

*Elizabeth Evans*

## **Desert Birds**

It was on Etter's fifty-seventh birthday that Jack died, when, leaning over to help her blow out the birthday candles, his heart simply gave up. As he fell forward, one of the candles caught fire to his hair, a handsome silvery harvest he'd let grow a bit after the heyday of hippies and freaks; Etter swatted out the flames with her hands.

"You'll be better off down here," the children said, referring to the Tucson condominium she and Jack had purchased two years before. She knew her moving there would make the children feel they were doing something — without their actually having to expend any effort; they both lived in Tucson, young people in a land of retirement.

She tilted a hair forward in her midrow seat as the plane lifted away from Minnesota's lucent beans and boomerangs of blue, as cars and cows shrank to the plastic playthings she'd bought Peter when he was a boy. The cows became raisins, they disappeared. She smiled politely at the woman in the window seat, as if the woman had made a gift of the view, and the woman nodded.

Well. Etter slipped her hand between the seat belt and her waist, checking the clasp. She did not have to sell the big house on White Bear, or say good-bye to the clear, snail-bottomed lake. She did not have to do anything, the lawyers said, just sit tight, see how things went. She wanted to see her grandchildren. She wanted to be near her own children, though sometimes that desire seemed a mixing of her own life with someone else's. Once, Jack said that the only thing the children ever did was come between himself and Etter; she had cried then and not just for the harshness of his words, but for the ache which must have prompted them.

After the funeral, on the phone, in letters, Peter and Lenny kept asking, "What are you going to do now, Mother?" Presumptuous, suddenly bossy. As if she could no longer do what she had done for the last thirty-six years. There seemed to be some truth in this. During the wretched weeks after the funeral, solitary save the occasional lawyer looking over papers in Jack's office, she had found herself frightened by certain noises. It was then that she arranged for people to check the heating and plumbing, then that she made her plane reservations.

She still owned an image of herself and Jack futuring in Arizona; they sat in their courtyard, her just-washed hair grown long, drying in the sun before she twisted it into a simple bun. They watched the boat-tailed grackles feed on the patio, the gambel's quail — harem-jewel hanging over the eye — roost along the oleander wall. They picked a topic — Indian crafts, desert fauna, birds — and read up on it together.

She smiled as she took a plastic tumbler of 7-Up from the flight attendant. His eyes were very large and his skin caramel-colored. Perhaps he was an Indian — an India Indian. "Can I get you a pillow?" he asked.

"No, thank you." She tilted her head back, shook it, demonstrating her neck was fine. He reminded her a little of her father in the sepia pictures taken before she was born. Hair smooth and dark and a little old-fashioned. When he reached over the aisle passenger to give Etter her bag of barbecued almonds, she blurted, "You certainly have beautiful hands!" The compliment made her weak. Her eyes began to tear — how silly! — but he simply edged his cart to the next row. The woman by the window patted Etter on the arm, and Etter turned towards her, grateful. "I don't think he heard you, dear," the woman whispered. "They *were* lovely, weren't they?" She was an Aussie, she said. The United States were quite a disappointment to her, and here's why.

Jack, Etter thought, would have managed to change the subject. As it was, she listened to the woman until Denver, then flew on to Tucson next to a young, absorbed businessman. She tried to read from the glossy book on Kachina dolls which her daughter, Lenny, had sent — very nice of Lenny — but a part of Etter was on the prowl for some pleasant thing to say to the young man, almost as if to prove to herself she wasn't like the woman on the other flight. When had this trip taken on such a therapeutic quality? She thought of friends who'd flown away for extravagant weeks at La Costa or The Golden Door, returning smooth and brown as hand-dipped chocolates. She mustn't lie. She was no different from most. All her life she'd wanted to be a magical somebody else who was still herself.

The young man seated next to her smiled when she passed him his creamer packets, then he went back to reading from a notebook notched by plastic index tabs, bright as stained glass over printed titles: CHARTING GROWTH, SALES TECHNIQUES, MEETING THE PUBLIC.

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Peter and his Katie and Rob were waiting for her at the airport. She knelt to the grandchildren and they hugged her, rocked her back on her



high heels; Peter had to steady her shoulders with his hand. When she looked up to smile, she found his lips trembling. They crushed into each other's arms for a moment, confusing the grandchildren, who tugged at grown-up knees for attention.

"Well, it's lucky I have a hand for each, isn't it Peter?" she said as she and her son backed out of the embrace.

It was a shame, she thought, as he went on ahead for the luggage, his letting himself get so heavy. Though lacking Jack's charm, Peter was a handsome man. Only thirty-four. Or already thirty-four. He should think about his heart. But it was too soon after Jack to say anything about that. Jack was fat once, after the War. After the War, everyone was fat. In old photos, she and her friends shot their Great Plains thighs towards vacation-time cameras without shame. Jack's cleft chin appeared positively incised.

She'd lost twenty-seven pounds since he died: the same twenty-seven pounds she'd been trying to lose ever since Lenny was born. Peter could not have missed the change; perhaps he thought he shouldn't mention it. She was sad and a little proud when Katie asked, "Are you our same grandma?" and insisted Etter sit in the back seat with them.

In Minnesota, she was moving into fall; here the car had the hot-vinyl smell of summer. There were palm trees, mountains. Even now, after years of traveling with Jack, such scenes still had a foreign tang, seemed like a set for a TV detective show. She leaned forward, watching, as Peter moved in and out of the lanes of traffic. Jack had always done their driving here. While packing she'd looked at a map of the city and panicked; she could not even find their street. "Your street isn't on the map yet," said Lenny, long distance. "Too new."

An ambulance clamored by and the children shrieked with pleasure. Etter pulled them in close and the wonderful biscuit-odor of their hair filled her nose. "How's Lenny?" she asked Peter.

"Good. We decided to get together at your place."

She was not surprised-surprised. They were oddly dependent for children who'd moved thousands of miles away; yet they'd complained and complained that she and Jack should have bought a bigger place in the foothills. She and Jack had liked the guards, the main wall thick with vines, green lawns all around them, their courtyard full of roses and citrus and hibiscus.

"Lenny brought some godawful vegetarian casserole. Looks like kitty litter, or what goes in it," Peter said. The children, four and six, giggled. Etter murmured a slight reproval meant half in fun; they didn't understand, they went silent. She thought she might make up by placing her rather natty hat on Peter's head, but suppose the surprise startled him and

they all ended up crushed by oncoming cars? Her grandchildren crushed, her grown son — child she watched cross streets for years, as if eyes had the power to stop the arrival of disaster — and herself, herself crushed, too.

"Mommy bought hot dogs," her granddaughter said. Said Peter, "And buns. She's making a salad. Lenny's got some friend with her she wants you to meet." He made a little face; the presence of the grandchildren stopped Etter from asking why.

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Lenny met Etter with hugs by the service entrance. "Well, look at this skinny!" she said. Except for her guest, who waited at a polite but unshy distance in the kitchen, the others were upstairs watching "The Muppet Show."

"Hello," Etter called into the guest.

"This is Eleanor, Mother," said Lenny.

"Welcome to the land of the sun!" said Eleanor. Skin opulently desert-worn, skirt bearing a turquoise firebird, wonderful heavy bun resting on her shoulders, natural as a knot in a tree. By comparison, Etter, in her navy Ultrasuede, felt diminished, a fuddy-dud.

"Your Lenny's such a joy!" Eleanor said, taking Lenny's hand. Lenny smiled, unabashedly proud of Eleanor's recommendations. Etter smiled back; they certainly meant for her to share in this, but she felt left out. Eleanor was probably not much younger than herself, yet Lenny saw Eleanor as a friend. Maybe she even talked to Eleanor about sex. Sex. With Jack gone, Etter found herself neuter to the world. A little rag of anger dropped through her, top to bottom, making her feet ache.

"Somebody's painted my kitchen!" She stepped closer to the walls, now a peach-adobe color and not the pale cream she'd painted them on her last visit.

"I did them," said Lenny.

"They're very nice," Etter tried to squeeze Lenny's feelings in with her own dismay. Peach walls.

"Scotch and water, Mother?" Peter asked. She nodded, but really only to avoid being odd man out; having a drink seemed almost wild to her with Jack gone. She'd never even had a drink before she married Jack, a fact the children had laughed over, but of which she'd been proud.

"Eleanor owns Casa del Sol, Mom," said Lenny. "You remember that wonderful shop on the edge of town, all the *true* Indian baskets and pots?"

Probably she did. Very small. Very expensive. "Did this come from your shop?" she asked, shyly fingering Eleanor's beautiful rose shawl.

"Do you like it?" Eleanor whisked the thing from her shoulders. "Put it on! Here, here. It's wonderful on her, isn't it? That color with your skin!"

Lenny nodded. Peter handed Etter her drink. "You're sure you don't feel like the Berry Lady?" he said.

"The Berry Lady!" Lenny cried. Etter felt her cheeks redden. She shrugged away from the cloth with a little laugh: The Berry Lady was a quaint, shawled woman who had made her way along the lakeshore of the children's childhood.

"Okay, okay, not The Berry Lady," Peter said, and tugged the cloth back onto Etter's shoulders, his shame making her even more uncomfortable; she had to stand still, let him, not make a scene.

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"It won't seem nearly so hot if you tear up the carpet and expose that gorgeous tile," Lenny said over dinner. Etter knew Lenny hoped to make the change sound practical rather than aesthetic; the subject had been broached before, and Jack had been opposed. The children were careful not to say things which might seem like a charge against Jack, not to imply his death had set her free. They had loved their father — better than they loved her, she suspected — but they had no idea what his death meant. Down the long glass table, the candlelit faces of children, grandchildren, and Lenny's handsome guest glowed like the luminarias the inhabitants set along their drives at Christmas. Forks scraped over the rough pottery she and Jack had bought in Nogales. The children, her children, didn't understand that the lines slowly gathering on their faces were not going to disappear. With all their talk of diet and exercise, they seemed to think they could turn the clock around, or at least keep it from moving once they got the proper routine down: everything was still possible.

In the bathroom, before dinner, while Etter coated her lips with Vaseline — everything dried out down here! — Lenny had said, "Do you know, Mother, every twelve years your body is composed of entirely different cells than the cells it had twelve years before?" She put her arm around Etter — it was nice, how they were all more affectionate now. She said, as if it should be a great comfort, "Just think, Mom, when you're sixty-nine, you'll be a entirely new person!" Sixty-nine. The children had thoughtfully cleared Jack's things from the closets but they'd missed the medicine chest. Etter closed the door quickly on the bottle of British Sterling, the toenail clippers on a chain.

Etter worried about Lenny. She'd been married and divorced twice. She had a child with each ex-husband, which meant enormously difficult holiday arrangements, flights, the hubbub of two red-faced fathers sometimes arriving for visitation pickups at the same time. She was working at the Desert Museum on a CETA grant, but she had expensive tastes. She had brought with her, that evening, in addition to Eleanor and the boys, a round of Stilton — Etter had never purchased Stilton in her life — but when Etter thanked her, Lenny winked and handed Etter the register tape, clearly expecting reimbursement. "I did bring the tabouli, though," she said.

Now Lenny smiled down the table at Etter, trying to ignore a quarrel between her sons. Recently, she had written Etter an impassioned letter quoting a book whose central thesis was that every woman was a daughter. The letter was fenced with exclamation marks and sadness; Etter thrilled to its intensity, but didn't know how to respond. If she sent her a gift, she would have to send Peter a gift, and that would invalidate the one to Lenny. She tried to give Lenny a special smile down the length of the table; they lifted their wine glasses to one another in the same movement, a private toast.

"Has Eleanor told you she's going to Spain, Mother?" Lenny asked after they had gained a moist sort of composure.

"Next month," Eleanor said. "And I *still* haven't found anyone to work the shop with Tina while I'm gone. *Si que fue undisastre!*"

"Mother has to meet Tina. You'd love Tina, Mom," Lenny said.

"Etter's been to Spain," said Peter's wife.

"How marvelous! Where?" Eleanor diddped further over the table, after a new view of Etter. Etter rummaged for a few names besides Madrid and Barcelona. "Torremolinos. Granada. Malaga." The foreign pronunciations made her shy and she said them in a breathy, uncharacteristic voice.

"I'm going to Granada! Did you get to Toledo?" Eleanor pulled her chair out and dragged it to Etter's side.

"Toledo, yes," said Etter.

With the wine and everyone trying so hard to be a family, Etter could hardly help but connect working at Eleanor's Casa del Sol with possession of Eleanor's bristling good looks and air of competency — and of Lenny's obvious admiration of her. When the subject of the shop came round again, as Etter knew it would — Lenny seemed to have set the thing up this way — Etter was ready to demonstrate that she knew a shaky thing or two about the crafts of the region. Lenny nodded and beamed at "Zuni inlay," "ceremonial jar," "Kachina," and when the offer came, Etter said yes.



"Wonderful!" Eleanor said, and giddy, Etter carried a platter out to her peach kitchen. Well, she would not be like some widows. There had been a visit to Peter when he was in law school: in the hall of his apartment house, a shrunken woman with wild points of hair wept and screamed. Her children and grandchildren were carrying her things up to the apartment. She shouted, "I won't stay! You can't make me!" Like a child pleading with her parents before they float off into a night on the town.

Lenny stayed after the others left, her boys asleep on the big bed down the hall. She helped Etter wash up the dishes. "I'm glad you're here," she told Etter.

"You can move in with me if you need to," Etter said, but she knew that Lenny knew it wouldn't work.

"I'll think about it," Lenny said. With a damp hand, she gathered Etter's chin-length hair towards the nape of her neck, then stepped in front of Etter to check the effect. "Very handsome!" she murmured. Etter, looking at her reflection in the window over the sink, smiled for Lenny, but was not so sure.

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The shop was on the edge of town. Cars drove by quickly, eager to make a getaway. Sometimes, passing drivers frightened her with their sudden stops, the popping gravel pushed into crescents by their tires. Generally, trips to the shop were planned, but the exterior of the building was so unimposing — a gas station built several decades in anticipation of the automobile? — customers were likely to drive by before realizing their error.

Etter sunk deeper into the thick oatmeal sweater she had given Jack last Christmas. Dense, almost as if woven from paper, it was the only thing which really kept her warm. The winter chill of the shop, the single space heater, low ceilings and small windows, the incandescents and troughs of pots made her think of her mother's basement storeroom, one wall holding empty fruit jars, one holding full, seasonally balanced.

Before her sat a mug of instant coffee and a book on the fetishes of the Southwest (better examples of the items in the display case under her elbows). She pared tiny bits off an apple. An apple would last her till dinner these days. She set the mug on the corner of the book, her elbow on the other, so she could study the fetishes of the six directions while she chipped on the apple. Lately, when she tried to imagine Jack's face, it seemed to slide towards the edge of her brain, it warped, almost like the

photo of "Brown Bear of the West," tucked too close to the spine of the book. Mountain Lion. Eagle. She liked the cool stone figures very much, but thought belief in them dangerous: what would you do if you lost that container of good fortune? As Eleanor had said, "*Si que fue un disastre!*"

The doorbell's ringing made Etter gasp. No one had told her the shop would always be kept locked — "against the undesireables," as Tina Bartlett said. Tina Bartlett had worked in the shop for nine years. Etter had been there two months; she still wasn't used to the bell.

A pair of women, husbands waiting outside in a Buick, filed past her when she opened the door. Fat car, Etter thought, and was surprised at herself. "Fat car" sounded like something one of her children might have said back in the Sixties. *She* owned a Buick, an Electra 225 which Jack had given her. I'm mad at him! she thought. Mad at Jack!

"Can we help you?" Tina Bartlett called from the backroom, her cue irritating Etter. The women demurred. They looked at Etter as if they did not know how to place her. Tina Bartlett stuck her head out the curtain to the backroom, said, "Okey-doke!" and made the women smile.

Tina Bartlett was small with steel gray hair curled tight as a poodle's. Jack would have called Tina a character. He would have smiled as he said it, but Etter would have known he dismissed Tina — relegated her to a lumber room of other useless people. Tina was divorced. She once said to Etter, "Some people call theirs an Ex, but I call mine a Why." Then she spanked her skinny knees and laughed and laughed. Before Etter's time, she once chased a gunman out of the store. She liked to tell customers about the incident, making the scene sound fraught, simultaneously, with danger and comedy:

"I was taking my lunch out of the thermos bag under the counter. I looked up when this fellow came in. Something was wrong with his face, but I'm being polite, I look away. Turned out he had a nylon stocking over his head!" Everyone laughed at this point of the story: Tina gave them a chance before continuing. "'You've got to be kidding!' I said. 'You just back on out the door.'" At that point, Tina pulled a gun out from the box of ribbons under the display case of fetishes and jewelry, set the customers gasping. "I showed him this," she said, "and you better believe he took off running." She grinned. "*That's* why we got the doorbells installed."

Whenever the children called Etter now, they asked about Tina, as if she and Etter were great friends, did outrageous things together; but Tina Bartlett already had a best friend. Her initials were DDT, and when the two called each other, there was giggling. "DDT here! Is TB there?" Etter thought them silly beyond belief, though she would not have minded so much if they would have given her a monicker. Her initials were

hopeless: EJM. And what could be done with *Etter*?

And what on earth good was a shop with a locked door? One of the fun things about a shop was an air of hospitality. The locked door made her feel endangered. How was she to know who to open it to? "Don't go to the door, then, Mother," Lenny had told her. "Just go in the back."

"I can't very well go in the back if somebody's at the door."

"Just shake your head, like you're closed."

On Etter's first day of work, a large van pulled up in front of the shop, music pouring from its innards, and out climbed three men, black, dressed in the closest thing to zoot suits Etter could remember ever seeing in the light of day. Two of them — a big man, handsome, and a skinny one in lime green — were already at the door by the time she stood up. They left the van running; the third fellow, in sober brown, with an International Harvester hat on his head, stayed beside the van, smoking.

She let them in, she thought about the gun. "Good day," the handsome man had said. He sported a large ring which winked at Etter when he picked up a pot. She moved behind the counter, her hand hovering over the ribbon box. The men spent twenty-one hundred dollars in fifteen minutes. That evening, she saw a photo of the trio in the entertainment section of the paper. Jazz musicians. Tickets for twelve-fifty. She had never told anyone *that* story.

The women from the Buick — West Virginia plates — edged their way through the shop, pretended to be discreet in their exclamations over the price tags, but were not. Tina emerged from the backroom, a jaunty cap on her head: creamy llama wool with bittersweet llamas circling the brim. "I'm running to the P.O. Have fun," she said as she went out the door.

Etter sliced deeper into the apple, exposing its creamy halo. One of the women, chocolate scarf knotted high on her throat, brought a pot to the counter. "Is this right?" she asked, glancing back at her friend with raised eyebrows.

"Six hundred and fifty. Yes. That's a ceremonial jar." Etter repeated, almost verbatim, the decidedly inaccurate speech Tina Bartlett had offered on another pot that very morning. She was greatly relieved when the woman carried the pot back to its place and turned to something else.

Though Etter studied books garnered from the library, there was too much to learn, it swam by her, quick and dark as schools of baby bullheads moving under her dock on White Bear. The only book she seemed to have absorbed was one Tina Bartlett gave her: *Black Elk Speaks*. Etter couldn't make head nor tails of Black Elk's great vision, but she understood his sorrow over it not coming to fruition. "It is time! It is time!" the skies cried to Black Elk, but he did not know what he was meant to do. Poor Black Elk. And though he spoke about a scalping the

way Etter might have a sighting of a Great Horned Owl, he saved the lives of children, he wept, he used the Oglala name for the months: Moon When The Plums Turn Purple; Moon Of The Black Cherries. Etter had lived that way, too, once upon a time. Life began over every September with the buying of school shoes and woolens, and then there was planning for Halloween costumes, Thanksgiving dinner, and so on. Black Elk's story ended after the Battle of Wounded Knee, but he lived many, many years beyond that time.

Etter massaged her temples as the other woman, this one with a sprig of holly attached to her lapel, approached the counter. The holly was real; several of its points were already broken off. Christmas was coming. Etter kept forgetting. At home, the goldfinches at her feeder would be in their drab. She'd have regular visits from cardinals, passing cluster of the almost exotic cedar waxwings. Here, the pale adobe houses looked odd in festive lights, more like honky-tonks or juke boxes than homes. The children wanted her to try an Arizona-style Christmas again this year: mass at the San Xavier Mission, a turkey roast in Sabino Canyon. Last week, with all of them gathered for dinner, she'd said, "I'd fly us all home?" She smiled so nobody would become angry if they thought the idea dumb.

"This is home," Peter had said. Lenny nodded. She had a new boyfriend with her. For some reason, she was wearing harem pants tucked into majorette boots with dirty tassels. The boyfriend was with the FBI. "Oh," Etter said at the news, and decided then and there she would have to talk with Lenny. Things weren't so desperate, she'd tell the girl, thirty-one wasn't so old. Before dinner, the FBI man showed Etter his gun and holster, and, with some ceremony, requested permission to set it on top of the buffet. Throughout the meal, Etter found herself eyeing the nub of leather extended over the top shelf like the nose of some shy but curious animal.

"How much is that?" The woman with the holly pointed to a travertine sheep with a chip of turquoise tied to its back. At least Etter *thought* it was a sheep. She wasn't complaining, but didn't even the bears look swinish in a pleasant, domestic sort of way? She placed the fetish into the woman's hand. One of the delights was holding the smooth, cool figures. They felt like the Japanese pebbles she used in flower arrangements. Peter used to secret those rocks on his tongue, as if they soothed him.

"The power is supposedly in the spirit that lives in the fetish, and not in the fetish itself," Etter said. Feeling suddenly friendly, she held out a jet bear with turquoise Orphan Annie eyes, a coral heart-line running along its side. "This is my favorite." In back, she was working on a model desert to insert in the case; she had built that bear its own cave.



Clutching their hairdos, the women ran back to the Buick. Etter touched the ends of her own hair, which now almost reached her shoulders. The women shook their heads at the husbands: an opinion of the prices, Etter supposed. They could easily have been herself and Marilyn Eggert with Jack and Lee Eggert waiting in the car.

She went into the backroom, a cubbyhole with a hot plate, a table full of packaging materials. Tina Bartlett had stapled a postcard from Eleanor onto the curtain. The handwriting was so large the card said little more than hello.

The rose-patterned sheet Etter used as a cover for the model stuck on the highest points of the salt clay, and she had to tug at the cloth to remove it. Tina Bartlett frowned over the work, but she did needlepoint while waiting for customers so she could not complain. She even admitted the clay had dried to a good desertish color.

Too desertish., Etter thought, more like the Sahara. She pulled a bag from her purse: poster paints, a brush. The shop's quiet was a mixed blessing: she did not have to go to the door, she did have to be alone. She held down the panic by working. She painted. She made lakes — one sheet of aluminum foil, one sheet of green tissue paper, one sheet of blue; she'd learned the trick by helping the children through social studies years before.

By the time she pulled away from the shop, it was already five-thirty. Peter had helped her devise a route to the house which would keep her off busy roads, but tonight it seemed too slow. She felt hungry, tryly hungry for the first time in months. She was so hungry the feeling almost scared her. Mentally, she ticked through the contents of the freezer and decided on an Oriental-style TV dinner. She'd take the freeway to Ina Road. Have some pound cake for dessert. She might even have a drink. And call someone. Someone from home, not Lenny or Peter.

Across the road from her entrance sat two detached semi-trailers. They belonged to the developers who stirred the sand all day, laying pipe for an invasion of squat, mid-priced homes. Expect kids on motorbikes, black plastic bags spilling garbage! So warned Etter's neighborhood association. A meeting had been called. Etter had meant to attend, had forgotten. Her headlights washed over winter-bleached zoysia, rocks, palm trees, houses pale and clean as igloos. "Stop For Golf Carts!" said a sign. There were fewer green lawns than when she and Jack had bought in. "People are finally getting smart about the water table and switching to desert plantings," Peter explained. "You ought to do the same."

From behind the gate house, the guard's cart pressed into the road, aligned itself with Etter's window. Etter set her face in a mildly puzzled look; cool, unimpeachable, patient. Her window whined its way into the

door, stopped with a small *thuck*. She smiled at the guard. He always came on at five. He was trying to grow a mustache now. A handsome boy.

"How're you this evening, ma'am?"

"Just fine, thank you."

"Can I help you with something here?" He shined his flashlight into the backseat, then onto the passenger side, looking.

"I live here," Etter said. With only the pressure of her left index finger, she erected a glass wall between herself and the handsome boy. She drove further in. The slow yawn of the electric garage door welcomed her home.

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"Talk about the Painted Desert!" said Tina Bartlett. Etter slid the sections of her model into the display case without a word. Some of the paint came off on her palms, leaving them green. Maybe she had overdone things a bit. The light in the backroom had not been good.

Tina slipped on her jacket, preparing for her trip to the post office. "I'm going to have to take you for a little nature hike, dear," she said, shaking her head at the model.

"You've made your point," said Etter, and was surprised at her tone. She certainly didn't want to spoil things with Tina, or give Tina fodder for poor-sport remarks. She set a bear in a depression — almost a cave — situated on one of the model's higher peaks. The bear alone made the model look like one of those amphitheaters of fake rock which zoos use to house big animals; so she added a pair of eagles, a sheep of ground beans and flour, a travertine coyote and wolf, another bear, and two turquoise moles. She made sure to say a cheery goody-bye to Tina, as if not a thing in the world were wrong between them. Maybe she should invite Tina to supper. She'd invited Lenny over for that talk. No. She didn't want to share Lenny and the boys with Tina.

Around noon, a station wagon bearing Iowa plates pulled up, and a compelte family hatched from its doors.

"Hello!" Etter called out to them; even before they had a chance to ring, she was letting them in. She glanced outside as the family — four children from perhaps seven to fifteen — filed past her. Half proud, half shy, she said to the parents, "Iowa!", as if just making the discovery. "Why, we're practically neighbors. I'm from Minnesota!"

They were nice people. And not only were they sailors, they'd been housed at Garsts' in White Bear during the last regatta! A small world, they said, and smiled and shook their heads over the fact. She showed the

littlest girl the cheap items — small eyes of the gods, Mexican tops and chocolate mixers, Christmas ornaments fashioned from bread dough and tin can lids. She might suggest the shop get more things like that, fill big good-looking baskets with things picked up in Nogales. That brown sugar confection in tiny pans. Sour balls. The picture made her almost laugh aloud: herself running a kind of old-time candy counter!

"Maybe we'll meet again!" she said gaily. She could invite them to dinner even, to meet the children. She could tell them Tina Bartlett's story as if it were her own.

"Look," the smallest child said, peering into the glass fetish case while her dad paid for a handful of Christmas ornaments: a star, a sun, an angel. "Look."

The father nodded absently; "Minnesota," he said, and gathered up his change. Already the rest of the family was climbing into the car. "Tell the lady thank you," he said. He winked at Etter as he held the door open for the child. "Bye now," he said, but before the door swung closed, a string-haired girl of perhaps sixteen caught it — Etter thought for a second of Lenny back in her days of grim-hemmed blue jeans — and then the girl was in, followed by a boy. In, in. Too late. Beneath their shoes, the inevitable scatter of fine sand scoured the floorboards. The boy curved himself over one of the high troughs of pots. He flipped up a price tag. "Hh!" he said. His hair was pale blond with pink scalp showing through.

Etter looked down at the book on the counter — a buzzing spread of Zuni bird necklaces — but her knees jiggled against the undersides of the glass case. What was the girl eating? One of those juicy desert fruits — a cherimoya. "What're them things?" the girl asked, pointing to the fetishes, dripping a little juice on the case. Dear, Etter thought she might say. Dear.

"How come you got a doorbell?" the girl asked. "We seen a doorbell."

Etter began to answer, but then she could not remember the question. It was something about the boy. The boy was turned away from the counter. He was reaching into his jacket for something. As if she had lived with it all her life, Etter recognized that fumbling, the red threat of his neck.

By the time he turned to the counter, she had the gun, pink ribbon dangling from its barrel, aimed. The boy dropped what was in his hand — a cigarette lighter — and it skipped across the floor. The cigarette he had been preparing to light clung to his lower lip as if glued there.

"Oh," Etter said, sorry, sorry, sorry and bewildered, "you can't smoke in here."

They were already backing towards the door. "Just hand on there, lady," the boy said, and gave the girl a little shove. "We're going."

"Wait a minute!" said Etter. The girl was crying, her face bunched and blotched as a crab apple. Then the heavy door closed and they were gone.

Etter stood behind the counter for a moment, her lungs cold, subaqueous, light as the pale balloons of tissue the children used to drag home after somebody killed a carp.

She ran after them, wind whipping her hair across her mouth. She called into the brush, through ocotillos and thin air, "I thought you had a gun, I'm sorry." A roadrunner, typically lunatic, scrambled across a clear spot and froze. Then nothing. The crackling of rocks and dry vegetation beneath her feet so loud, so intimately crisp she might have been chewing up the stuff rather than walking on it. She pushed back a feathery green branch and it gave off an oily smell, pungent as the stack of fence posts on her parents' farm. "I'm sorry," she called again; but she did not want to frighten them any more than she already had. She headed back to the shop, gun heavy in her hand.

It was not until she tried the door that she realized she had locked herself out. "Oh, hell," she said, "hell." And looked about as if help might be at her elbow, waiting to hand her the key. But there was nothing, only that desert light — so clear it might have been sifted — desert light holding the desert.

She peered through a window at the dark cozy shop. In the case, the animals were keeping a stiff and constant watch from the hills and valleys of their land. Eagles. Sheep. Coyotes. Bears. The troughs, the pots and baskets, a packing crate losing its excelsior — everything inside glowed like something secret of accidentally lost. Through the shop and out another window, she could see the Santa Catalinas, peaks cropped by the window frame. The mountains seemed to go on and on, to fill her vision like some monster so fierce, so enormous it did not need to flex muscles or bare teeth.

She let her eyes close for a moment. Her heartbeat was beginning to slow. She imagined herself driving alone up the long precipitous road which led to the mountains' highest peak, up that road which Jack and the children had once driven her up, first past cactus and yucca, then pines, then arriving, finally, at snow. But for now she would have to wait for Tina Bartlett to come back. She would have to hide the gun. Or invent her own story. She supposed she could do that.