

Greeting

It is, indeed, a rare gift that, at the age when most men are welcoming retirement with open, flabby arms, I have at last found my true calling: I am a novelist. Sadly, some would disagree. I know this because within moments of the publication of my debut novel, *Christopher*, they attacked me with ruthless vigor. Now, I am well aware that the longevity of one's fame depends as much on abuse as it does on praise (Fame is a shuttlecock, which to stay aloft must be struck at both ends), but it seemed that the entire critical community of Manhattan -- a hideous assortment of bawling and blowing swellheads, hopeless waste-goods, unctuous award-seekers, fallow fancy boys, illiterate drones, crawling freelancers, Ivy League anti-sexers, righteous marplots, coy, cringing compromisers, suicidal bookworms, blind men, pimped men, fat men, stinky men, the lousy combings and born idol-smashers of the world -- hurled at me every sort of nasty criticism.

I was called a "plagiarist," a "lunatic," a "homeless man's Rabelais," and "Nabokov on poppers." A local East-Side giveaway newspaper, a favorite among dying pensioners, called my Prose of Fire "fatuous and overripe." They claimed I was "Wilde without the wit," and that my eponymous hero was not worth a sane man's devotion or even the common reader's attention. They despised my particularity in times and dates. A librarian's fishwrapper, with a circulation of upwards of seven, even had the gall to accuse me of unreliability, claiming that I had simply "made it all up." My groundbreaking use of the virtually omniscient first-person narrator, they labeled "arrogant monkeyshine." Another blabsheet, printed on pink toilet tissue, clearly catering to the homosexualists who cluster like Dickens fans of yore along the docks of the West Side, labeled me a "self-loathing grotesque." They charged that I, like some great lump of undigested cheddar, had "set back the Movement." The other prigs who deigned to review my book dwelled mostly on how dull it was.

I would love to report that I hovered above the fray, secure in my knowledge that it was not for the critics of this generation that I had written my life-affirming tale but for the schoolboys of the next, but, truth be told, I was wounded. Although

I knew these criticisms were quite simply wrong, born of envy more than anything else, and while on the surface I bore them stoically enough, inwardly I mewled like a nettled kitten. Here I had given all of which I was capable, consuming myself like a very meteor to light the earth, and this was how my epoch had repaid me? It was enough to make a proud man set down his ballpoint and fags and turn on the TV. And I almost did -- especially when sales of *Christopher* stalled in the high four figures.

Then the tide turned.

I began to receive letters, almost three dozen in all, mostly from old bachelors, thanking me for the golden light my novel had shed on their dismal, untenable lives. These communications came from every corner of the city. I read them again and again, struggling to make out the words through a scrim of my own grateful tears. It would be immodest for me to repeat what they said, but their outpourings of praise were as lavish as they were sincere. My intuition had been confirmed! My labor had *not* been in vain. The love that I felt for my protagonist and the value that I had placed on his struggle were not aberrations. I was not a freak. I was not alone. I enjoyed a readership.

Renewed! Recreated! I rose from my queen, threw on my best tweed, and trotted off to the local stationers, where I picked up a brand-new three-pack of legal pads and a carton of generic cigarettes. Then I hurried home and plopped down at my desk. The window admitted a cool, fresh breeze. From the next room could be heard the cozy clicking of computer keys, and from the basement the muffled glissando of a trombone. Gazing down at the street, I freed my fancy. Like a wind-blessed balloon, it drifted away and away, gliding over our recent troubles with our Cousins of the Sands, to more innocent times. I was in search of a second tale to make deathless in prose -- one to instruct the young, delight the old, correct the town, and castigate the age. An hour passed. My hips and buttocks were numb in the hard chair. An open bottle of too-new Chianti wheezed at my side. I felt dizzy and afraid. Just as I was about to give up, it came to me, like a descending angel: I would tell of a single summer in the House Beautiful. Not just any

summer, but the sweet, sweltering season that brought me Adrian -- a lad every bit as pretty and slim-hipped as Christopher, but even more sympathetic. A boy whose anguish reaffirmed for me the eternal truth that the life of the artist is the only life worth living.

-- B.K. Troop

We Spend More Money on Toilet Seats

It was June 16, 1989, the third anniversary of the death of my ex-landlady and dearest pal, Sasha Buchwitz. Sasha had gone to her reward as the result of a stroke suffered during a much-needed round of electro-convulsive therapy. While in the hours following the vascular accident the prognosis had been hopeful, by morning it all turned grim. Sasha, ever on the plump side, began to shed girth at an alarming rate, dipping for the first time, since her salad days at New York University, below two hundred pounds. Her prodigious powers of speech did not return. Her left arm and left leg remained as lank as poached string.

As she had no surviving family and no other friends, it fell on me alone to give comfort. Day after day, I squatted at her bedside, stroking, humming, swabbing, adoring. My saintly ministrations recalled those of Mr. Walt Whitman at the cot sides of his beloved soldier-boys. Although Sasha rarely moved a muscle, I entertained her with spirited readings from her vast trove of detective fiction, many of whose volumes still carried mid-century library slips on their inflaps. For a while it seemed that I had the healing touch. Her color deepened, and one afternoon, in reply to one of my countless *bon mots*, she even managed something terrible that resembled a smile. Then, on Bloomsday morning, 1986, her breathing became labored and I heard (or imagined I did) the tap-tap-tap of the Deathwatch. A few hours later as, reading aloud, I hastened toward the predictable climax of an Agatha Christie, she gasped, coughed, and heaped. I screamed for the bearded Bengali nurse. Because I had screamed for her so often, it was a full eight minutes before she ambled in, carrying a pineapple Popsicle, and by that time Sasha's great, pure heart was still. Three days later, she was laid to rest in a discount bone-orchard in Queens. A stooped rabbi and I were the only witnesses. Before the unfinished pine box was lowered into the earth, I managed (in the manner of the pagans) to jam a silver dollar inside, so that she might pay her fare.

In the weeks of mourning that followed, the last thing on my mind was whether or not I would be named in her will. In fact, there was absolutely nothing on my mind, for I had come apart at the threads, shedding a Nile of tears, not only for the death of my friend, but for every other loss I had incurred during my half-century on earth. The most recent was the passing, six months earlier, of dear, old Wolf Zeller, my mentor, who met his maker on the corner of 55th Street and Eighth Avenue, felled by a bicycle messenger. Imagine, then, my surprise, when Sasha's attorney called to inform me that I had been named sole beneficiary of her estate, which, after all her debts had been paid, came to more than three thousand dollars in cash and sole ownership of her exquisite turn-of-the-century brownstone and all of its contents.

At first I was overjoyed, because there were few places on earth where I would rather have lived, but then, late one night, reviewing all relevant documents and crunching every vital number, I realized that the tax and utility bills alone were far more than my subsistence trust and meager government check could manage. And this was not even taking into account the hefty mortgage payment. Alas, it was true. Although this was Sasha's ancestral home, purchased decades before by her grandparents when they arrived on our shores after fleeing a less-than-efficient *pogrom*, Sasha had, at some point in the 1970's, following a demented spending spree, borrowed on the place. It was in hock up to its eaves. I would have to sell. There were no two ways about it, and it broke my heart. It would have broken Sasha's as well.

The rising sun found me on the red vinyl of my beloved Parnassus Diner, rocking anxiously, like an unchosen orphan. My sole surviving friend, Ms. Cassandra Apopardoumenos, an expert waitress and amateur sorceress, strolled over to condole.

"Boy trouble?" she croaked, pulling her pencil from behind her fuzzy ear.

It was a reasonable assumption. Since the disappearance of Christopher from my life, I had embarked on a series of ill-advised erotic adventures, each surpassing the last in futility and devastation. I shook my head, choked back my

snot, and told her all. I ended by comparing the selling of Sasha's cherished home to the selling of her very carcass to a glue-and-wig factory.

Cassandra was not only well versed in signs, charms, divinations, and other quaint prospects of love, but she was also pretty shrewd with a drachma. Her witchy eyes twirled like pinwheels as she pondered the fiscal matter, then she snapped her fingers.

"Rent out rooms!" she said.

By God, she was right.

In no time at all, I had dismantled my *Bloomsbury Aesthetic* and sold it on the sidewalk outside my building. (It did not bring in a fifth of what it was worth.) Then I set to prowling the neighborhood for cardboard boxes in which to transport my vast antiquarian library. The morning probate closed, I vaulted from my bed, astir with cock-eyed optimism. I brewed some coffee for the removalists and taped shut the last few boxes. By day's end, I was settled into my new digs. Rather, my *old* digs. I had, after all, lived in Sasha's brownstone for twenty-three years. But I was no longer the basement dweller; now I ruled the master suite. After using my own two mitts to apply to the most important rooms a fresh coat of paint (canary on the walls; parchment on the trim), I tore apart a brown paper bag. I scrawled in majuscules the words, "ROOMS FOR RENT," and, beneath that, the word "CHEAP!" and, beneath that, my new phone number. I taped it to the front window, and in no time the phone began to ring.

The rooms I had to let (five in all), I priced at a mere two hundred dollars a month. I did this not because I am foolish, but because, ever-devoted to Apollo, I had made up my mind to rent only to artists. The thought of living with anyone else depressed me to no end. What on earth would there be to talk about? Plus, my experience with Christopher had taught me that my chief talent was to serve as mentor, if not muse, to those artists most in need: the young, struggling, and unhappy. I knew the word "cheap" would draw that particular demographic like fleas to the Irish, and I was right. From the large pool of young, struggling, and unhappy applicants, I chose the lucky

few based on a long list of other more narrow qualifications: charm, beauty, talent, and, most important, ethnic and religious similarity to myself.

Before I am accused of bigotry (another calumny hurled at my head by a knee-jerk-Judy after the publication of my first novel), let me remind you that I have always been politically liberal to the extreme. Until his death, I was a lifelong supporter of Mr. Gus Hall, a fire-breathing Commie, and every year I dig deep in support of a charity that feeds hot lunches to bloated brown infants. Furthermore, in the bedroom, my tastes have always tended toward the exotic and needy; my sexual résumé reads like a Red Cross drop sheet. But co-habitation is a different matter altogether. If I am forced into close quarters with my own species, I am most comfortable with those who most closely resemble myself. For this reason, I admit into my home only white pagans. I'm sorry, but that's just the way it is.

In terms of sexual preference, I naturally favor young, pretty male homosexualists, but I have learned from bitter experience that they are hard to come by and even harder to keep. Lesbians, on the other hand, are easy to find and keep, but for some reason they do not like me. I can't imagine why. Perhaps it has something to do with their natures.

But I digress.

It was June 16, 1989, the third anniversary of Sasha's death. As though in her honor, the city was enjoying a rare day of cool breezes, and the smell of trash and urine was unusually slight. At the precise moment that I dropped my feet to the parquet floor, a mere twenty blocks away the hero of our tale, young Adrian, was dropping his heavy suitcase to the marble floor of the Grand Central Terminal. In his other hand, he carried a loaded trash bag. He had heard about the station's starry ceiling, but he saw it now for the first time and his face softened with reverence. It was not only the spidery beauty of its constellations that touched him; it was also what it told him: at last he was in New York City. The Big Apple. It didn't matter anymore that his suit was old and ill-fitting or that he carried a bulging trash bag in a public place; what mattered was that he was alone. After the swarm of relatives and guests at his father's funeral, after the days spent with his

grandmother, comforting her, solitude was what he craved most. And where better to be alone than New York City? He had no friends here. No one even knew his name. No one pitied him. He tottered past an information booth, listing toward the weight of his suitcase, and turned for a last, fond look at the ceiling's golden stars, as though they were the back of a departing friend.

His shoulders already ached when he reached the top of the ramp. Ahead, the glare of Forty-Second Street was visible through a row of filmy glass doors. To his right lay the men's room. He stopped. His bladder wailed for relief.

(To those critics, rank literalists all, who are already objecting to my use, once again, of the first-person virtually omniscient voice, let me remind you that I am not only highly intuitive, often able to glean with little more than a glance the innermost thoughts and feelings of others, but also extremely curious. There is very little that goes on in the hearts and souls and beds of my lodgers that I do not eventually ferret out. I achieve this not only through direct interrogation, but through every other available means, including, but not limited to, eavesdropping, the rummaging of rooms, the pinching of personal documents, and the use of peepholes. While such behavior is not strictly ethical, I justify it in two ways: first, ethics are a luxury of the secure, and, second, I am a novelist.)

At the instant that Adrian made his way into the men's room of the Grand Central Terminal, a floor above me in the House Beautiful, Carl Alan Dealey lay on his stomach, a cigarette hanging from his thin Protestant lips. His freckled arms lazied out the window. Below him was my backyard garden -- The Vale of Health, I call it -- a chaos of crumbling walkways sunk into clusters of rare wildflowers. Across the way stood the rear of a tenement apartment building, from whose windows shot an occasional wink of midday sun.

Carl, thirty now, losing, daily, both muscle tone and hair, dreaded another summer in the city: baking garbage, human stink, subways like speeding coffins, midnight sirens, damp, dirty morning sheets wrung tight as tourniquets. Worst of all was the telephone. It slept at his side now. The only person who knew its secret number was his talent agent. The last time it had jangled, a month before, it had

brought him news of an audition -- for a honey commercial in which, had he not overslept, he might well have been cast as a bumblebee. Sadly, this ebony abomination was the center of his existence. There was not a moment when his conscious or unconscious mind was not on bended knee, praying that it would ring. During the year it rarely did; during the summer, it never did. How on earth would he distract himself until fall? His answer came when his eyes landed on a window across the way. It was wide open and bore no blind. For a long time now, the flat inside had been empty, but now he spied a television, a hanging plant, a Renoir print, a frilly lamp, and a fancy antique vanity. His reverie was abruptly struck by footsteps outside his door. Who could it be? Was it was some new lodger?

(A logical assumption. After all, the room down the hall from his had been empty for weeks -- ever since Alexander Kecalek, a film director from suburban Chicago, had suffered a *grand mal* seizure during a cocaine binge and been whisked back home to the tough-loving embrace of his blue-collar parents.)

The door opened before Carl could yell, "Go away!" and the face of a young woman appeared. She was tiny, with owlish blue eyes, and blonde hair yanked into pigtails. Her long johns were Pollacked with paint.

"You're up," she said, her voice soft and shy.

"Ever heard of knocking?" Carl snapped. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

Immune to sarcasm, Miranda Buchner scanned the filthy disarray of Carl's room to see what he was busy with. Nothing suggested itself. Maybe it was his acting. Maybe that's how actors did it -- they memorized all those lines while looking out the window.

"An audition?" she asked hopefully.

"Yeah, I'm workin' on a monologue for the unemployment people. What the hell do you want?"

"I'm out of Goldenrod. My dad's check is late. Can I borrow ten bucks?"

The thespian turned away and sucked smoke. Miranda never popped in unless she wanted something. And it was never sex. Not that he would have wanted it, anyway.

It would be like defiling a broom. Maybe worse.

“It’s on the dresser,” he sighed wearily.

As she made for his wallet, Carl grumbled, "By the way, I'm quittin' show business. I'm gonna have a real life. You oughta follow my lead. Quit the paintin' business."

She chuckled, snatched the cash, and shut the door. Carl did not care that she thought he was ridiculous; he had more important things to worry about -- like the window across the way. Who was this new tenant? When would she return? And was she pretty enough to deserve such a fancy vanity? He took in the last, best smoke from his cigarette and flicked the tawny filter into the Vale of Health. What would he do until she got home? He stared at the telephone. It did not ring. He stared longer. Piece of shit. Maybe he ought to practice his art. Act. Kill time acting. He jutted his chin out onto the sill, like a dog yearning to be scratched. He parted his dry lips and whispered, "O that this too too sullied flesh would melt, thaw and resolve itself into a dew!" It was a heartfelt reading, but, as usual, nothing. No applause.

In the corner of the men's room, a scabby hoochhound stood next to a plastic pail, wailing in the minor key about a woman who had left him. One by one, local commuters, inured to such aesthetic insults, walked to and fro without so much as a glance in his direction, but Adrian winced with disgust. Back home in Iowa, such a fellow would never be allowed to walk the streets. Adrian quickly chose a urinal and planted his brown work boots on the sticky floor. To his right, a bald man, unable to urinate, gently teased his manhood, as though coaxing petrol from a siphon. Adrian stared straight ahead into the grimy tile where some clever urchin had scrawled the words, "Pee Here Now." Yes, that was the goal, but first he needed to take his mind off the stink of ammonia and the vagrant's ugly singing.

Thoughts of water might help. Adrian pictured the St. John River in northern Maine. He had swum there just a week before, the morning of his father's

funeral. The current was so strong that had he wanted to swim straight across to Canada he would have had to dive in a quarter-mile upstream. The water was clear and numbing-cold. An island of shrubs bent in the breeze in front of him. His father had claimed Indian treasure was buried at its southern tip. Adrian's little buttocks tensed. The vagrant was not singing anymore, just growling and whooping. A door slammed behind him. A toilet seat fell. Someone emptied a pound of giblets into a deep well -- at least that's what it sounded like. Adrian exhaled heavily and looked down. Nothing.

Different water. His grandmother's house in the Hudson Valley. The brook in back swirled, calmed, and trickled between green rocks -- a demi-paradise for wheeling bugs and darting flies. That very morning, he had stood on its shady brink, listening to the dunking call of bullfrogs lying camouflaged in the cool moss, and told his grandmother for the tenth time about the funeral of her son. She was nursing a broken hip and a crumbling mind and had not made the trip.

Success! A fast, happy stream of gold. When Adrian was finished peeing, he glanced away and was surprised to see that the bald man was still at his side, only he was jerking frantically now. Adrian jumped away, as though the man were clutching a hamster or a plump rat. He stifled a cry of fear and turned to see who else had noticed. No one. Red-faced and sweating, Adrian hauled his bags to the exit and wondered if this sort of thing was an everyday occurrence in New York City. Could life here actually be so foul and depraved?

(The answer, of course, is yes.)

Twenty minutes later, Adrian emerged from a taxi cab, dragging his bags. The place was not at all what he had expected. Its reddish facade was badly weathered. Shutters tilted off their hinges. The windows were dirty. A hand-painted wooden placard nailed to the peeling front door read, "The House Beautiful." What did it mean? Was it a joke? The place seemed desperate more than anything else. Maybe he shouldn't have come. Then he saw, scrawled on a piece of paper in the window, the words, "ROOM FOR RENT! CHEAP!" and he smiled for the first time since the funeral.

Because I was busy in the kitchen, unscrewing a bottle of stormy Chablis (hail of raw fennel, drizzle of butterscotch) I did not hear Adrian's first shy knock, but I did hear the second. I strode angrily through the front room, certain that it was a door-to-door solicitor to whom I would be more than happy to give a heaping helping of my outraged mind. Imagine my delight when I peeked out and saw instead a tiny lad with delicate bones, a candid nose, a wide mouth, and gorgeous rust-colored hair (rare on one unfreckled). His big hazel eyes were dreamy with depression and intelligence. He looked like someone I knew, but I wasn't sure whom. I flung open the door and flashed a smile, which, now that I paid regular visits to a Pakistani sadist, was no longer oyster-gray, but the color of the spring's first daffodils.

"Well, hello," I said.

"Mr. Troop?" he asked cautiously, his voice soft, gentle, and low -- an excellent thing in a boy.

I was suddenly breathless, when it hit me whom he resembled. He was the spitting image of Johnny Keats, my favorite Romantic poet. How marvelous.

"Yes?" I replied.

"You rent rooms?" He gestured with his little head toward the sign.

"I most certainly do. Please come in."

I stepped aside and the little lad slithered past, grazing my knees with his trash bag. I heaved a deep sniff of him. As I had suspected, his hair was scented with innocence. I leaned out for a quick look up and down the street. No, this was not a practical joke. The Gods had actually sent me a gift. And what an improvement! While Alexander Kecalek had been a model lodger and a gifted filmmaker (à la Lubitsch), toward the end of his stay, he had been rendered, by his coke habit, smelly and chubby.

I laid a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Come this way, boy. Who told you about me?"

"Pardon?"

"I doubt you were merely passing by with your suitcase and trash bag. Who referred you?" My tone was brusque, all business. There would be plenty of time for fun and games later. "Who told you about my colony?"

"Ummm.... Jim. Jim did."

"Jim who?" I dropped into the leather armchair that had been Sasha's throne. In her honor, I refused to replace it, even though the seat was cracked and required taping.

The lad settled on the sofa, from whose tired springs rose a puff of Edwardian dust. "I'm not sure what his last name was. I met him at a party. He used to live here. Or...or maybe his friend did."

My brow furrowed for an instant, then I pointed. "Jim Fuchs!"

He nervously cracked a knuckle. "That's right. He gave me your address. He said you might have a room to rent."

"A talented boy, Jim was, but so, so sloppy. He had a tail and everywhere he went it trailed clay."

"A tail?"

"Are you a sculptor, too?" I asked with sudden worry.

"Oh, no. No, I'm--"

"Thank God. The way they mix their mud is like an infant playing with its own diaper-dirt. *Nostalgie de la boue*, the frogs call it. Some enterprising young Freudian ought to write a thesis." He smiled warmly. Good start. I demand that all my lodgers appreciate my wit, or at least pretend to. I crossed one knee over the other and fumbled for a cigarette. "I only rent to artists, you know. Jim must have told you. And they must be young, struggling, and desperately unhappy."

Adrian's eyes ricocheted away. He was about to crack the knuckles of his other hand, but when I threw him a warning look he thought better of it.

"Artists are treated dreadfully in this country," I resumed. (This was not the first time I had delivered the speech, but you would never have known it. It seemed plucked from the very air.) "We spend more money on toilet seats for our submarines than we do on the arts. That's why artists are all I allow to take refuge

here." I snapped open Sasha's trim gold lighter and spoke as I torched up. "And I don't just admit anyone who happens to own a tuba or a paintbrush. My tenants are all exceptional. No dilettantes, no *poseurs*, and definitely no nihilists -- if you can't say 'yea' in your work, don't say anything at all." I exhaled a plume of smoke. "Don't you agree?"

He smiled and nodded wholeheartedly. Lord, he was a swooner, his teeth straight and white. I imagined him kissing me. Then I remembered with a start that I was already spoken for. I had recently met a young man to whom I had pledged sexual fidelity -- a first for me. So far, the experiment had been in progress a full six days and I had never felt more relaxed. Why jeopardize it now? It struck me that perhaps the Gods had sent me Adrian not as a gift, but as a test. They have a tendency to do that, sly buggers. No sooner do you feel the crisp click of your heel on the moral high ground than they send down a distraction, some smooth-skinned dryad standing nude in a distant olive grove, waving a floppy hand, crying out, "Yoo hoo, handsome! Over here!"

"Excellent." I patted both arms of my chair and jumped to my feet. "I'll be right back." I thundered up the steps, which seemed to crack as I hit them. My guts seized. I lost breath as I lunged for the toilet.

Left alone, Adrian ventured a look around. But for the paint job, the room was just the way Sasha had left it. The antique furniture was stout, squat, dark. Oil paintings of the Ashcan School hung too low on the walls. The air was dusty, as though years had passed since sunlight had been allowed to enter. Adrian noticed on my mantel, amidst a slew of quaint doodads, gewgaws, and whatnots, a dozen snapshots, each housed in a sterling frame. He was holding one of the photographs when I burst back in.

"So sorry," I said, out of breath, having just voided my bowels. (Recently this had become necessary at the most inopportune times; the embarrassment it caused me was the cardinal reason I had pledged loyalty to my new boyfriend after just a couple of nights together.)

"Oh, you enjoy photography?" I asked.

He smiled a bit sadly. "Yeah."

"In my old digs, I had no room for them, but now that I own a mantel I display them proudly. There they are, boy. The visual record of a rich and varied life." I walked over and prodded Adrian's garbage bag with my foot. "Where are you coming from, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Maine."

"What a small world. The man in that picture you're holding is from Maine."

"Really? That's weird. Who is he?"

"I'd rather not say. Here let me dust that off." I dragged a sleeve across the top of the frame.

He took a closer look at the man's sensitive face. "I'm not from Maine myself. My father was. I just got back from his funeral."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that," I said. "My father died, too."

"I know."

"You do?"

"Well, you've got so many pictures of him."

"You could tell this was my father? How?"

"You have the same smile."

"That's odd. I was adopted. He molested me until I was nine."

Adrian gulped. I had revealed too much. I plopped back in my chair and asked about his mother.

"She's dead, too," he said. "Of cancer. My senior year in high school."

So the lad was an orphan. Just like Keats. The ants multiplied in my pants, but I stayed on point.

"And what, boy, is your name?" I asked.

"Adrian," he said. "Adrian Malloy." He cracked another knuckle.

"Stop doing that!" I screamed. He looked as though he might burst into tears, so I fell friendly: "Boy, let me be frank. I'd like you to live here. The rent is only two hundred dollars a month. All I ask is that you give away or put to sleep

any pets you might have, keep your room free of dust mites, and work very, very hard. I expect all my lodgers to produce.” He could barely conceal his relief. “But first I have two final questions. Do you believe in many gods?”

Surprised, he thought for a long time.

“I’m not sure,” he said, finally.

“Good enough. Second, what is your art? I like to keep a balance.” He began to answer, but I stupidly cut him off. “No, let me guess. You’re an actor.” He looked surprised, even a bit flattered. “No? Well, you could be. You’re pretty enough. Oh, I know. You’re a painter.” He began to answer, but I cut him off again. “No, no, your fingernails are too clean. I’ve got it. You’re a poet. A lyric poet!”

He smiled and nodded.

Why hadn't I trusted the obvious? I nearly levitated with joy. The modest lad looked down, his face prickling with self-consciousness.

On the second floor there was a room so tiny it was all but unusable. A few days after I had filled my home with its first batch of lodgers, I answered the bell to find standing in the pouring rain a young woman of about twenty-eight, with fiery red hair. She shivered under a soaked parasol, her cotton dress pasted indecently to every curve of her tall, well-formed body. Her face was homely in a striking, gorgeous way. Her name was Louise D'Aprix and she was a lady novelist, she said, speaking very quickly, her eyes a bit bugged. I immediately diagnosed her as suffering from an acute manic disorder. Like all pure products of America, the girl had gone mad. I plucked her from the deluge, handed her a tea towel, and assured her that although there was nothing I loved more than helping young white artists in distress, I really had nothing available at the moment, only a virtual closet.

"I'll take it," she said, toweling her sturdy gams.

"But you'll feel like you've been put in storage," I said. "Like an old trunk."

"That's what I want. I just went off my medication. I want to be *stored*."

As one who had long ago set aside all pharmaceuticals in favor of “letting it all hang out,” I was impressed.

“Anyway, I *prefer* small rooms,” she continued. “They make my ideas seem large.”

“But you won’t even have space for a desk.”

“I write in bed.”

Against my better judgment, I showed her the closet.

When she saw it, she cried, “Home, sweet home!”

A deal was struck, and since that day almost three years before, hardly a minute had passed when Louise's manual typewriter could not be heard clicking and clacking behind her door -- except, of course, during the hours she slept, which, due to her unipolar affliction, were alarmingly few. Louise was the only one of that first batch of lodgers who remained today. The rest had fled within just a few weeks or months, unable to live up to the exacting standards I had set for them, both as artists and as human beings.

As Adrian and I neared Louise’s door that day, she knew without opening it that a new tenant was moving in and that he was male and pretty. She knew because my voice was bright and musical and I walked on the balls of my feet like a Park Avenue hostess. She set aside her typewriter and pillow and crawled close to the door. She smiled as I declared, “Louise D'Aprix sleeps in the closet here. She is a great novelist. In the mold of Ms. Willa Cather. But her prose is far less precious and her head is smaller than a bowling ball.”

After we passed by, Louise cracked open the door for a peek. She would have called out and introduced herself, but she was wearing only underwear. (I forbid air conditioners, and her little window could not be lifted above halfway due to a sloppy paint job during the Coolidge administration.) Her keen, crazy eyes fed on us, gobbling every detail.

I pointed to Miranda’s door. “Miranda Buchner. A painter. Gorgeous abstracts. Her use of color recalls Matisse, but her subject matter is strictly...oh, what’s the word? Gynecological. This is the last flight,” I said, laying a hand on my

stomach as it endured a sharp spasm. "In the good old days, Sasha and I would do jigsaw puzzles up here. I'd run up these stairs. Nay, *gallop!*"

"Who's Sasha?" he asked.

As we disappeared around the mahogany banister, Louise pulled in her head and reached for her typewriter. Incredible, she thought. She had been having trouble finding a hero for her new novel and now he had been delivered to her doorstep. This is exactly what she typed about Adrian: "*His hair is the color of dead leaves and his jacket hangs from his frail shoulders like a cape. He is a fairy tale prince, banished from the kingdom.*"

(Later that week, reading over these words, I was skeptical about the "tale" and the "prince," but I had a pretty good feeling about the "fairy." If my intuition was correct, young Adrian was teetering on the fence and it was my job to give him a hearty shove into the fertile compost of the homosexual way of life. Not for myself, of course, but for him. I would not be his first lover {my frail monogamy dared not even entertain such a prospect}; I would merely guide him toward a suitable candidate and be there when it was over to help him make sense of it.)

Everything on the top floor was smaller than in the rest of the house -- the ceilings, the doors, the windows.

"And now, unveiled, the Toilet stands displayed!" I flung open the door to the tiny, vile bathroom. "Your floor mate is a pig, you see." I pointed to a door across the way. "But he's brilliant, so I don't nag. He's an actor. Born to privilege. A young Franchot Tone by the name of Carl Alan Dealey."

I tapped on Carl's door. When I got no answer, I opened it. Adrian peeked under my armpit. Carl lay sound asleep on his back, his paltry hair tickled by a breeze. His boxers were, unfortunately, wrapped around his ankles and his T-shirt was hiked. Fused to his sparse stomach hair was a mangled duckling of crusty tissue. In one hand, he limply held a bottle of baby oil.

"He's rehearsing," I lied, slamming the door.

Adrian's smile was queasy.

"And here is your Cave of Quietude!" I proclaimed, opening the next door to reveal a clean, square room, graced with a dresser, a desk, a single bed, and a stretch of dung-colored carpeting. "You'll have plenty of privacy. Nothing to come between you and your muse." I tossed him a twinkle. "Keats, too, slept in an attic." Wearing a look of confusion and wonder, the lad stepped in.