

Little America

by Diane Simmers

They'd all blow in to some hick town where Hank and Lorraine would put on a program in a hall they'd hired for the night. Gorgeous in aviators and rattlesnake books, Hank jumped and spun and flirted with ladies and men alike as Lorraine chain-smoked and flipped charts that showed how people in other towns had gotten richer and happier and even better-looking since they'd bought whatever it was Hank happened to be selling. When it was over—sometimes even before it was over—they'd jump in the car and speed out of there, driving a hundred miles before stopping to sleep, Hank harmonizing with the radio all the way.

Billie—who spent these evenings watching TV in the motel room if they had one, or reading romance novels in the back of the hall if they didn't—knew they were crooks of some sort. Beyond that, she didn't know much, such as where they came from or what their real names were. Even the idea of a "real name"—as opposed to the name you were using just then—was something she didn't pick up until the third grade when the teacher asked why she had started writing Bunny Miller on her papers instead of Billie Moore.

Billie made a rule for herself then: don't change your name unless you have to. And she kept Billie for many years, even when Hank and Lorraine went to Mel and Monica and then Clark and Inez.

Whatever Hank—as Billie always thought of him—was up to, it required a lot of travel and over the years a variety of cars. A few of them were purring and fragrant; most were banging and stinking of other people's cigarettes or, especially in the backseat where Billie rode, throw-up.

Whatever sort of car it was, the first thing Hank did was install a telescoping rod across the backseat so he could hang up his clothes. Billie rode along back there in a forest of swaying cowboy shirts and fringe-sleeved jackets, all smelling deliciously of Hank's aftershave and sweat.

No matter what had just happened, Hank was always happy driving along. He loved every kind of scenery and was always telling Billie to look out the window to see how the tall grass seemed to be racing away in the wind or how the high mountains looked just exactly like frosted glass. One memorable dawn in Eastern Oregon—up early to beat a wide-awake motel operator and wanting to avoid troopers on Interstate 84—they had headed south from Pendleton on a two-lane road through the wheat fields. As the dawn began to creep over the vast, unbroken fields of ripe wheat, Hank was so overwhelmed he stopped the car. Lorraine wouldn't wake up and look, but Hank and Billie stood by the side of the road for fifteen minutes watching the purple, then pink-soaked wheat turn the purest gold, as far as the eye could see.

"What would you have to pay to see something like that?" Hank asked when they finally got back in the car.

While Hank could be brought almost to tears by the scenery of the West, he had nothing but pity for the squares in the little towns they passed through. His scorn he saved for the men who worked in the stores, men who seemed to think they were something because they stood behind a cash register in a white shirt and a clip-on tie.

Hank had a little more respect for the farmers and ranchers; at least they were out in scenery. Still, when he saw somebody out on a tractor plowing in big slow circles, he would ask, "What could they be thinking about all the time?"

Lorraine, who was said to be Billie's mother, spent most of her time smoking and didn't talk much, though Hank, maybe as a joke, said she was the brains of the outfit.

"You can tell she used to be a preacher's wife," Hank would say. Billie was pretty sure *that* was a joke.

Lorraine didn't talk to or look at Billie unnecessarily, and Billie was certain that if she got left behind at a filling station bathroom one day, Lorraine would not be coming back to pick her up. Hank probably would if they remembered in time and weren't like three hundred miles away already.

"Where was I born?" Billie asked Lorraine once when they were alone. Lorraine blew out a nose full of smoke. "Montana," she said.

But when Billie asked Hank separately, he answered without hesitation: "Rock Springs, Wyoming. What a pit *that* was."

Of course they never wanted to slip into the habit of telling the truth.

Lorraine and Billie seemed weakly linked, if at all, but Hank and Billie both had the same curly red-orange hair so that waitresses seeing them often said, "I guess I know who your Daddy is!"

Hank was tall and trim, and when he got dressed up, which was most of the time, he looked just like a movie star. No matter what, he had to have good boots and a newish cowboy hat. Just about the only time he really lost his good humor was if somebody disturbed his hat where it rode on the little ledge above the backseat. It had to sit there all alone because if you crowded stuff beside it, the brim would curl up wrong. Then too, during one period when they must have been flush, he got himself a necktie made of real mink. When he took it off, he would wrap it up in an old silk neckerchief, then carefully stuff it inside a cardboard toilet-paper tube.

Besides being good-looking and well-dressed, Hank was also a little bit famous, having once been the object of an investigation by the Idaho attorney general. He'd been in the newspaper for it, and just before they left Idaho and crossed into Wyoming, he'd bought several editions of the paper and then carefully ripped out of each the articles that had his name in it. He folded the articles and put them in his little leather bag of important things.

At one point, waiting alone in a motel room somewhere, Billie had taken the article out and read it but hadn't found out much besides that Hank was selling something he shouldn't.

It was exciting to see his name in print though.

"We don't hurt anybody much," Hank told her after they'd been run out of Idaho. It was the one time they talked about business. "And sometimes we do them some good."

This talk took place in a window booth at truck stop called Little America that they'd reached after a couple of days driving east through Wyoming. They'd been seeing signs for it, practically since Idaho, so many signs, in fact, that Billie figured it would be a big nothing. When they got there, though, it was the biggest, fanciest truck stop, surely in the world, with parking for maybe a hundred tractor trailers.

They'd gotten there late and slept in the car—Hank and Lorraine

tilted back in the front seats, Billie snuggled amid the bags and bundles in the back. All night they could hear the soothing whine of the high-speed trucks approaching then departing across the flat plain.

Lorraine was still sleeping when Billie and Hank unfolded themselves from the car and went into the fine restaurant there. Hank sat over his tea with lemon, and Billie with a root beer. It was a pink, hopeful dawn and there was a cheerful waitress who winked and slipped Billie a free doughnut for getting up so early and for having such a good-looking daddy. Billie loved it when waitresses flirted with Hank, because then they almost never ran out on the bill. It was nice to eat without thinking about your exit, even though Hank—who hated paying for things or letting go of his money in any way—would be a little grumpy for half an hour because of it.

"We may not be one hundred percent on the up-and-up," Hank had told Billie as they sat in Little America. "But it's only fraud. And fraud isn't violent."

Hank stopped and looked out over the lines of trucks and the immense blue sky. Billie was a little worried to hear him speak so soberly and wondered if they were really in trouble. But it seemed it was only the gaudeur of early morning at Little America that had caused him to be so thoughtful.

"I've known violent people," Hank said, "and not one of them could make a plan or talk their way out of a paper bag. Well, I don't have much respect for that type of person. And maybe it isn't nice to say so"—here he paused and looked back into the kitchen where you could see a fat, hairy cook smacking the grill with a giant spatula—"but I think you'll find that violent people are almost always, well, almost always, unattractive to look at."

The next time she found herself in a schoolroom, Billie tried to look up "fraud," but it wasn't, evidently, spelled like it sounded. She knew enough, of course, not to ask the teacher what it meant.

As Billie was in her adolescent years, they seemed to have drifted more to the east, maybe because of being famous in Idaho. The winter she was sixteen, they'd come to perch briefly in Grand Island, Nebraska, waiting out the worst of the cold weather before making one of their big swings down through Kansas, then back up through Colorado and Wyoming.

Hank had found them an old bullet-shaped, thirty-foot trailer in a six-trailer court. It wasn't far from the tracks, and all night long you heard the slow freight trains go clacking past, which was probably why Hank had picked it.

The place was run by an obese and filthy woman named Stella who couldn't stop flirting with Hank.

"I'll get you, boy!" she would yell out the door when he passed by her trailer. "Wait'll I get my teeth!"

Stella ignored Lorraine and Billie, but every day around noon she would come flopping over to their trailer to see Hank. She wore an old bathrobe, obscenely held together over her massive chest with a safety pin, and carried a tin pie plate in her hand.

"Here's your grits, boy!" she'd yell, pounding on their trailer until Hank came out. "Steamin' hot!"

Billie could take the bathrobe and the grits; that was Hank's problem. But she hated the signs Stella had up all over, scrawled on boards in sneaky lipstick with a spelling that was completely made up. Some were advertising the trailer court; most were warning trespassers what Stella would do to them if they dared come on her property. There was something terrifying about the bright-red ignorance of those signs. How, Billie wondered, did some little kid end up being Stella?

It was during those winter months that Billie gave up on school and started spending the day at the Grand Island Library reading all the romance novels. It was a cozy place with leather chairs and nice lamps, and the librarian, who admired Billie for coming to Grand Island to help nurse her old aunt, was always looking for new books Billie might like.

It was about this time too that Lorraine kind of disappeared—Hank said something about her visiting family—and in her place there was someone named Pam. Pam talked more than Lorraine and was better-looking, probably, in a plucked sort of way. She also seemed to be a whole lot dumber.

There wasn't any question of whether or not she was Billie's mother which was kind of a relief. In fact, Pam kept trying to make Hank admit that she and Billie looked like sisters.

"I'm closer to her age than yours," she would say to Hank. "We could be your two teenage daughters. Let's watch and see if people take us as sisters."

They didn't look a thing alike, of course, even though Pam's hair was some kind of bottle orange.

When the topic of how Billie and Pam looked like sisters lost its kick,

it got replaced by a discussion along the lines of what was Billie going to do. It made her wonder what had happened to Lorraine anyway.

Billie had had the odd boyfriend here and there; none of them had done that much for her and she wondered if the whole thing wasn't something mostly made up to sell books. But now, to hedge her bets, she took up with a dark-haired, wet-handed boy named Tom who she met at the library.

Tom was in his second year at the nearby Nazarene College and wanted to become a fourth-grade teacher. He was an anxious, yearning boy who thought Billie was beautiful and who was desperate for sex even though he didn't believe in going all the way until marriage. Around five in the afternoon, he would pick her up at the library where she told him she always went to study after school. They drove out to park at a gravel pit outside of town, and there on the front seat with the heater blasting did everything *but go* all the way until six-thirty when he had to be home for dinner. He would drop her off at a big Victorian house where he thought she lived with that same elderly aunt, and she would walk the fifteen blocks to the trailer court.

Being sex-crazy was one thing about Tom. The other thing about him was his mother, Marge, who was a real mother type with the apron and the stuff cooking and the sewing box with the red tomato pincushion. And who, when she saw Tom coming home all hot and smelly with his shirttail out, quickly found out about Billie and invited her to dinner. She knew Tom was losing his mind over sex and she worried, as she told Billie while they washed up the dinner dishes together, because Tom's other girl friends had been the type of little hot-pants numbers that were bound to keep him from achieving his goals.

"But you seem different," Marge said. "You are so quiet and thoughtful. I always hoped Tom would find a girl like you."

"Well," Billie said. "I guess being an orphan makes you different."

"Maybe you'll be *my* daughter one day," Marge said, looking so frankly and hopefully into Billie's eyes that Billie could not help shuddering slightly. Seeing the shudder, Marge gave Billie a big squeezy hug.

It was only a backup plan, but it's good to plan because one day, sure enough, Billie came home from an afternoon with Tom to find Pam in the back of the trailer packing up, and Hank standing in the trailer's little front room clearing his throat. He said he was glad to see her because he had something for her: two New Mexico driver's licenses, one under the name Billie Moore, and another under the name of Lola Lester. Both put

her age at eighteen, which would make her old enough to be on her own.

Hank handed over the I.D., cleared his throat, and looked out the door of the little trailer and finally said that he and Pam had to leave town unexpectedly, and, instead of taking Billie with them, they were planning to put her on a bus to Winnemucca where Hank had heard a young person could get a job in the casinos and do real well. Start off in Winnemucca, Hank advised; then work up to Reno. She should stay away from Las Vegas, though, because Hank had heard it was full of show-offs.

They stood there in the little old trailer house and looked at each other. Hank cleared his throat again.

"You'll make it just fine," Hank said. "Sharp girl like you." "I'll need a stake," Billie said.

"Oh, well sure," Hank said, shifting around a little and caressing the bills in his pocket. "Sure you will!"

"I'll pay you back when I get set up," she said.

They both smiled at this.

They packed the car late that night, using the flashlights they had for such moments even though Stella, who hadn't been paid any rent yet, was always dead drunk by midnight; you could hear her snore all over the court. Still it always felt good to clear out invisibly before daybreak, and they eased past Stella's trailer in first gear. They drove to the Grand Island bus depot, and while Pam waited in a no-parking zone, Hank and Billie went in to buy a ticket to Winnemucca.

Hank said he and Pam would send their new address right away. Billie said she'd send her address too, but of course neither of them would be likely to have an address any time soon and then where would you send it? Looking off in another direction, Hank slid her four fifty-dollar bills and gruffly told her to put it under the insole of her shoe. After she'd done it, he suddenly pulled out one more fifty-dollar bill and put it in her hand.

She knew he hadn't meant to give her the last fifty and for the first time she felt like crying.

"I'll pay you back," she said.

He looked away, cleared his throat a couple of times.

"Oh," he said. "Only if you're flush."

When the eastbound bus pulled in at four-twenty, Hank saw her on, saw her suitcase into the cargo space underneath. Then, from inside the dark, cigarette-and-upholstery-cleaner-smelling bus, she watched him turn and walk away, tall and square shouldered, resetting his hat as he went.

Once he was gone, she got off the bus, got her bag from underneath, and went in to the depot to get the ticket refunded. She sat in the station until daylight, then took the station cab to Tom's house where she told Tom's mother that her aunt had died and another aunt, a mean one, had taken four days off work to drive out from Winnemucca and have a cremation. Now this aunt was going to take Billie back with her and put her to work in the casinos. Of course Marge invited Billie to move right in with them. She put Tom down in the basement for safety, giving Billie his room which was next to Marge's own.

Who knows how this might have turned out if Marge hadn't been quite so determined to love Billie as if she were her own child. But she *was* determined, and it meant that, for one thing, she wanted to share feelings with Billie, to talk about her dear deceased husband and her failure to have a second child. Then too she wanted to talk about Billie's lost parents and the poor deceased aunt. In this way, Marge seemed to think, they would grow close. But Billie didn't know much about sharing feelings unless it was about mountains or dawn or something. Otherwise, feelings had seemed to be something you made up when people seemed to want you to. But while it had been easy enough to make up stuff up to tell people you weren't going to see again, here, stuck with Marge all the time, you had to remember what you'd said in way that was both nerve-wracking and tedious.

The one feeling Billie did have, maybe, was missing Hank. She seemed to miss most of all how the back of his head looked with his hat set at a very slight tilt, and the way he would look up and give her a wink in the rearview mirror. But there wasn't any point in talking to Marge about that. Anyway, Billie was supposed to be an orphan.

It was as much to get away from living with Marge as it was to keep Tom from exploding that Billie agreed to get married. Marge arranged for them to have a little wedding at the justice of the peace. The three of them drove over to his house one evening and made him get up from *Gunsmoke* and go into his little study where he had a desk and a book of wedding certificates. His wife came in as a witness and they stood there and did it, all the time hearing the sound of gunfire coming from the front room.

Then they went back to the little one-bedroom house that Marge had gotten set up for them, stocking it with old sheets and dishes that she'd been saving, and a box of condoms for their bedside table, since they couldn't start a family until Tom graduated.

As far as Tom was concerned, things went pretty well. He was at school or work most of the time, trying to graduate early so he could start

supporting a family. He ate his supper while he was at his job as a campus security guard, so there wasn't need for much when he got home late but sex and sleep. He was a boy who tried to do what was expected of him, and if he got to screw every night, things were just fine.

Marge was more complicated, and—as Billie should probably have known—getting married didn't get rid of her. In fact, it made her worse, because now she wanted to help Billie fix up the little house and to teach her the tricks of housekeeping that Billie, as an orphan, had missed out on. In theory Billie liked the idea of a fixed-up house; sometimes in the past she had felt a little jealous when she glimpsed the luxury of other people's lives. In practice, though, a fixed-up house turned out to be way more trouble than it was worth. She was shocked, for instance, to find out what you went through to make and put up curtains in just one room: the measuring, the shopping, the cutting and sewing, the screwing of stuff up to the wall, the standing back to see if it was crooked, the taking it down and putting it up again.

Billie decided the house was fine like it was. It was better than a lot of places.

Like a lot of people who don't want to do housework, she got herself a job, working the lunch shift at a truck-stop restaurant and motel out on the interstate. It's true she couldn't bring herself to show up every day; going every day made you seem like such a suck-up. But her boss, Mr. Rexley, was a nice old man who liked to look at girls with good legs, and who seemed to buy her story about emergencies with a mother who had gone smile.

Billie was surprised to see that having a job wasn't that bad. It was kind of fun, for a change, to be on the other side of the counter and to ironically eye those who came in, as she and Hank had been eyed so many times. Also it was interesting to see that all the waitresses and busboys smuggled out food. That you could be legit and steal at the same time; Billie wondered if Hank had realized such a thing was possible. Of course she liked the tips that nobody reported, that there was no reason for Tom (or Marge) to know the extent of, and that Billie converted into big bills and stored—along with Hank's fifties—in the sole of her shoe.

In a way, the job was a kind of halfway house between the straight life and the road. It was close enough to the interstate that you could step out the back for a minute, squat down on your heels, lean your back against the cinder-block wall and listen to the whine of the trucks. Then you could

go back in and pick up a coffeepot and slide dollar bills into your apron pocket.

And then too there were times when she liked getting back to her own little house after a shift at work. She'd walk the half-mile from the bus stop, let herself in the back door, and sit down in her uniform and coat at the kitchen table, feeling the kind of pleasant tiredness that work could give you. She'd sit eating cold sirloin steak out of the sack she'd smuggled it home in, licking the grease off her fingers, and reading a romance in the pink afternoon light that came in from the west. At such moments she might have said she was happy, and maybe if it could have been like that most of the time, she would have slowly gotten tamed.

But so often there was Marge at the back door, loaded down with shelf paper and paint samples and recipes, looking right in because of course there were no curtains yet.

"Honey," Marge would say, dropping all the stuff on the table. "Turn on the heat when you come home, Dear, and the lights. Take off your coat for goodness' sake. Shall we make some brownies to treat Tom later? I can show you how to make his favorites. Did you shop?"

Marge would open the refrigerator where there might be only a jar of mayonnaise and a petrified lemon.

"Shall we go to Safeway? Next time, though, why not shop the Tuesday specials?"

Marge was determined to be patient and loving. She could understand that someone had never learned how to make a nice home. What she probably couldn't get was that you wouldn't want to learn. And she was no doubt a little scared; the marriage had, after all, been pretty much her idea. So she wasn't about to give up.

Meanwhile Billie did what she'd always done when people got too interested in what was really going on with her, which was to go blank, sometimes sitting with her finger in her book until Marge finally left, close to tears. Then Billie couldn't stand the house. The house was just another version of Marge, wanting every impossible thing from her and never letting her get a minute's peace. Then she would put on her coat to walk to 7-Eleven and shoplift something.

She got so that instead of going home after her shift, she would bribe one of the Mexican chambermaids to let her into an unused room. She would lie carefully on one of the beds and read until it was too late for Marge to come over. Or she would draw a bath and sit in the hot water and not think.

"You like horses?" asked some tall, skinny, cowboy type who'd ordered the Blue Plate Special steak dinner, mashed potato and French fries, cherry pie à la mode with an extra scoop.

"No," she said, filling his coffee cup and moving on. You work a truck stop for five minutes and you find out everybody has something cute to say.

"Can you ride?" he asked when she passed back by.

"No," she said.

"Look," he said when she passed by the next time. He glanced out the plate-glass window toward a shiny new pickup truck with a horse trailer hitched to the back. "That's mine."

"Rooty-toot-toot," Billie said.

He laughed at that. She saw that he wasn't that old. Twenty-something, maybe.

"Why don't you come with me up to Montana to a rodeo," he said. "It's a good rodeo. Good purse. I'll win it. I'm a bulldogging champ. I took the grand prize in Nampa. That's how I got my truck. That and another big purse I won down in Utah."

He nodded out the window again toward the shiny truck.

"Come with me," he said. "I could use a girl."

"What for?"

"Girls take your mind off of things," he said. "Keep you from getting too keyed up. The right girl anyhow. Not some Mama's girl. You know."

"I'm married," she said.

She held up her left hand with its thin gold ring.

"Oh yeah? Who too?"

"This kid. He's in college. He's going to be a teacher."

"Teacher, huh? Must be smart. Must be some stud to rate a girl like you."

"He's OK."

Billie went to get a lady's banana cream pie from the pie case. Outside the window the new pickup gleamed. She'd thought it was greenish but really it was more of a midnight blue.

"Only," he said, when she had to pass down the counter again, "Mona is so pretty this time of year. I don't know if you've ever been up there. Probably not, huh?"

"Yeah, I've been up there. I've probably been up there more than you. I'm not *from* here."

"But you're here now. Looks like."

Billie gave him his check. Maybe if he'd walked over to the cashier to pay, that would have been that. Instead he took the check, reset his hat, and walked unhurried past the cashier's stand where Mr. Rexley, his glasses up on his forehead, a rubber tip on his thumb, and a frown on his face, was counting and recounting a pile of singles.

Suitcase

Some people were yelling that it was bourgeois to care if the kitchen floor pulled at your socks. Yeah, and what was wrong with shit on the side of the toilet? Shit's natural.

But other people were yelling just as loud that it was false consciousness—whatever that was—to equate filth with opposition to the status quo. Marie, who had been in the house only a couple of days, tried to stay out of it by hiding in the curtained-off bay window where they'd said she could sleep. But a big girl in braids and overalls named Sheila came over and yanked the curtain back. This was a collective, she said, and everybody had to participate. It even seemed that Marie's vote was needed to break the tie over whether or not there should be household chores. Some people said she shouldn't be forced to vote, that *that* was bourgeois, and as things went on, they urged her to refuse to vote. The other group agreed that, no, she shouldn't be forced to vote, but that she should *want* to vote and she'd better.

It was 1972, and probably too late to be showing up in San Francisco, but Marie didn't know that. Even if she had known, she would have probably gone anyhow. She had to go somewhere, and San Francisco was in the news, still, as someplace.

Now everyone turned to look at her.

"Well," Marie said. "I mean."

"Oh yeah, she better talk," said Chick, a burly, older guy—thirty, maybe—with an immense, graying ponytail and thick glasses. Because he'd made money on a crab boat in Alaska, he had a big upstairs room