

Dear Mrs Parker

Peter Fox March 2013

In January 1923 Dorothy Parker made her first suicide attempt. She was twenty-nine and had nothing permanent to show but a failed marriage, a recent failed affair and the resulting legal but distressing abortion. She dressed smartly but lived in a shabby apartment, was lonely, drank heavily in heavy-drinking company but wasn't penniless. Her work and social life consisted of the New York clique of journalists, writers, columnists, actors, musicians and artists epitomised by the Algonquin Round Table. While many members were extremely supportive of each other, when at the table brutal character assassination and New Yorker toughness bred from noisy swearing and insults was the norm. Dorothy couldn't get enough of that excitement.

As soon as she was fit after slashing her wrists with a razorblade she returned to the Round Table like an asbestos moth. Pale blue ribbons gaily tied on her bandages showed killing yourself was just an eccentric whim not to be taken seriously. What would I have done if I'd been at the Algonquin that day? I like to think I'd have sent this note across.

*Dear Mrs Parker,
I'm concerned for you and wish you better. I have an ear to listen with but not a shoulder to cry on. I want to pick you up but not to hug you in your sorrow. You do the despair and I'll do the hope. Meet me. Yours sincerely Merlin Smallbone, Smallbone, Fox and Peters, Advertising Agents, 101 Madison Avenue*

Fox and Peters were fictional and my office was three clerks and myself. If was any smaller it would have been condemned by the Kennel Club. I could have expanded but preferred to pay bonuses to Effie, Hettie and Mabel and be on hand to be the hand they held when they could do a deal for themselves with a little hand-holding. I was only half-kidding when I said the agency would have to be renamed Mabeffenhet and Smallbone. They liked me because I liked them, had fun when we could and paid them well. I liked them because they looked after me as sisters inviting me to their parlour. After the War I found it easier to boast with the boys to forget than cuddle with the girls. Any one of them would have been happiness in my empty apartment but I couldn't have one without betraying the other two. The truce we arrived at was they would find me a nice girlfriend, I would love them with equal ruthlessness, and if I introduced one or other to somebody famous that was just chance.

The highlights of my income came from product endorsements from famous people. If Noël Coward endorsed shirts the initial deal meant dollars and shirts for everyone then came extra rewards like 'would he endorse cigarettes' for me and envy from lesser stars for Noël. Then 'Hettie the harpy' would let the client know Noel needed a box of new shirts to be kept sweet, and I'd arrange to have a photographer outside his hotel to see the gift arriving and 'Mabel the mouse' would rattle-off the invoice for services rendered. Our mouse was more of a mongoose when it came to late-payers. My girls were getting to be business-women in their own right, New Yorkers who could punch like Dempsey. Mabel was now pitching half as much as me to existing clients simply by mentioning names then leaving the rest to me. Effie was officially the telephone clerk but really the mistress of the housekeeping, a maid of all work with an imagination bigger than the Statue of Liberty. Taking herself off on one of our domestic laundry, shoe-repair or food errands she'd come back with a lead to a new customer found by chatting in a queue. She'd answer the phone first and see

if there was any fun to be had. When someone calling themselves H-G-Wells rang she asked if that was 'Aych as in Urbert and Gee as in gee nice to talk to you Mister Wells. Merl ain't in but he said there's a photo-opportunity for typewriters at Macy's to be had.' I knew how the girls liked to talk to the great ones so that was fine by me and I knew 'HG' liked women very much from the drunken confidences of the night before. A punched thumbs-up to Effie and that was another two-hundred in our account with the promise of more to come. I really must do something about our success.

Having been a mate of Alexander Woollcott's in France I was eligible for occasional visits to his Round Table. He was a man with an E-F-G-H-Igo. There was nobody in America with a worse writing style or a better opinion of it. At first it was barbed boorish bullying and silly jokes but soon the entertainment value of Bob Benchley, and of course the Venus fly trap of Dorothy Parker, attracted an interesting mix of performers, artists and writers. Harpo Marx was one of the early ones. I got on well with him, his eyes were always watching and teasing in the way of a university professor who gets students to make a wild attempt then with a twist of the eyebrows tosses it to the other students to answer. Dorothy did the same but there's a world of difference between Harpo's kindly encouragement and being tempted onto the butcher's slab by a coquette. He could be as droll or spitting-flinty as any New Yorker news-boy from the Lower East Side but was mostly a urbane college don deciding between a Rembrandt or Rubens to hang in his study. I was an advertising tradesman and knew my place but my private sideline of writing dressed-up documentary pieces using the name 'Dandy Kannik' about the behind-the-scenes life of the New York transport system was beginning to get noticed. It was something that had to be done, but rather me than they. Like the people I wrote about, I played my part and could be useful and might get a nod of grudging respect. Reviewing plays was more exciting for them, congenial and gave opportunities for name-dropping – dropping into acid-baths – than talking to stokers on the ferries or boys who worked in the post-room of City Hall. I knew where I could sell my work but kept quiet about how much it made because it suited me to have everyone assume it was a pay-nothing vanity. I was often asked about my secret access to the fraternity of East-side carmen and Greek-quarter warfingers to which I claimed I'd been lost in the

woods and raised by Miners. That was ample to deter the writers, actors and cartoonists but the artists and playwrights wanted me to take them to observe these strange creatures sweating in the firelight or peering into the dawn fog on the river. Harpo, bless him, knew the taste of dark-bread and work with beatings. The two of us had a bond that was kept secret at the Algonquin and perhaps for our future's would be best denied, but we shared underdog in our blood.

Although I'd seen the waiter hand her the message scribbled on the back of my business card she didn't look at me. After fifteen arid minutes I was about to sort of ask permission to get back to the office when a flapjack with cream was unexpectedly placed in front of me. Underneath the napkin was a curl of pale blue ribbon. My first instinct was to play the viper in the viper-pit and haughtily ignore her. After a few seconds of adjusting to the new equilibrium I was stable in my own world again. I smiled and nodded in her direction and she beckoned me over.

I have a rule, I don't know where I learned it, that when talking to someone sitting down crouch down to be on their level. Perhaps the war made me brutal. Perhaps the Table made me brutal. I said into her dark eyes hiding behind her fringe "Is this your funeral wake?"

"It might as well be."

"It had better not be."

"Have you come to view the body."

"I won't climb into your grave but if I stretch a hand down will you hold on?"

Her brunet flop-fringe covered one quarter of her face but the rest of her broke through the severe mascara and blood-red lipstick to plead patience while conflicting emotions were unknotted. "I'll call."

"I'll wait."

After returning to my food I had to eat it. Shell holes were round. They sported sculpted barbed wire with the bonus of unexpected unpleasantnesses to go with their general circus of the macabre excitement value. Mud, bits of boots and roots, buckles and bare bones of mangled men. While collecting my coat in the lobby I heard the trap-trap-trap of a hurrying woman and her arm appeared through mine. She looked up to me so I bent my knees to come to her level. "When and where?" I asked.

"Your office in a while?"

"Come and meet us at four thirty."

"I was thinking six thirty."

"I'll be there until seven then. Not a minute later. Now you go and talk to Harpo about selling papers without shoes."

To my amazement she took this order without question. That was a good sign.

Back at the office I reported my morning's meetings and lunchtime surprise. In between calls the girls told me what I was doing this evening. My evenings were always vacant.

Until thinking about Dorothy in the elevator it had never occurred to me that the girls might have empty evenings. She was obviously lonely with no shoulder to lean on. Perhaps she was on drugs as well as booze? Why was I a Samaritan? Never anything else. I really meant my offer of my eye to my brother Charles when I shot his out while we were playing Robin Hood.

My evening's free tickets were to *Pawnee Parade* which promised the intellectual stimulation of a blown fuse stretched over an hour and a half. The prize was about as interesting. 'Indian chicken steaks' whatever they were. The girls assured me that the chorus line was full of legs – just what the blue collar workers liked in their papers and who the client wanted to get at. 'Full of legs like turkeys' was my line. I kept that Algonquin thought to myself and promised the girls we'd have a meeting as business man and women together next week. I told them about Mrs Parker and what I'd written on my business card and what happened. I must be the worst boss ever.

Effie said "God help you Merl! She'll bite your head off! You know like those Playing Mantises."

"No? Something bad?"

"One kiss and she bites her partner's head off. And he still loves her."

"Screws her headless?"

"Yes. But I didn't like to say."

"She's a bitch but she needs my help. Slashing your wrists is bad."

Hettie said "Stop wasting your time Merl. Why chase a failure when we need you to pull yourself together. Don't go back to blaming yourself over Florence again. We gotta expand while we can."

Mabel said "Don't you get a man-friend who knows nothing as a partner. But most of all don't you dare get a woman-friend to boss us around."

"I want to help her not go to bed with. I must at least try."

~

The girls left together at five in high spirits for a Friday night full of entertainment. Flappers! Good for them. Hettie had arranged for invitations to a pre-release viewing of *Down to the Sea in Ships* with their latest idol Clara Bow. They were film-mad, dance-mad but as Hettie said "You do the toffs and we'll stretch our legs with the rest." I couldn't help put a coarse meaning on that. I'm sure she didn't mean to hurt me.

I was nervously watching the relays of the Harold Interlocking as they chattered like showers of falling shrapnel to referee the complex routing of the trains fighting

to get into and out of Penn Station. Beside me war veteran 'Sparky' Nicky Noelquist poised with meter and probes in the cable festooned gloom. He watched over those racks like a mother-hen – mother? – Hospital matron? – Matron at Lenox Hill maternity ward. The office door opened, she was there, quite tiny and beautiful in the centre of a huge fur. Overwhelming Chypre perfume caught me out for a moment. The etiquette for one writer interrupting another at a typewriter is to let them finish. Whatever it was I'd been writing was yesterday's dreams. I didn't really know what to do but we were writers weren't we? I pulled the paper out of the typewriter and lined up another sheet.

I am an ear to listen not a shoulder to cry on.

Ha! That's what the relays sounded like. Safety messages typed in a hurry. She looked over my shoulder as writer's etiquette allowed. With disturbing closeness she reached across me and typed. There were a couple of swear words when the machine wasn't like the one she was used to. The back of her neck was stretched out from her fur collar enough to silence me with remorse of abstinence. When she stood up I saw

**You are you like the other BASTards?
or a quer? or liar?**

I wanted another glimpse of that white neck. I typed

(1)No (2)No (3)To myself.

Hungry? N Damn! ice perfume .

She squeezed in front to perch on my knees, battering the keys while I gently kept her safe by holding her tiny waist and gazing with realisation of regrets at her neck. She zipped the paper out, turned then thrust it at me demanding my understanding.

**Empty not hungry.
My diet doesn't suit me.
What good is food to a woman
who has nobody to feed?**

"That's shrapnel in my stomach Dorothy. The sort that spreads guts out on the ground beside you like a split sack. I promise not to cry on your shoulder if you won't cry on mine."

Later we left the office together hoping our partial confessions would be the first of a column. We arrived late to *Pawnee Parade*. In the theatrical business I was nothing more than a hoodlum but Dot was a boss. She glided into the foyer of the 'Olympia' with me on her arm and was so polite and understanding it was joy to watch. Like somebody taking twenty minutes to eat a stick of celery. I tried out my new Harpo impression. Slant questioning lips alternating with a tense smile while looking with raised eyebrows for happy answers. As I caught the first bits of this I developed it with cricked head when Dot needed a break from being fussed by dollar-an-hour staff. "I'm a liar" I whispered to Dot when we left after twenty minutes. She'd reviewed it before and I got

a good deal from a desperate producer so why stay? I'd have to ask the girls if *Pawnee Parade* was a hit. I insisted on seeing the convalescing Mrs Parker got home early and safe. She fought against me but I used my talisman to subdue her. An East River ferry boat stoker, Spook Ernstein, he must have been well over seventy, so sparse you could see every tendon in his body whether glistening in the red flare of the fire or playing the piano of the Salvation Army hostel like every note was a stitch in a holy firmament. One drunken night soon after I returned he gave me a talisman. It was a silver wire ring. 'Look inside that Merl! You see the 'O'? That's a woman's kiss and all a woman's love.' I didn't quite understand him then or now but it was too sincere a gift to ignore. From the doorway her apartment was dishevelled, battered by the noise of the El and contained two sulky dogs that at least had the decency to wag their tails for show but otherwise might as well have been floor mops. Before she could drag me into her lair I was spied from across the hallway. I recognised illustrator, sculptress, painter and bohemian play-girl Neysa McMein. She leant out of a half-open door with authoritarian inquisition.

"I've brought her back safe. Sober too! Really. I've been with her since six. Not a drop!"

"Come and join us then. We've got spare."

I could hear patched-jeans piano coming out of Neysa's apartment and would normally have fallen in without needing a second invitation, but now what? For a second I resumed my indifferent Harpo impersonation but then my stomach was split by shrapnel. "Another night! Not this one. She's on a new diet." Neysa gave me a very sour look. Dot smiled at me, gave me a hug then went into her apartment like the Staten Island ferry slipping the dock. I gave Dot a thumbs up. I gave myself a thumbs-up.

Saturday at our office was mornings only and now 'if you feel like it'. I went because I hadn't got anywhere else to be and ought to show a lead. The girls usually dropped-in for a while for a different pace of tidying-up and getting on with their own work. During the week we were chasing butterfly business and being nice to people who couldn't follow simple instructions or understand being late costs money. I admitted the girls knew their business. Today I tried to finish my railroad piece but that river was dry under Dot's sun. Never mind there was always administration to do. I sweated in the dusty canyons of old contacts to be re-juiced. Hoping to find shade in the monthly accounts I found Effie had every hard fact concreted in and a delicious sheet of promises. I didn't even have the furtive pleasure of adding up the profits as Effie had an end-of week summary jotted on a scrap torn from one of my carbons. How could I be so successful but still more nervous than a twice jilted lover?

Why did the girls look after me? Their lame brother. As an afterthought to Effie's figures she'd written 'Mon 10am – Hair Mon noon – New office?' What a wife! But how impossible to have her without losing the other two! Dot's neck was the fire-bell that made me look for ways to escape four years of guilt. Now what?

The girls arrived in a happy heap at nine-thirty then it went as silent as a tiny office with three purposeful women can be while they deal with telegrams, post, filing, receipts and invoices. I retreated to the aisles of the largest interlocking relay room in the United States and invented a crisis for Nicky – Could I think of a better name? – to deal with. His eyes scanned the blueprint of the master proving-circuit of track seven while his mind stepped across the tracks greasy with January drizzle. Like a submarine captain he looked round at his instruments, made his decision and sent an electrician shooting out into the dawn so that twenty thousand tons of packed trains would continue to flow.'

It was tradition for me to get the elevenses treats on Saturdays. It was a girly thing really but they looked after me, so I pretended this was an emotional investment. Really it was ten floors down the elevator, asking Toni Scipi behind the Deli counter what he thought the girls would like and accepting his suggestion. I didn't put my heart in it. Treats are treats not tokens of a deep love for goodness sake! Back at the office the coffee was poured and the girls picked at the box of cakes with the cackling glee of piratical ravens raiding a jewellery casket.

It turned out I was to be their guest at a business conference. It began now with an innocent question from Mabel about what they'd thought of last night's film preview. Before the others could give an opinion she apologised for ignoring me and asked if Mrs Dorothy Parker turned up and what was she really like. I described our brief evening without giving anything private away. "She's sad and lonely and scares the monkey-balls off the Broadway producers. She was nice to me but only stops to get grovelling apologies or obsequious compliments and then she's away again."

Hettie said "We want to go to Hollywood. All of us. You too. I've got a deal with Warner Brothers I think. They have film stars that need promoting and they want investors. I told Mr. Harbish you were the man who could show Wall Street they knew how to make profits on top of profits. That's what we do isn't it Merl?"

"It sounds good. Are you sure you're not dreaming of being starlets yourselves?"

Effie said "I've been practising my reviews. When Mrs Parker reviews a show I go to see it and try to write the same number of words and find a Bronx-girl's angle. I read all your pieces in *Men's Weekly Reporter* too.

I gave in then. Anyway I didn't really object. They'd got a plan that was better than mine."OK. You say we are hired by Warners to pump their stock. I know you've thought this through Hettie. But why go to Hollywood?"

Hettie said "That's where the stars are. That's where we get the photos. We don't need reviews we need photos."

In France our Colonel, Chips Henderson, killed in a car crash three days after the armistice, would say 'Merlin you're as

precious to me as any man with a rifle.' That made me sick of war and proud to be as good as the other millions of men in it. He made the war personal to us in-the-ranks correspondents. If he'd called me into his office and promoted me to safety I'd have taken it as an insult. At least he died drunk and insensible – He'd earned that. Now it was my turn to lead my troops. "I'm proud... You know the ground... We've won and lost (One of Chip's phrases)..."

Effie was the first to touch me. "We're not in the war Merl. Come with us to Hollywood. You'll be just what they want."

Hettie said "And they want good writers as well."

Mabel said "Eight hundred a week between us."

Hettie said "To start with."

I was still in the war. I pointed to a coloured map on the wall of the United States and said "We are here!" I tapped the map. "We will advance to here!" I tapped California. To Hettie I said "Is it really a done deal?"

"No but we'll pull it together together. Tomorrow isn't the Sabbath for studio bosses. We've got the details typed-up in this folder. Good luck. We're depending on you Merl."

"Are you sure you all want to leave New York? I've lived in New York most of my life and I'm just getting used to it."

Chip's spirit came back to me "Girls you are as precious to me as any clerk with a typewriter." Fuck! "Sorry. I meant you are the most precious things I have. Sorry."

I was so grateful for Effie still holding me. She whispered "Time to leave Florence behind. She wouldn't want you to mope for ever would she?"

Each of the girls left with a cute kiss and little squeeze. What had I done to deserve these angels? I wasn't hungry. I wasn't able to escape to be Dandy in a tug-boat pushing a flat of railroad cars up the East river. Every beautiful thing I could want in Hollywood and now I was... Empty. The girls had taken my will without my permission. Clever girls! What would I do in Hollywood? Become a ghost of dust to be blown away without even a shadow in the searing sun. The phone rang interrupting my bleak non-survey. It was the lobby clerk with a Mrs Parker for me. "Put her on Pete."

"I'm hungry!"

"I'm not."

"Bastard!"

"I'm not. I'm empty – Remember?"

The reply was more conciliatory "Please buy me lunch."

I wondered how many times she'd used 'please' in the last year. A big round, silver ring round, number. "I have to finish with my luscious courtesan but wait two minutes and I'll be hungry as ordered. Sorry Dot. I've had a shock."

In the seconds it took me to get my hat and coat, close the office and hit the elevator button I changed my mind. She'd probably used 'please!' a thousand desperate times with Eddie. When I got to the lobby she wasn't there. Pete called

across to say the lady had just gone up. Typical bloody woman! Why was that 'and obey' so difficult for them! 'I'll be down in a couple of minutes' means 'wait two minutes', in men's language anyway. When a tiny fur-coated bullet came spiralling out of the elevator looking for a target I met her with my harmless Harpo quizzical expression and a little hug. The words behind her lips remained unsaid. Once captured with a linked arm she made to drag me to the street but I wasn't any woman-in-a-green-hat's plaything. "Wait. Wait." When she was looking straight up at me. I said "I've just had a shock. My time on this soil is limited. Shall I explain over something to eat?"

"Yes Merl. Sorry Merl. Yesterday you were so strong."

"I'm still strong enough to help you one more day. You're worth it."

Over Lox and Bagels at the corner deli I admitted my limited time was not imminent death but being transplanted thousands of miles into the movie industry. She tried to take umbrage at my devious deception but I explained that the effect was the same. I could be gone forever in a few days. I was then educated that going away wasn't the same thing as dying. I told her about Florence. "I went to France. She went to pieces. Half our letters were lost so she thought I didn't care. She wrote me 'you bastard' letters and 'please come back' letters. Perhaps she wasn't the most stable person but I thought I'd done the best thing for her by marrying her before going to war. If I was killed she'd have a pension, a few fond memories and a clean sheet to start over. She killed herself. Don't do that Dot."

"I'm sorry. You're a man's man aren't you Merl?"

"Guilty."

"I've read a couple of your Dandy pieces. You're looking for saints in overalls."

"Not really. Just ordinary people."

"Don't kid me! You paint them as if they're noble savages of the subway or Euclids of the elevated."

"They put their heart into their job. Shouldn't they be praised?"

"Most are just scratching a living."

"They don't get paid more for getting their hand scalded when a valve bursts to save the two hundred unknowing passengers on the Hoboken ferry. I make them heroes because they are. New York would seize up without them."

"You're romanticising them."

"Perhaps. What's wrong with that?"

"They're not romantic!"

"I'll introduce you to a couple shall I? Then you can judge for yourself. Lefty who lost his arm up to his shoulder in a streetcar accident because he tried to throw the switch to catch the runaway? Or how about Taxi Inspector Howard who was sacked when he wouldn't take bribes then ejected from the Brothers of Liberty Grand Lodge and couldn't get a job as a result. He went to Chicago only to find his name on a blacklist. I'd introduce you to him but he went to France with the intention of never coming back."

"That's terrible."

"For his family too."

"That's worse."

"Men have their troubles too Dorothy."

"I apologise."

"Will you come with me now to meet a man? You could write his story – or a story – for me. I mean for you – I'll be gone. It pays OK money."

"Yes but what do I know?"

"Find out. Humans – so they say – are good communicators."

"Who is this man?"

"Finest pilot on the coast."

"I'm supposed to be staying at the Tasselheim's later."

"Bank of National Credit man? You can take me with you as your secret Hollywood spy. I've got to start selling Warner Brothers stock and Tasselheim Junior must have easy access to millions."

"Why 'Junior'?"

"The older generation might tolerate novelty in others but seldom encourages it amongst the family."

"You're wrong! Who were the first to have electric light and telephones!"

"Only to show off! I know. That's my job. I make things fashionable."

On the twenty minute elevated ride past the Brooklyn Navy Yard I made Dot sit in the carriage ahead. "You're lonely. So see how far you can go without joining me? I'll be in the next car I promise. If you make it all the way then we'll return together." That was a deal. I was pleased to have the simple responsibility of a fragile female alone in the next car and my own thoughts. I made sure to show how pleased I was that Dot had made it all the way without popping through the doors joining the cars. "One day you'll write you went to the docks alone, you met an odd man and took an odder one home." She immediately saw my bouquet to a poet. The bitter wind hurled gull-winged newspapers between a confusion of deserted warehouses, railroad tracks, locked gates and weigh-bridges. Black ice scabs pockmarked the sidewalk. Loose gutters rattled. At the Harbour Board depot the man we'd come to see had been given tickets to go to the game at the last minute. I explained to Dot how Davey Davey was the king of the navigation lights as far as the many different methods for marking the channels with flashing and sounding were concerned. So many vessels came and went every day, relying on say a white flash then a red then a dark or else they'd go aground or crash into each other. Davey Davey was the man who knew where every spare mechanism was and how to keep them in working order. His mate Robbie Roberts did the weekly checks up to fifteen miles out in the Atlantic in fog or storm. "Fog's almost impossible to deal with."

"Oh yes Merl. I suppose you can't see the light in the fog – Just when you need it."

"There's a poem in that. Robbie can smell the tides and the banks. If you whoop a tallowed lead over the side and bring it up he'll rub the sand or shell or mud in his fingers then smell them to tell you exactly where you are when there's nothing but brown choppy waves and a hopeful gull to be seen in all directions. He's no good to write about as he's about as interesting as a cobblestone but there's nobody knows the oily swell in the approaches to the busiest port on earth better than Robbie."

In the street car on the way back with her to my apartment on 59th I tried to play my trump card. "Why have dogs when you're hardly ever home?"

"They're friends to come home to."

"I know what an empty apartment is like to come home to. I hate mine. I'm leaving my unhappiness behind soon. I may find more but it will be a fresh suit to start with. No stains, no tears, no damp. What about you? If you're unhappy you must change."

"You're all after one thing. 'Leave your garret Dorothy and come into to my lair.' Do you think I haven't heard that before?"

"I'm leaving for Hollywood so don't fear me. I'm getting round to saying something boring."

"I didn't mean it Merl."

"If I wasn't leaving then perhaps we could be friends. I haven't shared a bed for three years. I wish you hadn't sat on my knees. But I'm leaving so that's that."

The white ice floes almost covered the brown river as we went over the Brooklyn Bridge. "I did mean it Merl."

I deliberately misinterpreted her. "You did mean to kill yourself?"

"Um. I didn't care if I did." She was putting on a face that tried to be brazen but failed to be even petulant. Her eyes betrayed her hunger.

"And now you're a failure twice. First for failing in general and second you couldn't even slash your wrists." I stared into those brown eyes in the deeper shade of her hat. "That's in the past. Repeat after me. 'That's in the past'."

She tightened her grip on my arm as we swung the curve into Park Row terminus "I know you mean well Merl but there's no fairy dust – and even if there was – fairies aren't real."

"I like you Dot because you're not fooled by fairy dust. Pillow dust and man-sweat fools you like a kitten's feather on a string – but you're not a kitten are you?" I left it there wondering what denial would come.

"I'm a cockroach. I like the dirty parts. Greasy, dark crevices. Fighting with other insects for trophies of drips and stains."

We waited for a down-town car. "Can I say my boring bit?"

"Oh God! You're not going to confess you love me to eternity!"

"No. Listen. Instead of a lonely apartment to go back to – Listen! Hear me out! You could go back to yourself in five years time. An imaginary you five years older. A happier you. That's it. That's my boring idea."

She burrowed into her bag for a cigarette then fiddled while I cupped my hands as a windshield. Eventually she was able to give a wistful reply. "I know you mean well Merl but I can't do that. I can't imagine what the future will be like – only what I've missed and messed-up."

"Try anyway Dot. When you're ready you could come to the sun of California. My girls are New York moths but soon they'll be Hollywood butterflies. All I have to do is connect a stock broker with Warner Brothers and get a pretty starlet to drive a Packard or Ford and I'll have a villa with a pool and parties under the palms."

"Should I come with you Merl?"

"Leave me alone. Come in your own time as yourself. I have three wonderful women I can't leave them yet. I'm married in business with them. Please don't wreck that."

"Why are you afraid of me Merl?"

"Why are you afraid?" I pulled her off the car so we could walk the last bit.

"I'm not afraid."

"Ha!"

"Ha! What's that supposed to mean Merl?"

"You are a brave woman. I lo... Like you – but bravery doesn't erase fear any more than overtyping fear with xxxx."

She stopped and looked into my face. The bitter north wind scraped it clear of all pretence. "You're being brave Merl. Perhaps I only understand cowards."

Without an answer I steered her off the sidewalk into a coffee shop. The wave of welcome warmth was sufficient punctuation. Ordering and waiting at the counter was a chance to regroup. Before getting our order Dot was recognised and caught by first one, then a handful of follow-me customers. 'I knew it was you by your hat' said one idiot. 'My wife reads all your knitting articles' said another. I was worried our special moment was lost forever beneath the never-to-be-silenced opinions of millions of New Yorkers but Dot had been this way before. "What's the best show you've seen this week on Broadway guys?" The replies were three postponements of admitting failure and one clear response. "Quick! What's your name? Meet Robin Rankheim."

Oh! I was now Robin Rankheim, probably Reuben, with no idea of what I was supposed to do. "Have I seen you in Hollywood?" I improvised. Dot smiled with pride at my quick pick-up on her acid attack. I was a happy harpy! Belatedly I put on my Harpo mask.

"Brendan Grady. Scene shifter. Russian Revue had one singing star Titania somebody and one leg star who made the other dancers look like ducks."

Dot dealt with him with less compassion than a burst of machine gun bullets. "Thank you Brendan. I had much the same opinion. Enjoy the rest of your day." I collected our coffees and we fortified ourselves in a corner table. The pressure of time is a funny thing. It took time for us to hold hands beneath the table and time to let go. Time measured in desperate gasps and urgent uncertain grips. Nobody interrupted our windless whispers. So much to say and no way of saying it.

That evening at the Tasselheim's I was accepted as one of Dot's interesting friends. In less than half an hour I'd convinced Junior I knew my way around the dollars and cents side of the film industry and would he like to meet mister Harmish? It turned out that Tasselheim senior was a secret Dandy fan, longing to be at the helm of a tug boat in the chaos of the Narrows with only a corn-cob pipe for comfort as liners and ferries fought for a skewing patch of churned-up river. Soon I was the centre of a knot of men in evening dress who wished they were wearing fresh pressed BBDs, bravely doing their noble duty on a night when the Lower East side powerhouse dynamos started winding-down or grimly fighting the feed-water pump in the boiler room of the Lenox Hill hospital. I must be mad to leave this good business for Hollywood.

I forgot about Dorothy until we were all ushered into the lounge to hear a piano recital by Esther the youngest Tasselheim daughter. She was eighteen, terribly refined, beautifully dressed wearing a long rope of pearls. Her face, a white enamelled plate with two currant eyes over half a grape and smear of ketchup, peered out from behind a spray of greenery on her absent bosom and wayward feathers from a glittering headband. She performed magnificently. What an advertisement for the roller coaster at Starlight Park. First gentle leaning back, then the gathering momentum and fold forward with screwed-up eyes. Now swaying side to side having us believe every moment she would be flung out of the car. It was agony trying not to laugh. I leant over to Dot to whisper but had my foot stamped on before I could speak. Under cover of taking a deep sip from her glass she stole a wink then resumed charmed rapture. If it was difficult for me not to laugh then it must be worse for her. Half the audience would be watching the most important critic in New York. I found her hand and held it to support her. Every so often Esther's pearls would rattle staccato against the edge of the keys and her greenery was getting a bit wind-blown. Still she continued bravely and I began to feel sorry for her. At the end, under cover of the commotion of applause and presentation of a huge bouquet I whispered to Dorothy "At least she had a go. Do you think Dandy should start a unsung heroines of the orchestra column?" She choked with the difficulty of appearing benign and thrust me her cocktail glass to be refilled. "What was her name Merl? Ether? Take her to Hollywood Merl. Take her anywhere – Please!" Later I saw Dot pointing me out to Esther and the joke came to me.

"Mrs Parker say's you're looking for film stars to take to Hollywood."

"I'm sorry Esther. You see there's a big problem with what you do." I'm not a cruel man but she'd just tortured me for half an hour so five seconds of revenge was champagne cocktail. "Playing the piano you see... Do you see? On film you see it – but can't hear it." She left disappointed but not hurt. Dot came over to claim her prize for dropping me in it. Smug Harpo came to my aid as I took her empty glass.

"Good performance don't you think Dorothy? She made love to the piano like Chopin washing his underwear." She squealed with tearful agony.

I could have walked home in fifteen minutes but Dorothy lived-out when she could and guests needed a good excuse not to be ready to resume at breakfast. I couldn't think of one. I'd had a good evening and made a dozen contacts which could soon be contracts. I still couldn't think of a lie that wouldn't melt and leave me soiled. I would escape to Hollywood and let Dorothy cannon around with other men. I didn't need her and I wondered if she'd ever be happy.

I plunged in for my netting.

"Which is your room Merl?"

"No!"

"Go on. Just once for old time's sake."

"No."

"I promise not to cry on your shoulder."

"No."

"Can't you just keep me warm then."

"No."

"I'll visit anyway."

"I sleep with a loaded revolver under my pillow."

She pushed the two of us into the bedroom. "I don't believe you. Anyway what do I care about being killed? Look at my wrists!" She held out her arms, bare all the way up, then gently laid her hands on my chest. Her bravado peeling to show desperate loneliness. "Please shoot me. Shoot me or love me."

"Alright. Help me with these collar studs Mrs. Parker."