

so deliberately choreographed that one gained protection from the community's hushed intolerance.

Betsy looked to her side and saw that she was by herself, that she had lost Luis. Then she twisted her head around and saw him standing in front of the coffee shop, holding the door open and waving her over. The large glass window next to him had the name "C. C. Brown's" painted on it, and Luis's reflection, butted up against his actual figure, made him look like Siamese twins connected at the ribcage.

In the small men's room of the coffee shop, Luis was bent over the sink, washing the blood off his hands. Then he held the bar of soap under the running water, making it clean. Some of the blood had embedded itself in little cracks on either side of it. He dug his fingernails deep into these places, scraping out every last trace, and watched the particles fall into the drain. As he began drying his hands on the towel hung through a metal ring, he heard someone pulling at the bathroom door, which he had latched. The hinges were worn, and the door rattled loudly.

"Someone is in here," said Luis, but whoever was there kept turning the knob and pulling at the door. Then he heard someone knocking, three fast, impatient raps, and then the knob was turned again. Luis froze, his hands still dripping. He took a deep insuck of breath. Again someone knocked, louder this time, and Luis stepped backwards, away from the door. A voice on the other side said, "Lemme in."

"Go away," said Luis, and he turned his head and saw a window, the glass reinforced with chicken-wire, high above the toilet. He stepped onto the rim of the bowl. Then, with one hand holding onto the cold pipe that extended from the bowl to the water tank, he stretched over, and with his

other hand grabbed the handle of the window. He pushed out on it with all his strength, but it would only open halfway before it became stuck. He clambered over the tank and shimmied up the wall, clutching both hands around the bottom of the metal windowpane. As he hoisted himself, the narrow metal cut into his palms and opened the new skin that had formed over them. They began bleeding again.

Two men unloading a delivery truck behind the coffee shop set a box filled with pastries down on a small, corrugated ramp suspended between the truck and a loading area. They looked around, and one of them broke the string tied around the box and lifted the balsa-wood cover, pushing it away just enough to reveal a row of closely packed chocolate eclairs. Each of them took out an eclair, and the first man kicked the cover back over the box. As they were bringing the long, tube-shaped pastries to their mouths, the other man, a surprised look on his face, motioned to the first man, then pointed in the direction of the bathroom window. They watched in astonishment as Luis crammed his body through the opening, the top half of his body jackknifing to the pavement before he kicked his legs out and toppled to the ground.

He picked himself up and, dazed, walked in the direction he was facing, which happened to be towards where the two men stood. The thieves, assuming Luis to be a crony of the coffee shop's management, interpreted the panic in his eyes as anger. Luis, in turn, thought he had walked right into a trap and saw the two men as the avengers he knew, at that moment, he would never elude. He stood there, facing them, his chest heaving with exhaustion, ready to surrender.

"La muerte," said Luis. "It is time for death."

"Hey, come on," said the first man. "It's only a couple of chocolate eclairs, what's the big deal? Didn't you hear about this stock-market thing? I lost twelve hundred dollars!"

"You have any idea what this job pays?" said the second man. "A little sugar in our bloodstream and we could work faster, right, Eddie?"

"Exactly," said the first man. "Everybody's happy."

"I am not happy," said Luis. "I beg you, put me out of my misery."

Betsy was sitting at a booth constructed of dark-stained, polished wood, waiting for Luis. The booth felt almost private because of four broad, question mark-shaped slats that ornamented either end. Bending over slightly and peering at the occupants of another booth, Betsy could see two sets of hands across from each other, gesticulating in turn, the table between laden with half-eaten portions. The hands appeared to be appendages emanating from beneath the two identical profiles formed by the curved wood, as though a conversation was taking place between a pair of overgrown embryos, people not yet fully formed.

"It's a set of techniques that are guaranteed to work," said one of the question marks.

"Have you tried them?" said the other question mark.

"That's not the point," said the first. "There are plenty of men who will want to know."

"I'm still not clear," said the other. "You've researched them, these techniques, or you just made them up, or what?"

"The important thing for you to know is the title," said the first.

"We're going to call it 'How to Attract Beautiful Women'. It doesn't matter

what's inside. There are plenty of men who will buy this book. I'm certain of it."

"But will it work?" said the other. "If men read the book and try out the techniques, will they attract beautiful women?"

"If they follow the techniques to a tee," said the first question mark, "we guarantee they will work. Whether or not our customers can do that is not our concern. If they don't, that is their failing. What happens in life happens. It is out of our control, and our market will be for men who are intelligent enough to understand that. We don't want to sell our product to just anybody. It's a quality product." His hand reached towards where his chest would be and he pulled out a handkerchief. He brought it to the outermost protrusion of his question mark and blew into it. "The point is it will *sell*," he continued. "We are not scientists and we are going to be perfectly honest about that in the advertising for the book."

"Don't you think a lot of unsavory characters might be attracted to this type of book?" said the second question mark. "How are you going to stop them from buying it?"

"What happens in life happens," said the first. "Our duty is to provide the service. If we don't, that would be *our* failing. Everything else is out of our control, and we're all being perfectly honest here in admitting that right from the get-go."

"'How to Attract Beautiful Women'," said the second.

"Grabs you, doesn't it?" said the first. "So are you in or out? We need an initial investment of two thousand dollars."

"You are going to be totally honest in the advertising?" said the second. "About not being scientists and all."

"Totally," said the first.

Betsy saw the second question mark spear a droopy piece of lettuce with his fork and guide it into the area where his mouth would be. "Sounds good," he said, his invisible teeth mashing down on the leaf. "Sounds very, very good."

A waitress appeared wearing a blue uniform with a small, doily-edged apron fastened to the front. She had an unhealthy pallor. It appeared, to Betsy, as though she had caked make-up on her cheek over a bruise that was similar to the one on Betsy's face. She held a glass coffee pot over the table, letting it hover over the cup next to Betsy's place setting. A menu was tucked under her other arm. "Coffee?" she said.

"Please," said Betsy. "Also, there'll be someone joining me in a moment."

"Do you know what you'd like?" said the waitress. Betsy had expected the waitress's glance to shift, if only for a moment, at the empty seat across from her, as if in acknowledgement of the party that was yet to arrive. She kept her attention fixed solely on Betsy, however, even when a customer at the booth next to her's called out to the waitress, "Where are my eggs?" Betsy was hungry, but wanted to wait for Luis.

"Not yet," she said, looking right at the waitress.

"Here, then," she said. She pulled the single menu from under her arm and placed it in front of Betsy. Before Betsy could indicate that she should leave another one for Luis, the waitress walked away, at first looking straight ahead of her, then quickly looking over to the customer at the next booth as he asked about his eggs again. "They remain unprepared," she said, without stopping, and continued past. She held the pot so steadily that the coffee inside was carried along without the slightest turbulence.

Betsy took a long sip of the coffee, drinking it black. She looked across the booth at the vacant seat where Luis should be sitting. She thought of how peculiar it was that, even though she had been in his company minutes ago, she did not remember exactly what he looked like. She remembered his general coloring and the clothes he was wearing, but the particulars of his face eluded her mind's eye. She knew, however, that they had been firmly planted in her subconscious. If another man who looked vaguely similar to Luis walked into the restaurant at this very moment and sat down across from her, declaring himself to *be* Luis, she would know he was a liar. She found herself imagining, and hoping, that that would happen, as if she desperately needed a test not only of her sanity but, strangely, of her loyalty to this odd new acquaintance with whom she shared a nagging feeling of mutual violation. Watching these thoughts pass in front of her, Betsy found it amazing how her relationship with Luis was, of its own device, deepening. It was deepening even while he was not present, when there was nothing but a plank of wooden seat-back staring back at her.

After reading, for the third time, the initials "G. D. + J. L." inside the arrow-speared heart that was scratched into a corner of the wood, where her eyes would probably not have wandered had Luis been sitting there, Betsy got up. She began walking towards the rear of the restaurant. The waitress was coming the other way and it was Betsy, and not the other, who stepped aside so they could each pass. Betsy said "I'll be right back", but the words seemed to rebound and splatter all over her face, as though she had spit into the blades of a rattling electric fan.

She arrived at the rest room doors with her head held down, and then looked up when she heard a man pounding angrily at the door of the men's

room. Standing beside him was a little boy, an albino, who was jumping up and down, his hands held over his crotch. Something caught the boy's attention and he darted away. Betsy's eyes followed him as he ran over to the rear entrance of C. C. Brown's, where the two delivery men were carrying Luis's limp body through a screen door. The door was on a spring. After the first delivery man stepped inside, backwards, the door slammed closed onto Luis's side and he cried out, clutching the point of impact. The second delivery man, holding Luis's legs, kicked the door back open and they quickly hefted him inside before it could slam shut again. The little boy ran right up beside Luis and began jumping up and down again, pointing and shouting "Is he dead? Is he dead?", his pink eyes twinkling with Christmas-morning elation.

The man who had been pounding on the men's room door was struck by the disturbance, too, and hurried over to the scene. He had an enormous, pillowcase behind which weighed him down so much that he was panting heavily by the time he waddled over the few steps to where the delivery men stood with Luis.

A few of the customers at tables towards the rear, upon hearing the boy's repeated shouts, stood halfway-up and turned their gaze in the direction of the commotion. One of them, whose view was being blocked by Betsy, poked her with a fork and said, "Hey, move!" She ran over to Luis, standing on the opposite side of the little boy. As if for the benefit of the watching audience, the man with the large behind said loudly, "What's the meaning of this?"

The boy again shouted, "Is he dead?", and Luis's eyes opened, his hand tightening over where the door slammed into his abdomen.

"I have been shot?" said Luis.

"The manager of this place fainted out there," said the delivery man who was holding Luis under the shoulders. His stolen chocolate éclair was sticking out from his pants pocket.

"What are you talking about?" said the man with the large behind, turning a bit so as to face the customers head-on. "*I'm* the manager!"

"Luis," said Betsy, "what happened?"

"He didn't faint, he's *dead!*" said the boy.

"Are you the Devil?" said Luis to the boy.

"Ha!" shouted the boy. "Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Luis felt another twinge of pain on his side and he looked about, his head moving spasmodically. He saw the one delivery man holding his feet, then arched his neck so he could see the other, his face upside-down so that he appeared inhuman, a bloated, deformed emissary from the bowels of Hades.

"Nooo!" cried Luis. "I am not ready for eternal damnation!" He yanked his knees, his legs slipping out of the grasp of the one delivery man, and at the same time he twisted his torso forcefully so that the second could no longer hold onto his shoulders. He crashed to the floor. The only pain he felt, though, was the throbbing in his abdomen, where he was certain he had been shot.

He leapt to his feet. He didn't noticed Betsy standing there; he just ran towards the front of the restaurant, Betsy walking quickly after him. All eyes were on Luis as he scurried past the tables, then skidded to a halt when his way was blocked by an aged, hunched-over woman who was having great difficulty pushing open the front door. She was carrying a cane, which kept slipping through her bony fingers as she grappled with the door handle. Luis stood inches behind her, balancing on the tips of his toes,



shaking his arms over his head with rabid impatience. To the people sitting at the tables, the pair of them looked like a gigantic, trapped hummingbird, Luis's circling arms its frantically beating wings, that was bumping over and over into the front-door glass. Finally, Luis spun around and began running back towards the rear of the restaurant. Halfway there, he nearly collided into Betsy. He stopped short and grabbed her by the arms, his jacket soaked with perspiration. He looked at her pleadingly.

"Do you forgive me for running away from the bull?" he asked. The waitress squeezed behind Luis carrying two plates of food. They were sandwiches made with some kind of meat, sliced diagonally, with toothpicks stuck into each half.

Betsy noticed that, even though he was standing directly under a Tiffany lamp, nowhere in Luis's eyes was there to be found even the smallest reflection of light. It was as if a visor was being poised over his head by an unseen, mischievous valet.

"I don't know," she said, shrugging. "I guess so."

"Gracias a Dios!" said Luis. He looked around him, feeling the glare of the customers, all frozen, some with spoons or forks lifted halfway to their mouths. He cupped his hand over his abdomen. The floor beneath him buckled and began to sag, so that the spot on which he was standing became the bottom-most point of a cone into which the whole of the restaurant was about to start sliding. He held Betsy's head and pulled it close to him. He whispered into her ear. "Meet me at the Hill Street Tunnel. One week from today," he said. "Do you promise?"

Betsy nodded.

He released her and ran to the back, past the manager, the two delivery men and the albino boy. He flung open the screen door and kept

running in the same direction long enough so that Betsy could see his figure dwindle to the size of a Mexican jumping bean, the kind of bean with a miniature worm inside. The bean reached a fence, jumped over it, and was gone.

Betsy sat back down at her booth just as the waitress arrived to ask her what she wanted. Famished, Betsy ordered two breakfasts. They were the same breakfasts. She ate them quickly, never once looking outside the contained area of the booth. After that she paid her bill. At first, she handed the waitress one of the crisper dollar bills that she had pulled from the cleavage of her dress. Then she asked for it back. She picked out an old, wilted bill, its ink slightly faded, and gave that one up instead. Betsy waited for the waitress to return with the change. It was twenty-four cents. She took it and left.

For various reasons, not clear even to herself, Betsy experienced a strange dread at the prospect of going to 6404 Hollywood Boulevard and announcing her arrival in Los Angeles to Raymond Bowes. She stood perfectly still on the sidewalk in front of C. C. Brown's and looked down the street in the direction of Caheunga Boulevard, straining to see the building she had passed in the jalopy the night before. Perhaps because she was no longer in possession of the card Raymond Bowes had given her, or perhaps because his encounter with her at her parents' house seemed, in retrospect, like one with an apparition, conjured out of her own terrible need to run away from home, Betsy felt distrustful of the invitation that had, only two days earlier, seemed genuine and direct. Mostly, she was bewildered, and still rattled, by the conflagration in the restaurant, and at this moment she was feeling apprehensive about all things.

She walked to the corner of Hollywood and Cahuenga. The building at number 6404 stood out even less prominently than it had when she had seen it the night before. It was without luster. She glanced at the buildings on either side of it, a haberdashery to the right, and Sun Drugs on the other side of Cahuenga. She found herself wishing, absurdly, that it was one of these, instead, into which she had a reason for entering.

It was noon. Betsy decided to circle the block, as though it would be just that added amount of time, in walking around the block once, that would cause her to be thought of, missed, and then more fervently welcomed by Raymond Bowes when she finally showed up. It turned out, though, that Betsy's decision to create a pocket of space between herself and her immanent foray into the world of Los Angeles speakeasys was in timely answer to a faint, far-away call from a more hardened, wiser aspect of her character.

As she approached Selma Avenue, Betsy felt her resistance to any romantic notions of what life would be like for her in Los Angeles grow to proportions so profound that it achieved, in her mind, a kind of perfect beauty. It was not prediction, she thought, that caused her to anticipate disappointment in her eventual rendezvous with Raymond Bowes, but knowledge. It was a tragic knowledge, although she did not know where it came from. It came from everywhere as reasonably as it came from nowhere.

It came, as simply, from the fact that the well-groomed man whom Betsy noticed, sucking pistachios and sitting on one of three chairs at a shoeshine stand, at the southwest corner of Cahuenga Boulevard and Selma Avenue, looked sad.