

FEED THE BABY OF LOVE

Orson Scott Card

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FEED THE BABY OF LOVE

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When Rainie Pinyon split this time she didn't go south, even though it was October and she didn't like the winter cold. Maybe she thought that this winter she didn't deserve to be warm, or maybe she wanted to find some unfamiliar territory -- whatever. She got on the bus in Bremerton and got off it again in Boise. She hitched to Salt Lake City and took a bus to Omaha. She got herself a waitressing job, using the name Ida Johnson, as usual. She quit after a week, got another job in Kansas City, quit after three days, and so on and so on until she came to a tired-looking cafe in Harmony, Illinois, a small town up on the bluffs above the Mississippi. She liked Harmony right off, because it was pretty and sad -- half the storefronts brightly painted and cheerful, the other half streaked and stained, the windows boarded up. The kind of town that would be perfectly willing to pick up and move into a shopping mall only nobody wanted to build one here and so they'd just have to make do. The help wanted sign in the cafe window was so old that several generations of spiders had lived and died on webs between the sign and the glass.

"We're a five-calendar cafe," said the pinched-up overpainted old lady at the cash register.

Rainie looked around and sure enough, there were five calendars on the walls.

"Not just because of that Blue Highways book, either, I'll have you know. We already had these calendars up before he wrote his book. He never stopped here but he could have."

"Aren't they a little out of date?" asked Rainie.

The old lady looked at her like she was crazy.

"If you already had the calendars up when he wrote the book, I mean."

"Well, not these calendars," said the old lady. "Here's the thing, darlin'. A lot of diners and what-not put up calendars after that Blue Highways book said that was how you could tell a good restaurant. But those were all fakes. They didn't understand. The calendars have all got to be local calendars. You know, like the insurance guy gives you a calendar and the car dealer and the real estate guy and the funeral home. They give you one every year, and you put them all up

because they're your friends and your customers and you hope they do good business."

"You got a car dealer in Harmony?"

"Went out of business thirty years ago. Used to deal in Studebakers, but he hung on with Buicks until the big dealers up in the tri-cities underpriced him to death. No, I don't get his calendar anymore, but we got two funeral homes so maybe that makes up for it."

Rainie almost made a remark about this being the kind of town where nobody goes anywhere, they just stay home and die, but then she decided that maybe she liked this old lady and maybe she'd stay here for a couple of days, so she held her tongue.

The old lady smiled a twisted old smile. "You didn't say it, but I know you thought it."

"What?" asked Rainie, feeling guilty.

"Some joke about how people don't need cars here, cause they aren't going anywhere until they die."

"I want the job," said Rainie.

"I like your style," said the old lady. "I'm Minnie Wilcox, and I can hardly believe that anybody in this day and age named their little girl Ida, but I had a good friend named Ida when I was a girl and I hope you don't mind if I forget sometimes and call you Idie like I always did her."

"Don't mind a bit," said Rainie. "And nobody in this day and age does name their daughter Ida. I wasn't named in this day and age."

"Oh, right, you're probably just pushing forty and starting to feel old. Well, I hope I never hear a single word about it from you because I'm right on the seventy line, which to my mind is about the same as driving on empty, the engine's still running but you know it'll sputter soon so what the hell, let's get a few more miles on the old girl before we junk her. I need you on the morning shift, Idie, I hope that's all the same with you."

"How early?"

"Six a.m. I'm sad to say, but before you whine about it in your heart, you remember that I'm up baking biscuits at four-thirty. My Jack and I used to do that together. In fact he got his heart attack rolling out the dough, so if you ever come in early and see me spilling a few tears into the powdermilk, I'm not having a bad day, I'm just remembering a good man, and that's my privilege. We got to open at six on account of the hotel across the street. It's sort of the opposite of a bed and breakfast. They only serve dinner, an all-you-can-eat family-style home-cooking restaurant that brings 'em in from fifty miles around. The hotel sends them over here for breakfast and on top of that we get a lot of folks in town, for breakfast and for lunch, too. We do good business. I'm not poor and I'm not rich. I'll pay you decent and you'll make fair tips, for this part of the country. You still see the nickels by the coffee cups, but you just give those old coots a wink and a smile, cause the younger boys make up for them and it's not like it costs that much for a room around here. Meals free during your shift but not after, I'm sorry to say."

"Fine with me," said Rainie.

"Don't go quittin' on me after a week, darlin'."

"Don't plan on it," said Rainie, and to her surprise it was true. It made her wonder -- was Harmony Illinois what she'd been looking for when she checked out in Bremerton? It wasn't what usually happened. Usually she was looking for the street -- the down-and-out half-hopeless life of people who lived in the shadow of the city. She'd found the street once in New Orleans, and once in San Francisco, and another time in Paris, and she found places where the street used to be, like Beale Street in Memphis, and the Village in New York City, and Venice in L.A. But the street was such a fragile place, and it kept disappearing on you even while you were living right in it.

But there was no way that Harmony Illinois was the street, so what in the world was she looking for if she had found it here?

Funeral homes, she thought. I'm looking for a place where funeral homes outnumber car dealerships, because my songs are dead and I need a decent place to bury them.

It wasn't bad working for Minnie Wilcox. She talked a lot but there were plenty of town people who came by for coffee in the morning and a sandwich at lunch, so Rainie didn't have to pay attention to most of the talking unless she wanted to. Minnie found out that Rainie was a fair hand at making sandwiches, too, and she could fry an egg, so the work load kind of evened out -- whichever of them was getting behind, the other one helped. It was busy, but it was decent work -- nobody yelled at anybody else, and even when the people who came in were boring, which was always, they were still decent and even the one old man who leered at her kept his hands and his comments to himself. There were days when Rainie even forgot to slip outside in back of the cafe and have a smoke in the wide-open gravel alleyway next to the dumpster.

"How'd you used to manage before I came along?" she asked early on. "I mean, judging from that sign, you've been looking for help for a long time."

"Oh, I got by, Idie, darlin', I got by."

Pretty soon, though, Rainie picked up the truth from comments the customers made when they thought she was far enough away not to hear. Old people always thought that because they could barely hear, everybody else was half-deaf, too. "Oh, she's a live one." "Knows how to work, this one does." "Not one of those young girls who only care about one thing." "How long you think she'll last, Minnie?"

She lasted one week. She lasted two weeks. It was on into November and getting cold, with all the leaves brown or fallen, and she was still there. This wasn't like any of the other times she'd dropped out of sight, and it scared her a little, how easily she'd been caught here. It made no sense at all. This town just wasn't Rainie Pinyon, and yet it must be, because here she was.

After a while even getting up at six a.m. wasn't hard because there was no life in this town at night so she might as well go to bed as soon as it turned dark and then dawn was a logical time to get up. There was no TV in the room Rainie took over the garage of a short-tempered man who told her "No visitors" in a tone of voice that made it clear he assumed that she was a whore by nature and only by sheer

force of will could he keep her respectable. Well, she was used to letting the voice of authority make proclamations about what she could and couldn't do. Almost made her feel at home. And, of course, she'd do whatever she wanted. This was 1990 and she was forty-two years old and there was freedom in Russia now so her landlord, whatever his name was, could take his no-visitors rule and apply it to his own self. She saw how he sized up her body and decided she was nice-looking. A man who sees a nice-looking woman and assumes that she's wicked to the core is confessing his own desires.

After work Rainie didn't have anywhere much to go. She ate enough for breakfast and lunch at the cafe that dinner didn't play much of a part in her plans. Besides, the hotel restaurant was too crowded and noisy and full of people's children running around dripping thick globs of gravy off their plates. The chatter of people and clatter of silverware, with Montovani and Kastelanetz (?) playing in the background -- it was not a sound Rainie could enjoy for long. And when she passed the piano in the hotel lobby the one time she went there, she felt no attraction toward it at all, so she knew she wasn't ready to surface yet.

One afternoon, chilly as it was, she took off her apron after work and put on her jacket and walked in the waning light down to the river. There was a park there, a long skinny one that consisted mostly of parking places, plus a couple of picnic tables, and then a muddy bank and a river that seemed to be as wide as the San Francisco Bay. Dirty and cold, that was the Mississippi. It didn't call out for you to swim in it, but it did keep moving leftward, flowing south, flowing downhill to New Orleans. I know where this river goes, thought Rainie. I've been where it ends up, and it ends up pretty low. She remembered Nicky Villiers sprawled on the levee, his vomit forming one of the Mississippi's less distinguished tributaries as it trickled on down and disappeared in the mud. Nicky shot up on heroin one day when she was out and then forgot he'd done it already and shot up again, or maybe he didn't forget, but anyway Rainie found him dead in the nasty little apartment they shared, back in the winter of -- what, sixty-eight? Twenty-two years ago. Before her first album. Before anybody ever heard of her. Back when she thought she knew who she was and what she wanted. If I'd had his baby like he asked me, he'd still be dead and I'd have a fatherless child old enough to go out drinking without fake i.d.

The sky had clouded up faster than she had thought possible -- sunny but cold when she left the cafe, dark and cloudy and the temperature dropping about a degree a minute by the time she stood on the riverbank. Her jacket had been warm enough every other day, but not today. A blast of wind came into her face from the river, and there was ice in it. Snowflakes like needles in it. Oh yes, she thought. This is why I always go south in winter. But this year I'm not even as smart as a migratory bird, I've gone and got myself a nest in blizzard country.

She turned around to head back up the bluff to town. For a moment the wind caught her from behind, catching at her jacket and making it cling to her back. When she got back to the two-lane highway and turned north, the wind tried to tear her jacket off her, and even when she zipped it closed, it cut through. The snow was coming down for real now, falling steadily and sticking on the grass and on the gravel at the edges of the road. Her feet were getting wet and cold right through her shoes as she walked along in the weeds, so she had to move out onto the asphalt. She walked on the left side of the road so she could see any oncoming cars, and that made her feel like she

was a kid in school again, listening to the safety instructions. Wear light clothing at night and always walk on the left side of the road, facing traffic. Why? So they can see your white, white face and your bright terrified eyes just before they run you down.

She reached the intersection where the road to town slanted up from the Great River Road. There was a car coming, so she waited for it to pass before crossing the street. She was looking forward to heading southeast for a while, so the wind wouldn't be right in her face. It'd be just her luck to catch a cold and get laryngitis. Couldn't afford laryngitis. Once she got that it could linger for months. Cost her half a million dollars once, back in '73, five months of laryngitis and a cancelled tour. Promoter was going to sue her, too, since he figured he'd lost ten times that much. His lawyer talked sense to him, though, and the lawsuit and the promoter both went away. Those were the days, when the whole world trembled if I caught a cold. Now it'd just be Minnie Wilcox in the Harmony Cafe, and it wouldn't exactly take her by surprise. The sign was still in the window.

The car didn't pass. Instead it slowed down and stopped. The driver rolled down his window and leaned his head out. "Ride?"

She shook her head.

"Don't be crazy, Ms. Johnson," he said. So he knew her. A customer from the cafe. He pulled his head back in and leaned over and opened the door on the other side.

She walked over, just to be polite, to close the door for him as she turned him down. "You're very nice," she began, "but --"

"No buts," he said. "Mrs. Wilcox'll kill me if you get a cold and I could have given you a ride."

Now she knew him. The man who did Minnie's accounting. Lately he came in for lunch every day, even though he only went over the cafe books once a week. Rainie wasn't a fool. He was a nice man, quiet and he never even joked with her, but he was coming in for her, and she didn't want to encourage him.

"If you're worried about your personal safety, I got my two older kids as chaperones."

The kids leaned forward from the back seat to get a look at her. A boy, maybe twelve years old. A girl, looking about the same age, which meant she was probably younger. "Get in, lady, you're letting all the heat out of the car," said the girl.

She got in. "This is nice of you, but you didn't need to," she said.

"I can tell you're not from around here," said the boy in the back seat. "Radio says this is a bad storm coming and you don't walk around in a blizzard after dark. Sometimes they don't find your body till spring."

"Dougie," said the man.

That was the man's name, too, she remembered. Douglas. And his last name ... Spaulding. Like the ball manufacturer.

"This is nice of you, Mr. Spaulding," she said.

"We're just coming back down from the Tri-cities Mall," he said.

"They can't wear last year's leather shoes cause they're too small, and their mother would have a fit if I suggested they keep wearing their sneakers right on through the winter, so we just had the privilege of dropping fifty bucks at the shoe store."

"Who are you?" asked the girl.

"I'm Ida Johnson," she said. "I'm a waitress at the cafe."

"Oh, yeah," said the girl.

"Dad said Mrs. Wilcox had a new girl," said Dougie. "But you're not a girl, you're old."

"Dougie," said Mr. Spaulding.

"I mean you're older than, like, a teenager, right? I don't mean like you're about to get Alzheimer's or anything, for Pete's sake, but you're not young, either."

"She's my age," said Mr. Spaulding, "so I'd appreciate it if you'd get off this subject."

"How old are you, then, Daddy?" asked the girl.

"Bet he doesn't remember," said Dougie. He explained to Rainie. "Dad forgets his age all the time."

"Do not," said Mr. Spaulding.

"Do so," said Dougie. It was obviously a game they had played before.

"Do not, and I'll prove it. I was born in 1948, which was three years after World War II ended, and five years before Eisenhower became president, and he died at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, which was the site of a battle that was fought in 1863, which was 127 years ago last July, and here it is November which is four months after July, and November is the eleventh month and so I'm four times eleven, forty-four."

"No!" the kids both shouted, laughing. "You turned forty-two in May."

"Why, that's good news," he said. "I feel two years younger, and I'll bet Ms. Johnson does too."

She couldn't help but smile.

"Here we are," he said.

It took her a moment to realize that without any directions, he had taken her right to the garage with the outside stair that led to her apartment. "How did you know where to take me?"

"It's a small town," said Mr. Spaulding. "Everybody knows everything about everybody, except for the things which nobody knows."

"Like Father's middle name," said the girl.

"Get on upstairs and turn your heat on, Ms. Johnson," said Mr. Spaulding. "This is going to be a bad one tonight."

"Thanks for the ride," said Rainie.

"Nice to meet you," said Dougie.

"Nice to meet you," echoed the girl.

Rainie stood in the door and leaned in. "I never caught your name," she said to the girl.

"I'm Rose. Never Rosie. Grandpa Spaulding picked the name, after his aunt who never married. I personally think the name sucks pond scum, but it's better than Ida, don't you agree?"

"Definitely," said Rainie.

"Rosie," said Mr. Spaulding, in his warning voice.

"Good-night, Mr. Spaulding," said Rainie. "And thanks for the ride."

He gave a snappy little salute in the air, as if he were touching the brim of a non-existent hat. "Any time," he said. She closed the door of the car and watched them drive away. Up in her room she turned the heater on.

During the night the snow piled up a foot and a half deep and the temperature got to ten below zero, but she was warm all night. In the morning she wondered if she should go to work. She knew Minnie would be there and Rainie wasn't about to have Minnie decide that her "new girl" was soft. She almost left the apartment with only her jacket for warmth, but then she thought better and put on a sweater under it. She still froze, what with the wind blowing ground snow in her face.

At the cafe the talk was that four people died between Chicago and St. Louis that night, the storm was so bad. But the cafe was open and the coffee was hot, and standing there looking out the window at the occasional car passing by on the freshly plowed road, Rainie realized that in Louisiana and California she had never felt as warm as this, to be in a cafe with coffee steaming and eggs sizzling on the grill and deadly winter outside, trying but failing to get at her.

When Mr. Spaulding came into the cafe for his lunch just after one o'clock, Rainie thanked him again.

"For what?"

"For saving my life yesterday."

He still looked baffled.

"Giving me a ride up from the river."

Now he remembered. "Oh, I was just doing Minnie a favor. She never thought you'd stay a week, and here you've stayed for more than a month already. She would have reamed me out royal if we had to dig your corpse out of a snowdrift."

"Well, anyway, thanks." But she wasn't saying thanks for the ride, she realized. It was something else. Maybe it was the kids in the back seat. Maybe it was the way he'd talked to them. The way he'd kept on talking with them even though there was an adult in the car. Rainie wasn't used to that. She wasn't used to being with kids at all, actually. And when she did find herself in the presence of other people's

children, the parents were always shushing the kids so they could talk to her. "I liked your kids," said Rainie.

"They're OK," he said. But his eyes said a lot more than that. They said, You must be good people if you think well of my kids.

She tried to imagine what it would have been like, if her own parents had ever been with her the way Mr. Spaulding was with his children. Maybe my whole life would have been different, she thought. Then she remembered where she was -- Harmony, Illinois, otherwise known as the last place on Earth. No matter whether her parents were nice or not, she probably would have hated every minute of her childhood in a one-horse town like this. "Must be hard for them, though," she said. "Growing up miles from anywhere like this."

All at once his face closed off. He didn't argue or get mad or anything, he just closed up shop and the conversation was over. "I suppose so," he said. "I'll just have a club sandwich today, and a diet something."

"Coming right up," she said.

It really annoyed her that he'd shut her down like that. Didn't he know how small this town was? He'd been to college, hadn't he? Which meant he must have lived away from this town sometime in his life. Have some perspective, Spaulding, she said to him silently. If your kids aren't dying to get out of here now, just give them a couple of years and they will be, and what'll you do then?

As he sat there eating, looking through some papers from his briefcase, it began to grate on her that he was so pointedly ignoring her. What right did he have to judge her?

"What put a bug up your behind?" asked Minnie.

"What do you mean?" said Rainie.

"You're stalking and bustling around here like you're getting set to smack somebody."

"Sorry," said Rainie.

"One of my customers insult you?"

She shook her head. Because now that she thought about it, the reverse was true. She had insulted him, or at least had insulted the town he lived in. What was griping at her wasn't him being rude to her, because he hadn't been. He simply didn't like to hear people badmouthing his town. Douglas Spaulding wasn't in Harmony because he never had an idea that there was a larger world out there. He was a smart man, much smarter than the job of smalltown accountant required. He was here by choice, and she had talked as if it was a bad choice for his children, and this was a man who loved his children, and it really bothered her that he had closed her off like that.

It bothered her so much that she went over and pulled up a chair at his table. He looked up from his papers, raised an eyebrow. "This a new service at Jack & Minnie's Cafe?"

"I'm willing to learn," said Rainie. "I'm not a bigot against small towns. I just sort of took it for granted that small towns would feel oppressive to kids because the small town I grew up in felt oppressive to me. If that's a crime, shoot me."



He looked at her in wonder. "I don't have an idea on God's Earth what you're talking about."

"A minute ago when you shut me down," she said, really annoyed now. "You can't tell me that shutting people down is so unimportant that you don't even remember doing it."

"I ordered my breakfast is all I did," said Spaulding.

"So you do remember," she said triumphantly.

"I just wasn't interested in continuing that conversation."

"Then don't shut a person down, Mr. Spaulding. Tell them that you don't appreciate what they said, but don't just cut me off."

"It honestly didn't occur to me that you'd even notice," he said. "I figured you were just making small talk, and the talk just got too small."

"I wasn't making small talk," said Rainie. "I was really impressed with your kids. It's a sure thing I was never that way with my father."

"They're good kids." He took another bite and looked down at his paper.

She laid her hand on the paper, fingers spread out to cover the whole sheet and make it unreadable.

He sat up, leaned back in his chair, and regarded her. "The place isn't crowded, the lunch rush is over, so it can't be that you need my table."

"No sir," said Rainie. "I need your attention. I need just a couple of minutes of your attention, Mr. Spaulding, because in your car yesterday I caught a whiff of something I've heard about but I always thought it was a legend, a lie, like Santa Claus and the tooth fairy and the Easter bunny."

He got a little half-smile on his face, but there was still fire in his eyes. "Since when is Santa Claus a lie?"

"Since I was six years old and got up to pee and saw Dad putting together the bike on the living room floor."

"It strikes me that what you saw was proof that Santa Claus was real. Flesh and blood. Putting together a bike. Making cookies for you in the kitchen."

"That wasn't Santa Claus, that was Dad and Mom, except that my Mom didn't make cookies for me, she made them for her, all neat and round and lined up exactly perfect on the cooky tray, Lord help me if I actually touched one, and Dad couldn't get the bike together right, he had to wait till the stores opened the day after Christmas so he could get the guy in the bike shop to put it together."

"So far you haven't proved that Santa Claus was fake, you just proved that he wasn't good enough for you. If Santa Claus couldn't be perfect, you didn't want any Santa Claus at all."

"Why are you getting so mad at me?"

"Did I invite you to sit at this table, Ms. Johnson?"

"Dammit, Mr. Spaulding, would you call me Ida like everybody else?"

"Dammit, Ms. Johnson, why are you the only person in town who doesn't call me Douglas?"

"Begging your pardon, Douglas."

"Begging yours, Ida."

"All I was trying to say, Douglas, when I brought up Santa Claus, Douglas, was that in your car I saw a father being easy with his children, and the children being easy with their dad, right in front of a stranger, and I never thought that happened in the real world."

"We get along OK," said Douglas. He shrugged it off, but she could see that he was pleased.

"So for a minute in your car I felt like I was part of that and I guess it just hurt my feelings a little when you shut me down back then. It didn't seem fair. I didn't think my offense was so terrible."

"Like I said. I wasn't punishing you."

"All right then. More coffee?"

"No thanks."

"Pie? Ice cream?"

"No thanks."

"Well then why do you keep calling me over to your table?"

He smiled. Laughed almost. So it was all right. She felt better, and she could leave him alone then.

After he left, after all the lunch customers had gone and she was washing down the tables and wiping off the saltshakers and emptying the ashtrays, Minnie came over to her and looked her in the eye, hard and angry.

"I saw you sitting down and talking with Douglas," she said.

"We weren't busy," said Rainie.

"Douglas is a decent man with a happy family."

Now Rainie understood. In her own way, Minnie was just like the guy who rented her the room over the garage. Always assuming that because she was a good-looking woman, she was on the make. Well, she wasn't on the make, but if she was, it wouldn't be any of Minnie's business or anybody else's except her own. What was it about this place? Why did everybody always assume that sex was the foremost thing in a single forty-two-year-old woman's mind?

"I'm glad for him," Rainie said.

"Don't you make no trouble for that good man and his good wife," said Minnie.

"I said something that I thought maybe offended him and I wanted to make sure everything was all right, that's all. I was trying to make sure I hadn't alienated a customer." Even as she explained,

Rainie resented having to make an explanation.

"Do you think I'm a fool? Do you think I'm such a fool as to think you're a fool? Since he first laid eyes on you he's been in here every day. And now you're going over sitting at his table arguing with him and then making him laugh. I've got half a mind to fire you right now and send you on your way, except I like you and I'd like to keep you around. But I don't like you so much I'm willing to have you making things ugly for people around here. You can make a mess here and then just walk away, but me and my customers, we'll have to keep living with whatever it is you do, so don't do it. Am I clear?"

Rainie didn't answer, just furiously wiped at the table. She hadn't been reamed out like that since ... her mother was the last one to ream her out like this, and Rainie had left home over it, and it made her so mad to have to listen to it all over again, she was forty-two years old and she still had some old lady telling her what she could and couldn't do, laying down rules, making conditions and regulations, and claiming that she liked her while she was doing it.

Minnie waited for a minute till it was clear Rainie wasn't going to answer. "All right then," said Minnie. "I've got enough in the register to give you your pay. Take off the apron, you can go."

I don't need your money or your job, you poor old fool, I'm Rainie Pinyon, I sing and write songs and play the piano and cut albums, I've got a million-dollar ranch in the Horse Heaven Hills of eastern Washington and an agent in L.A. who calls me sweetheart and sends me checks a couple of times a year, checks large enough even during the bad years that I could buy your two-bit cafe and move it to Tokyo and never even miss the money.

Rainie thought all that, but she didn't say it. Instead she said, "I'm sorry. I'm not going to mess around with anybody's life, and I'll be careful with Mr. Spaulding."

"Take off the apron, Ida."

Rainie whirled on her. "I said I'd do what you wanted."

"I don't think so," said Minnie. "I think you got the same tone of voice I heard in my daughter when she had no intention of doing what I said, but promised to do it just to get me off her back."

"Well I'm not your daughter. I thought I was your friend."

Minnie looked at her, steady and cold, then shook her head. "Ida Johnson, I can't figure you out. I never thought you'd last a week, and I sure never figured you for the type who'd try to hold onto a lousy job like this one after the tongue-lashing I just gave you."

"To tell you the truth, Mrs. Wilcox, I never figured myself that way either. But I don't want to leave."

"Is it Douglas Spaulding? Are you in love?"

"I used up love a dozen years ago, Mrs. Wilcox, and I haven't looked to recharge the batteries since then."

"You mean to tell me you been without a man for twelve years?"

"I thought we were talking about whether I was in love."

"No such thing." Minnie looked her up and down. "I'll bet you didn't wear a bra during the bra-burning days, did you?"

"What?"

"Your chest has dropped so low you could almost tuck 'em into your belt. I don't know what a man would find attractive about you anyway."

It was such an insulting, outrageous thing to say that Rainie was speechless.

"You can stay, as long as you don't call me Mrs. Wilcox, that just drives me crazy, call me Minnie."

Things went right back to normal, mostly because Douglas Spaulding didn't come in again for more than a week, and when he did come back, he wasn't alone. He was part of a group of men -- most of them in suits, but not all -- who came into the cafe walking on the balls of their feet like dancers, like running backs. "You're all full of sass," said Minnie to one of the men.

"Time to feed the baby!" he answered.

Minnie rolled her eyes. "I know. Jaynanne Spaulding's gone out of town again."

"Dougie's Christmas present to her -- a week with her folks up in Racine."

"Present to himself," said Minnie.

"Taking care of the kids for a solid week, you think that's a picnic?"

"Those kids take care of themselves," said Minnie. "Douglas Spaulding's just a big old kid himself. And so are you, Tom Reuther, if you want my opinion."

"Minnie, honey, nobody ever has time to want your opinion. You give it to us before we even have a chance to wish for it."

Minnie held up a ladle of her Cincinnati chili. "You planning to eat your lunch or wear it, Tom?"

One of the other men -- a mechanic, from the black stains on his overalls -- piped up from the two tables they had pushed together in the middle of the room. "He's already wearing every bit of food you ever served him. Can't you see it hanging over his belt?"

"Under my belt or over it, Minnie, I wear your food with pride," said Tom. Then he blew her a kiss and joined the others.

Douglas was already sitting at the table, laughing at nothing and everything, just like the others. He really did seem to be just a big old kid right then -- there was nothing of the father about him now. Just noise and laughing and moving around in his chair, as if it might just kill him if he ever sat still for more than ten seconds at a time. Rainie half expected to look down and see him wearing too-short or too-long jeans with holes in the knees, showing one knee skinned up and scabbed over, and maybe raggedy sneakers on his feet. She was almost disappointed to see those shiny sensible oxfords and suitpants with the hems just right. He didn't not look at her, but he didn't

particularly look at her, either. He was just generally cheerful, being with his friends, and he had plenty of good cheer to share with anybody who happened to come along.

"You going to order separate checks and make my life miserable?" asked Rainie of the group at large.

"Just give the bill to Doug," said Tom.

"You can make one total and we'll divvy it up ourselves," said Douglas. "It'll be easy, because we're all having exactly the same thing."

"Is that right?"

"Beans!" cried Tom.

"Beans! Beans! Beans!" chanted several of the others.

"We gots to have our daily beans, ma'am," Tom explained, "cause we gots to feed the baby of love!"

"I got a double batch of chili with extra cinnamon!" called Minnie from the behind the counter. "This time somebody had the brains to call ahead and warn me!"

Tom immediately pointed an accusing finger at Douglas. "What is this, Spaulding! A sudden attack of maturity and consideration for others? Malicious foresight? For shame!"

Douglas shrugged. "Last time she ran out."

"Chili for everybody," said Rainie. "Is that all? Nothing to drink?"

"What is the drink of the day?" asked one of the men.

"Whose turn is it anyway?" asked another.

"Tom's turn," said Douglas.

They turned toward him expectantly. He spread his hands out on the table, and looked them in the eye, as if he was about to deliver the state of the union address. Or a funeral prayer. "Seven-Up," said Tom. "A large seven-up for everybody."

"Are you serious?" asked Douglas. "And what's for dessert, toothpaste?"

"The rule is no alcohol at lunch," said Tom, "and beyond that we're free to be as creative as we like."

"You're giving creativity a bad name," said Douglas.

"Trust me," said Tom.

"If all we get today is Seven-Up," said the mechanic, "you are going to spend the entire evening as primordial slime."

"No, he's going to spend the night in hell," said another.

At the soda machine, spurling the Seven-Up into the glasses, Rainie had to ask. "What in the world are they talking about?"

"It's a game they play," said Minnie. "It's notorious all over town. More satanic than Dungeons and Dragons. If these boys weren't so

nice they'd probably be burnt at the stake or something."

"Satanic?"

"Or secular humanist or whatever. I get those two things mixed up. It's all about feeding beans to the baby and when you win you turn into God. Pagan religion and evolution. I asked Reverend Blakely about it and he just shook his head. No wonder Jaynanne leaves town whenever they play."

"Aren't you going to serve up the chili?"

"Not till they're through with whatever nonsense they do about the drinks."

Rainie loaded the drinks onto the tray and headed back to what she was now thinking of as the Boys' Table. Whatever it was that Douglas Spaulding and his friends had turned into, it was suddenly a lot more interesting to her, now that she knew that at least some groups in the town disapproved of it. Evolution and paganism? It sounded like it was right up her alley.

She started to load off the glasses at each place, but Tom beckoned her frantically. "No, no, all here in front of me!" With one arm he swept away the salt and pepper shakers, the napkin dispenser, the sugar canister, and the red plastic ketchup bottle. "Right here, Miss Ida, if you don't mind."

She leaned over Tom's left shoulder and set down the whole tray without spilling a drop from any of the glasses. Before she stood up, she glanced at Douglas, who was right across from Tom, and caught him looking down the neck of her dress. Almost immediately he looked away; she didn't know whether he knew she saw him looking or not.

My boobs may have sagged a little, Minnie, but I still got enough architecture to make the tourists take a second glance.

There were other customers, but while she was dropping off their orders she kept an eye on the Boys' Table. Tom had been creative, after all -- he had packets of Kool-Aid in his suitcoat pocket, and he made quite a ritual of opening them and putting a little of every flavor in each glass. They foamed a lot when he stirred them, and they all ended up a sickly brownish color.

She heard the mechanic say, "Why didn't you just puke in the glasses to start with and avoid the middleman?"

"Drink, my beloved newts and emus, drink!" cried Tom.

They passed out the glasses and prepared to drink.

"A toast!" cried Douglas, and he rose to his feet. Everybody in the cafe was watching, of course -- how often does somebody propose a toast at noon in a smalltown cafe? -- but Rainie kept right on working, laying down plates in front of people.

"To the human species!" said Douglas. "And to all the people in it, a toast!"

"Hear hear!"

"And to all the people who only wish they were in it, I promise that when I am supreme god, you will all be human at last!"

"In a pig's eye!" shouted the mechanic joyously.

"I'll drink to that!" cried Tom, and with that they all drank.

The mechanic did a spit take, putting a thin brown Kool-Aid and Seven-Up fog into the air. Tom must have had some inner need to top that; as he finished noisily chug-a-lugging his drink, Rainie could see that he intended to throw the glass to the floor.

Apparently Minnie saw the same glint in his eye. Before he could hardly move his arm she screeched at him, "Not on your life, Tom Reuther!"

"I paid for it last time," said Tom.

"You didn't pay for all the lunch customers who never came back. Now you boys sit down and be quiet and let folks have their lunch in peace!"

"Wait a minute!" cried Douglas. "We haven't had the song yet."

"All right, do the song and then shut up," said Minnie. She turned back to the chili and resumed dipping it out into the bowls, muttering all the while, "... drive away my customers, spitting all over, breaking glasses on the floor ..."

"Whose turn to start?" somebody asked.

The mechanic rose to his feet. "I choose the tune."

"Not opera again!"

"Better than opera," said the mechanic. "I choose that pinnacle of indigenous American musical accomplishment, the love theme from Oscar Meyer."

The boys all whooped and laughed. The man next to him rose to his feet and sang what must have been the first words that came into his mind, to the tune of the Oscar Meyer weiner jingle from -- what, twenty years ago? Rainie had to laugh ironically inside herself. After all my songs, and all the songs of all the musicians who've suffered and sweated and taken serious drugs for their art, what sticks in the memory of my generation is a song about a kid who wishes he could be a hot dog so he'd have friends.

"I wish I had a friend in my nostril."

The next man got up and without hesitation sang the next line. "In fact I know that's where he'd want to be."

And the next guy: "Cause if I had a friend in my nostril."

"Cheat, cheat, too close to the first line!" cried Tom.

"Bad rhyme -- same word!" said the mechanic.

"Well what else am I supposed to do?" said the guy who sang the line. "There's no rhyme for nostril in the English language."

"Or any other," said Douglas.

"Like you're an expert on Tadjhiki dialects or something," said Tom.

"Wastrel!" shouted the mechanic.

"That doesn't rhyme," said Douglas.

"Leave it with nostril," said Tom. "We'll simply heap scorn upon poor Raymond until he rues the day."

"You are so gracious," said Raymond.

"Dougie's turn," said the mechanic.

"I forgot where we were," said Douglas, rising to his feet.

The mechanic immediately jumped up and sang the three lines they had so far:

I wish I had a friend in my nostril,  
I know that's where he'd really want to be,  
Cause if I had a friend in my nostril ...

Rainie happened to be passing near the Boys' Table at that moment, and she blurted out the song lyric that popped into her mind before Douglas could even open his mouth:

He could eat the boogers I don't see!

Immediately the men at the table leaped to their feet and gave her a standing ovation, all except Tom, who fell off his chair and rolled on the floor. The only people who didn't seem to enjoy her lyric were Minnie, who was glaring at her, and Douglas, who stared straight ahead for a moment and then sat down -- laughing along with the others, but only as much as conviviality required.

I'm sorry I stole your thunder, Rainie said silently. Whenever I think of the perfect clincher at the end of a verse, I always blurt it out like that, I'm sorry.

She went back to the counter and got the chili, which Minnie had already laid out on a tray. "Are you trying to make my customers get indigestion right here in the diner?" Minnie hissed. "Boogers! Eating them. My land!"

"I'm sorry," said Rainie. "It just came out."

"You got a barnyard mouth, Ida, and it's nothing to be proud of," said Minnie. She turned away, looking huffy.

When Rainie got back to the table with the chili, the men were talking about her. "She got the last line, and it was a beaut, and so she's first," said Tom. "That's the law."

"It may be the law," said Douglas, "but Ida Johnson isn't going to want to feed the baby."

"Maybe I do and maybe I don't," said Rainie.

Douglas closed his eyes.

"Dougie's just sore because he could never think of a line to top Ida's," said Raymond.



"Retarded parrots could think of better lines than yours, Raymond," said the mechanic.

"Retarded parrot embryos," said another man.

"What baby do you feed, and what do you feed it?" asked Rainie.

"It's a game," said Tom. "We kind of made it up. Dougie and I."

"All of us," said Douglas.

"Dougie and me first, and then everybody together. It's called 'Feed the Baby of Love Many Beans or Perish in the Flames of Hell.'"

"Greg had the idea in the first place," said Douglas.

"Yeah, well, Greg moved to California and so we spit upon his memory," said Tom.

At once everybody made a show of spitting -- all to their left, all at once. But instead of actually spitting, they all said, in perfect unison, "Ptui."

"Come on, Ida," said Tom. "It's at Douglas's house. The game's all about karma and reincarnation and trying to progress from primordial slime to newt to emu to human until finally you get to be supreme god."

"Or not," said the mechanic.

"In which case your karma decides your eternal fate."

"In Heaven with the Baby of Love!"

"Or in Hell with the Baby of Sorrows!"

"I don't think so," said Rainie. She was noticing how Douglas didn't seem too eager to have her come. "I mean, if Douglas's wife leaves town whenever you play, then it must be one of those male-bonding things and I've never been good at male bonding."

"Oh, great," said Tom, "now she thinks we're gay."

"Not at all," said Rainie. "If I thought you were gay I'd be there with bells on. The refreshments are always great at gay parties. It's you pick-up basketball-game types who think beer and limp pretzels are a righteous spread."

Raymond rose to his feet. "Behold our nuncheon feast, your majesty," he said. "Do we look like the beer and pretzels type?"

"No, you actually look like the boys who always made disgusting messes out of the table scraps on their school-lunch trays."

"That's it!" cried Tom. "She understands us! And she put a brilliant last line on the song. Tonight at seven, Idie Baby, I'll pick you up."

From the look on Douglas's face, Rainie knew that she should say no. But she could feel the loneliness of these past few weeks in this town -- and, truth to tell, of the months, the years, before -- like a sharp pain within her. Being on the fringes of this group of glad friends made her feel like ... what? Like her best days living on the street. That's what it was. She had found the street after all. Grown up a

little, most of them wearing suits, but here in this godforsaken town she had found some people who had the street in their souls, and she couldn't bear to say no. Not unless Douglas made her say it.

And he didn't make her say it. On the contrary. She looked him in the eye and he half smiled and gave her a little shrug. Suit yourself, that's what he was saying. So she did.

"OK, so I'll be there," she said.

"But you should be aware," said Tom, "we probably aren't as fun as your gay friends' parties."

"Naw," she said, "they stopped being fun in the eighties, when they started spending all their time talking about who had AIDS and who didn't."

"What a downer," said Raymond.

"Bad karma!" said the mechanic.

"No problem," said Tom. "That just means she'll end up in Hell a lot."

"Do I need to bring anything?" asked Rainie.

"Junk food," said Tom. "Nothing healthy."

"That's Tom's rule," said Douglas. "You can bring anything you want. I'll be putting out a vegetable dip."

"Yeah, right," said Raymond. "Mr. Health."

"Mr. Quiche," said another man.

"Tell her what we dip in your vegetable dip, Dougie."

"Frankfurters show up a lot," said Douglas. "And Tootsie Rolls. Once Tommy stuck his nose into the dip, and then the Health Department came and closed us down."

"Ida!" Minnie's voice was sharp.

"I'm about to get fired," said Rainie.

"Minnie can't fire you," said Tom. "Nothing bad can ever happen to Those Who Feed the Baby!"

But the expression on Minnie's face spoke eloquently about the bad things that could happen to her waitress Ida Johnson. As soon as Rainie got behind the counter with her, she whispered in Minnie's ear, "I can't help it that it's at Douglas's house. Count the chaperones and give me credit for a little judgment."

Minnie sniffed, but she stopped looking like she was about to put a skewer through Rainie's heart.

The Boys' Table lasted a whole hour, and then Douglas looked at his watch and said, "Ding."

"The one-o'clock bell," cried Tom.

Raymond whistled between his teeth.

"The one-o'clock whistle!"

And in only a few moments they had their coats on and hustled on out the door. They might act like boys for an hour at noon, but they were still grown-ups. They still had to get back to work, and right on time, too. Rainie couldn't decide if that was sad or wonderful. Maybe both.

By the time Rainie's shift was over, Minnie was her cheerful self again. Whether that meant that Minnie trusted her or she had simply forgotten that Rainie was going to feed the baby with the boys tonight, Rainie was glad not to have to argue with her. She didn't want anything to take away the strange jittery happiness that had been growing inside her all afternoon. She had no idea what the game was about, but she knew she liked these men, and she was beginning to suspect that maybe this game, maybe these boys were the reason she had stopped her wandering at this cafe in Harmony, Illinois. If there'd been a place in town that sold any clothes worth buying, Rainie would have bought a new outfit. As it was, she spent a ridiculous amount of time fretting over what to wear. It had to be that the sheer foolish immaturity of these boys had infected her. She was like a virgin girl getting ready for her first date. She laughed at herself -- and then took off all her clothes and started over again.

She spent so much time choosing what to wear that she put off buying any refreshments until it was almost too late. As it was, all she had time to do was rush to the corner grocery and buy the first thing that she saw that looked suitable -- a giant bag of peanut M&Ms.

"I hear you're going to feed the baby," said the zit-faced fat thirty-year-old checkout girl, who'd never given her the time of day before.

"How do these stories get started?" said Rainie. "I don't even have a baby."

She got back to her apartment just as Tom pulled up in a brand-new but thoroughly mud-spattered pickup truck. "Hop in before you let all the heat out!" he shouted. He was rolling before she had the door shut.

Douglas Spaulding's house was just what she expected, right down to the white picket fence and the veranda wrapped around the white clapboard walls. Simple, clean lines, the walls and trim freshly painted, with dark blue shutters at the windows and lights shining between the pulled-back curtains. A house that said Good plain folks live here, and the doors aren't locked, and if you're hungry we've got a bite to eat, and if you're lonely we've got a few minutes to chat, anytime you feel like dropping by. It was an island of light in the dark night. When she opened the door of Tom's pickup truck, she could hear laughter from the parlor, and as she picked her way through the paths in the snow to get to the front porch, she could look up and see people moving around inside the house, eating and drinking and talking, all so at ease with each other that it woke the sweetest flavors in her memory and made her hungry to get inside.

They were laying the game out on the dining room table -- a large homemade board, meadow green with tiny flowers and a path of white squares drawn around the outside of it. Most squares had either a red heart or a black teardrop, with a number. In the middle of the board was a dark area shaped like a giant kidney bean with black dotted lines radiating out from it toward the squares. And in the middle of the "bean" were a half-dozen little pigs that Rainie recognized

as being from the old Pig-Out game, plus a larger pig from some child's set of plastic barnyard animals.

"That's the pigpen," said the mechanic, who was counting beans into piles of ten. Only he wasn't dressed like a mechanic anymore -- he was wearing a white shirt and white pants with fire-engine-red suspenders. He was also wearing a visor, like the brim of a baseball cap. Rainie remembered seeing people wear visors like that on TV. In old westerns or something. Who wore them? Bank tellers? Bookies? She couldn't remember.

"What's your name?" asked Rainie. "I've been thinking of you as the guy in overalls cause I never caught your name."

"If I'd'a knowed you was a-thinkin' of me, Miss Ida, I'd'a wore my overalls again tonight, just to please you." He grinned at her.

"Three Idas in the same sentence," said Rainie. "Not bad."

"It's a good thing she didn't think of you as `that butt-ugly guy,'" said Tom. "You're a lot better looking when you keep that particular feature covered up."

"Look what Miss Ida brung us," said the mechanic. "M's."

Immediately all the men in the vicinity of the table hummed in unison. "Mmmmm. Mmmmm."

"Not just M's, but peanut M's."

Again, only twice as loud: "MMMMMM! MMMMMM!"

Either M&Ms were part of the ritual, or they were making fun of her. Suddenly Rainie felt unsure of herself. She held up the bag. "Isn't this OK?"

"Sure," said Douglas. "And I get the brown ones." He had a large bowl in his hand; he took the back of M&Ms from her, pulled it open, and poured it into the bowl.

"Dougie has a thing for brown M&Ms," said the mechanic.

"I eat them as a public service," said Douglas. "They're the ugly ones, so when I eat them all the bowl is full of nothing but bright colors for everyone else."

"He eats the brown ones because they make up forty percent of the package," said Tom.

"Tom spends most of his weekends opening bags of M&Ms and counting them, just to get the percentages," said an old man that hadn't been at the cafe.

"Hi, Dad," said Douglas. He turned and offered the old man the bowl of M&Ms.

The old man took a green one and popped it in his mouth. Then he stuck out his right hand to Rainie. "Hi," he said. "I'm Douglas Spaulding. Since he and his son are also Douglas Spaulding, everybody calls me Grandpa. I'm old but I still have all my own teeth."

"Yeah, in an old baby-food jar on his dresser," said Tom.

"In fact, he has several of my teeth, too," said the mechanic.

Rainie shook Grandpa's hand. "Pleased to meet you. I'm ..."  
Rainie paused. For one crazy moment she had been about to say, I'm  
Rainie Pinyon. "I'm Ida Johnson."

"You sure about that?" asked Grandpa. He didn't let go of her  
hand.

"Yes, I am," she said. Rather sharply.

Grandpa raised his eyebrows and released her hand. "Welcome  
to the madhouse."

Suddenly there was a thunderous pounding on the stairs and  
Rose and Dougie burst into the room. "Release the pigs!" they both  
shouted. "Pig attack! Pig attack!"

Douglas just stood there laughing as his kids ran around the table,  
grunting and snorting like hogs as they reached into every bowl for  
chips and M&Ms and anything else that looked vaguely edible, stuffing  
it all into their mouths. The men all laughed as the kids ran back out of  
the room. Except Grandpa, who never cracked a smile. "What is the  
younger generation coming to?" he murmured. Then he winked at  
Rainie.

"Where should I sit?" she asked.

"Anyplace," said Tom.

She took the chair at the corner. It seemed the best place -- the  
spot where she'd have to sit back away from the table because the  
table leg was in the way. It felt just a little safer to her, to be able to sit  
a little bit outside of the circle of the players.

The mechanic leaned over to her and said, "Cecil."

"What?" Rainie asked.

"My name," he said. "Don't tell anybody else."

Tom, who was sitting next to her, said in a loud whisper. "We  
all pretend that we think his name is `Buck.' It makes him feel more  
manly."

"What do I call you?" asked Rainie. "If I'm supposed to keep  
Cecil a secret."

"Now you've gone and told," said Cecil.

"Call him Buck," said Tom.

"Does anybody else really call him that?" asked Rainie.

"I will if you will," said Tom.

"Time for a review of the rules!" said Douglas, as he took the last  
place at the table, which happened to be in the middle of the table on  
the side across from Rainie, so she'd be looking at him throughout the  
game.

"I hate to make you have to spend time going over everything for  
me," said Rainie.

"They repeat the rules every time anyway," said Grandpa.

"Cause Grandpa's getting senile and forgets them every time," said Tom.

"They repeat them because they're so proud of having thought them up themselves," said Grandpa.

The game was pretty complicated. They used plastic children's toys -- little robots or dinosaurs -- as their playing pieces. The idea of the game was to roll three dice and get around the board. Each time they passed Start they were reborn as the next higher life-form, from slime to newt to emu to human; the winner was the first human to reach Start and therefore become supreme god.

"Then the supreme god turns over his karma cards. If he's got more good than bad karma, then whoever has the most good karma comes in second. But if the supreme god has more bad karma than good, then whoever has the most bad karma comes in second," said Douglas.

"So bad karma can be good?" asked Rainie.

"Never," said Tom. "What kind of person are you? No, if the supreme god turns out to have bad karma, it's a terrible disaster for the known universe. We all sing a very sad song and cry on the way home."

"The last time bad karma triumphed, Meryl Streep and Roseanne Barr released that movie She-Devil," said Douglas.

"So you see, the consequences can be dire," said Tom.

"She didn't even get to do an accent," said Cecil, his tone mournful and hushed.

"And ... and Ed Begley Junior had to play Roseanne Barr's husband," said Raymond.

"Only John Goodman is man enough to do that and live," said Cecil.

"So you see," said Tom, "our game isn't just a game. It has consequences in the real world."

Douglas continued with the rules. Every time you landed on a teardrop or a heart, you had a chance to pray to either the Baby of Sorrows or the Baby of Love, depending. In order to pray, you had to make an offering of as many beans as the number shown on the square. "So beans are like money," said Rainie.

"Ugly money," said Raymond.

"Nasty money," said Tom.

"Filthy lucre," said Grandpa.

"We hate beans," said Cecil. "Nobody wants beans. Only greedy, nasty, selfish people try to get a lot of beans."

"Of course, you have no chance of winning unless you have a lot of beans," said Douglas. "But if it ever looks like you are too interested in getting beans, then we hold a bean council and punish you."

"I never did like beans," said Rainie.

"Good thing," said Cecil. "But watch out, because Tom is a miserable bean thief and he'll steal your beans when you're not looking."

"If I actually cared for beans," said Tom, "I'd be an excellent bean thief."

"If your prayer is granted," Douglas said, going on with the rules, "then you get a power card. There are evil powers and good powers, depending on which baby you pray to. When you use an evil power you get a bad karma card, and when you use a good power you get a good karma card. Good power cards are always played on other people -- they never benefit the person who plays them. Evil power cards are always vicious and selfish and vindictive."

"That's not in the rules," said Cecil.

"But it's the truth," said Douglas. "Good people never use evil power cards."

"Dougie's just sore because of the time we ganged up on him and killed him every time he stuck his nose out of Hell," explained Tom.

"I tried to reason with them."

"He whined all night. It only goaded us to new depths of cruelty."

"They had no pity."

"We were nature red in tooth and claw," said Tom. "You were unfit to survive."

They went on with the rules but at the end Rainie could hardly remember half of them. "You just tell me what to do and I'll get the hang of it."

She started the game with five power cards. All of them were hand-written, the good powers in red ink, the evil powers in black. She had three evil cards and two good ones. One of the good ones said:

"BUTT-INSKI"

Allows you to

cause 2 other

players to swap

all power cards.

Two of the evil power cards said:

"UP THE PIGGAGE"

ADD 2 PIGS TO THE PEN.

and

"YOUR KARMA IS  
MY KARMA"

allows you to swap  
karma cards with  
another player

The last two cards, one good, one evil, made Rainie laugh out  
loud. The evil one said:

RELEASE

THE

PIGS!!

The good one, on the other hand, said:

RELEASE

THE

PIGS!!

For the good of the  
whole.

"What's funny?" asked Tom.

"Is there any difference between releasing the pigs on somebody  
from a good power card as opposed to an evil power card?" she asked.

"All the difference in the world!" cried Raymond.

"When you release the pigs for the good of the whole," said Cecil,  
"it's a noble act, a kind and generous sacrifice for the benefit of the  
entire community, without a single thought of personal benefit."

"Whereas," said Tom, "releasing the pigs from an evil power card  
is the act of a soulless, cruel, despicable human being."

"But I mean, is the actual pig attack any different?"

"Not a whit," said Douglas.

"Absolutely identical," said Tom.

"I'm betting that Ida has her a couple of Release-the-Pigs cards,"  
said Raymond.

"How many beans are you betting?" asked Tom.

"Five beans says she does."

"Oh, yeah?" said Tom. "Well, ten beans says she does."

"That's what I said," said Raymond.

"No, you said five beans," said Tom.

"Roll the dice, Ida," said Grandpa, "or we'll never get started."

"The fate of the world hangs in the balance," said the quiet guy at



the other end of the table -- Rainie couldn't remember his name. He looked very sad, even when he laughed.

"Because you are first," said Douglas, "and because you have never played before, you may use the lobster dice to begin."

The lobster dice were just like the other dice -- there were about a dozen scattered around the table -- except that they had a red lobster printed on the face that should have had the one-spot.

"The lobster dice have special significance," said Douglas. "And if you should be so fortunate as to have a lobster turn up on your roll, it changes your move. For instance, if you roll the three dice and get two fives and a lobster, the total isn't eleven, it's ten-lobster."

"How many do I move for the lobster?"

"One," said Douglas.

"Per lobster," added Tom.

"So that's eleven," said Rainie.

Douglas and Tom both made a show of looking stricken. "An unbeliever," said Douglas. "I never would have thought it of you."

Tom addressed the others. "If she can't tell the difference between eleven and ten-lobster, then what if she rolls, like, four-lobster-lobster?"

They all shook their head and made mournful noises.

"I worry about you, Ida," said Douglas. "You seem to have an unhealthy grip on reality."

"Nay," said Cecil, "reality hath an unhealthy grip on her."

"Maybe I'm not worthy to use the lobster dice," said Rainie.

"Ah," said Douglas. "That's all right then."

"What is?"

"As long as you think you might be unworthy, then you are worthy."

"Thinking I'm unworthy makes me worthy?"

"Here are the sacred lobster dice," said Douglas. "You found the perfect last line for the song. You served us our beans and brought us our drinks. No one is worthier than you."

He spoke with such simplicity and sincerity that, even though she knew he was joking, she couldn't help but be touched. "I'm honored," she said, and meant it. She took the dice and rolled.

Two of the dice showed lobsters. The other die showed an ace. Some of the men gasped.

"One-lobster-lobster," murmured Cecil.

"The first roll of the game."

"Surely good karma will triumph tonight."

"Tell me," said Cecil, "are you perchance a visitor from another realm, temporarily dwelling among us mortals in disguise?"

"No," she said, laughing.

"Have you not been sent by the Baby of Love," Cecil insisted, "to bring the blessing of healing to a world of woe?"

Rainie reached out her hand toward Cecil. "Flesh and blood, see?"

He touched her hand, cradled it gently in his, as if it were a porcelain rose. "Ah," he said, "she is real. I know it, for I have touched her."

"She's not a real person," said Grandpa. "She's a ghost. Can't you tell? We're being haunted here tonight. Ida Johnson is just a figment of her own imagination."

The others chuckled, and Rainie laughed. But as she took her hand back from Cecil, she felt strangely shy. And when she looked at Grandpa, she found him gazing at her very steadily.

"I'm not a ghost," she said softly.

"Yes she is," said Grandpa to the others. "She can fool you boys, but not these old eyes. I know the difference."

"One-lobster-lobster," said Douglas. "Let's get this game moving!"

The game got moving. It took only a few minutes for Rainie to get into the spirit of it. The game was about life and death, but what happened with the dice was almost trivial compared to what they all did to each other with the power cards. The game had hardly begun when the blond guy at the other end of the table -- Jack? -- played a card on her that said,

"THE GRASS IS ALWAYS GREENER ..."

Allows you to swap power

cards with another player.

and in one moment she found herself with a handful of completely different cards. It wasn't Jack's turn, or hers -- he just felt like playing it.

In a moment, though, she saw why. Douglas had landed on a square whose pigpath -- the line connecting it to the pigpen -- had only three dots on it. Jack played one of her former Release-the-Pigs cards, and they all whooped and hollered and lined up the baby pigs at the head of the pigpath, with Momma Pig last in line.

"This is pointless," said Douglas. "I'm still primordial ooze. I can't regress any farther than that."

"I want you in hell," said Jack.

"But I won't go to hell. I don't have any karma at all yet."

"You personally released the pigs on me twice last time. Tonight you're never going to be reincarnated."

"Grudge-holding is beneath you, Jack."

Jack burst into a country-music song.

If I can't hold me a woman,  
Then a grudge will have to do.  
The woman I'd hold against myself,  
But the grudge I'll hold against you.

Rainie had never heard the song before, so she figured he had made it up. The tune was actually pretty good.

The pigs were about to start charging down the pigpath when Jack played her former card adding two pigs to the pen. Now there were even more pigs on the path, and since they leapfrogged instead of taking turns, the pigs were bound to reach Douglas. Each pig that got to him would cost him two life-pennies, except for Momma, who would cost him four. Since everybody started with only ten life-pennies, he was doomed.

"I need the lobster dice," said Douglas.

"You need an angel from heaven," said Jack.

Tom handed Jack the two bad-karma cards he got for playing evil power cards.

"Oh, these are bad," sad Jack.

"Only what you deserve," said Douglas.

"Well, before we sic the pigs on you, Dougie, let's try this." Whereupon Jack laid down another of Rainie's old cards, the one that allowed him to swap karma with Douglas. Since Douglas had none and Jack had two bad karma cards, it meant that when Douglas died his karmic balance would be negative and he'd go to hell.

"You are one seriously evil dude tonight, Jack," said Raymond. "I like your style. Let's see what happens with this one." He laid down an evil power card that said,

"ANGRY OINKERS"

doubles the damage of  
all pigs on a given pig  
attack

"Hey, how dead can I get?" asked Douglas.

"We won't find out on this turn," said Grandpa. He laid down a good power card that said,

"FAIR IS FAIR"  
Causes the person  
who released the  
pigs to take the  
damage from a  
pig attack (only

when pigs are  
released on  
someone else)

"Son of a gun!" shouted Jack. "You can't do this to me!"

"Can so."

"I'm not even on a pigpath!" It was true. Jack's playing piece -- the plastic triceratops -- was on a square with no path connecting it to the pigpen.

"Doesn't matter," said Tom. "You're taking the damage from the attack on Douglas, so the pigs will still follow his pigpath."

"And since you just played that evil power on Douglas switching your karma, you get a new evil power card of your very own," said Grandpa. "So if you die, you'll go to hell."

The pigs started down the path. As each baby pig advanced to a new dot on the path, Jack got to roll one die. If he got a one or a two, the pig was "popped" and returned to the pen. He wasn't lucky -- he only popped two pigs, so five reached him and he was dead before Momma could even start her run down the path.

Just before the last pig reached him, though, he played the other Release-the-Pigs card that he had got from Rainie, and since this one was "for the good of the whole" he got a good karma card for it. "Ha!" he said. "It's a ten and my bad karma card was only a four. I'll go to heaven, and Douglas still has to face the pigs!"

So once again the pigs were lined up and started down the path. Rainie looked again at the cards she had gotten from Jack. One of them said,

"PERHAPS I CAN HELP"  
Allows you to heal  
another player of  
all damage.  
(Will not work after  
they have been  
killed).

She waited until Douglas was down to his last two life-pennies, and played the card.

"You are my hero," he said.

"You're just too young to die," said Rainie.

"There's still some more pigs," Jack pointed out.

"Not enough to kill me," said Douglas.

"But," said Tom, "what if Momma rides again!" He slapped down an evil power card that said,

"MOMMA RIDES AGAIN"  
causes the momma pig to come  
down the path twice.

"This has gone too far!" cried Cecil. "I say Momma is drunk as a

skunk." He laid down a good power called "SOUSED SOW" that was supposed to keep Momma home.

"I hate do-gooders," said Raymond. He laid down an evil power card that said,

"I HATE  
DO-GOODERS"  
Allows you to  
cancel a Good  
power before it  
takes effect.

"So Momma rides twice," said Tom. "That'll be eight life-pennies if she makes it both times, and that plus the two babies and you could die, Douglas."

"Good to know," said Douglas. "Is this how you talk to your patients?"

"I'm a dermatologist," said Tom. "My patients don't die, they just put bags over their heads."

"Let's make sure of this," said Raymond, laying down another card.

"PIGS CAN FLY"  
pigs move 2 squares  
each step instead of 1.

"I'm dead," said Douglas. And it was true. The pigs came down the path, Momma twice, and all his life-pennies were gone.

"Dead and in hell," said Jack cheerfully.

"Boy am I nice," said Grandpa, laying down a card.

"Not `Boy Am I Nice'!" wailed Jack.

But it was the Boy-Am-I-Nice card. Grandpa took on himself all of the bad karma Douglas had gotten from Jack, leaving Douglas with no karma at all. "And that counts as good karma," said Douglas, "and so I go to heaven."

"No, no, no," moaned Jack.

"I'm in heaven while you're in hell, Jack," said Douglas. "Which is the natural order of the universe."

"Do people get to stay in heaven if they gloat?" asked Rainie.

"Absolutely. It's about the only fun thing that people in heaven are allowed to do," said Grandpa.

"And you should know, Grandpa," said Jack.

"All my old friends have gone to heaven," said Grandpa, "and not one of them is having any fun at all."

"They talk to you?" asked Rainie.

"No. They send me postcards that say `Having a wonderful time. Wish you were here.' They're all gloating."

The game went on, the power cards flying thick and fast, with everybody praying like crazy to get more power cards. When someone didn't have enough beans to pray, somebody would invariably lend him a few. And Rainie noticed that there actually was a remarkable amount of bean-stealing when people weren't looking. In the meantime, Douglas had eaten every single brown peanut M&M in the bowl. "It really does look more festive when you do that," said Rainie.

"Do what?"

"Take the brown ones out. It looks so much brighter."

"Sometimes he leaves only the red and green ones," said Raymond. "At Christmastime, especially."

Douglas got out of heaven after three turns there, and before long he had caught up with the others -- or rather, the others had been sent back or killed or whatever so often that he was about even with them. Jack, however, was never even able to get past the slime stage and up to the level of newt. "The game knows," said Douglas. "Slime thou art, and slime thou shalt remain."

"Makes me want to go wash," said Jack.

"That's a question," said Douglas. "If slime washed, what would it wash off? I mean, what seems dirty to slime?"

The game ebbed and flowed, people ganging up on each other and then, at odd moments, pitching in and helping somebody out with a good power card. Rainie began to realize that crazy as it was, this game really was like life. Even though people could only do to each other whatever was permitted by the power cards they randomly drew, it took on the rhythms of life. Things would be going great, and then something bad would happen and everything would look hopeless, and then you'd come back from the dead and the dice would be with you again and you'd be OK. They didn't take it easy on Rainie, and she played with the same gusto as everyone else, but the dice were with her, so that she seemed to make up her losses quite easily, and seemed to have exactly the power card she needed time after time.

Then Rainie prayed successfully to the Baby of Sorrow and the evil card she drew was an event, not a power.

"TAKE A BREAK"  
everyone relax, eat some  
food (at host's expense)  
call your spouses or  
whatever. After all,  
what's life for?

"About time!" said Tom. "I'm hungry."

"You've had your hands in the potato chips all night," said Douglas.

"That just means my hands are greasy."

"Nobody can eat just one," added Raymond.

They were already up from the table and moving toward the

kitchen. "Should I draw another power card to replace this?" asked Rainie.

"Naw," said Jack. "When the card says take a break, we take a break. You can finish your turn when we get back."

In the kitchen, Douglas was nuking some lasagna.

"It doesn't have that revolting cottage cheese this time, does it?" Raymond was asking when Rainie came in.

"It's ricotta cheese," said Douglas.

"Oh, excuse me, ricotta cheese."

"And I made the second pan without it, just for you."

"Oh, I have to wait for the second pan, eh?"

"Wait for it or wear it," said Douglas.

Rainie pitched in and helped, but she noticed that none of them seemed to expect her to do the dishes. They cleaned up after themselves right along, so that the kitchen never got disgusting. They weren't really little boys after all.

The lasagna was pretty good, though of course the microwave heated it unevenly so that half of it was burning hot and the other half was cold. She carried her plate into the family room, where most of them were eating.

"They'll call them `the oughts,'" Grandpa was saying.

"They'll call what `the oughts?'" asked Rainie.

"The first ten years of the next century. You know, `ought-one,' `ought-two.' When I was a kid people still remembered the oughts, and people always talked about them that way. `Back in ought-five.' Like that."

"Yeah, but back then they still used the word ought for zero, too," said Douglas. "Nobody'd even know what it meant today."

"People won't use ought even if they ought to," said Tom. Several of the men near him dipped a finger into whatever they were drinking and flicked a little of the liquid onto Tom, who bowed his head graciously.

"What about zero?" said Raymond. "Just call the first two decades `the zeroes' and `the teens.'"

"People aren't going to say `zero-five,'" said Douglas. "Besides, zero has such a negative connotation. `Last year was a real zero.'"

"Aren't there any other words for zero?" asked Rainie.

"I've got it!" said Tom. "The zips! Zip-one, zip-two, zip-three."

"That's it!" cried Raymond.

Douglas tried it out. "`Back in zip-nine, when Junior got his Ph.D.' That works pretty well. It has style."

"`I know what's happening, you young whippersnapper,'" said

Cecil, putting on an old man's voice. "`I remember the nineties! I didn't grow up in the zips, like you.'"

"This is great!" said Tom. "Let's write to our Congressman and get it made into a law. The next decade will be called `the zips!'"

"Don't make it a law, or they'll find a way to tax it," said Raymond.

"Fine with me," said Tom, "if I get a percentage for having thought of it."

Rainie noticed when Grandpa got up, set his plate down, and stepped outside. Probably going for a smoke, thought Rainie. And now that she thought of smoking, she wanted to. And now that she wanted to, she found herself getting up without a second thought. It was cold outside, she knew, and her coat wasn't that warm, but she needed to get out there.

And not just for the cigarette. In fact, when she got outside and looked into her purse, she realized that she didn't have any cigarettes. When had she stopped carrying them? How long had she not even noticed that she didn't have any?

"Nasty habit," said Grandpa.

She turned. He was sitting on the porch swing. Not smoking.

"I thought you came out here to smoke," said Rainie.

"Naw," he said. "I just got to thinking about the people I knew who remembered the oughts, and I liked thinking about them, and so I came out here so I could hold the thought without getting distracted."

"Well, I didn't mean to disturb you."

"No problem," said Grandpa. "I'm old enough that my thoughts aren't very complicated anymore. I get hold of one, it just goes around and around until it bumps into a dead brain cell and then I just stand there and wonder what I was thinking about."

"You're not so old," said Rainie. "You hold your own with those young men in there."

"I am so old. And they aren't all that young anymore, either."

He was right. This was definitely a party of middle-aged men. Rainie thought back to the beginning of her career and remembered that in those days, people in their forties seemed so powerful. They were the Establishment, the ones to be rebelled against. But now that she was in her forties herself she understood that if anything middle-aged people were less powerful than the young. They had less chance of changing anything. They seemed to fit into the world, not because they had made the world the way it was or because they even particularly liked it, but because they had to fit in so they could keep their jobs and feed their families. That's what I never understood when I was young, thought Rainie. I knew it with my head, but not with my heart -- that pressure of feeding a family.

Or maybe I did know it, and hated what it did to people. To my parents. Maybe that's why my marriages didn't last and I never had any babies. Because I never wanted to be forty.



Surprise. I'm past forty anyway, and lonely to boot.

"I've got a question I want you to answer," she said to Grandpa. "Straight, no jokes."

"I knew you'd get around to asking."

"Oh, really?" she said. "Since you're so knowledgeable, do you happen to know what the question is?"

"Maybe." Grandpa got up and walked near her and leaned against the porch railing, whistling. The breath came out of his mouth in a continuous little puff of vapor.

He looked unbearably smug, and Rainie longed to take him down just a notch. "OK, what did I want to know?"

"You want to know why I called you a ghost."

That was exactly what she wanted to ask, but she couldn't stand to admit that he was right. "That wasn't my question, but as long as you bring it up, why did you say that? If it was a joke I didn't get it. You hurt my feelings."

"I said it because it's true. You're just haunting us. We can see you, but we can't touch you in any way."

"I have been touched in a hundred places since I came here."

"You got nothing at risk here, Ida Johnson," said Grandpa. "You don't care."

Rainie thought of Minnie. Of Douglas and his kids. "You're wrong, Grandpa Spaulding. I care very much."

"You care with your heart, maybe, but not with your soul. You care with those feelings that come and go like breezes, nothing that's going to last. You're playing with house money here. No matter how it comes out, you can't lose. You're going to come away from Harmony Illinois with more than you brought here."

"Maybe so," said Rainie. "Is that a crime?"

"No ma'am. Just a discovery. Something I noticed about you and I didn't think you'd noticed about yourself."

"Well ain't you clever, Grandpa." She smiled when she said it, so he'd know she was teasing him, not really being snide. But it hurt her feelings all over again, mostly because she could see now that he was right. How could anything she did here be real, after all, when nobody even knew her right name? In a way Ida Johnson was her right name -- it was her mother's name, anyway, and didn't Douglas Spaulding have the same name as his father? Didn't he give the same name to his son? Why couldn't she use her mother's name? How was that a lie, really, when you looked at it the right way? "Ain't you clever. You found out my secret. Grandpa Spaulding, Gray Detective. Sees a strange woman in his parlor one November evening and all at once he knows everything there is to know about her."

Grandpa waited a moment before answering. And his answer wasn't really an answer. More like he just let slip whatever her words made him think of. "My brother Tom and I did that one summer. Kept a list of Discoveries and Revelations. Like noticing that you were a

ghost."

Every time he said it, it stung her deeper. Still, she tried to keep her protest playful-sounding. "When you prick me, do I not bleed?"

He ignored her. "We made another list, too. Rites and Ceremonies. All the things we always did every year, we wrote them down, too, when we did them that summer. First stinkbug we stepped on. First harvest of dandelions."

"They got chemicals to kill the dandelions now," said Rainie.

"Stinkbugs too, for that matter," said Grandpa. "Very convenient."

Rainie looked through the window. "They're settling back down to play the game in there."

"Go on back in then, if you want. Haunt whoever you want. Us mortals can't determine your itinerary."

She was tired of his sniping at her. But it didn't make her angry. It just made her sad. As if she had lost something and she couldn't even remember what it was. "Don't be mean to me," she said softly.

"Why shouldn't I?" he answered. "I see you setting up to do some harm to my family, Ida Johnson or whoever you are."

It couldn't be that Rainie was doing something to tip everybody off how much she was attracted to Douglas Spaulding, to the idea of him. It had to be that people around here were just naturally suspicious. "Do you say that to every stranger in town, or just the women?"

"You're one hungry woman, Ida Johnson," said Grandpa, cheerfully enough.

"Maybe I haven't been getting my vitamins."

"You can get pretty malnourished on a diet of stolen food."

That was it. The last straw. She didn't have to put up with any more accusations. "I'm done talking with you, old man." She meant to make a dramatic exit from the porch, but the door to the parlor wouldn't open.

"That door's painted shut," he said helpfully. "You want the other one." He pointed around to the far side of the bay window, where the door she had come out of was open a crack. The noises of the men at the table surged and faded like waves on the shore.

She took two steps toward that door, stalking, angry, and then realized that Grandpa was laughing. For a moment she wanted to slap him, to stop him from thinking he was so irresistibly wise, judging her the way adults always did. But she didn't slap him. Instead she plunked back down on the swing beside him and laughed right along.

Finally they both stopped laughing; even the silent gusts of laughter settled down; even the lingering smiles faded. It was cold, just sitting there, not talking, not even swinging.

"What was your question, anyway?" he asked out of nowhere.

For a moment she couldn't think what he was talking about. Then she remembered that she had denied that he was right when he

guessed her question. "Oh, nothing," she said.

"It was important enough for you to come out here into the cold, wasn't it? Might as well ask me, cause here I am, and next week you can't be sure, I'm seventy-four going on seventy-five."

She still couldn't bring herself to admit that he had been right. Or rather, she couldn't admit that she had lied about it. "It was a silly question."

He said nothing. Just waited.

And as he waited, a question did come to her. "Your grandson, Dougie, he said that there were some things that nobody in town knew, and one of them was his father's middle name."

Grandpa Spaulding sighed.

"You can tell me," said Rainie. "After all, I'm a ghost."

"Douglas has never forgiven me for naming him the way I did. And sometimes I'm sorry I did it to him. How was I supposed to know that the name would turn trendy -- as a girl's name? To me it was a boy's name, still is, a name full of sweat and sneakers and flies buzzing and jumping into the lake off a swing and almost drowning. A name that means open windows and hot fast crickets chirping in the sultry night."

"Summer," she said. A murmur. A whisper. A sweet memory on a cold night like this.

"That's right," he said. "I named him Douglas Summer Spaulding."

She nodded, thinking that Summer was the kind of name a sentimental, narcissistic fourteen-year-old girl would choose for herself. "You're lucky he didn't sue you when he came of age."

"I explained it to him. The way I explained it to my wife. I wanted to name him for something perfect, a dream to hold onto, or at least to wish for, to try for."

"You don't have to try for summer," said Rainie. "You just have to have the guy come and service the air conditioner."

"You don't believe that," he said, looking appalled.

"Oh, aren't ghosts allowed to tease old eccentrics?"

"I didn't name him for just any old summer, you know. I named him for one summer in particular. The summer of 1928, to be exact, the perfect summer. Twelve years old. Living in Grandpa's and Grandma's boarding house with my brother Tom. I knew it was perfect even at the time, not just thinking back on it. That summer was the place where God lived, the place where he filled my heart with love, the moment, the long exquisite twelve-week moment when I discovered that I was alive and that I liked it. The next summer Grandpa was dead, and the next year the Depression was under way and I had to work all summer to help put food on the table. I wasn't a kid anymore after summer 1928."

"But you were still alive," Rainie said.

"Not really," said Grandpa. "I remembered being alive, but I was coasting. Summer of '28 was like I had me a bike at the top of Culligan Hill and from up there I could see so far -- I could see past the edge of every horizon. All so beautiful, spread out in front of me like Grandma's supper table, strange-looking and sweet-smelling and bound to be delicious. And so I got on the bike and I pushed off and never had to touch the pedals at all, I just coasted and coasted and coasted."

"Still coasting?" asked Rainie. "Never got to the supper table?"

"When you get down there and see things close, it isn't a supper table anymore, Rainie. It turns out to be the kitchen, and you aren't there to eat, you're there to fix the meal for other people. Grandma's kitchen was the strangest place. Nothing was anywhere that made sense. Sugar in every place except the canister marked sugar. Onions out on the counter and the knives never put away and the spices wherever Grandma last set them down. Chaos. But oh, Rainie, that old lady could cook. She had miracles in her fingers."

"What about you? Could you cook?"

He looked at her blankly.

"When you stopped coasting and found out that life was a kitchen."

"Oh." He remembered the stream of the conversation. "No," he said, chuckling. "No ma'am, I was no chef. But I didn't have to do it alone. Didn't get married till I got back from the war, twenty-nine years old in 1945, I still got the mud of Italy under my fingernails and believe me, I've scrubbed them plenty, but there was my Marjory, and she gave me three children and the second one was a boy and I named him Douglas after myself and then I named him for the most perfect thing I ever knew, I named him for a dream ..."

"For a ghost," said Rainie.

He looked at her so sadly. "For the opposite of a ghost, you poor child."

Douglas opened the parlor door and leaned out into the night. "Aren't you two smart enough to come in out of the cold?"

"One of us is," said Grandpa, but he didn't move.

"We're starting up," said Douglas, "and it's still your turn, Ida."

"Coming," said Rainie, getting up.

Douglas slipped back inside.

She helped Grandpa Spaulding out of the swing. "Don't get me wrong," he said, patting her back as she led the way to the door. "I like you. You're really something."

"Mmm," said Rainie.

"And if I can feel that way about you when you're pretending to be something you're not, think how much I'd like you if you actually told the truth about something."

She came through the door blushing, with anger and with

embarrassment and with that thrill of fear -- was she found out? Did Grandpa Spaulding somehow know who she really was?

Maybe he did. Without knowing the name Rainie Pinyon, maybe he knew exactly who she was anyway.

"Whose turn is it?" asked Tommy.

"Ida's," somebody said.

"What is she, an emu?"

"No, human. Look, she's a human."

"How did she get so far without us noticing?"

"Not to worry!" cried Douglas Summer Spaulding. He raised a red-lettered card over his head. "For the good of the whole -- Release the Pigs!"

The others gave a rousing cheer.

"Give me my good karma," said Douglas. Then he grinned sheepishly in Rainie's face. "You have only five life-pennies and there are seven piglets and the pig-path is only three dots long, so I sincerely hope with all my heart that your karmic balance is of a sort to send you to heaven, because, dear lady, the porkers from purgatory are going to eat your shorts."

"Heaven?" said Rainie. "Not likely."

But she popped every one of the pigs before they got to her. It was like she couldn't roll anything but ones and twos.

"Grandpa's right," said Tommy. "She really is a ghost! The pigs went right through her!"

Then she rolled eighteen, three sixes, and it was enough to win.

"Supreme god!" Tommy cried. "She has effed the ineffable!"

"What's her karmic balance?"

She flipped over the karma cards. Three evils and one good, but the good was a ten and the evils were all low numbers and they balanced exactly.

"Zero counts as good," said Douglas. "How could anyone have supposed otherwise? So I bet I come in second with a balance of nine on the good side."

They all tallied and Grandpa finished last, his karmic balance a negative fifty.

"That's the most evil I ever saw in all the years we've been feeding the baby," said Tommy. He switched to a midwestern white man's version of black dialect. "Grandpa, you bad."

Grandpa caught Rainie's eye and winked. "It's the truth."

They all stayed around and helped finish off the refreshments and clean up from dinner, talking and laughing. Tom was the first to go. "If you're coming with me, Ida, the time is now."

"Already?" She shouldn't have said that, but she really did hate to go. It was the best night she'd had in months. Years.

"Sorry," he said. "But I've got to scrape some moles off people's faces first thing tomorrow, and I have to be bright-eyed and bushy-tailed or I accidentally take off noses and ears and people get so testy with me when I do that."

"That's fine, I really don't mind going."

"No, you go on ahead, Tom," said Douglas. "Somebody else can take her home."

"I can," said Raymond.

"Me too," said Jack. "Right on my way."

They all knew where she was living, of course. It made her smile. Whether I knew them or not, they cared enough about me to notice where I lived. Smalltown nosiness could be ugly if you looked at it one way, but kind of sweet and comforting if you looked at it another way entirely.

After a while she drifted away from the conversation in the kitchen and began wandering a little in the house. It was a bad habit of hers -- her mother used to yell at her about it when she was a little kid. Don't go wandering around in strangers' houses. But curiosity always got the better of her. She drifted into the living room. No TV, lots of books. Fiction, biography, history, science -- so that's what accountants read. I never would have guessed.

And then up the stairs, just to see what was there. Not meaning to pry. Just wanting to know.

Standing in the upstairs hall, in the near darkness, she could hear the children breathing. Which room is which, she wondered. The bathroom had the nightlight in it; she could see that the first two rooms belonged to the kids, one on the right, one on the left. The other two rooms had to be the one Douglas shared with his absent wife, and Grandpa's. A houseful. The extended family. Three generations present under one roof. This is the American home that everyone dreams of and nobody has. Dad goes off to work, Mom stays home, Grandpa lives right with you, there's a white picket fence and probably a dog in a nice little doghouse in the back yard. Nobody lives like this, except those who really work at it, those who know what life is supposed to be like and are determined to live that way.

Lord knows Mom and Dad weren't like this. Fighting all the time, clawing at each other to get their own way. And who's to say that Douglas and Jaynanne aren't like that, too? I haven't seen them together, I don't know what they're like.

But she did know. From the way the kids were with their father. That doesn't come out of a home torn apart with power struggles, with mutual fear and loathing.

She walked down the hall -- just to see -- and opened the last two doors. The one on the right had to be Grandpa's room, and she closed the door immediately. The one on the left had the big bed. Douglas's room.

She would have closed the door and gone downstairs at once, except that in the faint light from the bathroom nightlight she caught a

glimpse of bright reflection from an old familiar shape, and suddenly she was filled with a longing that was so familiar, so right, that she couldn't resist it, not even for a moment. She snapped on the light and yes, it was what she had thought, a guitar, leaning against the wall beside the dresser that was obviously his -- cluttered on top, no knick-knacks.

Pulling the door almost closed behind her, she walked to the guitar and picked it up. Not a particularly good make, but not a bad one. And the strings were steel, not that wimpy nylon, and when she strummed them softly they were perfectly in tune. He has played this guitar today, she thought. And now my hands are holding something that his hands have held. I don't share the having of children with him, I don't share this sweet impossible house with him, but he plays this instrument and I can do that too.

She didn't mean to play, but she couldn't help herself. It had been so long since she had even wanted to touch a musical instrument that, now that the hunger had returned to her, she had no will to resist it. Why should she? It was music that defined who she was in this world. It was music that gave her fame and fortune. It was music that was her only comfort when people let her down, which was always, always.

She played those old mournful melodies, the plucked-out ones, not the strumming tunes, not the dancey, frolicking ones. She played softly, gently, and hummed along, no words, no words ... words would come later, after the music, after the mood. She remembered the hot African wind coming across the Mediterranean and drying her after a late-night swim on a beach in Mallorca. She remembered the lover she had had then, the one who yelled at her when he was drunk but who made love in the morning like no man had ever made love to her before, gluttonously, gorgeously, filling her like the sun coming up over the sea. Where was he now? Old. He'd be in his sixties now. He might be dead now. I didn't have his baby, either, but he didn't want one. He was a sunrise man, he was always gone by noon.

Tossing and turning, that's what sleep was like in Mallorca. Sticky and sweaty and never more than a couple of hours at a time. In the darkness you get up and stand on the veranda and let the sea breeze dry the sweat off you until you could go back inside and lie down again. And there he'd be, asleep, yes, but even though you were facing away from him you knew he'd reach out to you in his sleep, he'd hold you and press against you and his sweat would be clammy on your cold body, and his arm would arch over you and his hand would reach around you and cup your breast, and he'd start moving against you, and through it all he'd never even wake up. It was second nature to him. He could do it in his sleep.

What did Mallorca have to do with Harmony, Illinois? Why were tunes of hot Spanish nights coming out of this guitar here in the cold of December, with Christmas coming on and the little dying firs and pines standing up in the tree lots? It was the dream of love, that's what it was, the dream but not the memory of love because in the long run it never turned out to be real. In the long run she always woke up from love and felt it slip away the way dreams slip away in the morning, retreating all the faster the harder you try to remember them. It was always a mirage, but when she got thirsty for it the way she was now, it would come back, that dream, and make her warm again, make her sweat with the sweetness of it.

Maybe there was a noise. Maybe just the movement at the door.

She looked up, and there were young Dougie and Rose, both of them awake, their faces sleepy but their eyes bright.

"I'm sorry," said Rainie, immediately setting the guitar aside.

"That's Dad's guitar," said Rose.

"You're good," said Dougie. "I wish I could play like that."

"I wish Dad could play like that," said Rose, giggling.

"I shouldn't be in here."

"What was that song?" asked Dougie. "I think I've heard it before."

"I don't think so," said Rainie. "I was making it up as I went along."

"It sounded like one of Dad's records."

"Well, I guess I'm not very original-sounding," said Rainie. She felt unbelievably awkward. She didn't belong in this room. It wasn't her room. But there they were in the doorway, not seeming to be angry at all.

"Can't you play some more?" said Dougie.

"You need your sleep," said Rainie. "I shouldn't have wakened you."

"But we're already awake," said Rose. "And we don't have school tomorrow, it's Saturday."

"No, no," said Rainie. "I have to get home." She brushed apologetically past them and hurried down the stairs.

Everybody was gone. The house was quiet. How long had she played?

Douglas was in the kitchen, making a honey sandwich. "It's my secret vice," he said. "It's making me fat. Want one?"

"Sure," she said. She couldn't remember ever having a honey sandwich in her life. She watched him pull the honey out of the jar, white and creamy, and spread it thickly on a slice of bread.

"Lid or no lid?" he asked.

"No lid," she said. She picked it up and bit into it and it was wonderful. He bit into his. A thin strand of honey stretched between his mouth and the bread, then broke, leaving a thread of honey down his chin.

"It's messy, but I don't care," he said.

"Where do you buy bread like this?"

"Jaynanne makes it," he said.

Of course. Of course she makes bread.

"Where is everybody?" she asked.



"Went home," said Doug. "Don't worry about a ride. They all had wives waiting for them, and I don't, so I said I'd take you home."

"No, I don't want you to have to go out on a night like this."

"I figured we'd leave a note on Minnie's door telling her you'd be late tomorrow."

"No," said Rainie. "I'll be there on time."

"It's after midnight."

"I've slept less and done more the next day. But I hate to have you have to drive me."

"So what would you do, walk?"

I'd sleep in your bed, Rainie said silently. I'd get up in the morning and we'd make breakfast together, and we'd eat it together, and then when the kids got up we'd fix another breakfast for them, and they'd laugh with us and be glad to see us. And we'd smile at each other and remember the sweetness in the dark, the secret that the children would never understand until twenty, thirty years from now. The secret that I'm only beginning to understand tonight.

"Thanks, I'll ride," said Rainie.

"Dad's out seeing to the dog. He worries that the dog gets too cold on nights like this."

"What, does he heat the doghouse?"

"Yes, he does," said Douglas. "He keeps bricks just inside the fireplace and then when he puts the fire out at night he wraps the hot bricks in a cloth and carries them outside and puts them in the doghouse."

"Does the dog appreciate it?"

"He sleeps inside with the bricks. He wags his tail. I guess he does." Douglas's bread was gone. She reached up and wiped the honey off his chin with her finger, then licked her finger clean.

"Thanks," he said.

But she could hear more in his voice than he meant to say. She could hear that faint tremble in his voice, the hesitation, the uncertainty. He could have interpreted her gesture as motherly. He could have taken it as a sisterly act. But he did not. Instead he was taking it the way she meant it, and yet he wasn't sure that she really meant it that way.

"Better go," he said. "Morning comes awful early."

They bundled up and went outside. They met Grandpa coming around the front of the house. "Night," Grandpa said.

"Night," said Rainie. "It was good talking to you."

"My pleasure entirely," he said. He sounded perfectly cheerful, which surprised her. Why should it surprise her?

Because I'm planning to do what he warned me not to do, thought Rainie. I'm planning to sleep with Douglas Spaulding tonight.

He's mine if I want him, and I want him. Not forever, but tonight, this sweet lonely night when my music came back to me in his house, sitting on his bed, playing his guitar. Jaynanne can spare me this one night, out of all her happiness. There'll be no pain for anyone, and joy for him and me, and there's nothing wrong with that, I don't care what anyone says.

She got in his car and sat beside him, watching the fog of his breath in the cold air as he started the engine. She never took her eyes off him, seeing how the light changed when the headlights came on inside the garage, how it changed again as he leaned over the back seat, guiding the car in reverse down the driveway. He pressed a button and the garage door closed after them.

No one else was on the road. No one else seemed even to exist -- all the houses were dark and still, and the tires crunching on snow were the only noise besides the engine, besides their breathing.

He tried to cover what was happening with chat. "Good game tonight, wasn't it?"

"Mm-hm," she said.

"Fun," he said. "Crazy bunch of guys. We act like children, I know it."

"I like children," she said.

"In fact, my kids are more mature than I am when I'm with those guys."

She remembered speaking to them tonight, their faces so sleepy. "I woke them, I'm afraid. I was playing your guitar. That's a bad habit of mine, intruding in people's houses. Sort of an invited burglar or something."

"I heard you playing," he said.

"Clear downstairs? I thought I was quieter than that."

"Steel strings," he said. "And the vents are all open in the winter. Sound carries. It was beautiful."

"Thanks."

"It was -- beautiful," he said again, as if he had searched for another word and couldn't think of one. "It was the kind of music I've always longed for in my home, but I've never been good enough on the guitar to play like that myself."

"You keep it in tune."

"If I don't the dog barks."

She laughed, and he smiled in return. She couldn't stop looking at him. The heater was on now, so his breath didn't make a fog. The streetlights brightened his face; then it fell dark again. He's not that handsome. I'd never have looked at him twice if I'd met him in L.A. or New York. He would have been just another accountant there. So many bright lights in the city, how can someone like this ever shine there? But here, in the snow, in this small town, I can see the truth. That this is the true light, the one that all those neon lights and strobes and spots and halogens are trying to imitate but never can.

They pulled up in front of her apartment. He switched off his lights. The dark turned bright again almost immediately, as the snow reflected streetlights and moonlight.

I can't sleep with this man, thought Rainie. I don't deserve him. I made my choice many years ago, and a man like him is forever out of reach. Sleeping with him would be another self-deception, like so many I've indulged in before. He'd still be Jaynanne's husband and Dougie's and Rose's father and I'd still be a stranger, an intruder. If I sleep with him tonight I'd have to leave town tomorrow, not because I care what anybody thinks, not because anybody'd even know, but because I couldn't stand it, to have come so close and still not belong here. This is forbidden fruit. If I ate of it, I'd know too much, I'd see how naked I am in my own life, my old life.

He opened his car door.

"No," she said. "You don't need to help me out."

But he was already walking around the car, opening her door. He gave her a hand getting out. The snow squeaked under their feet.

"Thanks for the ride," she said. "I can get up the stairs OK."

"I know," he said. "I just don't like dropping people off without seeing them safe inside."

"You'd walk Tom to the door?"

"So I'm a sexist reactionary," he said. "I can't help it, I was raised that way. Always see the woman safely to the door."

"There aren't many rapists out on a night like this," said Rainie.

Ignoring her arguments, he followed her up the stairs and waited while she got the key out and unlocked the deadbolt and the knob. She knew that he'd ask to come inside. Knew that he'd try to kiss her. Well, she'd tell him no. Not because Minnie and Grandpa told her to, but because she had her own kind of integrity. Sleeping with him would be a lie she was telling to herself, and she wouldn't do it.

But he didn't try to kiss her. He stepped back as she pushed open the door and gave a little half-wave with his gloved hand and said, "Thanks."

"For what?" she asked.

"For bringing your music into my house tonight."

"Thanks," she said. It touched her that it seemed to mean so much to him. "Sorry I woke your kids."

He shook his head. "I never would have asked you to play. But I hoped. Isn't that stupid? I tuned my guitar for you, and then I hid it upstairs, and you found it anyway. Karma, right?"

It took a moment for her to realize what it meant, him saying that. In this town she had never touched a musical instrument or even told anybody that she played guitar. So why did he know to tune it for her?

"I'm such a fool," she whispered. "I thought my disguise was so perfect."

"I love your music," he said. "Since I heard the first note of it. Your songs have been at the heart of all the best moments of my life."

"How did you know?"

"You've done it before," he said. "Dropped out. Lived under an assumed name. Right? It took a while for me to realize why you looked so familiar. I kept coming back in to the cafe until finally I was sure. When you talked to me that day, you know, when you chewed me out, your voice -- I had just listened to your live album that morning. I was pretty sure then. And tonight when you played, then I really knew. I wasn't going to say anything, but I had to thank you ... for the music. Not just tonight, all of it. I'm sorry. I won't bother you again."

She was barely hearing him, though; her mind had snagged on the phrase he said before: Her songs had been at the heart of all the best moments of his life. It made her weak in the knees, those words. Because it meant that she was part of this, after all. Through her music. Her songs had all her longings in them, everything she'd ever known or felt or wished for, and he had brought those songs into his life, had brought her into his home. Of course Dougie thought she sounded like his dad's records -- they had grown up hearing her songs. She did belong there in that house. He had probably known her music before he even knew his wife.

And now he was going to turn away and go on down the stairs and out to his car and leave her here alone and she couldn't let him go, not now, not now. She reached out and caught his arm; he stopped on the next-to-top step and that put them at the same level, and she kissed him. Kissed him and clung to him, kissed him and tasted the honey in his mouth. His arms closed around her. It was maddening to have their thick winter coats between them. She reached down, still kissing him, and fumbled to unbutton her coat, then his; she stepped inside his coat as if it were his bedroom. She pressed herself against him and felt his desire, the heat of his body.

At last the endless kiss ended, but only because she was ready to take him inside her room, to share with him what she knew he needed from her. She stepped up into her doorway and turned to lead him in.

He was rebuttoning his coat.

"No," she said. "You can't go now."

He shook his head and kept fastening the buttons. He was slow and clumsy, with his gloves on.

"You want me, Douglas Spaulding, and I need you more than you know."

He smiled, a shy, embarrassed smile. "Some fantasies can't come true," he said.

"I'm not fantasizing you, Douglas Spaulding."

"I'm fantasizing you," he answered.

"I'm real," she said. "You want me."

"I do," he said. "I want you very much."

"Then have me, and let me have you. For one night. Like the music. You've had my music with you all these years. I want the memory of your love with me. Who could begrudge us that?"

"Nobody would begrudge us anything."

"Then stay with me."

"It's not me you love," said Douglas, "and it's not my love you want."

"No?"

"It's my life you love, and my life you want."

"Yes," she said. "I want your life inside me."

"I know," he said. "I understand. I wanted this life, too. The difference between us is that I wanted it so much I did the things you have to do to get it. I set aside my career ambitions. I moved away from the city, from the center of things. I turned inward, toward my children, toward my wife. That's how you get the life I have."

Against her will, there were tears in her eyes. Feeling him slip away she wanted him all the more. "So you have it, and you won't share, is that it?"

"No, you don't understand," he said. "I can't give it to you."

"Because you're afraid of losing it yourself. Afraid of what all these small-minded people in this two-bit town will think."

"No, Rainie Pinyon, I'm not afraid of what they'll think of me, I'm afraid of what I'll know about myself. Right now, standing here, I'm the kind of man who keeps his promises. An hour from now, leaving here, I'd never be that kind of man again. It's the man who keeps his promises who gets the kind of life I have. Even if nothing else changed, I'd know that I was not that man anymore, and so everything would be changed. It would all be dust and ashes in my heart."

"You are a selfish bastard and I hate you," said Rainie. At the moment she said it, she meant it with all her heart. He was forbidding her. He was refusing her. She had offered him real love, her best love, her whole heart. She had allowed herself to need him and he was letting some idiotic notion of honor or something get in the way even though she knew that he wanted her too.

"Yeah," he said. He turned and walked down the stairs. She closed the door and stood there with her hand on the knob as she heard him start the car and drive away. It was hot in her apartment, with the heater on, with her coat on. She pulled it off and threw it against the door. She pulled off her sweater, her shoes, all her clothes and threw them against the walls and crawled into bed and cried, the way she used to cry when her mother didn't let her do what she needed to do. Cried herself to sleep.

She woke up with the sun shining into her window. She had overslept. She was late for work. She jumped out of bed and got dressed, hurrying. Minnie will be furious. I let her down.

But by the time she had her clothes on, she knew the truth. She had overslept because in her heart she knew she was done with this place. She had no reason to get up early because working for Minnie

Wilcox wasn't her job anymore. She had found all that she was looking for when she first dropped out and went searching. Her music was back. She had something to sing about again. She could go home.

She didn't even pack. Just took her purse with all her credit cards and walked to the post office, which was where the buses stopped. She didn't care which one -- St. Louis, Chicago, Des Moines, Cairo, Indianapolis, any bus that got her to an airport city would do. It turned out to be St. Louis.

By the time she saw the Gateway Arch she had written a song about feeding the baby of love. It turned out well enough that it got her some decent radio airplay for the first time in years, her first top-forty single since seventy-five.

Tried to walk that lonely highway  
Men and women, two by two  
Promising, promising they will be true  
You went your way, I'll go my way  
Feeling old and talking new  
Whatever happened to you?  
I wonder what happened to you?

Spoke to someone in the air  
Heard but didn't heed my prayer  
Couldn't feed it anyway  
Didn't have the price to pay  
You got to feed the baby  
Hungry, hungry, hungry baby  
Got to feed the baby of love

She had her music back again, the only lover that had ever been faithful to her. Even when it tried to leave her, it always came home to her in the end.

