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Kissing Kerouac

"Stevie, your fruit cup is ready," Jan Kerouac called over the hotel's PA system. The banquet waiters—we were setting up for an April wedding—broke into laughter. I went back to the kitchen to reprimand her, but I was more amused than anything. Jan handed me a tall sundae glass with fresh-cut fruit brimming over the top. I'd mentioned I liked fresh fruit cups. She was the Santa Fe Hilton's new pantry assistant, and we'd gotten to know each other over the month she'd been here.

She gave me a long spoon and I ate the fruit cup while she busied herself sectioning grapefruits for tonight's banquet. I'd read several of her father's books, including *On the Road*, a novel I counted among my favorites, and I'd seen a few photographs of him. Jan had his same strong face and full lips, and his eyes—a searing blue, almost sapphire. She'd met her father twice, once as a child when her mother, Joan Haverty, Jack's second wife, had sued for child support. He'd denied all along that Jan was his child. But getting the results of a blood test and seeing Jan's resemblance down to her pushed-out lower lip convinced him otherwise, and he agreed to pay fifty-two dollars a month in support for Jan, the only child he would ever have. That same day after he and Jan took their

blood tests he came over to their New York City apartment (stopping on his way for a bottle of Harvey's Bristol Cream sherry) and spent some time with Jan, who at nine years old was so nervous she could hardly speak in front of him for fear of saying something stupid. After joking around for a while at the kitchen table and talking in funny voices in between finishing the bottle of sherry, he announced he had to go. "See you in *Janyary*," he said, the month made up of her name, although she didn't see him then.

"Eat, eat," she said, when I only half-finished my fruit cup.

"You were going to show me your poetry sometime," I said.

So it was arranged. After the banquet tonight we'd go back to my place. I lived not far away on Galisteo Street in a two-bedroom adobe home with a beehive fireplace and polished vigas across the ceiling. It was quite a step up from the encampment I'd been living in with my ex-girlfriend Alice on Apodaca Hill, but I could afford such a place now, even though I hardly spent any time there.

That evening we walked back to my house and went over her poetry. I picked out images I liked, discussed rhythm, questioned her line

breaks, analyzed the diction, and marked the weaker abstractions. I had a pen in my hand and was completely absorbed in my work. I didn't realize it then, but I'd slipped into my future role as a creative writing teacher, as easily as I'd become a catering manager of the Santa Fe Hilton. Her poetry, wrinkled sheets of it stuffed in a pocket folder, focused on her travels. There were no poems directly about her father, although a number of them were about her mother, who lived near Ellensburg, Washington with Jan's much younger half-brother, David. The poems were also witty and full of clever word play, just like Jan herself, one strong reason I was attracted to her. Of course her father played into things, too. I'd never known a writer, and that Jan was the daughter of a famous one gave her an immediate allure beyond curiosity. I went blithely on my way commenting on her talent for description and her evocative settings until she gently put two fingers on my chin and turned my face towards her and kissed me with her Kerouac mouth.

After graduating from the University of Colorado in 1973, I'd moved to Santa Fe with my girlfriend, Alice. We'd wanted to stay in the West, and Santa Fe was among the more exotic places one could go. But after five months in Santa Fe, Alice and I broke up and she returned to Boston where her family lived. We kept the possibility open of getting back together, but I

knew that my staying behind showed I was more attached to my job than the relationship.

Glenn Gustafson, the Hilton's Food and Beverage Director, had hired me as part-time banquet waiter when I first got to Santa Fe. He'd asked me if I could carry a tray loaded with mains, and I assured him I could. He looked me over, I think concluding that I was a little slight, and although I tried to enlarge myself like a puffer fish, one could only do so much at one hundred and thirty-five pounds. Though I'd worked plenty as a waiter during summers in the Catskills, I'd never actually done banquets before and soon discovered there were some special demands such as getting the knack of moving wobbly stacks of chairs from the storage room on a hand truck. Tom, the other banquet set-up man, taking a student leave from nearby St. John's College, wasn't much taller than I but more muscular and able to lift smokestack-high columns of chairs, depositing them one by one at the tables with such alacrity it was as if he were shooting them from a nail gun. When I first tried this same feat, lifting up a tower of ten chairs at once, I toppled backwards. Tom quietly helped me to my feet, restacking my chairs for me and dispensing them at the tables.

Glenn had promised Tom that another man would be hired to help with the heavy lifting, and Tom must have been disappointed to see that I was that guy. But he was too decent a person to complain, and eventually I learned to

lift, if not with his strongman capacity, certainly more than I could handle that first day. I learned too from him how to flip up long rectangle tables with my toe and snap open the legs in a split second, how to move carts of “rounds”—circular tables for eight—at a zippy pace through the halls, how to unbolt and stabilize the heavy risers that the head tables stood on. After a while I began to enjoy the sheer grunting physical demands of the job.

“You guys are doing the work of four men,” Glenn complimented us one night. We were aware too that most hotels had one crew that set up the banquets and then another that served them and that we were doing both, a little sweaty in between. We didn’t care. Glenn was treating us fairly and paying us well—I’d gotten three raises in the four months I’d been here. We groaned and complained when he would tell us that a convention was coming in for three days of round-the-clock meals and meetings, but I’d never felt prouder of a paycheck and of the sheer atom-smashing satisfaction of hurling myself at hard work.

After a few months, Glenn told us he’d been made an irresistible offer by a hotel chain in California. The General Manager proposed splitting Glenn’s position. I’d become the catering and banquet manager. He’d hire someone else to be dining room manager. (Tom, meanwhile, would be going back to St. John’s College.) Was I willing to do it?

I told Alice and she feigned excitement for me. I would realize one day that the paradox of being a workaholic is that you try to prove yourself worthy through your job to the very person you’re driving away with your work. But at the time, I just couldn’t understand why she didn’t appreciate how motivated I was.

It was only a month later that she moved back to Boston and I met Jan Kerouac.

As banquet director, I wore a baby-blue tuxedo to ritually slice the juicy-hearted baron of beef at the head of the buffet table or to flambé the baked Alaska wheeled out for a finale. The GM, in a gentle aside, had persuaded me to cut my globe of springy corkscrew curls, which had not been officially cut in years and had expanded to look as if it kept its shape with the metal supports of a hoop skirt. It didn’t fit the conservative hotel-man image I was trying to project. The hippie-cum-writer-antiwar-protestor-grass-smoking-future-Carl Rogers-Gestalt therapist had run screaming off to the piñon-studded hills, booted out by the price-quoting catering manager who thrived in the climate-controlled world of the hotel where all your needs—choicely prepared food, a selection of numerous shelters including the governor and presidential suites when not in use, and sex if you want it with various unattached staff personnel—were always met.

“So you’re becoming a big *macher*,” my father

told me over the phone. I'd sent him my new business card with the emblazoned gold *H* for Hilton and the title Catering and Banquet Director under my name. I'd also sent him and my mother copies of letters that I'd received from the Department of Game and Fish, the State Employees Credit Union, the New Mexico Highway Department, the mayor of Santa Fe, bankers, realtors, insurance companies, car dealers, brokers, and community organizations that thanked me for making their functions at the Hilton a big success. Of course I asked them to write such letters, and I gave them the address for a copy to be sent to our corporate office in Texas where the elusive Mr. B, owner of twenty-seven hotels, including ours, resided. Mr. B had never visited our property—he was known to sneak on and off in disguise to observe—but he knew I existed. And I'd learned that he'd asked, "Who is this catering manager in Santa Fe I keep hearing about?"

I was disappointed my father didn't use the less conniving term *mensch* instead of *macher* to refer to my accomplishments—from part-time banquet waiter to catering manager in four months!—but he was right: I was a go-getter, a hustler, a wheeler and dealer, setting up luaus out by the pool; selling the Mexican wedding package; finding a local theater group to stage *Jacques Brel Is Alive and Well and Living in Paris* for the New York brokerage convention that wanted something out of the ordinary for their

final evening; arranging Opera Night for the teachers' association that got a meal served in a banquet room decorated like an artist's garret and then was whisked away on busses to see *La Bohème* at the Santa Fe Opera. Before long I knew every important business person and official in Santa Fe, including Bruce King, New Mexico's square-jawed, big-shouldered governor who pumped my hand while blazing by with his entourage into the Ortiz Room for a luncheon with state legislators. One day I discovered Mr. B himself on the premises.

As promised, he was in disguise, a baseball hat pulled down on his forehead. He ordered a drink from the bar, sitting there by himself. I knew it was he because Lorraine, who was thirty years younger than Mr. B and a corporate sales manager who'd visited us before, had grabbed my arm earlier and alerted me that "He" was on the premises. Lorraine was Mr. B's "traveling companion." Our general manager was having an affair with his secretary, Joy. The bar manager was seeing one of the bar waitresses on the side. The Front Desk manager, Dan, with his well-trimmed mustache and French curl looping down the middle of his forehead, had told me he and his wife were swingers and how about that looker he saw me with a couple times (Alice) . . . would we like to join them sometime? Sex was not in short supply in the hotel business.

I shook Mr. B's hand after he was "revealed"

and introduced to me, after I put my hand on his arm and expressed concern for him as just an ordinary guest: *How are we doing today, sir?* We spent the evening together having drinks and talking in the Presidential suite with its mahogany furnishings, oriental rugs, and bathroom phones—a novelty at the time—about occupancy rates and food markups. Noting my last name, he told more than one Jew joke (“Your people are born funny, son”) and I laughed politely and miserably.

So I paid attention that day, as Lorraine, my champion—she had taken a liking to me after her first visit—nestled up on Mr. B’s right side, while he informed me he wanted to groom me for the position of General Manager at the Santa Fe Hilton, implying the present GM would be booted. This was private information, of course, and should be kept between us, and I nodded, Judas-like, complicit, because that’s what I truly wanted and would not be satisfied until I got: managing the entire hotel before I turned twenty-four. And I went further down that bright if thorny path with Mr. B, with his thinning hair and wattled neck and fine-grained gray eyes and Texas-tall frame. He foretold how life would be for me, starting with a trip to HQ, the corporate headquarters in Dallas, where I would meet all the important players and learn the business “inside out from the best.”

“Ours is a growing company and we need sharp people like you, Steve,” he said, Jew jokes

aside. Lorraine, bedecked in a heavy necklace of gold baubles, her jet-black hair sprayed into compliance above the shoulders of her olive pants suit, beamed at me in the august Presidential suite. I was one of them now.

Jan and I went on a junket to the Albuquerque Hilton, also owned by Mr. B. Our general manager, who had not been fired after all, informed me I was working too hard and needed a vacation and should go to our larger sister hotel for the weekend. Stay and eat free, enjoy the entertainment—they had a cabaret—take a guest. A top-floor suite had been reserved for us, with champagne and flowers and a fruit basket. I wore a suit and tie and Jan a new gold cocktail dress I’d bought her. She enjoyed pretending she was my escort, a term which had attendant meanings for her. At nineteen, she’d worked in a “club” outside Phoenix, driven a big pink Cadillac she bought with cash, sat by the pool all day with the other girls and waited for the johns to come by and look them over.

“What was it like?” I suppose I meant everything about it, all the men, the life, the money. She didn’t seem shy or embarrassed speaking about it, and told me everything, from the trick of using suppositories to lubricate herself to her being a special attraction as the most “child-like” of the girls. It was just another experience, like being evicted and on welfare with her mother when she was a child or

hanging out with Allen Ginsberg in the Village or shooting heroin or being committed briefly to Bellevue as a juvenile or dropping acid at thirteen with her twenty-two-year-old boyfriend or doing peyote in Tesuque with her best friend, Carol, or deciding one day she could help a friend get three-hundred dollars he needed by selling herself to a couple of rich businessmen. "Sometimes it seemed I did things for no reason whatsoever except they were there to do," she would write years later in *Baby Driver*, a book about those days and brimming with the details of one episode after another of experience swallowed like gallons and gallons of plankton, much of it celebrated, as her father did, in Whitmanesque paeans about travel.

But for all the hard living, prostitution, drugs, and drinking, Jan often acted like a little girl, making baby talk, goofy faces, bumping into walls to get a laugh, looking out from the kitchen into the dark banquet hall and singing—in perfect pitch—"The Lion Sleeps Tonight." Acting silly was her way of facing all her fears—even if it was with a certain mischievous criminal streak that ran through everything. She once "borrowed" a silver candelabra from the Hilton to use as a centerpiece for a birthday dinner she was cooking for me at the house. I made her take it back the next day. She'd seen no problem in keeping it for "a while."

That weekend at the Albuquerque Hilton we

stayed in our room much of the time—Jan, who had just turned twenty-two, ordered one White Russian after another from room service—except to go downstairs and eat. She didn't hesitate to order the most expensive meal on the menu, Chateaubriand, just because it *was* expensive and free. I felt uncomfortable doing so but let her have her way, and when after dinner we strolled through the atrium of the Albuquerque Hilton—we were both dressed up, young, flushed and happy from dinner and drinks, her arm in mine—an elderly lady stopped us and exclaimed, "What a handsome couple you two make!" We thanked her and then went back to our suite and made love, without using any protection. Sex with Jan was sweet more than rough, affectionate more than passionate. Despite the see-through nightgown she'd brought along for our Albuquerque trip and the black lace panties underneath and her heavy blue eye shadow in an era when makeup was decidedly ungroovy, the sex act itself was tame. She was small-boned, her breasts flatter than rounder, her toenails always painted some cheery Popsicle color, her belly enjoying the slight swell of her excellent baking. We kissed a lot, necked in the old-fashioned sense, screwed in front of the suite's full-length mirror, and called room service for champagne and nachos, and Jan chattered on—she loved talking even during sex. When she showed me how she used to kick her leg out to titillate her customers as an exotic

dancer, the motion looked more like that of a comedienne, say Carol Burnett or Lucille Ball, than of someone trained in the art of suggestiveness. She lived less in her body than in a constant stream of language laced with the comic. “Aw cripes,” was a typical expression. Above all else we liked yapping to one another. We talked about having a child together, and if it happened, it would be okay. We’d balance each other out. We’d make a good team. Jan would keep me loose, relaxed, and having fun, and I’d keep her . . . well, I’d keep her alive.

Jan’s name got her attention, opened up doors, but offered little compensation for never having had her father in her life. Pregnant and on her way to Mexico at fifteen with a boyfriend, John, whom she’d later marry and divorce (the child, though not John’s, would be stillborn in Mexico), she tracked down her father in Lowell, Massachusetts, the only time besides the blood test she would have any contact with him. At the house, Jack was watching *The Beverly Hillbillies* and swilling down a fifth of whiskey. Other relatives dropped over—Jan had located him by calling all the Kerouacs listed in Lowell—and started teasing Jack about why he’d never told them he had a kid. While Jack’s third wife, Stella, stood by, Jan and he compared hands—her mother had always said she had the same hands as her father, and then he told her, “You go ‘head and

write a book. Use my name.” The remark was as close to a blessing, as well as an acknowledgment of being her father, as she would ever hear from him. The visit ended when Jack’s mother, Gabrielle, became agitated and called from the back of the house. Worried about upsetting Gabrielle further, who’d suffered a stroke previously, Stella asked Jan to go.

“Why did your father leave your mother?” I once asked Jan.

“Because of a cake.”

“A cake?”

“He asked her to get up and bake him a cake in the middle of the night,” Jan said. “My mother turned over and went back to sleep. The next morning he vamoosed—for good.”

Later I would hear another story, not from Jan, but from what was written about her mother, Joan Haverty. Jack had wanted her to have an abortion. She’d refused. He’d insisted. She refused again, and when he wouldn’t stop pressuring her, she kicked him out.

Maybe it was easier to believe a cake made all the difference.

It’s hard for the children of the famous to separate what about them is unique and worthy of adulation apart from their celebrated parents. And it’s particularly hard when the famous parent isn’t around to make himself less than his reputation—the inevitable demystifying that comes of knowing someone in the flesh. Even

an absent parent who isn't famous can become easily idealized, let alone one who is a cultural icon and is, as Freud observed in defining fame, loved anonymously. You're torn between getting in line and loving the person from a distance like everyone else, and between knowing you deserve better, much better. Your choices are limited: 1) you can try to be like him; 2) you can try to be anything but him; 3) you can accept your place as the offspring of greatness and understand that people will pay homage to him through you.

You can also find someone—someone who believes in the myth as much as you do, someone who wants to be a writer too, someone who understands your longing—who wants to make a baby with you and create him from within. When we talked about having a baby together, as we often did, we were using code about giving birth to Jack, the loving, caring, creative, brilliant, mad Jack who would never leave her.

"Listen," I said, one day, "you wouldn't ever go back to what you used to do, would you?" I didn't have to be specific about what I meant—Jan knew it was the prostitution.

"Only if I had to," she said.

"What's that mean?"

"I don't want to . . . but I might not have a choice."

I wish I could say I heard in her answer the

sincerity of someone who would never let such a fate befall her again, a Sister Carrie, say, victimized by socio-economic forces. But there was a note of daring in Jan's voice too, something a little disingenuous about her helplessness, as if to say, Poor me, what else can I do?

"Well," I said, "if that ever happens, I mean, if you ever get that bad off . . . I hope you'll let me know first."

"I will," Jan said. "I promise."

One afternoon a couple of well-dressed guys representing a fraternity in Albuquerque came to see me. They wanted to have their annual dinner dance at the Santa Fe Hilton. They wore jackets and ties, spoke earnestly about the success of past years' celebrations, and guaranteed at least four hundred people at the event. We went over menus, toured the ballroom, discussed setting up an extended dance floor, and reserved a date and time for their event.

The night of the fraternity party only Jan and Carlos, a cook, were working in the kitchen. I'd assigned just two waiters to the party because as it turned out the fraternity changed their menu at the last minute to a limited amount of hors d'oeuvres. Mostly they wanted a dance, with a soda bar (we didn't serve liquor to a college age crowd), and a good band, which they'd already hired.

Everyone showed up in semi-formal attire, the women with their hair done and their faces made up and the men with their cars washed and their faces shaved close. They looked as though they could be from any era of college kids, and they milled around the hallways and inside the ballroom while my waiters circulated among them offering platters of hors d'oeuvres.

It wasn't long into the event, about an hour, that we started to run out of food. One of the fraternity men I had dealt with came back to me in the catering office where I was working on menus for an upcoming convention and said there wasn't any food left. I told him that's all they'd ordered. They had wanted to keep the price down. He said he'd expected there would at least be enough for a couple hours. I said I'd planned—and we'd agreed—on two to three hors d'oeuvres per person at the price they'd offered.

"Well, I guess we'll just have to drink our food then," he said, a statement that had an ominous ring.

There were easily four hundred people at the dance now. Paul, the bar manager, who was on duty, came into my office and told me the kids were trying to get drinks from him with fake ID's. He'd closed off the bar to them. "I think you'd better figure out what you're going to do," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"They've brought an arsenal of liquor with

them. They're making mucho trips back and forth to their cars."

I jumped up and went into the ballroom. Guys had stripped off their jackets, girls had taken off their shoes and unfastened their hair. The air conditioning in the ballroom wasn't up to cooling a crowd of four hundred, and people's faces and necks ran with sweat. I saw one guy pouring splashes of liquor from a flask into outstretched plastic cups of soda. Other people walked around with bottles and cans of beer. Everywhere I looked people had something alcoholic to drink in their hands—fifths, pints, splits of wine. A champagne cork ejected into the air. It was as if the banquet room had become one large speakeasy.

I made the decision to shut down the portable bars, not that I thought it would stop anything—they'd just drink their stuff straight. But I wanted to take steps to start closing up the party altogether.

I went back to the kitchen. Jan and Carlos were finishing cleaning up and getting ready to leave.

"Stay here, can you?" I asked her. "We have to try and make some more food."

"Everything's locked up," Jan said. She was right. The dining room was already closed and at this hour the bar only served a limited menu of mostly pre-prepared sandwiches. I looked in the small refrigerator under the salad table and saw that there were only a half dozen of those

left.

"Come with me," I told Jan. We walked through the hall outside the ballroom. A guy was pissing into a planter. Through the promenade windows I could see three people had jumped into the pool with their clothes on. "Whee," Jan said.

"Be quiet," I said, "and just stay with me."

When we got back to my office the same two soft-spoken young gentlemen I'd originally dealt with were waiting for me. Their faces red and bloated from drinking, they demanded I provide more food and reopen the portable bars. I heard glass crash in the lobby. Jan stretched up and whispered in my ear, "Maybe you should call the police?"

I should have listened to her. If she of all people were telling me to call the police, I should have heeded the advice. But what I told her and what I believed was that I could control the situation. I pushed by the two fraternity organizers, and taking Jan with me, I went into the ballroom itself.

Guys were climbing up the room dividers, hanging from them like wild-eyed monkeys twenty-five feet high at the top, drunk out of their minds, about to fall. Couples sloshed around the dance floor. Trash was everywhere: broken glass, napkins, cups, swizzle sticks, even wilted lettuce leaves from serving trays.

I went up to the band. "Stop playing," I said. "What?" the guitar player shouted,

continuing to play. I stepped up on the risers and got close to his ear. "Stop the music."

"No way, man. Who the hell are you, anyway?"

He turned his back to me. I tugged at his shoulder. "I'm in charge here and I want you to shut down."

"Get the fuck off me," he said, jerking away from me. "You didn't hire us. We play until we're supposed to quit at midnight."

I pulled out his amp's plug, the crowd groaned, and the guitarist shouted an obscenity at me.

Jan squeezed my hand, which had turned icy. "Carlos wants you." He was signaling to us from the door of the banquet hall that led into the kitchen. I went over to him, Jan following me. Inside the kitchen was a roving band of men, pulling bulk-sized cans of peaches, peas, and beans from the storage closet, trying to find a way to open them, digging through the pantry, overturning serving trays and chafing dishes. "What the hell are you doing?" I demanded.

"We're fucking hungry, man!" one shouted back at me. "Where's the food!" He picked up a kitchen knife. I stood there a moment locked in a rage, feeling a furious disregard for my own safety. They were in my hotel, in my kitchen, ransacking the place. I started toward them, but Jan grabbed my arm and pulled me back and Carlos followed us out.

We called the police.

The evening resulted in almost five thousand dollars in damages. I walked through the wreckage the next morning, the garbage-strewn halls, the broken promenade window overlooking the pool, the beer cans stuck in every conceivable nook and cranny, the defaced portraits of Santa Fe's conquistadors in the lobby, and the trashed-out hotel rooms—many of the students had reserved rooms overnight. What I thought would be one of my biggest bookings, a full hotel of party guests and a ballroom of diners and dancers, had turned into the worst disaster the hotel—perhaps any Hilton for all I know—ever experienced.

"You approved this without telling me," the GM said, as I sat in his office. He'd never had to authorize my negotiations before, but now was not the time to remind him. "I never would have *okayed* this. Every person in this business knows you *never* sell a fraternity party. Why the hell do you think they came here instead of Albuquerque? Nobody there would *rent* to them, for Christ's sake!" He went on like that for a while, and then asked, "So how much damage deposit did you take from them?"

"Deposit?" I said.

"Oh Jesus, you didn't get a deposit?" He practically clawed at his face, rubbed his unshaven cheeks. He'd been alerted to the situation and hurried in at six this morning to

inspect. "You mean to tell me you let an organization like that come in here without getting a deposit first? Are you *nuts*?"

"We never take deposits."

"We could have lost our liquor license."

"It was a private party and they sneaked in their own stuff."

"It's only a private party as long as no one underage gets shit-faced drunk and the wrong people learn about it. You could have gotten this entire hotel closed down."

I went back to the house, where Jan was waiting. She was off today and she knew as soon as she saw me things were terrible. "This is all because I snatched that candelabra," she said. "I jinxed you."

I wasn't in the mood for joking and went into the bedroom and closed the door.

Two weeks later the hotel had been cleaned up, the broken picture window repaired, the artwork replaced, the pool sifted of bras and underwear, and nobody had yet asked me to leave. Perhaps the GM hadn't reported it yet to Mr. B's people or perhaps the end was about to come. But I woke up one night and lay awake next to Jan listening to her cry out in her sleep. She would often cry out in her sleep, as if she were being hurt, and I thought whatever fears and torments she suffered must seep through the porous scrim of her unconscious when her

usually carefree disposition was not on guard. Her body jerked and then she settled down for a stretch of quietude before the muffled cries started up again.

I myself would dream of kissing Jan, a reoccurring dream I'd have for years to come: she would sit on the low adobe wall in front of our house in Santa Fe and touch her full, pretty lips to mine. In back of us was a rapturous blue sky that threatened to swallow us up or shelter us—I was never sure which. Jan had spent her life in the shadow of her famous and unloving father, and I knew if you had to make a choice between proximity to greatness or the uncertainties of love, you'd be better off taking your chances with the latter.

In the morning I gave notice that I was quitting.

"Why?" the GM said, as if nothing had happened and I hadn't been miserably sitting in his office two weeks before. "Do you know what's ahead of you here," he said. It wasn't a question. "Tell me what we need to do to keep you on." I felt guilty listening to his plea, both because I didn't think I deserved the second chance and because I'd coveted his job not so long ago and had been more than willing to see him lose it.

The next day I got a call from Mr. B himself. He made no reference to the fraternity debacle of the previous weeks, if he knew about it at all. Maybe, destruction aside, it was all show

business to him. "Name your place," he told me. "Where do you want to be, son? You want to come down here to Dallas and work? You got something cooking with another company? Let's write the ticket right now. I want you on our side, you got that?"

I did get it and I told him I'd think about it, but I had no intention of doing so. I wanted to leave. Jan and I spoke about a temporary separation. She'd go up to Kittitas, Washington to see her mother and her half brother, David, and I'd go back to Philadelphia for a while to sort things out before rejoining her in the Northwest. Maybe Karen, one of the kitchen workers, was right when she'd periodically exclaim, "Steven, you're just a hippie!" if I became too uptight about some banquet detail. Or maybe I'd been playing out a drama I thought important to becoming a successful young man and Jan had fit into that scenario as Alice hadn't. Jan had let me be a conquering knight and she my lady in waiting as I charged ahead at corporate windmills. Hans, our German and irascible chef, had once told me, "In Europe the general manager is often a count! So important is he!" You could fill every royal need at the best hotels and almost pretend it would provide all the pleasure and power of being a king: simply sign checks to comp your—or anyone else's—meal; sleep in the best suites on freshly made beds with fruit baskets at your waiting; charge anything you desired from

the gift shop to your expense account; check on your help in the scullery or Great Hall, your treasury scribes in accounting, your toiling souls in the bowels of housekeeping's thundering laundries; find an adoring maiden in a pretty uniform to make you happy.

I had played out a role, and Jan too, only she was more used to jumping adroitly, sometimes painfully, from one role to another, and perhaps that's why she tried to tease me out of my gloom. It wasn't a catastrophe to her, not a huge mistake or defeat, not Steven's come down or even a learning experience, if I wanted it to be that. It was just life, something that happened, a place to move on from, no questions asked.

Maybe, though, Jan didn't take things as seriously because she knew it was all make believe, like Disneyland, the illusion of accomplishment in your own magic kingdom, a manufactured greatness, when really anyone, no matter how renowned, could wind up at the end of his life drunk and watching *The Beverly Hillbillies*.

I withdrew my resignation and stuck it out for another two months. Perhaps I thought I'd make a career out of hotel management after all, seduced by Mr. B's promises of my pick of places in his empire. Or maybe I couldn't bear to leave so soon after the embarrassment of the riot under my watch. But I think it also had something to do with not knowing where else to

go. I'd staked my importance on this job and proudly reported all my successes to my parents. My father at the time was on the verge of bankruptcy; his furniture store of forty years in Chester, Pennsylvania was going out of business. The loss of Chester's manufacturing base—ship and rail yards had closed—was dooming the town to future decades of impoverishment. He was in his middle sixties and still wanted (and needed) to work and much of my striving at the hotel had been a reaction and counterpoint to his dying business, a belief that my upward trajectory could redeem and save his forty years of sweat in a business that had little prospects left. And I kept working at the hotel too because I was afraid of what I really wanted to do, the hard work of becoming a writer, the fear of facing an ambition I worried I didn't have the talent for, though I knew now after working at the hotel that I at least had the drive. I was not lazy, and I had heard that writing was all about perseverance, so I took heart in that and began to write stories again in spare moments instead of hanging out in the hotel bar or checking up on every detail of a banquet.

Jan and I wrote letters to each other, and at first the tone of the correspondence was affectionate and tender. We missed each other. She wanted me to come up to see her in Washington:

*Dear Steven my beloved Mensch,
I wish you could see the garden, we've got*

tomatoes and corn . . . maybe you could come up and see the rodeo with us. You'll love my mother, she knows much more Yiddish than I do. If you get here in September I'm sure there will be an abundance of strawberries left and corn and peppers and peas—you like corn & peas, right?

So how are you taking care of yourself, teddy bear? Eating alright? I wish I was there to take care of you but I'm also glad I'm here—some paradox huh?

Oh! By the way, I got my period! Anyway, it wasn't a good time to have one until after the world collapses in '75. But maybe we'll try again sometime. Write me soon lovey—I send a kiss to you. Jan

I wrote back about all the gossip at the hotel, and that I'd run into her friend Carol and that yes, indeed, I was eating well. Then, about two weeks later, came the first of the letters asking for money. A short while after I sent her \$50, I received another letter and another request for money, which I sent. Even the letters that didn't ask directly, made a backhand request:

Carol and I plan to go to France next year . . . don't know what we'll do for \$ either—guess I'll have to print up a fresh batch! And: I got a car now, too, named Fred, who I got for free—but had to spend a good deal on registration crap nevertheless. And my favorite: This will have to be the last letter I send you for a while unfortunately since I only have one stamp left . . .

I wrote to her that I'd decided for sure to

leave the Hilton, hoping she would get the hint that money would be tighter now.

Dearest Steven Pie,

And now it looks like I'm going to get a job in the library up here—in which case I'll be able to pay you back—[I get] \$533 a month! The only problem is they pay you every month—so the first month that you work there is always a squeeze . . . For a while there the temptation of going to Seattle for the weekend and bringing back the rent was haunting me—but then I remembered what you said—and I wouldn't like the idea, anyway . . .

She signed her letter "Shiksa Meshuganah."

The bald manipulation—the threat that she'd sell herself to get money—made me furious, and I wrote back that she'd reduced me to just another sugar daddy—had I been one all along? Did she think so little of herself or me that she would lie about what she might do, because I believed it was a lie, a button to push that she knew would get my attention, and why (I continued blasting her on Hilton stationery) didn't she ever think out the consequences of what she did, including her most recent affair with a macho Mexican guy whose enraged wife had dumped all her husband's belongings on Jan's mother's front yard . . . and by the way, I didn't believe she only got paid once a month.

A week later came her reply:

Dear Steven,

I can certainly see your point, your reason for being disgusted with my antics. I would be too, if

I were you. But you see, you perpetuate my problem and I yours. Because you, because of your background, experiences, psyche, personality, etc. tend to be a money lender and I because of my experiences, etc.—my whore makeup—cause me to be a money borrower—and money borrowers are often very irresponsible good for nothing bums who don't pay money back—and of course people who set themselves up to lend money also set themselves up not to be paid back, that's just the way it goes.

I'm not pissed off at all, even though my first reaction to your letter was OH FUCK OFF! That was my other side talking. But that's no way to talk to a friend. I understand your failings. I can set myself up in your shoes—and I can certainly understand mine, I have to live with them every day, my insanity, immorality, irresponsibility. What have I done for anyone lately? Certainly nothing you could trace to money. Maybe something more intangible—from the heart.

So I accept you for what you are—and maybe you'll accept me for what I am. I don't think however that we should continue this money bit—if it is endangering our friendship. And I hope you'll come up here because I'd love to see you.

P.S. The job I have is Federal. It pays every 10th of the month, scouts honor.

I never did get up to Washington. After a few more earnest letters asserting our wish to remain friends and see each other again, we stopped writing. At some point in our lives, we lived not more than forty miles from each other,

Jan in Boulder and myself in Fort Collins, Colorado, but I never sought her out and I don't know if she knew I was so close by. What happened to her over the years came to me in snatches from what I read in her two memoirs and in the public record. She married once more, followed by a quick divorce. She never had children or owned a home or stayed at the same address for more than a year. She inherited her father's blood problems—he had phlebitis—which led to high blood pressure and kidney disease. She worked as a cook, a dishwasher, a stable hand, a baker, and in canneries cleaning hundreds of pounds of corn.

Much of her later life became consumed by a quest to oversee the disposition and control of her father's estate. Stella Sampas, Jack's widow, had inherited his estate based on a will made out by Gabrielle, Jack's mother. When Stella died, she left the Kerouac archives to her family, principally her brother, John Sampas, a childhood friend of Jack's. But Jan claimed that the original will from Gabrielle was a forgery, and that Jan and her cousin Paul were the rightful heirs to the estate. Before he died, Kerouac had written to his nephew Paul (his only other descendant besides Jan) that he wanted "someone directly connected with the last remaining drop of my direct blood line" to be in charge of his estate "and not to leave a dingblasted fucking goddamn thing to my wife's hundred Greek relatives." A bitter, ugly legal

feud ensued that consumed much of Jan's later life. In part, besides wanting more of a share of the royalties from his books, she petitioned the courts to have Jack's grave moved from Lowell, Massachusetts to Nashua, New Hampshire where the Kerouac family plot was, and she wanted his archives to be housed in a museum or library. She claimed the Sampas family, who denied the charge, was selling off his belongings and manuscripts piecemeal to private collectors. The case was still pending in court when Jan died in 1996, at the age of forty-four, from kidney failure, three years short of her father's age of death at forty-seven.

Not long ago, upon an agreement with the Sampas family, the New York Public Library announced that most of the Kerouac archive would become part of their Berg collection, which already had been steadily acquiring Jack Kerouac's materials from private donors. The final collection would include his harmonicas, his high school varsity letter, his brakeman's lamp he'd used as a rail worker, a fantasy baseball game he invented, his 1,050 manuscripts, 130 notebooks, 52 journals, 55 diaries, 1,800 pieces of correspondence, and the oldest item among the materials, a Valentine made in 1933 for his mother. Jan would have been pleased, but she couldn't help knowing that among all that volume of materials her famous father produced, despite all the wrangling over the

rightful inheritor, there was not a word about her.

I quit the Hilton and went back home to visit my parents, for the first time in two years. My father's business in Chester had closed, and he now worked for a furniture store in Philadelphia. Used to being the boss all his life, he had too many suggestions for his new employer and soon lost that job as well as a succession of others. He had plenty of suggestions for what I should do with my life too, including finding work at the new Hilton Hotel opening at Naamans Road, fifteen minutes from us on I-95 in Delaware. He'd never been so proud of me as when I'd been sending home letters from the president of the New Mexico Medical Society or from the Governor's office thanking and complimenting me for how well I'd handled their events at the Hilton.

Instead I drove back to New Mexico. It was a first stop before I would wind up in San Francisco, then Portland, then Eugene—towns on the longhaired nomadic circuit—working odd jobs by day and writing until two in the morning each night. But when I stopped in Santa Fe en route to the rest of my life, I visited the Hilton. The people I had hired as banquet waiters had already moved on. I introduced myself to one of the new waiters who said,

“You’re Steven Schwartz? You’re a legend around here!” I didn’t ask him for what; he had said it with a measure of awe so I knew it wasn’t just for producing a fraternity riot.

I went into the kitchen and greeted Hans warmly. We chatted amicably for a few minutes, and then I realized there was nothing for me to do at the hotel—my place had closed up there, and what I wanted to be known for,

my writing, was years of hard work away. I walked over to the kitchen door that looked out to the ballroom. I stood there a moment remembering the first time I’d seen Jan. Peeking out this same porthole window into the dark cavern of the ballroom, she’d sung in a silky, trembling fine soprano, *Hush my darling, don’t fear my darling, the lion sleeps tonight . . .* 