

## At D'Ambrosia's · *Jeffrey Alan Johnson*

"ONCE UPON A TIME upon a lovely wooded shore there was a place that made it possible to live your deepest dreams. Come . . . explore . . . delight. Embrace the world of D'Ambrosia's. Opening so very soon, so very near, at the Shores West Mall, just minutes from the Twin Cities on Lake Minnetonka. D'Ambrosia's. Once upon a time, upon a time, a time, a time. . . ."

Johnnie Hundelby did not need his mother to tell him that D'Ambrosia's was no dumb little five-and-dime. He was an employee; he knew. The commercials were his proof. On Johnnie's TV screen the landscapes shimmered—a city street with skyscrapers made of gigantic alphabet blocks, a jungle village steaming beneath a shroud of vines, a surface as bright and pocked as the moon's—and at the center of each was the lady, slender and tranquil, pudding-soft and bone-china sleek, forever on the verge of slipping out of some silk-and-lacey garment into a bath or bed or simply into pure thin air. D'Ambrosia's was wonderful. Yet his mother kept saying, "I can't quite believe it, Johnnie." She had been saying it for three weeks now, ever since the social worker from Project Outreach had come to announce that he'd found Johnnie a job. "I can't believe that a certain young man I know could be so fortunate," his mother said. "Though I must tell you I'm the proudest I've ever been. Now just you remember, it's quite the elegant store. I trust you're acting accordingly."

Johnnie listened, and yessed when he was supposed to, but he saved his strict attention for the commercials, for the dazzling messages they brought him; and on the eve of the Grand Opening, as he lay in his bedroom with the small comfortable weight of his TV resting on his stomach, he allowed himself to do what his mother said she couldn't: he believed. The job was his for good. He was the man for the job. He would make his mother proud. And D'Ambrosia's would never be anything like the Worthmore store back home. Janitor work was janitor work, but at D'Ambrosia's there were no tattered SALE! signs taped up all over, no screeching chrome turnstiles, no smudged linoleum, no smelly hamster cages and turtle bowls, no grumpy head cashier always asking when, Johnnie, when are you going to dump the trash, scrape the gum, beat the rugs, sweep the walk, and when in the world are you going to get rid of that cricket in the stockroom, how many times do

I have to tell you? No. D'Ambrosia's was large and fluorescent and peaceful, thickly carpeted, filled with gleaming racks and fixtures of glass and wood-veneer, all of them stocked with fresh merchandise. At D'Ambrosia's he was on a crew. He had a title, Maintenance, and a foreman, Roscoe Taylor, who knew his business. Crickets had gotten into D'Ambrosia's, but Roscoe said what did Maintenance care about insect pests. Johnnie agreed. He had more important concerns. Paper towels. Liquid soap. Toilets. Trash-mashing. His part in the overall job. There was no more being a lone sweeper, no more Johnnie the Worthmore gopher. And no more Dixie Frost either—especially not Dixie, with her blonde eyelashes and her taut skirts, swivelling in a perfume haze through Cosmetics & Notions, slinking into the stockroom to pout her glossy lips and croon Johnnie Johnnie Johnnie Johnnie oooh hey Johnnie what's up? Watcha doing back here, huh handsome? When're you gonna ask me—watch out don't kill it—whyncha up and ask me for a date? I said don't kill it, Dumbo, crickets mean—

"Stop it," Johnnie said, and turned his head to look at the clock radio on his bedside table. 8:53. He stared at the crisp white numbers, watched them flip, quick as an eyeblink, to 8:54. He had to stop remembering Dixie Frost. He had to. Already he could feel, on the other side of the TV, a distressing thrill in his flesh. He ground the heels of his hands into the bedspread. Why did this always have to happen? He agreed with everything his mother had ever said about Dixie. He knew that Dixie was unladylike and ill-brought-up and just about as unrefined as they come, and that the best thing to do with people like her is to go on about your business as if they didn't exist. But knowing was not the same as being able to obey. The clock blinked again, and Dixie's voice went right on in his memory, *Johnnie Johnnie*, each word like a brief hot touch. "Go away," he muttered, "get out of here, shut up." The reply was a sharper memory—Dixie in the stockroom *Johnnie hey* her cupped hands brimming with caramel corn from the machine at the front of the store *kill it yet?* bright fingernails bright eyes long bright blonde hair *let it alone then* one at a time picking up the kernels with the tip of her tongue *crickets sing pretty don't you think?* the sweet candy smell all around *Johnnie don't* her soft munching *don't don't* the slow lowering of her eyelids *if you don't kill it* the sly spread of her smile *if you don't Johnnie don't then I might just let you kiss me.*

His mother knocked once on her way into his room, calling, "Johnnie, lights out now, morning comes early."

Johnnie sat up fast, grabbing his TV before it could roll off his belly and onto the floor.

He heard a faint sigh from his mother.

"John Jerome Hundelby." He knew she was gently shaking her head. He felt her stepping closer, raising a hand to his shoulder, and he hunched as low as he could. "Relax and breathe deeply," she said.

"I am."

"I'm afraid I beg to differ." Her grip on his shoulder was so tight it hurt. He inhaled her smell of dry cloth and dish soap.

"I am so," he said.

"Shhh." She let go of his shoulder and began fussing with his hair. "Such knots," she said in the tone of voice she used for making him cheerful.

"Can't help it." Johnnie felt for the switch and turned off his TV. Dixie's presence was receding, slowly.

"Oh, I'll bet you could too, if you tried. When you lie in bed with your head propped up to watch your programs, you get so many cowlicks in the back."

"Ouch," Johnnie said, his eyes suddenly stung with tears.

"Sweetheart, I'm sorry, but this is quite some tangled-up bird's nest you've got back here. You'd only have a worse problem in the morning. Now, may I put your TV back on the shelf for you?"

"No." He still needed it to hide under.

"You can suit yourself, Johnnie, but you don't have to be rude."

"No thank you."

She tugged at his hair in silence. Dixie was a distant whisper.

"No thank you."

"You're forgiven." She gave another sigh.

"Hey," Johnnie said, sitting up straight, remembering D'Ambrosia's. "Did you iron my tuxedo T-shirt?"

"Johnnie, please. Not to meet the owner of the whole store—"

"It's better than a janitor shirt. I can wear it if I want."

"All right, honey. All right. Don't get upset."

"I'm not. I'm going to wear it."

"There," his mother said, combing her fingers one last time through his hair and sitting down on the edge of his bed. "I suppose you'll be presentable, if you don't sleep funny and wake up looking like a ragamuffin."

"I won't sleep funny," Johnnie said. And no matter what his mother

thought, he would be quite presentable in his tuxedo T-shirt. It was black and brand-new and the design was correct right down to the bow tie. "You can take my TV now," he said.

"Good, Johnnie. That's very good." She took his chin in her hand and made him look at her eyes. "Do you need a towel?" she asked.

"No thank you."

"That's wonderful. That makes me so glad."

"Me too."

"Say," she said, rubbing her thumb across his cheek. "Somebody didn't shave when he got ready for bed."

"In the morning, how about?"

"That means you can't oversleep. I want you to look your very best and most handsome when you meet—what was her name, Johnnie?"

"Selina."

"No, her last name."

"Roscoe calls her Selina."

"Well, you make sure to find out her last name and call her *Mrs.* whatever it is." She stood and lifted the TV from his lap. "Unplug it, now." He did. "Oof," she groaned, carrying it toward his bookshelf. While her back was turned he pulled at the crotch of his pajamas to make himself comfortable again, then crawled under the covers. "Do you know what I've been doing tonight?" his mother was saying. "I've been baking a lemon cake so that a hungry young man can take a slice to work with him tomorrow. But I might not have time to frost it if he doesn't get to sleep pronto." She was back at his bedside, leaning to kiss his forehead.

"Lemon frosting?" he asked.

"Lemon both, cake and frosting. You can dream about it all night long."

"Wait."

"Johnnie, you need your sleep." She kissed him again. "Five o'clock will sneak up on you before you know it."

"Wait. You have to tell the story, okay?"

"Sweetheart—"

"You haven't for a long time."

"I just told it a few weeks ago."

"Please. You have to."

"Don't get panicky."

"I'm not." He closed his eyes and took five deep breaths to show her he was calm. "Start with the ages," he said.

"I know how it starts."

"Then hurry up, I need my sleep."

She laughed. "You"—she pointed a finger and zoomed in to pinch his nose—"are impossible sometimes, buster."

"But still," he said, prompting her, and warm shivers ran through him.

"True." She squeezed his elbow and held on tight. "Not for all the tea in China."

"Not for all the green cheese on the moon," Johnnie said.

"Never," said his mother. "Never ever."

"Tell it. Tell it now."

"What about you telling me something?" she said.

"Don't have anything to tell."

"You haven't said much about your job yet. You promised you would."

"I did. Told you about the other guys on the crew. Told you what the store's like."

"You haven't told me anything about your foreman. Roscoe. How he treats you. I like to know things like that."

"I don't know. He treats me fine." There was very little about Roscoe that Johnnie could tell his mother. He wanted to tell her everything, but she wouldn't approve. Roscoe smoked. He swore. He stole from D'Ambrosia's. He called himself a nigger and he called Johnnie and the rest of the crew reetards. Johnnie didn't mind. He'd been called dingbat, dope, dumbhead, and a lot of names that were just plain lies—drooler, spaz, mongy, frankenstein. Roscoe wasn't mean about it, but Johnnie knew his mother would cause an uproar with the Project Outreach people if she found out. Roscoe had only been mean once. Johnnie's partners were bragging during coffee break one day, saying they all had pretty girlfriends who would kiss and go further, so Johnnie had said me too, my girlfriend back home is Dixie Frost and she'll do plenty. The next morning Roscoe came to work singing I wish I was in Dixie, away, away, I wish I was in Dixie's pants, away down south in Dixie . . . until Johnnie yelled at him to shut up, shut up, shut up. So what could he tell his mother about Roscoe? That he steered a floor buffer with his hips, slow and close and steady, as if he was dancing with a lady? That he'd fixed up an "office" with pallets and empty boxes at the back of the loading dock so that he could catch some sleep when things were slow? That he talked constantly about how much he hated

the D'Amrosia's company? That at break time, when he wasn't planning what he'd say to Selina when he finally quit, he and the dock supervisor laughed about all the times they'd been drunk, all the times they'd been in fistfights and knife fights and gunfights, all the times they'd worn women out, made women howl, or sigh, or beg for more of the same?

"Tell the story," Johnnie said.

"Nothing?" his mother said. "Nothing to tell me?"

Johnnie shook his head. He needed to hear the story. He knew it by heart—the events, the lessons, the goodnights at the end—but it took his mother's voice to make it true and useful. She had to tell it. Now was the time for D'Ambrosia's to become a part of it. He crooked his elbow to keep his mother's hand there and said, "I love you." He felt shaky, saying that.

But it worked. She smiled her proudest smile and turned out his reading lamp. "Listen," she said, and by the way she spoke Johnnie knew she had been planning to tell the story all along. "Tonight, Johnnie Hundelby, you are twenty-six-and-a-half years old, and I am fifty-nine. But once upon a time I was your age, and what do you suppose I was doing then?" Johnnie grinned and wriggled deeper under the covers as his mother began the list of events. The day of his parents' marriage. His own long-awaited and difficult entrance into the world. The time he broke one of his mother's beautiful china figurines and hid the pieces in the brooder house. The summer it didn't rain and didn't rain and then when it did a tornado came and the barn collapsed like a house of cards but down in the storm cellar they all lived to tell the tale. The day he rode his pony, Potbelly, clear into town and back without telling his mother beforehand. The night his father came home from the doctor and said cancer. The day Worthmore closed for good. His mother's deciding in the middle of an April blizzard to move to Minneapolis so that he would have more and better opportunities.

"And we couldn't hope for better than this, could we, Johnnie?"

"Uh-uhm," he murmured, yawning. His mother was telling the story perfectly, moving from the events to the lessons without changing the bedtime lilt in her voice, and Johnnie did not resist as he slid down toward the edge of sleep. D'Ambrosia's, she said, a fine fine chance for you Johnnie, D'Ambrosia's, and he saw an endless spread of cool green turf, a herd of horses, and the lady, this time in profile, her face downturned, demure, a pale towel loosely wrapped around her body, a slim bent leg half lost in a frothy clawfoot tub, the horses pushing in

on every side with their large oblong curious faces. D'Ambrosia's. So very soon. D'Ambrosia's. Embrace upon a time. D'Ambrosia's. A sudden rise toward wakefulness made Johnnie aware of a new lesson—his mother going on and on about how some people had been the kindest she'd ever met, the most generous, the most dedicated, on and on saying they were practically angels in earthly garments Johnnie and they might very well have saved him if he hadn't been so stubborn about going in for checkups, and people talk about the good old days Johnnie but as far as medicine goes they can do marvelous things now that they couldn't do years ago, so a person should never be afraid to see a doctor because they can cure almost anything if they catch it in time. Johnnie was about to open his eyes and ask if it was time for him to go to the doctor again when his mother went back to the familiar words, saying always remember Johnnie that the world presents us every morning with a shiny clean slate to write on, and Johnnie be happy and thankful that you have a useful skill, and Johnnie pay strict attention when I tell you that a lady, and not only your mother but any lady you meet, a lady is a very special person and is to be treated at all times with the utmost respect and deference. Johnnie counted the lessons, waiting for the last one, the one about trials and disappointments making bonds stronger than ever, so strong that you wouldn't trade them for anything, so strong and rare and rewarding that one person couldn't get along without the other. After that came the goodnights, the last tiny kiss on the forehead and then sweetheart now sleep, listen to my voice, listen out the window to the night sounds, let them lull you off, I am just so full of pride in you John Jerome Hundelby because you try so very hard to be good, listen, listen, crickets and cars and breeze outside, pleasant dreams, happy dreams, sleep deeply now, deeply and well. Drowsing, numb, Johnnie did his best to obey, but at the last minute he remembered *if they catch it in time* and understood what his mother had meant. She was the one who had to go to the doctor. A tremor passed low in his stomach, and that made the voice he was hearing change—or had it changed earlier?—to Dixie Frost's, and she was whispering don't kill it Johnnie, sleep tight, sleep well, please don't kill it honey because you know they mean love, sleep hard sleep deep Johnnie crickets mean love.

Marvelous things, Johnnie told himself. In time. In time. Almost anything if they catch it in time.

D'Ambrosia's was filled with darkness and quiet. Roscoe was late. Johnnie and his crew partners stood waiting just inside the smoky-glass main entrance. Only Roscoe was allowed to go into the junction-box room and flip the dozens of switches it took to light the store. Until he got there Security wouldn't let anyone beyond the ring of night-light at the entrance. Johnnie wished Roscoe would hurry. Work would take his mind off his mother.

Bleeding, she had said at breakfast.

They had to catch it in time. They had to.

Don't you dare panic, she'd said. Don't disappoint me, Johnnie. Think of other things and you'll be fine.

Once upon a time upon a lovely wooded shore there was a place that made it possible to live your deepest dreams. D'Ambrosia's. Dump trash. Check soap dispensers. Fill towels. Scrub all porcelain and chrome fixtures. Floors. Refill kotex machine in ladies'. Replace mint deodorant blocks in men's. Double-check for cigarette butts. Rub fingerprints off door.

Now I've said all I want to say about it, his mother had insisted, stirring milk into his coffee. It's what's known as a female complaint, and it doesn't concern you.

D'Ambrosia's. D'Ambrosia's. There was a cricket, over by his partners. "Squeege," Johnnie called. He had never learned his partners' real names, so he used the names Roscoe had given them on the first day of work: Sucker, Wringer, and Squeege. Johnnie decided from the start that if they wanted to act extra-special just because they had new names and they all lived in a State Agency Group Home, that was their privilege. He didn't want to take part in their secret conferences or their giggling anyway. He, at least, understood the importance of this job. Besides, he knew from his mother that those group places were not nearly so nice as a real home.

"Squeege," he called again, annoyed.

"What."

"Look down."

"Watch out," Squeege yelled, stomping.

The cricket leapt into the shadows. "Missed," Johnnie said.

"No way." Squeege chased it into Juniors.

"Get back here," Security snapped.

Squeege shuffled back, hands in his pockets. "Would of got him," he said.



"They're real tricky," Johnnie said.  
Security yawned and stretched, resting his feet on his guard desk.  
"Friday," he said. "Payday."  
"Hey, yeah," Wringer said.  
"Bar-hopping," Sucker said. "All right!"  
Security hooted. "You guys?"  
"Counselors take us," Wringer said. "Wanna come?"  
No, Johnnie said inwardly.  
"That'll be the damn day," Security said. "Do you drink, you guys?"  
"We dance," Wringer said.  
"I can just imagine."  
"With girls."  
"The Agency house next to ours," Squeege said, "they have girls in there. They have girls in there and they all have to be on the pill."  
"Dream on," Security said.  
"I'm not lying." He snickered, and Sucker and Wringer joined in.  
Johnnie knew what was coming. They'd done the same joke on Roscoe. It hadn't been funny then, either.  
It wasn't that Johnnie didn't understand the joke. He knew about sex. A man and a woman loved each other, and they married, and that was why there was sex. There was a lesson in the story about it. His mother's voice was always at its calmest and most reasonable when she told him that sex was one of the loveliest expressions of human respect and affection. Still, the lesson went on, there were other expressions, and there were certain people who weren't interested in sex. Those people knew who they were. They had other interests. In any case, sex was never to be made a subject for crudeness and jokes.  
"Some *really* pretty girls," Squeege was saying, "and every single one is on the pill. The counselors stick the pill in their orange juice."  
"Don't you want to know why?" Sucker asked.  
"Not really," Security said.  
"Don't you?"  
"Nope."  
All three partners shouted at once. "Because we're irresistible!"  
"Yeah," Security said, "to barnyard animals, maybe."  
"Barnyard animals and your mama." Roscoe was suddenly there, standing behind Johnnie, lean and a little swaybacked and smoking the first cigarette of the day. One smoky-glass door was slowly settling shut. "Matter of fact," he said, "I understand my man Squeege here had her in a steamy state of mind just last night."

"Sign in," Security said.

"They tell me she was hollerin like a stuck hog. Won't be long we'll have a new litter of Security runts underfoot."

Wringer and Sucker started punching Squeeze in the ribs.

"Hey, Roscoe," Johnnie said.

"Hey, John. Say now, what is this here? Let me go get the lights so I can check out this new wardrobe item."

"Tuxedo T-shirt," Johnnie said.

"Absolutely fine."

"Sign in and show me your I.D., Roscoe," Security said.

"Man, you sign in for me," Roscoe said, heading for the loading dock. "You know anybody else works here looks like me?"

"I can't do that."

"Sure you can," Roscoe said. "Always used to. What else you got to do? Go ahead and sign me in on time, too, show some initiative." And then, laughing, he was out of sight in the dark store.

Johnnie watched Security. He didn't unclip his pen. He looked pleased about something, and very proud, sitting there behind his Security desk in his private Security alcove.

"Goddamn." Roscoe's voice carried all the way from the back of the sales floor. "Gonna have more manikins than customers around here."

In the silence that followed, Johnnie remembered the doctor appointment.

For the last time, his mother had said, it's a little abnormal bleeding. They're going to do what they call a D and C to find out what's causing it, and that's a very routine thing for them to do. It's nothing to get so worked up about. I've mentioned it several times in the past few weeks.

Have not, Johnnie said.

Johnnie.

Well—I forgot. But you didn't say bleeding, you said test.

Almost every lady has this test sooner or later. They consider it minor surgery, but that's really an exaggeration.

You're not explaining everything. What if you're not all right?

I wish you wouldn't be such a baby about this. I'll be feeling fine by morning.

Aren't supposed to keep secrets.

Johnnie. It's not as if I'm bursting with secrets I refuse to tell you. Now why won't you do as I've asked? Say—tomorrow's Saturday. We'll both sleep in and then we'll have French toast. How does that sound?

I don't know.

I know you. You're a French-toast eater. Oh, there's the van. Here's your lunch. Give me a kiss and do a good job at work, and I'll be very happy if I find you've handled this whole business in a level-headed way.

*Bleeding. Surgery. D and C.*

"Hey," Squeege said, pointing. "Dummies."

*Catch it in time if they catch it in time.*

On the high wide ceiling the fluorescent panels were flickering to life in groups of four. As the light spread, Johnnie looked into the store and saw that overnight it had become filled with figurines as large as ladies. Everywhere he looked he saw them, alone or in groups of two or three, breathtaking in their elegant clothes and graceful poses. And then one of them moved, coming toward the entrance from a still-shadowy aisle, stopping once to rub the fabric of a blouse between her fingers. Her dress was filmy and it rippled with mother-of-pearl reflections. Johnnie recognized her.

"You're on TV," he said.

"You noticed!" She struck a familiar pose, one hand outstretched, the other held tightly to her chest. In the commercials her hair was in a bun, or in ringlets, or pulled to one side, but now it was down, long, straight, and shiny-blond. She smelled sharply of perfume, and of mint, like chewing gum. "Which ad do you like best?" she asked.

Johnnie thought first of the cool green pasture, the antique bathtub, the curious horses—then of the jungle, the desert, the city, the mountaintop, the shore. "I don't know," he said. "All of them."

She lowered her slim eyebrows at him. "You're not bucking for a raise already, are you?"

Johnnie's partners giggled. He blushed, and his face smarted in three places, where his electric shaver had mown off the heads of pimples.

"Personally," the lady said, "I like the one where I'm standing like this"—she struck another bold pose—"in a silk wrap among the dead volcanoes of the moon. In fact, we're using the same backdrop for the fashion showcase upstairs. But anyway, guys, I'm Selina, Selina Ambrose married-name Fox, and I'm glad to have you working for me." The store was fully lit now, and she turned around to survey it. Johnnie paid attention. She worked her gum nonstop, mostly with her front teeth. Her hair kept falling over her face. Three times she reached up to catch a thin lock of it with a deep-maroon fingernail and drape it behind her shoulder. "Or rather," she said, spinning quickly on her high heels, "the D'Ambrosia's organization is proud to welcome you."

"Thank you," Johnnie said.

"Tell me," she said, stepping toward Johnnie and his partners. "How do you like working with Mr. Taylor? You know, Roscoe?"

They all said, "Fine." Johnnie wanted to say more, to tell her how things were so much better at D'Ambrosia's than they could ever have been at Worthmore, but she was standing awfully close. He couldn't keep from imagining what her hair would feel like if she bunched it into a ponytail and brushed it across the back of his neck, as Dixie Frost had done once in the musty Worthmore stockroom. Stop it, he told himself. She's a lady.

"I see," she said. "Well."

"Well, hey," Roscoe said from the doorway behind Security's desk, where, as Johnnie knew from repeated warnings, no one but Security was ever supposed to be. "How do you do, Selina? I see you met my reetards."

"Roscoe," she said.

"How did you get back there?" Security said. "I want you out of there. Now."

"Ain't we high and mighty," Roscoe said, "long as Selina's around."

"And I want to know how you got back there in the first place."

Johnnie expected Roscoe to say he'd huffed and he'd puffed and he'd blown the door down, or to make some other smart remark, but he said nothing. He was smoking harder than he usually did, drawing the smoke in quickly and sending it out a long way. His neck was sweaty, the ropey muscles gleaming through his open collar.

"I asked you a question," Security said.

"Leave it be," Selina said.

"Yeah," Johnnie said, startling himself—he hadn't known he was going to speak.

"Hey, Johnnie," Roscoe said. "You and me, John."

"So, Roscoe," Selina said. "Good to see you again. How've you been?"

"I'm all right." Roscoe slouched his way around Security's desk, his cigarette flapping as he talked. "I been tendin these reetards you sent over."

"Roscoe, please don't use that word."

Roscoe shrugged. "I must say you're lookin fine today," he said. "How do you manage it, so bright and early?"

"I have a Grand Opening to set up this morning," Selina said. "I've been here for an hour. I see you still can't seem to get to work on time."

"Aaah," he said, "you know you love me." Selina gave a short giggle, and Johnnie heard clearly what his mother would have said: He's awfully breezy with her if you ask me. "And I absolutely guarantee," Roscoe went on, "that you'll love these reetards when you come to see how beautiful they are on the inside."

Selina's smile vanished. "I mean it," she said. "Stop. Once upon a time these boys would not have been considered employable. D'Ambrosia's is—"

"Once upon a time," Roscoe said, "people knew better than to mix their business and their social charity work."

"I said that's enough, Roscoe."

"Might've asked me if I minded."

Selina looked at Johnnie. "I don't believe this guy," she said, trying to smile again. "I make him foreman at my newest, most important store, and he doesn't appreciate it."

"No I don't," Roscoe said. "I sure do not appreciate such a fine place where they spy on the employees. Never had that in the other stores."

Johnnie saw now that Roscoe wasn't feeling breezy at all. Roscoe was scared.

"Nobody *spies*, Roscoe," Selina said.

"Hell they don't." He pointed to the off-limits doorway behind Security's desk. "It's a damn peepshow in there, down that hallway. But you don't tell nobody about these things."

"Times change," Selina said.

"Yeah, right." Roscoe stubbed out his cigarette against his thumb-nail. Johnnie saw sweat-beads on his forehead and taut veins on his arms. "Like to get me a seat at one of the ladies' tryin-on rooms sometime. Bound to be better than lookin in on the employee locker room."

For an instant Johnnie pictured a lady in a cubicle, putting on silky things just for him. Then he remembered the night before, his mother's single knock as she came into his room, her cheerful voice saying *Johnnie lights out now*, the tiny sigh she gave when she saw him hunched around his TV.

"I'll talk to you about it later," Selina told Roscoe. "Come see me before you pick up your paycheck." She turned to Johnnie. "I certainly like that shirt," she said.

Johnnie heard his partners start to whisper among themselves. "Tuxedo T-shirt," he said. He knew it was impolite not to return her smile, but he wanted her to know he was on Roscoe's side.

"Your name is Johnnie, right?" Selina said. He nodded. "Well, it's a wonderful shirt, Johnnie. Very chic. Now Roscoe, why don't you introduce me to the rest of your crew."

Johnnie's partners stopped whispering and began to sing, "We don't have tuxedoes, we don't have tuxedoes."

"Oughta have straitjackets," Roscoe said.

"Oh, relax, Roscoe," Selina said. The partners were still singing.

"Shut your damn dumb mouths," Roscoe ordered. "Okay, Selina. The fat one there is Squeege. Windows. One with the glasses is Wringer. Moppin. Leftover one is Sucker. Runs a vackum cleaner."

"And Johnnie?"

"Try guessin. Or don't you have unmentionable functions?"

Selina rolled her eyes. "Okay, I get it," she said. "Very good." Her giggle ended with a sigh. "That's always been your saving grace, Roscoe."

"What's that?" he said.

"You're so entertaining."

"Ain't I, though."

"Puts on a helluva show," Security said.

"You watch your *mouth*," Roscoe said, whirling on him.

"You watch your step," Security said.

"Guys," Selina said sharply.

"You *die*," Squeege said, slapping his foot down hard. Johnnie saw the cricket sail to safety.

"I don't believe it," Selina said, her voice high and angry. "I just do not believe it. We've had the exterminators out here twice."

"Oh, relax, Selina," Roscoe said. "You always got bugs in a new building. Crickets make it sound like a summer night in here."

"I'll have to call them again. I cannot open a store with those things hopping around." Johnnie watched her as she walked away. Halfway across the sales floor she stopped and called, "Roscoe, I'll be upstairs by the fashion showcase. Get your boys started now." She waved, turned, and with one last shimmer of her dress she was lost among the merchandise.

"Hey, Roscoe," Security said. "Tell me how you got in that hallway."

"Hell," Roscoe said. "Would of found it sooner if I didn't have these goofs to look after. Ain't nobody can get around this store better than me."

"Sure," Security said, quiet and smug.

Let's work, Johnnie pleaded silently. All Roscoe's stories of fists and knives and guns seemed about to happen.

"That Selina," Roscoe said, lighting another cigarette. "Don't she just love her charity work. It makes her day to come jaw with the help."

Let's work, let's work.

"You know what she needs," Roscoe went on, leading the crew across the store toward the loading dock. "She needs somebody to give it to her till she's shiverin and snarlin and beggin for him to quit. And then he has to just keep on givin it to her and givin it to her and givin it to her."

Roscoe stopped, so abruptly that Johnnie bumped into him. "Jesus," he said, stepping over to a figurine and rubbing the sweater it was wearing, rubbing its chest with his thumbs. "They got nipples."

Johnnie's partners sputtered with laughter.

"What a whorehouse," Roscoe said. "Come on now, get your stuff and get to work."

Johnnie saw a cricket and stomped. He got it. It was dead for good.

Johnnie was on his last bathroom, the upstairs north men's. He had worked straight through his lunch hour. Stopping would have meant having nothing to do but think about the doctor appointment—especially now, since he'd learned from Roscoe during coffee break that surgery meant *cuttin* and female complaint meant *cuttin down there*. But don't you worry, John, Roscoe had said. You get your ass back to work. Sounds like your mama's just shy.

The disinfectant fizzed in the toilet bowls and the glass cleaner misted on the mirrors, and Johnnie felt better. He killed two more crickets and made sure their corpses got into the huge trash-masher on the loading dock. As long as he kept working his mother's voice stayed with him—her bedtime voice, the voice of the story, saying you are my very good Johnnie and you always do your best. Every so often a spurt of worry rushed through and left him stomach-weak and shaky in the knees. Work, he told himself. Work and think of pleasant voices. He filled the paper towel dispensers *come explore delight* poured the emerald liquid soap into the jars above the sinks *not for all the tea in China would I ever give you up* shined the mirrors until they were deep and streakless *hey John you and me* rubbed the chrome and porcelain to an utter gloss

*I am just so full of pride in you* recalled the beauty of the commercials and knew he was helping to make them true *D'Ambrosia's once upon a time embrace your deepest dreams* and everything was fine until he finished the upstairs north men's—until, as he was backing his cart of supplies out the door, he saw that the sleek low out-thrust urinals looked like caved-in horses' skulls.

The panic was already taking hold when Selina called to him, "I could use your help for a minute." He left his cart in Fine Leathers and went to where she was standing, in a doorway at the edge of what had always seemed to be a wall of mirrors. "No," she told him, "it's a lighting trick. It looks like mirrors until some special lights go on inside here. Then it becomes the fashion showcase." Inside, on the back wall, was the landscape from Selina's favorite commerical, rough and bright beneath the starry black sky. "We're showcasing this dress I have on," Selina said.

Johnnie nodded.

"Hold her," Selina said, pointing.

Johnnie had been trying not to look at the naked figurines—a lady and a man.

"Hurry up, now."

He knelt and touched the cool plastic skin. A cricket chirped.

*Don't kill it Johnnie.*

"Those damn little monsters," Selina hissed.

"What's a D and C?" Johnnie said, head down, staring at the floor.

"Hmm?"

"D and C. Surgery." Selina would know about female complaints.

"Oh. Well—it's very minor surgery, Johnnie."

"Roscoe said cutting."

"What does Roscoe know?"

"A lot."

"Don't be so sure."

"Oh." Johnnie wanted to say *Oh yeah?*

"It's more of a scraping than anything to do with cutting."

Scraping sounded worse.

"Hold her steady, Johnnie."

Johnnie looked up. The figurine had hair like Selina's. Selina was lowering a dress just like the one she had on over the head of the figurine.

*They got nipples.*



"You can do better than that. I need her steady."

You could cut her, Johnnie thought. You could cut this figurine and she wouldn't bleed. You could cut her and get a slice of flesh as pure and rich as pound cake or Velveeta.

It was a mean thought and he tried to be sorry for it. He looked away from the figurine, but he couldn't ignore Selina at his side—the smoothness of her legs, the rustle of her dress, the tang of her perfume.

*Shiverin and snarlin and beggin they got nipples.*

"I have to go," Johnnie said.

"I'm not finished yet. And we still have the man to dress and pose."

"I have to go." But he couldn't go, couldn't get up and walk now. Selina would see what he was thinking.

"Johnnie," she said, kneeling and touching his arm. "What is it?"

"No thank you." He yanked his arm away and curled up on the floor, hugging his knees. He needed his mother. She could touch his arm, straighten his hair, tell him the story. "Come on," he said, "please." Selina said his name, and he squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head. He felt her get up and move away. "Please," he said. Dixie answered. *Kiss me Johnnie kiss me.* "Cut it out," he begged, but she wouldn't, and she was joined by others, ladies from TV, ladies from magazines, ladies he'd never heard speak. His mother's voice wouldn't come to him. She was bleeding, he was sure now, bleeding away at the hospital, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. And nothing she could do to stop the ladies' voices. They were pitched higher now, hot and breathy and demanding. Johnnie clutched his knees and pressed his face to them, forcing them against his eye sockets. The voices kept rising, led by Dixie's *please Johnnie don't* and Johnnie saw their secret places *you know they mean love* breasts and thighs and buttocks *please Johnnie don't kill it don't Johnnie don't* scented and smooth and soft. He imagined his touch in those places, and he knew an instant too late that he was going to need a towel. He sobbed, and that felt good, letting the sobs wrack his body—that felt good, at last something felt good, and he cried until Roscoe got there.

"Hey, John," Roscoe said. Johnnie wouldn't look at him. He stayed curled around his shame. "Come on, now. Stretch out some, take it easy."

"Uh-uh."

"Do like I tell you."

"No."

"Don't you be that way," Roscoe said, making him straighten his legs and back. "Now what in the—"

"I'm sorry," Johnnie said.

From the showcase doorway, Selina said, "I'm glad you're here, Roscoe. I didn't know—"

"What the hell, Selina?" Roscoe said, as mean as Johnnie had ever heard him. "What the goddamn hell anyway? What kind of a charity project is this? Why don't you just shove him up against some real pussy?"

There was a silence. Then Selina said, "I know you're angry. But I will not tolerate being spoken to that way. Is that understood?"

"Get away from here," Roscoe said.

"Is that understood?"

"Listen, girl, when I find a pink slip in with my paycheck I say whatever I want to."

"You were supposed to see me before you picked up your check."

Roscoe didn't say anything. Johnnie took a long wet quivery breath.

"Do you understand the reason for your dismissal?"

"Eight years I been workin for you or some other Ambrose. I saw that peepshow, I figured I had trouble, but I didn't expect to see no pink slip."

"Roscoe, security is essential these days in a concern of any size. Store, office, whatever. We had no choice—you left us no choice. I like you, I'd like to keep you on—"

"Yeah, *right*."

Selina cleared her throat. "Johnnie," she said.

"You leave him be," Roscoe said.

"Let me know when I can come back and finish my work," she said, and then she was gone.

Roscoe patted Johnnie's shoulder. "Just take your time, John," he said.

Johnnie rubbed his eyes dry. "My pants," he said. They felt clammy.

"Shirt, too, I bet," Roscoe said. "Sit tight, we'll fix you up."

Roscoe took care of everything. He went to Men's Casuals and got Johnnie a pair of blue jeans and a sport shirt. "But I refuse to be known as a man who steals underwear," he said. "You can go without till you get home." On the loading dock he showed Johnnie an unused clothing rack where he could hang his wet things. "Now," he said, "you get your lunch and go on back to my office. And just stay there till quittin time. I'm gonna go out to Leathers and pick up your cart."

Johnnie gratefully obeyed, crawling back among the pallets and boxes to the cigarette-burned piece of cardboard that Roscoe called his office rug. As he ate his sandwiches, his apple, and his cake, his mother's voice returned to him. John Jerome Hundelby, he heard her say, full of sorrow and disappointment. He was tired from crying, too tired to apologize. He stretched out on the cardboard and closed his eyes. The loading dock was quiet. Everyone else was out on the floor, upstairs or down. He thought of nothing but the lemon taste of cake in his mouth.

He half-woke once to the smell of cigarette smoke, opening his eyes to see Roscoe beside him. "Go on and rest, John," Roscoe said. "You got time." His voice went on as Johnnie tried to doze. "Always been your saving grace," he said, and laughed. "Well, I got the upper hand now, you just see if I don't. And so do you, John. After what she did. Don't you dare go feelin' bad about it. Next time you see her you stare her right down." Johnnie wanted to say *Okay Roscoe you and me* but he couldn't pull himself out of his drowse, and Roscoe didn't seem to be waiting for an answer. He was talking about how he was gonna show Selina some entertainment all right, and Johnnie listened until the words mingled with the sound of the crickets and the soft mutter of his own heartbeat in his ears. Before it was too late he thought of all the words for goodbye he knew—so long, farewell, take care, be good, goodnight. He wished them all for Roscoe, and he slept.

"I know you guys should be on your way home by now," Selina said. "But these crickets. The exterminators couldn't make it. Now of course I'm paying you overtime. I have a Grand Opening reception right here in twenty minutes. I thought you could try to vacuum up the crickets."

"Vackum," Johnnie said. He and his partners had been stopped by Security as they were getting into the Project Outreach van to go home. Selina had called down to say she had one last job for them.

"You don't have to talk like him," Squeegee said.

"Can if I want," Johnnie said.

"Let's go, guys," Selina said. "Hurry." She motioned for Johnnie to come closer and said, "No hard feelings, okay?"

Johnnie stared.

"Where's your tuxedo?" Squeegee said as they went to plug in their vackums.

Johnnie didn't know. When he'd awakened, alone in Roscoe's office,

and stumbled groggily to the uncluttered part of the dock, his shirt had been missing from the rack where he'd left it.

"Did Roscoe steal it?" Squeege asked. "With that watch?"

"No." Anyone could have taken it—his partners, the stockboys, anyone. Anyone would be thrilled to have a shirt like that.

"He got canned," Squeege said.

"I know."

"He begged Selina for his job back."

"You're lying."

"Security told me. First he got mad and then he begged for it back. Security saw him put the watch in his locker. Yesterday."

"Shut up, you're lying," Johnnie said, jabbing his vackum plug into an outlet and switching on the noisy machine.

It was a furious, joyful slaughter. The crickets were easy to spot on the orange carpet of Fine Leathers, and the roar of the vackums seemed to flush more and more of them out of hiding. Johnnie saw some drop right out of the glossy leather coats. Their leaps were in vain. The long wand of Johnnie's vackum picked up so many of them that he lost count. Each crisp body made a satisfying plink when it hit the inside of the wand's snout. This event deserved a place in the story, Johnnie decided. The day Johnnie Hundelby killed every last cricket and made D'Ambrosia's silent and lovely just in time for the Grand Opening. He could almost hear the way his mother would tell it. Almost. The vackums were too loud. He began to hear Dixie, though. She pleaded *don't* as he killed, and he laughed. He laughed all the harder when she recited her whole little poem: *Don't kill it Johnnie because crickets mean love, hear them singing in the weeds and see the stars all up above*. She could say it a hundred times. He had a vackum bag full of trophies to put up against that one escaped Worthmore cricket. Her rhyme was like a funeral song for all the murdered crickets. Johnnie pushed his vackum wand faster, going into every corner of Fine Leathers, breathing in the thick salty smell of the merchandise, believing, as he had the night before, that he was the man for the job. The trials of the day had only made him stronger. He would make Selina see that D'Ambrosia's could only be marvelous with Roscoe Taylor as Maintenance foreman. She would beg Roscoe to come back. And Johnnie's mother would be all right. Johnnie would insist that the doctor fix the complaint, whatever it was. Everything would be absolutely fine.

The lights began to go out, four at a time, in sequence across the

ceiling. Johnnie knew instantly that Roscoe was in the junction-box room, flipping the long columns of switches. He saw Selina at a sales counter, shouting into a telephone. His partners had shut off their vackums and were standing together near the mall entrance to the store, peering at the ceiling. Behind them, shoppers and people who looked like they were dressed up for Selina's reception were looking through the plate glass. Salesladies with cash trays in their hands were staring upwards, too. Johnnie grinned and reached to turn off his vackum—but there was one more cricket. It escaped the first pass of his wand, and the next, springing to avoid the nozzle. Johnnie chased it around the racks of leather coats, making a final lunge as the store went black.

He heard a plink, and felt a tiny impact in the hand that held the wand. Then, behind him, a light went on. He turned. The fashion showcase was lit from within.

The two figurines, the lady and the man, were there among the dead volcanoes of the moon. The lady had Selina's hair and dress. The man was wearing Johnnie's tuxedo T-shirt. The man had his arms around the lady. The lady had her legs around the man. Her head was tipped all the way back. Her hair hung down straight, unmoving.

For a moment Johnnie felt no panic. His vackum was still running, but he could hear his mother's voice now. It was sweet and reasonable, and she was saying, Johnnie, Johnnie, pay strict attention now. Some people simply have other interests. And those people know who they are, don't they?

When the panic came it was nothing that could be soothed by deep breaths or cake or the story or the kind of secret tantrum that brought his mother to him with a disappointed sigh and an old bath towel. He imagined his mother dead. He pictured her pale and sealed away from him in a coffin, emptied of her blood and her voice and her pride in him; and the panic was not that he could imagine it, but that he could wish it.

He did wish it.

In the next instant he repented, *if they catch it in time if they catch it in time*, but he knew it would do no good.

*They got nipples.*

*Sleep hard sleep deep Johnnie hard Johnnie deep.*

*Givin it to her and givin it to her and givin it to her.*

*Once upon a time.*

*D'Ambrosia's.*

He did wish it.

He turned off his vacuum, finally, and stood still in the darkness before the bright fashion showcase, listening to all the crickets he had failed to kill.