

SHOPPING

Sherry Kramer

“I can’t hold this here another second longer, I can’t” Mary says, out loud, and there are tears in her eyes and her back stabs at her, but Terry is still outside talking. Terry is not even bothering to look at the window display she has warned Mary would be absolutely ruined if Mary moves so much as a fraction of an inch. And so Mary somehow holds the magenta silk robe up in the air, higher than she can hold it, longer than she has held anything in her life.

“Oh you poor dear, you still holding that thing? Put it down, put it down” Terry says, as she breezes back into the shop. She pulls the robe out from Mary’s clenched fingers. “I never dreamed you’d still be holding it, I could tell it was all wrong the instant I saw it from the street. And then that chatty Mrs. McMahon came by and--oh look, I’ve talked the morning away” she says, glancing at her watch. She hands Mary a ten dollar bill. “Remember this time, Mary. Mine with, Charlotte’s without.”

The man at the delicatessen smiles when he sees Mary come in. She tries, as she always tries, not to smile back.

“Pretty” he says, pointing at her.

“My necklace?” she says, and can’t help putting her hand up, to cover it.

“Necklace” he repeats, in his strong Greek accent.

“Necklace. Funny.” He winks at the young boy slicing cheese, and says in a low whisper he believes, it is true, that Mary can’t hear, “Never heard them called that before.” He laughs, and jabs the young boy in the ribs.

“I’d like a roast beef and a pastrami on--”

“Sure, sure. Everyday you tell me. Roast beef on rye, pastrami on rye. Roast beef and pastrami. You think I got no mind? I expecting you, see?” He pats a brown sack sitting on the counter, the top folded, a small wet spot already visible on the side from an improperly placed pickle. “Pretty girls get extra special service from Felix. Service with a smile.”

Mary looks at the sack. She knows what is in there. A roast beef with, and a pastrami without. She wonders if he does this on purpose. She knows she should say, “The pastrami is supposed to be with, the roast beef without, and the smile is an unnecessary condiment.” She knows she should hold up the sack, say this to him, and smile. But instead it is all she can do to take the bag and wait for her change, all hunched over to hide whatever Felix had been pointing at.

On the way back to the shop she knows that everyone she passes will look at her and know that she is just a salesgirl sent out to fetch a bag of lunch. It’s hard for her to remember that she’s a pretty girl on her way back to the shop. A pretty girl like her, Mary’s father always used to tell her, should never had to put up with stuff like that from an ugly old man at a meat counter. Everyday, at the corner of

Spruce and Beacon, holding the same bag, carrying Charlotte and Terry the same change, Mary passes the spot where, on the way to the delicatessen earlier in the day she had promised herself that this time, she would put the change in her pocket, eat the sandwiches herself, and keep on walking.

While Charlotte and Terry eat their sandwiches in the back room, Mary minds the store.

Mary watches a woman, dressed in expensive clothing that looks as though it only recently has begun, in two or three places, to pucker and ride up, too tight on her, push her way through the front door with her right arm pumping the rest of her body hard. Mary can find a thousand things wrong with the woman's face, which objectively has only its nose against it, in the space of time it takes the woman to walk the length of the shop to the counter, waving a black jacket back and forth in front of her. The jacket lands on the counter.

“This is just what it is like. If I were to buy a car, as is, say it was a used car, okay? Say I took a look at it, and that's how I bought it, as is. Well, I get the car home, and it turns out that the tires are...well, say they've dissolved on the way home, say they're...marshmallow, say they're...anything that you can think of that is not a tire. The tires only happen to look like, they give like the illusion of tires, okay? Well, I could take that car back.

“This jacket. This jacket was bought on sale, as is, but it was bought as a black jacket, and it turns out that it only appears, it only pretends to be a black jacket. In reality the black is entirely separate from the jacket. Well, visiting the jacket would be more precise.

“There is something in my eye. But as you can see, now I’ve got all this black from the jacket all over my hands. I try to scoop whatever is in my eye out with my little finger. Usually, no matter what you have gotten yourself into, your little finger tends to be more or less clean of it. They say that the little finger, like the little toe and the wings of chickens, is vestigial, and will soon disappear. From lack of use. In the future we will probably not have to worry about dirt in our eyes or wear jackets, so black jackets where the black does not stay will concern no one. But if this should turn out to not be the case then we will certainly miss our little fingers.”

The woman gets what is in her eye out. She notices that her little finger has somehow managed to pick up as much black as her index, her forefinger, even her thumb. She looks at the thing that was in her eye (which is very hard to see). She looks at the dirt that outlines every one of her fingers, including the fourth, but she can’t remember that it is known as the ring finger, and doesn’t know how else to refer to it, even to herself. “Why doesn’t it have a name of its own” she wonders, and then realizes that it must; it must be somebody else’s fault that she can’t remember it.

“I want this jacket. I am not asking to return it. What I want from you, what I want from this store, is dry cleaning. What if I were to take it to the dry cleaners myself and something were to happen? Who is to say how much black this jacket is prepared to hold? As I say, I want this jacket. I am not attempting to return it. I paid money for this jacket because that was what this jacket was worth to me, my money. It is a contract, to my way of thinking. There are all kinds of Latin phrases available to me at this point, if we need to get legal.” The woman slides

the jacket across the counter so it just touches Mary's arm. "I hope that won't be necessary."

Mary tells herself that she is a pretty girl. Her father always said so. Her father's friends sometimes looked too long at her legs but they always mentioned her smile. She needs that smile now. She is terrified. Sometimes, she is a pretty girl, but not when she is trying not to cry by telling herself she is one. At moments like these, Mary is distinctly not pretty and next to tears.

"Oh God" Sara thinks, trying to push the jacket into Mary's hand, "I hope she doesn't start crying on me, that's all I need, this baby bitch crying on me, this bundle of rare goods, this star of country and western wet dreams, that's all I need." Sara smiles and leans a little closer.

"Honey, did you hear what I said? About this jacket?"

Mary moves from behind the counter and walks as fast as she can, hoping the lady notices just how fast she's walking back to the back room for help.

Sara notices.

Sara would have noticed Mary's walk if Mary had been taking her own sweet time or dancing the two step backwards. Sara likes to watch 17 year old salesgirls, she likes to see them tottering on their spike heels, the high tilt of their ass bobbing on the long legs, perfectly outlined in the inevitable tight, front slit skirt. "Yes, we're something special, aren't we" Sara thinks, "we ought to wear a sign. Just another snot nosed tight ass with no idea of how to give it away but goddamn you or your boss had better sweet-talk me about this jacket."

Terry looks up from her pastrami as Mary stumbles into the back room.

“Terry--”

“Yes, Mary dear, what is it?”

“There’s a woman, bought a jacket, on sale, but--”

“Next time, please, my mayonnaise, Mary?” Terry reminds her, waving the remains of her lunch in the air above her well cared for lap. Then she sighs. Obviously, she can ask for mayo till the cows come home, Mary seems so sweet, but she must be doing this on purpose. She decides to give up on the mayo. “On sale? You know our policy. You’ve been here, what, two weeks? Well you can’t expect Charlotte or myself to come running to the rescue every time some not overly well heeled matron whose husband has made one bad investment too many attempts to hold her marriage together at my expense. Go on, shoo, go on.”

Mary does not go. “But--”

“Oh, and next time, Charlotte’s just too nice to bother you with it, but--”

“It doesn’t matter, really” Charlotte protests, “really, Mary, it doesn’t.”

“Of course it matters.”

“I can just pick them off, really, I can.”

“You must remember to tell them no pickles on Charlotte’s. She’s allergic to them.”

“I’m not really allergic to them, I just--”

“But they leave that piss green edged spot on the roll. That’s what you said, isn’t it, Charlotte? So try and remember, Mary” she says, and she smiles.

“Ma’am?” Mary calls across to Sara. “Ma’am?” Ma’am. She hates the word, she hates Terry, she hates Charlotte only slightly less, she hates the man at the meat counter, and she hates the woman she’s calling Ma’am. “She’ll be with you in a minute” she says, still standing close to the curtains that divide the back room from the rest of the shop, knowing that Terry will hear, and that it will not be a minute. She could, at this juncture, stay put and wait out Terry’s emergence from the back, but Mary decides to get up close and call the woman “Ma’am” again, just because she hates the word so much.

Brushing against the merchandise, weaving in and out of the racks, Mary feels something she calls “Creeping Scarlet.” Ma’am, Ma’am, Ma’am. Lordy, Miz Scarlet O’Hara. Mary sweeps along the aisles, hearing the rustle of her ante-bellum lace and satin, and wishes she had something easy to do, like planting turnips or marrying Clark Gable, anything easy like that a heroine would gladly do. “As God is mah witness” she swears to herself “Ah will neveh work in a Newberry Street boutique again.”

Another woman walks into the shop. Mary changes course and goes up to her.

“May Ah help youall” becomes “ May I help you” just in time. The woman says that she is “Just looking.”

Mary has sworn that on her last day in this damn shop (and there will be a last day, she promises herself, soon) on her last day she

will tell every last bitch who says she is “just looking” to go to a goddamned movie.

Mary has no way of knowing that this particular woman has already, without any assistance from her, found just exactly what she is looking for: Sara Vogal, standing at the main register, rubbing the sleeve of a black jacket in her hands.

Evelyn knows this is not the way Sara would have planned it. Sara would have imagined their reunion in a country that was a country to her. France--the Riviera at dusk. Italy-- either coast. Sara would not be wearing that trendy outfit. Evelyn watches as Sara bends over slightly. “Yes, there’s no doubt about it” Evelyn thinks “Sara’s put on a few.” Sara, if she had planned this meeting, would not have put on that weight.

Sara rubs the black sleeve for all she is worth. She notes the blackened condition of her hands with satisfaction, and some disgust. “Black enough” she thinks.

Evelyn, moving closer and closer to her, thinks how typical this is of Sara. “Just like her--to base the purchase of an article of clothing on the way it will feel to someone else when they are touching her.”

They are only a few feet apart. Sara hears someone coming up behind her. Prepared to launch into an abbreviated version of the black-jacket-contract injured-shopper speech, Sara turns, to face, not the owner--but Evelyn.

The women stand there, very still, staring at each other.

Mary, under pretext of dusting the display, is talking to the redheaded mannequin in the window.

“Sugar pie. Youall’s tiny feet are just soooo precious they wouldn’t support ah hummin’bird on his way to tea. Ah just neveh do git tired of changin’ yur dainty slippers.” Mary coos. Mary and the redhead share a secret. Last night Mary sold the last pair of size five Channel slings right off the redhead. The woman who bought them inspected them carefully, and then suggested she receive a slight discount, since the shoes looked as if they’d been worn. Mary insisted they hadn’t been, absolutely refused to discuss a floor sample reduction, and stayed behind the counter where her size five feet wouldn’t show. After the woman had gone, Mary let the red head know she was wise to what was going on. “Been dancin’ after the shop closes, ain’t you? Ah done tole you once, I done tole you ah hundret times--no more dancin’! It’s wearing the merchandise out.”

Mary looks over her shoulder in the direction of the main counter in time to see Sara raise a dirty black hand up to Evelyn’s face. Mary can see that the swirls and horizontal joint lines of the woman’s fingers are boldfaced by the dye, making her hand look like the hand of someone who works in ink, like something made by that printer, etched in artists’ thick, off-white paper.

Mary comes closer, to see better, but Sara drops her hand and the two women start to say something that resembles the word “well.” They start to say it, but at the end of the word, their mouths open up and the word falls back into their throats, and it is a half a word and a whole, caught breath that Mary hears. Mary tells herself that she can see the two double ll’s trapped in their throats, like sudden Adam’s apples, for certainly something is lodged there. The breathing of the two women accelerates, as if trying to pass some obstruction.

And then they begin laughing. Sweeping, shaking, bottomed out laughing, and Mary cannot stand not knowing what is so funny. It isn't fair. Two not all that attractive women who have not said one whole word to each other laughing like that, with all their imperfect teeth showing, laughing the way men in beer commercials laugh, as if they had everything in the world that they wanted and were going to keep on getting it, too, confident that there were, after all, whole factories devoted to the manufacture and warehouses stacked high with this happiness, this very easily more where this came from, ordinary, everyday for everyone but Mary happiness, and Mary reminds herself quickly that she is prettier than either of these women, prettier than both of them put together, a pretty girl a pretty girl a pretty girl.

Terry hurries out of the back room and takes her position behind the main counter. She looks Sara over briefly. "Was there something I can do for you?"

"Do? You? Do for me? You?" Sara cannot help laughing. Sara can tell that Terry wouldn't do anything for her if it were up to her, but she still looks carefully at Terry, inspecting her eyes and her breasts and her hands and her thighs for some hint of what Terry might be able to do for her if she would, that is.

Mary points to the black jacket. "She wants to return this jacket."

"I don't want to return it, I--"

"This jacket?" Terry makes a show of holding it up to the light. "This jacket?"

"The black" Mary says "the black, it won't stay."

"What do you mean, Mary, the black won't stay?"

“On the jacket, it won’t stay, it’s just---visiting, it’s--”

“Visiting, Mary? Oh Mary.” Terry drops the jacket, disgusted that she will be forced to break in a new girl so soon after breaking Mary in, vowing never to be a soft touch for a sad story ever again.

Mary grabs the jacket and rubs it between her hands.

“Please, just look” she begs, holding her dirty hands, palm up, in front of her.

Terry looks at Mary’s hands without much interest. She thinks how ugly, how much like a man’s a woman’s hand can look when there is dirt under the nails and in the creases, and in a reflex action is about to check and make sure she has not been similarly contaminated by the jacket, when Sara’s black hand prods her arm.

“I’ll give you credit” she says, rubbing the place where Sara has touched her.

“I don’t want credit, I want the jacket.”

“You’ve got the jacket.”

“I want dry-cleaning.”

“Two doors down.”

“I want you to take it, to be responsible, if something happens.”

“I said, I’ll give you credit.”

“I don’t want credit.”

“I don’t give refunds.”

“I don’t want a refund. I want dry-cleaning.”

“Keep your receipt.”

“I don’t want a receipt. I want this jacket. And I want it black.”

“Then I’m afraid I can’t do anything for you.”

Sara and Evelyn start laughing again.

“I can give you credit.” Terry says, as Sara and Evelyn throw their arms around each other and wail with laughter. Terry turns hard on the spike heels of her high heeled boots and, in an attempt to keep from seeing Evelyn and Sara touch each other any more than has already been more than enough, heads for the back room.

“Mary, write it up” she calls back over her shoulder.

Sara and Evelyn turn in tandem to watch Terry’s perfectly formed ass jerking back and forth under the expensive skirt. They point at it and chant, wagging their fingers back and forth, “tic-tock, tic -tock, the mouse ran up the clock.” When Terry and her ass disappear behind the back room curtain, Evelyn and Sara’s rhythm finding fingers find more familiar (less professionally constructed and maintained, it’s true) double-time keepers, conveniently within reach. They face each other and grab on tight. “Tick-tock, tick-tock.” They wiggle and they squeeze and they grind.

Mary ducks behind the counter and waits for it to be over. When it doesn’t get over she decides to come up slowly.

“I’m wri-writing it up” she says.

“Don’t write it up” Sara tells her, while she squeezes two round handfuls of Evelyn through a layer of last year’s plaid. “I’ve decided to take it out. Take all of it out. In trade.” Sara lets go of Evelyn, puts her dirty hands on her hips, and flashes Mary a big smile.

Evelyn gasps. “Sara” she giggles, looking Mary up and down. “Sara, really.”

Sara looks at Evelyn looking Mary up and down.

“Evelyn, really!” Sara says, looking Mary up and down. “How could you think I meant--” and the two of them are holding on and laughing again.

Mary wants to tell herself that she is a pretty girl, but the way the two women looked her up and down somehow makes her realize that she wishes she weren't, that she wishes no one would ever look her up and down like this, that when she is repeating the phrase “I'm a pretty girl” and carrying a damn pastrami and a damn roast beef in a pickle spotted paper bag and keeping her eyes focused on the three feet of sidewalk in front of her, hating and repeating and wanting, so bad, that what she really wants is not to be pretty, to be nothing near pretty, to be able to walk down the sidewalk and never have to be afraid that everyone who looks at her will ever bother to think that she pretty, but really not all that pretty a girl, ever again.

That's what Mary wants.

Mary dear, wake up.” Sara claps her hands. “I'm talking to you.” She points in the direction of the summer silks. “I said that dress and that and that. Into the dressing room. And don't tell me there's a limit. I know all about limits. Don't tell me only two dresses at a time in the dressing room, little Mary. That and that and that.” Sara offers her arm to Evelyn, who takes it, and the two of them promenade in through the curtains of the smallest dressing room in the store.

Mary has been waiting since she started here for a woman to say “that and that and that into the dressing room” and forget to say

what size. Accurately guessing the dress size of women who forget to say what size is the closest thing to on the job training that Terry and Charlotte have bothered to give her. Though its practical application in the world outside is limited to a position at the Weight and Height Booth at the County Fair, it is at least something Mary can say she can do well. Even Terry agrees she has a natural knack for it.

Mary pulls all three dresses in the next size smaller than the one she knows will fit.

She uses her sweet salesgirl's imitation of Terry's imitation of a sweet salesgirl's voice. "These may be too big on you-all. You-all didn't say what size." Mary sweeps through the racks of lush fabrics, feeling it start again. This time she is transfigured into Scarlet O'Hara's favorite, best loved, and most trusted slave. "Lordy, lordy" Mary clucks to herself, and as she gathers up the tan corduroy dressing room curtains, they billow into a rich fold of velvet, transforming the dressing room doorway into the stately bay windows fronting onto the palatial grounds of Tara.

If Mary were not so hell bent on turning a 2' by 3' dressing room into four hundred acres, a cash crop, and Rhet Butler a'coming up the drive, perhaps she might be able to think about what it is she surely is supposed to think about Sara's black hands caressing Evelyn's gently sagging breasts.

All Mary can think is that she can't remember ever having been touched the way Sara is touching Evelyn.

Mary cannot even begin to remember all the hands, and the faces and names and whispered words that had somehow been attached, and even if she could, she cannot pretend, pleading a trick of memory or

the darkness of the closely remembered but undifferentiated back seats, to have ever had one boy's hand touching her that looked and felt like this. All Mary can remember is how hard all the hands pushed against her, how they squeezed and pressed and made her think they were trying to rub her breasts away.

Each time with each new boy Mary pretends that it will be different, but each time it is not, it is only a different boy pretending to be interested in everything about Mary so that he can head, in the stationary car, in nothing but the direction of her breasts. Mary watches as Evelyn's breasts color under the imprint of the beautifully stained, delicately black-etched hands. "If my breasts were as small as this woman's are" Mary thinks, "boys might be more careful of them." If her breasts were just a little smaller, Mary is sure, she would not be afraid to ask 18 and 19 year old boys to please not push and rub so hard.

But Mary's breasts were not smaller, and were not likely to become smaller. She begins to cry softly as she watches the lovely, patterned, decorated hands touch a woman's breasts the way she has always known hers could be touched.

And then Evelyn pushes Sara's hands away from her, whimpering "Sara, don't, please, not in front of the girl." The fluttering, bird-trapped ashamed shoving is so familiar to Mary, as familiar as the embarrassed hardness to Evelyn's voice as she pleads again "Sara, don't", recognizable because Mary has said other names, countless names, in just this same way.

Mary watches as Evelyn hunches over and crosses her arms protectively in front of her, just the way Mary always crosses hers when she tries to hide in the corner of a back seat, praying for the strength to

push in hard enough to sustain the miracle that will make her breasts go away.

Mary feels her stomach go all wrong. She drops the dresses she has been holding, and would have kept on, forever, holding, high in the air so the hems wouldn't drag, and ducks back out of the dressing room, struggling for air. She turns. Her eyes focus on the door to the street outside.

Terry's lacquered nails dig into the sweet spot between Mary's neck and collar bone as Mary stumbles blindly out of the shop.

"I thought you were helping our two customers."

"I am helping them" Mary whines, helplessly.

"How can you help them out here on the street?" Mary cannot answer. Terry shakes her. "I said what are you doing leaving the store? What, Mary, answer me. What happened, Mary? Did something happen?"

"It hurts" Mary says.

"Oh, so that's it. You feel sick. What did I say about feeling sick, Mary? I said you can feel sick as well inside as you can outside and if I must be forced to pay you for feeling sick, inside is where I want to do it. What did I say would happen to you if you left the shop one more time to feel sick, Mary?"

"Something happened" Mary whispers, remembering how happy her mother was to get her pitiful little paycheck. "Something happened, it's not my fault" she says out loud, remembering that her father was gone and she had to look out for herself and Terry would surely not blame her, would she, when she told her what she had seen.

But then Mary remembered the way it had looked.

“I feel sick” she whispers.

“I can’t hear you Mary.”

“I said I feel--”

“She was feeding the meter for us” Mary hears Sara call out from the dressing room. Praying for a miracle, Mary reaches into her pocket. She holds the shining, silver quarter up to Terry’s face.

When she comes back into the store a minute later, after slipping the quarter into the meter of a blue Camry with a dented bumper, chosen with great care, completely at random, Terry is blocking the aisle, holding out a blue silk dress.

“She asked for this dress, the one she’s got in red, in blue. She asked for you to bring it in to her.” Mary automatically closes her fingers over the hook of the hanger, swings her arm above her head, and enters the cramped dressing room.

“We’re sorry” Sara whispers, “to get you into trouble. We--”

“MARY!” Terry yells, and Mary whips around and out to answer her. “How many did you let them take in there, Mary?”

“Just two.”

“Well, if they had two, now they’ve got three. I’m dreadfully sorry, ladies” Terry raises her voice, “I am, but the store regulations--”

“They’ve got two now, the red one and now the blue one. Two.”

“Well if they’ve only got two what is the other woman trying on?”

“She’s trying it on in red.”

“I thought the big one was trying it on in red.”

“She was only trying it on in red because the other woman wanted to see what it looked like on. She wants to try it on in red, and the other one, the big one, really wanted it all along in blue.”

“I’d like to see you in my office” Terry says, snagging Mary by the arm.

“But I’m helping--”

“Charlotte! Charlotte! Can you come out here please and help some ladies for us?” Terry calls as she begins to drag Mary in the direction of the back room.

Sara’s head appears in the space between the curtains almost immediately. “You’re not taking her away from us, surely?”

“Charlotte, my manager, will help you.”

“Oh, but Mary here is giving us such good service. Such excellent service.’

“I’m sure Charlotte, who is much more experienced than Mary, will be able to help you just as well.”

“Oh well, it’s just as well” Sara says, pulling her head back in behind the curtains, but making sure her voice projects. “Tomorrow I’ll be oh so thankful that woman came and took that nice salesgirl away right in the nick of time. You know, when a salesgirl takes good care of you, makes you feel special, that puts you in the buying mood. Don’t you agree, Evelyn?”

“Every time” Evelyn agrees, with a great, exaggerated sigh. Every time.”

“Those bitches!” Terry hisses under her breath. She wishes she could scream it at the top of her lungs. “Bitches!”

“More than one place to spend our money” Sara pipes out through the curtain.

“Can I go? They might still buy something” Mary begs, “can I go help them?”

“Can you go? Why ask me?” Terry lets go of Mary’s arm.

“But--”

“You don’t work for me any longer, Mary. You can go help whomever you like.”

“But--but--my mother” Mary gasps, “my father--”

“Save it for the jury, Mary. Save it for the bleeding hearts. Save it for when you file for unemployment against my account. As a rule I don’t look forward to coming before the board, but I’ll love telling all those naive, softhearted liberal bastards exactly what you were helping your little friends in the dressing room do.”

“Oh, shit” Sara says. “Shit.” She grabs the blue dress and tries to struggle into it. “Who was this made for, an anorectic midget? Shit!” She somehow yanks it on. She doesn’t take the time to look at herself in the mirror but hurries out into the store.

The sleeves of the dress are squeezing her arms, from shoulder to elbow, into fat blue sausages. The hem of the straight skirt is riding hard in the direction of her waist. The low V-neck line is exposing a cleavage wrinkled and off center, obscenely squashed by a dress that even Mary could not have guessed would be three sizes too small.

“Oh dear” Sara says to Terry, sweetly, “did I hear you right? Are you letting this poor girl go just because we begged her, we

practically got down on our knees and begged her to let us take more than two dresses into the dressing room?”

Terry ignores her. She doesn't even notice that the blue silk dress is already ripping in several places.

Terry leans over close to Mary, and says very softly, so that Sara can't hear. “Come on you precious brat, let's see you pour on the waterworks. Let's see your really spectacular impersonation of the Baby Wets and Cries Doll. Come on, Mary, finally you've got something to cry about. Let's see how much damn good it does you this time.”

Terry keeps her face close to Mary's. Mary cocks her head far to one side, slowly smiles a confused little smile, and then turns to Sara.

“Is there anything else Ah kin do for y'all? Mary inquires, indicating that the length and breadth of the store is at Sara's disposal. “Any little thing at all, y'all just say the word.”

“Mary, did you hear what I said--” but Mary shushes Terry with a wave of one of her hummingbird hands and tells her “Sorry, honey, Ah'm busy with ah customer.”

“Matching shoes, bags, jackets, darlin' we got em' all” she tells Sara, “allow me.” Terry and Sara watch in amazement as Mary selects sweaters, jackets, hats, purses, shoes, in less than a minute she has grabbed everything in the store that has even the remotest chance of matching the blue silk dress and heads with them for the dressing room.

“If y'all would come with me” Mary says to Sara, and the two of them enter the dressing room together. Mary drops them all in a pile. Evelyn closes the curtains behind them, and Mary begins to shake.

“So cold” Mary shivers, “so cold.” She holds herself with both hands, hunching over.

“We’re sorry, Mary, we’re so sorry, really we are-- if there’s anything we can do--”

“Anything at all--”

“So cold” Mary whispers. “So, so cold.”

Evelyn fishes through the heap of merchandise on the floor and comes up with a fox lined brocade evening jacket. She pushes Mary’s arms into the stiff sleeves and fluffs the soft white fur around her face. She takes Mary’s hands in hers, and gently rubs them.

Mary looks up and sees herself in the mirror. The white fur lining of the jacket frames her face like a cloud. The rest of the world seems safely far away.

“I’m pretty” she says.

“Of course you’re pretty” Evelyn says, and she hugs Mary, just throws her arms around her and hugs her. “You’re a pretty girl” she says.

Evelyn’s arms feel so good to Mary. They feel so safe. Mary knows what it feels like to feel safe and warm. Mary remembers how everything in the world looked prettier after her father held her tight in his arms. But if the world were really, truly been pretty, it would have stayed that way even after. After he was gone.

“It isn’t pretty. None of it is pretty” Mary says, and she begins hitting Evelyn, pounding on her hard before Sara can get hold of her hands, and pin her to the wall. “You said it was pretty but it’s a lie.”

“What’s wrong, honey--”

“It’s all wrong, it’s all a lie!”

“All right then, honey. You don’t believe us, we’ll say you’re not pretty” Sara says softly. “You’re not pretty.”

Mary does not move her eyes away from her reflection in the mirror, afraid to let go of it.

“Say it” Sara prompts Evelyn, speaking in a gentle, sad voice, “Say she isn’t pretty.”

“But--but--” Evelyn stutters, “I don’t--”

“Just say it. Say it.”

“You’re not...you’re not pretty.”

“But you said!” Mary points at the mirror, for proof. “Just look--look!” and all three women look.

Mary sees her hand begin to shake.

“I’m pretty” she whispers, but she does not believe it, she does not see it.

There was just that one moment when she had seen it. Just that one moment when she hadn’t needed anyone to tell her.

Sara slides her arm around Evelyn’s shoulder, and slowly begins to sway from side to side. “It’s not the meat it’s the motion.” she chants. Evelyn looks up at her, puzzled, then understands and joins in. She and Sara circle slowly around Mary in the tiny dressing room, Evelyn in the red silk dress and Sara wearing the matching one in blue. They swing and kick and sing “It’s not the meat it’s the motion” while Mary stands all alone and laughs and cries.

On her way home that night, Mary notices men and women all in some kind of haze that does not include her. As she climbs up the grated steps at her subway stop, the train speeds out of the station,

pushing a gust of air up under Mary's skirt, flicking it high around her legs.

“A pretty picture I'm making for some drunken bum lying on the floor looking up at me” Mary thinks, dully, desperate to gather her skirt around her, fighting the air.

And then she hears a little voice inside her whisper “It's not the meat, it's the motion.” Mary lets go of her skirt. “It's not the meat, it's the motion” the little voice says again, and this time, the voice is louder, this time it sounds more like her voice. Mary picks her feet up higher on the next step, and again higher on the next, and she is dancing up the rusting stairway, she is making the pretty picture. She loves making it and she'll make it for a drunken bum, she'll make it for whoever the hell.

“I'm making the pretty picture for me” she says to herself, and she throws her head back, laughing. “For me. I'll make it for me.”

This time she sings it out loud. “It's not the meat it's the motion.” She comes up the stairway into the bright street lights, holding her body the way it feels good to hold it. She sings it all the way home.