



Siri Hustvedt

The Enchantment of Lily Dahl

A Novel

"Siri Hustvedt writes, literally, like a dream—
a dream that's at once intensely romantic and
disturbingly eerie. This dark, sexy, spooky novel
is an indelibly memorable fiction. Read it and
it will haunt you." —SALMAN RUSHDIE

Picador

1

She had been watching him for three weeks. Every morning since the beginning of May, she had gone to the window to look at him. It was always early, just before dawn, and as far as she knew he had never seen her. On that first morning, Lily had opened her eyes and spotted a light coming from a window across the street in the Stuart Hotel, and once she had moved closer, she had noticed him in the shining square: a beautiful man standing near a large canvas. Stripped down in the heat to only his shorts, he had stood so still for a minute that he hadn't looked real to her. But then he had started to move, using his whole body to paint, and Lily had watched him reach, stoop, lunge, and even kneel before the canvas. She had watched him pace the floor, rub his face hard with his hands, and smoke. The man smoked little cigars, which he held between his teeth whenever he paused to think. And sometimes, when he was just quietly smoking, he would nod at the painting as if it were talking to him. Lily had studied the

lines of his muscles and the light brown color of his skin and the way it gleamed in the light, but she had not seen what he was painting. The front of the canvas had always been hidden from her.

Division Street was wide and treeless. The man's room was at least twenty yards from Lily's, and she had never been closer to him than that. Exactly what she expected from watching him she didn't know, but it hardly mattered. The truth was that she couldn't look at the man enough, and on those days when he didn't go to bed but stayed up and worked through the dawn, she had to force herself to close her curtains and turn away from the window.

On this particular morning, however, it was raining hard and Lily couldn't see him clearly. She stuck her head out the window and squinted in his direction. Rain pelted her face, and water was streaming down his closed window, so all she could make out was a blurred, waving body behind the glass. And then, before she understood what was happening, he walked to his window, jerked it open and leaned out into the rain. Lily ducked beneath the sill and squatted on the floor. Her heart was beating fast and her cheeks turned hot as she listened to the noise of water running in the gutters. She had taken a terrible risk leaning out that way. Before that moment, she had scolded herself a little for spying on him, but the thought that she had been discovered filled her with sudden, acute shame. She had been so careful, too, always crouching beside her window with only her eyes above the sill, making sure no light was on in her room, and every time she did turn them on to shower and get dressed for work, she had kept her curtains tightly closed.

Lily knew that the man's name was Edward Shapiro.

Although they hadn't exchanged a single word, she had gathered several facts about him and had heard a lot of gossip. She knew for certain that Edward Shapiro had spent a year as "artist in residence" at Courtland College. She knew that instead of returning home to New York City at the end of his last semester, he had decided to stay on in Webster, and that was when he had rented the room in the Stuart Hotel. She also accepted as fact that sometime in March, his wife, who had been living with him in faculty housing, had packed her bags and left him. The rest was rumor. A lot of people wanted to know what he was doing in a fleabag like the Stuart, a hotel so crummy that it didn't even take women. The five or six old codgers who lived there were a sad bunch, and Lily knew most of them. The hotel's restaurant had been closed for as long as she could remember, even though they had never taken down the sign for it, and just about every morning, one by one, the men would shuffle across the street to eat their breakfasts at the Ideal Cafe, where Lily waited on them six days a week. She had heard that Edward Shapiro was poor, that he gambled his earnings at the college on baseball games, and she had heard he was rich but was too cheap to rent a decent place. She had heard his wife left him because he gambled, and she had heard she left him because, as Lester Underberg put it not a week ago in the cafe, "he couldn't keep his pecker at home." Lester had it "on good authority" that Shapiro had "nailed" a beautiful redheaded student in his office while playing Verdi at full tilt. According to Lester, Shapiro had received dozens of young opera fans in his office while he was at the college, but the truth was that Lester couldn't be trusted. He collected dirt on everybody and anybody, and on a couple of occasions Lily had caught him telling out-and-out whoppers. Lester was right

about Edward Shapiro's love for opera, however. There had been nights in the past weeks when she had heard music coming from his window, and twice the voices had been so loud that they had woken her from a deep sleep. The story about the redhead stuck in her mind nevertheless, and Lily kept adding details to it that Lester had left out. She imagined Shapiro and the girl, saw her lying with her legs open on a desk, her skirt pulled up around her waist and the man standing over her, completely dressed except for an open zipper. Over and over, she had played out the scene in her mind, had seen papers scatter and books drop from the desk as the man grappled with his student. Lily had watched for women to appear in the man's window, but if they visited, they never stayed the night. The narrow iron bed that stood in the far right-hand corner of his room had been empty twenty-two mornings in a row.

Lily balked at moving, but very slowly she peeked over the sill. Shapiro's window was dark, and she felt her shoulders sink in relief. When she closed her curtains, she heard footsteps from the apartment next door. Mabel's up, she thought. Mabel Wasley slept very little, and the wall between the two rooms wasn't thick enough to muffle even the smallest noise. Day after day, Lily listened to the old woman walk, rustle papers, open and close cupboards and drawers, clink dishes, cough, mumble, flush her toilet, and all afternoon and far into the night she listened to Mabel type. Exactly what Mabel was writing had never been clear to Lily, although the woman had once explained it. The enormous manuscript was an autobiography of some kind that included dreams and how they mixed into everyday life, but whenever Mabel talked about the book, she went on and on and used words Lily didn't under-

stand, and sometimes when she was particularly excited, her voice would get very loud until she was almost shouting, so Lily didn't like to bring up the subject. For nine months Lily had lived above the Ideal Cafe alone. She had rented her room only a few days after graduating from high school, and when Mabel arrived in early March, Lily had welcomed the company, even though from time to time, she had the impression that Mabel was hiding something. No one knew much about her, although she had taught at Courtland College for twenty years. There were rumors that she had been married several times before she came to Minnesota, but Mabel had never mentioned a husband, and although she was very friendly, she was also stiff, and that stiffness forbade prying.

Lily sat down at her table where she ate and put on her makeup and did anything else that required sitting. She had hung her mirror above it and looked at her own tired face in the reflection and at Marilyn Monroe's face behind her on a poster she had fastened to the wall. Boomer Wee had once said she looked like Marilyn, only dark, and even though Lily knew this wasn't true, she liked the idea. She leaned toward the mirror, lowered her eyelids, parted her lips and pushed her breasts together to make a long cleavage over her white bra. She glanced at Marilyn again and then heard a knock at the door.

"It's open," she said, her voice hoarse with sleep.

Without turning around, Lily saw Mabel enter the room in the mirror. The old woman walked quickly, her long robe sweeping the floor, and stopped when she reached the chair.

"I'm sorry to bother you, but I wanted to catch you before work and ask you how the play was going and tell you that if you're still having trouble with the part, I might be able to

help. You know I taught *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for, well, close to thirty years, and it struck me last night that I could coach you. Hermia's a wonderful part, really, and you're perfect for it. What do you think?" Mabel delivered this speech fast and with few breaths, addressing Lily's reflection in the mirror, all the while waving her hands for emphasis, and once her fingers brushed the top of Lily's head. Then she let her hands fall and rested them lightly on Lily's shoulders. They were both silent for several seconds, and Lily stared at their faces in the mirror and at Marilyn's between them, and she thought that the three of them looked strange together. Mabel's small heart-shaped face, with deep wrinkles on her forehead and around her eyes and mouth, had an intense expression that could have been either defiance or concentration. Marilyn wasn't smiling either, but her lips were parted to show teeth, and her fingers indented the flesh of her right breast. There was something too perfect about the way the three of them were framed in the mirror, and it bothered Lily. It created an annoying stillness that made her think suddenly of things that were alive and things that were dead, and she shrugged her shoulders to release herself from Mabel's touch.

"Monday's good after work. I need help. I remember my lines, but half the time I don't know what they mean."

The woman clasped her hands. "We'll have tea first."

Mabel's happiness irritated Lily for some reason, and she said nothing more.

Mabel left the room. She didn't say good-bye. Instead, she recited some of Lily's lines from the play: "Dark night, that from the eye his function takes." Lily saw Mabel put a finger to her ear. "The ear more quick of comprehension makes; / Wherein it doth impair the seeing sense, / It pays the hearing double recompense."

The woman's voice was thin and old, but her delivery had a nuance and understanding Lily knew she lacked completely. That's why she did it, she thought, to show me how natural and good she is. Isn't that what Mrs. Wright had been telling her in rehearsal? "Just speak in your natural voice," and Lily had thought to herself: But what is my natural voice?

The early customers who straggled into the Ideal Cafe were all men, all regulars, and none of them had much to say. Between five and six the place was pretty quiet. The men who came in during that first hour didn't have wives or girlfriends, but every one of them would have had a story to tell if he'd chosen to tell it, a story about the accident, death, bad break or quirk of personality that had turned him into what he was now: a solitary character who arrived at the crack of dawn to eat his breakfast alone in a room full of other solitary characters who were eating their breakfasts alone.

Pete Lund usually arrived first, after chores on his big farm east of town. Pete's wife had died of breast cancer a couple years back, and he had taken to eating his meals out. A year ago when Lily first started working, he had placed his order aloud, and it still stood: a cup of black coffee, two eggs, scrambled, and three pieces of white toast with strawberry jam, not grape jelly. After that, he hadn't bothered to speak. When Lily approached him, he nodded at her, and she put in the order. Harold Hrdlicka, who had bought the old Muus farm, took his eggs sunny-side up with hash browns, and Earl Butenhoff from the Stuart Hotel ate a bowl of Wheaties before his eggs—once over easy—and finished off his meal with a fat, usually half-smoked stogie that he carried around in his shirt pocket. By five-thirty that morning they had all

arrived, each one sitting in his own booth waiting for food. Pete was staring over the counter at Vince's collection of "semiantique" windup toys. Harold was reading the *Webster Chronicle*, and Earl studied the tabletop between repeated throat-clearings—during which he spat gobs of yellow mucus into a huge, stained handkerchief that he pulled in and out of his pants pocket. From the kitchen, Lily could hear Vince singing "Anything Goes" in a low voice. She could hear the rain outside and smell bacon and sausage on the grill, and from the street came an odor of wet pavement, grass, and what she supposed were worms crawling onto the sidewalk, and as she moved from table to table with her pot of coffee, she felt happy and hummed along with Vince under her breath.

Martin Petersen walked into the cafe around six, took his usual seat in the booth by the window and started staring at Lily. Every time he came in for breakfast, he stared. She was used to it, not just from Martin, but from lots of people. She had suffered through braces on her teeth, breasts that wouldn't grow and a reputation as a tomboy, but the year she turned fourteen, it had changed, and now after five years she had grown used to her looks and the staring that went with them. Sometimes she liked it, and sometimes she didn't, but she had learned to pretend that she didn't notice. Martin, however, was different. He always studied her calmly and deliberately as if it were his job to look at her, and because she couldn't penetrate what he meant by those long stares, Martin's eyes made her a little uncomfortable. But at the same time, she felt oddly drawn to him. Martin was mysterious. She had heard rumors that he was gay and rumors that he was a person who had no interest in sex. Linda Haugen had once whispered to her in confirmation class that Martin had been "born both" and that "they

took the girl half away.” But this had to be nonsense. The secret of Martin wasn’t his body, but it wasn’t his mind either. He gave off something peculiar—an air of hidden knowledge or intuition that sometimes made Lily feel he was looking at her from a great distance even though he was only inches away.

Lily couldn’t remember not knowing Martin Petersen. The house where Martin lived as a child and where he still lived wasn’t far from Lily’s own childhood house on the outskirts of town, and she and Martin had sometimes played together in the woods or near the creek. He had stuttered even worse then than he did now. A couple of times, she had taken Martin home with her to play, but Lily had never gone to Martin’s house. There had been something wrong with his father, and whatever it was, it had made Lily’s mother nervous enough to leave it unexplained. When Lily was eight, Martin’s father, Rufus Petersen, had killed his dog—a bitch about to give birth. He shot her and left the bleeding carcass down by the creek, where Lily’s father had found the poor mutt and buried her along with her unborn pups. Lily remembered the blood on her father’s shirt from the dog, and remembered that he had cursed Rufus Petersen with uncommon violence. She had played with Martin less often after that, but he rode the same school bus that she did, and she remembered he was teased mercilessly for his stutter. Once Andy Feenie and Pete Borum had beaten up Martin behind Longfellow School, and she remembered him coming around the brick building, bawling loudly as blood poured down his shirt from his nose. In high school, Martin had kept mostly to himself, and he and Lily hadn’t talked to each other much, but she had felt connected to him anyway, and sometimes they had run into each other at the creek, where Martin fled his house to read books

and be alone. His father had left the family by then, and his young mother who didn't look young was sick with leukemia, and his older brother and sister were fending for themselves and, some said, running wild. Mrs. Petersen died during Martin's last year of junior high school, and there had been a mess with the welfare people. Hard knocks, Lily thought, one after the other. The other Petersen kids had left town, but Martin had stayed on in the family house and was working as a handyman. The word was that he was very good at it. Reliable and honest, they said, and people were calling him all the time to fix this or that, to do some painting or small carpentry work, and Lily had a feeling that life was better for him now that he was grown up.

Martin always wanted the same breakfast—poached eggs on toast—but unlike Lily's other early customers, he had never been happy with silence. It wasn't enough to say to him, "The usual?" and let him nod. He wanted an exchange, so instead of Martin stammering out an order and getting flustered, he tapped out a little rhythm on the tabletop with his fingers, rat-tat-a-tat-tat, and Lily answered him with two raps of her own, tat-tat. The tapping had started soon after Lily began working in the cafe and had made them friends again, after a fashion. No one else was in on it. Those beats were a little language all their own, and Martin seemed so happy to order his breakfast in code, it made Lily happy, too.

That morning they went through the routine again. Martin rapped the table.

Lily slapped her index finger twice against the edge of the table and said, "You've got it, Cobweb."

Martin had landed the tiny part of Cobweb in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and Lily thought it would be friendly

to acknowledge it, although she wondered if Mrs. Wright hadn't taken charity a little too far by casting Martin in any role, no matter how small. She hadn't rehearsed with Martin yet. So far practice had been limited to the actors with big parts, but it was hard to imagine Martin as any kind of actor, much less a fairy.

When she gave Vince Martin's order in the kitchen, the fat man leaned across the stove and said, "Where's the funeral? It's so quiet in there, you'd think I was cooking for a bunch of stiffs."

Lily grinned and shook her head. "You say that every morning, Vince. It gets noisier in an hour. You know that."

"This is one dead little burg, baby doll. It's big-time excitement around here when one of them old Lutherans lets out a fart."

Lily smiled at Vince. He was in a good mood this morning, and she felt grateful. "Go back to Philadelphia then, why don't you, if it's so perfect there," Lily said and picked up the plate of French toast for Mike Fox. "Must be great, people shooting each other in the streets, muggers, pickpockets. I read the papers, Vince. Sounds like paradise." Lily backed through the swinging doors.

Vince pointed his spatula at her. "At least people talk to you before they shoot you!"

With Mike's plate in her hands, Lily paused behind the counter. She could feel Martin watching her and glanced over at him for an instant. His sober face was measuring hers. Maybe he does have a thing for me, she thought, and laid Mike's plate on the counter beside the six cigarettes that he had already lined up in front of him on the Formica surface.

"You're food's here when you're ready, Mike," she said.

He looked up at her and pushed a strand of long blond hair behind his ear, before he stuck a fresh cigarette between his teeth. Lily watched him light it. Six days a week for a year, she had watched Mike go through the same ritual. The job called for a whole pack of Kents, and when he was finished, Lily would find a row of twenty cigarettes on the counter, each one smoked just a hair shorter than the one before it. Looking at Mike, she felt sure that he was counting his puffs, but she knew he couldn't be dragging too hard on it either or the butt would burn too fast. Mike lowered the cigarette to the black ashtray and began to snuff it with a gentle turning motion of his wrist and fingers. The first time Mike had left that perfect slant of Kents on the counter, Lily had been scared to throw them away. But Bert had said, "He doesn't care about it once it's done. Just sweep the masterpiece into the garbage. He'll make another one tomorrow."

Lily walked back to the kitchen to pick up Martin's food, and Vince started in right where he left off. "And because there's no talking in this goddamned place, there's no real sex. Ever think of that, doll? Look at the women in this town, hardly a single one with a speck of 'cha-cha.' In the winter they're all covered up with those god-awful down parkas and in the summer they wear dresses that look like bags. Lipstick's a sin. Jewelry's a sin." The man's face was red. He had big jowls that shook when he moved his head.

Lily grabbed Martin's plate. "There's plenty of sex in this town, Vince. Don't be a dummy."

"Yeah, but it's not *fun* sex. There's a big difference."

Lily groaned. "Come on."

"You haven't been around, baby. I'm telling you." He held his arms out at his sides and wiggled his enormous hips back and forth. "Sex is shmooze in a dusky bar with a jazz

band and a girl who looks like she likes it. Oh, honey, the nights I spend dreamin' about Sandra Martinez," the man groaned.

"What you don't know, Mr. City Man," Lily said, "is that a cornfield can be just as sexy as a jazz club. You just haven't been around." Lily rolled her shoulder at him.

Vince opened his mouth and pretended to be shocked. "Why, Lily Dahl," he said. "You little devil."

"Don't ever tell *me* I haven't got cha-cha," Lily said on her way out, and she heard Vince muttering something under his breath.

The rain had stopped and Division Street looked brighter. When she put down the plate in front of Martin, he looked up at her with his serious face and his wide eyes, and she remembered how light his irises were—pale blue—a color that made her feel she could look right through them. As she left the table she felt a vague spasm in her abdomen, heard the screen door open and, turning toward the sound, saw the Bodler boys shuffle into the cafe. She sighed, but not loudly enough for them to hear it, and watched them walk toward the booth in the back just outside the bathroom with the sign Vince had put up that said "EITHER/OR." If only they weren't so dirty, Lily thought, as she looked down at the trail of mud on the floor behind the two men. If only it was just their boots that were dirty, and not their arms and legs and heads and butts and every square inch of their whole selves. Lily stopped in front of the Bodlers' table and took out her order pad. She looked from Filthy Frank to Dirty Dick and back to Filthy Frank. The old coots were just as grimy as ever, only moister. She could see drip lines on their cheeks where they'd been rained on. Lily tapped her toe and waited. Frank would order. He always did. Dick never said a word. The Bodler boys

were identical twins who over many years had turned out different. Nobody had the slightest difficulty telling them apart. Dick's body echoed Frank's but didn't repeat it. Punier, balder, blanker, Dick had become a diluted copy of his brother.

Everything they touched turned black. Lily looked down at Frank's hands. She could already see smudges forming on the white table.

"Well, what'll it be?" she said.

Neither man moved or even blinked.

She leaned closer to Frank and raised her eyebrows. He smelled like clay.

The man opened his mouth, showing brown teeth interrupted by several holes. Then came the guttural rumble: "Two eggs, scrambled, bacon, toast, coffee."

"Coming up." Lily turned away and looked over Martin's head into the street. The weather was clearing steadily. Martin was reading now. He usually brought a book with him and read for a while before leaving. As far as Lily could tell, Martin read everything. He seemed to like history books, especially books on World War II, but he also liked novels—cheap ones and highbrow ones—and science fiction books and how-to books. She remembered him reading *Anna Karenina* in the cafe for several weeks, and when he finished with that he had started in on a book called *A Hundred Ways to Make Money in the Country*. Still, Lily figured all that reading had to do some good. He's probably pretty smart, she thought, and then on her way to the kitchen she considered the fact that Martin had turned twenty-one and was most likely a virgin. She liked this thought, liked the idea of innocence in a young man. At the same time, she felt sorry for him.

Only a few minutes later, when Lily was serving the Bodlers their breakfast and pouring them more coffee, she noticed a brown grocery bag sitting beside Frank in the booth and asked herself what the dirt twins might be hauling around with them. Then she watched Frank grasp his cup and looked down at his thumbnail—a thick, yellow husk—and staring at the fat, dirty nail started her thinking about Helen Bodler.

No one doubted anymore that old man Bodler had buried his wife alive back in 1932, but at the time people thought she'd walked out on him and the twins. Bodler drank. His small farm, like a lot of other farms, was in bad trouble and the theory was he went mad from the strain. Lily remembered her grandmother telling her the story, remembered how she had leaned over the oilcloth on the kitchen table, her voice tense but clear. "Helen wouldn't've left them two little boys and gone off without a word to nobody. She wasn't that kind. I knew her, and she wasn't that kind. Mighty pretty woman, too. People said she ran off with the peddler, Ira Cohen. Talk about rubbish. Cohen had a wife and six kids in St. Paul. Where'd he put her? In the back of the cart? The whole thing stank to high heaven from the start."

They found Helen's body in 1950. The twins and another man, Jacob Hiner, were digging up the old outhouse on the property and unearthed her skeleton near it. Bodler had already been dead for eleven years. His two sons had fought in Europe, had come home and started up their junk business. Lily didn't know exactly when they had stopped washing. The army enforced cleanliness, so it must have been sometime after 1945 that the Bodler twins became Filthy Frank and Dirty Dick. Had they married, the gruesome story of their parents might have aged faster, grown distant with children

and grandchildren, but there were no more Bodlers. What the two brothers had felt when they discovered their mother's bones frozen in a position of panic, a position that showed she had tried to claw her way out of her grave, was anybody's guess. Illegible as stones, the two walked, ate and snorted out as few words as possible.

Then, as she looked up, Lily saw Edward Shapiro standing on the steps outside the Stuart Hotel. Even from that distance, she could see that he was rumpled, as if he had just climbed out of bed. Lily walked toward the window and stopped. She watched the man scratch his leg, and at the same time, out of the corner of her eye, she saw Bert waltz into the cafe and let the screen door slam behind her. After tying an apron around her waist, Bert sidled up to Lily and said, "So how's the Ordeal this morning?" Without waiting for an answer, she surveyed the booths, nodded at the twins and groaned theatrically.

Lily nodded and moved her head to the right so she wouldn't lose sight of the man on the steps. Bert followed Lily's eyes and the two women watched him together.

"Absolutely, definitely cheating material if I ever saw it." Bert gave her wad of gum a snap. "It's not often I get the urge to sneak out on old Rog', but that one . . .," and without bothering to finish the sentence, Bert shook her head. Then she whistled and turned to Lily. "Poor Hank, he's in for it."

"I'm not married to Hank, Bert."

"Oh yeah, I thought you two were engaged."

"Not really," Lily said and held out her left hand. "No ring, see. Anyway, who says I'd have a chance with a guy like that. He must be at least thirty, and he's an artist, and—"

"Honey," Bert interrupted her, "with a bod like yours

you've got a chance with anything male and breathing." She paused. "Well, what d'ya know, Mr. Tall, Dark and Mysterious is coming over."

"Nah," Lily said. "He never comes in here."

But Edward Shapiro was striding across the street toward them, and Lily grabbed the coffeepot off its heating coil and began to pour coffee into Clarence Sogn's cup, even though it was nearly full already, and once she had done that, she wiped her hands on her apron for no reason and felt her heart beating and told herself not to be stupid. She didn't see him, but she heard him come through the door, and at the sound she straightened her back and pulled in her stomach. Just as she turned to look at him and saw him sitting at the counter, she felt a slow, warm sensation between her legs and knew it was blood. Shit, she thought. I never keep track. She stared at Edward Shapiro from behind. He was leaning forward and the fabric of his blue work shirt had tightened across his shoulder blades. She moved her eyes down the back seam of his jeans that disappeared into the red covering of the stool, and she could almost feel his weight. The man was lean, but the idea of his heaviness aroused her. Even if he did see me, he'll never recognize me, she said to herself and watched Bert pour him a cup of coffee. She wished she were on the other side of the counter with the coffeepot. She wished she didn't have to run upstairs to her room for a tampon. She waved at Bert, mouthed the word "curse," raced to the back of the cafe and through the door to the stairwell.

Sitting on the toilet in her apartment, Lily felt grateful to be off her feet. Her jeans and underpants were lying on the floor, and she was looking down at the blood stain on the white material of her underpants, its red brilliant against the

denim and the dull blue floor tiles. She didn't want to move, but after several seconds she reached for her tampons, unwrapped one and pushed it inside her. She glanced down at the blue string between her legs, at her bare knees and the lines of their bones, and had one of those sudden, curious feelings, more sensation than thought, and more familiar to children than adults, that she wasn't really there in the room at all, that she had been blown out of her own head somewhere else, and that every thing she was looking at was no longer itself, but a kind of inanimate impostor. Lily changed position to get rid of the feeling and then changed into a fresh pair of underpants and jeans.

She opened the back door to the cafe slowly. She wanted to look in on Edward Shapiro at the counter, but he was gone. Instead, she saw Martin only three or four feet in front of her, standing beside the Bodlers' booth, and at that very second, he was handing Filthy Frank two twenty-dollar bills. Half a minute later, she would have missed the whole transaction. Frank took the money, picked at his greasy shirt pocket and tucked the bills inside. Then he handed Martin the bag. It was the way Martin took the bag that gave Lily a start. As he reached for it, his fingers trembled with expectation, and his eyes rolled upward so that for an instant his pupils disappeared and all she saw was white. His lips parted, and she heard him exhale. Lily didn't know what she was seeing, but whatever lay inside that dirty grocery bag, it had affected Martin in a way that embarrassed her. She suffered for him, for his oddness, for his not knowing how to act, for that horrible expression that was much too private for a cafe. She pushed the door open, and in her hurry to get past him, accidentally brushed his elbow. Damn, she said to herself as she confirmed that Shapiro had really and truly vanished. She felt a light touch

on her shoulder, turned around and saw Martin staring down at her. He stuttered out her name and said, "I'm leaving something for you on the table."

She glanced down at the bag that Martin was holding in his left hand. "A present for me?" She knew perfectly well that it wasn't. The question was prompted by irritation with him, and she heard an edge in her voice.

He shook his head, and Lily turned away from him to avoid his face.

She hurried over to Bert and said, "So, what's he like?"

Bert looked up. "To whom are you referring?" she said with an artificial sniff.

"Ah, cut it out. Give me the dope."

"He came and went like lightning, but for the minute he was here, I'd say he was real class, real nice and not stuck-up at all."

"Yeah?" Lily said. She slid behind the counter and poured Matt Halvorsen more coffee. "Did you talk about anything?"

"He said he'd take a doughnut."

"That's deep," Lily said.

"I said, 'Which one?' and pointed at the case. Then he said in New York you don't get to pick 'em, and I said, 'Well, this ain't New York,' and he said he knew that, and that he'd take the one without the hole, more for your money. He swilled down his coffee in three seconds flat, grabbed the doughnut and ran out the door."

Lily pressed her lips together. "His eyes are kind of unusual, wouldn't you say? They go up a little. Did you notice?"

Bert nodded. "Almond shaped. That's uncommon, at least around here."

"He's uncommon, all right."

Lily and Bert turned their heads to spot the eavesdropper.

Ida Bodine walked toward them, carrying her coffee cup. The tiny woman wore her hair in a towering beehive to compensate for the missing inches.

“Gossip radar,” Bert said to Lily in a low voice.

“He’s got somethin’ goin’ up in his room,” Ida said. “I’ve been hearin’ things.”

“What kind of things?” Lily said.

“Bangin’, creakin’. More than once I’ve had to tell him to cut the racket—opera music blarin’ till it busts your eardrums. It’s my job as night manager to keep things runnin’ smooth-like, and that one’s made my job a regular hell.”

Night desk clerk, you mean, Lily thought to herself. “Doesn’t sound so bad to me,” she said aloud. “A little noise.”

Ida sipped her coffee, her eyes on Lily. “That ain’t all. I seen people goin’ in there when I start work at six, and they don’t go in the front door neither, go in the back from the river side and stay in there with him for hours. And they ain’t what you call ‘nice’ folks neither.” Ida nodded.

“I think a man’s got a right to see anyone he pleases,” Bert said.

Ida looked straight at Bert, cocked her head to one side and smiled with false sweetness. “Tex?” she said.

Lily looked at Ida, who had put down her coffee cup and folded her arms across her chest. It did seem unlikely. Lily conjured an image of the big man—six feet five with long red sideburns, a nose bent from too many fights and a big beer belly hanging over his pants. Vince had banned him from the Ideal a couple of years before Lily started as a waitress, and she rarely met up with him, but Hank knew Tex from the city jail, where he sometimes spent the night in one or the other of the two cells. Hank’s summer job as a dispatcher at the Webster

Police and Fire Department had made him an expert on the big redhead's misdemeanors. It was true that his crimes usually didn't amount to much more than disturbing the peace, but he disturbed the peace at a pretty regular clip and drove the officers batty. Tex's last offense had taken place last Thursday, when he barged through the doors of the Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall out on Highway 19, howling like Tarzan as he loped down the aisle dressed in nothing but a pair of leopard bikini underwear, a ten-gallon hat and cowboy boots.

"I'd say Tex must've paid that Shapiro fellow eight or nine visits, and the last time I seen him, he was comin' out of the room buttonin' up his shirt." Ida's face puckered in disgust.

Bert gaped at Ida in mock horror. "Why, Ida Bodine," she said. "If the man's a fruit, I'm a five-eyed alien from the next galaxy."

Ida sniffed. "I'm just sayin' what I seen, nothin' more."

"Come on, Ida," Lily said. "Edward Shapiro taught at Courtland. He had a good job there—"

Ida interrupted. "His wife left him, didn't she? It's gonna be divorce." She hissed the last consonant. "Tell me this, if he's so hoity-toity, big professor and all, what's he doin' in the Stuart?"

Lily glanced at Bert, then back at Ida. "I think he's painting." Her tone had more vehemence than she had intended.

Ida raised her eyebrows. "You know what they say about the paintings, don't you? They're pictures of Webster, and they ain't none of our beauty spots. I guess he's done the grain elevator and the tracks and the dump and made 'em real ugly to show all of us here that we're a bunch of hicks."

Lily had only seen the backs of Shapiro's paintings, but she wondered why he would paint outdoor scenes inside.

"Now where did you get that information?" Bert said.