

18. MAGIC SHOP

Like a football coach the day before the big game, Dr. Quo had insisted that his teammates get proper rest before meeting the Mary Smith challenge. One dead Mary Smith was more than enough. He summed it up: *Let's keep this Mary Smith alive.*

The doctor's six and a half foot height, rounded frame, and motherly manner--to say nothing of Jon and Lyn's exhaustion, overwhelmed any lingering resistance. Meekly they submitted to assignment to adjacent cots, reserved for residents on call. He shut the door, and instructed the nurses not to disturb them.

Doctors need the room, argued head nurse, who'd overheard.

Not for several hours, Quo countered. *By then we'll not need it.*

Are they married? You know we don't put men and women in the same room--and shut the door. We're not running a house of assignation, you know.

What do you know about houses? Hurt that they'd never hire you? Karl couldn't stand the hypocritical streak of latent puritanism in the head nurse.

Back in the tiny, windowless room Lyn sighed, *Our first bedtime together, and it's twin beds. This will never do.*

Jon chuckled. *The way I feel, I couldn't, and you shouldn't.*

The way I feel, if you do't, I won't. She slipped into instant slumber fully clothed. Before imitating her example, Jon thoughtfully removed her shoes, then his own. At last, moments later, he was finishing the night's sleep interrupted so many hours before.

Much later, refreshed and renewed, they accompanied Dr. Quo to the double room kept private for the barely living Mary Smith.

Well, well. How are we doing today? boomed Dr. Quo.

You're doing fine, but I'm not so good. How could the patient come up with a smile? *Who's the handsome newcomer you've dragged along with you?*

I came voluntarily, Jon joined in the up-beat tempo. *Because the people who mean a lot to me are concerned about you. You've met my brother-in-law, Lieutenant Bill Kent, and my student here, Lyn Lane. My name is Jon Allen. Please call me 'Jon.'*

What do you teach, Jon? Police science?

No, I teach clinical psychology and psychodrama at Sunset Shores University, where Lyn is my assistant.

How many people do you assist, Lyn? Are you psychologizing or policing today? Just to keep the record straight.

You've met all three I'm currently assisting, Lyn acknowledged.

You decided I was pretty far gone and called for help, huh, Dr. Quo? I wouldn't think a guy your size needed any help.

Dr. Quo wasn't easily derailed. His eyes locked on hers. *There's no medical reason I can find to account for your condition. Jon is a psychodrama expert. It's a kind of treatment that often works faster than pills or surgery.*

Karl, you don't talk like any doctor I've ever known, but then Bill isn't the typical policeman either, and Jon, you'll not be like any psychologist I've ever met, unless I miss my guess. If this is a dream, I don't want to wake up. Do you think I'm crazy, Jon?

No, came the quick, unadorned reply.

Wow! That's something. A straight answer. No hedging. Are you sure you're a psychologist?

Card carrying.

Well, I called it right. Just like the others here: different!

Karl shifted his bulk uneasily. *Jon, is there something psychodramatic you can do to break through that persona? Said as much for Mary to hear.*

We can play MAGIC SHOP.

Curiosity aroused, she asked, *What's that?*

A game of fantasy and imagination, Jon replied.

It lets you see yourself, and what it may take for you to get what you want, Lyn added.

What've I got to lose, said Mary, that I haven't already lost?

We'll see, Lyn promised. *Magic shopkeepers ask you to give up something in order to get what you want.*

For example? Mary sat up, and leaned forward.

It's not apt to be anything material--like money, Jon continued. *Your questions are answered better by demonstration than by telling.*

She looked from Karl to Lyn and finally back to Jon. *O.K.*

doctors, or performers, or whatever you are. *Let's go.*

I'm the magic shopkeeper, Jon began, walking to the far side of the room and indicating the unoccupied second bed there. This is my magic shop. I'll set the scene for you. We're in the bayou country of South Louisiana, not at all like Southern California. The air, even at night, is like tepid bath submerging your body. Dark, still water, sprouting lily pads, cypress knees, tall swamp grass, dead and dying trees, covered with long strands of Spanish moss, draped like fur pieces, where the leaves should've been. The gentle breeze brings wiffs of fish, or salt, or decay---along with an occasional swarm of mosquitos. He swatted an arm, and then the back of his neck. But don't let that worry you. You're one of the few who mosquitos ignore.

I don't like being ignored, said Mary.

A high price to pay for being noticed, Jon continued. But there are immediate, and more threatening dangers. Here's an alligator, he said, as he pointed to a pillow he'd dropped to the floor, and over here, masquerading as an innocent stocking, lurks a deadly water moccasin. The surface, apparently as firm as a rubber mat, conceals treacherous quicksand. One false step and you may sink out of sight before anyone can reach you.

With such formidable hazards we're not in the high rent district. My low overhead lets me pass the savings on to you. Moreover, the dearth of customers permits my giving you my full attention the moment you arrive. You deserve every benefit for believing I exist, and that I reward the resourceful who seek me.

As you come closer you'll be able to make out my unpainted, weatherbeaten cabin, between whose boards streak the rays of a flickering kerosene flame. You'll note the structure vaguely resembles a hospital bed as it stands high above the surface of the waters on its sturdy stilts. There are no roads, of course. The water-way is the lone avenue of access.

Reversing a straight back chair and straddling it, Jon explained. *This pirogue glides where clumsy craft cannot go. It is the vehicle of choice with those who've set out on the arduous journey through the wilderness---and have returned!*

He moved to the unoccupied bed, and perched at the head of it. *Here I am in my rocking chair, waiting patiently on the porch for*

whatever business may come my way. Bring your surplus traits as barter for the dreams, values and desires with which your predecessors have stocked my shelves. But beware! I strike hard bargains. You may not be willing to pay the price---at least not yet. No matter. Come as your growing courage and strength allow you to make the journey. It's been a long, hot, humid day. Nightfall will soon be upon us. If there are any pilgrims out there, I hope they find me before darkness overwhelms them.

Lyn's Sex Appeal

Lyn seized the straight-back Jon had vacated and skidded herself over the tiles toward the figure seated lotus-fashion high on the other bed. *Voila Monsieur le Jon Allen, magic shopkeeper, n'est-ce pas? It is pauvre petite Lyn Lane who has come.*

Bonjour, Mademoiselle Lane. Welcome to my humble establishment. He reached out to help her from pirogue to porch. Had you a difficult journey?

Indeed. But I expect a profitable exchange to make it worthwhile.

And what is it that mademoiselle wishes?

Sex appeal.

Jon caught his breath. M.J. cracked, *Like working on that second million? (Let us call 'Mary' 'M.J.' in accord with her own preference, to distinguish her from the late 'Mary Smith').*

Lyn hastily amended: *Pardon me, shopkeeper. I must be more specific. With all due respect to Mademoiselle Smith, who sees through a woman's eyes, I ask for 'sex appeal for men.' I want to turn on at least one of the men who turn me on.*

Do you ask for a love potion, like Dulcamara marketed in Donisetti's L'Elsir d'Amore? Jon was trying to fathom where Lyn was coming from.

Not at all. I want nothing to do with fakery. Nor have I any wish to trap a man. I want him to want me, of his own free will. I want to be the kind of person my kind of man would want.

What convinces you that you lack sex appeal?

I'm more than a quarter century old, and I'm not going steady. I'm not even playing the field. The sad truth is that I've not had an old-fashioned type date in six months. Those are starvation rations.

When in the normal course of events you come upon an eligible man, what happens?

Nothing that matters. They see me all right, but not as a woman. They lean on me, confide in me, and ask my advice on how to handle women! Or they pick my brain on some technical matter. I save them trips to the library. I remind them of a sister, whether they've ever had one or not. Sometimes a daughter. That doesn't bother me quite as much as being mistaken for mother.

Lyn, how can this be? M.J. was mystified. Nearly every man I've ever been out with has made a serious pass at me no later than the second date---except for the last one.

Lyn was more precise. I'm not talking about guys who are looking for a warm body. I want to be able to share more than a bed. In recent years I've only had that kind of 'come on' from strangers. Never from the men I've known as fellow students or workers. I'm so out of practice that in an unguarded moment of crisis I may not be able to come out with the right word. Then where would I be?

Pregnant, like I was, said M.J.

So what do you want to do with sex appeal when you get it? Jon asked. You don't relish holding wolves at bay.

Don't you understand? I want to be accepted and appreciated. I refuse to be used, or what is just as bad, to be put on a pedestal. Please! None of those common postures like the goddess and the worshipper, the sultan and the slave, the guy 'who only wants a buddy, not a sweetheart,' nor the scrapper. Those role combinations I can do without.

What you don't want is clear. What you do want is still a bit fuzzy, said Jon. I may be under a bit of a handicap because of the nature of our relationship. May I call in a consultant from further back, like Karl Quo? That OK, Karl?

Sure, said Karl. What do you want to know?

How would you describe Lyn to a colleague?

First impression, a very attractive woman who comes on strong. Later, what a brain!

Now tell Lyn directly, Karl.

Lyn, you come across as a first-rate professional already.

Jon pressed. Karl, assume you're her age and unattached. You're giving her the 'once over' as a prospective girlfriend. What are your

thoughts?

My first thought is 'Wow.' But after a while, remembering how I was in my mid-twenties, I feel sure I'd pass her by for someone more in my league. Speaking as 26 year old Karl Quo, you scare me, Lyn. I doubt whether I could keep up with you. You're so frank, I'd try to do it too, and then I'd end up with egg on my face. You'd be so far ahead of me, others would take me for your kid brother. Another thing, and I guess it's related to your frankness. You're not romantic. You're not mysterious. If you realized I saw you as more than a sex object, you might suggest sex, and wonder why I couldn't perform.

Lyn, said the shopkeeper. Hold your response to the consultant. I'm ready to quote a price for sex appeal. Here's a large slice of 'humble pie,' to be munched on in the presence of eligible men. And here's a cassette tape of key sounds you should practice and use at opportune moments, such as 'wonderful,' 'fantastic,' 'I wish I'd thought of that,' 'Explain that again for me?' Spend more money on clothes than on books. Make sure that no one but your professors hear your creative ideas. Spend leisure time with other women to see how they do it. At the same time, consider the nearby woman a possible competitor and the nearby man as the prize, never the competition. Men play in another league, and follow another set of rules. Shall I continue?

No deal. I refuse to pay inflated prices even if I never marry. I'll be real. I'll be direct. I refuse to play games. Some man somewhere is going to take me the way I am, which is exactly the way I'd take him, without window dressing.

Lyn, you're really something, said M.J. I wish I were more like you, but I hardly know where to begin.

Karl's Weight

Shopkeeper, are you still open for business? Karl asked.

Certainly. Is there something I can do for you? Paddle your pirogue up a little closer. Be careful not to tip it as you get out. Pirogues are not built for persons your size.

That's what I want to see you about---my size. I'm not talking about my height, of course, which was a problem when I was growing up. Now it has its advantages, and there's no changing it, even if I wanted to. What troubles me is my excess weight. As a physician I cannot plead ignorance as to how I got like this. And I know several

adequate diet routines. What I want from you, shopkeeper, is the power to put my knowledge into action. Action is your specialty.

True. I love a challenge. But Karl, tell me what's wrong with being the way you are?

Fat people don't live as long. Fat is hard on the heart. When I dash up the stairs, I end up puffing like a locomotive.

Doesn't everyone?

I don't recover as quickly as I should.

This hospital has several elevators. Do you suffer from claustrophobia too?

No, but waiting is very painful for me. Seems like the elevators run half speed. People get on and off at every floor.

You're a man in a hurry. I'm surprised you take time to eat.

Only at the beginning and end of my work days....and all the time in between. Sadly he wagged his head, as he produced a huge candy bar from the pocket where it nestled next to his stethoscope, and flung it onto the nightstand. Maybe you'd like something to nibble on, Miss Smith.

M.J. responded thoughtfully. I have lost weight, haven't I? It used to be such a chore. Did this without trying. Of course, the fetus weighed something.

A couple of pounds, her doctor informed her. You're down 15 pounds. Off you it shows. Off me you'd need a scale to tell it.

Coming back to you, Karl. Next to yourself, who'd be most pleased to see you lose your excess middle?

My wife.

Does she nag you about it?

She used to. Lately she's found other things to gripe about.

Like 'You're always at the hospital' and 'You're never at home?'

Oh, I guess that's a pretty common complaint from doctors' families. But my wife should know better. She's a nurse, and she knows how important it is to take care of people.

But she doesn't take very good care of you.

She could if she wanted to.

Is there something you can do to help her 'want to?'

He frowned, and turned away. She's always got a chip on her shoulder. It's like trying to make love to a buzz saw.

Jon put a hand on his shoulder. You don't make love very often.

Karl hung his head. She says I'm too heavy.

Softly Jon continued. And she's too little.

She's six feet herself, though she's not at all overweight, compared to me. He stared out the window.

Does she like to cook? Jon asked.

At that he turned back and responded with enthusiasm. Does she ever! But she never knows when I'm coming in, and she's never up when I leave in the morning. On days off, though, she makes up for lost time.

Tell me about your children, Karl.

He spread his hands. We don't have any.

A matter of choice?

Definitely not. I'd look into adoption, if we got along better with each other.

You work with pregnant and recently pregnant women every day?

It's my job.

And you take good care of your patients?

The very best. His patient answered for him.

Your opinion, Karl?

He shrugged. I work at it more than most other guys. I have to. When I'm at work my mind wanders off to what's happening at home. When I'm at home, I worry about what's happening here.

Making eye contact and letting caring into his voice, Jon said, You sound like my brother-in-law, Bill Kent. He's a worrier, too. Don't answer the next one too quickly. Think it over first. That speech you made at breakfast against getting overly-involved with patients was delivered as much to yourself as to us. I got defensive and didn't see it then. How much do you identify with your patients, Karl? Enough for your body to show it?

Enough to look eight months pregnant, the way I'd like my wife to be. Why hadn't I ever thought of that? What my patients must

think of me!

I doubt whether they have any conscious awareness of the intensity of your identification with them, but on an unconscious level they sense it. But Karl, what's the harm? When you've delivered one of theirs, they keep coming back to you for the next one, don't they?

I guess they do. I don't lose many patients. Shopkeeper, your fee?

You've already paid it. You've faced painful parts of your life. You've been able to connect your body with those parts. I offer you a telephone. The next time you reach for a candy bar, reach for a telephone instead.

Whom am I to call?

Your wife, of course. Make a pact with her. She can help you. Trust her with the things you've told me. Make her your ally rather than your opponent. And you make up the menu on your days off, using good professional judgment. Respect the child in your wife. She feels rejected and neglected. Respect the child in yourself. When you've given those hungry children the love due them, then, one way or another, get a child of your own together. When you've done all that, you may 'terminate your pregnancy.' Meanwhile, take this salve.

Jon handed him an empty tumbler from the nightstand, full of imaginary salve. Its active ingredient is love. Rub it on yourself. Let her rub it on you. Take your time. It soaks in better that way.

Find yourself an assistant here. If you already have one, let that doctor make some decisions. Take more time to chat with your patients when you're with them. Maybe they won't call you back so frequently for so-called medical reasons.

Also the husbands. Let them work for you too. Then there will be enough of you to go around. You won't need all 275 pounds anymore.

Do you follow-up, doctor? He asked respectfully.

Of course.

Then I accept your offer. It's a pleasure doing business with you.

Well, have a safe trip back, Karl. Watch out! That alligator nearly caught your foot. The doctor returned to his chair.

After a small pause, Jon said aloud. Well, it will be dark soon. I guess I'm not going to have any more business today.

M.J.'s Abortion

Oh, yes you are, cried the patient, as she swung out of bed,

plugged into a chair, and dragged it over toward the magic shop.

Mr. Shopkeeper, I heard a vicious rumor you'd denied a previous customer sex appeal. Is she likely to return? M.J. asked.

Winking at Lyn, Jon replied. I think so.

Then I'll unload two-thirds of mine. I've no practical use for all the sex appeal I've accumulated. What I want is a baby. She wasn't kidding.

The magic shop doesn't stock babies. Why not let your sex appeal get you a husband, and a baby may come naturally.?

She stood up tall and straight. Who wants to trap him? I want a man capable of appreciating personality, brains and talent as much as a warm body.

Jon paused, and stroked his chin. But you already have a man who values such qualities, don't you?

No more. He doesn't know where I am, nor that I'm a teacher.

He began, I've heard of people not mixing love and work.....

She cut in, But this is ridiculous. Grimacing at the irony, she sighed, I wish I could relive this past week.

Jon was brisk. All right, M.J. Let's set up a contract. There's no way I can actually turn the clock back, but what I have to offer may be just as good---or even better. Psychodrama provides a way of altering one's relationship with the past. You shall have the chance to face your past again, not alone this time, but with Lyn's, Karl's and my support. We'll help you change your relationship with what happened. Things will come out as you want them to this time.

He gave her a moment to absorb what he'd said. Therefore, M.J., for two-thirds of your sex appeal, a dash of your courage in facing painful realities, and a dab of willingness to share your fantasy life with us, I hereby promise you the ability to grasp your present reality, in order to build a solid future on it. Are you ready to deal?

Deal. I've heard good things about psychodrama.

Let's begin with your visit to the clinic here, he proposed.

M.J.: Originally I'd been scheduled to see Dr. Quo, who devotes a day a week to the clinic, but when I got there, they'd put this stupid resident in his place. Mocking the nurse's voice, 'The doctor has an emergency.' I wonder why they thought I was there.

KARL: with an embarrassed sigh, She's talking about Dr. Rush.

I'm his supervisor.

JON to M.J. *Shall we have Dr. Quo finish the emergency in sufficient time to supervise his student in person?*

M.J. with eyes bright, *Please!*

JON, standing. *Let's imagine this is the room where you were examined. Your bed is the examination table. We need....*

LYN, winking at M.J. *I'll be the stupid resident.*

JON: *We'll play the first part the way it happened, but Karl will break in at my signal to give the event a different outcome.*

M.J. *But how will Lyn know what to do?*

LYN: *Trust me. You've told me a lot already. If I mis-represent Dr. Rush, you'll correct me. Jon will say, 'reverse roles' and we'll trade places, so that I become you and you become the resident. As resident you can show me exactly how to be him. When Jon says 'reverse' again, we go back to where we were, and I am prepared to do the job right. Any questions?* M.J. shook her head.

JON directs doctor and patient to their places. Dr. Rush has just completed his examination.

Lyn as DR. RUSH: *You can sit up now and cover yourself. It's what you expected. You're pregnant, at least three months, but a hundred dollars can change that. Shall we get on with the abortion?*

JON nods to KARL who lumbers in as himself, Dr. Quo.

KARL: *Hold on, doctor. I heard that. How do you know what the patient wants? Miss Smith is no baby factory. She's a person. Here, let me show you how it's done.*

The resident stands aside, while Karl takes the chair next to M.J.

KARL: *Miss Smith, we can do the abortion for you, if that's what you want. But first, let's explore your whole situation. Have you considered any of the other possibilities?*

M.J: *Like having the baby? I'm not married.*

KARL: *Do you love the father?*

M.J: *I doubt whether the father loves me.*

KARL: *Because he's not here with you?*

M.J: *Didn't tell him. We fought over having sex to begin with.*

KARL: *You felt raped?*

M.J. gave a nervous laugh. *The other way around. He reacted as*

if I'd raped him. He'd offer to marry me, but I won't trap him.

KARL: *Miss Smith, if you seduced him, I'm sure a significant part of him was quite an enthusiastic 'victim.' It's not done alone, you know. But even if you didn't marry, you can still keep the baby. More people do nowadays.*

M.J: *I'd lose my job.*

KARL; *Let your family help you.*

M.J: *They're dead.*

KARL: *Our social worker will help you apply for welfare.*

M.J. looks disgusted. *I couldn't take that.*

KARL: *Situations like yours are what welfare's for. How about adoption? Couples can be found who'd willingly cover all your expenses. With regard to the job, maybe you could manufacture a plausible excuse and go on leave?*

M.J, arms akimbo: *How can I give my baby away?*

KARL: *Then you want him.*

M.J: *Not this way.*

KARL: *For this baby, your first, it's this way or no way at all.*

M.J: *But it's not fair to bring a baby into the world unwanted.*

KARL: *But you've just admitted that you wanted him.*

JON as director cut in: *At least part of you, M.J., wants this baby, and another part of you doesn't. But babies don't come in pieces. They come in whole packages. You take it or you leave it, which means that one part of you doesn't get her way, but the other part does. He paused. No one spoke. Your best course is a moot point. I'll not side with one part of you at the expense of the other part. All sides must be heard. Now, granting the decision for abortion, the way it was carried out proved to be all the more upsetting to you.*

When and where did it take place?

M.J: *Eleven the next morning, in this same room.*

JON: *Who's there?*

M.J: *Some nurse, who had nothing to say---we can leave her out---and Dr. Rush, who grunted that I'd get an injection of saline, because of how far along the pregnancy had gone. He didn't say where he'd inject me, how long it would take, or whether it would hurt. How was I to know it would differ from any injection I'd ever had, or ever seen? Let me ask Karl a few questions. I don't trust Rush.*

JON: *We'll rewrite history, and have Karl call on you beforehand.*

KARL moved into role immediately. *Ah, Miss Smith. I dropped by in case you have some questions about the abortion procedure.*

M.J: *Doctor, I'm so glad you called. What's this about an injection?*

KARL: *Before injecting anything into your womb, we have to make space for it. This means we must draw off some of the fluid first, replace it with sterile saline, which kills the fetus, and brings on labor.*

M.J: *Does it hurt?*

KARL: *Yes. Would you like an anesthetic?*

M.J: *Does the baby get one? It hurts him, too. Doesn't it?*

KARL stops short: *How about that? You're the first patient to ask. What a sensitive person you are to have realized that!*

The words coming in a flood:

M.J: *How developed is my fetus? Has it arms and legs? Can you tell its gender? If I were to go into labor could you save him?*

KARL: *One question at a time. Arms, legs, and gender were determined long ago. There's a small chance we could save the baby if you went into labor at this stage. It's been done.*

M.J, angrily: *Karl, how can you justify using your medical skill to take a life, when you've used the same skill to save the lives of other fetuses of the same age? Karl, why is it up to me? Where are you?*

KARL, deeply moved: *I'd take your place, if I could.*

JON, impressed: *My hat's off to both of you. Let's hold your answers, Karl, for M.J. has pointed us in a direction which has a far more compelling claim on her. Cut this scene, and move into what followed the operation.*

A painful medical procedure became more painful, because it had been badly botched. Her fetus fell to the floor, creating a spectacle searing itself into her memory, of a man-child staring through her. Standard psychodrama method required that she reverse roles with the fetus, then reverse back once again to hear Karl-as-the-fetus heap upon her the foul abuse she'd been heaping on herself. She nearly caved in. Jon marvelled at her courage.

He projected her forward in time, and directed her to imagine the child who might've been, giving him a voice with which to confront her. Her sense of loss grew more outspoken than ever,

for the child-who-might've-been---or who, given another pregnancy, may yet be---is the carrier of the mother's unfulfilled desire, and the promise of her fulfillment.

Karl's involvement was every bit as pervasive as the protagonist's. When he could endure no more, as the articulate fetus grown old enough he reached out and took M.J. into his arms, saying,

Mother, I don't care what you've done. I still love you. Don't let me kill you. That won't do either of us any good. It won't bring me back, and it would deprive the world of a very exceptional person. People you've yet to meet would be denied the privilege of ever knowing you, as I know you now. Mother, I'm proud of you. You've been honest with me, which is to be honest with yourself also. You've got guts. Keep meeting life head-on. You're the only spokesperson I have. Represent me!

Sobbing, M.J. blurted, *I was frightened. I was hasty. Forgive me.*

I forgive you, mother. You've heard me. It's not too late for you and for others. I'm satisfied. Mother, I forgave you even before you asked. When I was angry with you, I still loved you. The world shouldn't ask you to take full responsibility for such life and death decisions, then imply your decision has been wrong. On the contrary, when you conceive again, the child will be right for you. If you don't, your adopting will be right. And if there's no adoption, that will be all right too. Whatever happens, you've opened the way. You've finished the past right this time.

Thus M.J. received everyone's acceptance, all together. Jon said, *We're already in the midst of sharing. We've shared nonverbally. Let's sit close to one another and continue our sharing in words. Ask yourselves, 'What have I experienced which resembles what the protagonist has shown us of herself?' Karl, you've already begun.*

I don't know the rules of psychodrama, but I did what felt right. Before the law changed, I'd covered this same ground in my thoughts, but never with so much feeling. It's as if we entered another dimension.

Taking M.J.'s hand, Lyn said, *You've made me face parts of myself I've been too ready to gloss over. I've been identified with the*

women's movement in a simplistic, partisan way. You've given my participation depth. You've made me proud to be a woman.

Jon turned to Karl. *I want to extend my sharing to you also. Though we were married many years, we never had any children. Early in our relationship, before marriage, my then-fiance missed her period. We decided for an abortion, even though we'd planned to wed at the end of the school year. It was a false alarm. But how tragic it would've been, had we done the abortion, and then had been unable to conceive ever again! It's hard enough never to have had a child, but it would be infinitely harder to have had one, and then to have lost him, as a result of our own---uninformed--- choice.*

M.J., there are times in my life I'd love to live over again, just as you have. And Lyn, I'm glad you refused the shopkeeper's deal. You have plenty of sex appeal anyway, for the kind of man who appreciates your kind of woman.

With a twinkle in her eye, M.J. whispered, *Speaking for yourself, Jon?*

He made eye contact with Lyn. *Yes, I speak for myself.*

Enormously pleased, Karl commented, *The lady's blushing.*

Blowing on her fingertips, M.J. concluded, *It's my two-thirds sex appeal. Lyn has been shoplifting at the magic shop.*

19. CHECKING ALIBIS

Late Sunday afternoon, as Bill Kent pulled into the Post driveway with the group he'd driven to the mental hospital, Bea invited him in. Gus excused himself. *Sue is expecting me.*

Bea called after him, *Tell Arnold dinner will be ready soon.*

Turning to Bill she said, *I'm setting a place for you. It's not going to be anything special.*

Bill reflected that she'd be easier to interview in the midst of the distractions of dinner preparation. *Then I'll accept,* he replied, *if the fare is ordinary enough to allow us to talk in the kitchen.*

At that, she let him set the table, while she opened cans and rattled pans on the stove. His task done, he straddled a kitchen chair and began *Would you mind giving me a run down of your talk with Mary Saturday morning, including any impressions you had?*

Of course, Bill. I had intended to tell you about that, she lied, but Bill let it pass. *I'll write it out for you, if you wish, but basically*

it was a woman-to-woman talk where we took one another's measure. I tried Francois's method, offering liberal compensation for her time and trouble, to make it easier for her to start again.

With what response? Bill asked.

She told me she'd already let her apartment go, and was moving in with Drew that very day, and as for the money--- well, the comment she made about that was very unladylike. I told her Drew knew I was coming home, and would never permit her moving in. She accused me of lying. She refused to believe that Drew and I had had a long distance phone conversation.

Phone company records show no recent long distance calls charged to Drew's number, Bea, Bill said.

Smoothly she replied, *I called him from a pay phone, covering the cost from my end.*

From the doorway came Arnold's wry comment, *Yes you did, at the cost of one thin dime.*

How long have you been standing there? Bea glared at her son, then turned a smile on Bill, as she explained. *I let Drew assume it was long distance---he didn't ask, because I wanted to deal with Mary first. That way Drew would feel less pressured, and be prone to do what's right.*

What do you think happened to Mary? Bill asked her.

Probably Mary came here Saturday and posed for the painting, changed into more casual clothes she already had here in the studio closet, got into an argument with Drew over moving in, and left in a huff when he wouldn't let her. Then she went to a bar, and got picked up by some crazy guy, who killed her when she wouldn't cooperate. I don't know. That's my guess. She lay a huge dish of savory beef stew center-table, and sat down.

Later, with the last crumb of a French apple pie gratefully consumed, Bill thanked Bea for her hospitality, and apologized for having to leave so soon. *I have to get Phil's close-up of Mary on the wire to Ohio right away. Phil, will you walk me to the car?*

As they bobbed down the 39 steps Bill began, *Where were you Wednesday night and early Thursday morning?*

Wednesday night I was with Gus at his apartment. Sue was off with Arnold somewhere. Thursday morning I attended my first class this semester. Gus rode out to the university with me. You know that. You were there.