

After Grief

by M. F. Sullivan

A month after Susan handled *The Baby*, she boarded a train to New York, a city that had entranced her with only its reputation. Oh, the cautionary tales—little girl lost in the concrete woods, encircled by predators. But Susan wasn't afraid of predators. She grew up around them, in a city of her own. Someday, she would be one in her own right. But then, a few weeks shy of seventeen in '76, she was just a girl who believed in a strong offense.

Within a day, she had a scummy apartment which belonged to the government. It had cockroaches, which she was not used to. They churned her stomach, repulsive little things. Not even creatures. Hideous aliens. Two brains, she'd read: one in the head, one in the ass. A cat, now that was a creature. Perhaps she'd employ one to keep the pests out. An extra bill to pay, maybe, but they were charming creatures, cats. They rather reminded her of herself.

First, though, she had to find a job. Someday, she'd have a job singing. But at the time, she had to grasp for something more in her reach. A waitress job at the chain diner a few blocks from her apartment. Yes, that would do. Smile and wow them, and start next Tuesday. The short commute was particularly good because, had she walked much further in the swimming-pool humidity, she would have reached work in a sweat-soaked uniform.

The job was murder. Always smiling, so polite, bowing to the whims of the customers. No, of course that isn't what you ordered, only what you said. Why, we're glad to seat you five minutes to close. Oh, it's no problem to let your baby scream and flail and wander the diner. Would you like to hear our specials tonight?

Susan, of course, was not the only one who hated it, and soon, she was smoking in back of the building right along with her colleagues. She made good tips because she was sweet to customers' faces, but the minute she was out that door, it would all come out.

“Oh, God, the couple at table two smells like baked garbage.”

Jerry-the-Cook was a blond boy only a couple years older than she

was. He seemed a lot younger somehow. He was always laughing at her jokes, and laughed at that one. "They can't smell that bad."

"No, they do. They smell like a necklace my Uncle brought home from India one summer. It was lovely, this strange brown weaving and these colored stones, but I couldn't wear it because the smell never faded. It made me nauseous. They must be Indian."

And he'd laugh again, and ask if her family had really gone to India. Her Uncle had, and her aunt. And then, because the questions were getting too personal, she would excuse herself, and go back in, and get ready to smile big for everyone.

But, then, there were the regulars. They tried her nerves a little more because the show was long-term. No one-nighters for these people: they had to see the same show, night after night, until the play finished its run. They wanted rapport. Lonely old men, all of them. Honey, sweetheart, angel. Some of them were grandfatherly, gently chiding her for dropping out of school and coaching her to return, or asking if she'd like to meet their grandson some weekend. Those men, she didn't mind. She might even go so far as to say she liked it when they came in. They reminded her of Mr. Everson, her music teacher: the only reason she made it out here at all.

The regulars she hated, though, were the men who reminded her of her Uncle. Men who were too nice to her. Men who looked at her like they wanted something. She hated that. They put her on guard when they came in near closing. Those nights, she'd ask Jerry to walk her home, since he lived just down the way to take care of his mother. He was a nice boy, and he also wanted something, but he wasn't unpleasant about it. He didn't ask after boyfriends to scope out the competition, or probe into her weekend plans. He just wanted to walk her home, and ask what sorts of things she liked.

"Music," she said, "and theater."

"Maybe that's why you get such great tips. You're a great actress!"

"You'll see me on posters someday," she said in the surety of youth, smiling as she did. "But you're right. I can make them think I like them."

He gave her a shy grin, then gave one to his shoes, one hand sweeping back cascades of unkempt blond curls. "That Douglas guy tonight is really over the moon with you. You know last week, he came when you called in sick? Drank a coffee and got out as soon as he could.

Susan smiled through her disgust. She didn't find it as funny as he did, because the more often Douglas came, the more money he 'gave' her, and the more he 'gave' her, the more his entitlement grew. There was so much threat in every smile—it didn't scare her, but rather repelled her.

Jerry wasn't entirely repellant. His kindness was the worst part, because at the end of every walk home he would tarry by the entrance of her building as if wanting to kiss her but unable to bring himself. She couldn't bring herself to initiate either, and always had her keys in her hand at least a block in advance. At the door, she would bid him a polite, but curt good-night. A firm message: your company is only welcome outside this apartment. Please, do not impose. For your own good.

And he never did. She would go three flights upstairs, trudging over mildew-green carpet without touching the undusted banister. She was always so tense that last length, wishing she was already there, trying to remember she soon would be.

Few things were as pure as the release which arrived upon fitting her brass key in its lock. Each time, she would sigh. Yes, home. Another day endured. Another day spent waiting for something. What would it consist of, this something? A break, she hoped. A chance to lift herself out of food service, out of customer service, out of the whole concept of serving anyone but herself. Every day she wore a mask. Every day she pretended she was a people person, content with her lot in life. But as she stepped into her little room each night, she shed her skin, smoked a joint, and told Reginald the cat how she loathed each and every last one of them out there.

She could not explain why. It was as if they were lesser, though she knew that was not true—not inherently, anyways. But she did know that she was willing to do things most were not. She, as a

tender teenager, had experienced things most would not, could not. That gave her an advantage in catching hold of her dreams.

Sunk into her beanbag chair, Susan pondered the black and white cat in her lap. There hadn't been many cockroaches since he'd moved in, though a lot more fur. She liked his fur, though. It wasn't like most cats'. Ultra-soft, not as long as a Persian's, but still long enough so she could bury her face in it and scream if he felt like allowing her. It was good Reginald was there, because she had the sudden, very keen urge to call home. Nobody would be up, but she was sure her Uncle was still looking for her, and would hop out of bed at any hour for a ringing phone. Then, she'd rub it in his face. The Baby. Maybe lie to him to make it worse than it was. She'd make him cry on the phone. Listen to meaningless pleas of forgiveness. She had accepted it all, mostly, but still couldn't figure out whether he cared for the ways he'd hurt her. He certainly seemed to love her. But what did she know? She was only a kid then.

Outside, the humidity gave way to rain, and she groaned with a glance towards the paint bubble on the wall opposite her bed. She'd seen it a day before at barely a millimeter, but now it would only get bigger. Somehow she couldn't bring herself to report it to management. Tomorrow, she lied to herself, finally shooing away the cat to set aside a pair of pink panties for the next day, still in the temporary dresser of her suitcase. Then, she opened the window to listen to the rain, and went to sleep to make tomorrow come a little faster.

The days following were all much the same, each spent waiting for the clock to turn over, waiting for something. Praying for something, practically, though she was more and more sure that there was no God. Not because of what she had endured, mind, but because of how securely alone she felt. Sometimes she prayed to her mother, but it was never serious. If her mother really wanted to help her, after all, she wouldn't have stuck her head in the oven and left Susan with her Uncle. Now, the girl didn't even have him. No Uncle, no God, no Baby.

If she was being honest, The Baby had made her feel less alone.

The idea of it, at any rate, had been somehow appealing. But the practical reality—no, she couldn't. Anyways, that was all handled now. Better this way, for the child and for her. Certainly better for her. Better for her mind. The abomination. But, still—it was hard not to wonder. Hard not to feel very alone, wondering like that.

One Wednesday, at her apartment door, Susan stopped and turned to Jerry, who now walked her home every night, regardless of customers.

“Do you want to come up and listen to some records with me,” she asked him, and he grinned so big she might have told him Pink Floyd was playing in her room.

“I don't know. My mom might get worried.”

Didn't he know how unattractive that was? She was trying to be nice to him, the way he was nice to her. The way he was probably expecting her to be nice to him. It's not as if she would have been doing that had she any other option, but that cat, and the paint bubble, and the window that got harder to open each day—she leaned up and kissed him. He kissed like a teenager. He was a teenager, still. She tried to remember that she was one, too, though she felt much older. Eighty, ninety, like this was all old hat. She was tired. She wanted a warm body to be tired against. His mouth tasted like burned hashbrowns and cigarettes.

“Okay,” he said after the kiss. Then, “Do you have a phone? So I could call my mom?”

“In the hallway upstairs. Come on.”

And, he did: came upstairs, called his mother, listened to records with Susan. It wasn't long before they had sex, because except the beanbag, the only place to sit was the bed. It wasn't good sex, but it wasn't long, either. After, he tucked burgundy waves behind her ear, his eyes full of marvel. She tried to feel something. There was only pity there, because she knew this would all result in quite a lot of needless pain for him.

“You're the most beautiful girl I've ever seen,” he said, and it made her smile, but she knew that already. She didn't want someone to tell her she was beautiful. She wanted someone to tell her she

was a wonderful singer. Someone to tell her she was witty, or sharp, or clever. Anything with meaning. But, no. She was just pretty. That was why she was tipped well. Why she got regulars. Maybe they all had a point. Maybe beauty was all that mattered.

For two, maybe three weeks, Jerry visited her almost every night after work. The second Saturday, he took her to the dollar movies, explaining he couldn't afford Broadway. It was a sweet gesture. He felt her up in the theater while they watched a movie that had already been out six months. She leaned around him to better see Robert De Niro do push-ups.

The following Monday was when she met Miles. A round, balding man with a pencil mustache, a man near-identical to the rest of her customers, took the corner booth for himself. As soon as she took his drink order, it started:

“Do you let folks go off-menu this place?”

Susan endured a great struggle to keep the twitch from her eye. “We can do an Arnold Palmer, if that's what you mean.”

“I'm thinking something more...feminine.”

“Virgin Shirley Temples.”

“Isn't that just ginger ale?”

“And a cherry.” She hated herself for saying that, an automatic response, the brand of her service sizzling on her tongue. The man gave a lascivious grin while Susan observed her white notepad. “So, what do you want?”

“I think I'll have that Shirley Temple, sweetheart.”

Oh, she hated him. Moving her hips as little as possible, she retreated to the kitchen to fetch the drink. Vague flashes of fetching her father's drinks fluttered before her eyes, along with his face after the last one. It was tempting now—but she had no means, too many witnesses. Like a yoked mule, she bore him his drink. As she handed it over, she recognized it was missing its red buoy.

“I thought you said there'd be a cherry.”

Already bored, exasperated by constant pretending, Susan suddenly found she couldn't keep her mask straight. She just hated him, this man, and barely restrained a sneer. “I asked, but I guess

we lost them years ago.”

He liked that, barked a laugh into his glass. “It’s all right, sweetheart.”

“Susan,” she insisted, tapping her nametag with her pen.

“Fine, Susan. You’re not one of these Steinem gals, are you?”

“No,” she said, now finally smiling. “Just Susan. What can I get you?”

At last, he ordered—steak and eggs and double hashbrowns, and she was able to make good her escape from him. A blissful ten minutes. Ten minutes to smoke. Ten minutes to pace, and ignore Jerry when he asked what was wrong. Why did she hate this man so much? Maybe because he was a symbol—a stereotype. All the unpleasantness throbbing with life. Life, and grease. He and everybody else had her pinned as a certain type of girl, and she didn’t appreciate it. A svelte redhead with pouty lips and thickly-lashed green eyes. One who enjoyed—well, the idea of sex—and dressed her body to flatter its finest qualities. They thought of it as an invitation. As an indication that she was cheap, or easy, all because she wanted to wear well-fit dresses for the same reason men wanted well-tailored coats. Really, she was the most expensive coat on the rack. And, for some reason, she felt she had to prove that to someone. Specifically, this man. It was illogical, but she hated him. Hate is not bound by logic. She couldn’t just lay down and let his slimy words creep over her.

As she emerged from the kitchen and her ten minutes of peace, she almost didn’t notice it. But then, it came again: the snap of pudgy fingers. “Hey,” the pig was saying. Her face boiled over with heat. Almost nothing made her angrier than a snapping customer. What was she, a dog? Yes, perhaps a dog. A pretty little bitch. That thought was how she managed to smile as she responded to his bidding, though it was only half a real one.

“Yes, sir?”

“Another Shirley Temple.” Christ, his wink. “Are you sure they’re virgin?”

“No liquor license here, sir.”

"I see. And you?"

Heated, appalled, Susan snatched the glass from the table. "It doesn't matter. You couldn't have it either way."

"Ah, hey—" As she turned away, he grabbed her elbow, her flesh now rancid with the acidic slime of stranger-touch. "Hey, I was kidding. Don't be sore."

Barely turning her head, Susan cast a disdainful glance from the corner of her eye. "You men make a lot of jokes which don't sound like jokes."

The man grinned a little, almost meekly. "Well, if you saw yourself the way we see you, you'd understand."

With a brief, sardonic baring of teeth, Susan turned to stare down her nose at him. "I don't know about that, sir. I see more of myself than anyone else ever could. Everything in the mirror, and everything up here." She tapped the glass's lip to the temple of her forehead. "If you could see that, you'd understand why I do not appreciate it. Understand." She scoffed. "Of course I understand. Don't you think I know how I look? I love how I look. How I look benefits me, sure, but it doesn't give you license to say whatever you please. It's rude."

After, she swayed. That was more than she'd meant to say, but oh, it had felt too good to stop. She might get in trouble with her boss. So be it. The man wasn't saying anything, so she left his table to replenish his drink and get his plate. By the time she returned, she was no less furious. Her words had not been a steam valve, but rather a spark, and a fire was burning, now. It certainly didn't abate when he had the audacity to ask her to sit.

"I just had my break, sir."

"Just a minute, you won't get in trouble. I'll make sure."

Put-upon and sure to demonstrate it, Susan lowered into the seat across from his, arranged her skirt upon the red leather upholstery, and folded her hands before her. The man heaped a forkful of hashbrowns into his maw.

"I'm Miles," he blurbled. She didn't reply, so he swallowed and said, "What's your story, Susie Q?"

"Susan," she corrected. "I don't have one."

"Everybody's got a story. Especially a girl like you. You've got an angle—something you want. Right?"

"Everybody wants something."

"Of course they do. That's how I know you want something, too."

Susan glanced out the window, past all the traffic and faceless people, to the brick building across the street. A little theater. She'd been there once or twice, off-Broadway productions of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* or *Death of a Salesman*. "I want to be on the stage. Of course, so does everybody. But I can do it."

"What kind of stage? Musicals?"

She shook her head, still not sure why she indulged him past the point of proving her mind. Maybe because it was good to tell a stranger about her people. To unburden herself to someone with no context, no presuppositions. "My mother was an opera soprano. I don't want to be like her—I want to do real plays, or real singing. Not both."

"But you do sing?"

She nodded, her eyes glinting towards him. Yes, see her worth. It's more than a fine body.

Miles was still stuffing his cheeks, but he seemed genuinely interested. His beady black eyes were focused. "Could I hear some singing, sometime?"

"Not here."

He laughed and said, "No, not here. I'd like to hear how it sounds with a microphone."

Susan tilted her head, her eyes narrowed. "What do you want from me?"

"Well, a new waitress, for one. If she can sing, moreso the better, that's the kind of girl we need. Multi-talented, entertaining on slow nights, nights when headliners call sick. You're eighteen, right?"

"Yes," she said without batting an eye.

"And I don't believe in coincidences. Look, it's not the most glamorous place. You'd still be waiting tables, but you'd also be singing for a living. Eh? Isn't that a start?"

“Why me?”

“We need a girl with spunk. Got enough of those cutesy blonde ditzes running around, my customers want somebody who can keep them on their toes. Some men like it when a pretty young woman makes them feel bad about themselves, and I can tell you're my woman just by talking to you.” Wiping his fingers on his lapel, he reached into his pocket and withdrew a business card. La Granada, with palm trees and pink lips stamped on either side.

“A strip club,” she sneered.

He lifted his hand. “Burlesque revival. We have private dancers, yeah, but you wouldn't be one of them. I ask that you come. Just give it a shot. You might like it.”

“Is this how you get all your girls? Poaching naïve young women with big dreams and crumby jobs?”

“Usually. But sometimes, we get ones like you.”

“And what happens to them?”

He smiled, leaned forward, and whispered, “They make a lot of money.”

With her lips in a set line, Susan tucked the card into her apron and rose. “I'll think about it.”

“Come by tonight. What are you doing?”

Jerry didn't even cross her mind. She repeated, “I'll think about it,” then left to reel in the kitchen. What just happened? Was this a con?

Jerry frowned from the grill. “You okay? Alexis said you were talking to that guy a while—did he say something to you?”

Breathless, Susan plucked a few crumbs of food from her apron and said, “No, he knew my mother. That's all.”

“Isn't that something!”

“Yes,” she agreed as she took a plate for a different customer, the guy with the glasses at the corner of the counter. “Certainly something.”

Miles didn't say much to her after that, but he settled his seven dollar tab with a fifty dollar bill, and left before she could ring it up. As he put on his hat, he told her, “Anytime after eight. Ask for

Miles.”

Her shift ended at nine. Jerry was all set to go, so she let him down gently. Not tonight. Her girlfriend was in town, she was going to visit her awhile. He wilted like an unwatered flower, that boy, but helped her get a taxi and watched it pull away. Melodramatic, like it was the last time he'd see her.

It was her first cab since the one that brought her from the train. The leather reeked of cigarettes and the floor had several rust-colored stains, but she loved the reflections of the city lights, the way they slid across the windows, the thick traffic, all the people crowding the sidewalks, and the bums, and the newspapermen, and the closed-down food stands, and the skyscrapers, and the blurry night sky so far beyond it all.

At the club, the cabbie looked over his shoulder and asked, “You sure this is it?”

“My uncle works here,” she explained rather curtly while awaiting change.

Outside, the air smelled damp. She stood frozen as the cab pulled away. The building seemed a purple behemoth, its facade cluttered with posters like a movie theater, but unlike any movie theater she'd seen. The marquee advertised not films, but names like BIG BETTIE and SHELLY TINGLE all in big block letters. Stripper names. But she was here to sing, not to strip. Not stripping-stripping, anyways. If it was real burlesque like he said, then maybe she'd be fine with that. But nothing dancing on a pole.

Inside the front doors was a dingy wood-paneled lobby, a bucket for umbrellas and a foreboding coat check, dark and empty. The only other door was guarded by a massive black man wearing a hot pink shirt with a wide collar and a pair of tight bell-bottoms, like something out of a silly television show. The whole thing was out of a silly television show, but he made her want to laugh. He was so huge she felt like a five-year-old as he took her in from behind crossed arms and asked, “You lost?”

“I'm here to see Miles.”

The man sucked his teeth. “You're here for Miles? You look too

fresh.”

“You don't need to know what I've been through.”

She thought he might smile, but he didn't. Just looked like he might, or was trying not to. “You eighteen?”

“Would Miles have told me to come see him if I wasn't?”

“Are you sure you're eighteen?”

“Do you really want to know? Or do you really want a waitress who can keep the men in line?”

Lips pursed, he nodded, slowly, thoughtfully, then opened the door to a club as purple as the facade. “All right, all right. Come on, sister, Miles is this way.”

As they set out across the plush violet carpet, past the overstuffed chairs and around the empty tables by the stage, it occurred to Susan that, were it not for the other women lazing about, chatting, prepping for the night, this would feel like a trap. Maybe it still was. She might be drugged. Raped. Sold into slavery. Goodness. What would Uncle think? Too late now, she supposed.

“Shouldn't this place be...busier,” she asked.

“Shows start at eleven on Fridays. Makes it feel more exclusive. They'll trickle in soon. Might even get to watch you sing, the early ones.” The onyx statue of a man stopped at the door nearest to the stage, which he knocked at before opening. “Mr. Miles, got a girl here to see you.”

“Girl—oh, is it Susie? Come in, come on in.”

The bouncer stepped aside to wave her into the sour-smelling office, a tiny box with walls cluttered by photographs, awards she'd never heard of, signed posters, and at least one gold-plated dildo. Miles rocketed himself from the sunken pink couch, an inspiring achievement from a man so rotund. In the sofa's other cushion lounged a blonde who examined Susan's every inch with eyes so heavily made-up that she had trouble discerning their color.

Though he still repulsed her, Susan allowed herself crushed in a hug from Miles, who turned to the blonde and said, “Baby, this is that girl I told you about. Come in,” he said for the third time, guiding her around the mirror-finished coffee table, then more or

less pushing her into his still uncomfortably warm spot on the couch. As Susan sat up, the girl next to her extended her hand. "I'm Shelly."

"Susan," she said, somehow glad to touch another woman, realizing then that the last woman she'd touched was the nun in Columbus, who had insisted she hug her when the whole exchange was over. Genuinely, Susan said, "It's nice to meet you. You're on the marquee, right?"

"Mmhm. I'm Daddy's headliner."

The heinous appellation wasn't enough to deter her because she already knew she wouldn't use it for him. This would be a business relationship, or she was out. "What do you do?"

"Shelly sings, and dances." Miles was sitting in his desk chair now, having turned it to face the table and women. It settled on Susan that the sour smell she'd initially assumed to be sweat was not that, but rather semen. "Someday, you might sing and dance on Friday nights, too."

"Let's hear her," said Shelly, but Miles was getting something from his pocket and bending down over the coffee table.

"So, here's the thing of it, Susie...at first, you'll be mostly a waitress. Waitresses have to be polite to our guests, of course, but they aren't floor dancers, so they don't have to be nice, get me."

He was cutting up cocaine, something she'd only seen done in movies. He continued, "Singers also don't have to be nice, though they do dance. Their dance is part of a set, not—well, not like the floor girls. No private dances. There's a mystique we maintain with the singers.

"Most our girls, we start out easy. No set, just a song or two. Tuesday nights, Sundays. Quiet days. But the better they get, and the bigger they get, the more likely they are to get moved to Friday. And if they get moved to Friday, there's no more waiting tables, but they'll be expected to deliver a set. That's a dance, and a song. You okay with dancing?"

"There's no problem." As much as she hated it on principle, her body had been a source of income since she was twelve. It was a curse, certainly, but a curse that came with great benefits, and she

had to make use of them any way she could. So long as another quality was acknowledged apart from her body: here, it was singing. Creativity. "Would I get to create my set?"

"Oh, of course. My girls don't do anything that doesn't inspire them. We want you to be the music here. It's about bodies, pretty girls, but it's also more than that." With a pre-rolled bill stuck in his nose, Miles vacuumed up two lines. Then, he offered the dollar to Susan.

Her pulse fluttered, then doubled, and her blood ran hot with excitement. In later years she would find this to be her body's standard reaction to the presence of hard drugs, or any other risk-taking activity. Trembling inwardly, Susan tipped her head over the line of powder and pinched one nostril closed. The moment, the walls, the big, pink couch: it was all so surreal. A dream. The line seared the back of her throat, but it was only a minute before she was bright, and awake, and warm. She quite liked this drug. She was starting to think she even liked Miles. Shelly took the last one, and after, Miles slapped his knees.

"You ready to sing? What do you like?"

"Nina Simone," Susan said, and the blonde gasped, clapping her hands.

"Oh, I love Nina!"

"Good," she said over her shoulder, laughing, "that means we can be friends."

Then, suddenly, she was up on a stage, and the spotlight rolled onto her. She hadn't had time to put on makeup, or change out of her waitress costume, but it didn't matter. She felt good, great, and that was what she sang about. Under the heat of the spotlight and the watchful eyes of the all the girls, and Miles and his girlfriend-liner and the bouncer, there could be no failure. Her hero's words were under her tongue, and she sang them, channeled her, it seemed, so lost in the music she didn't even realize that this was what she had been waiting for. That opportunity. That change. Everything falling, slowly but surely, into place.

Good fortune. But good fortune wouldn't have happened to her if

she was any girl but Susan.

After, Miles and his girlfriend gave her a two-person standing ovation. She bowed hugely, graciously, and as Miles helped her down from the stage, he said, "That was wonderful, my dear, I think you're going to be a great addition. I'd like you to consider signing up for some daytime vocal lessons, though, just to stay sharp. Were you a singer in school?"

"I was. It's been a few months, though."

"I can tell, you're a little out of practice. Little warbly. But oh, girlie, that feeling!" Miles gave her an affectionate jostle and showed her to the door. "When can you start?"

"Let me give a week's notice at work."

"A week! I can't wait that long, I'll wither and die."

Susan laughed. "It'll give me time to get lessons."

"That's my girl." From his wallet, he drew a couple of twenties and said, "Here, for the cab rides, I don't like the thought of you wasting your tip on an interview."

"Oh, thank you, Miles. It wasn't very much."

"Nonsense. You're one of the family now. Go home, get a good night's sleep, get those lessons, and we're ready to start you next Monday at eight sharp."

The whole ride home, Susan was giddy with delirium and dopamine. The experiment with a new drug had been fun, of course, but it had felt incredible to be up on that stage. She'd been on stages in school, but it wasn't like this. In school they tried to give you a chance to be special. This was the real world, where people didn't give other people chances to be anything. Maybe Miles wasn't so bad, if he was giving her a chance.

The next morning, Susan wrote her notice under Reginald's watchful eye. Then, letter in-hand, she started off for work, feeling lighter—but as she left the lobby of her building, Jerry leapt back in surprise, his hand on the other side of the handle. He had combed his hair today, and parted it. She fell back a step, his name on her lips as she noticed the rose in his hand. Shit. She had almost forgotten about him.

"Susan, I just—I wanted to walk you to work today so I could give you this."

"Oh. Thank you."

"I just feel like you've been kind of distant lately, and I...it's our one-month anniversary," he said, all honeysuckle. She tried not to roll her eyes, tried not to sneer. Uncle would have blithely corrected that an anniversary was a yearly marker, hence the name, but she didn't. She just frowned. Poor, stupid boy. Loving her was stupid. She was starting to realize she wasn't meant to make other people happy. She was meant to make herself happy. This couldn't go on. She'd do him a favor, get it over with now.

"Jerry...I'm sorry. I don't think I want this."

His face changed like she'd kicked him. "I can get you a different flower."

She wanted to laugh, or scream. Instead, she closed her eyes.

"No, Jerry. I mean, this. I gave it a chance. It's just—it's not."

"Not what?"

"Not—not for me." Then she looked, and was sorry she had. His eyes were watering, now, and it made her hate him, made her want to get this over with fast. She examined the peeling floral wallpaper in the corner of the lobby. "Look, you're a nice boy. That's not what I want."

"But I love you."

"I know, I'm sorry. It was cruel of me to let you. You're not the first, and you won't be the last. You're just—you're nice. Go be with someone nice."

"Please, Susan, I understand. I'm not nice. Sometimes I have these dark thoughts, too—please, just give me a chance."

That was enough. Like an angry child, Susan stamped her foot. "No, Jerry, you don't understand me. What do you know about me? You walk me home, you get your fill, you talk about your model planes until it's time for you to go home to your mom's. You don't know what I think, what I've been through. You know I like music and theater but you don't know my favorite singer or my favorite play. You keep begging and expecting without really knowing what

you're asking for. I only invited you up in the first place because it was obvious you wanted me, and I was tired of being alone. Now I'm just tired of you."

At least he wasn't crying now. Brow furrowed and teeth clenched, Jerry threw the rose at her and muttered, "Fine." The flower bounced off her chest and fell to her feet. When she looked up, the doorway was empty of anything but a busy, baking street, and a slowly-closing door.

Susan threw her letter away along with the flower, quit with a phone call, and decided to spend a happy week alone with her cat before taking the step she'd been waiting for. But that bubble on the wall, that one full of water and three inches big by now, well—that could wait for tomorrow. So could calling Mr. Everson to tell him about her singing job. So could thinking about The Baby. Today, for once, was just for her.

