

**NANCY
CASTEEL
VOGEL**

FOUR AND TWENTY BEDS

Nancy Vogel
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Four and Twenty Beds:

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Nancy Casteel Vogel

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CHAPTER ONE

ANYONE CAN MANAGE a motel successfully—anyone who can subsist on meals snatched a mouthful at a time, and requires no sleep; anyone who is a mechanic, gardener, publicity agent, handyman, psychologist, carpenter, and midwife combined; anyone who can cheerfully greet as "Mrs. Beulabottom" each of the various women who accompanies salesman Mr. Beulabottom on his frequent trips; anyone who is gregarious to the point of welcoming the strangers who will witness, interrupt, and discuss the intimate details of his life.

I'm shy, poor at dealing with people, helpless, lazy, and definitely the clinging vine type. The extra-curricular activities of the average husband shock me. I like to eat leisurely meals, and to sleep nine or ten hours a night; and the prime requirement of my soul is privacy.

I love the motel business.

My husband, Grant, is the one who possesses the qualifications that make our partnership in this business a success. He is efficient, patient (if there is money in it) and ingenious—and buying a motel was his idea in the first place.

It was all very sudden.

For a month Los Angeles had been having the kind of weather the Chamber of Commerce members mention only in whispers. Grant and I and our two children had colds, already a month old, which the fog and dampness were cherishing lovingly. Memorial Day and a weekend had been courteous enough to get together and arrange a three-day holiday; and so we decided to take a trip to the desert.

We stopped in Banning, a little town on the edge of the Mojave desert which boasts both altitude (2350 feet) and dryness, and which is popular with sufferers from all kinds of bronchial and respiratory troubles. Banning is about ninety miles from Los Angeles, and has a population of under eight thousand. It has a lot of motels, and of these we selected the one we considered the most attractive, and engaged a cabin for the next three nights.

The Moonrise Motel was a big, new, sparkling-white, green-shuttered structure, shaped a little like a horseshoe with its open end toward the highway. Wide graveled driveways curved in front of the cabins and around three central islands of grass. The interior of our cabin—artistically plastered, carpeted, well-furnished, and with superlatively rich details—was in keeping with the exterior. From the beginning I was awed by the beauty and the size of the motel, but no premonitory tickle hinted to me the incredible fact that within two months it would be ours. After unloading the car, we put David and Donna into the back seat again and drove around idly exploring Banning. Trees

and flowers flourished everywhere, and high, rocky, beautiful mountains towered close toward the north and south and more distantly in the east.

"Let's move to Banning," I said. "Perfect scenery, perfect climate—what more could we want?"

Grant looked at me. He has a habit of simply looking at me on the occasions when he thinks I am more stupid than usual—a look that any fair-minded judge would consider ample grounds for divorce. Fortunately his endearing qualities so far outweigh his annoying ones that I have never considered testing any judge's fair-mindedness. The last time Grant gave me that look was when I came home from an antique shop with five perfectly matched silver deer bookends. The deer were bent forward in attitudes of straining, so that when their antlered heads were placed against a row of books they appeared to be holding them up by sheer force of muscle.

"But why five bookends?" Grant had asked, exasperated.

He is very unimaginative and practical. There's no use in trying to explain to a person of his type what effect the contents of an antique shop can have on a susceptible browser. Besides, I always get too mad to say anything at all when he looks at me like that.

And now he was giving me that same look.

"I'll speak to the manager of General Motors about moving the Los Angeles factory to Banning," he said.

It was hot, but there was a cooling wind all afternoon, and

when we went to bed it was so chilly that it felt good to snuggle under the blankets. The children were asleep in their bed, and we lay there and talked—or, rather, I did.

"How much do you suppose a motel like this is worth?"

"Uh . . . uh . . . mm h'm."

"Let's see, they have fourteen cabins," I went on. "I counted them. The owners live in one, so that leaves thirteen to rent. There are eight other cabins that seem to be as big as this one, with two rooms, and they must get six and a half dollars a night for them, like they do for this one. And then those four cabins in the back; they seem to be smaller, just one room and one bed, probably, but they must bring in at least three or four dollars a night. Why, this place must earn about seventy dollars a night! Why, that's over two thousand a month!"

"Uh."

"And what wouldn't I do with two thousand dollars a month," I went on reverently.

Grant, it seemed was more than half awake, after all. "I don't know what you wouldn't do," he said, "but I know what you would do. You'd quick go to some junk shop and buy three earrings. You'd come home with half a pair of scissors, or one giant size bronze shoe tree."

"Seriously, though," I said, "Why don't we buy a motel—this very one, maybe? It would pay for itself in a few years, and then—"

"Uh. Mm h'm."

While he slept, I lay there and thought about going into the

motel business. Grant could quit his job at General Motors, and together we could keep the cabins clean and the place looking its best. The more I thought about it, the more excited I became.

In the morning we drove into the business district of Banning, about a mile from the Moonrise Motel, and went into Pillyer's cafe, for breakfast. Pillyer was a thin, stooped old man with an embittered expression and a few lonely hairs on a broad expanse of skull.

"What's he mad about, Mama?" David whispered, when Pillyer had taken our orders and disappeared into the dim regions beyond the counter.

"Probably because everyone calls him Pill," I ventured.

Grant shifted Donna onto his other knee, feeling her diaper gingerly. He took a sip of water, and drummed his lean fingers on the counter.

"How would you like to go into the motel business?" he asked me.

I gasped for air.

"I've been figuring," he said. "Why, I'll bet a horned toad the Moonrise takes in two thousand a month. Say they want fifty thousand for the place, it would just about pay itself off, interest and expenses and all, in three years. It sounds pretty good to me. What do you think—shall we look into it?"

As I said, our going into the motel business was all Grant's idea.

While Donna took her nap that afternoon, and David

alternately dug in the gravel and drew out from his mouth for inspection a long string of gum, we lay in the sunshine on one of the green islands and talked feverishly. Grant had been wanting to get away from factory work; for a year he had been looking around in his spare time for a profitable business. He had wanted an automobile agency or a farm implement agency, but now he was willing to give up those plans in favor of getting a motel. Ever since our marriage six years ago we had saved our money; aside from our house and furniture, our only big expenses had been David, born five years ago, and Donna, born one year ago. We hoped that what we had saved—five thousand dollars—would be enough for a down payment on a motel.

When I saw the manager of the motel digging weeds out of the gravel I sauntered up to him and engaged him in a long conversation that dealt with everything from black widow spiders to the cost of living, and worked itself slowly to the subject of motels.

I told him frankly that we were thinking of going into the motel business, and asked if the Moonrise happened to be for sale.

He was a handsome, stocky man whose face dripped water continually. Sweat rolled in oily beads from his eyebrows, from his chin, and from the end of his nose, and it ran in a rivulet down the vertical wrinkle above his nose.

"Yes," he said, wiping the perspiration from his forehead with the back of his hand. "We've just decided to put it up for sale.

The income varies from fifteen hundred to over two thousand, depending on the season. Wonderful climate, here in the San Gorgonio Pass, even if it is a little windy sometimes. It's a new motel, six months old; all the furniture is maple, everything brand new. Sixty-seven thousand."

I gulped. "And—how much down?" I asked timidly.

"Thirty thousand."

It was my turn to wipe away perspiration.

We spent the remaining days of our vacation haunting real estate offices and discovering that there was nothing new and nice for less than thirty thousand down.

We went back to Los Angeles, but we hadn't given up the idea of getting a motel. Every day for nearly a month, while Grant was working, I studied the classified sections of the papers and called real estate brokers. We even went to look at a few motels that were within our means, but they didn't seem to be worth the money—and, after the Moonrise, everything looked cheap and shabby and old.

It was exactly a month after we had first seen the Moonrise that we left the children with Grandma and took another trip to Banning. Perhaps somewhere in that lovely little city, we thought, we might find another motel that would satisfy us—and that we could afford.

But first, before driving around, we had to see the Moonrise again. Grant drove slowly as the Moonrise Motel came into view, and I looked wistfully out the window. The sun gleamed on the

white stucco, and the bright green shutters were magnets to the eye.

"Isn't it beautiful?" I asked sadly.

"Look!" Grant exclaimed. "There's the manager, out digging weeds! Let's stop once and talk to him."

Grant is of Holland Dutch ancestry, a fact which shows itself principally in his tendency to insert a "once" or a "quick" into as many of his sentences as possible. He doesn't fall back on the superfluous "yet's" and "already's" that sprinkle the speech of his relatives, but his method of expressing himself is rather quaint.

(It was in a very quaint way, in fact, that he proposed to me. "Let's get married once," he said. I was so intrigued by his way of putting it that I agreed.)

The manager of the motel took out a large, clean handkerchief and mopped his face and neck when we drove in.

"You folks bought a motel yet?" he wanted to know.

"Nope," Grant said. "We've been looking around, but we can't find anything we like as well as this."

The stocky man wiped his face again, and I noticed that under the moisture of his skin there was a yellowish pallor.

"Got to sell now," he said. "I'm sick; going to a sanitarium the minute I get this place off my hands. You can have it for sixty-three thousand, five hundred."

"But the down payment ..." I said.

"You got fifteen thousand?"

Grant and I looked at each other. During the last month we

had asked a real estate broker what we could get for our home, if we wanted to raise some money in a hurry. Eight thousand, he had told us.

That, with the five we had saved, would make thirteen thousand. Our furniture should bring close to a thousand, and we could borrow the rest from Grandma.

After six years, we were able to read each other's thoughts pretty well.

"Yep, we could raise fifteen thousand," Grant told the motel manager.

And that was the beginning.

When the deal was in escrow we advertised in the local newspaper that we had furniture for sale. The manager's apartment at the motel was completely furnished, and we intended to keep only our washing machine, our book-case, and the children's beds.

It was to be a thirty day escrow, but we wanted to begin selling our furniture immediately. Last minute sales usually bring low prices, Grant pointed out, and we needed every penny we could get. We could only hope that non-essential furniture, like rugs, end tables, and lamps, would be the first to go.

When I was a child—a typically selfish and demanding one—Grandma used to remind me "it ain't what you want that makes you fat, by gorry, it's what you get."

What we got, immediately after our ad was printed, was a fat, heavily perfumed woman who bought our dining room set and

our kitchen table—items which we had hoped to keep until the last week before we left. Her husband, she said, would bring a trailer and get the tables later in the afternoon.

I stood in the doorway a while after she had gone, looking at the quiet little street where we had lived for six years. Palm trees rose majestically from the parkways, one in front of every house. The houses were neat, stucco squares set close together behind green lawns, and a brooding afternoon quiet hung over the neighborhood.

Our own house, too, was white stucco set behind a green lawn. The white stucco was trimmed with violet where Donna had rubbed it with a crayon, and there were patches of dirt in the grass where David and his friends had staged a "rasslin match." But it was home; I had come here as a bride, and my babies had been born here. Life at the motel would never be as smooth and peaceful as life here had been.

A wail from the bedroom announced that Donna was awake. It was time for David to come crashing home from kindergarten. I was busy with the children for about an hour, and then I heard heavy footsteps on the porch.

A round little man was standing there. "I come for the tables," he explained, taking the cap off his small basketball of a head. "Oh, yes—come in."

He clumped into the house and began loading the two tables and the chairs onto a trailer. When he had gone Donna pointed to the spot where the kitchen table had stood.

"All gone," she mourned.

"All gone is right," I said grimly. "But at least we still have your high chair." I lifted her into it and tied a diaper around her fat middle, pulling it around the bars of her chair so that she couldn't climb out.

The doorbell rang.

"Hawve you a bedroom set for sale?" asked the tall, thin woman who stood at the door.

I showed her the bedroom set. She examined it through a lorgnette, thumped the mattress with a long, bony hand, and demanded to know how much I was "awsking" for it.

I told her.

She bought it.

"The moving vawn will be along in an hour," she informed me briskly, and she was gone.

I addressed the kitchen sink bitterly. "Is there any particular reason," I inquired of it, "why they have to buy our most necessary possessions first? Somewhere in this city are the people who are going to buy our lamps and end tables; what are they waiting for? I suppose they're going to be sweet about it and let us have the use of them until the day before we leave."

I was in a bad mood when Grant got home from work. He started to put his lunch bucket where the kitchen table should have been. He put it on the sink instead and asked me why I looked so unhappy.

"They bought our kitchen table and our dining room set and

the bedroom set," I wailed.

"For the price we wanted?"

I nodded miserably.

"Wonderful!" He seized me in his grease-stained hands and swung me above his head.

"You won't think it's so wonderful after you've slept on the floor a few nights," I prophesied grimly.

The doorbell rang. "Ah," I said, "it must be the moving vawn."

While two muscular men dismantled the bedroom set and carried it out, I prepared dinner. I had no idea how or where we were going to eat it, but I decided not to face that problem until it came.

It came soon enough. The moving van had gone, taking with it all hope for the next month's nocturnal comfort, and the potatoes were done. The pork chops were brown and sizzling, and the peas were steaming.

I pondered.

Should we put the plates on the kitchen floor and squat around them?

That wouldn't be very comfortable.

I could put the breadboard over the bathroom sink, making a small table out of it. David and I could sit on the edge of the bathtub, and Grant could sit on the—

No, that wouldn't do.

I settled it by filling our plates and carrying them into the living room. Grant's and David's plates I set on each arm of the

davenport. I put my own plate on an arm of the overstuffed chair. The salt, pepper, bread and butter were in the middle of the living room floor.

"Are you still glad we sold our tables?" I asked Grant, when we had started eating.

He's always willing to put up with a little inconvenience if there's profit in it.

"Yep," he said. "If we hadn't quick sold them the first day, it might have turned out that no one would want them at all, and we'd have to come way down in the price. Please pass the bread."

"Just the same," I said, getting down on my hands and knees to get him a piece of bread, "I'm going to add twenty dollars to what we planned on asking for the living room set. If anyone wants it tomorrow they're going to have to really pay for it!"

"You split your infinitive, Mama," David said.

There's one thing that must be said for David. Maybe he does usually sound more like a herd of elephants than like one small, agreeable little boy, and maybe he does create a very reasonable facsimile of chaos when he gets hold of a piece of gum—but he recognizes a split infinitive when he hears it. My friends all think he's an infant prodigy—in that one respect, anyway. But sometimes I wish I'd never taught him anything about grammar. I didn't know what a split infinitive was until I was in high school, and I got along just as well without knowing. I never made Grandma want to swing me by the heels and smack my head against a wall, either.

"I'm very sorry I split an infinitive," I told David. "I'll try to be more careful in the future. But just the same," I went on, turning back to Grant, "whoever buys that living room set is going to really pay for it!"

"Fine," Grant said, getting up and going into the kitchen; "the more money we can raise, the better." He came back carrying a jar of horseradish; he sat down and put some horseradish on his plate, and proceeded to mix it thoroughly with his peas.

One of the strangest things about Grant, hardly compatible with the efficiency and practicality of his nature, is his passion for weird combinations of food. I have learned to look the other way while he improves upon what I have prepared; if I were to watch while he mixes and eats his little gastronomical horrors, I doubt if I'd be able to do much eating myself.

I slept—or, rather, spent the night—on the davenport, and Grant slept in David's twin-size bed with David. In the middle of the night I sat up and felt the welts across my back that the ridges in the davenport cushions had made. I went through the empty bedroom where our lovely, comfortable bed used to be, into the children's bedroom.

Grant was lying slantwise across David's bed, with David draped across him. The baby was sleeping peacefully on her stomach in her crib. I considered crawling in with her, but I was afraid the crib wouldn't hold an additional hundred and twelve pounds.

I went back into the living room, put another blanket over the

davenport cushions to cover the ridges more thoroughly, and lay down again.

After breakfast I felt more kindly toward the davenport, though. In our hour of need it was serving as table, chairs, and bed. What were a few welts in the face of all that?

Just then the doorbell rang. It was a short, dark, bristling man who actually tinkled whenever he moved. I was so fascinated by this discovery that he was inside the house punching at the davenport before I realized that he wanted my precious living room set.

"How much?" he shot at me suddenly.

I told him, adding twenty dollars to the price we had originally planned to ask for the set.

"Fine! Sold!" he barked, tinkling as he peeled off crisp green bills into my hands.

"What are you staring at?" he cried.

I backed away timidly. "It's just that—that noise you make," I said. "I was just wondering—"

He put a thumb under the watch chain that was draped against his vest and thrust it out where I could see it. There was a tiny golden bell attached to the chain.

He let go of the chain suddenly and strode to the overstuffed chair, picking it up as though it had been a child's chair.

"Open the door, please."

He loaded the chair and davenport onto his pickup truck and drove away.

I sat down in the middle of the living room floor, my hands full of the crisp green bills, and burst into tears.

The rest of that month crawled by. I visualized the angel in charge of time chortling and slowing down the time machine so that he'd have longer to watch us sitting on boxes and eating from boxes, and to watch me sleeping on the floor—which I chose in preference to sleeping with David and being kicked all night.

The general inconvenience, and living in such a state of upset and excitement, didn't seem to bother Grant very much. What annoyed him most about the whole proceeding, I think, was the fact that since a part of our savings was in small government bonds that had to be cashed, he'd had to sign his name and address seventy-five times. He learned from experience what the term "writer's cramp" means.

We had sold our home, of course, getting all cash for it and retaining possession of it until the day we were to take over the motel. Actually it was the real estate broker whose advice we had asked about its value, who bought it. The rise in prices that followed the war had made it worth a lot more than we paid for it, and we knew that the realtor too would make a profit on it. But we needed the cash in a hurry, so we were glad to sell it to him.

Grandma had lent us two thousand dollars. Grandma is a short, sturdy widow without a lazy bone in her body or a wrinkle in her face. Her eighty-year-old "boyfriend," Hellwig, had offered us five hundred dollars more, but we thought we'd be able to get along without the bachelor's mite.

That made our fifteen thousand. What we got for the furniture, and Grant's weekly paychecks from General Motors, would have to see us through the moving and whatever extra expenses might come up.

Our furniture kept selling steadily, and I put a lot of our accumulated, surplus household goods on display, too. We wouldn't have room for it in the new place; I was resolved to get rid of as much of it as I possibly could.

The woman who bought our lamps and rugs, a Mrs. Alexander, kept coming back to see what else I'd brought out from closets and drawers in the way of household goods. Every time she came, she bought several armloads of things. Toward the end of the month, when nearly everything was gone, she even bought our half-empty cans and jars of spices and cereals, and on her next trip she bought Grant's rusty tools and half-used cans of paint. She bought at least twenty dollars worth of junk that we would otherwise have thrown away. I couldn't help wondering what her house must look like. She had probably been acquiring things as avidly as this ever since she got married. I even sold her the five silver deer bookends!

We were all getting very tired of eating and sitting on boxes.

"I never want to see another box, once we get away from here," I said. "Just think, some day all of this will be only a memory. Some day I'll sleep on a bed again, and we'll have chairs to sit on, and a real table to eat from. Someday, this will all be over."

And then, suddenly, it was. Suddenly it was the day before we

were to leave, and there was a flurry of last minute packing to do, and a last night of sleeping on the hard floor, and then it was the Saturday we were to take possession of the motel.

Grant hadn't given up his job. Our monthly payments on the first and second trust deeds were to be three hundred dollars each (one of them would be four hundred after the first of the year) and he didn't dare to quit his job until we had a little money saved. We'd get settled this first weekend, and after that I'd have to manage the place alone, while he came back to Los Angeles to work. He would live with Grandma, in her apartment.

I had been so busy selling things and packing, all month, that I hadn't had time to become frightened at the prospect, but now, putting the last of our things in the two-wheeled trailer Grant had borrowed from a friend, I found myself dwelling upon it more and more, and feeling more and more certain that I'd never be able to do it. Even the average woman might not succeed at a new job of such proportions, and anyway, the resemblance between me and the average woman is purely superficial. I am the type who would call in a plumber to put a new washer in a faucet. I remember that on one occasion when, with unusual brilliance and energy, I tightened a screw with a knife, it was weeks before I finished telling people about my exploit.

When everything was packed on the trailer and squeezed into the back seat of the car, I took the camera out of the glove compartment. I handed it to Grandma and told her to take a picture of us, with the loaded trailer as background.

Grant is inclined to be a little impatient when he has a big job ahead. "Come on, come on, we haven't got time to be fooling with pictures," he said.

"Oh, yes we have," I said firmly. "This is a historic occasion, and we must have a picture of it."

Grumbling, he came to stand beside me. I held Donna in my arms, and David stood beside Grant. Grandma focused the camera and took our picture.

I put the camera back into the glove compartment, and kissed a weeping Grandma goodbye.

"They wun't nothing seem right, with you folks gone!" she exclaimed.

I told her to say goodbye to Hellwig for us, and I climbed into the front seat with the children. I took a last look at our prim white house, gleaming in the morning sunlight, and at all the other prim houses on the palm-lined street.

Then Grant started the car, and we were off!

CHAPTER TWO

IT WAS A long, hot, uncomfortable ride. The children, who ordinarily ride in the back seat, had to ride in front because the back seat was piled to the ceiling with clothes, pans, boxes and suitcases.

Grant had fastened an old blanket over the trailer to protect its contents from dirt and wind. It wouldn't stay fastened, though, and when we were on the highway headed toward Banning he had to stop the car and get out about every ten minutes to adjust it and to see how the things in the trailer were riding. The ironing board was slowly working its way loose from the ropes with which he had tied it to David's bed. Several books had slid forward from the crevice where I had tucked them, and their pages were fluttering and waving as though, I thought sentimentally, in farewell to the life we had known.

"Those mmm things," Grant mumbled.

I had put a lot of the odds and ends we hadn't been able to sell, and that Grant wouldn't let me throw away, into some small cardboard boxes. I had packed these onto the rear of the trailer with my own little lily-white hands, giving Grant another occasion for disgust at my inefficiency. For now, one by one, they were freeing themselves and plopping onto the road. After a few stops, to pick up the boxes and try to repack them in a trailer that was so loaded there was no room for them, Grant gave up the

time-wasting game. When one of the cardboard boxes dropped off, slapping itself against the highway, he'd just let it go, and keep on driving.

I was very happy over the situation. I hadn't wanted to take all those unnecessary articles along with us to our new tiny living quarters anyway. Every time a box fell off, I looked back to be sure it wasn't something else—something we'd have to stop for. "This is just like Hansel and Gretel," I told Grant cheerfully.

The baby got tired of being so crowded, and she began to cry. David was restless, and Grant was getting more and more provoked with the way the things on the trailer were unpacking themselves. We were driving through beautiful scenery—orange groves and tall palm trees with their dead branches drooping like old-fashioned pantalettes, and mountains in the background—but none of us paid much attention to it. We were too anxious to get the trip over with.

When we got to the Moonrise Motel, after a three-hour drive, the manager and his wife were ready to leave. They gave us the keys, and showed us briefly how they registered guests and how they kept track of the laundry; and, assuring us that people wouldn't start coming for cabins until evening, they got into their car and left. A lost, scared feeling spread from my chest to my stomach as I realized that from now on, what ever might happen, we ourselves would have to handle it.

A hot, hot wind was blowing from the east, across the desert. Perspiration dribbled down our faces and necks as we got to

work.

When we had unpacked the trailer and had lunch, Grant set up the baby's crib and I put her to bed for her nap. Then I went outside to see if the place looked any different, now that it was actually ours.

The motel is built in three sections, which are arranged in the shape of a square-cornered U, with the open end toward the highway. The angles of the U are disconnected; the three sections are separate buildings. The back section, parallel to the highway, consists of four single, externally joined cabins without garages.

The other two sections of the motel, facing each other across the wide driveways and the islands of cool-looking grass between them, are identical. Each consists of five double cabins with garages between. There is no cabin number 13, and for some strange reason, no number 5; so our fourteen cabins are numbered up to 16. Cabin 16 is the one directly opposite the one we live in, which is number 1. Cabins 16 and 1 are the closest to the highway, only sixty feet from that roaring, screaming wide ribbon that is flung across the burning desert and stretches clear through to the coast.

The three islands of grass are surrounded by white cement curbs, and the graveled driveways curve around and between the islands as well as in a direct path in front of every cabin. Each island of lawn has three small Chinese elm trees, and the nine trees form a prim, straight row.

In front of the motel is a big green and red neon sign which

says "Moonrise Motel." Directly beneath that is a smaller sign saying "no vacancy," or, if the metal cover is over the "no," saying "vacancy." The sign is double; each "no" has a cover.

Behind the four rear cabins which face the highway is half an acre of rocky, desert ground, with a bumpy private road on one side leading from our driveways back through one of the open angles of the U to the dirt road, Williams street, at the end of our property line, which runs parallel with the highway and leads into town.

I wandered out behind the rear cabins and looked at our big back yard. After six years of living in the crowded outskirts of a big city, that barren half-acre looked like a little chunk of heaven. It was a safety valve as far as the busy highway was concerned. We would fix it up so that the children could play out here happily and safely. We could plant an orchard. We could even build a little house out here for Grandma. The opportunities presented by that half acre of ground were limitless. But that would all come in the future. Right now, there was the present to consider.

I stood at the edge of the highway and looked in each direction. We are nearly a mile from the business district of Banning, and that mile is thick with motels. Directly west of us is a new restaurant, and east, toward the desert, there are only a few motels between us and the Mojave. Across the highway are a cocktail lounge, several small motels and two service-station markets. Beyond those, I saw the beautiful ranges of mountains, with the afternoon sun forming little cups of shadow, like dark dimples,

on their steep sides—Mt. San Gorgonio towering on the north, and Mt. San Jacinto rearing its lovely head on the south.

I breathed deeply. Banning had a scent all its own, one I had noticed before—a scent compounded of freshness and clear skies and blossoms, and the essence of the mountains. My tour of inspection completed, I went back into our cabin. It was small, but so attractive and so new that living in it, I thought, should be more pleasant than in our old home in Los Angeles. There was a large living room, which contained, besides the usual amount of living room furniture, the bed we would sleep on; a small kitchen, and a bathroom and closet; and the adjoining garage at the time was half converted into a bedroom—that is, two windows and a cement floor had been put in it, and a door connected it with the living room. Unfinished as that bedroom was, the children would have to sleep in it.

The office was actually the partitioned-off front part of the children's bedroom. It was completed, and plastered to match the rest of the interior, with dull red broadfelt carpeting like that in all the cabins. There was a large built-in desk in the office—chest high, to be stood at rather than sat at—with registration cards and a desk set on top of it.

We finished unpacking and storing our belongings in the few inadequate drawers and shelves. Donna was still asleep in her crib, and David was out exploring.

Grant and I sat down and looked at each other.

Grant has blue eyes and coarse brown hair, just as I do. Our

children never had a chance to have different coloring; they, too, have brown hair and blue eyes. David has long black curly lashes, and thick hair, while Donna's hair is so fine it won't even hold a bobby pin or a ribbon. It grows straight forward on her head, and usually hangs down over her face. We call her "Little Chief Hair-in-the-Face." I have consistently refused to have her hair cut into bangs, in spite of the arguments of Grant and Grandma. "It'll grow long enough to curl or braid one of these days," I always tell them.

"Well," Grant said, "it's five o'clock—about time we were getting our first customer."

He is tall and slenderly built, and so wonderfully competent—even if he isn't very systematic—that I always feel awkward by contrast. But I never in my life felt so helpless as when, just as he finished speaking, we heard the scrunch of tires on the graveled driveway outside.

"Oh, someone's coming," I said nervously. "You go see who it is. You go."

I sat in a corner of the living room where I could hear and not be seen from the office. I alternately twisted my hands and bit my nails as Grant opened the office door and stepped out to meet the driver of the car. This was a momentous occasion. I strained to hear as the men began to speak.

"This motel's just changed hands, hasn't it?"

"Yep, that's right."

"Well, I've got something here that I know will interest you,

as the new owner. A revolutionary kind of vacuum cleaner ... cuts your work and your cleaning bill in half ... no motel owner should be without one."

I sighed and relaxed.

If the rule is true that women are the worst gossips, Grant must be the exception that proves that rule. He can outtalk any woman; he has more endurance, more lung power, and far more enthusiasm, when it comes to a prolonged conversation on any subject, than any avid old lady, or any young girl draped about a telephone. This habit of his annoys me, partly because he usually indulges it just when I have some work for him to do, and partly because I am jealous of his ability to get along well with everyone. I have such a shy nature that I am seldom able to get past the polite amenities with anyone whom I have known less than three years ... a great disadvantage for anyone as extremely inquisitive and curious as I.

Being so talkative, and so unable to end a conversation, Grant is easy prey for salesmen. That is, although he seldom buys what they are trying to sell, he lets them waste hours of his time.

When Grant finally got rid of the vacuum cleaner salesman, I went in to get the baby. The conversation about vacuum cleaners had awakened her. It wasn't, I realized, the last time that noises from the office, so close to her bed, would awaken her.

I fixed dinner, clumsy in a new, differently arranged kitchen. While I washed dishes, Grant dried them, and there followed an uneasy evening during which we both pretended to read, but

actually sat straining to hear above the children's voices the sound of a car driving into our driveway.

The sun was sinking, and the mountains were clothed in soft shadows. I stood looking out the kitchen window, which faced the darkened east, and I saw the neon sign of the second motel from us turned on. It was a big, impressive sign, with the name of the motel—the Peacock—in bright red letters, and a green "vacancy" sign above it. There was the likeness of a huge, stately, graceful peacock above the name of the motel, blazoned in bright blue and red neon.

"Our sign!" I exclaimed suddenly. "It's time to turn it on!"

Grant had thought of it the same instant I had, and, like greedy children with a new toy, we rushed to the dark office. The light switches—five of them—were side by side in a neat and very confusing little row on the wall behind the desk.

I yanked Grant's outstretched hand aside. "I want to do it!"

He offered a compromise. "We'll take turns once."

"All right. Me first!"

I hovered over the switches with loving indecision. Finally I pushed up the one on the extreme right.

The office light beamed suddenly on us from the ceiling. "Oh, that isn't fair!" I cried. "I didn't know that was the office light—I didn't—"

"You had your turn," Grant said firmly. He reached out one thin brown finger and flipped up the switch that was second from the left. I looked out the window woefully. Sure enough, he had

lit up the "Moonrise Motel" part of the sign.

"You've been experimenting," I accused him. "You knew that was the right switch."

I should have realized he'd know all about the switches. He always investigates everything, and if there is something he doesn't know how to do, he learns how. He's a jack of all trades—and a master of all of them, too! Usually that makes me very proud of him, but right now I was just exasperated. "Now I'm going to turn on the 'vacancy' sign," I said, jabbing grimly at another switch.

Grant laughed. "You turned on the porch light outside the office door." He put his finger on a switch. "Now look out the window."

I looked out, and saw the green "vacancy" spring into brilliant being.

Furiously I flipped up the other switch. That, it developed, lit up the red "office" sign outside and above the office door.

It was a beautiful evening. After the hot day the breeze was cooling and refreshing. The branches of the slender little Chinese elms waved gently.

When I had put the children to bed Grant said, "It's too nice to be inside. Let's go outside once." We sat on the curb of the front island of grass and watched our sign proudly. The island in which the sign stood was planted in myrtle and bright Martha Washington geraniums, and now, with the reflection of the soft neon light on them, they were a mass of color.

Cars were thick in front of the cocktail lounge across the street. Every once in a while a car, leaving, would make a turn in the highway preparatory to going back to the business district, and we'd catch our breaths.

"I thought sure that one was coming in," Grant remarked, at intervals, about five times while we sat there. And then suddenly the neon lights flickered and went out, leaving a complete and utter blackness.

We sat there, horrified. Without a neon sign, there wasn't the slightest possibility that any of the cars on the highway would stop at our motel . . . indeed, their drivers couldn't possibly realize that there was a motel here at all.

By the light of a match. Grant called up the electricity company. No doubt twenty other people were calling them, too, but he wanted to be sure they'd have the lines repaired at once. It happened to remember that I had put some candles on one of the shelves under the kitchen sink. We lighted two candles, setting one in a saucer on the desk in the office, and the other in the living room.

The electricity was off until after eleven-thirty. It wasn't the whole city of Banning that was affected; just an area of about two blocks, starting with us and extending west, toward the business district. The Peacock's sign was blazing twice as brightly beside all that darkness, and every once in a while a car left the surge of traffic and slipped into the Peacock's driveway.

And then, at nearly midnight, our sign flashed on again. Of

course all the other signs did too, but ours was the only one we saw, even though its modest, steady colors were put to shame by the flashing red, white and blue eye of the Winking Eye, the second motel to the west of us. The lights hadn't been on ten minutes when a sleek black sedan nosed into our driveway.

"A customer!" Grant exclaimed.

"You go, you go," I chattered, wondering how on earth I'd manage when he went back to Los Angeles and I'd have to overcome my shyness and talk to our customers myself.

But Grant was already approaching the driver.

I was sitting on the curb of the island, and I couldn't quite hear their voices. But after a few seconds of conversation the man got out of the car and followed Grant into one of the cabins. Then he went back with Grant into the office. "He's registering!" I thought with awe.

Presently the man came out of the office, got back into his car and drove into the garage adjoining the cabin he had looked at. I could see now that there were two people in the back seat.

I hurried into the office, where Grant, with a dazed expression, stood looking at a five dollar bill and a fifty-cent piece.

"Our first money from the motel," he said. "Shall we frame it?"

There was no door between the office and our living room. The whole interior of the cabin was lighted up by our neon sign. When we lay in bed we could see the desk in the office; and,

conversely, people standing in the office would be able to see us.

Grant hung a filmy curtain over the doorway, fastening it at the top with thumb tacks. When the office light was on and the living room light was off, we discovered by experimentaion, it was possible to see from the living room into the office, but not the reverse.

That, I reflected as I lay in bed, would be very cozy. I'd be able to lie in bed and watch while people filled out registration cards (which would be a soothing agent to my rather abnormal curiosity)—but they wouldn't be able to see me. This seemed like the ultimate in privacy. And to have a real bed, a soft comfortable bed again, seemed the ultimate in luxury.

After we went to bed people began driving in, thick and fast. Grant had to hop out of bed so many times that finally he decided to stay up. He put on his robe and slippers and sat in a chair in the office doorway. I watched avidly as he rented cabins, admiring again the ease and sureness with which he did something he had never done before.

I had dozed off, in spite of the lumbering of trucks and the zipping of traffic along the highway. I felt someone shaking me. "Come and look once," Grant said.

I followed him sleepily and looked out the window where he pointed.

Our sign proclaimed, "No vacancy!"

"You mean they're all rented?" I cried.

"Every one. It's three o'clock; we rented them all in a little

over three hours."

"How much did we take in?" I asked.

"Over sixty-five dollars," he said smugly. "I guess it's a good omen, the cabins being full the first night."

He got into bed and, with his customary annoying suddenness, fell asleep.

I was too excited to sleep. I padded happily around the room in my bare feet. I went into the children's bedroom to see if they were covered. The light from the highway, and the glow from neon signs, made the room so light that I could see them clearly.

David, as sound a sleeper as his daddy, was asleep and covered with a thin blanket. Donna was wide awake, motionless, her big blue eyes watching me fixedly behind the screen of hair that hung over her forehead, as I approached her crib. The traffic, the lack of her accustomed bedtime darkness, and the voices of people in the office, had apparently kept her awake ever since I put her to bed.

I patted her head, pulled the thin blanket snugly around her plump neck, and went back to bed. At five, awakened by the rumble of an unusually noisy truck, I went in again and looked at her. She was still gravely awake. I'm sure she didn't sleep at all that first night.

That ended her tendency to be a light sleeper, though. Since that first night she has slept as well as David.

Sunday is supposed to be a day of rest, but the next day was one Sunday when rest was the most remote possibility in the

world for us. The people in our cabins were checking out one after the other, leaving their keys in the doors of the cabins or coming into the office and tossing them on the desk. (One man, leaving early, had got Grant out of bed at five-thirty just to hand him a key!)

Now, after a happy, exciting night of renting cabins, we were faced with the result—thirteen dirty cabins to be cleaned.

We had contacted Mrs. Clark, the strongly-built, dark-haired cleaning woman who did the work for the former owners, but she wasn't coming until Monday. She would work for us only every other day, because we were too low on funds to dare spend any on having work done that we could do ourselves.

I put the baby in her playpen, reminded David again not to play near the highway, and Grant and I set to work on the cabins. We were tired anyway after a day of moving and a night of very little sleep, and whenever I happened to catch a glimpse of myself in one of the little round mirrors that hung on the wall of each cabin as I worked, I was shocked. My thick, long hair was tangled and untidy, because of Banning's cooling but too incessant wind. My eyes looked sunken, and my face pale. (With so much work before me, I hadn't taken time to put on any makeup.) I tried to avoid looking in mirrors, because it made me feel twice as bad to realize how tired and bedraggled I looked.

Grant cleaned the bathrooms, scouring until every fixture shone, while I stripped the cabins of their dirty towels and sheets, brought clean ones, and made the beds. I emptied ash trays

and wastebaskets and dusted while Grant vacuumed the floors. That may sound simple, but, multiplied by thirteen, it becomes drudgery. We plodded along, almost without hope that we would ever finish. Emptying and polishing the twentieth ashtray, I cursed the day that cigarettes had been invented. My hands grew rough and sore from tucking in so many sheets and blankets, slipping so many pillows into clean cases, and adjusting and smoothing so many spreads. My back ached. I began to wish I was in Los Angeles again. I wondered dully how I could ever have considered it work to clean up just one five-room house, with only two beds in it to be made.

Every once in a while I had to stop and see that the baby was all right. David helped by playing in our cabin near her playpen, so that she wouldn't get lonesome and begin to cry.

At lunchtime there was just one cabin left to clean. Grant said he'd clean that one, while I fixed lunch. I carried in clean sheets and pillowslips, hand towels, bath towels, wash cloths, and a bath mat, and went in to prepare lunch.

I was too tired to do anything but open a can of soup; we were both too tired to appreciate anything more elaborate, anyway.

Just one task remained for Grant before his return to Los Angeles—to put up David's tent, in the back yard. I hated to insist on his putting up the tent when he was so tired, but I knew that having the tent up back there would be the only thing that would keep David away from the front of the motel, occupied, and out of mischief. We had agreed to keep the children as invisible from

the front of the motel as possible; the sight of children is too likely to suggest to travelers that here is a place where their cars and belongings might be tampered with, and where there will be so much noise that sleeping will be difficult.

About nine o'clock that night Grant went back to Los Angeles. He rented three of the cabins before he left, and we agreed on a method of keeping books.

Grant would come back each weekend and possibly once during each week, although to drive ninety miles each way just to be here for a few hours would hardly be worthwhile. He wouldn't quit his job until our income from the motel was consistently so good that we knew we'd be able to make our payments and repay Grandma.

I'd have all the renting to do, I'd have to supervise and help the cleaning woman, on alternate days I'd have to do all the cleaning; I'd have the two children to take care of, I'd be completely responsible for anything that might go wrong with the motel. The lights might all go off again, or the plumbing might get stopped up. I had visions of careless customers tossing towels and hairbrushes blithely down the toilets.

Many authors mention, when they want to portray intense feeling, that their heroine views a certain happening with "mixed emotions." Well, my emotions as I watched Grant drive off the gravel onto the highway weren't mixed in the least. They were all the same. I was scared to death.

CHAPTER THREE

FORTUNATELY I HAD the children in bed, where I didn't have to worry about them, when the next customer drove in. He was a brisk-looking, gray-haired man in a new coupe.

Often during my life I had heard people speak of "buck fever." It had seemed strange to me that any hunter should, at his first sight of a deer, tremble and shiver and find his fingers too numb and unresponsive to pull the trigger.

Now, though, I understood. With no capable, confident husband to talk to the man, I would have to do it myself. My fingers were icy as I opened the door, and I forced my lips apart in what I hoped looked like a pleasant smile of greeting.

My knees were quivering (visibly, no doubt) and my voice, when I squeaked "hello" to the man, was so like the sound of a rusty hinge that I glanced around in surprise.

The tall, gray-haired man looked at me strangely and asked if I had a vacancy.

I throttled the moronic impulse to gibber "I feel like there's a great big one in my head!" and carefully mouthed the words I had rehearsed for such an emergency as this.

"Yes, I have," I chirped. "Would you care to see it?"

"Please," he replied, with a pained expression that seemed to say, "Well, what in hell do you think I'm here for?"

I led the way to one of the single cabins in the rear. He

followed close behind me. It was about three hundred feet from the office to the single cabins—much too far for two people to walk together without saying a word. Coyotes were howling in the blackness of the hills, and I felt like howling with them.

I was hot with embarrassment as his footsteps padded along behind me. I cast about frantically in my mind for a topic of conversation. If only I had noticed the state on his car license I could ask him how the weather was where he came from. But I couldn't risk saying merely, "How's the weather where you came from?" He might sneer, "Same as it is here. I just came from the other side of town."

He tramped along close behind me, without saying a word. We still had more than half the distance to go to get to the cabin. Suddenly I had an idea. Maybe something in his costume, or an emblem or pin he might be wearing, would give me a topic for conversation. I turned and looked back at him, searching for pins or ornaments in his lapel and working slowly up to his face, which was ten or twelve inches higher than my own. The yard lights, bright lights on a pole on one of the grass islands, made the details of his clothing visible. Just as I got up to his eyes I was struck by his expression. He didn't say it, but I could literally feel him thinking it: "Well, what the hell are you staring at?"

We went the rest of the way in silence—still more of it. I sighed with relief as we reached the door of the single cabin—at last the ordeal was over.

And then I realized I had forgotten to bring the key!

His eyes were on me, impatient, obviously bored with my stupidity and slowness.

"I—I forgot the key. I'm very sorry. I'll go get it," I stammered.

Throwing dignity to the Banning breezes, I broke into a run as I headed back toward the office. Not only was I in a hurry to get away from the pitying contempt in his expression, but I was afraid that if he didn't get a little satisfaction soon he'd just get into his car and drive away. It would be terrible if I lost my first customer, especially after such a bad start. I'd never have the courage to tackle one again.

Seizing the master key out of the desk drawer, I rushed back and opened the door, snapping on the light and motioning him into the cabin.

His eyes flicked over the maple furniture, the red carpet, the Venetian blinds, and back to me.

"Well, the cabin's okay," he said.

We embarked on the trip back to the office, while I pondered over the inflection of his words.

He filled out the registration card, paid me four dollars, accepted the key from my frigid hand, and turned to give me one last contemptuous glance before he stepped out of the office.

I sank onto the davenport, weak with relief that my initiation into the horrors of cabin-renting was over.

I suppose the affliction from which I suffered would be called customerphobia. Such a word, if it existed, would be defined in the dictionary as "a morbid fear of customers." No doubt in

extreme cases the victim would run shrieking at the sight of a customer. (As a matter of fact, I had had to exert a lot of self-control to keep from doing that very thing!) I grace the ailment by the coining of a name only because I discovered others can suffer from it too. Grandma, later, was to go through a violent attack of it, with much more disastrous results.

The next car that drove in that night disgorged a dark, trim looking man with big ears who demanded, "How mocha get two people?"

"Four dollars," I said.

"How mocha get three people, four people?"

"Five dollars and a half; six-fifty for four people," I said. "I wanna to buy it," the man declared.

"All right," I said indulgently. "Just fill out this registration card."

"No, no—no, no no!" he cried, shoving the registration card away in horror. "I means, I wanna to buy it, I wanna to buy it to belong to me. I got thirty thousand dollars down pay. You wanna to sell your motel?"

"Well," I hedged, "we hadn't really thought of selling. How much did you want to pay?"

He fingered one huge ear, and I saw the glitter of a diamond on his finger. "Let's let me look at it, first. Then I make you offer."

I showed some of the empty cabins to him and his wife, a meek little woman who clambered out of their car and trailed along after us. I led them out to the land behind the back row

of courts. It was just a gigantic splotch of blackness at this time of night, but I described it to them. They were very much impressed.

When we were back in the office Mr. Gorvane—for he had introduced himself by now—said, "I been looking around, this is nicest court in Banning. I wanna it to belong to me. I offer you seventy-five thousand."

I gasped. By selling, we would make eleven and a half thousand dollars profit. That was a lot of money, especially considering the short length of time involved.

I promised him I would talk it over with my husband the following weekend. I took his address—he lived in Los Angeles—and told him that Grant would stop in to see him in a little over a week.

Every once in a while during the rest of that evening, I caught myself almost on the verge of tears. I tried to figure out what was the matter with me, and I realized that I was unhappy because I was afraid Grant would insist on selling the motel. I wanted to keep it, no matter how much we might be offered for it.

Still, I was glad Mr. Gorvane had made the offer. My relatives and the few of our closer friends to whom we had told the price we were paying for the motel had insisted that we were being fools, that the motel couldn't possibly be worth it; that the business about the owner being sick and having to sell was an old, old gag, that we'd lose every penny. I had never really doubted the wisdom of our course, but it was nice to have my faith in the

value of our motel upheld. And if some one offered to buy it for seventy-five thousand the day after we took possession, probably in a couple of months, with the beginning of the season at Palm Springs, (a popular winter resort twenty miles from us) and the influx of winter tourists into California, we'd be offered even more.

After those two encounters, the edge wore off my customerphobia. I rented two more cabins before I went to bed. I checked carefully to be sure that all the neon lights were on. Then I locked the office door and the door that led outside from the living room, and lay down on the bed with my clothes on.

The scrunch of wheels on gravel brought me off the bed several times, but it turned out to be cars going into the restaurant next door. The beam of the headlights of cars turning around in the restaurant parking lot shone between the cracks of our Venetian blinds, casting stripes of light against the wall, and made me think cars were coming into our driveway.

There was no doubt, though, that the next car I heard was in our driveway. Besides the agitation of the gravel, there was a thud, and then loud, excited male voices.

I hurried to the door and looked out. A battered roadster, which had apparently come from Williams street along our private road and entered the graveled driveway from the rear, had banged up against the curb of one of the grass islands. Two young men in the roadster were arguing in a heated and highly alcoholic manner.

The idea of approaching two angry, unpredictable drunks didn't appeal to me, but I knew I couldn't let them stay there, making a disturbance that would be sure to annoy our customers. "Thish ish too the highway!" one of the men roared.

"No, it ish not! Thash the highway over there, where the lightsh are! You better let me drive, you're drunk, don't even know where the highway ish."

They struggled for a moment over possession of the steering wheel. Finally the one who had been driving said, "You're drunk yourshelf. Here, you better drive."

They traded seats, with painstaking clumsiness. Then they sat quietly for a moment, apparently about to go to sleep.

I was trying to coax my reluctant legs to carry me fiercely toward them when, to my relief, the new driver started the car and pulled out onto the highway. I hoped they would get safely wherever they were going.

At last I relaxed and went to sleep. Anyone who drove up wanting a cabin would ring the bell by the office door, anyway.

I couldn't have been asleep more than five minutes when the bell rang for the first time. I rented four more cabins during the night, each about an hour after the other. Nervousness and excitement kept me awake about half an hour after I rented each cabin, and I'd just be drifting into the sounder stages of sleep when the bell would ring again.

It wasn't a very restful night.

In the morning Mrs. Clark, the husky maid, came to work

in the cabins. She was, in a bristling way, proud of her dark complexion and her Irish-Italian ancestry, and contemptuous of "them funny-lookin' foreigners that's always stayin' in your cabins," but she seemed to enjoy the work of cleaning the cabins, and did it with a zest and speed I could never have equaled. When I got the children fed and dressed and the baby in her playpen, I decided to tackle the mountainous heap of laundry. The laundry truck was due in a couple of hours; and I felt sure that, on the first day at least, it would take me almost as long to sort and count and list the dirty things as it would have to actually wash and iron them myself.

In the garages between cabins number 2 and 3 there were several strips of leftover linoleum standing against the back wall. I rolled these flat on the floor and brought armfuls of dirty linens from a compartment in the linen closet, putting them on one side. Then I sorted the things into six different piles—sheets, slips, hand towels, bath mats, wash cloths, bath towels. My arms began to ache from lifting each sheet and shaking it to be sure no smaller articles were wrapped up in it. Then I stuffed the sheets into a laundry bag, counting them carefully. There were sixty sheets, and I had to get a second laundry bag out of the linen closet.

The linen closet was a huge, roomy affair built against the back of the garage adjoining cabin 2, and it left plenty of room for a car in the garage. There were three gigantic shelves in it. On the bottom shelf were extra blankets and bedspreads, cleaning equipment of all kinds, and supplies such as soap, toilet paper,

small boxes of matches, and water pitchers. On the middle shelf were stacks of clean linens—about two hundred of each item. On the top shelf we had stored as many of our personal belongings as we could get along without temporarily, since there was no room for them in our cabin.

I was exhausted by the time I had counted all the laundry, stuffed it into bags, and listed it in the laundry book. Just as I finished, the laundry truck roared into the driveway and stopped suddenly in front of the garage where I stood, gravel flying in all directions. The driver got out. He was a likeable, lanky, red-haired youth with a very few tiny patches of white skin showing between his freckles.

"How d'you like the motel business by now?" he asked me, as he lifted the heavy bags into the back of the truck.

"It's fun," I said, "all except cleaning cabins, and sorting laundry, and keeping books, and getting up in the night to rent cabins!"

He laughed, and rubbed his brown-speckled nose. "You'll get used to it," he said.

That night wasn't as bad as my first night alone had been. I rented five cabins before I went to bed, and I did it with so much nonchalance that I was proud of myself.

Once I got into bed, though, reaction from two days of worry and hard work and a night of very little sleep set in. I slept deeply, dreamlessly, without moving, until the shriek of the office bell shattered my sleep.

Dazedly I went into the office, snapped on the light, and unlocked the door. Two young men came in. "We want a cabin with two double beds," the taller man said.

He filled out the registration card which I shoved sleepily toward him. "How much?" he asked.

"Five-fifty," I replied. Our rate for a double cabin with two double beds was five and a half or six and a half dollars, depending on the number of people that were to occupy it. We had decided to charge that much or less, depending on the demand for cabins and the number of "vacancy" signs along the highway, following the custom of the former owners.

Each of the young men laid a five dollar bill on the counter. I looked at the bills groggily. I was still half asleep.

"Just one of those will do, with fifty cents beside," I said.

"We want to pay separately," said the shorter man. "Give us each change, please."

I missed Grant, with his quick mind and his easy competence, more intensely at that moment than I missed him yet. I smothered a yawn and tried to concentrate on the difficult task before me. My reasoning, if you could call it that, was hazy and confused.

"Well," I thought, opening the cash drawer and looking at the array of five and one dollar bills, and fifty cent pieces and quarters, "they're each paying half of five and a half. How much is half of five and a half, anyway? Half of five would be two and a half, so half of five and a half would be a little more than that. How much more? Well..." At that point I lost the thread of the

whole thing and had to begin over. "Suppose," I thought, starting on a new tack, "I would give each of them a dollar. That would mean they each had paid four dollars, which would be too much. Well, then, suppose I gave them each three dollars. That would mean they had each paid me two dollars, which wouldn't be quite enough. But how much would it lack of being enough?"

Arithmetic had always stirred up a swirling fog inside my head. My eyelids were drooping more and more, and yet I was beginning to feel beneath my drowsiness a desperate panic. The men were growing impatient.

I frowned and stared more sternly at the money in the cash drawer. I summoned all my powers of concentration. I handled the money in the drawer ostentatiously, as a bluff, so that they would think I was beginning to go into action.

I still don't remember how I did it—unless maybe it was by doling out the money slowly and watching their faces until their expressions suggested they had received the full amount—but somehow the awful situation ended and the men went to their cabin.

The following morning when I did the day's bookkeeping I found that there was fifty cents too much in the cash drawer. Still, I didn't feel that the system I had used the previous night had much to recommend it, and I resolved not to try it again.

Traffic noises along the highway were loud and almost ceaseless—they quieted down a little just often enough to give the next crescendo the greatest possible impact. Planes roared up and

down from the airport which was about a block to the southeast; trains whistled and roared along the track that was a block to the south; cars and trucks and busses roared along the highway. The whole highway, in fact, was one big, solid roar.

After the first few days, though, the noise faded to the back of my consciousness. The peal of the office bell would rouse me instantly, even if I were working in a cabin several doors away, but the sky-shattering whine of jet-propelled planes made no impression on me at all.

Travelers and newcomers to the vicinity nearly always commented on the noise. Often they'd have to raise their voices to be heard above it. I got so used to the noise that when someone would yell above the din, "What an awful racket that train makes." I'd shriek back, "What train?"

I was beginning to become acquainted with some of our neighbors. Moe, the bald, thick-set, beak-nosed man who owned the restaurant next door, had a son, Moejy (no doubt a corruption of Moe, Jr.) who was about a year older than David. The first moment I laid eyes on Moejy I had a premonition that he would turn out to be the most obnoxious child I had ever encountered—a premonition which, as later events were to prove, was correct.

He was a wiry boy with a small head, close set ears, and eyes that darted about continually in search of insects to be dismembered or walls to be scribbled on. He was about a head taller than David, and in the second grade. For the first few days after we took possession of the motel, he and David were

inseparable.

Directly to the east of us, between us and the imposing Peacock, was a four-unit motel that was unfinished and had no neon sign. The owner of the place was a tall, gaunt black-haired old man with a curiously pink chin. His name, I had learned, was Featherbrain; and I reflected that he must possess more sterling and endearing qualities than were immediately visible, to have inspired in the woman who married him such affection that she was willing to accept him, name and all.

He worked each day on his little motel, painting and hammering, while his wife, always with a cigarette in one hand, planted shrubs, lined the driveways with big rocks which she painted white, and did the watering—an important job in this part of the country. Our own shrubs, the islands of grass and the geraniums beneath our sign needed a thorough watering every day. We discovered that watering every other day was not enough; the grass would turn brown and die in spots unless it received a daily watering.

There were advantages to the heat and dryness, though. Besides being contributing factors to what must be one of the most healthful climates in the world, they made it possible for one to hang clothes up on a line, stand and wait a few seconds while the things were whipped by the wind, and take them down, completely dry.

I never had to worry about not having enough clothesline space, even though there were only three short lines between the

posts Grant put up behind the rear cabins a few weeks after we took over the motel. When the three lines were full, the first line of clothes was ready to be taken down, making room for the rest of the wet things.

Donna, even though I had less time to be with her, and she had to remain in the safety of her playpen for the greater part of the day, was growing and developing rapidly. She was becoming more agile, and she could climb on and off the furniture—something she hadn't yet been able to do when we left Los Angeles. It was a problem what to do with her when a customer came while she was out of her playpen. I never dared leave her alone in the house on such occasions, for fear she might somehow get outside and onto the highway. If I chucked her suddenly into her playpen, though, and went to talk to the customer, she would howl with indignation. Since her playpen was in the unfinished bedroom right behind the office, where her howls would be plainly audible, that had to be prevented. So I put a bag of cookies on the bookcase, and whenever I had to rush her to the playpen suddenly, I gave her a cookie in each hand. She became too absorbed with enjoying her feast to protest over where she had it.

I bathed her sometimes in the kitchen sink, sometimes in the dishpan. Our cabin, like the other thirteen, had a lovely tile shower, but no bathtub. One morning I had just set her in the dishpan of warm water on the kitchen table when the office bell rang. It must be a salesman, I reasoned; we very seldom had customers this early in the morning. I'd get rid of him in short

order. I picked up the baby's celluloid duck, which was on a chair beside the table, and gave it to her to keep her entertained. Then I hurried into the office.

Three very distinguished looking men stood there. They introduced themselves; they were representatives of some motel and apartment house association, which they wanted us to join.

They launched into an exposition of the various benefits connected with belonging to their organization, and described the exalted position of the member. The principal spokesman of the group, a dignified creature with a glistening bald head, was waxing very eloquent indeed when suddenly he stopped, coughed, and delicately adjusted the white handkerchief in his pocket. Obviously he was rattled about something, and behind his close, even shave a faint red was rising. The other two men laughed uncomfortably, and I realized they were looking at a point behind me. I turned, to see what they were looking at.

There, with her celluloid duck in one hand, stood Donna, as naked as the spokesman's head, beaming graciously and impartially upon the three men.

It was so hard to handle the baby and the motel, doing half of the work of cleaning cabins, taking care of the laundry, answering customer's questions and listening to their views on life when there were a dozen other things I should be doing, that I persuaded Grant to quit his job. Business was good, even better than we had hoped it would be, and every night our garages were filled with sleek, shiny automobiles from every part of the

country. The income from the motel was almost as much in one night as Grant was earning in a week. Unless something went terribly wrong, there was no reason why we wouldn't make a financial success.

So Grant left Southgate (the suburb of Los Angeles in which the General Motors plant was located) and came to Banning, bag and baggage; and I shucked my new capability, that had been born of necessity, and reverted to being my old helpless self, which was more natural—and a lot more fun.

Grant and I had discussed Mr. Gorvane's offer to buy the place, and had decided that we wanted the motel more than we wanted the quick, easy profit.

That is, Grant decided that—I had known all along that that was how I felt about it.

CHAPTER FOUR

THERE'S A LOT of work to running a motel, and no matter how many people there are to do the work, there's never a moment when they are completely caught up. Always there are the big jobs awaiting any rare moments of leisure—digging out the insidious weeds that thrust their way through the gravel, planting flowers and improving the external appearance of the place, utilizing the extra land, and repairing the inevitable damage done by careless customers.

Mr. Featherbrain, the old man next door—whose black hair, I suspected, was dyed—finally got his motel finished to the point where it was ready to operate; and one day some men came and installed a big neon sign (Palace Motel—Vacancy) in front of his place. It was a great day for him. He came over to talk to us about it. He leaned his tall form against our office door, stroked his rosy chin, and said, "Well sir, I'm a goin to have muh 'no vacancy' up tonight afore anybody else. Yep, two hours after dark, and we'll be full."

"Good for you," I said. "With only three cabins to rent, you should be able to do it, too!"

"Durned old fellers that put up the sign," he grumbled, "they went'n knocked all muh white rocks out of line with theit truck. I shoulda busted evvy bone in their head."

A customer drove into our driveway, and the irascible old man

went home. A middle-aged woman in a mouse-colored dress got out of the car, and just as she began to speak another car, a green coupe, whirled up on to the gravel. A well built, fiftyish man with his dark hat at a rakish angle stepped out of the car and said, "Do you rent any of your cabins by the week, madame? I've got some work to do in Palm Springs—I'm a contractor, don't know just how long I'll want to stay, but—" Realizing suddenly that he had interrupted the middle-aged woman, he swept off his hat and bowed before her.

"I apologize deeply, madame," he said. "It was unforgivable. Pray go ahead and do your business with this young lady, while I wait my turn."

The woman smiled timidly, first at him and then at me. She was a dainty, plump, small-boned creature with white, slightly rouged skin and tiny white hands. Her blue eyes, underlined with a criss-cross of faint wrinkles, sparkled behind rimless glasses.

"Bon jour," she said. "I'm Miss Nestlebert. I, too, was wondering if you rent cabins by the week or month. I have to live in this climate for my health for a few weeks ... the doctor says I'm just on the verge of asthma, and a few months of desert air should prevent it from developing."

"We usually rent our cabins on an overnight basis," I said, "but there's no reason why we couldn't rent them by the week."

"Of course I know it will be simply terribly expensive," she said, "but I want a nice place like these you have here, and I'm willing to pay for it." She took a deep, rattling breath.

"Come on, I'll show you what we have," I said, my smile including the man with the dark hat. His eyes, I noticed, were sparkling with love of life and a private amusement.

Miss Nestlebert and the man, whose name turned out to be Hawkins, were both pleased with the newness and the cleanness of the cabins. I gave them cabins 7 and 8, and as they left the office after filling out registration cards he set his hat back on his head in order, apparently, to be able to lift it gallantly.

"May I call upon you tonight?" I heard him ask. A truck thundered past and I couldn't hear her reply, but I watched them as they walked together toward their cars. Her birdlike head was fluttering in agreement with the remarks he was making, and his steps were jaunty.

I turned my attention to the desk, to put the date and the cabin number on each of the two registration cards. About to pick up a pencil, suddenly I gasped and jumped backward. There, leering at me with strangely human eyes, was an enormous black spider, motionless on one of the registration cards.

I would have called Grant, but I knew he was behind the rear cabins, cleaning out the incinerator. I was on my own.

I picked up a newspaper that was on one edge of the desk, moving quietly and carefully, and folded it until it was narrow and stiff.

I hated to think of having squashed spider all over the top of the desk, but I hated even more to think of letting the huge, loathsome creature escape. I raised the folded newspaper, with

grim slowness, and then I brought it crashing down on the registration card.

I sighed with relief. There, that would fix him! I lifted the paper, preparing to clean up the mess.

There, still watching me mockingly, sat the spider, still motionless—and completely unharmed!

About that time it began to dawn on me that this was a very strange spider, indeed. I had seen every imaginable sort of insect since we came to Banning, including black widows, but I had never in all my life seen anything resembling this.

I moved a little closer and, bending down, looked the spider over carefully. Then I laughed and picked him up in my hand. He was made of rubber. Either Miss Nestleburst or Mr. Hawkins must have left him there, since he was on top of the registration cards.

I put him in the cash drawer, where he would give Grant a shock.

I went back into our cabin and set to work on a "Vacancy" sign I was making, to hang up just outside the office door under the neon sign that said "Office."

We had been thinking of getting a neon "vacancy" sign, but we were afraid it would be too expensive. One night the "Moonrise Motel" sign had begun to flicker on and off, so we telephoned Oian Rosco, the only neon expert within fifty miles. Grant was disgusted at the idea of having to hire anyone to fix something for him, but neon signs are one thing—probably about the only

thing—he doesn't know how to fix.

While Rosco, a small man with an innocent-looking round face, was fixing our sign, we asked him how much a neon "vacancy" sign would cost. He told us he'd figure it out and let us know when he brought back the parts for our broken sign.

When he returned with the parts, he not only gave us an estimate of the cost, but brought along a penciled sketch of the sign as he planned it, in its full size.

It was very attractive, and he could make it for us in a very short time, but it would cost a little more than we wanted to spend, with what neighboring motel owners called the "late summer slump" due at almost any time. We'd think it over, though, we told him.

He left the penciled sketch for us to consider, assuring us, his round eyes guileless, that he had no use for it.

We decided that, even though we didn't feel that we could afford a neon sign, we should have a "vacancy" sign of some kind to hang under the "office" sign. It would catch the eyes of the minority of people who look toward the office, instead of at the big sign in front of a motel, to determine whether or not accommodations are available.

"I'll get a board the size of the 'office' sign," Grant, the ever resourceful, said: "I'll paint it white, and you can put the letters on carefully with pencil. Then we'll paint the letters black."

"A good idea," I agreed, glancing at the paper Rosco had left, and at the beautiful, perfect lettering on it.

When Grant put the dry, white-painted board before me a few days later, I had a battle with my conscience. Should I take a ruler and painstakingly create my own letters, or should I cut out Rosco's letters and trace them onto the board?

The latter course seemed the most practical. Still, a stern inner voice told me, Rosco had put his time and work into that sample sign with the hope of selling us its counterpart in neon, not so that we might make use of his labor by tracing his letters and making a sign ourselves, thereby pushing ourselves still further out of the market for the neon sign he might have sold us.

I finally decided that the only honorable thing to do would be to start from scratch. Pushing his sign aside, I set laboriously to work making new letters. If I cast an occasional glance at the formation of his lettering as I worked, it was accidental.

I was intently studying the proportions of his "Y" when the office bell rang. I put aside my work guiltily and hurried to the door.

It was Miss Nesdeburt. She gave me a timid smile.

"My cabin is just lovely," she said, her tiny white hands fluttering up to her glasses. She took them off, as though she could see me better without a barrier of glass between us; "it's really lovely," she continued. "I was wondering if I could borrow a pencil? I'd like to write some postcards and tell every one I've found a cabin, and I seem to have forgotten to bring a pen or pencil."

"Certainly. We've got dozens of them," I said lightly. I opened

the cash drawer and put my hand into it.

Then I shrieked and leaped backward. There, in the drawer, sat a huge black spider!

Then I remembered, and I could feel the color flooding into my face. I had been taken in by my own trick—and before an audience, too!

"It's just—just an artificial spider, made of rubber. I forgot, for a minute, that I'd put him in there. I was going to play a little joke on my husband, you know. But I guess the joke was on me." I produced a laugh that was meant to be hearty, but which actually was sickly and aggrieved.

Miss Nestlebert's sparkling blue eyes had never left my face. Her expression was sad and horrified. "Et tu, Brute?" she asked, with more pathos than Caesar could possibly have squeezed into the three words.

"What do you mean?" I asked uneasily.

"Why, what kind of a den of practical jokers have I gotten myself into?" she wanted to know. "First Mr. Hawkins, now you."

"Oh, but I'm not really a practical joker," I assured her hastily. "In fact, it must have been Mr. Hawkins who left this spider to scare me, and I just thought as long as I had it anyway I'd scare my husband. I'm not in the habit of doing things like that. Did Mr. Hawkins scare you with a spider too?"

She shuddered daintily. "Mais non! It was worse than that."

I leaned across the desk eagerly.

"I'll—I'll tell you when I know you better," she said in confusion. "Really, it was quite a dreadful thing. Maybe I shouldn't let him come to call tonight after all."

She took the pencil I handed her, smiled her thanks, and went thoughtfully out the office door.

We hadn't been in the motel business long before we discovered that the proper name for customers is "clients" or "guests"—not the common, vulgar "customers" that came so naturally to our lips. In spite of the good example set by practically all the other motel owners we knew, who were careful not to use the uncouth word, we continued calling our customers what they were—customers.

Grant, falling as easily and competently into the role of motel owner as he had into his many former roles, must have convinced our customers from his very first day that he was a veteran of the motel business. His every action, his every remark led people to believe he had been in this part of the country, at this work, for years. He freely employed such words and phrases as "usually," "generally in the summer here," and "every winter." If a customer were to ask him, "Isn't it warmer than usual here?" he'd reply something like, "Nope, it always gets pretty hot here, this time of year. In a month or so it'll get cool, though; there'll even be snow on those mountains."

The sweating customer, glancing at the close, towering mountains to the north and south, would mention that it didn't seem possible, and Grant would say, "Yep, it's a surprise, every

winter, when the desert heat turns into snow and cold wind. It happens, though." Of course it does happen, too, but at the time he had only our neighbor's word for it. Snow near Banning was something as incredible to us as it was to any traveler across the hot desert.

When I was still in the last stages of customerphobia, Grant was dealing with the people who stayed in our cabins, and their often outlandish requests, with ease and confidence. He had at his fingertips the answers to the amazing array of questions customers put to him, and the distances between most of the fairly well known cities in the country. If anyone who had rented a cabin wanted to know the distance to Los Angeles, Grant told him: eighty-nine miles. But if someone who hadn't yet registered wanted the same information, Grant would tell him that it was "almost a hundred miles" (merely another way of putting it) and the prospective customer would usually decide, since it was so far, he might as well stay for the night instead of driving on in.

Grant could describe the location of the nearest (or best-in-Banning) bar, restaurant, skating rink or lumber yard. He could get rid of the west-bound, cross-country truck drivers who, preparatory to going to the bar across the highway for a quick beer, parked their long, two-sectioned trucks so that the rear section blocked one of our two driveways. We had one driveway on each side of our sign; they led from the highway and were the initial source of all our income.

Getting rid of truck drivers was one thing I could never do;

and there had been many occasions during the time Grant was still working at General Motors, and later, when he was away during the day on business, that it had been necessary for me to try. I had two approaches, one stern, the other sweet, which I varied. Actually, I guess I alternated them, on the theory that last time one hadn't worked, so this time I'd try the other! My stern approach called forth two general reactions on the part of the drivers, who were always about to descend from their puffing, steaming contraptions as I ran up. My tough expression and sharp, short order to the driver to get his truck away at once!—would bring forth (a) an amused "Look who's talkin'" smile, and a significant glance from the lofty perch of the truck seat, at my slender height of slightly over five feet; or (b) it would kindle an equally warm response, and I'd find myself showered by abuse, epithets, and threats from a mouth twisted frighteningly sidewise, full of tobacco juice, and topping off a frame composed of so much bulging muscle that I'd start back to the cabin without arguing.

My "sweet" approach was just as unsatisfying. There were two reactions to it, too, and neither resulted in the removal of the truck.

"I know you don't realize it," I'd say, my voice dripping saccharin, "but your truck is blocking our driveway. I wonder if you'd mind moving it?" And I'd smile and flutter my eyelashes.

Either the truck driver would exclaim something like, "Well, hi there, honey! You just forget about the truck and think about

who's drivin' it. How about givin' me your phone number, honey, so's next time I come through here--"

Or else he'd reply in a falsetto imitation of my too-sweet voice, "Oh, dearie me, is that dreat big bad truck really block ing your itsy bitsy driveway? 'oo just stand there and pout at it while I go get me a itsy bitsy glass of beer."

Both these types of reply were quite beside the point. Truck drivers are one breed of men with whom I can't commune.

Grant, of course, never has any trouble with them. Whenever possible, I watch out the window as he runs up to whatever truck is the offender at the moment and speaks with the driver a few moments. He smiles, the driver waves a hand good naturedly, and the truck moves off. I have never been able to understand how he does it.

Grant is so irritatingly competent, in fact, that I can't help being secretly overjoyed about his one weak point. He has no sense of system or organization, and he can seldom make the money in the cash drawer, when he takes out the day's profits, add up to exactly the amount our penciled list, filled in customer by customer, says it should. When I was running the place alone it always balanced out to the penny, with the exception of that one morning when I found fifty cents too much. When Grant left General Motors and came to Banning, he began adding money to the cash drawer if there weren't enough small bills, taking money out of the drawer on any pretext, and in general getting things so confused that I wiped my hands of the whole affair.

"You handle the money," I said. "I'm tired of trying to keep it straight, with you dipping into it and adding to it all the time. From now on it's your job to make it come out right."

And from that day on I have never worried about the amount of money in the drawer.

Grant's lack of system concerning book-keeping and handling money is characteristic of his general lack of system in regard to everything; with so little sense of order and preciseness, it amazes me that he can always get so much accomplished, and so well. He's always starting something that he knows perfectly well he won't, due to other obligations, be able to finish. And then, of course, so that his initial effort won't be wasted, I have to stop whatever I'm doing and finish what he started. Perhaps, on second thought, I do understand how he gets so much accomplished.

When the broadfelt carpet in one of the rear single cabins—number 9—began to wear out, we bought a new one, a gorgeous thing with a swirling dark red pattern. We would have liked to add a final note of luxuriousness to the cabins by substituting lovely new carpeting for the plain red broadfelt in each—but that would have cost a penny that would be not only pretty, but downright beautiful.

When Grant tried to get the old carpeting up, he made the discovery that it had been glued to the cement floor. He would have left it there to serve as a pad for the new rug, but he wanted to keep the good portions of it to substitute for parts of the other

carpets that were on the verge of looking too shabby to be in keeping with the rest of the furnishings.

The glue with which the old carpet had been secured to the floor must have been the strongest in the world. Or perhaps, as Grant suggested, the builders of the place had laid the carpet before the cement of the floor had dried, and the cement had hardened with a firm grip on the fabric of the rug.

Anyway, it took us, working together, about an hour to get each square of the old carpet up. Grant chopping at it from underneath with a sharp, knife-like tool while I pulled as hard as I could on the part that was loose, so that the free parts would be lifted out of the way and he could see in just what spots the rug was still attached to the floor.

My hands ached before I had been on the job long. "I wasn't raised to be a carpet yanker," I remarked at frequent intervals; but Grant, steaming and clenching his teeth, his brown hair hanging over his forehead like Donna's, wouldn't let me escape. "I'll never get the mmm thing finished," he grunted, "if you don't help me."

I tried standing while I pulled, and then sitting in various positions to relieve the strain on various parts of my body. I tried leaning backward and pulling with all my might, relaxing all the other muscles of my body and depending on the rug to hold me up. Of course the inevitable happened; Grant struck an area where the rug wasn't attached so firmly to the floor, the part I was holding yielded suddenly to my pulling, and I sprawled backward with my legs in the air.

When Grant was through laughing we began again. My thumbs were getting sore, and my whole hands ached. I glared out the open door of the cabin at a fat couple sunning themselves indolently on one of the grass islands. That's what's wrong with this country, I thought darkly—too many loafers.

When at last the rug was completely pried and hacked loose, Grant began cutting the new rug to fit the room, while I went up front and administered poison verbally to Moejy, who had brought an armful of glass jars from his father's restaurant next door and was breaking them on our sidewalk. Moejy, in my opinion, had only one redeeming feature: a tendency to spend most of his time at the Auto Haven Motel half a mile west of us. The Bradleys, who owned the court, must certainly be lovers of childhood in general—and in the raw—to be able to endure him.

Miss Nesdeburst fluttered into the office the next morning before I was through bathing the baby. Grant had started cleaning cabins.

I could tell she was in a talkative mood, so I invited her to sit in the kitchen while I scrubbed Donna.

"I had the nicest dream last night," Miss Nesdeburst began. "And I believe people should share their dreams, don't you? I dream nearly every night, and I have a little book I write the dreams in. I do it the first thing when I wake up, because you know how dreams slip out of a person's mind. And if I forgot them I wouldn't be able to share them with other people." I smiled vaguely.

"Dreams are important, you know," she said, lowering her voice mysteriously. "Much more important than most people realize. Anyone who can interpret them correctly can forecast coming events. I'm learning to interpret them."

"Oh, you read those dream books?" I asked, rinsing the soap off Donna's plump, firm little body and brushing the hair away from her eyes.

"Oh, no!" Miss Nesdeburt cried. "I was studying under Eimo, who is known as the famous somnologist, until I started getting this asthma. His method is entirely new. Why, he—"

"Tell me about your dream," I interposed hastily.

She clasped her little white hands. "Well, it was like most of my dreams. I was alone, walking through a big empty place, and then all of a sudden there were a lot of other people, couples, all around me, but they stayed just beyond me, and I couldn't reach them, no matter how I tried. Now, I'll interpret that for you, according to Elmo's teaching. It means that I'm going to make a trip soon and go where there'll be crowds of people!"

I don't pretend to be a dream interpreter, but her dream sounded to me more like the dream of a frustrated, man-starved old maid than anything else I could think of.

That line of thought prompted me to ask whether Mr. Hawkins had called on her the previous night.

Her blue eyes brightened, and she took off her glasses. She smiled, and her smile had lost its first timidity.

"Yes, he did," she confessed. "He's a very nice man, really,

even if—well, he does have a strange sense of humor." She flushed a little, apparently remembering whatever it was he had done soon after they met, and I ruefully remembered the black spider. (I had left it in the cash drawer, but it didn't draw even a gasp from Grant. Reaching into the drawer for some money, he had said, "Well, look here once! Someone's left a fake spider in the drawer! Lucky I found it instead of you. You'd have been running yet.")

"I hope Mr. Hawkins was more gentlemanly last night," I said. I am, I must admit in all modesty, an expert at drawing forth information without appearing to pry. Actually, I employ this gift principally because a writer needs to know as much as possible of the thoughts and actions and experiences of other people. What many of my friends and relatives call my accursed curiosity has dug out for me plots which eventually, garnished a little, appear in magazines. I suppose I should confess that my curiosity isn't completely scientific, though; a fraction of it—(about nine-tenths) is just the plain old garden variety.

"Last night . . ." Miss Nestlebert began reminiscently, wheezing a little. "Well, I don't know whether you'd say he was gentlemanly or not. He—he brought me a large bag of tomatoes, which I thanked him for and put on the bed. Then, just as I was sitting down on a chair, he grabbed the bag and shoved it under me, like lightning. I couldn't help sitting on it and squashing the tomatoes."

Miss Nestlebert sighed and replaced her glasses. "He laughed

and laughed, and then he said in that gallant way of his, 'I apologize deeply, madame! I had no idea you were going to sit in that particular chair! It was a most unfortunate coincidence!' And then, while I stood there dripping tomato juice, he started laughing again, and he laughed until the tears rolled down his face." The fine lines under Miss Nesdebur's eyes crinkled with reluctant amusement.

I finished drying Donna and began pulling her tiny gingham dress over her head. Miss Nestlebur rose.

"Well, I must go lie in the sun for a while," she said. "It's such a fine, bright day, n'est-ce pas? Be sure to remember your dreams from now on, and I'll interpret them for you."

I assured her that I would, although I seldom had a chance to get more than a third of the way into a dream before some cabin-hunter rang our bell.

I went out to help Grant clean cabins. He was working in the rear group, in number 9, at the moment. Donna pulled newspapers out of the wastebasket while I set to work making the bed for which Grant had just brought clean sheets. We "bolster" the pillows by smacking an arm down the middle of each pillow when the clean slip is on it, folding it back over the arm. This gives a stiff, smart appearance to the bed when the spread is drawn taut around the pillows. There's all the difference between pillows au naturel and pillows bolstered, that there is between a slovenly woman without a brassiere, and a sprightly one who is wearing the latest style uplift.

Although I bolstered the pillows faithfully, I never put the sheets on the beds in accordance with the rules. I never bothered with "square corners," but simply tucked the sheets in all around in my own speedier, although slightly less neat, way.

Grant was just finishing the bathroom when I saw, through the slats of the Venetian blind, that a car had pulled up in front of the office.

"You go," I said. "I'm tired of galloping way up there just to tell people we don't have any cabins with kitchens."

Grant set down his bucket of soapy water, and through the slats I watched his tall figure hurrying toward the car. He talked a few seconds to the man and woman who were standing by the car; then, preparatory to leading them to a cabin, he turned and started away from them. But he had been standing just off the sidewalk, which jutted up an inch above the gravel. He caught his toe on the sidewalk and thrust his other foot forward quickly to regain his balance. He half ran, half staggered, in a crouching position, for several grotesque, humiliating steps, until at last he recovered his equilibrium and was able to stand upright.

I howled with laughter. If I had been closer to him I would have pretended not to notice his lack of dignity, but I was so far away—completely out of earshot—that I knew I could enjoy myself without causing him further embarrassment. I bent double, clutching my aching sides. I took a step backward, and stepped against Grant's bucket of soapy water.

In my struggle to extricate myself from the unexpected

situation I flailed the air wildly with my arms, and concluded the performance by falling flat on the floor, tipping the bucket so that its contents surged all over the brand new rug.

Donna looked up from the newspapers she was taking out of the wastebasket. "Mama down," she stated, a little superfluously.

CHAPTER FIVE

GRANDMA COMES OUT from Los Angeles to see us every other Friday, and returns the following Monday morning to her job as fancy presser in a cleaning plant, and to her small apartment, which is a ten-minute streetcar ride from Hellwig's apartment. She is a creature of such infallibly regular habits that I sometimes wonder if there isn't a small, precise clock or calendar, or some mechanism for keeping track of time, tucked away inside her.

She works hard whenever she comes. If there's work at hand to be done, she plunges into it. If there isn't any, she creates some, or snoops around the various cabins and garages and the grounds until she finds something we have neglected.

It was she who made Donna's little play yard habitable, after Grant had put up a white picket fence around a patch of ground at the end of one row of cabins. "The little stinkpot has to have a place to play!" she exclaimed. She painstakingly cleared the stony ground of Russian thistles, embryo tumbleweeds, stickers, and rocks. She hosed the ground, spaded it, and planted devil grass seeds. In a few weeks Donna had a lawn to play on; during the time before it grew, she dug in the loose dirt with a spoon, and required three complete baths every day. (A big disadvantage to the yard, though, was that it was so inaccessible; it was a nuisance to take her all the way out there, and to go out to check up on her

every once in a while. Knowing that she couldn't get back into the house until I came for her, and knowing how far from it her yard was, Donna began to develop symptoms of loneliness which became more and more acute, and gradually I gave up taking her out to the yard at all.)

"My land, you know what a woman that's staying in one of your cabins told me?" Grandma asked, looking up from a lapful of mending the day after she met Miss Nestlebert. "She told me that a dream I had last week, about a fire, meant I would soon be injured." Grandma held up one finger, on the end of which glistened a tiny pinpoint of blood. "And I'll be swear'n if I didn't prick myself just now, on this needle! Ain't she good? Maybe she'll be able to tell me if I'm ever gonna marry Hellwig! Ayah, she's just like a fortune teller—a sight better than one, even! I never see anything like it!"

Something else Grandma "never see anything like" was the number and variety of articles left behind in their cabins by our customers. Nearly every morning we find something. We have a big box in which we put them all, and there they stay until they are called for—which is almost always never—or until their owners write, giving an address to which to send the objects, and requesting that they be mailed. Usually such requests are accompanied by a dollar for our trouble and for postage. If every article left behind would cause one letter with a dollar in it to be sent to us, we'd have a very nice little business on the side, wrapping and mailing packages. Most of the things, though, lie

quietly forgotten, and accumulate. After about six months we paw through the pajama tops, bottles of shaving lotion, slippers, garter belts, cosmetic jars and hair nets, and salvage whatever we think we can use. The rest we give to Mrs. Clark, who bears it triumphantly home in the manner of a hunter returning with an elusive and long-sought deer. What she ever manages to do with it all, I have never asked her.

To Grandma, the conglomeration of left-behind articles is "one H. of a mess," and I am inclined to share her view.

Mr. Featherbrain's little motel, next door, didn't do very well for a couple of months after it opened. It was in a bad spot, between us and the Peacock. Whenever I went to the store across the street and looked at it from that vantage point, I couldn't help thinking of a tiny, pale, bashful man squeezed to insignificance between two fat, husky, rouged and mascara-ed women. One day while I was waiting for Mr. Bertram, the plump grocer, to finish making a sale to someone else, I leaned back against the counter and gazed dreamily across the highway, at our motel. (I never got over the thrill of pride I felt every time I reminded myself that those beautiful buildings were ours—or would be, when we had paid about fifty thousand dollars more on them!) The high, mistily blue mountains rose behind the motel, reaching into the dimmer blue of the sky.

And then I looked at Featherbrain's small place, which—new and nice though it was—appeared to have a wistful, bewildered air about it. I smiled, and the thought about the little man between

two huge gaudy women must have been written on my face, for the customer on whom the grocer had been waiting snarled suddenly, "Just wait'll the summer slump comes. You're a goin' to have your "vacancy" sign on all night, every night, and it ain't a goin' to do you no good, neither. Durned old cars won't stop, any more'n they're a stoppin' at my place now."

It was Mr. Featherbrain, his chin pinker than ever now with indignation. I flushed guiltily, and tossed him an airy, "Oh, I wasn't thinking what you thought I was thinking!" smile. I turned to the grocer, whose jaws were clamping spasmodically upon a wad of something in his mouth, as the gaunt old man stamped out of the store.

At least once every day since we have been in Banning, a dark-skinned man or woman with straight black hair has strolled through the grounds of our motel. Sometimes they come in groups of three or four, coming from the little country road—Williams street—to which the back portion of our land extends, and ambling on out to the highway. These, I learned, are Indians. There is an Indian reservation a mile or so north of us, in the first hills that comprise the sloping upward into the mountains. Jed, our freckled laundry truck driver, told me as much as he knew about them, one day after he had finished lifting our heavy sheet-filled laundry bags into his truck. They still hold their tribal ceremonies at regular intervals far back in the hills and, according to legend, no white man has ever witnessed any of these ceremonies.

The principal pastime of these Indians, according to Jed, is to maintain and increase their fearsomeness and mystery. They give special attention to fostering awe of themselves in those people, most of them from the Eastern parts of the country, who believe that Indians still go on the warpath and scalp people—or that, if they haven't actually done either of those things recently, they are quite capable of doing either at any moment.

"Far as I'm concerned, they're just a bunch of showoffs," Jed said, rubbing his nose. "D'you know what they did? They even put a curse on Banning in 1935. You'd be surprised how many people were terrified, and left."

"Why did they put a curse on the city?" I wanted to know.

"They were mad because so many curious white people kept coming out and snooping around their reservation."

"H'm." It would be interesting to look an Indian reservation over, especially if the inhabitants—or inmates—or whatever you'd call them—were the curse-putting kind. My own curiosity, seldom dormant, was definitely aroused, and I promised myself that the Indians would have one more white person to be angry at, as soon as I could possibly arrange it.

The ubiquity of the Smiths never became a personal thing to me until we moved to Banning. Never a week goes by that a car doesn't drive up in a flurry of gravel and belch forth a person who rings the bell and inquires, "Have you a party staying here by the name of Smith?" The only variation in this routine is the wording. Sometimes it's "Is dere a guy, name a' Smith, stayin' "

here?"

It happens so often that, if there weren't so many different people involved, I'd think it was some kind of a gag. As it is, whenever a Smith actually registers to spend a night with us, I can hardly resist telling him, in a coy and enigmatic manner, that someone has been looking for him.

With two children playing noisily and constantly, and customers ringing the office bell blithely at the most inconvenient moments, and Grant coming into our cabin every now and then to ask me where's that mmm screwdriver, it was impossible for me to be able to concentrate enough to do any writing. Therefore, each day while the baby took her nap, when the cabins were cleaned up, the laundry sent out, and everything as nearly under control as possible, I loaded up with paper, pen, a reference book or two, and the partially done article or story I had been working on, and went to cabin number 15, which is almost directly across from the cabin in which we live. There, in glorious solitude, I wrote, interrupted only by the occasional intriguing sight of customers driving up to the office, ringing the bell, and being confronted by Grant. Whenever such an event occurred, I had to stop my work, go to the window, and peek breathlessly between the slats of the Venetian blind at all that went on. This is always an unnecessary distraction from my work, and I know I should have more will power and self control; but there is something in me ('your damn curiosity!' I've heard it called by irritated objects of it) that won't allow me to sit by, quietly absorbed in something

that can wait, when things are happening which I might just as well be investigating.

I did my writing in longhand, although I had always used the typewriter before we came to Banning. I wrote longhand now because, with all my other paraphernalia, I didn't want to haul the typewriter back and forth all the time. To relieve the boredom which frequently attacked me, while I was writing, I used different colored ink on different days. My original manuscripts were gorgeous things of purple, green, red and blue. I couldn't leave my writing equipment in any cabin overnight, naturally, because we hoped to rent every cabin every night—although we weren't at all sure of filling up, except on Saturday nights.

That's why, also, when Grandma comes to visit us every other week, we don't give her one of the cabins. She can sleep in our cabin, even if it is a little crowded; but, obviously, the customers can't. She sleeps on David's bed, and David sleeps on the floor, using Donna's playpen pad for a mattress; and everyone is happy—except, possibly, David.

Grandma suffers from customerphobia far more acutely than I ever did. The trembling and quivering I suffered were mild compared to the tremors, amounting practically to convulsions, she goes through at even the mere thought of waiting on a customer. I know better now than to attempt to break her in to the gentle art of renting cabins, but there was a time when I was not so wise. That was on one of her first visits, when I thought

I'd teach her to be a substitute motel manager, in much the same manner of the man who teaches his little boy to swim by throwing him shrieking into six feet of cold water.

Grant had tossed David and Donna into the back seat of the car and taken them along for the ride on a trip to the drug store. They were going to buy a jar of salve for David's nose, which sunburns, peels, and sunburns all over again, with painful persistence. Grandma and I were alone. I hoped that a customer would come during the brief time that Grant would be gone, for I had mapped out a campaign for ridding Grandma of her fear of customers for once and for all.

I was sitting in the kitchen reading, wearing a dress that had a zipper all the way down the front. Grandma, unsuspecting and happy, was bustling about the living room with a dustcloth, searching for dust.

It wasn't long before I heard the sound I had been hoping for—the scunch of tires on the gravel, and a squeak of brakes. Faster than I had ever done it before, I stood up, zipped down my dress, took it off and tossed it under the table.

About that time Grandma noticed that there was a car outside, and that a fat, middle-aged couple were getting out of it. She came rushing into the kitchen with that near panic that always overcomes her when customers approach, even when she knows perfectly well she won't have to talk to them.

"My land, here's a customer! Come on, come on!" She hurried into the kitchen, her black eyes sparkling with excitement in her

unwrinkled face.

I gasped with what I hoped sounded like dismay. "A customer? Oh, dear, and I was just getting ready to take a shower! See, I'm in my slip. I can't possibly wait on them like this. You'll have to do it, I'm afraid."

"Good Godfrey Mighty," Grandma breathed. "I can't—"
The doorbell pealed a strident summons.

"My God!" exclaimed Grandma. "What am I gonna do?"
Grandma, to my great regret and mortification, swears. She insists that she doesn't, and that she hasn't uttered a single word that would be inappropriate at a Ladies' Aid meeting, since two years ago when she made a New Year's resolution to stop swearing. Actually, that resolution proved to be only the mildest sort of damper on her powers of expression; but she maintains that she no longer swears. The only time she'll admit it is when she's caught in the act, and confronted with the echo of what she has said. And even at such times, she tries to persuade me that, with the exception of that one time ...

The doorbell rang again, more insistently. Grandma's black eyes darted around with lightning speed. Whether she was looking for my dress, or for a means of escape, I didn't know.

"Go ahead," I prodded. "I've explained to you how to do it. You know where the keys are, and what we charge for each cabin."

Grandma gave a low moan and started for the office. I sat down again, still in my slip, and chuckled. I glanced at the book

I had been reading, but I strained to hear what was going on in the office. I could hear only a low rumble of voices.

Well, she could tell me all about it afterward. I tucked one leg under me on the kitchen chair, fingered the satiny material of my slip, and began reading my book again.

I was absorbed in a faintly lavender passage in the book when suddenly I realized that I was not alone. There, in the doorway of the kitchen, stood a middle-aged couple, their eyes busily engaged in examining my slip and the broad expanses of skin above and below it.

"There she is," Grandma, behind them, was saying weakly. "I'm new here—she knows how to rent cabins—she's the owner—I ain't—Godfrey, I don't know how—" Her voice tapered off. She gave a despairing little bleat, and disappeared.

I clutched the book to my bosom, and began moving my feet under the table, hoping perhaps I could hook my dress on one of them.

"Er—uh—you wanted to rent a cabin?" I asked, with as much poise as I could muster under the circumstances.

"Well, I must say!" exclaimed the middle-aged woman, finding her voice at last. "Well, I never. Indeed, no, we do not wish to rent a cabin. Come, Horace."

And she swirled out the door, Horace behind her.

Grandma was abject. We had quite a discussion while I put my dress back on.

"You wouldn't come," she kept protesting, rather feebly. She

rubbed the burn scars on her arms—scars that, in spite of her years of experience with irons and mangles and press machines, she reinforces frequently with fresh burns. "I see you wasn't coming, so—"

"Something on the order of 'Mohammed won't go to the mountain, so the mountain must come to Mohammed'?" I asked bitterly.

But I couldn't be too harsh with her. After all, it was due to my own scheming that she had found herself in a position so terrifying that she had put me in a worse one. However, as I zipped up my dress, I made a little promise to myself that I would never again try to make Grandma do anything she didn't want to do.

One thing she never minded doing was taking care of the children whenever I wanted to go anywhere. Or, when all the cabins were filled and our "no vacancy" sign was on, Grant and I could go away for one of our rare respites from the motel business.

Unless the cabins were full, and Grant could leave also, it didn't do me much good that there was someone to take care of the children, unless I felt like walking in the hot sun three quarters of a mile to town. I didn't know how to drive the car. There was no reason why I shouldn't learn, though, I decided. Now we were out of Los Angeles with its traffic and its careless drivers; there was a little, seldom-used country road—Williams street—way out behind our cabins, at the end of our land, which

had probably been designed specifically for beginners to practice driving upon.

Grant explained the rudiments of driving to me. I learned to tell the gear shift lever, the clutch and the brake apart. All this, and my first experiments with making the car go, had to be done in the driveways leading to our various cabins, since a customer might arrive at any moment—and Grandma, as I well knew, would not be able to cope with such a situation. Obviously, my opportunities for practicing there, with Grant beside me to instruct and to point out my errors, were limited. When I thought I had the idea pretty well, I drove alone out our rocky driveway that extended along the side of our land behind the cabins, onto Williams street.

It was my first solo flight, and I was full of pride as the car bounced over the rocks. A glimpse into the mirror showed me that Grant and Grandma and David were standing in front of our cabin, watching me, their eyes shaded from the hot sunlight by their hands. Their faces, I assured myself smugly, were alight with admiration—although of course I couldn't see their expressions that far away.

At the end of our little private road there was a small ditch, and just beyond it was a sudden steep rise. I'd have to get out here and do some hoeing, I reflected, clinging desperately to the steering wheel as the car forged ahead over the obstacles.

And then I was on the road. I turned the car to the left, waved airily so that my tiny, faraway audience could see how well I was

doing, and stepped harder on the gas until I was racing along at eighteen miles an hour.

Well, so far so good. But I recalled what I had said to Grant just before taking off—"In order to really learn to handle the car, what should I do besides just driving down the road?"

"You split an infilitive, Mama," David said reproachfully.

"Back it up, turn around in the road, pretend you're parking between two cars," Grant said.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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