

"Any people in them?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"People who are just meat now, man."

"Is that really how it is?"

"How do I know how it is? I just got here. And it stinks."

"Are you kidding? They're pumping Haldol by the quart. It's a playpen."

"I hope so. Because I been in places where all they do is wrap you in a wet sheet, and let you bite down on a little rubber toy for puppies."

"I could see living here two weeks out of every month."

"Well, I'm older than you are. You can take a couple more rides on this wheel and still get out with all your arms and legs stuck on right. Not me."

"Hey. You're doing fine."

"Talk into here."

"Talk into your bullet hole?"

"Talk into my bullet hole. Tell me I'm fine."

Beverly Home

Sometimes I went during my lunch break into a big nursery across the street, a glass building full of plants and wet earth and feeling of cool dead sex. During this hour the same woman always watered the dark beds with a hose. Once I talked with her, mostly about myself and about, stupidly, my problems. I asked

her for her number. She said she had no phone, and I got the feeling she was purposely hiding her left hand, maybe because she wore a wedding ring. She wanted me to come by and see her again sometime. But I left knowing I wouldn't go back. She seemed much too grown-up for me.

And sometimes a dust storm would stand off in the desert, towering so high it was like another city---a terrifying new era approaching, blurring our dreams.

I was a whimpering dog inside, nothing more than that. I looked for work because people seemed to believe I should look for work, and when I found a job I believed I was happy about it because these same people---counselors and Narcotics Anonymous members and such--- seemed to think a job was a happy thing.

Maybe, when you hear the name "Beverly," you think of Beverly Hills---people wandering the streets with their heads shot off by money.

As for me, I don't remember ever knowing anybody named Beverly. But it's a beautiful, a sonorous name. I worked in an O-shaped, turquoise-blue hospital for the aged bearing it.

Not all the people living at Beverly Home were old and helpless. Some were young but paralyzed. Some weren't past middle age but were already demented. Others were fine, except that they couldn't be allowed out on the street with their impossible deformities. They made God look like a senseless maniac. One man had a congenital bone ailment that had turned him into a seven-foot-tall monster. His name was Robert. Each day Robert dressed himself in a fine suit, or a blazer-and-trousers combination. His hands were eighteen inches long. His head was like a fifty-pound Brazil nut with a face. You and I don't know about these diseases until we get them, in which case we also will be put out of sight.

This was part-time work. I was responsible for the facility's newsletter, just a few mimeographed pages issued twice a month. Also it was part of my job to touch people. The patients had nothing to do but stumble or wheel themselves through the wide halls in a herd. Traffic flowed in one direction only, those were the rules. I walked against the tide, according to my instructions, greeting everybody and grasping their hands or squeezing their shoulders, because they needed to be touched, and they didn't get much of that. I always said hello to a grey-haired man in his early forties, vigorous and muscular, but completely senile. He'd take

me by the shirtfront and say things like, "There's a price to be paid for dreaming." I covered his fingers with my own. Nearby was a woman nearly falling out of her wheelchair and hollering, "Lord? Lord?" Her feet pointed left, her head looked to the right, and her arms twisted around her like ribbons around a Maypole. I put my hands in her hair. Meanwhile around us ambled all these people whose eyes made me think of clouds and whose bodies made me think of pillows. And there were others out of whom all the meat appeared to have been sucked by the strange machines they kept in the closets around here---hygienic things. Most of these people were far enough gone that they couldn't bathe themselves. They had to be given their baths by professionals using shiny hoses with sophisticated nozzles.

There was a guy with something like multiple sclerosis. A perpetual spasm forced him to perch sideways on his wheelchair and peer down along his nose at his knotted fingers. This condition had descended on him suddenly. He got no visitors. His wife was divorcing him. He was only thirty-three, I believe he said, but it was hard to guess what he told about himself because he really couldn't talk anymore, beyond clamping his lips repeatedly around his protruding tongue while groaning.

No more pretending for him! He was completely and openly a mess. Meanwhile the rest of us go on trying to fool each other.

I always looked in on a man named Frank, amputated above both knees, who greeted me with a magisterial sadness and a nod at his empty pajama-pants legs. All day long he watched television from his bed. It wasn't his physical condition that kept him here, but his sadness.

The home lay in a cul-de-sac in east Phoenix, with a view into the desert surrounding the city. This was in the spring of that year, the season when some varieties of cactus produced tiny blossoms out of their thorns. To catch the bus home each day I walked through a vacant lot, and sometimes I'd run right up on one---one small orange flower that looked as if it had fallen down here from Andromeda, surrounded by a part of the world cast mainly in eleven hundred shades of brown, under a sky whose blueness seemed to get lost in its own distances. Dizzy, enchanted--- I'd have felt the same if I'd been walking along and run into an elf out here sitting in a little chair. The desert days were already burning, but nothing could stifle these flowers.

One day, too, when I'd passed through the lot and was walking along behind a row of town houses on the way to the bus stop, I heard the sound of a woman singing in her shower. I thought of mermaids: the blurry music of falling water, the soft song from the wet chamber. The dusk was down, and the heat came off the hovering buildings. It was rush hour, but the desert sky has a way of absorbing the sounds of traffic and making them seem idle and small. Her voice was the clearest thing coming to my ears.

She sang with the unconsciousness, the obliviousness, of a castaway. She must not have understood that somebody might be able to hear her. It sounded like an Irish hymn.

I thought I might be tall enough to peek inside her window, and it didn't look like anybody would catch me at it.

These town houses went in * for that desert landscaping---gravel and cactus instead of a lawn. I had to walk softly so as not to crunch--- not that anybody would have heard my steps. But I didn't want to hear them myself.

Under the window I was camouflaged by a trellis and a vine of morning glories. The traffic went by as always; nobody noticed me. It was one of those small, high bathroom windows. I had to stand on tiptoe and grip the windowsill to keep my chin above it. She'd already stepped from the shower, a woman as soft and young as her voice, but not a girl. Her physique was on the chunky side. She had light hair falling straight and wet almost to the small of her back. She faced away. Mist covered her mirror, and also the window, just a bit; otherwise she might have seen my eyes reflected there from behind her. I felt weightless. I had no trouble clinging to the windowsill. I knew that if I let go I wouldn't have the gall to raise my face back up again---by then she might have turned toward the window, might give a yell.

She towelled off quickly, briskly, never touching herself in any indulgent or particularly sensual way. That was disappointing. But it was virginal and exciting, too. I had thoughts of breaking through the glass and raping her. But I would have been ashamed to have her see me. I thought I might be able to do something like that if I were wearing a mask.

My bus went by. Bus 24---it didn't even slow down. Just a glimpse, but I could see how tired everybody inside it must have been, simply by the way they held

themselves, pitching to and fro. Many of them I vaguely recognized. Usually we all rode together back and forth, work and home, home and work, but not tonight.

It wasn't all that dark yet. The cars, however, were fewer now; most of the commuters were already in their living rooms watching TV. But not her husband. He drove up while I was there by his bathroom window trying to peek at his wife. I had a feeling, a terrible touch against my neck, and ducked beside a cactus just before his car turned into the drive, at which point his eyes would have swept the wall where I was standing. The car turned into the driveway, out of sight around the building's other side, and I heard the engine die and its last sounds echo out over the evening.

His wife had finished her bath. The door[^]was just shutting behind her. There seemed to be nothing left in that bathroom then but the flatness of that door.

Now that she'd left the bathroom she was lost to me. I wouldn't be able to peek at her because the other windows lay around the building's corner and were visible, full on, from the street.

I got out of there and waited forty-five minutes for the next bus, the last one on the schedule. By then it was pretty well dark. On the bus I sat in the strange, artificial light with my notebook in my lap, working on my newsletter. "We've got a new crafts hour, too"---I wrote in a bumpy scrawl---"Mondays at 2:00 p.m. Our last project was making animals out of dough. Grace Wright made a dandy Snoopy dog and Clarence Lovell made a gunboat. Others made miniature ponds, turtles, frogs, lady bugs, and more."

The first woman I actually dated during this era was somebody I met at a "Sober Dance," a social event for recovering drunkards and dope addicts, people bite me. She didn't have such problems herself, but her husband had, and he'd run off somewhere long ago. Now she put in time here and there as a volunteer for charity, though she worked a full-time job and was raising a little daughter. We started dating regularly, every Saturday night, and we slept together, too, at her apartment, though I never stayed all the way through to breakfast.

This woman was quite short, well under five feet, closer, in fact, to four and half feet tall. Her arms weren't proportional to her body, or at least not to her torso,

although they matched her legs, which were also exceptionally abbreviated. Medically speaking, she was a dwarf. But that wasn't the first thing you noticed about her. She had large, Mediterranean eyes, full of a certain amount of smoke and mystery and bad luck. She'd learned how to dress so you didn't observe right away that she was a dwarf. When we made love, we were the same size, because her torso was ordinary. It was only her arms and legs that had come out too short. We made love on the floor in her TV room after she got her little daughter down for the night. Between our jobs and her routines with the little girl, we were kept to a kind of schedule. The same shows were always playing when we made love. They were stupid shows, Saturday-night shows. But I was afraid to make love to her without the conversations and laughter from that false universe playing in our ears, because I didn't want to get to know her very well, and didn't want to be bridging any silences with our eyes.

Usually before that we'd have gone to dinner at one of the Mexican places---the posh ones, with the adobe walls and the velvet paintings that would have been cheap in anybody's home---and we'd have filled each other in on the week's happenings. I told her all about my job at Beverly Home. I was taking a new approach to life. I was trying to fit in at work. I wasn't stealing. I was trying to see each task through to the end. That kind of thing. She, for her part, worked at an airline ticket counter, and I suppose she stood on a box to accomplish her transactions. She had an understanding soul. I had no trouble presenting myself to her pretty much as I actually was, except when it came to one thing.

The spring was on and the days were getting longer. I missed my bus often, waiting to spy on the wife in the town-house apartment. How could I do it, how could a person go that low? And I understand your question, to which I reply, Are you kidding? That's nothing. I'd been much lower than that. And I expected to see myself do worse.

Stopping there and watching while she showered, watching her step out naked, dry off, and leave the bathroom, and then listening to the sounds her husband made coming home in his car and walking through the front door, all of this became a regular part of my routine. They did the same thing every day. On the weekends I don't know, because I didn't work then. I don't think the weekend

buses ran on the same schedule anyway.

Sometimes I saw her and sometimes I didn't. She never did anything she might have been embarrassed about, and I didn't learn any of her secrets, though I wanted to, especially because she didn't know me. She probably, couldn't even have imagined me.

Usually her husband came home before I left, but he didn't cross my line of sight. One day I went to their house later than usual, went to the

front instead of around to the back. This time I walked past the house just as her husband was getting out of his car. There wasn't much to see, just a man coming home to his supper like anybody else. I'd been curious, and now that I'd had a look at him I could be sure I didn't like him. His head was bald on top. His suit was baggy, wrinkled, comical. He wore a beard, but he shaved his upper lip.

I didn't think he belonged with his wife. He was middle-aged or better. She was young. I was young. I imagined running away' with her. Cruel giants, mermaids, captivating spells, a hunger for such things seemed to want to play itself out within the desert springtime and its ambushes, its perfumes.

I watched him go inside, then I waited up at my bus stop till it was night. I didn't care about the bus. I was waiting for darkness, when I could stand out front of their house without being seen and look right into their living room.

Through the front window I watched them eat supper. She was dressed in a long skirt and wore a white cloth over the crown of her head, something like a skullcap. Before they ate, they dipped their faces and prayed for three or four full minutes.

It had struck me that the husband looked very somber, very old-fashioned, with his dark suit and big shoes, his Lincoln beard and shiny head. Now that I saw the wife in the same kind of get up, I understood: they were Amish, or more likely Mennonites. I knew the Mennonites did missionary work overseas, works of lonely charity in strange worlds where nobody spoke their language. But I wouldn't have expected to find a couple of them all alone in Phoenix, living in an apartment, because these sects normally kept to the rural areas. There was a Bible college nearby; they must have come to take some courses there. I was excited. I wanted to watch them fucking. I wondered how I could manage to be here when that was happening. If I came back one night late, after dark, I'd be

able to stand by the bedroom window without being seen from the street. The idea made me dizzy. I was sick of myself and full of joy. Just watching for a glimpse of- her as she stepped from the shower didn't seem enough anymore, and I left and went back and waited to get on bus 24. But it was too late, because the last bus had already gone by.

On Thursdays at Beverly Home the oldest patients were rounded up and placed in chairs in the cafeteria before paper cups of milk and given paper plates with cookies on them. They played a game called "I Remember"---a thing to keep them involved with the details of their lives before they slipped away into senility beyond anybody's reach. Each one would talk about what had happened that morning, what had happened last week, what had happened in the past few minutes.

Once in a while they had a little party, with cupcakes, honoring yet one more year in somebody's life. I had a list of dates, and kept everybody informed:

"And on the tenth, Isaac Christopherson turned a whopping ninety-seven! Many happy returns! There'll be six birthday people next month. Watch for April's *Beverly Home News* to find out who they are!"

The rooms were set off a hallway that curved until it circled back on itself completely and you found the room you'd first looked in on. Sometimes it seemed to curve back around in a narrowing spiral, shrinking toward the heart of it all, which was the room you'd begun with---any of the rooms, the room with the man who kept his stumps cuddled like pets under the comforter or the room with the woman who cried, "Lord? Lord?" or the room with the man with blue skin or the room with the man and wife who no longer remembered each other's name.

I didn't spend a lot of time here---ten, twelve hours a week, something like that. There were other things to do. I looked for a real job, I went to a therapy group for heroin addicts, I reported regularly to the local Alcoholic Reception Center, I took walks in the desert springtime. But I felt about the circular hallway of Beverly Home as about the place where, between our lives on this earth, we go back to mingle with other souls waiting to be born.

Thursday nights I usually went to an AA meeting in an Episcopal church's basement. We sat around collapsible tables looking very much like people stuck in a swamp---slapping at invisible things, shifting, squirming, scratching, rubbing the flesh of our arms and our necks. "I used to walk around in the night," one guy said, a guy named Chris---kind of a friend, we'd been in Detox together---"all alone, all screwed-up. Did you ever walk around like that past the houses with their behind those curtains, people are leading normal, happy lives?" This was just rhetorical, just part of what he said when it was his turn to say something.

But I got up and left the room and stood around outside the church, smoking lousy low-tar cigarettes, my guts jumping with unintelligible words, until the meeting broke up and I could beg a lift back to my neighborhood.

As for the Mennonite couple, you could almost say that our schedules were coordinated now. I spent a lot of time outside their building, after sundown, in the rapidly cooling dark. Any window suited me by this time. I just wanted to see them at home together.

She always wore a long skirt, flat-heeled walking shoes or sneakers, delicate white socks. She kept her hair pinned up and covered with a white skullcap. Her hair, when it wasn't wet, was quite blond.

I got so I enjoyed seeing them sitting in their living room talking, almost not talking at all, reading the Bible, saying grace, eating their supper in the kitchen alcove, as much as I liked watching her naked in the shower.

If I wanted to wait till it was dark enough, I could stand by the bedroom window without being seen from the street. Several nights I stayed there until they fell asleep. But they never made love. They lay there and never even touched each other, as far as I knew. My guess was that in that kind of religious community they were kept to a schedule or something. How often were they allowed to have each other? Once a month? Or once a year? Or for the purpose, only, of getting children? I started to wonder if maybe the morning was their time, if maybe I should come in the morning. But then it would be too light. I was anxious to catch them at it soon, because nowadays they slept with the windows open and the curtains slightly parted. Before much longer it would be too hot for that;

they'd turn on the central cooling and shut themselves away.

After a month, or very nearly, the particular night came when I heard her crying out. They'd left the living room just minutes before. It hardly seemed they'd had time to get undressed. They'd put away the things they were reading a little while before that and had been talking quietly, he lying back on the couch and she sitting in the easy chair perpendicular to it. There'd been nothing of the lover about him right then. He hadn't seemed inflamed, but maybe a little nervous, touching the edge of the coffee table with an idle hand and rocking it while they talked.

Now they weren't talking, though. It was almost as if she were singing, as I'd heard her do many times when she thought she was by herself. I hurried around from the living-room window to the bedroom.

They'd closed the bedroom window, and the curtains, too. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but I heard the bedsprings, I was sure of that, and her lovely cries. And soon he was shouting also, like a preacher on the stump. Meanwhile I was lurking there in the dark, trembling, really, from the pit of my stomach out to my fingertips. Two inches of crack at the curtain's edge, that's all I could have, all I could have, it seemed, in the whole world. I could have one corner of the bed, and shadows moving in a thin band of light from the living room. I felt wronged---it wasn't that hot tonight, other people had their windows open, I heard voices, music, messages from their televisions, and their cars going by and their sprinklers hissing. But of the Mennonites, almost nothing. I felt abandoned--cast out of the fold. I was ready to break the glass with a rock.

But already their cries were over. I tried the window's other end, where the curtains were drawn more snugly, and though the view was narrower, the angle was better. From this side I could see shadows moving in the light from the living room. In fact, they'd never made it to the bed. They were standing upright. Not passionately twining. More likely they were fighting. The bedroom lamp came on. Then a hand drew the curtain aside. Just like that I was staring into her face.

I thought to run, but it was such a nauseating jolt that suddenly I didn't know how to move. But after all it didn't matter. My face wasn't two feet from hers, but it was dark out and she could only have been looking at her own reflection, not at me. She was alone in the bedroom. She still had all her clothes on. I had the

same flutter in my heart that I got when I happened to stroll past a car parked off by itself somewhere, with a guitar or a suede jacket on the front seat, and I'd think: But anybody could steal this.

I stood on the dark side of her and actually couldn't see very well, but I got the impression she was upset. I thought I heard her weeping. I could have touched a teardrop, I stood that close. I was pretty sure that, shadowed as I was, she wouldn't notice me now, unless perhaps I made a movement, so I stayed very still while absently she put her hand to her head and removed the little bonnet, the skullcap. I peered at her dark face until I was sure she was grieving---chewing her lower lip, staring, and letting the tears fall across her cheeks.

In just a minute or so, her husband came back. He took several steps into the room and paused like somebody, a boxer or a football player maybe, trying to walk with an injury. They'd been arguing, and he was sorry; it was plain in the way he stood there with his jaw stuck on a word and kind of holding his apology in his hands. But his wife wouldn't turn around.

He put an end to the argument by getting down before her and washing her feet.

First he left the room once more, and after a while he returned with a basin, a yellow plastic thing for washing the dishes, carrying it in a careful way that made it obvious there was water sloshing inside it. He had a kitchen towel draped over one shoulder. He put the basin on the floor and went down on one knee, head bowed, as if he were proposing to her. She didn't move for a while, not perhaps for a full minute, which seemed like a very long time to me outside in the dark with a great loneliness and the terror of a whole life not yet lived, and the TVs and garden sprinklers making the noises of a thousand lives never to be lived, and the cars going by with the sound of passage, movement, untouchable, uncatchable. Then she turned toward him, slipped her tennis shoes from her feet, reached backward to each lifted ankle one after the other, and peeled the small white socks off. She dipped the toe of her right foot into the water, then the whole foot, lowering it down out of sight into the yellow basin. He took the cloth from his shoulder, never once looking up at her, and started the washing.

By this time I wasn't dating the Mediterranean beauty anymore; I was seeing another woman, who was of normal size but happened to be crippled.

As a small child she'd had encephalitis---sleeping sickness. It had cut her down the middle, like a stroke. Her left arm was almost useless. She could walk, but she dragged her left leg, swinging it around from behind her with every step. When she was excited, which was especially the case when she made love, the paralyzed arm would start to quiver and then rise up, float upward, in a miraculous salute. She'd begin to swear like a sailor, cursing out of the side of her mouth, the side that wasn't thick with paralysis.

I stayed at her studio apartment once or twice a week, all the way through to morning. I almost always woke up before she did. Usually I worked on the newsletter for Beverly Home, while outside, in the desert clarity, people splashed in the apartment complex's tiny swimming pool. I sat at her dining table with pen and paper and consulted my notes, writing, "Special announcement! On Saturday, April 25th, at 6:30 p.m., a group from the Southern Baptist Church in Toll-son will be putting on a Bible pageant for Beverly Home residents. It should be inspiring---don't miss it!"

She'd lie in bed a while, trying to stay asleep, clinging to that other world. But soon she'd get up, galumphing toward the bathroom with the sheet half wrapped around her and trailing her wildly orbiting leg. For the first few minutes after she got up in the morning her paralysis was quite a bit worse. It was unwholesome, and very erotic.

Once she was up we'd drink coffee, instant coffee with low-fat milk, and she'd tell me about all the boyfriends she'd had. She'd had more boyfriends than anybody I'd ever heard of. Most of them had been given short lives.

I liked the time we spent in her kitchen those mornings. She liked it, too. Usually we were naked. Her eyes shed a certain brightness while she talked. And then we made love.

Her sofa bed was two steps from the kitchen. We'd take those steps and lie down. Ghosts and sunshine hovered around us. Memories, loved ones, everyone was watching. She'd had one boyfriend who was killed by a train---stalled on the tracks and thinking he could get his motor firing before the engine caught him, but he was wrong. Another fell through a thousand evergreen boughs in the north Arizona mountains, a tree surgeon or someone along those lines, and crushed his head. Two died in the Marines, one in Vietnam and the other, a younger boy, in an unexplained one-car accident just after basic training. Two

black men: one died of too many drugs and another was shanked in prison---that means stabbed with a weapon from the woodworking shop. Most of these people, by the time they were dead, had long since left her to travel down their lonely paths. People just like us, but unluckier. I was full of a sweet pity for them as we lay in the sunny little room, sad that they would never live again, drunk with sadness, I couldn't get enough of it.

During my regular hours at Beverly Home, the full-time employees had their shift change, and a lot of them congregated, coming and going, in the kitchen, where the time clock was. I often went in there and flirted with some of the beautiful nurses. I was just learning to live sober, and in fact I was often confused, especially because some Antabuse I was taking was having a very uncharacteristic effect on me. Sometimes I heard voices muttering in my head, and a lot of the time the world seemed to smolder around its edges. But I was in a little better physical shape every day, I was getting my looks back, and my spirits were rising, and this was all in all a happy time for me.

All these weirdos, and me getting a little better every day right in the midst of them. I had never known, never even imagined for a heartbeat, that there might be a place for people like us.