

Lorrie Moore, Like Life (1990)  
in Lorrie Moore, The Collected Stories  
Vissi d'Arte (2008)



HARRY LIVED near Times Square, above the sex pavilion that advertised 25 CENT GIRLS. He had lived there for five years and had never gone in, a fact of which he was proud. In the land of perversities he had maintained the perversity of refusal.

"You've never even stepped in? Just once, during the day?" asked his girlfriend, Breckie. "Just to see? I mean, *I* have." Breckie was finishing up her internship at St. Luke's. She was a surgeon and worked with beating and stabbing victims brought into the emergency room. She liked getting her hands on the insides of a thing. It had to do with her childhood.

"Someday when I'm rich," said Harry. "It's not as if it's free."

Harry was a playwright, which made it, he felt, appropriate to live in the theater district. Also, the rent was cheap, and he could play his Maria Callas records loud without causing a stir. The neighborhood, after all, was already in a stir. It was a living, permanent stir. He felt he felt relaxed there. He did.

He did.

And if once in a while a small rodent washed up into the toilet or dashed out from under the radiator, Breckie's cat almost always got it.

Harry had started writing plays because he liked them. He liked the idea of an audience: live guests in front of live performers. It was like company at holidays: all those real-life, blood-gorged bodies in one room, those bunches of overdressed grapes; everyone just had to be polite. They had no choice. That, thought Harry, was civilization. Harry had had a play produced once as part of a city competition that

had named him one of the three top up-and-coming under-thirty playwrights. His picture had appeared with pictures of the other two in the *New York Times*, all of them wearing the same tie. The tie had belonged to the photographer, who had made them all wear it, individually, like a jacket in a restaurant, but besides that it had been an exuberant event. The play itself was a bleak, apocalyptic comedy set in the Sheep Meadow at Central Park in the year 2050. A ranger stood stage left for the four-hour duration of the play; other characters had love affairs and conversations. It was called *For Hours See a Ranger*, and it had run for five days in a church basement in Murray Hill.

Since that time Harry had been working on what he hoped would be his masterpiece. The story of his life. *O'Neillian*, he called it.

"Sounds like *chameleon*," said Breckie. Her work took a lot out of her.

"It's about the ragtag American family and the lies we all tell ourselves."

"I know," she said. "I know."

Harry had been writing the play for years. Mostly he worked at night, tucked in out of the neighborhood's gaud and glare, letting what he called "the writing fairies" twinkle down from their night perches to commune with his pen. He was very secretive about his work. He had never shown Breckie more than a page of it, and the two or three times he had taken portions to the photocopier's it had sent him into the flush and sweat of the shy. It wasn't that he didn't have confidence in it. It was simply that the material felt so powerful to him, its arrangement so delicate, that a premature glimpse by the wrong person might curse it forever. He had drawn heavily from his life for this play. He had included the funniest family anecdotes, the most painful details of his adolescence, and the wrenching yet life-affirming death of his great-aunt Flora, Fussbudget Flora, whose dying word had been "Cripes." He had suffered poverty for this play, and would suffer more, he knew, until its completion, living off the frugally spent prize money and the occasional grant he applied for and received. When his cash was low, he had, in the past, done such things as write articles for magazines and newspapers, but he

had taken the work too personally and had had too many run-ins with editors. "Don't fuck with my prose," he'd been known to say in a loud voice.

"But, Harry, we need to shorten this to fit in an illustration."

"You're asking me to eat my children so you can fit in some dumb picture?"

"If you don't want a picture, Harry, go publish in the phone book."

"I have to think about this. I have to think about whether or not I can really eat my children this way." But once he had nibbled at the limbs, he found it was not such a far cry to the vital organs, and soon Harry got good at eating his children. When his articles appeared, often there were two pictures.

And so Harry stopped writing journalism. He also turned down offers to write for "the movies, those pieces of crap" and had had to resist continually the persistent efforts of a television producer named Glen Scarp, who had telephoned him every six months for the last four years, since Harry had won the prize—"Hey, Harry, how's it goin', man?"—trying to get him to write for his television series. "TV," Scarp kept saying, "it's a lot like theater. Its roots are in theater." Harry never watched television. He had an old black-and-white set, but the reception was bad because he and Breckie lived too close to the Empire State Building, the waves shooting out over them and missing the apartment altogether. Once in a while, usually after he got a call from Glen Scarp, Harry would turn the TV on, just to see if things had changed, but it was always a blare of static and police calls from the squad cars that circled the block like birds. "We're going to have to face it," he said to Breckie. "This television is just a large, broken radio with abstract art on the front."

"I can't live like this anymore," said Breckie. "Harry, we've got to make plans. I can't stand the whores, the junkies, the cops, the bums, the porno theaters—you know what's playing at the corner? *Succulent Stewardesses* and *Meat Man*. I'm moving. I'm moving to the Upper West Side. Are you coming with me?"

"Um," said Harry. They had talked once about moving. They had talked once about marriage. They would have children, and Harry would stay home and write and take care of the children during the

day. But this had troubled Harry. During the day he liked to go out. He liked to wander down the street to a coffee shop and read the paper, think about his play, order the rice pudding and eat it slowly, his brain aflame with sugar and caffeine, his thoughts heated to a usable caramel. It was a secret life, and it nourished him in a way he couldn't explain. He was most himself in a coffee shop. He imagined having a family and having to say to his children—tiny squalling children in diapers, children with construction paper and pointed scissors, small children with blunt scissors, mewling, puking children with birdhead scissors or scissors with the ears of a dog—"Now, kids, Daddy's going to a coffee shop now. Daddy'll be back in a while."

"Are you coming with me?" repeated Breckie. "I'm talking you get a job, we get an apartment in a building wired for cable, and we have a *real* life. I can wait for you only so long." She had a cat who could wait for anything: food, water, a mouse under a radiator, a twistie from a plastic bag, which, batted under the rug, might come whizzing back out again, any day now, who knew. But not Breckie. Her cat was vigilant as Madame Butterfly, but Breckie had to get on with things.

Harry tried to get angry. "Look," he said. "I'm not a possession. I may not even belong *with* you, but I certainly don't belong *to* you."

"I'm leaving," she said quietly.

"Aw, Breck," said Harry, and he sank down on the bed and put his hands to his face. Breckie could not bear to leave a man with his hands to his face until he had pulled them away. She sat down next to him, held him, and kissed him deeply, until he was asleep, until the morning, when it would be, when it was, possible to leave.

THE FIRST FEW weeks of living alone were difficult, but Harry got used to it in a way. "One year of living alone," said his old friend Dane in a phone call from Seattle, "and you're ruined for life. You'll be spoiled. You'll never go back." Harry worked hard, as he always had, but this time without even the illusion of company. This time there was just the voice of play and playwright in the bombed-away world of his apartment. He started not to mind it, to feel he was suited in some ways to solitude, to the near weightlessness of no one but himself

holding things down. He began to prefer talking on the phone to actually getting together with someone, preferred the bodilessness of it, and started to turn down social engagements. He didn't want to actually sit across from someone in a restaurant, look at their face, and eat food. He wanted to turn away, not deal with the face, have the waitress bring them two tin cans and some string so they could just converse, in a faceless dialogue. It would be like writing a play, the cobbling in the night, the great cavity of mind that you filled with voices, like a dark piñata with fruit.

"Tell me something wonderful," he said to Dane. He would lie on his bed, the phone cradled at his cheek, and stare lonesomely at the steeple made by the shadow of the bookcase against the wall. "Tell me that we are going to die dreamfully and loved in our sleep."

"You're always writing one of your plays on the phone," said Dane.

"I said, something wonderful. Say something about springtime."

"It is sloppy and wet. It is a beast from the sea."

"Ah," said Harry.

Downstairs every morning, when he went to get the paper and head for a coffee shop, there was Deli, the hooker, always in his doorway. Her real name was Mirellen, but she had named herself Deli because when she first came to New York from Jackson, she had liked the name Delicatessen, seen it flashing all over in signs above stores, and though she hadn't known what one was, she knew the name was for her.

"Mornin', Harry." She smiled groggily. She had on a black dress, a yellow short-sleeved coat, and white boots. Scabs of translucent gray freckled her arms.

"Mornin', Deli," said Harry.

Deli started to follow him a bit up the block. "Haven't seen your Breck woman around—how things be with you-all?"

"Fine." Harry smiled, but then he had to turn and walk fast down Forty-third Street, for Deli was smart and sly, and in the morning these qualities made him nervous.

It was the following week that the trucks started coming. Eighteen-wheelers. They came, one by one, in the middle of the night, pulled up in front of the 25 Cent Girls pavilion, and idled there. Harry began



waking up at four in the morning, in a sweat. The noise was deafening as a factory, and the apartment, even with the windows closed, filled with diesel fumes. He put on his boots, over his bare feet, and threw on his overcoat, a coat over nothing but underwear and skin, and stomped downstairs.

The trucks were always monstrous, with mean bulldog faces, and eyes of glassy plaid. Their bodies stretched the length of the block, and the exhaust that billowed out of the vertical stovepipe at the front was a demonic fog, something from *Macbeth* or *Sherlock Holmes*. Harry didn't like trucks. Some people, he knew, liked them, liked seeing one, thought it was like seeing a moose, something big and wild. But not Harry.

"Hey! Get this heap out of here!" Harry shouted and pounded on the driver's door. "Or at least turn it off!" He looked up into the cabin, but nobody seemed to be there. He pounded again with his fist and then kicked once with his boot. Curtains in the back of the cabin parted, and a man poked his head out. He looked sleepy and annoyed.

"What's the problem, man?" he said, opening the door.

"Turn this thing off!" shouted Harry over the truck's oceanic roar. "Can't you see what's happening with the exhaust here? You're asphyxiating everyone in these apartments!"

"I can't turn this thing off, man," shouted the driver. He was in his underwear—boxer shorts and a neat white vest.

The curtains parted again, and a woman's head emerged. "What's happening, man?"

Harry tried to appeal to the woman. "I'm dying up there. Listen, you've got to move this truck or turn it off."

"I told you buffore," said the man. "I can't turn it off."

"What do you mean, you can't turn it off?"

"I can't turn it off. What am I gonna do, freeze? We're trying to get some sleep in here." He turned and smiled at the woman, who smiled back. She then disappeared behind the curtain.

"I'm trying to get some sleep, too," yelled Harry. "Why don't you just move this thing somewhere else?"

"I can't be moving this thing," said the driver. "If I be moving this thing, you see that guy back there?" He pointed at his rearview mirror,

and Harry looked down the street. "I move and that guy be coming to take my spot."

"Just turn this off, then!" shouted Harry.

The driver grew furious. "What are you, some kind of mental retard? I *already* told you. I can't!"

"What do you mean, you can't. That's ridiculous."

"If I turn this mother off, I can't get it started back up again."

Harry stormed back upstairs and phoned the police. "Yeah, right," said Sgt. Dan Lucey of the Eighteenth Precinct. "As if we don't have more urgent things in this neighborhood than truck fumes. What is your name?"

"Harry DeLeo. Look," said Harry. "You think some guy blowing crack in a welfare hotel isn't having one of the few moments of joy in his whole life. *I am the one—*"

"That's a pretty socially responsible thing to say. Look, mister. We'll see what we can do about the trucks, but I can't promise you anything." And then Officer Lucey hung up, as if on a crank call.

There was no way, Harry decided, that he could stay in his apartment. He would die. He would get cancer and die. Of course, all the best people—Christ, Gershwin, Schubert, theater people!—had died in their thirties, but this did not console him. He went back downstairs, outside, in nothing but his overcoat thrown over a pajama top, and a pair of army boots with the laces flapping. He roamed the streets, like the homeless people, like the junkies and hookers with their slow children and quick deals, like the guys down from Harlem with business to transact, like the women with old toasters and knives in their shopping bags, venturing out from Port Authority on those occasions when the weather thawed. With his overcoat and pajama top, he was not in the least scared, because he had become one of them, a street person, rebellion and desperation in his lungs, and they knew this when he passed. They smiled in welcome, but Harry did not smile back. He wandered the streets until he found a newsstand, bought the *Times*, and then drifted some more until he found an all-night coffee shop, where he sat in a booth—a whole big booth, though it was only him!—and spread out his *Times* and circled apartments he could never ever afford. "1500 dollars; EIK."



He was shocked. He grew delirious. He made up a joke: how you could cut up the elk for meat during the winter, but in the months before you could never housebreak the thing. "Fifteen hundred dollars for a lousy apartment!" But gradually the numbers grew more and more abstract, and he started circling the ones for eighteen hundred as well.

By March, Harry found himself gassed out of his apartment, roaming the streets, several nights a week. He went to bed full of dread and trepidation, never knowing whether this particular night would be a Truck Night or not. He would phone the landlord's machine and the police and shout things about lymphoma and emphysema and about being a taxpayer, but the police would simply say, "You've called here before, haven't you." He tried sounding like a different neighbor, very polite, a family man, with children, saying, "Please, sir. The trucks are waking the baby."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," said the police. Harry called the Health Department, the Community Board, the Phil Donahue people. He referred to Officer Lucey as Officer Lucifer and cited cancer statistics from the *Science Times*. Most of the time people listened and said they would see what they could do.

In the meantime, Harry quit smoking and took vitamins. Once he even called Breckie in the middle of the night at her new apartment on the Upper West Side.

"Is this an awkward time?" he asked.

"To be honest, Harry, yes."

"Oh, my God, really?"

"Look, I don't know how to tell you these things."

"Can you answer yes-or-no questions?"

"All right."

"Shit, I can't think of any." He stopped talking, and the two of them breathed into the phone. "Do you realize," he said at last, "that I have three plantar's warts from walking around barefoot in this apartment?"

"Yes," she said. "I do now."

"A barnacled sole. That's what I am."

"Harry, I can't be writing your plays with you right now."

"Do you recall any trucks hanging out in front of our building, running their engines all night? Did that happen when you were here, when we were living together, when we were together and living here so much in love?"

"Come on, Harry." There was some muffled noise, the seashell sound of hand over mouthpiece, the dim din of a man's voice and hers. Harry hung up. He put on his Maria Callas records, all in a stack on the phonograph spindle, and left the apartment to roam the streets again, to find an open newsstand, a safe coffee shop that didn't put a maraschino cherry on the rice pudding, so that even when you picked it off its mark remained, soaked in, like blood by Walt Disney.

When he trudged back to his apartment, the morning at last all fully lit, falsely wide-eyed and innocent, the trucks were always gone. There was just Deli in the doorway, smiling. "Mornin', Harry," she'd say. "Have a bad dream?"

"You're up early," said Harry. Usually that was what he said.

"Oh, is it daytime already? Well, I'm gonna get myself a real job, a daytime job. Besides, I've been listening to your records from upstairs." Harry stopped jangling his keys for a moment. The Callas arias sailed faintly out through the windowpanes. "Isn't that fag music, Harry? I mean, don't get me wrong. I like fag music. I really like that song that keeps playing about the VCR."

"What are you talking about?" He had his keys out now, pointed and ready to go. But he kept one shoulder turned slightly her way.

"V-C-R-err," sang Deli. "V-C-Dannemora." Deli stopped and laughed. "Dannemora! That girl's in Sing Sing for sure."

"See you," said Harry.

On his answering machine was a message from Glen Scarp. "Hey, Harry, sorry to call you so early, but hey, it's even earlier out here. And wasn't it Ionesco who said something about genius up with the sun? Maybe it was Odets. . . ." *Odets?* thought Harry. "At any rate, I'm flying into New York in a few days, and I thought we might meet for a drink. I'll phone you when I get in."

"No," said Harry out loud. "No. No."

But it was that very morning, after a short, cold rain, just after he'd opened the windows and gotten the apartment aired out, that the

bathroom started acting up. The toilet refused to swallow, gurgling if Harry ran the kitchen faucet, and the tub suddenly and terrifyingly filled with water from elsewhere in the building. Somebody else's bath: sudsy water, with rusty swirls. Harry tried flushing the toilet again, and it rose ominously toward the rim. He watched in horror, softly howling the protests—"Ahhhhh! UUUaahhh!"—that seemed to help keep the thing from overflowing altogether.

He phoned the landlord, but no one answered. He phoned a plumber he found in the yellow pages, some place advertising *High Velocity Jet Flush* and *Truck Mounted Rodding Machine*. "Are you the super?" asked the plumber.

"There is no super here," said Harry, a confession that left him sad, like an admission that finally there was no God.

"Are you the landlord?"

"No," said Harry. "I'm a tenant."

"We charge two hundred dollars, automatic, if we visit," said the plumber, calmly. Plumbers were always calm. It wasn't just because they were rich. It had something to do with pipes and sticking your hands into them over and over. "Tell your landlord to give us a call."

Harry left another message on his landlord's machine and then went off to a coffee shop. It was called The Cosmic Galaxy and was full of actors and actresses talking wearily about auditions and getting work and how useless *Back Stage* was, though they bought it faithfully and spread it out over the tables anxiously to read. "What I'm trying to put together here," he overheard one actress say, "is a look like Mindy and a sound like Mork." Harry thought with compassion how any one of these people would mutilate themselves to write a TV episode for Glen Scarp, how people are driven to it, for the ten thousand dollars, for the exposure, for the trashy, shameful love of television, whatever it was, and how he had held out for his play, for his beautiful secret play, which he had been mining for years. But it would be worth it, he believed. When he came triumphantly up from the mine, emerged with his work gorgeous and completed, he would be, he knew, feted with an orchestra, greeted big by a huge brass band—trumpeted!—for there were people who knew he was down there, intelligent people, and they were waiting for him.

Of course, you could be down there too long. You could come up for air, all tired and sooty, and find only a man with a harmonica and a tin can, cymbals banging between his knees.

On Tuesday the suds were gone. Harry pulled the drain closed so that nothing else could come rushing up. Then he washed in the kitchen sink, with a rag and some dish detergent, and went off again to The Cosmic Galaxy.

But on Wednesday morning he woke once more to the sharp poison of diesel fumes in the apartment. He walked into his bathroom cautiously and discovered the tub full to the brim with a brackish broth and bits of green floating in it. Scallions. Miso soup with scallions. "What?" He checked the drain, and it was still closed. He left a message on his landlord's machine that went, "Hey, I've got vegetables in my tub," then he trudged out to a different coffee shop, a far one, on the very edge of the neighborhood, practically up by Lincoln Center, and ordered the cheeseburger deluxe, just to treat himself, just to put himself in touch with real life again. When he returned home, Deli was hovering in his doorway. "Mornin', Harry," said Deli.

"Isn't it afternoon?" asked Harry.

"Whatever," said Deli. "You know, Harry, I been thinking. What you need is to spend a little money on a girl who can treat you right." She inched seductively toward him, took his arm with one hand and with the other began rubbing his buttocks through his jeans.

Harry shook her off. "Deli, don't pull this shit on me! How long have I known you? Every morning for five years I've come out of this building and seen you here, said hello. We've been friends. Don't start your hooker shit with me now."

"Fuck you," said Deli. And she walked away, in a sinuous hobble, up to the corner to stand.

Harry went upstairs to his apartment and slowly opened the door to his bathroom. He reached for the switches to the light and fan and turned them on in a single, dramatic flick.

The tub. The miso soup was gone, but in its stead was a dark brown sludge, a foot deep, sulfurous and bubbled. "Oh, my God," said Harry. It was a plague. First suds. Then vegetables. Then darkness. He would get typhus or liver death. There would be frogs.



He left another message on his landlord's machine, then he phoned Breckie and left one on hers: "I have half the Hudson River backed up into my tub. Sea gulls are circling the building. You are a doctor. Does this mean I could get a sad and fatal ailment?" He had Maria Callas singing in the background; he always did now whenever he phoned Breckie and left messages. "Also, I want to know how seriously involved you are with this guy. Because I'm making plans, Breck. I am."

On Thursday, Glen Scarp called and Harry said yes. Yes, yes, yes.

They met that Monday for drinks at the hotel where Scarp was staying. It was on East Fifty-seventh Street and had a long vaulted entrance, dreamy and mirrored, like Versailles, or a wizard's castle. Scarp was waiting for Harry at the end of the corridor, sitting on a velvet bench. Harry knew it was Scarp by his look of inventory and indifference for everyone who came down the passageway until he got to Harry. Then he looked bemused. Harry proceeded painfully slow, in a worn-shoed lope, toward the bench. Velvet spread to either side of Scarp, like hips.

"Hello," said Harry.

Scarp was a short man and stood quickly, aggressively, to greet a tall. "Harry? Glen Scarp. Good to meet you at last." He was not that much older than Harry, and took Harry's hand and shook it gingerly between both of his. This was California ginger, Hollywood ginger. This was the limp of flirtation, the lightness of promise. Harry knew this, of course, but knew this only in the way everyone did, which was *knew it sort of*.

Scarp was wearing a diamond broach, a sparkly broccoli on his lapel, and Harry almost said, "Nice pin," but stopped himself. "Well, good to meet you, too," said Harry. "My whole life these days feels conducted on the phone. It's great to finally see the person behind the voice." This was not true, of course, and the lie of it trickled icily down his back.

"Let's have a drink in here, shall we?" Scarp motioned toward the cocktail lounge, which was all ficus trees and chrome and suffused in a bluish light.

"After you," said Harry, which was how he liked to do things.

"Fabulous," said Scarp, who marched confidently in ahead of Harry, so that Harry got to see the back of Scarp's hair: long, sprayed, and waved as a waterfall.

"I want to tell you again first of all how much I admire your work," said Scarp when they were seated and after they had ordered and Scarp had had a chance to push his sleeves up a bit and glance quickly down at his broach, a quick check.

"I admire yours as well," said Harry. In reality he had never seen Scarp's TV series and had actually heard negative things about it. Supposedly it was about young professionals, and there were a lot of blenders and babies. But this, here, now, was not reality. This was reality's back room. It was called dealing. The key, Harry knew, once you got done with the flattery, was to be charming and quick. That is what these people liked: a good, quick story, a snappy line, a confessional anecdote with polish and perhaps a relative in it. Then they would talk money with you. They would talk ten, fifteen thousand an episode, but that was only starters. Sometimes there was more to be had than that. But Harry was after only a single episode. In and out, like a cold bath. That was all he wanted. In and out. A single episode couldn't hurt his soul, not really. His play would have to sit for a while, but when he returned to it, like a soldier home to his wife, he would be a wealthy man. He would move. He would move somewhere with fresh air, somewhere where Breckie lived.

"Thanks," said Scarp. "So what have you been working on lately? You had the under-thirty prize thing—what was that—three years ago?"

"Three? What year is it now?"

"Eighty-eight."

"Eighty-eight," repeated Harry. "Well, the prize thing was actually then four years ago."

"Not under thirty anymore, I'll bet." Scarp smiled, studying Harry's eyes.

"Nope," said Harry, glancing away. "Not for a while."

"So what have you been doing?"

It was like talking to the playwriting police. You needed alibis. "I've been lying in my apartment," said Harry, "eating bonbons and going, 'What year is this?'"



"Right." Scarp laughed inscrutably. He picked up his drink, then put it down again without taking a sip. "As you know, I'm always looking for writers for the show. I've been doing some of the writing myself lately, and I don't mind that. But I thought you and I should get to know each other. I think you have a great handle on contemporary language and the . . . uh . . ."

"Postmodern imagination?" suggested Harry.

"Absolutely."

"Of the young deracinated American?"

"Absolutely," said Scarp.

*Absolutely.* It wasn't even absolutely to Harry, and he was the one who'd said it.

"So just informally, as friends, tell me what you've been up to," said Scarp. "There's no pressure here, no design. We're just getting to know each other."

"Actually I've been working on this play that I feel pretty good about, but it's long and is taking a lot out of me."

"You know, I used to want to write plays. What's this one about, or can't you talk about it?" Scarp started in on his drink, settling back into a listener's sit.

"I'm primitively secret about my work," said Harry.

"I respect that, absolutely," said Scarp. He scowled. "Your family from this country?"

Harry stared at Scarp: His eyes were locketts of distraction. What did it mean? "Yes," said Harry. He had to get Scarp back, get him interested, and so he began telling Scarp, in the most eloquent sentences he could construct, the story of the town his ancestors had founded in the Poconos, and what had become of it recently with radon gas, and the flight to Philly and Pittsburgh. It was a sad, complicated tale, jeweled with bittersweet wisdom, and he was lifting it in its entirety from the central speech of his play.

"That's amazing," said Scarp, apparently impressed, and it gave Harry confidence. He barreled on ahead, with the story of his parents' marriage, his father's alcoholism, his cousin's sex change operation, and a love affair he had once had with one of the Kennedy girls. These were fragile tales he had managed to hone carefully in the writing of

his play, and as he spoke with Scarp the voices of his characters entered his mouth and uttered their lines with poignancy and conviction. One had to say words, and these were the words Harry knew best.

"Astonishing," said Scarp. He had ordered another round of drinks, at the end of which Harry was regaling him with the play's climactic scene, the story of Aunt Fussbudget Flora—funny and wrenching and life-affirming in its way.

"The lights went dim, and the moon spilled onto her pillow in pale oblongs. We were all standing there, gathered in a prayer, when she sighed and breathed her very last word on earth: 'Cripes.' "

Scarp howled in laughter. "Miraculous! What a family you have. A fascinating bunch of characters!" Harry grinned and sat back. He liked himself. He liked his life. He liked his play. He didn't feel uneasy or cheaply spent, using his work this way, or if he did, well, he pushed that to one side.

"Harry," said Scarp, as he was signing for the check. "This has been a real pleasure, let me say."

"Yes, it has," said Harry.

"And though I've got to run right now—to have dinner with someone far less engaging, let me tell you—do I have your word that you will consider writing something for me sometime? We don't have to talk specifically now, but promise me you'll give it some thought. I'm making a troth here."

"And it shall set you free," said Harry. "Absolutely."

"I knew I would like you," said Scarp. "I knew we would hit it off. In fact, where do you live? I'll get a cab and drop you off."

"Uh, that's OK," said Harry, smiling. His heart was racing. "I could use the walk."

"If you're sure," said Scarp. "Listen, this was great. Truly great." He shook Harry's hand again, as limply as before. "Fabulous."

THERE IS A WAY of walking in New York, midevening, in the big, blocky East Fifties, that causes the heart to open up and the entire city to rush in and make a small town there. The city stops its painful tantalizing then, its elusiveness and tease suspended, it takes off its clothes and nestles wakefully, generously, next to you. It is there, it is

yours, no longer outwitting you. And it is not scary at all, because you love it very much.

"Ah," said Harry. He gave money to the madman who was always singing in front of Carnegie Hall, and not that badly either, but who for some reason was now on the East Side, in front of something called Carnegie Clothes. He dropped coins in the can of the ski-capped woman propped against the Fuller Building, the woman with the pet rabbit and potted plants and the sign saying, I HAVE JUST HAD BRAIN SURGERY, PLEASE HELP ME. "Thank you, dear," she said, glancing up, and Harry thought she looked, startlingly, sexy. "Have a nice day," she said, though it was night.

Harry descended into the subway, his usual lope invigorated to a skip. His play was racing through him: He had known it was good, but now he really knew. Glen Scarp had listened, amazed, and when he had laughed, Harry knew that all his instincts and choices in those lovely moments over the last four years, carefully mining and sculpting the play, had been right. His words could charm the jaded Hollywood likes of a Glen Scarp; soon those words, some lasting impression of them, might bring him a ten- or even twenty-thousand-dollar television episode to write, and after that he would never have to suffer again. It would just be him and Breckie and his play. A life that was real. They would go out and out and out to eat.

The E train rattled west, then stopped, the lights flickering. Harry looked at the *Be a Stenographer* ad across from him and felt the world was good, that despite the flickering lights, it basically, amazingly, worked. A man pushed into the car at the far end. "Can you help feed me and my hungry kids?" he shouted, holding out a paper cup, and moving slowly down Harry's side of the car. People placed quarters in the cup or else stared psychotically into the reading material on their laps and did not move or turn a page.

Suddenly a man came into the car from the opposite end. "Pay no attention to that man down there," he called to the riders. "I'm the needy one here!" Harry turned to look and saw a shabbily dressed man with a huge sombrero. He had electric Christmas tree lights strung all around the brim and just above it, like some chaotic hatband. He flicked a button and lit them up so that they flashed around his

head, red, green, yellow. The train was still stopped, and the flickering overheads had died altogether, along with the sound of the engine. There was only the dull hum of the ventilating system and the light show from the sombrero. "I am the needy one here," he reiterated in the strangely warm dark. "My name is Lothar, and I have come from Venus to arrest Ronald Reagan. He is an intergalactic criminal and needs to be taken back to my planet and made to stand trial. I have come here to see that that is done, but my spaceship has broken down. I need your assistance so that I can get it done."

"Amen!" someone called out.

"Yahoo," shouted Harry.

"Can you help me, people, earthlings. I implore you. Anything you can spare will aid me in my goal." The Christmas tree lights zipped around his head, people started to applaud, and everyone dug into their wallets to give money. When the lights came on, and the train started to go again, even the man with the hungry kids was smiling reluctantly, though he did say to Lothar, "Man, I thought this was *my* car." When the train pulled into Forty-second Street, people got off humming, slapping high fives, low fives, though the station smelled of piss.

Harry's happiness lasted five days, Monday through Friday, like a job. On Saturday he awoke in a funk. The phone had not rung. The mail had brought him no letters. The apartment smelled faintly of truck and sewage. He went out to breakfast and ordered the rice pudding, but it came with a cherry.

"What is this?" he asked the waiter. "You didn't use to do this."

"Maraschino eyeballs." The waiter smiled. "We just started putting them on. You wanna whipped cream, too?"

When he went back home, not Deli but a homeless woman in a cloth coat and sneakers was sitting in his doorway. He reached into his pocket to give her some change, but she looked away.

"Excuse me," he said. "I just have to get by here." He took out his keys.

The woman stood up angrily, grabbing her shopping bags. "No, really, you can sit here," said Harry. "I just need to get by you to get in."



"Thanks a lot!" shouted the woman. Her teeth were gray in the grain, like old wood. "Thanks!"

"Come back!" he called. "It's perfectly OK!" But the woman staggered halfway down the block, turned, and started screaming at him. "Thanks for all you've done for me! I really appreciate it! I really appreciate everything you've done for me my whole life!"

To relax, he enrolled in a yoga class. It was held three blocks away, and the teacher, short, overweight, and knowledgeable, kept coming over to Harry to tell him he was doing things wrong.

"Stomach in! Shoulders down! Head back!" she bellowed in the darkness of the yoga room. People looked. She was not fond of tall, thin men who thought they knew what they were doing. "Head back!" she said again, and this time tugged on his hair, to get his head at the right angle.

"I can't believe you pulled my hair," said Harry.

"Pardon me?" said the instructor. She pressed her knee into the middle disks of his spine.

"I would just do better," said Harry loudly, "if you wouldn't keep touching me!"

"All right, all right," said the teacher. "I won't touch you," and she walked to the other side of the darkened room, to attend to someone else. Harry lay back for the deep breathing, spine pressed against the tough thread of the carpet. He put his hand over his eyes and stayed like that, while the rest of the class continued with headstands and cat stretches.

The next week Harry decided to try a calisthenics class instead. It was across the street from the yoga class and was full of white people in pastel Spandex. Serious acid disco blared from the corner speakers. The instructor was a thin black man, who smiled happily at the class and led them in exercises that resembled the motion of field hands picking cotton. "Pick that cotton!" he shouted gleefully, overseeing the group, walking archly among them. "Pick it fast!" He giggled, clasping his hands. "Oh, what sweet revenge!" The class lasted an hour and a half, and Harry stayed on for the next class as well, another hour and a half. It strangely encouraged and calmed him, and when he went to the grocery store afterward, he felt almost

serene. He lingered at the yogurt and the freshly made pasta. He filled his cart with mineral water, feeling healthy and whole again, when a man one aisle away was caught shoplifting a can of bean-with-bacon soup.

"Hey!" shouted the store manager, and two large shelf clerks grabbed the man with the soup. "I didn't do nothing!" yelled the man with the soup, but they dragged him by the ears across the store floor to the meat counter and the back room, where the butchers worked in the day and there they began to beat him, until he could no longer call out. Trails of red smeared the floor of the canned goods aisle, where his ears had split open like fruit and bled.

"Stop it!" cried Harry, following the men to the swinging meat doors. "There's no reason for this sort of violence!" and after two minutes, the employees finally let the shoplifter go. They shoved him, swollen and in shock, out the swinging doors toward the exit.

Harry turned to several other customers, who, also distressed, had come up behind him. "My God," said Harry. "I had two exercise classes today, and it still wasn't enough." He left his shopping cart and fled the store for the phone booth outside, where he dialed the police. "I would like to report a crime. My name is Harry DeLeo, and I am standing on the corner of Eighth and—"

"Yeah. Harry DeLeo. Trucks. Look, Harry DeLeo, we got real things," and the policeman hung up.

AT NIGHT Harry slept in the other room, the "living" room, the room decorated in what Breckie called Early American Mental Institution, the room away from the windows and the trucks, on the sharp-armed sofa, damp towels pressed at the bottom of the bedroom door, so he would not die in his sleep, though that had always been his wish but just not now. He also pressed towels against the bathroom door, in case of an overflow. Safe, barricaded, sulfurous, sandwiched in damp towels like the deviled eggs his mother used to bring to picnics: When he slept he did so dreamlessly, like a bug. In the mornings he woke early and went out and claimed a booth in The Cosmic Galaxy until noon. He read the *Times* and now even the *Post* and the *News*. Sometimes he took notes in the margins for his play. *He felt shackled*



*in nightmare, and in that constant state of daydream that nightmare gives conception to, creature within creature.* In the afternoons he went to see teen movies starring teens. For brief moments they consoled him in a way he couldn't explain. Perhaps it was that the actors were all so attractive and in high school and lived in lovely houses in California. He had never been to California, and only once in the last ten years—when he had gone home with Breck to visit her parents in Minnesota—had he been in a lovely house. The movies reminded him of Breckie, probably that was it, those poreless faces and hairless arms, those idealistic hearts knowing corruption for the first time and learning it well. Harry would leave the movie theater feeling miserable, stepping out into the daylight like a criminal, shoulders bent into coat-hanger angles, in his body the sick heat of hangover, his jacket rumpled as a sheet.

"Harry, you look like shit," said Deli in front of his building. She was passing out fliers for the 25 Cent Girls pavilion. She was wearing a patched vinyl jacket, a red dress, and black pumps with no stockings. "But hey. Nothing I can do for you—except here." She handed him a flier. *Twenty-five Cents! Cheap, Live, and Naked!* "I got myself a day job—ain't you proud of me, Harry?"

Harry *did* feel proud of her, though it surprised him. It did not feel quite appropriate to feel proud. "Deli, I think that's great," he said anyway. "I really do!" Peep show fliers were a start. Surely they were a start.

"Yeah," said Deli, smiling haughtily. "Soon you be asking me to marry you."

"Yup," said Harry, jiggling the key in the lock. Someone in the middle of the night had been jabbing at it with a knife, and the lock was scraped and bent.

"Hey, put on some of that music again, would you?" But Harry had gotten the door open, and it slammed behind him without his answering.

There was mail: a form letter from an agency interested in seeing scripts; an electric bill; a letter from the Health Department verifying his complaint call and advising him to keep after the precinct dispatcher; a postcard for Breckie from some old friend named Lisa,

traveling through Italy. *What a place, gal,* it said. *Hello to Harry.* He put it on his refrigerator with a magnet. He went to his desk and from there stared over at it, then stared back at his desk. He went to the window overlooking the street. Deli was still down there, passing out fliers, but people were not taking them anymore. They were brushing by, pretending not to see, and finally she just stood there, in the middle of the sidewalk, frowning, no longer trying, not thrusting a flier out to anyone, just letting the crowds break in front of her, like a wave, until she turned and walked with them, up to the corner, to the light, and threw her fliers into the trash, the way everyone else had done.

The next day Harry got a phone call from Glen Scarp. "Harry, my man, I'm in Jersey directing a scene for a friend. I've got an hour between seven and eight to have a quick drink with you. I'm taking a chopper. Can you make it?"

"I don't know," said Harry. "I'm busy." It was important to be cagey with these guys, to be a little unavailable, to act as if you, too, had a helicopter. "Can you give me a call back later?"

"Sure, sure," said Scarp, as if he understood too clearly. "How about four-thirty. I'll give you a call then."

"Fine," said Harry. "I should know better than what my schedule's like"—he stifled a cough—"for the evening."

"Exactly," said Scarp. "Fabulous."

Harry kept his dirty clothes in a laundry bag at the bottom of his closet. He grabbed the bag up, crammed into it two other pairs of underwear, which had been floating around, and dashed across the street to the Korean laundromat with a large box of generic heavy-duty laundry detergent. He did his wash in an excited fashion, got pushy in claiming a dryer, went next door and ordered a fried egg sandwich to go, with ketchup, and ate it back at the laundromat, sitting on the window ledge, next to a pimp with a satin tie.

At four-thirty, when Scarp called, Harry said, "All's squared away. Just name the place."

This time they met at a restaurant called Zelda. Harry was wearing clean underwear and socks.

"No one ever uses apostrophes anymore, have you noticed?" said Harry. He had been here before and had, in fact, said this before. "It makes restaurants sound like hurricanes." Zelda specialized in eclectic Louisiana cooking. It served things like salmon fillets with macaroni and cheese, both with bones. Capes, ponchos, and little sundresses hung from the ceiling. It was strictly a crazed southern woman's idea of a restaurant.

Harry and Scarp sat in the bar section, near the piano, hemmed in on every side by potted plants.

Scarp was fishing for descriptions. "There's no—"

"Business like show business!" burst out Harry.

"Yes," said Scarp, a little taken aback. He was dressed in jeans and a linen shirt. Again he wore a broach, this time of peridot and garnet, fastened close to the collar. He was drinking a martini.

Harry wasn't drinking. He'd ordered seltzer water and took big handfuls of mixed nuts from the bowl in front of him. He hadn't had a cigarette since the trucks had started coming, and now he found himself needing something to put in his mouth, something to engage his hand on its journey up from the table and back down again. "So tell me about this thing you were shooting in New Jersey," Harry began amiably, but a nut skin got caught in his throat and he began to choke, his face red and crumpling, frightening as a morel. Scarp pushed the seltzer water toward Harry, then politely looked away.

"It's a project that belongs to an old buddy of mine," said Scarp. Harry nodded at him, but his eyes were tearing and he was gulping down seltzer. Scarp continued, pretending not to notice, pretending to have to collect his thoughts by studying objects elsewhere. "He's doing this film about bourgeois guilt—you know, how you can be bourgeois and an artist at the same time . . ."

"Really," croaked Harry. Water filmed his eyes.

". . . but how the guilt can harrow you and how in the end you can't let it. As Flaubert said, Be bourgeois in your life so that you may be daring in your art."

Harry cleared his throat and started to cough again. The nut skin was still down there, scratching and dry. "I don't trust translations,"

he rasped. He took an especially large swallow of seltzer and could feel the blood leave his face a bit. There was some silence, and then Harry added, "Did Flaubert ever write a play?"

"Don't know," said Scarp. "At any rate, I was just shooting this one scene for my friend, since he was called away by a studio head. It was a very straightforward cute meet at a pedicurist's. Have you ever had a pedicure?"

"No," said Harry.

"You really have to. It's one of the great pleasures of life . . ."

*But I have had plantar's warts. You have to put acid on them, and Band-Aids. . . .*

"Do you feel all right?" asked Scarp, looking suddenly concerned.

"Fine. It's just I quit smoking. Suddenly there's all this air in my lungs. What's a cute meat?"

"Cute meet? It's Hollywood for where two lovers meet and fall in love."

"Oh," said Harry. "I think I liked myself better before I knew that."

Scarp laughed. "You writers," he said, downing his martini. "We writers, I should say. By the way, I have to tell you: I've ripped you off mercilessly." Scarp smiled proudly.

"Oh?" said Harry. Something lined up in him, got in order. His back straightened and his feet unhooked from the table legs.

"You know, when we met last time, I was working on an episode for the show where Elsie and John, the two principals, have to confront all sorts of family issues, including the death of an elderly relative."

"That doesn't really sound like ripping me off."

"Well, what I've done is use some of that stuff you told me about your family and the radon gas—well, you'll see—and that fabulous bit about your Aunt Flora dying while you were dating the Kennedy girl. It's due to air early next month. In fact, I'll give you a call when I find out exactly."

Harry didn't know what to say. The room revolved dizzily away from him, dumped him and spun, because he'd never really been part of it to begin with. "Excuse me?" he stammered. His hand started to tremble, and he moved it quickly through his hair.

"I'll give you a call. When it's on." Scarp frowned.



Harry gazed at the striated grain of the table—a tree split to show its innards. “*What?*” he said, finally, slow and muzzy. He picked up his seltzer, knocked it back fast. He set the glass down with a loud crack. “You’d do that for me? You’d really, honestly, do that for me?” He was starting to yell. The people at the table nearest the piano turned to look. “I have to go.”

Scarp looked anxiously at his watch. “Yes, I’ve gotta run myself.”

“No, you don’t understand!” said Harry loudly. He stood up, huge over the table. “I have to go.” He pushed back his chair, and it fell all the way over into a plant. He strode quickly toward the door and pushed against it hard.

The night was just beginning to come, and come warmly, the air in a sweet, garbagey thaw. Midtown was crawling with sailors. They were all youthful and ashore and excited to be this way, in their black and white-trimmed suits, exploring Manhattan and knowing it, in this particular guise, to be a movie set they had bought tickets to, knowing the Bronx was up, *the Bronx is up!* knowing there were girls, and places where there were girls, who would pull you against them, who knew what you knew though they seemed too bonelessly small to. Harry loped by the sailors, their boyish, boisterous clusters, then broke into a run. Old men were selling carnations on the corner, and they murmured indecipherably as he passed. The Hercules was showing *Dirty Desiree* and *Throbbin Hood*, and sailors were going in. Off-duty taxis sped from their last fares at the theaters to the Burger King on Ninth for something to eat. Putting block after block beneath his feet would clear his heart, Harry hoped, but the sailors: There was no shaking them. They were everywhere, hatless and landlubbed with eagernesses. Up ahead on his block, he saw a woman who looked like Deli strolling off with two of them, one on each arm. And then—it was Deli.

He stopped, frozen midstride, then started to walk again. “Aw, Deli,” he whispered. But who was he to whisper? He had tried to be a hooker himself, had got on the old hip boots and walked, only to discover he was just—a slut.

*The Battery’s down*, he thought. *The Battery’s down*. He stood in front of the 25 Cent Girls pavilion. Golden lights winked and dashed around the marquee.

“Wanna buy, man?” hissed a guy urinating at the curb. “I got bitches, I got rods, I got crack.”

Harry stepped toward the cashier in the entrance booth. He slid a dollar under the glass, and the cashier slid him back four tokens. “What do I do?” he said, looking at the tokens, but the cashier didn’t hear him. Two sailors came up behind, bought four dollars’ worth, and went inside, smiling.

Harry followed. The interior was lit and staircased like a discotheque, and all along the outer walls were booths with wooden doors. He passed three of them and then stumbled into the fourth. He closed the door, sat down on the bench, and, taking a deep breath, he wept, hopelessly, for Breckie and for God and for that life here that seemed always parallel to his own, never intersecting, like some opposite shore of river he could never swim across, although he kept trying. He looked at the tokens in his hand. They were leaving bluish streaks in the dampness there, melting if not used. He fumbled, placed one in the slot, and a dark screen lifted from behind the glass. Before him, lit and dancing, appeared a 25 Cent Girl, naked, thirtyish, auburn-haired and pale: *National Geographic* goes to Ireland. There was music playing, and she gyrated to it, sleepy and indifferent. But as he watched she seemed to lift her eyes, to spot him, to head toward his window, slow and smiling, until she was pressing her breast against his pane, his alone. He moaned, placed his mouth against the cold single rose of her nipple, against the hard smeared glass, though given time, in this, this wonderful town, he felt, it might warm beneath his labors, truly, like something real.