

# PRELUDES AND INTERLUDES

*by* Dennis Hiatt

Dora closed her eyes, pulled the army blanket up to her chin, and wished she was in a place where the air was so sweet and clean that she'd want to drink it. Last night, her best friend had hinted that she was the ugliest woman he knew. This morning Dora called in sick to work. She opened her eyes and stared at ceiling. It was off-white. It was dusty. Her friend had been drunk, and sometimes after two or three quarts of beer, he'd tell people that he was Jewish.

Dora knew her friend had been to Idaho. There he'd hung out with Neo Nazis, but he'd come back in a funk and tried to take up heroin as a hobby. Dora chuckled remembering how they'd hunted Old Town for the drug and none of the sly Mexicans with white girlfriends would sell the drug to her friend.

Eyes closed again, she wondered if The Pumpkin House Family Restaurant, where she bussed tables, would fire her. She'd met her friend there. Was it six months ago? He'd been a cook and wore pants with small black and white checks. They'd fired him for spitting in a customer's omelet.

Dora smiled, opened her eyes, and stretched. Her small studio reeked of cigarette smoke. She opened her window and left it open while she showered. Shivering, she toweled dry in the draft of the window. The towel smelled of mildew and she was out of deodorant. She splashed perfume on her armpits, and dressed carefully in her cleanest-of-the-dirty black-on-black clothes.

Outside, across the street, she looked back and saw that her window was left open. Dora paused, and stared, then

shrugged and ambled slowly down the street, as sexily as she could. Two old men, near hairless and fat, smiled and waved from the second floor window of a soot-gray, brick apartment. Dora, on impulse, blew them a kiss. One chortled until he coughed up something and hacked. The other one, with hopeful, sad eyes, waved her to come back with small, almost child-like hand movements. Dora smiled quickly, shook her head, and marched away, with a sway in her sway. The old man's coughing hack filled the damp air and mingled with the smell of the brewery three block north.

At the next corner, Dora stopped. Overhead, the sky was overcast dark as diesel fumes. Before her was a long street of bleak houses that seemed loveless, and a sidewalk strewn with Salvation Army toys and garbage. There were no children visible. Dora felt armpits flood and her asshole pucker, and yet she seemed unable to move. She was sure no one that lived on this street had ever dined at The Pumpkin House Family Restaurant.

A child shrieked dully from one of the dark houses, and Dora felt her feet moving down the street back the way that she'd came.

The old men, still at the window, waved. Dora waved back, and thinking she'd spend her last four dollars on a Waldorf salad, gifted them with a show of all her teeth and most of her gums. Behind the old men, she could see a bare light bulb dangling from the ceiling. One of the old men--the hacker--waved money at Dora, while the other one motioned for her to come to them with his small, almost childlike, hand movements. Dora shrugged and walked to the door to the apartment house. The inside of the building whiffed of mold, stale beer, urine and food being cooked in garlic. She made her way carefully up the worn stairs and looked down the hallway. The last door on the left was open.

She stepped into the stuffy, foul room and saw that both old men were in wheelchairs. The hacker smiled toothless,

bubbles of saliva dripped from his mouth, and down his chin. The other one, with small, almost childlike, hand movements motioned Dora to sit on a chromed chair with a cracked vinyl seat in the center of the room. Dora sat, crossed her legs, and with both hands held her small, black purse tight to her lap. The old men snorted and giggled and the hacker pulled two dirty dollar bills from a greasy leather pouch. "Shoes?" He cooed and the other old man nodded with slight jerks.

Dora took off her shoes and the old man laid the bills on the floor. Dora smiled and shrugged. The old men stared at her feet like poker players evaluating a good hand.

In the unnatural heat of the room, Dora found herself blossoming under their gaze. She smiled softly and set her purse on the floor, next to her scuffed black pumps. The hacker's head shot up. His eyes were as wide as if she'd fired a gun in the room. The other old man sighed and dug in his pants pocket. After a long moment he fished out a single dollar bill. He looked at it for a long second and then his small, bright, bloodshot eyes moved to Dora. She encouraged him with sweet eyed smile and a questioning tilt of her head. The old man looked back to his lone dollar. He was confused and afraid. The hacker whispered. "Nylons?"

Dora glowed at the old men to set them at ease and rose and picked up the three dollars where they lay. She swayed with a confident sensuality back to the chair and with one snappy move hooked her thumbs under her short, black skirt and peeled her panty hose off.

The old men gasp and Dora turned and sat in the chair. Her thighs and lips were clamped tight together.

The fat, old men pushed their wheelchairs together. The hacker whispered in the other's ear. The other nodded while his hands fluttered in his lap. Then the hacker rolled into the other room. After a moment he came back with three rings. In his wrinkled hand he held two wedding rings and a gold ring with a square red stone. His eyes pleaded when he

croaked. "All?"

Dora nodded with a smile, rose and took the rings from him. When they were deposited deep in her black purse she slipped on her shoes and leaving her panty hose walked out the door.

Dora moved away from the building at an angle that the fat, old men could not see. Two blocks from their apartment, she caught a bus and found a window seat for the ride downtown. The seat was vinyl and had been sliced with a knife or a razor. At the next stop, two young, black men got on. They sat behind her and played music on a ghetto blaster that she did not understand, but, nonetheless, liked. One of the young men said. "Momma yo' sure be look'n fine today." Dora didn't answer him. Instead she dug in her purse and found the ring with the square red stone. She made a childlike and harmless face, took the man's hand and slipped the ring on his finger.

He said. "Whoa!"

He friend chuckled. "Shit Home that Bitch be engaging you!"

Despite their many pleas, Dora did not speak to them the rest of the ride, but she smiled softly and nodded when they addressed her. She skipped off the bus downtown and made her way to a pawn shop on Fourth Avenue. The rings brought her seventeen dollars and thirty five cents. Dora examined several guns (two pistols and one automatic), and the man behind the counter smiled and smiled and kidded her about being a Pistol Pack'n Momma.

Dora told him she was Jewish. She did not smile and his face seemed to misplace his grin.

At the ritziest department store in town Dora bought panty hose. Wearing her new nylons, she went to the store's second story restaurant, and had coffee. Waldorf Salad was not on the menu. Dora ordered a Hot Dog and looked around the restaurant. Most of the customers were well-dressed women of

middle age. There were a few young people that looked hip. Each table had fresh flowers. Dora's table had a single red rose that reminded her of the golden ring with the red stone. Her glass of ice water sparkled and looked much nicer than the ice water at The Pumpkin House Family Restaurant. When the hot dog was served, Dora asked her waitress if they were hiring. The waitress looked at her for a second and murmured "No,".

Back on the street, refreshed and relaxed, Dora bought a newspaper, found a bench, and went through the help wanteds looking for a new job. She wanted to work in a place where the ice water was nice. She wanted to know cooks that did not wear black and white checkered pants. She wanted to dress in crisp, white dresses and murmur sweetly at her customers.

As night fell, wrapping the city in shadows, Dora walked out of the last restaurant on her list. At six restaurants she'd murmured sweetly for a job application. Two of them had told her the position was filled, two of them had insisted that she take the job application home, and two of the restaurants had asked her when she could start. La Jocks was the place that Dora hoped would hire her. La Jocks had purple curtains and neat pill box hats. Dora could see herself in pill box hat murmuring, "I would recommend the Waldorf Salad today."

Still smiling, Dora made her made down the dark sidewalk. A man in soiled cloths lurched toward her mumbling. "Got'a quarter?"

Dora cocked her head, murmured, "I would recommend the rack of lamb today," and with a wink, danced away from him and down the street.

Dora took a round about way back to her apartment. She passed down the street where the two old men lived. There was a light in their window. The window was shut, but the glass was so clean that it seemed to be open. She stood there for about ten minutes just watching the window. Then she

remembered that she'd left her own window open, turned and went home. Maybe her friend would come over again tonight. Dora had six dollars left. She could buy him beer.

