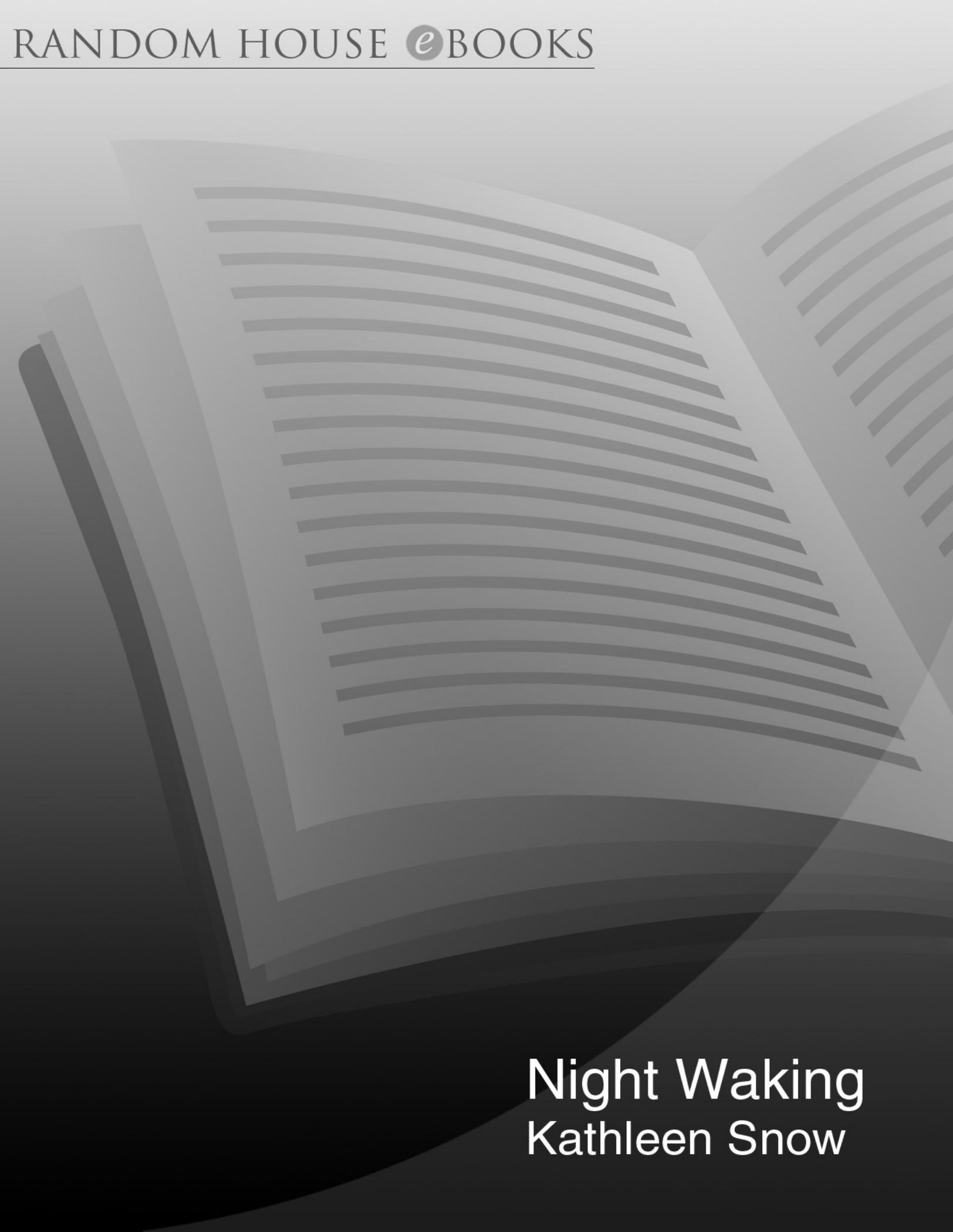


RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Night Waking
Kathleen Snow

Contents

About the Book
About the Author
Title Page
Dedication
Epigraph
Prologue

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve

Epilogue
Copyright

About the Book

Alex is young, sexy, beautiful and free. She has everything going for her. And then she is dead: a headline, a statistic, a madman's prey.

For her roommates Alex's murder is only the beginning. Now there is no safety in their lives, no security in their futures. Their emotions are shattered, their relationships twisted.

And terror slides through sleepless nights ...

About the Author

Kathleen Snow's novels include the family saga *Aguahega*, which charts the transformation of a Maine island into a national park, pitting wealthy summer-homers against local families. Her short stories have been published in book form by The Island Institute Press and The Montana Writers Guild, as well as in literary magazines. Her journalism has been published in, among others, *Harper's Magazine*, *Women in Natural Resources*, *Where-New York*, *American Journal of Nursing*, and *The Missoulian*.

Her forthcoming nonfiction book *Taken by Bear* in Yellowstone Park relates the history of bear attacks from 1870 to the present day, told by those involved.

NIGHT WAKING

KATHLEEN SNOW



arrow books

Thanks to the many who helped this book on its path with special gratitude to my writing group: Mary Epes, Carole Spearin McCauley, Lillian Perinciolo,

*Watchman, what of the night?
The watchman said, The morning
cometh, and also the night.*

Isaiah 21:11-12

Prologue

Wednesday, June 16, 1976
11:59 p.m.

The car eased off Long Island's Highway 27, homing in on the sound of surf. The tires drilled upon asphalt, turned right, crackled onto a hard-sand roadbed. Hollies, then the mittens and gloves of sassafras flogged the car's sides. It burrowed deeper. The roadbed became path, engulfed by masses of catbrier and twisted lianas of grape and poison ivy.

Dalroi snapped off the ignition. The car shivered into silence. Beyond the cicadas he heard the ocean, pounding under the starless dark. Through the open window came the iodine breeze, and with it the realization: they were alone, no one would bother them here.

He turned to the girl, his body flushing with the expected sweetness.

She was beautiful. Long hair lay loose down her back, a sheaf of frizzled wheat. Jeans, bleached thin and soft as chamois, rounded her thighs and dove between. He could see the sand, dark and damp, white and dry, between her toes.

He wanted to tell her how long he had waited. The times he had seen her, loving her even from afar. He wanted to

tell her how his love had grown.

Up in his head the soft words sounded. But it was his body that spoke.

He reached for her, fingers searching for the nub of her breast. She was unyielding, as if to resist him. But that was an old game: *No I will*.

His fingers played *Yes you will* on buttons, rippers, hooks. Calluses rasped on denim. Then he gathered a handful of pink nylon waistband elastic, feeling the urgency tighten, sweaty damp as his palm. He yanked down.

The cicadas roared.

Her legs tangled for a moment inside the pink hobbles—a netted fish, he thought as he stripped her panties over ankles, toes, and off. *Angelfish*.

But it was too dark in the car. Reaching behind him, he opened the door. The light blinked yellow across the tangled vegetation.

He stretched out on his belly, feet in the breeze.

Her eyes were dark and wide, liquid as he stared into them. Her body spilled up to him like a ripe fruit.

Did she know, he thought, the power she held? The control over him—past, present, future? That he would crawl over broken glass this last six inches, just to please her?

His mouth found her other mouth. With slow reverence he worked headfirst into the blackness.

Pain filled his mouth. An ache, he traced it, at his tongue's root. He could taste the dark scent of her, rolling on his tongue. He felt her thighs, smooth and unresisting beneath his palms.

Awareness returned, and with it gratitude, tenderness. And then the urgency, the need to feel her fully accept him.

He unzipped his trousers, held himself up against her. His thrust sent her head against the car door. But she did not complain.

He reached over her, yanked the door handle. Her flag of hair spilled off the seat as his rockings moved her head back, back, and over the edge into the cool salt night.

When he had finished, the girl's hair was moving, silver as quaking aspen in the wind. His hand smoothed down along the cool strands. Then he raised his body, balancing above her on whitened knuckles.

The light pooled yellow from inside the car. Looking out at the sweep of dunes, he saw an answering yellow. Across the bushy shapes of beach heather and bearberry came the far stab of a flashlight. Its beam blinked and wavered toward the car.

The fear rose, choking as vomit.

The ignition key chattered on metal, serrated edge grating impotently. Then it slid home.

He gunned the engine, wheeling the car's front end through a curtain of sand. The tires pulsed back along the hard-packed path, the flashlight fading in the mirror to firefly insignificance.

Air sighed deep and long into his lungs. He looked down at the girl beside him on the vinyl seat. He was sorry he hadn't pleased her. He wanted to tell her so.

But she was already dead.

Chapter One

Monday, August 8, 1977
10:14 a.m.

The phone rang in their apartment, the phone that no one picked up.

Where was Alex?

Gone back to sleep? Francie wondered. Sprawled on her back in a pool of sunlight? Limp-legged as what-was-his-name, Dad's old blue heeler, and just as dead to the world?

(That hound could sleep through ants on his balls. She had watched him once behind the barn twitching on through his dream.)

Or was Alex padding around their apartment, brown silk hair in her eyes, wearing her red silk kimono with the raised black-and-white dragon belching blue flames on the back (if she was wearing anything at all), thinking, "To hell with the phone, fuck Francie"?

Because she would know it was Francie.

Counting the eleventh ring, Francie Perry imagined the metal-on-metal sound scraping down through layers of sleep.

She has to answer it. She can sleep through work, sleep with as many men in a month as I meet in a year, sleep like

the dead. But when the telephone rings, your father could be dying and you have to answer it.

Two seconds of ringing, four seconds of silence, two seconds of ringing—it was rhythmic as life. No human being despite having been out all night Sunday night doing God knows what and with whom could sleep through such Pavlovian, predictable ringing.

Except someone once said the ringing you hear in the earpiece isn't the ringing at the other end at all. No, to pacify you, Ma Bell feeds you this phony ringing from down in central switching somewhere, because the truth is, there's no connection between you and the number you call until they pick up the receiver, so how could you hear the ringing?

The truth is there's no connection between appearance and reality.

Even right now on the twentieth ring there was no guarantee that the telephone in their apartment was ringing. Or even working at all.

"You haven't got anything to do out there but make calls, Francine," Cyrus Vetter shouted, "I've filing in here."

She punched the lighted cube still on Hold. "Kandis?" (The woman had even spelled it for her: "Hi, I sit behind Alex, Alex Baskin, your roommate? I'm Kandis. K-a-n-d-i-s?") "I don't know what to tell you," Francie said into the receiver. "She's not at home. Maybe a doctor's appointment ..."

There was a condemnatory silence.

As if *I* were the one, Francie thought, sleeping late, skipping work, arrogant enough not even to call in an excuse.

"Well, she better haul her ass in here," said the voice, whose accent now sounded like an angry Bryn Mawr, "or Tibor's going to fire her. And, sweetie, I *don't* mean fire her with enthusiasm."

“She’ll be in, don’t worry. Maybe some family emergen
—”

“Francine. Come in, please.”

Francie dropped the receiver onto the black plastic cradle, whose hairline fracture widened to a crevasse. She stood up—a short girl with a thin trunk and muscular calves, wearing a blue-and-white shirtwaist dress with makeup on the collar. Her thick shoulder-length hair—the pale brown that suggested a glorious blond childhood—was parted in the middle and pinned back on each side by a gold barrette. She walked out of her cubicle, last in a line of cubicles over whose breast-high walls every word circulated along with the air-conditioning, and paused at the open office door.

“Yes, Mr. Vetter?”

The editor of *Nebula* magazine was bending over an army-green filing cabinet whose bottom drawer was crazily askew. His too-short trousers strained up over sagging white socks.

“Coffee cups,” he said, not pausing in his search through the drawer. “Be a good girl, huh? Thanks.”

She looked down at his desk. Four yellow cups and saucers were in the Out box. Brown stains scalloped the sides, one held a Vesuvius of ash, and in another Vetter’s cigar butt floated belly up in oily liquid.

For *this* she had apprenticed four years at Iowa Wesleyan College, Mount *un*-Pleasant, Iowa? She felt like walking out. But she had already walked from two other secretarial-cum-trainee jobs in the past year.

She stacked the cups and carried them out to the door in the hall whose sign someone had amended to “*ma*Ladies Room.”

Can’t job-skip, she thought, squirting the yellow-green soap from the dispenser into the cups, rubbing the stains with her fingers. It was her father’s phrase, reducing her to

a child playing a game. *Looks unstable. What did we send you to college for, anyway, and you the first in the family?*

She saw Harold Perry's shoulders pinch together as he turned away—always turning away—his hand coming up to rub the back of his neck—always irritated there, bad as chiggers the way the skin burned and itched. She saw the stump of the index finger he had caught in the baler, out in the field two miles from anyone and only the crows to hear his scream. He had pulled out his pocketknife, lopped off the finger, and walked home.

If thy right hand offend thee, cut it off: Reverend Athol Eskerson, circa 1971, eyeballs like peeled grapes seeking her out in the third pew. Elmer Gantry? she had always wondered. *For it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.*

But didn't it take just as much courage to come out here hanging off the eastern seaboard over the sharks, trying to live in New York City?

She returned the cups and typed two letters, the cheap scent of the soap rising from the keys. Then finally she spread out the long, ink-stained galleys still to be proofread. She loved the neat, exacting, absorbing quest for the typo, the misspelled, misused word. She positioned the gray metal ruler beneath the line with the pencil tick beside it.

"The two green-scaled Arrusthenes, antennae tracking, pursued Jarl down the"

She moved the ruler to the line below.

"pedway. He reached for his blaster."

But where was Alex? What if she had killed herself?

Ridiculous.

Suicide because you told her at the kitchen table just this morning that it hadn't worked out, trying not to hurt, to wound, but that she might be happier finding another apartment, moving out?

“So who’s going to tell her?” Paige had said Sunday night from the opposite twin bed, when it was obvious Alex was staying out all night. With another man. Again.

The only reply appeared to be “I will, I guess.” She had always been the one with sympathy for Alex, when Paige had grown impatient. But the thought of the confrontation had kept her sleepless.

Under the bright gloss there was something sad reaching out from Alexandra Baskin. And she had her good, generous side. Coming out into the living room all those nights after Dad died, making cocoa and talking until dawn. She was a person you could like, get on with, other than *that*. But the that was the problem.

She and Paige had agreed: it *was* intolerable, wasn’t it? For ten months Alex’s sexuality had blanketed the apartment like a raincloud. Precipitation of pubic hairs on the soap.... Men on the phone, voices soft when they think you’re Alex, wheedling and yet barbed with threat.... G-strings flying on the shower rod.... Men in the living room, hallway, bathroom, Alex’s bedroom.... The toilet seat left upright.... Jockey shorts, size thirty-four, furred with dust under the couch.

And then there was that raw, underground sensation that prickled up your back when Alex came home in the mornings, face jaunty, lips swollen. Her voice, hoarsened and throaty: “I’m in love, Francie. This time it’s love.”

And then sometimes, jauntier than ever, it was just “Well, kid, I got laid.”

All right. Envy, maybe. Fascination, it was true. But also revulsion. Indignation.

But how do you tell someone her presence is so disturbing two women can’t live with her? How do you tell her she gives you the creeps, with her flabby, maybe gonococcal douche bag and the look of something hunted about her shoulder blades? That her promiscuity sometimes excites you, enthralls you with the taste of

destruction, like copper in the mouth? That you hate yourself for wondering, wondering, wondering what they do to her and how, and who makes the first overture to part? That her life plays like porno, which draws yet sickens?

How do you tell anyone, even yourself, that the worst thing is she's vivacious when you're not, beautiful when you're not, even with those odd eyes so dark the pupils don't show, and not quite in alignment, either—one eye looking off while the other is on you, giving that disconcerting irony to her face. As if she holds back from you, doesn't give a damn, and laughs.

That she was Beverly all over again, Beverly the cheerleader, prom queen, National Honor Society member, star of *You Can't Take It with You* on the auditorium stage. Beverly two years older, preceding everywhere, firstborn, Daddy's favorite, the tomboy he loved ("Look at that girl *corner*," he bragged when Beverly rode the tractor, "that little girl corners good as me"). And then Beverly sprung overnight into a beauty, her features kin-close, sister-shared, but one sister was beautiful. And the other—Suann O'Neill had said it—"What happened to Francie?"

But no matter how much the guilt, it was over. Alex had agreed to move out. The tears had glinted, fusing with her lashes, then double-streaking toward her mouth as their eyes had met.

But by the end of August the thing with Alex would be finished, scoured from the apartment. The way Alex threw herself at Spy would be buried in the past.

I might even, Francie thought, meet someone more scintillating than one Spyros Aristotle Xanthakis, who after all had bad breath.

She looked back down at the galleys, checking the spelling of "Arrusthenes" against her neatly scripted alphabetical list of proper nouns, even as the question surfaced again in her mind.

Where *was* Alex?

1:15 p.m.

Victor Amspoker stared at the shirt in his closet. He had never seen it before: red-and-green plaid—garish, ridiculous—sleeves stiffly at attention the way Maddie always starched them.

Who the hell did she think she was fooling?

Each disk of his spinal column seemed to grind down on the one below—bone powdering, spurs arrowing into his flesh. He opened his mouth, sucking air.

Not his. It was not his shirt she had ironed and laundered so lovingly, rubbing out the stiffened sweat marks, soured after-shave.

Amspoker withdrew his hand. He didn't want to touch it, this shirt of his careless wife's lover.

In his underwear he sank back onto the bed. The white gauze curtains bellied in the breeze, drawing in the voice of his elder daughter, Laurel, who shrieked from across the yard with a child's abandon.

He still had a family. Hold to that, he had to, get a grip on, think things out. Couldn't blow a sixteen-year marriage in one afternoon.

Seeing the shirt, the surprise of it, wasn't the worst part anyway. For three months now his suspicions had cut muscle-deep as a knife.

Amspoker felt the first touch of an absolute aloneness. It began at his toes, welling slowly higher, squeezing his chest. No one cared about him, no one even knew him except for Maddie. Every man and wife had problems, have to find a way to work them out was all.

But how do you negotiate loss of desire?

He remembered how she looked on their first date, sitting in the chilly diner with a very small, sad smile. God,

he'd wanted to make her laugh. Blundered, said something stupid about a pretty girl like her not being married yet.

"But getting married means the end," she had said. "I was always interested in beginnings."

"What do you mean?" he said as she stirred her coffee.

She drank, brown eyes focusing past him on an oil painting of the Acropolis. "In high school I used to feel ... oh, like I was standing in the center of a huge circle—all possibilities rayed out. You start down one path and it ends up with the others closed off. So I didn't want to start. Just wanted to go on standing there."

"Yeah, I felt that way, you know?" He spoke too quickly, cutting her off. But her words made him lonely. He wanted to share, whatever it was she meant, feeling her going out there somewhere beyond him.

"I used to go riding in Van Cortlandt Park," she continued, eyes everywhere but on him. "Even there, it was the same thing. The most fun was just as you left the stable, the day all new and bright, nothing tarnished. No end in sight."

Well, it was finished now, Amspoker thought, looking across at the closet. But where had it gone, the beginnings she had talked about, the juice to life? Forty-two years slipped past you like signs on the highway before you can read them. And love—he had never had that, whatever it was you were supposed to feel. Like, respect, lust—those he had known. Maddie was pregnant when he married her. Then she lost the baby—a boy, too.

The question was, what now? Confront her? Sicilian rage? Threaten mayhem, pledge violent love? He felt utterly without energy for such a task—he, Victor Amspoker, who knocked out Branislav Malowski's front teeth because he walked Carol Ann home from P.S. 194. Twelve months later Carol Ann was knocked up, she married the big Pole, last he heard she weighed two hundred pounds.

Amspoker pulled a blue shirt from the closet. Under the tails he buckled the belly holster of his off-duty Smith and Wesson, snuggling the gun beneath the roll of flab. He left the buttons open under his tie, as always, so he could get quickly at the hard wooden butt, against which he could feel the sweat starting. Still, it was better than the ankle holster, which felt funny when you were walking.

He raked the square hairbrush over his thick dark brown hair, then laid it down on the bureau top beside his comb and bullet.

It was *the* bullet, of course. From the same make of gun used to wound Joe Colombo—a 7.65 mm. Menta automatic bullet.

Amspoker picked it up, rolling it between his palms, enjoying the heavy feel of the metal. The nose was as flat as a mushroom.

The citation had been a cinch that year. He remembered that and the sound of the gun—short, sharp, flat—which registered only after the bullet caromed toward him, red-hot and malleable, twisting left down the barrel and out where he stood on stakeout at the finance company. He remembered the blow like a sledgehammer plunging into the Model P armor vest.

That was the answer, he thought, pulling on gray trousers, cinching the belt. He would throw himself into things at work, stop slacking off, trading stories in the coop. The work always nourished him, even with the cold winter concrete through your shoes, the paperwork, and now this damned reform-minded hairbag of a chief of detectives.

Well, he would make the work yield up a whole meal this time, three courses of chicken soup, chicken soup for dessert. He would get back between the traces, maybe lose the pounds, leave it to Maddie to make the next move.

What he needed, he thought as he walked out to the red Plymouth two-door, was a meat-and-potatoes case. One of

those A-priority headline makers that sent a detective everywhere but home.

2:07 p.m.

In her tiny fluorescent-lit office near Wall Street, Paige MacLeish felt a stab of annoyance. It had nothing to do with her.

She took a deep drag on her True, letting the smoke out in sharp puffs. The thought of her roommates and their squabble seemed to drag at her like wet skirts. Women were supposed to get along together. Wasn't that what feminism was for?

"This girl, Kandis, at Gilbert, Levensky, has called *twice*," came Francie's voice over the receiver. "No one answers at home. I think it's ominous."

"Ominous?" Paige laughed. "The only thing ominous is how you get so tied up in knots over Alex this, Alex that. She's always got a cold, cramps, some damned thing Fridays and Mondays. Just doesn't want to answer the phone."

"I can't—"

"Let her alone, okay?"

"Paige. I'm worried."

"Why are you worrying she skips work? For God's sake, Francie. It's almost two-thirty, Dornbush is waiting for a crapping report ..."

"What should I tell this Kandis, then?"

"You don't know where Alex is and you don't care. I'm taking in a movie with Heidi tonight, so I'll see you later. And, Francie ..."

"Huh?"

"*Don't worry.*"

Paige could hear the exasperation leaking through her voice, harshening the "Don't worry." As she replaced the

receiver she felt a stab of guilt.

But it was all so difficult. It seemed that with people, she never knew what to say or do. Just kept blundering on through.

Paige's hands were very large, with unpolished, bitten nails. She ran one hand through her short, crinkly auburn hair, fluffing it out from her ears. She felt the pulse of emotion mottle the whiteness of her throat, blotching up like a birthmark. So bad that, like wearing your heart on your sleeve, anybody could look at you and know your business.

Paige lit another cigarette, staring down at the sprawl of ink-corrected pages, the title sheet that read "Textured Vegetable Protein: Identifying New Market Opportunities."

It was making her hungry. She opened her drawer, unwrapped the foil-covered sandwich—tomatoes, salad, mushrooms, zucchini and Tahini-spread on whole-wheat *pita*. It was funny, she thought, biting down into the crisp layers. Since she had switched to health food in order to reduce her 140 pounds, she had gained ten.

She put the sandwich down and read the opening page again.

The time was now—she felt it rich and immediate: convince Dornbush, now that Hank Blaise had left, to promote her to senior research associate. Not to hire some off-the-street blunderer (a man, of course, the type in a three-piece chalk-stripe suit and paisley tie) who knew nothing about how things were done at Hornblower, Weeks, Noyes & Trask. Not like she had made it her business to.

Paige MacLeish, Senior Research Associate. Maybe even Hank's office with the window, acceptance at Harry's Bar, where she would breeze past the round table at the door where all the snobbish OTC securities traders sat and go right up to the bar where head bartender Daniel Bugarija would say "Hi, Paige," and write "MacLeish" on the back of her tab.

Yeah, and if horses were wishes, riders would beg.

"But I don't want to learn to type," Paige remembered telling her mother her freshman year at Sarah Lawrence. The thought made her smile.

"I don't care," Tessa MacLeish had said. "You get at least fifty words a minute under your belt. Then you can always leave your husband."

But it was all so difficult.

The job pressures, and this incessant third-roommate problem (remember Elinor, who never took a bath?). Thank God she and Francie got along, although they had nothing in common, but Francie was just *nice*.

Either they would have to move out of a great bargain of an apartment or put another ad in the New York *Times*: "Woman coll grad to shr w/2 othrs. Own bedr. \$76.40."

But how had they been so wrong about Alexandra Baskin?

She had, of course, seemed a vision of normal female personhood after the last three applicants. Paige remembered the meek voice on the telephone clumping in in combat boots with her ponytailed boyfriend; they were planning on taking the room *together*. Then there was the greasy-haired asthmatic, and the girl whose obvious intention was to treat the apartment like a hotel. But they wanted a friend, not a paying guest.

Enter Alex. She was neat, clean, employed, although suspiciously gorgeous. The breasts should have told them something, Paige thought. Large ones that bobbed free in a ribbon-knit V-neck sweater—the shelf of breasts you never saw except on a Lana Turner pinup but you thought such bosoms were as dead as the word "bosoms" and the forties.

But even librarians might innocently inherit such breasts. Except on Alex they seemed to move with an animal abandon, like a force of nature that ought to be harnessed to produce electricity.

And you could scarcely expect someone with breasts like that not to use them.

After the prescribed tour of the apartment, Alex had flopped onto the sofa, one platform-soled sandal up on her knee.

"Like, I love it," she said, smoothing her long straight bangs sideways out of her eyes. "Feels homey, you know?" Her eyes were dark and jumpy and very bright.

"Want a gin and tonic?" Francie asked.

Paige felt a start of surprise. It was their agreed-upon go-ahead sign. The other applicants had been offered Coke.

"You two are, like, really lucky," Alex said as they studied her. She appeared unconcerned under their gaze, dunking the lime slice with her little finger.

"Well, I'm glad someone thinks so," Paige said.

Alex sucked her finger. "No, you're really into your own thing, you know? You've got your own apartment, a place where you can, like, hang out, listen to music with your friends. I've been living with the parents in Manhasset. A drag, ov course. Like, you're still a baby when you live at home, no matter how ancient you get. I turned twenty-one last month, I want to be independent now, you know?"

There had followed the usual verbal résumés.

"I'm an exec secretary at Gilbert, Levensky—the Avon ad agency, ov course. No money. But lots of gorgeous Young Turks out to be the next Jerry Della Femina." She smiled. "You know?"

And then Alex had clinched it.

"J'ever think," she had said, "that women can click, I mean, like the way a woman clicks with a man? I mean, I'm independent. You're both independent. I can see that. I think it would work. I'd like to move in, if you guys agree."

Paige had thought about Rosalie, the asthmatic. In a way, she had liked her the best of the applicants—down-to-earth, friendly, shy. But that was it. She wasn't independent. She was a sad-eyed frumpy-looking introvert

who would probably tag after them every evening. The third woman out.

Alex was something else again. Although it was true she had a suspiciously sexy mouth—the kind you saw in close-ups on lipstick ads or performing fellatio in porn flicks—still she obviously had an outside life and friends. Unattached male friends, parties to which they might be invited. A contributor, not just a taker.

Paige had looked at Francie, who nodded.

“Okay, sure. Fine,” Paige had said.

Within forty-eight hours the error was evident: the time it took Alex to move in with eleven boxes, “Pandora’s boxes,” Paige had whispered to Francie.

It was true, Paige thought, that all her own clothes consisted of blazers and matching skirts and trousers (the covered-up executive look), that she herself was prejudiced in the direction of *tailored*. But Alex was the only girl she had ever known who owned three satin dressing gowns—power blue, silver gray, and Lana Turner (or was it Jean Harlow?) white.

And then there were the pills: birth control, Flagyl, Quaalude, Placidyl, Tuinal, Valium, Seconal, giant Welch-grape-blue unidentified capsules, and a bottle economically labeled “Speed.” Packed beneath was a copy of *The Physician’s Desk Reference*, with a lot of bent-down page corners.

Then the men began calling.

Paige remembered sitting trapped in the living room with one of Alex’s admirers, while in the bedroom Alex was dressing. She had tried to think of something to say. She had told him about walking on West Ninth Street, the trees with new celery-green leaves, walking and then stopping before a brownstone with a painting on an easel in its window. The painting showed a brownstone with an easel in its window on a street with new celery-green leaves. Alex’s admirer had been remarkably handsome, and his

brown eyes had turned warm. Paige remembered the jump—of what? Hope? That he might like you, want you instead? “Don’t let Alex spoil you,” he had said.

In her office, Paige felt the knife prick of pain bore above her nape. She shook her head, and the pain shook with her. Then it settled down to a steady throb, throb—in time to her heart.

It was foreign as Latin, undecipherable as cuneiform: how some women knew how to attract men.

Paige remembered the voices in the kitchen, Francie telling Alex to move out. And then Alex disappearing into the bathroom. Paige had walked past the steam writhing from under the closed door, heard the sound of falling soap inside. The door to Alex’s bedroom, just to the right, was open.

She had peered inside. The window was a pale square behind the curtain. Alex’s unslept-in bed lay empty, ruffled spread pulled up to its chin. White trousers and tunic were thrown on the floor, and there was a blue stain on one limp leg. What was it? Blueberry Joy Jell (An Orgy’s Delite) or the leaky pen with which he’d written down her number? Silver kid heels had been kicked off, and the soles inside were soiled.

I’ll have to put on my makeup in the goddamned office, Paige had thought. Then she heard the cracked, off-key soprano from the shower.

Paige stared down at her desktop, uncapped her pen over the waiting pages of the report. Alex had agreed to move out by the end of August. She wouldn’t have to feel this ... this *what?* Confusion about Alex, this sense of something unfinished, something she should have said or done but didn’t.

If only, she thought, she could remember the name of that blasted song Alex had sung.

Maybe then she could get it out of her mind.

3:31 p.m.

The clean scent of orange peel drifted across the city room of the New York *Post*, past soiled gray metal desks, smudged plastic typewriters, speckled floor tiles, the sooty AP ticker that shook grime like dark dandruff with every whir and click.

What the fuck was it with these vitamin-C freaks? Orange peels were everywhere—in the ashtrays, damp piles in the dented wastebaskets.

Miles Kendrick Overby III looked up from his typewriter to see who was at it this time. Harry Beinsdorf, the rewrite slob at the round wooden copy desk, saluted him with a dripping section, then gave him the finger.

Miles returned it with feeling. Then he swiveled his chair around, a smile tangling the corners of his overgrown rusty-brown mustache. He tapped out “Overby - Assigned” and slugged the story “MUG.” When he flipped the final take of copy from the machine and read it over, he felt the familiar rush at seeing his own order corralling an event, making it permanently his.

“NAB TWO IN ELDERLY MUGGING” the headline read. But below was the nice touch (exclusive, he hoped)—an interview with the hospitalized old lady’s sister out in Flatbush. He’d had to really hoof it to bring that one home.

“But don’t you feel like a jackal,” the girl last night at Maxwell’s Plum had asked, “hounding people in the midst of tragedy?” Such serious big green eyes.

Of course he did. He felt terrible for five minutes. But his job was to scoop, and if he took the other guys, the euphoria lasted two days.

The girl hadn’t seemed to go for that answer. Adonis Overby scores again. Okay, next time he would reverse the proportions, say he bled for the old dame for two days; Christ, he was a sensitive, feeling bastard.

She was too tall for him anyway. And where the fuck was all this sexual revolution, sport-fucking, girls asking you for a change? He could write an extended ode on a Grecian yearn.

The closest he'd come to sexual contact in the last month was watching the Burger King counter girl give idle head to her microphone while he fumbled for change.

Miles stubbed out his unfiltered Camel in the overflowing ashtray. Just make the 3:45-P.M. last-copy deadline. He walked over and dropped the pink carbon in the overnight editor's box, the original and yellow carbon at the copy desk.

Then he stretched, flexing stiff fingers—a slight, sandy-haired man in a wrinkled blue workshirt and tan chinos—and pulled the plaid sport jacket from his chair.

Good timing, he thought. Lacing into a couple of Heinekens was just what he needed.

Four floors below he stepped out on South Street, relishing the fish-laden breeze off the waterfront. Then he turned south toward Moriarty's, a bar a few blocks from One Police Plaza, where he was meeting Gerald A. Dunning, deputy commissioner for whatever info he could pry from the cops this week.

A barrage of playground noise and radios swelled from the tract housing on his right. Nothing like New York City to cut men down to size, Overby thought as he turned from the Puerto Rican block down the Chinese street. It was wonderful. Not a man in sight over five-foot-eight, nothing like Memphis, where it had seemed every other high-school junior was pushing six-three and had a fantastic jump shot. What made them sprout like that out there—Frisch's Big Boy burgers, fluoridated water? Heredity, of course, but it didn't work in his case, since Judge Miles K. Overby Jr., six-one, made the grievous error of marrying tiny.

He didn't have his father's looks, either, he thought. Or success.

Okay, the brain. What would you rather be, tall and dumb? Rather tall and bald, tall with pimples and bad breath—but tall and dumb, no. So settle: short, homely, but smart.

And he would settle, if he could make it to the New York *Times*, which, as Gay Talese had pointed out, was indeed the kingdom and the power.

The words, in his boy's falsetto at the 8:15-A.M. school assembly, came back to him: "For dying is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen."

For years he had thought "thine" in the Lord's Prayer was "dying"—probably had had some dark, deleterious impact on his id. But as the song went: "... who wants Freud's advice? I'm sure it works with mice."

He began to sing as he walked, enjoying the eyes that swiveled toward him.

The only trouble was he was thirty-two and on the verge of no longer being the promising young man.

He stopped singing.

Well, Joe Alsop had started as a police reporter, doing character sketches of witnesses at the trial of Bruno Richard Hauptmann for the murder of the Lindbergh baby. After that, for Joe Alsop, it was Washington all the way.

What he, Miles III, needed—God forbid—was a Lindbergh baby.

5:22 p.m.

Relax, Francie told herself.

It wasn't Thursday. She was only groped on Thursdays.

And she was only groped *going* to work, not coming home, like now, and only between the Fifty-seventh Street and Fifth Avenue stops, where the BMT subway swung shrieking around the bend, hurling hips into hips, knees into knees, mashers into mashees.

To mash: to reduce to a soft, pulpy state by beating or pressure.

Her left hand strained to hold on to the strap. With her right, she opened the paperback cover of *Lady Ingram's Retreat*. "Chapter One. Mr. Briggs shrugged up the collar of his shabby greatcoat and turned his tanned face to the west. The wind, he thought, with a pang of nostalgia, was blowing from Ireland...."

She pressed the book closed against her side. Impossible to concentrate. The tension had begun when she had told Alex this morning, and had built, crescendoed through the day. Where was Alex? So hurt by their rejection she was unable to go to work? Now she would have to face Alex—alone—once again. What could she say? Apologize? Beg her to stay?

Forty-second Street stop. Forty-ninth Street next, and not a masher in sight.

But "masher" wasn't the right word anyway; what had the dictionary said? *Frotteur*, that was it. Oh, she was getting to be a real expert, could get a Ph.D. in *frotteurism* (*frottage*?). He who rubs against clothing or anatomical parts (usually buttocks), from the French *frotter*, to rub; also, to create a design by rubbing (as with a pencil) over an object placed under paper. But why was sex always *à la française*? French kiss ... French postcard ... French tickler. On the fourth day of Christmas my true love sent to me four Frenched hens.

And why did the masher have a route, a schedule, like a paperboy? It would be unions next.

Forty-ninth Street now. Fifty-seventh Street next.

Maybe he wasn't a masher/*frotteur* at all, but only a *toucheur*, one who indecently touches (feels, palpates, handles, paws). And anyway, why her? Because she was short? Because she still looked too Midwestern, too Main Street-corny, naive? Because her hair was the color of hay