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Loving Natalie Wood

by Joseph M. Ditta

He walked up the block to Natalie's apartment building. Inside, he walked the long carpeted hallway to her door and knocked. When she opened it, she stepped back to let him in. The baby was crying, the television was on, and the house smelled of cooking, a foul oily smell of fried potatoes. It was too warm in the apartment, and Natalie had a frayed and wild look. She didn't say "Come in," or "Hi, James," or "What's up." She just stepped back, barefoot in faded black shorts and a tattered ketchup-stained white blouse, and when he came in turned and went into the living room where the baby had begun to scream sitting on the floor.

"Why don't you open a window Nat and cool it off in here. How can you stand it?"

"You do it," she shot back at him, and stooped to lift the baby. It stopped screaming when she lifted it and, cradling it in her arms, she sat on the sofa in front of the television. He saw her in nervous jerking movements unbutton her blouse and drop the padded cup of her bra. He disliked it when she exposed herself like that, taking no care to cover herself. Turning away, he went to the windows that overlooked the street and opened both of them. Then he lowered the television.

"Anything I can get you?" he asked.

"No," she said, dully, obviously resenting his coming.

Ignoring her tone, he sat beside her, looking at the dark-haired little girl, who was suckling contently with her eyes closed, but then he rose, went into the kitchen, and opened the fridge. He looked for something cold to drink and not finding anything, took ice from the freezer, filled a glass with it and opened the tap. He leaned against the sink and sipped the cold water. He could see her from where he stood. Her dark hair was unwashed and oily and hung in thick strands to her shoulders. She hadn't moved at all. The baby was suckling and she was looking at the television, but he could tell she wasn't paying attention. He thought he should leave. She was colder than the glass he was holding, and he knew they would begin to quarrel if he stayed longer.

"Listen, Nat," he said, "Your fridge is empty. I'm going to run up to the supermarket and get some things; I'll get some Coke, too. Anything else you need?"

"Nothing, thanks," she said. She didn't turn her head.

"T's up to you," he said, resignedly.

"Wait," she said, as he opened the door. "Don't get Coke—never mind, I don't want anything."

He stood at the opened door, turned toward her, waiting to see if she'd tell him to stay or go. But she didn't say anything.

"I'll just bring some things back and then I'll take off, OK?" he said.

As he turned again to leave, she screamed, "I don't *want* anything—don't bring anything

back!" The baby, startled by the violence, began to wail.

He felt his skin tingle at her rage. For a moment, he had frozen motionless, then he stepped into the hall, and as he was closing the door, he paused, opened it again and reentered. She had turned to see if he was gone, and seeing him, frowned and made an ugly face. Little Nat, still wailing, began to squirm in her mother's arms.

"I thought you were gone," she shouted angrily as she tossed the baby up against her shoulder and roughly patted her back.

"I'm gone," he said. "You make yourself impossible. Fine. You want me to go, I'm gone."

"Why do you keep coming back?" he heard her scream through the closed door.

He left and walked to the building where his own apartment was. There were four buildings in a row, each with twelve apartments, and behind each one was a row of garages and a parking lot. Across the highway, about a ten-minute walk away, was a supermarket, and in the mall next to it was a place he often frequented called The Little Pub. He changed his mind and crossed the street.

He sat at the bar of The Little Pub and ordered a scotch and soda. The drink would calm him and help him sleep when he went home. There were only two others in the place, both men, sitting at the bar. They were older men, both being about the age his father would have been had he still been alive. He had never seen them before and wondered if they were married. He glanced at them. Neither wore jeans, which didn't say much. But both were groomed and pressed, which suggested they had wives who did for them and for whom they kept themselves presentable. Both seemed on the edge of being drunk. It didn't surprise him when, listening to their talk, he found they were discussing Marilyn Monroe.

One was talking to the bartender, and the other was listening with a pugnacious air of agreement with what his friend was saying. He began to listen as well. He thought, at their age, Marilyn was probably still the woman who most lured them and burst their hearts. He thought about his sister, Natalie. She looked like Natalie Wood and seemed to him much like the kind of character she played in *Gypsy*. More likely, he thought, she was like the real stripper rather than the film version. But he loved her nonetheless. He loved her because he grew up with her. She was his only link to his mother and father and to his past, and these were important to him. She only had to mature, grow into the recognition of her need for them, too. In the meantime he endured her abuse.

The one Natalie was a dead ringer for the other. And both Natalies knew their share of men—his sister barely out of her teens! His sister, though, was an obscure little creature living on the edge with no hope of a future. He was feeling fatalistic and blue, staring into his scotch, when he realized one of the older men was talking to him.

"What does a guy your age think about Marilyn?" one was asking. "Is there anyone around like her today?"

"He probably thinks she was fat," the other said, before he could answer. "Women in the movies today are all bony. That's the way guys like 'em today. They like 'em skinny."

"What about it?" the first persisted. "Who do you like better, Marilyn or Kirsten Dunst?"

"He likes his wife," the other piped in, snickering. They both laughed.

“Well,” he said, smiling at the comparison, raising his drink to them as he thought what to say. “I’m not married. Don’t know if that’s going to change any time soon.”

“But what about it, hey? Who do you like better, Marilyn or Kirsten?” the first had persisted, as though he had something at stake on his answer.

“If they were both standing here,” he said tactfully, pausing to sip his scotch, looking down the bar at them, “Kirsten Dunst would look like an ordinary woman, but Marilyn’d drop your jaw.”

“That’s right,” the one old man said gravely.

“Drop your jaw all the way to the floor,” the other chanted, a big smile on his face.

They turned back to the bartender, continuing their reveries, while the bartender set them up for another round. He nursed his scotch, returning again to his own thoughts.

Marilyn was powerfully sexual. She projected the image, though, of a woman powerless to come to terms with her allure, as though it were something apart from her—as though her sexuality was as much a mystery to her as to men.

With Natalie Wood it was different. With her it wasn’t sex that appealed so much as an ineffable sweetness, something undefinable that looked out from her eyes, no matter what kind of character she played. It was an innocent sweetness made all the more compelling by her beauty and the air of glamour and sophistication that surrounded her—Natalie as Gypsy! He thought how impossible it would be to be Natalie Wood today. She would, of course, if *Gypsy* were made in our time, have to strip to the skin on camera, and once that happened, the Natalie of old would be gone, unrecoverable. She would have faded into Sharon Stone spreading her legs without underpants on in front of interrogating cops!

He finished his drink, signed to the two old men goodbye, and walked into the warm humid darkness. Wrapped in his thoughts, unobservant, he stepped off the curb to cross the street, all whitely illuminated by halogen lamps, when the sound of a car breaking caused him to reflexively step back onto the curb. Then he saw Natalie drive by. It was her reaction to him that snapped him back. When she saw him, she screamed up the block. She turned at the traffic light, which was red, and disappeared around the corner, racing as fast as she could go. He heard the car still, it’s engine roaring, though he couldn’t see it anymore.

“What’s that about?” he wondered. He wondered, also, if she had the baby with her. Where could she be going this time of night? There were few cars on the streets, and at this hour, the only places open were bars and supermarkets. He walked back to Natalie’s apartment and stood at the door listening. He knocked gently, in case she had gotten a neighbor to sit for her. But nobody came to the door. The baby might have been left in there. But what could he do not having a key?

“Would she have left the baby alone?” he wondered. He decided she just might have and suspected that as soon as it fell asleep, she took off. He wondered if she did this sort of thing often. He really didn’t know. Still standing at the door, he decided to see if the superintendent would let him in. The super lived in the next building over, in the first apartment at the entryway. He walked over there and roused the man out of bed and, apologizing, explained about his sister and the baby. But the super, annoyed at being wakened, refused at first to go there and let him in, saying it was against the law. But when he threatened to call the police and force the issue, keeping him up half the night in the process, the super relented and grabbed his keys, and together they crossed over to Natalie’s building.

“It’s against the law to do this, you know,” the super complained again.

"I know," he replied, "It's also against the law to let harm come to an infant when you can prevent it. You can come in too if you want. I just want to look in the bedroom and see if the baby's there. If it's not, fine. We'll leave. If it is, I'm going to stay until my sister gets back."

They both looked into the bedroom, a chaos of disorder, and, seeing the baby sleeping in its crib, quietly backed out. The super was astonished and said he would have to report his sister to the police, that that was his job.

"I have no problem with that," he said, "but do it in the morning. There's no point in doing it now, she's not here."

Since Natalie was breast feeding, he expected she would be back in a couple of hours at the most. He wondered if she was out getting herself soused. Did she feed the baby after doing that? He was getting angrier and angrier at the thought of her not being there. He was going to give her hell when she returned, and if she screamed and raged, well, let her. He would frighten her by telling her about the super calling the cops. Maybe that would shake some sense into her. He had given up trying to keep Natalie's apartment clean, so he ignored the mess and sat on the couch and tried to relax, and after a while, he stretched himself out and fell asleep.

He was wakened early in the morning by the baby's crying. It was still dark. He went into the bedroom and picked it up. It was drenched and hungry and Natalie wasn't there. She had not come home; at least, if she had, she hadn't wakened him, and she had left again. What was he going to do? He had to be at work in a couple of hours. He couldn't feed the baby himself, and he had no one to leave it with.

Natalie couldn't abide order and regularity. She wouldn't let him pay for day care, preferring to keep the baby with her when she was between jobs, as she was now, and finding day care on her own when she worked. Then, when she failed to pay the bills, and the day care refused any longer to take the baby, she would quit her job. It was all too complicated and messed up. Why she couldn't cope with the simplest arrangements for living was a mystery. And why she wouldn't let him help was even more mysterious. Order and support and a sense of security threatened her. She preferred chaos—as though all that mattered was the newness of each minute.

When he had the baby changed, he found a pacifier on the floor beside the crib, washed it in the bathroom sink, and stuck it in the baby's mouth. But it worked for only half a minute. Then the baby screamed harder, and he began to feel frayed and nervous. After pacing the room and running his hand through his hair over and over, he decided he had to do something, and the only person he could think of to ask for help was the super. So he packed some things for the baby, wrapped her in a blanket, picked her up and carried her to the super's apartment in the next building.

When the super came to the door, he seemed almost to fall backward at the sight of him holding the baby, and, surprised, said, "Your sister, she ain't back?"

"No," he said. "I need help."

"What you want me t'do? I can't take 'er!"

"I'll pay, I'll pay your wife to baby-sit for today. Just today. My sister'll be back after that."

"What if she aint?"

"Don't even think it. She'll be."

"I have t'call the police, you know. Last night. I have t'do that."

"Call. Serve her right. She should be here now. I swear, that woman!"

He stood helplessly in front of the open door, holding the wrapped baby which began, finally, to scream. She was hungry and she wasn't being fed and he had no idea how to provide for her. The super stood looking skeptically at them, shaking his head, making no motion to take the baby or let him in. Finally, his wife came, wrapped in a pink terrycloth robe and wearing furry slippers, and, looking out the door, asked what was going on. She stepped out and took the child, scolding her husband and ordering him to take the bag.

As she took the baby out of his arms, he told her his sister was breast feeding and asked if she wanted him to buy anything to feed the baby with.

"Nothing," she said. "It's old enough for milk. It has teeth. Boy or girl?" she asked.

"Girl," he said through the door, relieved, "her name is Natalie, almost a year."

"Don't worry, come for her when you can," the woman said, confident and commanding.

"Thank God," he thought as he walked back to his apartment. It was chilly and cloudy, as dismal a morning as he felt. He couldn't believe his sister had taken off and not come back.

Natalie did not come back that day, nor did she the next, nor the next. Finally, he had moved all the baby's things from his sister's apartment to his own. The super's wife was glad to sit the baby for the extra income, and after a week, they all settled into a working routine. A month had passed when he got the first postcard. In a barely legible scribble, it said, "*Im ok, bene to Seattle, no work, living in my car. Hows baby. Dont worry. Take care of little Nat. Sory.*" The card was posted from Oregon, so he assumed she was traveling south. He worried about her living in her car. Why would she do that? Give up her life where she had her baby and her brother, an apartment, and opportunities for work?

Postcards came regularly after that—once a month, each one marking the progress of her movements, and each one containing a worse scribble than the last, out of which he could make nothing except the words "little Nat" and "Sory" at the end. After eleven months on the road she seemed to have settled in Los Angeles. He had gotten three postcards now from there. He was thinking how he could find her when he got a package in the mail. It was a little box with a video cassette in it. He put it in his VCR, expecting it to be a message from Natalie, her having made friends, perhaps, with someone who owned a camcorder, or perhaps even paying to have the recording made. He was glad, because he couldn't read her writing. What he saw filled him with dread.

She had made her way slowly over many months to Los Angeles. He imagined her dreaming along the way of what would become of her there—her looks would get noticed, she would become an actor, she would be a new Natalie Wood. But the reality would be different—living out of her car, washing and brushing her teeth and hair in gas station toilets, God! She would be desperate. And here she was, stark naked—a round-eyed, dark-haired, innocent-looking girl doing vile and bestial things with two men. And, Oh! That smile. It was a knife in his heart. Why did she send it? Did she hate him so much? The note said, "Im in the movies now." That's all.

He turned it off and sat there numb. He felt the spitefulness in it, in the smile when she looked into the camera. It was a smile addressed to him. He was being accused, slapped in the face, punished. Why else would she send it? He sat back, letting little Nat cry, and thought about

the years since their parents died in the crash, and, tending to the child at last, weary, he gave up, concluding nothing. He felt sick and guilty. Natalie! After little Nat had gone to sleep, he took the tape her mother sent out of the VCR and slipped in *Rebel Without a Cause*. Natalie Wood was only a child in this movie. So much of her life ahead of her. So much like his own Natalie. She played the tough, run-around, street-smart kid with an uptight, cold-hearted father who couldn't stand her adolescent heat for fear of his own lusts. But in the home she was simply the confused kid yearning to be loved. He watched the movie attentive to the family dynamics that drove the teenagers into their desperate lives, trying to understand that smile on all fours. Those eyes beamed right into him. Was he domineering? Was he meek? He watched Natalie Wood and saw his sister as he remembered her.

The next month he received a larger package. He had to retrieve it from the post office, and on his way back he felt the dread that depressed him when the tape came the month before. He had an obligation to open it—she wasn't forgetting him and little Nat, and that meant hope for her. He stopped at the super's and picked up his niece, who was walking on her own now and beginning to talk. He hugged her and picked her up and carried her outside, where he put her down and took her hand and walked at her pace back to his apartment.

He settled her in front of the television and went to work on the package. Dreading what he would find inside, he was surprised to see that it contained clothes and toys for little Nat, and astonished at what he found in a sealed envelope—a thousand-dollar money order and a long typed letter to him! She said she was earning big money and would be able to send the same amount to be put away for little Nat each month. She said he could use some of it to buy her things and help pay for her day care, but some of it should be put away each month. The letter continued:

I no you dont like wat im doing I like it. Thats all that maters. I make alot of mony more than you. I live in a fine place with other girls. We all make alot of mony. We have fun. Dont worry because I no waht im doing. I go to church every sunday with a frend. I pray to god that things get better and thy do all the time. I have a boyfriend we go out to eat at fancy restarants his names thumper. I have nice clothes. Everyday is better than yesterday. Soon I will be rich i have so much mony. I go to church and thank god for all he has given me. If I had little Nat I cudnt do what I do. Which I like. You saw in the tape wat I do. Dont' be mad. Mom and dad wud be mad. Thay all ways said I was bad. Dad said I was wikked. You were gone most of the time you dont no. James. Wat Dad did. Im not wikked. Im just me do'nt hate me. please.

The letter continued for another page, telling him about her friends, describing the luxuries she lived amid, and describing the places she liked to go in the city. He sat down and reread it, then read it again. There was no sign of spite in it, no sign that she resented him—just the opposite. She seemed to care very much for him and was pleading for understanding. What could he possibly tell her? Come home? Live as a dependent upon him? Earn minimum wage? Besides, she was careful not to put a return address on any of the postcards or on this package and letter.

Still, he was depressed by the letter. Natalie was naïve. She didn't think about things, she never did. She lived only for the moment. She might get AIDS—not to mention other diseases. Worse, she was living in a world that, in spite of its luxury, could suddenly turn menacing. All was fine with her for the moment. How long would it last?

The next month an envelop came with another thousand-dollar money order folded in a sheet of paper on which Natalie had handwritten, "For little Nat, kiss her for me." A month later another package arrived. It contained more toys and clothes for Nat and a small package wrapped in brown paper with his name on it. When he opened it, he felt his stomach drop. It was cash—ten thousand dollars worth. He sat and stared at it, sure it was an omen of something awful about to happen. There was a handwritten note folded in with the bills

saying, "Put this away for Nat and me." He was frightened. What did it mean?

When *Splendor* was over, he turned off the VCR and the television and sat back. Little Nat was sleeping. She was very much like her mother. She had the same eyes, though her face was a little rounder. And she had her mother's mannerisms already. She would tilt her face downwards and lift her round eyes up and smile. The expression conveyed a sense of knowingness, of subtlety of feeling. But he knew it was empty. She was too young. It was a reflexive smile, nothing more. There was no worldliness behind his sister's beautiful eyes, either, just a stupidity that made him brood and worry.

Next month Little Nat would be two years old. Her mother will have missed both her birthdays, and he was feeling blue over the lost time and over the fact that little Nat didn't know her mother, wouldn't even recognize her if she saw her.

The birthday came and passed and no package came. Since Natalie first began sending postcards, this was the first month to pass without his hearing from her. His sense of dread had returned. She would not have forgotten little Nat's birthday. If she didn't send a package it was because something had happened. He was sure of it. He felt helpless. She didn't trust him enough to let him know where she lived or to give him any means to get in touch with her. She wanted to keep him safely at arm's length, out of her life, but kept in touch with him and little Nat out of some need he felt was the same as his own, the need that drove him to return from Chicago and live near her.

He felt guilty, also, for not just going to Los Angeles right from the start and trying to find her. He had gone to the public library and found maps of Los Angeles. He knew it was the largest of U.S. cities, but he couldn't conceptualize its vastness until he had begun looking at the maps. Discouraged, he had dialed information and asked if they had a number for his sister. Of course, after dialing the more than half a dozen he got under her name, he knew she was too cunning to leave herself open to discovery that way.

She didn't want to be found, but neither did she want to lose touch. But now, he felt, that is just what has happened. There was nothing he could do. Was it, he thought, a good thing for little Nat not to know her mother? He decided it wasn't. She had fallen asleep sitting on his lap looking at a picture book of Mother Goose rhymes. After putting her in her crib and cleaning up after their supper, he was drifting to sleep himself in the chair when he was startled awake by a banging on the door.

He heard mumbled talking in the hall and swung the door open. She was there. She leaped in at him and threw her arms around his shoulders with a cry of delight and he hugged her tightly in return. A man stood in the hall looking grimly at them, and as he swung his sister happily around and into the living room, the man stepped in himself and shut the door.

"I want to see Nat!" she said as soon as he put her down.

He motioned to the bedroom and as she dashed to it he followed her in. The man she came with, still unIntroduced, stayed in the living room. He hung in the doorway of the bedroom as Natalie stooped over the crib and kissed her daughter, brushing the hair off the side of her face. Looking over his shoulder, he saw the man, unsmiling and grim, looking directly at him. A sense of dread filled him as he thought, "This is not good." Their eyes met and held for a moment. The strange man's face was pasty white and expressionless, and there was a flatness in his eyes that deepened the dread. He wore a dark brown leather jacket over a silk, lime-colored shirt that was opened at the collar, revealing a gold chain around his neck, and black trousers and shiny black shoes. His red hair was pulled tight over the top and sides of his head and gathered into a short ponytail that had a stiff upward curl as though it was

hardened by hairspray. He turned back to the bedroom and looked at his sister and saw she was being careful not to wake little Nat. She was sniffing. She had something in her hand that she placed beside the sleeping child, but he couldn't make out what it was. Natalie turned then and walked towards him. Her expression had changed from tearful to grim, much like the mood of her companion.

"James, James, James," she said, coming into the living room and turning herself round, as though to show herself off, "look at me, look at me, am I dressed to kill?" she said. She was. She was beautiful. She was wearing designer clothes, no doubt—a lime-colored jumper, skimpy at the top, but flaring at the hips and widening sail-like as the material fell to the ankle, with a wide-collared cream-colored jacket of a different material over her shoulders that fell away from her bodice, revealing a generous portion of her breasts. Her neck was ornamented in gold, like the man's, but she also had several turns of gold on each of her wrists and gold on her fingers. Between the two of them, they wore thousands of dollars worth of it. He imagined the looks they drew as they sauntered, coordinated in lime, through airports, caught cabs out on the streets, and made their way, finally, to town, to the apartment building, and to the apartment. He wanted to laugh, but the impulse was stilled as he looked at her. At her and her companion.

"James," Natalie said, having changed the mood, "this is my boyfriend, Thumper. Remember I told you about him?"

"Yes," James said, "I remember. You go out to dinner in fancy restaurants, you said."

"Ye-e-s," Natalie said, "You remember!" She clapped her hands as she feigned delight.

He extended a hand to Thumper who took it shyly and flushed, his flatness of expression changing to an adolescent awkwardness. He knew the moment he touched hands with the man that he misjudged him, misjudged his sister as well. They were both afraid of him, of his judgment, and they had steeled themselves to brave it so Natalie could see little Nat. He felt terrible and wanted to put them at ease. He made them drinks, and Natalie went into the bedroom every ten minutes to look at little Nat, and came back flushed but always with that same hint of grimness in her face that he saw the first time. And just as the first time, she changed the mood by turning bright and shouting about one thing or another—Los Angeles is so beautiful! The people are so different! She's so happy, she and Thumper own their own house! And on and on.

It became obvious that something was wrong. Natalie talked feverishly, never leaving an opening for him to ask her anything she didn't want to talk about. Finally, he rose and crossed over to his sister, put his hand on her back, bent over, and kissed her on the mouth as she was gibbering, and when she quieted, he said, "You've been living high, Nat, and I'm glad for you. But are you going to go on doing what you've been doing?"

"Yea," she said petulantly. "There's too much money to stop. Besides, why should I? It's not your life, it's mine." Her face had been heated by excitement and glowed with the pleasure of seeing little Nat. But now she fell into the couch and sagged, the tension having gone out of her.

"I don't want to stop you. That's not what I meant, Nat," he said, feeling guilty, as though he had hurt her.

Thumper had become rigid and grim when Natalie sat back and became silent. The grimness was menacing. He paused, looking at the gold-throated man sitting on the couch beside his sister, and the dread he felt earlier returned. He wasn't sure how to judge Thumper. He seemed by turns shy and threatening. During the hour his sister had run on and on, Thumper

said nothing. He just sat quietly and listened.

“Don’t you want to live someday with little Nat?” he said to both of them, apologetically, trying to soften the expression in Thumper’s white face, soften that look in his eyes. “Don’t you want to take her home with you? Won’t you, at some time, have enough money to stop so you can do that?”

“You don’t understand, James. I’m sorry. I really am,” Nat said pleadingly, on the edge of tears. She had paled and her hands began to tremble in her lap. He was afraid when he saw that. He knew it was a sign of something gone terribly wrong.

“There’s no stopping. I’m not a mother anymore. I never was, you know that, no more than I was a sister.” She held her hand up to stop him from talking, shaking her head warningly, and went on, looking up at him with her round eyes, “It’s too late now. What’s done is done. Oh, James, I’m so sorry. I’m just nobody, you know, nothing, even in the films. People who watch them think I’m somebody else. Even Dad said it. You don’t know, James, because you were gone already. Dad said it, too, ‘You’re nobody, Nat, you’re just plain nobody, you have no soul. You’re not even going to hell when you die.’ That’s what he said to me—‘You’re not even going to hell when you die.’”

“What’s this talk about dying? What are you saying, Nat?”

“Nothing. Nothing. It’s just my mood,” she said, reaching to touch Thumper’s hand. She dried her eyes and he could see her making an effort to control the trembling. Thumper sat still, his face as stony and expressionless as when he first saw him in the hall.

She got up and made another call on little Nat, leaving him and Thumper alone. Thumper lit a cigarette and he went to the kitchen to get an ashtray from a cupboard. When he returned, Thumper said, ominously, “We’re not going to stay much longer. Your sister’s good looking. The best looking. Remember that.”

His stomach dropped. The man was inscrutable; he couldn’t tell if Thumper was praising his sister or eulogizing her. He had the feeling that Thumper had just told him something, but he didn’t know what.

Natalie came back and once again began to enliven the mood with talk about her wardrobe, the places she goes, and the glamorous people she has come to know. He listened to her and let her cheerfulness sway him.

But then she paused and became grave, as though the pendulum arm had just swung. “You didn’t live at home in those last years, James, you don’t know how hard dad was. How mean he was. I’m nobody, James, nobody. Dad knew it and said it.” She spoke so earnestly he felt that this was why she was here, to tell him this, to tell him what their father said, not to see little Nat.

“Why? Why did he say that? What did you do?” he said. He couldn’t see his father saying such things—it was too unlike him, especially since Natalie was so wounded by it. He tried to imagine the two of them, in the kitchen of the old house, facing off in an argument and his father scolding her with that condemnation. But Natalie had started to cry when he came near her, and, sympathetic, he looked at her, remembering her writing something about their father in that long letter packed in the first box that came for little Nat.

She wouldn’t respond to sympathy, pushing him away when he tried to comfort her. Her shoulders drooped, but at the same time she pulled herself together and looked defiantly at him. Thumper got up from the couch and came to him, grabbing him by the arm and drawing him aside, turning him around and pushing against his back until he steered him into the

kitchen.

"We can't stay any longer, James," Thumper said, sadly and so gently that he once again felt he had misjudged this man. He looked at Thumper, trying to figure out who he was.

"We knew it would be like this," Thumper continued in the same tone. "Too bad. But Natalie knew it would. You know, it's all coming to an end. She just can't say so, because not thinking it is the only way she can live. You'll know what I mean later. Don't ask me to explain. Stay here. Don't make it harder on Nat. She'll fall apart if you go back in there. Just let us leave, let us get out. Things'll be OK for you then."

Thumper looked very unsentimental saying goodbye, and not at all grim or menacing. He took his bother-in-law's hand, for that was the impression he gave, though he wasn't legally married to Nat, and shook it firmly. He turned and walked into the living room. In a minute the two of them were gone, the sound of the door clicking shut leaving the apartment feeling ghostly still.

Little Nat was sleeping soundly in the bedroom. What had come and gone never entered her dreams. He went back to his chair in the living room, thinking about his father, thinking what could have made him say those things to Natalie—things that wounded her so deeply. His father was a decent man and knowledgeable about the world—not the kind of man who would be so shocked by his daughter's behavior, whatever it might have been, to say such things. But apparently he had. His father saw something in Natalie that made him despair, for it seemed to him only despair could explain his father's saying to his own daughter that she had no soul. He wondered now if his father didn't send himself to hell by the accident, himself and their mother. There were things he would never know about his father, things his own nature would keep him from fathoming. There are things, sometimes, that life keeps buried, so we will never know the truth. He knew he couldn't imagine what those things might be. But Natalie knew. She threw herself into the life of the moment, perhaps, so she would forget.

In the morning, when little Nat woke, he went to her and found her playing in her crib amid dozens and dozens of hundred dollar bills. She had tossed them out by the handful onto the floor and scattered them all over the mattress. When he gathered them up and counted them, they made an astonishing fifty thousand dollars. He knew he would never see his sister again. "*Not thinking it is the only way she can live. You'll know what I mean,*" Thumper said, "*later.*" What was she going to? What were they both going to? Was Thumper brave? Or stupid? Or was he the killer? He cringed. He didn't want to know. But he was already mourning.

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