SYLVIA PLATH

# THE BELL JAR

HARPERPERENNIAL MODERNCLASSICS

# THE
# BELL JAR

## Sylvia Plath

*for Elizabeth and David*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

# Foreword

*by Frances McCullough*

*You might think that classics like* The Bell Jar *are immediately rec*ognized the moment they reach a publisher's office. But publishing history is rife with stories about classic novels that barely squeaked into print, from *Nightwood* to *A Confederacy of Dunces,* and *The Bell jar* is one of them. It's hard to say whether, if Sylvia Plath had lived--she'd be a senior citizen on her sixty-fifth birthday, October 27th, 1997--the novel would ever have been published in this country: Certainly it would not have been published until her mother died, which would have kept it from our shores until the early '90s. And by that time, Plath might have become a major novelist who might see her first book in a quite different light.

But of course Plath did die a tragic death at the age of thirty, and the book's subsequent history has everything to do with that fact. The first time her manuscript came into the offices at Harper and Row in late 1962 it was under the auspices of the Eugene F. Saxton Fellowship, a grant affiliated with the publishing house that supported the writing of the book. The grant required Plath to submit the final manuscript to the Saxton committee. Two Harper editors, both older women with a special interest in poetry, read the novel in hopes of getting first crack at a new voice in the literary world--but both of them found it disappointing, juvenile and overwrought. In effect, they rejected the book, though it hadn't been offered to them officially, and in fact Plath was quite insistent that it shouldn't be published in America because its roman-à-clef elements would be so hurtful to her family and their friends.

Actually, Plath already had an American publisher. Knopf had bought her first book of poems, The *Colossus* (1962), an event that triggered the first outpouring of prose that became *The Bell jar.* For a long time Plath had been thinking about writing a novel; her ambitions to break

into “the slicks,” especially the *Ladies Home journal)* were constantly on the back burner as she concentrated on her poems. Addressing her as “Dear Mrs. Hughes,” the Saxton Fellowship had turned down her poetry manuscript, the one that became *The Colossus)* so it must have been a particular point of pride when they later accepted *The Bell jar* project.

She also had a British publisher: William Heinemann Limited had published *The Colossus* in the fall of 1960, and agreed to publish *The Bell jar)* under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas (though everyone in literary London knew Plath was the author), in January 1963--which turned out to be just a few weeks before Plath’s death. Reviews were lukewarm, and Plath was deeply stung by them. But she had already begun another novel the previous spring, and by her mother’s account, there was yet another finished one that went up in a bonfire one day when Plath was in a rage. Although she wasn’t as surefooted in her fiction as she was in poetry, she planned to write “novel after novel” once her book of poems *(Ariel)* was finished.

But by the time *The Bell Jar* came out in London, Plath was in extremis; her marriage to poet Ted Hughes was over, she was in a panic about money, and had moved to a bare flat in London with her two small children in the coldest British winter in a hundred years. All three of them had the flu, there was no phone, and there was no help with child care. She was well aware of the brilliance of the poems she was writing--and in fact A. Alvarez, the leading critic of the day, had told her they deserved a Pulitzer. But even that knowledge didn’t save her from the dreaded bell jar experience, the sudden descent into deep depression that had triggered her first suicide attempt in the summer described in the novel. A number of the same elements were in place this time: the abrupt departure of the central male figure in her life, critical rejection (Plath had not been accepted for Frank O’Connor’s writing class at Harvard that *Bell Jar* summer), isolation in new surroundings, complete exhaustion.

Plath’s suicide on February 11, 1963 brought her instant fame in England, where she had made occasional appearances on the BBC and was beginning to be known through her publications. But she was still not well known here in her native land, and there was no sign that she would become not only the last of the major poets read widely, but also a feminist heroine whose single published novel had spoken directly to the hearts of more than one generation.

When I first arrived at Harper in the summer of 1964, there was no actual job for me--I'd been reading for the Saxton Prize novel contest, the latest incarnation of the Fellowship, on a temporary basis, and I'd been put on staff simply because, as my new boss put it, "If you're as good as we think you are, you'll figure out something to do." I looked around; the poetry editor, who was one of the readers of *The Bell Jar* who hadn't liked it, was retiring. I did a little checking and discovered that virtually every poet in America was unhappy with his or her publisher. This seemed to me a good opportunity to attract some stars to our list, so I proposed hiring a poetry scout--my candidate was Donald Hall. I sent off a memo to Cass Canfield, the publisher, who thought this was a fine idea.

When Don went to London later that year, *Ariel* had just been published and Don was elated; he bought a copy of the book and sent a cable urging us to publish it. Knopf was of course interested too, but they'd quickly hit a sticking point. None of their poets--and they had a fine list--had ever been paid over $250 as an advance against royalties for a book of poems, and it was unthinkably unfair, they felt, to make an exception for Plath. Meantime, Don pointed out to Plath's husband and executor Ted Hughes that it would make perfect sense to publish *Ariel* with Harper since Hughes himself was published there, so the nod was going in our direction.

I knew about Plath; her odd name had been ringing in my head ever since I'd first heard it from A. Alvarez, who'd been teaching at Brandeis in my graduate school days. But these poems profoundly affected me as none of her *New Yorker* poems or *Colossus* poems had. Although there was opposition inside the house from some quarters, who felt the poems were too sensational, eventually Roger Klein, a young editor, and I were allowed to buy the book for $750--a small sum, noted editor in chief Evan Thomas--to give the young people their head.

From the moment *Ariel* appeared in print, it was a sensation, with a double-page spread in *Time* magazine setting off a frenzy. Women were joining consciousness-raising groups, and Plath was often the center of the discussion. After her death, Ted Hughes, who inherited the copyright on all her work, published and unpublished, had assured her mother that *The Bell Jar* would not be published in America during Mrs. Plath's lifetime. But the demand for more Plath had led to bootleg copies of the

novel coming in from England; at least two bookstores in New York carried the book and sold it briskly.

There was yet another quirk in the publishing history of *The Bell Jar,* a copyright snag. Because it had been published abroad originally by an American citizen, and had not been published in America within six months of foreign publication or registered for copyright in the United States, it fell under a provision (since nullified) called Ad Interim, which mean it was no longer eligible for copyright protection in America. This had been a closely guarded secret, but one day in 1970 I had a phone call from Juris Jurjevics, an old friend at another publishing house, alerting me that John Simon at Random House was aware of the copyright situation and was planning to publish the book. This was horrifying; I called Simon and explained to him that the only reason the book hadn't been published was out of respect for Mrs. Plath's feelings, that we had an agreement to publish it if she changed her mind or if she died, and that it was unconscionable for him to steal this book. To my utter astonishment, he agreed, and said he would cancel the publication.

Obviously we had to publish the novel immediately. I called Ted Hughes and his sister Olwyn, who was the literary agent for the Estate, and we undertook the delicate business of telling Mrs. Plath--who later told her side of the story in *Letters Home* (1975), a selection of Sylvia's letters to her.

But again there was internal opposition to the project, from the remaining original reader of *The Bell Jar,* who didn't like it any better the second time around. Despite the success of *Ariel,* the house was concerned about publishing posthumous work that wasn't up to snuff. I turned to Frank Scioscia, a brilliant Harper sales manager with a legendary book nose, and asked if he could read the novel overnight and give me a reaction the next day. He did; Frank loved the book and thought it would have extraordinary sales. That saved the book for Harper, and nearly three million paperback copies have been sold since 1972.

The eight-year wait between the novel's original publication in England and its American appearance had only increased its audience. Plath was nearly a household name by 1971, there were Plath groupies, and the women's movement was in full bloom, with recent books from Germaine Greer and Robin Morgan. Confessional literature was in vogue. And there was a new fascination with death; Elisabeth Kubler-Ross had

burst on the scene and Erich Segal's tearjerker, *Love Story,* seemed to have a permanent place on the bestseller list. Depression and mental illness were subjects much on people's minds as well; they were reading R. D. Laing. A. Alvarez, the critic who so admired Plath, had written a highly romantic book about suicide featuring Plath as Exhibit A. A timely excerpt from the British edition appeared in the *New American Review* around the time of publication and became the topic of the moment.

*The Bell Jar* sailed right onto the bestseller list and despite some complaining reviews, it quickly established itself as a female rite-of-passage novel, a twin to *Catcher in the Rye*--a comparison first noted by one of the original British reviewers. In fact *The Bell jar* was published on the twentieth anniversary of Salinger's classic and Sylvia Plath herself was just two years older than the fictional hero, Holden Caulfield.

To Molly O'Neill, a seventeen-year-old lifeguard in Ohio who would grow up to become a food writer for the *New York Times* and a novelist herself, reading *The Bell Jar* that summer was nothing short of astonishing. Above all she was amazed by the possibility of madness descending like a tornado into a typical bright young woman's life out of nowhere--"That could happen? I could hardly believe it." To Janet Malcolm, the *New Yorker* writer who became fascinated by how we know what we know about Plath, *The Bell Jar* is a fine evocation of what madness is actually like.

Although her illness was never actually diagnosed, several researchers in the field have noted Plath's unerring description of schizophrenic perception: a hallway becomes a menacing tunnel, a person approaching has an enormity that threatens to engulf the viewer the closer they come, objects loom out of all proportion, the alphabet letters on a page become impossible to decipher, and virtually everything seems both unreal and dangerous. Despite the interventions of the last quarter-century, from Librium to Prozac, Plath's vivid, entirely rational, almost steely description of that world remains true and uneclipsed by any later writer. Now that it's become socially acceptable to talk about such things, it's easy to forget that reading *The Bell Jar* brought us an understanding of the experience that made such openness possible.

And what about the novel's larger relevance to today's young reader? At a time when Holden Caulfield's sensitivities seem unrelated to the hard edges of today's world for many readers, does *The Bell Jar* still

have any meaning? After all, the novel was pre-drugs, pre-Pill, pre-Women's Studies. In the survivalist mode of the *'90s,* suicide may seem like a loser's option. But the adolescent suicide rate has quadrupled since World War II, and if suicide isn't quite as romantic as it was when *The Bell Jar* was first published here, statistics indicate that it's definitely on the rise. Depression has become almost epidemic in America in the meantime.

When I asked an informal focus group of bright young women in their twenties what they thought about the book, they were unanimous: they loved it. Although some of them found it depressing, others found it surprisingly undepressing. The issues, they pointed out, haven't changed; yes, the social elements of teas and dating and the accepted conventions have changed, but they're not unfamiliar, since they're the stuff of old movies. The big questions: how to sort out your life, how to work out what you want, how to deal with men and sex, how to be true to yourself and how to figure out what that means--those things are the same today.

For contemporary readers who look back on the fifties as simply being cool, it may be difficult to see how daring Plath really was. In the clutches of postwar conformity and rampant conservatism, even enjoying one's own body was an incredibly risky thing to do. Plath had another rein to wear: because she was poor, everything depended on keeping her scholarship and winning prizes. If she was less than perfect, she could lose it all in a moment. For anyone going through the college admissions process today, Plath's anxieties are all too familiar.

Perhaps because she died young, Plath has almost always been viewed by critics as a contemporary. I remember one prominent feminist critic who aspired to be her biographer saying, about Plath's difficult last year of marriage: "I don't get it--why didn't she just walk out?" as though that would be an obvious option for a young American woman" stranded in the British countryside with two small children and no funds in the very early sixties.

But it may be equally true that readers feel she's a contemporary because her voice has such intensity, such a direct edge to it. Almost everything Plath wrote in her short life--and it was extraordinary how much she did write, exhausting three typewriters and writing everything from poetry to plays to radio dramas to fiction--has that quality, the immediacy of a letter just opened. It's heartbreaking to think of what

she would have written, what wisdom and maturity would have brought to this stunning voice.

There are also things we can see from this distance that we couldn't see before. When the novel was first published, her death was still a fresh tragedy, leaving her family in a huge amount of pain that any new Plath publication only intensified. For readers, the posthumous publications were of course seen as messages from the grave, clues to the mystery of what really happened. The jacket of the first edition, with its dried-blood color and lugubrious tone, certainly gave no hint of the hilarity inside. In fact, this is a very funny book--the intervening twenty-five years give us a good reason to delight in Plath's amazing humor, a quality she herself thought would make her career as a novelist.

Even such a powerful personal legend as Plath's recedes in the enduring presence of the work itself, which is of course as it should be. After Janet Malcolm's penetrating piece on the Plath legend appeared in the *New Yorker* in 1994, the artist Pat Stier, one of the many readers to respond, noted "The poetry soars over everything." This novel too has wings--it takes its readers where they need to go, and shows no sign of losing altitude.

**Frances McCullough**

New York, 1996

# THE
# BELL JAR

# 1

*It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the* Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York. I'm stupid about executions. The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick, and that's all there was to read about in the papers--goggle-eyed headlines staring up at me on every street corner and at the fusty, peanut-smelling mouth of every subway. It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn't help wondering what it would be like, being bummed alive all along your nerves.

I thought it must be the worst thing in the world.

New York was bad enough. By nine in the morning the fake, country-wet freshness that somehow seeped in overnight evaporated like the tail end of a sweet dream. Mirage-gray at the bottom of their granite canyons, the hot streets wavered in the sun, the car tops sizzled and glittered, and the dry, cindery dust blew into my eyes and down my throat.

I kept hearing about the Rosenbergs over the radio and at the office till I couldn't get them out of my mind. It was like the first time I saw a cadaver. For weeks afterward, the cadaver's head--or what there was left of it--floated up behind my eggs and bacon at breakfast and behind the face of Buddy Willard, who was responsible for my seeing it in the first place, and pretty soon I felt as though I were carrying that cadaver's head around with me on a string, like some black, noseless balloon stinking of vinegar.

(I knew something was wrong with me that summer, because all I could think about was the Rosenbergs and how stupid I'd been to buy all those uncomfortable, expensive clothes, hanging limp as fish in my closet, and how all the little successes I'd totted up so happily at college fizzled to nothing outside the slick marble and plate-glass fronts along Madison Avenue. )

I was supposed to be having the time of my life.

I was supposed to be the envy of thousands of other college girls just like me all over America who wanted nothing more than to be tripping about in those same size-seven patent leather shoes I'd bought in Bloomingdale's one lunch hour with a black patent leather belt and black patent leather pocketbook to match. And when my picture came out in the

magazine the twelve of us were working on drinking martinis in a skimpy, imitation silver-lamé bodice stuck on to a big, fat cloud of white tulle, on some Starlight Roof, in the company of several anonymous young men with all-American bone structures hired or loaned for the occasion--everybody would think I must having a real whirl.

Look what can happen in this country, they'd say. A girl lives in some out-of-the-way town for nineteen years, so poor she can't afford a magazine, and then she gets a scholarship to college and wins a prize here and a prize there and ends up steering New York like her own private car.

Only I wasn't steering anything, not even myself. I just bumped from my hotel to work and to parties and from parties to my hotel and back to work like a numb trolleybus. I guess I should have been excited the way most of the other girls were, but I couldn't get myself to react. (I felt very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo. )

There were twelve of us at the hotel.

We had all won a fashion magazine contest, by writing essays and stories and poems and fashion blurbs, and as prizes they gave us jobs in New York for a month, expenses paid, and piles and piles of free bonuses, like ballet tickets and passes to fashion shows and hair stylings at a famous expensive salon and chances to meet successful people in the field of our desire and advice about what to do with our particular complexions.

I still have the makeup kit they gave me, fitted out for a person with brown eyes and brown hair: an oblong of brown mascara with a tiny brush, and a round basin of blue eye-shadow just big enough to dab the tip of your finger in, and three lipsticks ranging from red to pink, all cased in the same little gilt box with a mirror on one side. I also have a white plastic sunglasses case with colored shells and sequins and a green plastic starfish sewed onto it.

I realized we kept piling up these presents because it was as good as free advertising for the firms involved, but I couldn't be cynical. I got such a kick out of all those free gifts showering on to us. For a long time afterward I hid them away, but later, when I was all right again, I brought them out, and I still have them around the house. I use the lipsticks now and then, and last week I cut the plastic starfish off the sunglasses case for the baby to play with.

So there were twelve of us at the hotel, in the same wing on the same floor in single rooms, one after the other, and it reminded me of my dormitory at college. It wasn't a proper hotel--I mean a hotel where there are both men and women mixed about here and there on the same floor.

This hotel--the Amazon--was for women only, and they were mostly girls my age with wealthy parents who wanted to be sure their daughters would be living where men couldn't get at them and deceive them; and they were all going to posh secretarial schools like Katy Gibbs, where they had to wear hats and stockings and gloves to class, or they had just graduated from places like Katy Gibbs and were secretaries to executives and junior executives and simply hanging around in New York waiting to get married to some career man or other.

These girls looked awfully bored to me. I saw them on the sunroof, yawning and painting their nails and trying to keep up their Bermuda tans, and they seemed bored as hell. I talked with one of them, and she was bored with yachts and bored with flying around in airplanes and bored with skiing in Switzerland at Christmas and bored with the men in Brazil.

Girls like that make me sick. I'm so jealous I can't speak. Nineteen years, and I hadn't been out of New England except for this trip to New York. It was my first big chance, but here I was, sitting back and letting it run through my fingers like so much water.

I guess one of my troubles was Doreen.

I'd never known a girl like Doreen before. Doreen came from a society girls' college down South and had bright white hair standing out in a cotton candy fluff round her head and blue eyes like transparent agate marbles, hard and polished and just about indestructible, and a mouth set in a sort of perpetual sneer. I don't mean a nasty sneer, but an amused, mysterious sneer, as if all the people around her were pretty silly and she could tell some good jokes on them if she wanted to.

Doreen singled me out right away. She made me feel I was that much sharper than the others, and she really was wonderfully funny. She used to sit next to me at the conference table, and when the visiting celebrities were talking she'd whisper witty sarcastic remarks to me under her breath.

Her college was so fashion conscious, she said, that all the girls had pocketbook covers made out of the same material as their dresses, so each time they changed their clothes they had a matching pocketbook. This kind of detail impressed me. It suggested a whole life of marvelous, elaborate decadence that attracted me like a magnet.

The only thing Doreen ever bawled me out about was bothering to get my assignments in by a deadline.

"What are you sweating over that for?" Doreen lounged on my bed in a peach silk dressing gown, filing her long, nicotine-yellow nails with an emery board, while I typed up the draft of an interview with a best-selling novelist.

That was another thing--the rest of us had starched cotton summer nighties and quilted housecoats, or maybe terry-cloth robes that doubled as beachcoats, but Doreen wore these full-length nylon and lace jobs you could half see through, and dressing gowns the color: of skin, that stuck to her by some kind of electricity.She had an interesting, slightly sweaty smell that reminded me of those scallopy leaves of sweet fern you break off and crush between your fingers for the musk of them.

"You know old Jay Cee won't give a damn if that story's in tomorrow or Monday." Doreen lit a cigarette and let the smoke flare slowly from her nostrils so her eyes were veiled. "Jay Cee's ugly as sin," Doreen went on coolly. "I bet that old husband of hers turns out all the lights before he gets near her or he'd puke otherwise."

Jay Cee was my boss, and I liked her a lot, in spite of what Doreen said. She wasn't one of the fashion magazine gushers with fake eyelashes and giddy jewelry.Jay Cee had brains, so her plug-ugly looks didn't seem to matter. She read a couple of languages and knew all the quality writers in the business.

I tried to imagine Jay Cee out of her strict office suit and luncheon-duty hat and in bed with her fat husband, but I just couldn't do it. I always had a terribly hard time trying to imagine people in bed together.

Jay Cee wanted to teach me something, all the old ladies I ever knew wanted to teach me something, but I suddenly didn't think they had anything to teach me. I fitted the lid on my typewriter and clicked it shut.

Doreen grinned. "Smart girl."

Somebody tapped at the door.

"Who is it?" I didn't bother to get up.

"It's me, Betsy. Are you coming to the party?"

"I guess so." I still didn't go to the door.

They imported Betsy straight from Kansas with her bouncing blonde ponytail and Sweetheart-of-Sigma-Chi smile. I remember once the two of us were called over to the office of some blue-chinned TV producer in a pin-stripe suit to see if we had any angles he could build up fur a program, and Betsy started to tell about the male and female corn in Kansas. She got so excited about that damn corn even the producer had tears in his eyes, only he couldn't use any of it, unfortunately, he said.

Later on, the Beauty Editor persuaded Betsy to cut her hair and made a cover girl out of her, and I still see her face now and then, smiling out of those "P.Q.'s wife wears B.H. Wragge" ads.

Betsy was always asking me to do things with her and the other girls as if she were trying to save me in some way. She never asked Doreen. In private, Doreen called her Pollyanna Cowgirl.

"Do you want to come in our cab?" Betsy said through the door.

Doreen shook her head.

"That's all right, Betsy," I said. "I'm going with Doreen."

"Okay." I could hear Betsy padding off down the hall.

"We'll just go till we get sick of it," Doreen told me, stubbing out her cigarette in the base of my bedside reading lamp, "then we'll go out on the town. Those parties they stage here remind me of the old dances in the school gym. Why do they always round up Yalies? They're so *stoo*pit!"

Buddy Willard went to Yale, but now I thought of it, what was wrong with him was that he was stupid. Oh, he'd managed to get good marks all right, and to have an affair with some awful waitress on the Cape by the name of Gladys, but he didn't have one speck of intuition. Doreen had intuition. Everything she said was like a secret voice speaking straight out of my own bones.

We were stuck in the theater-hour rush. Our cab sat wedged in back of Betsy's cab and in front of a cab with four of the other girls, and nothing moved.

Doreen looked terrific. She was wearing a strapless white lace dress zipped up over a snug corset affair that curved her in at the middle and bulged her out again spectacularly above and below, and her skin had a bronzy polish under the pale dusting powder. She smelled strong as a whole perfume store.

I wore a black shantung sheath that cost me forty dollars. It was part of a buying spree I had with some of my scholarship money when I heard I was one of the lucky ones going to New York. This dress was cut so queerly I couldn't wear any sort of a bra under it, but that didn't matter much as I was skinny as a boy and barely rippled, and I liked feeling almost naked on the hot summer nights.

The city had faded my tan, though. I looked yellow as a Chinaman. Ordinarily, I would have been nervous about my dress and my odd color, but being with Doreen made me forget my worries. I felt wise and cynical as all hell.

When the man in the blue lumber shirt and black chinos and tooled leather cowboy boots started to stroll over to us from under the striped awning of the bar where he'd been eyeing our cab, I couldn't have any illusions. I knew perfectly well he'd come for Doreen. He threaded his way out between the stopped cars and leaned engagingly on the sill of our open window.

" And what, may I ask, are two nice girls like you doing all alone in a cab on a nice night like this?"

He had a big, wide, white toothpaste-ad smile.

"We're on our way to a party," I blurted, since Doreen had gone suddenly dumb as a post and was fiddling in a blasé way with her white lace pocketbook cover.

"That sounds boring," the man said. "Whyn't you both join me for a couple of drinks in that bar over there? I've some friends waiting as well."

He nodded in the direction of several informally dressed men slouching around under the awning. They had been following him with their eyes, and when he glanced back at them, they burst out laughing.

The laughter should have warned me. It was a kind of low, know-it-all snicker, but the traffic showed signs of moving again, and I knew that if I sat tight, in two seconds I'd be wishing I'd taken this gift of a

chance to see something of New York besides what the people on the magazine had planned out for us so carefully.

"How about it, Doreen?" I said.

"How about it, Doreen?" the man said, smiling his big smile. To this day I can't remember what he looked like when he wasn't smiling. I think he must have been smiling the whole time. It must have been natural for him, smiling like that.

"Well, all right," Doreen said to me. I opened the door, and we stepped out of the cab just as it was edging ahead again and started to walk over to the bar.

There was a terrible shriek of brakes followed by a dull thump-thump.

"Hey you!" Our cabby was craning out of his window with a furious, purple expression. "Waddaya think you're doin'?"

He had stopped the cab so abruptly that the cab behind bumped smack into him, and we could see the four girls inside waving and struggling and scrambling up off the floor.

The man laughed and left us on the curb and went back and handed a bill to the driver in the middle of a great honking and some yelling, and then we saw the girls from the magazine moving off in a row, one cab after another, like a wedding party with nothing but bridesmaids.

"Come on, Frankie," the man said to one of his friends in the group, and a short, scrunty fellow detached himself and came into the bar with us.

He was the type of fellow I can't stand. I'm five feet ten in my stocking feet, and when I am with little men I stoop over a bit and slouch my hips, one up and one down, so I'll look shorter, and I feel gawky and morbid as somebody in a sideshow.

For a minute I had a wild hope we might pair off according to size, which would line me up with the man who had spoken to us in the first place, and he cleared a good six feet, but he went ahead with Doreen and didn't give me a second look. I tried to pretend I didn't see Frankie dogging along at my elbow and sat close by Doreen at the table.

It was so dark in the bar I could hardly make out anything except Doreen. With her white hair and white dress she was so white she looked silver. I think she must have reflected the neons over the bar. I felt

myself melting into the shadows like the negative of a person I'd never seen before in my life.

"Well, what'll we have?" the man asked with a large smile.

"I think I'll have an old-fashioned," Doreen said to me.

Ordering drinks always floored me. I didn't know whisky from gin and never managed to get anything I really liked the taste of. Buddy Willard and the other college boys I knew were usually too poor to buy hard liquor or they scorned drinking altogether. It's amazing how many college boys don't drink or smoke. I seemed to know them all. The farthest Buddy Willard ever went was buying us a bottle of Dubonnet, which he only did because he was trying to prove he could be aesthetic in spite of being a medical student.

"I'll have a vodka," I said.

The man looked at me more closely. "With anything?"

"Just plain," I said. "I always have it plain."

I thought I might make a fool of myself by saying I'd have it with ice or soda or gin or anything. I'd seen a vodka ad once, just a glass full of vodka standing in the middle of a snowdrift in a blue light, and the vodka looked clear and pure as water, so I thought having vodka plain must be all right. My dream was someday ordering a drink and finding out it tasted wonderful.

The waiter came up then, and the man ordered drinks for the four of us. He looked so at home in that citified bar in his ranch outfit I thought he might well be somebody famous.

Doreen wasn't saying a word, she only toyed with her cork placemat and eventually lit a cigarette, but the man didn't seem to mind. He kept staring at her the way people stare at the great white macaw in the zoo, waiting for it to say something human.

The drinks arrived, and mine looked clear and pure, just like the vodka ad.

"What do you do?" I asked the man, to break the silence shooting up around me on all sides, thick as jungle grass. "I mean what do you do here in New York?"

Slowly and with what seemed a great effort, the man dragged his eyes away from Doreen's shoulder. "I'm a disc jockey," he said. "You prob'ly must have heard of me. The name's Lenny Shepherd."

"I know you," Doreen said suddenly.

"I'm glad about that, honey," the man said, and burst out laughing. "That'll come in handy. I'm famous as hell."

Then Lenny Shepherd gave Frankie a long look.

"Say, where do you come from?" Frankie asked, sitting up with a jerk. "What's your name?"

"This here's Doreen." Lenny slid his hand around Doreen's bare arm and gave her a squeeze.

What surprised me was that Doreen didn't let on she noticed what he was doing. She just sat there, dusky as a bleached-blonde Negress in her white dress, and sipped daintily at her drink.

"My name's Elly Higginbottom," I said. "I come from Chicago." After that I felt safer. I didn't want anything I said or did that night to be associated with me and my real name and coming from Boston.

"Well, Elly, what do you say we dance some?"

The thought of dancing with that little runt in his orange suede elevator shoes and mingy T-shirt and droopy blue sports coat made me laugh. If there's anything I look down on, it's a man in a blue outfit. Black or gray, or brown, even. Blue just makes me laugh.

"I'm not in the mood," I said coldly, turning my back on him and hitching my chair over nearer to Doreen and Lenny.

Those two looked as if they'd known each other for years by now. Doreen was spooning up the hunks of fruit at the bottom of her glass with a spindly silver spoon, and Lenny was grunting each time she lifted the spoon to her mouth, and snapping and pretending to be a dog or something, and trying to get the fruit off the spoon. Doreen giggled and kept spooning up the fruit.

I began to think vodka was my drink at last. It didn't taste like anything, but it went straight down into my stomach like a sword swallower's sword and made me feel powerful and godlike.

"I better go now," Frankie said, standing up.

I couldn't see him very clearly, the place was so dim, but for the first time I heard what a high, silly voice he had. Nobody paid him any notice.

"Hey, Lenny, you owe me something. Remember, Lenny, you owe me something, don't you, Lenny?"

I thought it odd Frankie should be reminding Lenny he owed him something in front of us, and we being perfect strangers, but Frankie

stood there saying the same thing over and over until Lenny dug into his pocket and pulled out a big roll of green bills and peeled one off and handed it to Frankie. I think it was ten dollars.

"Shut up and scram."

For a minute I thought Lenny was talking to me as well, but then I heard Doreen say, "I won't come unless Elly comes." I had to hand it to her the way she picked up my fake name.

"Oh, Elly'll come, won't you, Elly?" Lenny said, giving me a wink.

"Sure I'll come," I said. Frankie had wilted away into the night, so I thought I'd string along with Doreen. I wanted to see as much as I could.

I liked looking on at other people in crucial situations. If there was a road accident or a street fight or a baby pickled in a laboratory jar for me to look at, I'd stop and look so hard I never forgot it.

I certainly learned a lot of things I never would have learned otherwise this way, and even when they surprised me or made me sick I never let on, but pretended that's the way I knew things were all the time.