equipment, or whose cars he has pushed down the highway until they would start. I often think he is so helpful more from a spirit of natural kindness than from a mercenary sense of good business. One time the occupants of a car, after learning our rates, declined to stay. Their car, however, declined to leave. After the driver had tried for several minutes to start the motor, muttering beneath his breath curses that seemed directed toward the battery, Grant good-naturedly got into our car and pushed them around off the driveway, onto the highway and on the road to our competitors.

Occasionally we get customers who are traveling with a house trailer. Their usual explanation is, "We wanted the comfort of a real cabin for once!" Sometimes we have customers who are so pleased with the accommodations that on a repeat trip they bring us a little gift. The most valuable--and most annoying--of these gifts was a half dozen baby chickens, which were presented to David. Grant fixed a small, inconspicuous yard for them behind the single cabins, but they developed a sly technique for getting out when they were hungry. Since they were supposed to be David's responsibility, and since he is a typical forgetful boy, they were frequently hungry. Often when I showed a prospective customer cabin 7, which was the closest cabin to their yard, the chickens would appear suddenly, to perch on the threshold and watch me with ravenous, reproachful eyes. It lent a very quaint and rural aspect to the proceedings.

The excuses people use for getting away without renting a cabin may not be rural, but they certainly are quaint. It seems to be almost impossible for most people to refuse frankly to rent a cabin, to admit outright that the cabin isn't suitable or that the price is too high. Most people seem to feel that they must offer some logical excuse to get away--and that then, once they have escaped, they needn't return. Typical excuses are that they "have to run to the other end of town a minute first, and will be right back" or that they'll "grab a bite at a restaurant and come back to sign up inside half an hour."

After one trip to a Banning department store where I tried many little coats, all too expensive, on Donna, I found myself making excuses to the attentive salesgirl. "I'll go home and think about it," I said, "and I might come back and buy one." Of course, I knew perfectly well that I wasn't going to buy one of the coats at those prices. I tried to analyze my own reasoning in making the excuse, so I would understand what motivated the customers who fished up frantic excuses so that they could get away.

They must feel guilty, I decided, for using so much of my time and courtesy without repaying me for it; they want to justify themselves in my sight, even if falsely and temporarily, by leaving me under the impression that my trouble will be repayed when they return from "the other end of town" or from "grabbing a bite in a restaurant." They'd be embarrassed if they knew how clearly I understood that they had no intention of returning--as embarrassed as I was when, after thinking it over, I realized that the clerk in the department store knew perfectly well that I had no intention of coming back after "going home to think about it," and that I was just easing myself out gracefully, trying to keep her from thinking I was the ungrateful wretch I actually felt myself to be.

Banning, on the whole a sane and level-headed little town, isn't without its cult members and its intense haranguers about "vibrations."

The vibrations were, no doubt, very strong in these dabblers in pseudo-metaphysics when the members of the Los Angeles Temple of Yahweh bought about nine hundred acres in the desert east of Banning, announcing that they would build there a settlement to be known as Yahweh Springs. Spokesmen for the sect revealed, for the edification of Banningites, that Los Angeles would be blown up by an atomic bomb in the near future, and members of the sect were taking advantage of their special knowledge to build a refuge in the desert.

On a trip to Banning's well-stocked library, I was searching the Encyclopedia Britannica for "Mother Carey's Chickens," in order to use correctly a reference to them in a farcical story I planned to write about a sea voyage. Whenever I look up a certain thing in a reference book I am compelled, by the intriguing lure of the other words in big, bold-face capitals, to waste time and energy studying the details of five or six subjects which bear no relation to the subject I'm looking up except in that they start with the same letters. My eye being caught by "motet" (which is, I learned against my will, vocal music in the contrapuntal style) it occurred to me that it would be interesting to look up "motel," since I must be in the immediate vicinity of the word.

To my surprise, "motel" wasn't listed in the Britannica. Piqued, I searched in several other encyclopedias and reference books for "motel," and finally even for the more lowly terms "auto court" and "tourist camp." Not even those words were mentioned. Finally, in desperation, I

tackled the huge unabridged dictionary, with the same result. Compilers of the dictionary had not allowed the word "motel" to sully its sacred pages.

Obviously, according to authorities, there is no such thing as a motel. However, I feel that I can with safety state that the authorities are all wet.

One day Grant came home for dinner after one of his two-hour talk fests.

"I thought I'd run up once and see Mr. Bradley," he said, sitting down at the table. "I wanted to talk over some business with him, about the motel association, but he was too upset to even think about that."

David made a remark, which we ignored, about Grant's split "infiltrative."

Mrs. Bradley, it seemed, had at last become so bad that they had had to take her to an asylum. Someone had substituted a fertile, ready-to-hatch egg for the china egg Mr. Bradley had provided for her to amuse herself with, and after a few days of basking in the warmth under the layers and layers of her garments, the egg had hatched--not into the human baby Mrs. Bradley had wanted, but, understandably enough, into a fluffy yellow baby chicken. The shock and disappointment had pushed her tottering reason completely into the abyss.

"It was bound to happen sooner or later," Grant said. "Mr. Bradley says he knew, himself, that he wouldn't be able to keep her home with him much longer."

"Who substituted the real egg?" I asked finally.

Grant buttered a slice of bread grimly.

"Moejy," he said.

Two weeks after Grandma and Hellwig visited us, I got an airmail letter from Grandma. Before I opened it I knew it must contain exciting news, because Grandma wouldn't have sent the letter airmail if she had been completely calm and in full possession of her faculties. Airmail takes about twice as long in getting from Los Angeles to Banning as regular mail does. It is such a short distance between the two cities that the time gained by the speedier flight of the plane is more than lost in the transportation to and from the airports.

Grandma's letter began with a burst of enthusiasm. "I'm going to be married! I'm going to be a bride!" it gurgled. "Wagonseller proposed to me. I never see anything like the way he carried on. He had a big diamond ring with him, he said it was his mother's and he said he wanted it to be mine if I'd accept him along with it, 'he did, all right!'"

I was a little disappointed in Grandma. After twenty-five years of going with Hellwig, I hadn't thought that a wad of money, a beautiful car and a big diamond could influence her so strongly. I resumed reading the letter.

"I told him I wouldn't marry him, though, and Thunderation, how he took on. I thought sure he was going to cry. When he finally got over it and left I hopped on the streetcar and went to see Hellwig. I told him what had happened, and you were right, you little stinkpot. All he was waiting for was for me to say something. So I said it, and, well, plague take it anyway, that's all there is to tell you. Except he was madder'n a wet hen to think Wagonseller'd been after me. The wedding's going to be two weeks from today, and in the meantime he's going to find us a little place in the country and we'll have a garden and raise a few chickens. He's going to retire at last."

Grandma was a long time getting her man, but she finally got him.

In the same mail with Grandma's joyous airmail letter was a large box with no return address. It bore a Burbank postmark, and I opened it warily.

When I had torn off all the wrappings and lifted the cover from the box, several anemic-looking cockroaches struggled out. And in the box was a solid mass of their relatives, who had been less hardy, and were quite dead.

A note reposed in the midst of the unsavory mess. It was face up, fortunately, and could be read without being touched. "I thought you might be interested," it said, "to know that Ermintrude had a blessed event. I know that you will give her children a good home. She had quite a litter, didn't she?"

The note wasn't signed, but there was no need for it to be.

I resolved that I'd never again try to compete with an expert at his own game.

Grandma's plans for her future as a bride started us planning for the future again. We had decided against putting in a trailer court in back, or kitchens in any of the cabins, on the ground that they would cheapen the place. But Grant was beginning to draw plans for ten small complete houses, to be set on the back part of the land, each with its own pleasant little yard, to be rented at weekly rates to vacationists during the winter. During the summer they could be rented by the month to more permanent tenants.

There would still be room for a small swimming pool. These things were, as yet, more or less in a dream stage; but the air conditioning units were a present reality at last, actually being installed. And the second story two-bedroom addition to our living quarters would be next.

I know that if in years to come we ever leave the motel, as I look back one act will stand out in my mind as representative of everything we did here, one act will somehow be the symbol of our life here: the removing of the covers from the "no." I'll remember how it felt to stand carefully among the brittle, waxy-looking geraniums and the myrtle, the wind whipping through my dress and through my hair as I stretched to reach the covers, silhouetted against the neighboring neon lights and feeling curiously exposed, as though each occupant of all the cars that streamed past with brilliant headlights were staring at me ... the cold feel of the metal in my hands as I slid the covers off the "no" so that the sign proclaimed in glowing neon "No Vacancy." I'll remember the smug feeling if we were the first of the nearby motels to fill up, or the relieved feeling if we were among the last. I'll remember the contented knowledge that the day's work was done, and that a night of uninterrupted sleep lay ahead. I'll never forget, either, how good it was to see lights in all the cabins and a car in each garage, and to know that the family or couple in each cabin was cozy and warm in its little haven-for-the-night.

And I'll remember the half guilty feeling that people might think I was snooping, when I went around at night the last thing before bed (if for some reason Grant couldn't do it) to write down the license number of each car, for later comparison with the license numbers written on the registration cards.

Being in the motel business adds a clarity to one's view of life that few other businesses could give. It lets one see things in a new, truer perspective. What were unalive, unreal news stories, for instance, become to me true, believable facts when people who have just come from the locality in question discuss them. It makes me realize that the places where I've never been really exist, and that people whom I have never seen are as human and as vulnerable as I am. There's as much difference between reading a newspaper about an event and talking with eye witnesses of that event, as there is between glancing at a faded snapshot and studying a picture through a stereoscope.

Another advantage of the motel business is that it prevents our marriage from sinking into the stale rut of custom and habit that afflicts so many marriages when the first rosy years have passed. No doubt Grant and I have some quarrels that we wouldn't have if we were leading a more normal life, where there would be less nervous tension and less intrusion of the public into our private life; but, on the other side of the ledger, it must be noted in big black letters that we never bore each other because of interests that lie in diverging directions, and that, with so much happening every day, we never run out of things to talk about.

Of course there are bad things about the motel business, too. Business is seasonal; we know that the winters will be good, and that the summers will have much room for improvement. Improvement is just what they'll get, though--Grant has made and will continue to make changes, some minor, some major, that will make our summers better and better, until finally, perhaps, they will be almost as good as our winters. Anyway, the winter tourist trade in the desert always is so good that it makes up for the slackest of summers.

Another bad thing about our being in the motel business is that our children are restricted more in their play than they would be if we had the average home life. David can never have his playmates around the front of the motel; nothing frightens prospective customers away more quickly than the sight of children playing. There are times, too, when the very sight of human beings nauseates me, I am so sick of being interrupted and constantly on call. Fortunately the times when I feel that way are rare.

A sense of humor is one of the principal requisites for any one who aspires to own or manage a motel. For instance, if I answer the bell late at night when Grant is out, and if the legs of my pajamas unroll suddenly while I'm showing a cabin, and leave me presenting an old-fashioned pantalette effect, I simply laugh and tuck them back up, without even bothering to explain that I just slipped my dress on over my pajamas.

In my opinion, the worst, most nearly unbearable phase of the motel business is that our lives are brushed daily by the fascinating lives of salesmen, vacationists, businessmen and travelers who each has secret, important affairs of his own--and that etiquette and lack of time (principally lack of time) prevent me from prying around the roots of these affairs and unearthing them. In addition to the rules we have now--that customers must check out by noon, that they must pay in advance, etc.--we should have a rule that each customer must give me a brief summary of his activities from birth until the present, explain the purpose of this particular trip, reveal his plans for the immediate future, and answer any questions that may occur to me.

Then the motel business would be perfect.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nancy Vogel's literary career began when, at the age of twelve, she had a poem published in a newspaper and won an essay contest. From then until the time she was married she wrote spasmodically; it wasn't until her first child was born, making free time for writing out of the question, that she began to write in earnest, producing fiction, articles, humor, poetry, book reviews, light verse, cartoon gags, newspaper columns, and everything else that varying kinds of word combinations might be termed.

A Casteel by birth, she feels that one nice thing about having traded that name for Vogel is that she is no longer vulnerable to "soap" gags. She is a "native" Californian, born in Great Falls, Montana, from which she was whisked when she was a baby.

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