

Cockroach Heaven

A Novel by Allison Fine

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Anita Cummings was forty-two, the same age that her sister Carla had been when she offed herself with pills. Now here she was, ready for something terrifying, something that would make her feel the shit of life backing up into her throat, something that would remind her: reality is real.

Grand Ledge was a boring place and she was sick to death of Michigan. She longed for excitement and dreamed of it repeatedly. She was even willing to put up with the necessary mess that invariably accompanies excitement.

When she met Ritchie, his charm and ready wit were the things she noticed first.

She did not, as a rule, like charm and ready wit; it was usually a cover for something sinister, ugly, and dark, or something stupid and in an advanced state of atrophy, but she was bored, bored, bored. Nice people bored her, Grand Ledge bored her; she bored herself. Anomie had taken up residence in her life and threatened to stay there, so the promise of something sinister, ugly and dark propelled her to submit to charm and ready wit.

They dined in a restaurant outside of town next to a seedy and strange motel, some Chinese place off the main highway. It was dark and dirty, Anita noticed. It meant she did not have to see his eyes.

She did notice the legs were strange. Skinny, spindly, a little bent. He hid them under a pair of Ralph Lauren pants. She decided to forgive him his skinny legs. His eyes

were a wee bit bulgy, however, and the whites had a yellowish tinge. She could forgive him that, too. After all, he had so much to say.

-Did you know it is a known-fact that dust mites, termites and cockroaches will survive a nuclear holocaust? He asked as he forked noodles onto both plates. They were sharing dishes.

-And? Your point?

-Insects will outlive humans. They will outlive anything. They will eventually be the dominant species of the earth.

-How do you know they haven't already been the dominant species of the earth? Maybe they were here for a while and just didn't like it so now it's our turn.

-We're not doing such a hot job of it either, by the look of things.

He had a small mouth, smaller than she had ever seen on a man, and he inhaled his food through the tiny little portal. It was somewhat disgusting, but it offset his witty manner, so Anita chose to go along with it. She wasn't sure where this was going, but mystery had long been an aphrodisiac for her.

-Where are your parents from? Anita asked.

-New York, he said, inhaling noodles through the little mouth.

-New York, New York, it's a wonderful town...Anita sang as she stuffed shrimp into her mouth.

-Of course, he said, my ancestors have made a good life for themselves there for thousands of years.

-Thousands of years—what—did they land on Plymouth Rock?

-No—Plymouth Rock landed on them. Ha ha.

Anita let this feeble joke slide. Only stupid people said ‘haha’ after their own jokes. Maybe he was mysterious. She hoped so. Men who were not mysterious bored her and she was bored to tears with boredom.

Women complain about withholding men, she thought, but when push comes to shove, withholding makes us sweat with anticipation. What’s the fun of fucking a guy who’s easy? Hard and just a little out of reach. It makes a woman feel the conquest is worth it. Ritchie might be worth it, Anita hoped, staring into her bowl of noodles.

-Ritchie—you want to come over to my place after?

-Sure—why not? You got a couch and a television?

-Yeah...

-Couch potato—that’s me, he said as more noodles disappeared into the tiny, little opening of a mouth.

-I also have popcorn and a blanket.

-Even better.

They went to her place. She hadn’t cleaned it in weeks, but Ritchie flopped onto the couch and made himself right at home.

-I love the Nouveux Pauvre motif. Is it intentional?

-What the hell are you talking about, Ritchie? she asked, setting a bowl of fresh popcorn at his right elbow.

-Well, I tagged you for a rich bitch, surely.

-You tagged wrong, my dear, Anita told him and sat on the other end of the couch sipping white wine.

-Don't I get any? he whined and flipped the T.V. on from the remote. Anita sneered and reluctantly got up to get him a glass. He switched channels incessantly.

-Stop it -she told him and grabbed the remote. This is MY place, remember?

-Oh yeah. Ritchie sighed and lay down on the pillows, closing his eyes. Watch what you like.

-Thanks, she said grabbing back the remote and switching channels incessantly. Celebrity Poker caught her eye. She waited for Jennifer Tilly's tits to fall out of the tank top she was wearing. He was falling asleep anyway. His glass of wine sat untouched. Anita finished her wine and his, poured another two glasses and finished the bottle. Feeling no pain, she decided to lie down next to him.

As she slid over his body, her hand accidentally brushing his penis, she felt an erection rising. Anita always got a kick out of how guys could get an erection in their sleep. What were they dreaming about anyway?

Ritchie snorted and turned over. Anita thought she could probably fuck this guy and he wouldn't even know it. She decided to undo his pants and find out. As she slid the zipper down he woke up, the bulging, yellowish eyes popping open with surprise.

-What you doing, honey?

-Just checking out the goods, Ritchie. Okay by you?

He looked at his watch and craned his neck.

-Boy, time flies. I got to go, my darling. Sorry, but my roommates and I are planning a kind of big-time get-together. One of them is getting married, you know.

-Great. I love weddings.

He got up, stretching his spindly legs and looking around as if he was just seeing the place for the first time.

-What's that on the wall? He pointed to an enlarged photo of Anita's father playing with their dead dog Patricia.

-Dad and Patricia, she answered. Patricia was smiling for the camera; dad was not.

-So, what does daddy do?

-Daddy did concubines, preferably Asian.

-Huh? Ritchie didn't get it.

-They're both dead now anyway.

-Who?

-Patricia and Dad. We buried them together.

As he ambled to the door Anita could smell him. He had a rather strange body odor--kind of like shit in the pants or something.

-Ritchie—did you shower?

-Well, I wash off in the puddles after the rain! He laughed and reached for the door handle.

-Are we—are you gonna see me again, or something?

-I don't know darling, do you want to? I mean, my smell and all.

-Oh shut up, she said and kissed him gently next to one of those bulging eyes. The smell was a bit overpowering that close, but his arm wrapped around her waist and she just didn't care.

-Couldn't you stay? His reluctance made her sassy.

-Nope. I'll call you. He slammed the door behind him and she heard his spindly legs bounding down the stairs.

Anita leaned against the door and sighed. This man was a keeper, she decided, no matter how weird he was.

The next day she got his message on her voice mail. He sounded urgent, co-dependent and desperate; all the qualities she saw reflected in herself. Desperation tired her.

-You have to see me. You just have to. My brother's in town! Want to go out together? Call me, call me, call me please?

She erased the message and got back to the task-at-hand. She could call him later, she decided.

Later:

As Anita walked into her apartment she could see the red blinking light on the phone. More messages. One from her mother, one from an old girlfriend, and three from Ritchie. What a loser. There was something attractive about it. She couldn't define exactly what, but she decided to make him wait just a little bit longer and went into the kitchen to make dinner. As she popped the frozen pizza into the oven the phone rang. She was half-tempted to make him leave another message, but decided to take him out of his misery and answer the phone.

-What is it Ritchie?

-How did you know it was me?

-Well, I don't know. Psychic I guess.

-You have caller ID.

-You're brilliant. So, what's up?

Did you get my message?

-I got them.

-And--?

-Ritchie, must you force me to do all the work? What do you want?

-I—I—my brother's—

-Your brother's in town, I know. What's this got to do with me?

-He's lonely, he's weird and he needs company.

Anita didn't want to say that this sounded like a perfect description of Ritchie; she just listened as he rambled on about his brother. How his brother had been kicked out of the Navy for insubordination, how he'd tried being a stand up comic, failed at it, and ending up playing clubs in towns like Rutland, New Hampshire and Martinsburg, Ohio. It was not an auspicious career. Then his brother decided to quit stand up and start again with something else, so he went into sales: storm doors and glass partitions.

-That only lasted one day after he got into a fight with his manager, Ritchie informed her.

-He sounds like a volatile type, she told him.

-Well, Lenny Bruce is his touchstone, what can I say?

-Lenny Bruce?

-Yeah, Lenny Bruce and Gertrude Stein. He likes to secretly dress in women's underwear—but only at night, alone, when no one's looking.

-He sounds like a real catch, Anita said, I can't wait to meet him.

-Well, that's what I am trying to do. So, when can we hook up?

-Can we take him somewhere without him starting a fight? she asked.

Ritchie sighed forlornly.

-I hope so.

Anita decided on a neutral spot uptown, a small café run by a friend of hers. Well, her friend was dead so his mother took over the café, but the name remained: *Final Destination*.

Her dead friend's mother, Elizabeth Goodstein, was a pain in the ass but she ran a good café. There was a quasi-world-band playing tunelessly in the corner; people wearing black and looking blue huddled in corners sipping exotic non-alcoholic caffeine beverages. It was decadent, affected, dripping with pseudo intellectualism—people inspiring themselves by quoting St. Augustine—mostly the Jews did this—every so often someone would actually come up with a genuine smart idea but it would be quickly annihilated by the others--Anita loved the place.

Her friend had died of complications related to AIDS. Elizabeth (*Lizzy* to her friends) was a flat-chested woman with a breast complex. Every time Anita walked in Elizabeth's eyes went immediately to her ample breasts and stayed there. Jealousy dripped off her arms like grease from a piece of fried chicken. Anita didn't like her, but she liked her café, she had liked her son, and whatever: Karma was Karma.

Ritchie and his brother Sunset met Anita at *Final Destination* late one Thursday evening. She had just gotten out of a grief-stricken meeting at work and was in no mood. Yes, his brother called himself Sunset.

Anita took a table at the back; she didn't want anyone thinking she was really with them. Sunset was nothing like Ritchie described.

Sunset had blue/green eyes with the longest lashes Anita had ever seen. His body was muscular, hot--full of life. Energy was shooting out of his chest. The legs were stocky, taut, rippled. The man was a God and Anita was ready to fuck him right there on the table. She restrained herself, but it wouldn't last long, she realized.

Ritchie was seemingly oblivious to the electricity between Sunset and Anita. It was a rippling grace-filled effect. She was sure the whole café could witness the explosion ripping apart his genitals and her heart. Her Chakras vibrated like a hairdryer in a bathtub—pretty soon she'd be shocked into death, purgatory or reincarnation; she didn't much care which.

Ritchie excused himself and disappeared into the bowels of the café, leaving Anita and Sunset alone. It was a moment she would never forget. Sunset looked with alarming intensity into her eyes and put his hand gently on her arm. It made the hairs stand on end and tingle. She was sure she was going through a Kundalini experience right there at the table over her double Americano with a shot of Hazelnut and triple cream coffee, but maybe it was a caffeine buzz—hard to tell.

-You know about my brother, don't you? he asked, a sly look drifting across his eyes.

-No—what—should I? Is there something?

-Well, the last thing I want to do is create serious disillusionment. I mean, I'm a good guy, and I really do love him. I do. I do love him. I'd give him my right kidney, if it came to that.

-I hope it never comes to that, Anita said, sipping her coffee.

-Shit no, his kidneys are fine, Sunset said rearranging his legs underneath the table so that his muscular thigh brushed up against Anita's.

-You know--Anita hated to broach this subject but she felt she had to--You know, your brother—Ritchie—described you as a complete loser.

-Oh, I know, there's always been a lot of sibling rivalry--goes with the territory, I guess. I mean, me being the—the specimen that I am and him being—well, you know.

-What?

-A fucking cockroach! Sunset laughed and spit coffee at her across the table. Anita grabbed a hunk of napkins to wipe the liquid off her shirt.

-Please.

-Sorry.

Sunset leaned over and started brushing her shirt with his hand, passing it gently over the cup of her breasts.

-Not here—she started to say and he immediately planted his lips on hers before she could finish speaking. The kiss went on for some moments and she found she was unable to breathe. Finally, in a panic, she pushed him away and took a deep breath. Her heart was pounding.

-I'm sorry, he said, I just couldn't help myself. You know, you're supposed to breathe when someone kisses you.

-Yeah—I was a little—she took a sip of coffee and felt the caffeine make her heart pound even faster, I just—

Ritchie came back to the table, agitated.

-God Damn fucking cocksucker--Ritchie muttered and pulled up a chair.

-What? Sunset asked him and winked at Anita.

-Oh nothing. Forget it. Where's my coffee?

-Right here. Anita pushed his double Cappuccino over to him. Ritchie sipped the coffee and brooded silently. Sunset brushed his thighs against Anita's legs with a certain insistence. After a moment the brushing stopped and he pushed against her thigh with his leg, forcing her legs to part open. After that he moved a knee into her groin, searching for her vagina. Once found, he pressed against the vulva and finding the sensitive clitoral region, began gently pressing over and over. Anita found herself panting slightly, mouth open.

-Are you okay? Ritchie asked. You seem a little—

-I'm fine, Anita said, shutting her legs and shoving Sunset's knee back to its rightful place. We need to go. Have you paid?

-I'll pay, Sunset said and rose from his chair dramatically. His chest was bulging out of his shirt and Anita watched the fluid grace with which he moved toward the cash register.

There wasn't time to evaluate the significance of the encounter. Anita and Sunset were hot and heavy into a sexually charged romance before either one of them could stop it. Ritchie was relegated to visiting Anita to watch her television and pig-out on frozen dinners. It was an amicable arrangement and Anita felt no compelling need to reveal to Ritchie the nature of her relationship with his brother.

Two brothers; one woman: A dangerous liaison that got Anita's libido going. It gave her a reason to get up in the morning, besides running the business and shopping for retail.

Ritchie generally came over on Tuesdays and Thursdays to watch television and grow stupid on her couch. Sunset came every other night and stayed the mornings. So far, this arrangement had not infringed on anyone's sensibilities and had worked just fine. Ignorance was bliss, after all, Anita told herself, and the less these brothers knew the better.

Sunset was working for a company based out of Philadelphia but just starting to open offices in states all over the Eastern Seaboard. With his obvious charm, Sunset had been propelled quickly through the ranks and was now District Manager of the entire Northeast Region. It meant he was able to hire a secretary, a bookkeeper, an accountant and be out of the office whenever he felt like it.

Delegation was the privilege of few and Sunset took full advantage of it. His office was in Grand Ledge, but he made frequent trips to Philadelphia for meetings. His Philadelphia trips gave Anita a chance to catch up on her sleep and revisit boredom. Boredom looked positively exciting after the constant diet of intrigue, subterfuge and sex that had become her life. Constant excitement could be soporific, she decided. A steady diet of anything could be monotonous. It was time to go have a talk with her mother.

Anita's mother always answered her phone. Caller I.D. was not in her repertoire. She figured that if someone wanted to call her she wanted to talk to them. It was as simple as that. Or not.

That was why, on a beautiful, clear June day when Rona Cummings had planned to do some solid gardening, she postponed her plans after answering a ten a.m. phone call. It was from her daughter Anita, a thin wisp of a girl, if she recalled correctly, the one who always gave her a hard time. Now the son, that was a different matter. He was smart, he was up, he was gone before she knew it--but Anita? *Not*. Anita had manic-depressive tendencies, Rona was sure of it. She had come to that conclusion soon after reading a recent book about hormones, diet and manic-depression. It seemed a plausible explanation for Anita's constant ups and downs and her co-dependency on excitement.

-Yes? Rona answered, gardening shears in one hand and a potting plant in the other. She cradled the phone under her ample chin.

-Mom, it's me.

-What else? I finally cleared the decks to do some gardening and...

-Mother, my life is more important than gardening.

-Really, and who said you could decide that? Rona set the shears and herself down on the nearest chair. She sensed it would be a long moment.

Anita wished her mother were more sympathetic to her problems. Now, if her brother Howard had called, her mother would never have been too busy to drop everything and display her *uber*-mother act, but for the daughter—women got a raw deal

in this life. Maybe the reflective energy was just more than Rona could handle, Anita decided.

-Look mom, I'm in a dilemma here and—

-When are you not in a dilemma dear? Rona asked. Underneath was a sense that Anita ought to just grow up and get on with things.

-I mean, perhaps you ought to consider getting serious about life.

-I am serious about life, mother. Oh, never mind. Talking to you never helps me. I don't know why I even bother.

-Because I am your mother, that's why, Rona said contritely and played with the gardening shears. -I really need to go, dear, before the day is over. Can you encapsulate what it is that is bothering you?

-No, I can't mother, I can't encapsulate it, as you put it—I am involved in some relationships that—well—

-You know, Anita, it wouldn't hurt you to consider therapy. Did you ever ask yourself why you are so terrified of intimacy and expressing the behavior of a confirmed commitment phobic?

Rona's language had become peppered with psycho-babble-slogans ever since she had begun her campaign toward awareness when Anita's father died and left her a large insurance policy. No longer having to work gave Rona lots of free time and she was determined to put it to good use. Helping herself was a good use of time, Rona concluded, and she became a frequent visitor to the local bookstore where she helped herself with all the latest self-help books available.

Armed with the knowledge of the real inner psychological reasons behind why people did what they did gave her an edge as a mother, Rona figured, and she was liberal about making sure her children knew it. Of course, her son Howard called very seldom, if at all. He was unable to receive the gift of her insight, Rona realized, and would one day perish or suffer for it. Anita, on the other hand, was available and ready for the knowledge. Rona's only problem was her impatience with Anita's unwillingness to put her advice to good use.

Putting things to good use was an essential part of Rona's character, and she considered anyone who did not this as a person who was wasting precious time. Anita was a person who wasted a lot of precious time, and some of it was encroaching on **her** precious time.

-I really have to get off the phone. Think about what I said.

-Think about what—what did you say?

-About therapy, Anita. It would do you a world of good.

-The last thing I need right now is a world of good, mother.

-Well, how about lunch then? I'll take you out tomorrow.

-I can't get off work. At least—

-All right, Saturday then. Call me! Rona hung up. It was best this way. Let them down easy. Children do have to grow up, after all, and learn to handle their own problems.

Handling problems was what Rona prided herself she did best. Handling them the way she handled her pots and her plants: carefully, precisely, magically, with discipline and a little touch of distraction. That was how a problem became something else—like a

memory or a dream or something that did not even really exist. Problems just did not exist after Rona finished handling them.

Rona went out into the garden and distracted herself for some hours. She was dating Max Crow; she liked to call him Max Crow but that did not make him laugh. He was older and richer than her, so she felt she ought to make him laugh.

His money gave her a sense of excitement coupled with insecurity. After all, he could pay for things she could not, though he was generous to a fault and very rarely mentioned that the funds from her dead husband were dwindling and would not last forever and maybe she ought to consider investing the money in something secure that would give her an income. He only mentioned this once a week.

-But if I did that, Max, I would be living on much less than I am living on now.

-True, he said thoughtfully, in his most considerate voice, but it would last longer. Now, don't you want it to last longer? I mean, it would be hard to enter the work force at your age, wouldn't it?

-True, Max, true, but I was a teacher. I could always go back to teaching.

-They don't usually hire sixty-six-year-old teachers after ten years of retirement, Rona. There are so many young graduates coming out these days.

Rona pondered this. That was usually the end of the discussion and Max would wait discreetly for another week before bringing it up again.

Rona handled the problem of her monetary insecurity by basking in the joy of the moment and paying particular attention to her roses. Max would undoubtedly call later and want to shoot nine holes of golf.

Rona was on her hands and knees in the dirt, loving the feeling of it all, thinking about golf and Max and dinner at the club. Her life was spectacular and she didn't want to ruin the joy of it by thinking about poverty, death and homelessness.

As she enjoyed her thoughts, they were rudely interrupted by a sudden pang of something. It had to do with Anita and it was an unpleasant pang; not something Rona liked at all. She made a concerted effort to shove aside the pang, whatever it was, and which, like all thoughts of her daughter, made her feel inadequate and old. After all, Rona thought, daughters are daughters and roses are roses. I am tending roses today.

Max came by just as she had thought he would, ready for golf and sporting a new Titanium putter. Rona put away her gardening tools with an exactness that always impressed Max. They were just tools, after all, he reasoned to himself, but she put them on the shelf as if they were religious talismans.

-I must wash and change dear, Rona smiled blithely and shut the garage door.

-Fine, I'll watch the news. Max planted himself in the living room, much like a rhododendron or some other type of houseplant, losing himself in the world of changing moral values.

When Rona was showered and ready, she came sweeping down the stairs in her Bill Blass golf outfit, hoping Max would notice the gold trim or something. Not that he had ever noticed these things before. He was asleep on the couch with his hands resting lightly on the remote. God, she hated retirement.

-Max, Max...dear...

He rustled a moment and turned.

-Oh...you...I was dreaming...my ex-wife...

-She's dead, but I am very much here. Are we going to play golf or what?

4

Anita decided to buy a dog. It would help her deal with too many men in her life. A dog would be a distraction, a friend; a loyal person in the guise of an animal who would listen to her endlessly without reply and accompany her on walks through the city when she got fed up. It was the perfect solution.

Ritchie called incessantly. Sunset called intermittently. Neither one of them interested her once she got her dog from the neighborhood pound. It was part Irish Wolf hound and part Standard Terrier. The man at the pound told her that the puppy would be enormous and she'd better be prepared to spend a lot on food and make sure it had plenty of exercise. Anita loved a challenge.

She named the dog *Chandresh* (in honor of her three-month Sanskrit phase); went on-line to purchase all the necessary items, including a monogrammed bed graced with a very large *D* in royal blue.

-Chandresh is boot-tiful, Chandresh is wonderful, Chandresh is my baby,-she cooed to the puppy once they were home. Chandresh curled up on Anita's lap, looking bored and searching for memory that did not exist.

Well, if I can't have children, this is the next best thing, Anita thought.

Having children was a dilemma Anita carefully avoided thinking about. The more she tried avoiding it, however, the more the thought reared its ugly little head. It just would not go away, and she knew being 42 didn't help either. Her mother had long ago given up pushing her about it—mostly because it was a lost cause and they both knew it. Anita was destined to be childless.

Ritchie had taken to popping in unannounced. She'd left a message on his voice mail about Chandresh and he came over, anxious and sweating and excited. He wanted to see the baby, he wanted to see **her** baby; he wanted to see if she had any mothering instincts at all.

Not that it really mattered, he told himself as he bounded up the stairs to her apartment, two at a time. It didn't matter at all. It was simply a formality—one wanted, a man wanted to know what sort of instinctual pride he could take in the woman he loved. This thought forced the issue: was Anita a woman he loved? Did he love her? Was he that willing to forego the pleasures of playing the field, the road trips, the inspired moments of sweaty ecstasy he indulged in periodically? Could he let all that go and be the one man in one woman's life? Could he?

He didn't care to answer that question. Bounding up the stairs was enough of an answer. He was excited to see her—that was answer plenty. Perhaps too excited. Perhaps he ought to cool it a little—calm down and realize where he was, and most importantly, who he was.

Who he was brought up other problems we won't delve into here.

Anita held the darling, adored Chandresh in her arms when she answered the door.

-Oh,-was all she said and turned her back on Ritchie to walk inside. He followed, much like a puppy himself, eager and ready to please.

-So—this is the baby, eh?-he asked and threw his jacket onto the end table.

-Don't do that, God damn it, you know I hate that.-Anita scooped the jacket up and tossed it into the closet.

-We're so familiar with each other—I love that,-Ritchie laughed and threw himself onto the couch.

-I hate it. Don't turn on the fucking television either-- it makes Chandresh nervous.

-Is that all you can think about—that damned dog? Aren't I at least as important as your dog?

Ritchie knew he was treading on dangerous ground, but surely it was time to let a little shit out of the bag.

Anita sat down carefully on the couch, watching Ritchie and fondling the dog. She wanted to take her time—choose the words with intent. A smile graced her otherwise immobile features. It was the smile of discontent—it was the smile that was not a smile, and, as eager as he was, Ritchie knew it well. It was the smile that threw daggers, cold daggers, into the hearts of men.

-You know, Ritchie, I've been thinking.

Ritchie muted the sound on the television.

-It might be a better idea—

Chandresh whined and wriggled.

-It might be a good idea if—if—

Chandresh whined more desperately and wriggled all over Anita's expensive silk blouse.

-You know, she has to go out, I think, Ritchie spoke.

-Fine. I know that. I know. Fine.

Anita rose; dog in arm, and walked out the door, slamming it ever so movingly behind her. Ritchie got the message and stayed put. No sense in creating more of a stir. When she came back in, Chandresh tumbled out of her arms and romped around the apartment, a renewed animal.

-Where was I? Anita asked.

-I don't know, but I'd best be going. It's painfully obvious you don't give a shit about me, in spite of the fact that we've had sex—made love, at least in mind, if not in body, in spite of the fact that you really have the hots for my brother, I—

-Oh, fuck you, Ritchie. There is nothing more dangerous to the female species than enlightened wimp, and you certainly are one. Now get out of here!

Ritchie rose to go, dragging his sweater behind him.

-...and don't come back, please?

-Now, why would I do that? Ritchie asked as he ambled toward the door.

-Because you're an idiot and you love to suffer.

Anita held open the door and Ritchie glided out on his spindly legs.

-You'll be begging me back, he said, clumping down the stairs.

-I doubt it! Anita shouted after him and slammed the door. The phone rang. She could see from her caller I.D. it was her mother—the last person she wanted to talk to now.

-Mother—could I call you back?

-How did you know it was me? Oh yes, you have one of those ID things.

-Mother, this is not a good time.

-When is it a good time? Couldn't you tell me what's troubling you? I mean, you always complain that I don't have time; that I don't care. Well, now, here I am, I am here, I care, I can help you with whatever is—

-Mother, excuse my French but shut the frug up.

Anita slammed the phone down firmly onto the cradle and wondered what to do with herself. She paced the apartment feeling guilty, relieved and abused. These were not feelings that felt comfortable with each other. She admitted wishing that she could start the whole thing all over again and do it different. She wished Sunset would call. She decided to go to *Final Destination* and get wired on coffee.

As she walked into the café she could almost smell epiphany brewing. Epiphanies always come in two's, she thought to herself cryptically, and I am certainly due for at least one. This epiphany smelt like burnt eggs or something and wouldn't you know it—there was the shithead Ritchie seated at a round table in the corner with some ho from high school it looked like.

She couldn't be older than seventeen, thought Anita with animosity. I hate young girls. How dare he not be pining away for me—missing me, wanting me—what's up with that?

That night Anita wrote in her journal:

-I went to the café to escape my life and I saw it there in all its glory and ugliness right in front of me. I took a coffee to go. Ritchie did not see me. Or if he did, he did not let on. He was at a table with some bimbo from High School. This is mortifying. I threw him out and he is fucking someone the same day! He must have made plans with her before he came to see me. What a jerk. This cannot be allowed. I must do something.

Doing something was not something Anita had time for. After all, she did have a day job and it did take quite a bit of her energy and time. She was the owner/manager of the only real video store in Grand Ledge. Yes, Blockbuster Video was there, too, but she did not acknowledge them as a video store. They were corporate, they were homogenized and franchised and all of their employees wore Blockbuster T-Shirts and hats.

At “Video Fun-they could wear anything they wanted, and they did. It was her store to manage as she wished. She thanked God everyday that her sister had died. Not that her sister had died, actually, but that she had left her the business.

Anita was not so callous that she did not miss her sister. She missed her. On some days she longed for her.

She wondered often, what would Carla have been like at fifty? Would she have loved to watch her two children grow to adulthood? As it was, the kids-- a daughter and a son, were raised by their paternal grandparents. Carla’s husband had long since vanished to some island in the Aegean Sea and was heard from every few years or so, by postcard. He disappeared not because he did not love his wife and the mother of his children, but because he loved them all too much. He was sentimental guy, really, a sailor and a romantic at heart. He just couldn’t take the ugliness of living the life of a widower; a man whose wife had popped too many pills and left the kids at school. It was a cynical death, Anita, concluded. Cynical and selfish. She couldn’t help hating Carla for being so self-absorbed, for her having to pick the kids up from the principal’s office and take them home and explain to them what their mother had done.

The aftermath was explosive and strange and weird. The funeral was grim. Afterwards, Thomas informed Anita and everyone in the family that he had a chance to

Captain a boat off Greece. It was an excellent job with good benefits. He would send money to the kids. They'd be better off with his parents in Bismarck, North Dakota. The kids thought North Dakota was a death sentence, and in some ways it was. So far from Michigan, so far from Anita and Rona and Rona's rhododendrons, and so far from civilization. Eugene, the boy, grew to love the cold and the snow and became a crack skier. Not so for Bridget, who wailed and whined and cried all the way through high school and ran off to Santa Barbara with a guy on a Harley. Now Eugene was in college in Idaho and Bridget was expecting her second child. Ah, the sweet pile of shit that life is, Anita thought, running her hands over her breasts, trying to feel for lumps.

Truth be known, if it were found that she was dying she would fight it tooth and nail. Perhaps this suicide thing was just a control issue: I'll die when I want to, thank you! Says the soul to God, and not when you surprise me. Of course, a long slow cancerous death was no surprise, but oh well. In that case, assisted suicide would be the only solution, Anita concluded. In fact, she reasoned, one did not need to wait for a catastrophic illness to die; one could off oneself at any time, really. There were so statutes of limitations on suicide. She stopped herself abruptly from this thinking process. How could she? After all they had gone through with Carla's death; the last thing she needed was to do the same thing herself. Her mother would not be able to carry it, she was sure of it. No, suicide was not the answer. Travel was.

5

Still, no one ever really “recovers” from a suicide in the family. It hangs there like an old, dirty, worn-out Christmas bauble from two seasons back. An ugly reminder that there once was a holiday.

Carla’s suicide was not something Anita cared to delve into too deeply, but she couldn’t stop thinking about it either. This year she was the same age as Carla was when she did it. It felt like an invitation. Of course Rona never mentioned it. Never. Not at all.

Anita did often wonder if suicide ran in the family. Was it a genetic thing? But everything these days seemed to be a genetic thing. It made life seem so futile and impossible and inevitable.

The discovery of genomes did not reassure her at all. After all, she had very little trust in the human sense of decency; the behavior of people when faced with the possibility of making money and having power through the manipulation of the human genetic code, the judgment of their fellow men and women based on that same code. No. The thought of it positively frightened her.

The inevitability of life leading to death was not the reason Carla killed herself, Anita thought, but it is the reason I would. If I could. If I will.

Thoughts of suicide swirled around her head at odd intervals during the day and sometimes at night. She had to confess that she’d rather be dead than alive. Things were not going that well. Even though she owned her own business, inherited from her dead sister, she didn’t really have any of the things she wanted; like a boyfriend or husband

that treated her like a Goddess, unlimited make-up, a Mazda—any of the stuff women were supposed to have at her age, but then, what was age?

It was at these thought-junctures that Anita would entertain fantasies of just how she would like to kill herself. Her sister did it with pills. Anita felt that way was too drawn out—it would take too long, and she certainly didn't have the stomach for shooting herself; her biggest fear would be that she would miss and merely maim herself, or worse, wound and injure some vital organ and end up in ER pumped full of someone else's blood. The third possibility was hanging—again, too long and drawn out and possibly painful. She could visualize herself choking for some minutes or more—this was not the way to go.

So, in the end, Anita opted for life out of default. She was too scared to die and too cowardly to do herself in, so instead, she did what everyone else does: go on and on in the endless and interminable slow death that the human race has embraced as “living,- and she went to work every day. It was her shop. She had loyal employees. She had a bookkeeper. She had her journal.

It was never enough.

She phoned Sunset and left a message on his voice mail.

-You know, I miss you and I want to kill myself. What do you think? Bye.

Sunset showed up at her door that night with flowers.

-How sweet,-Anita said, taking the roses.

-Flowers are said to absorb negative energy,-Sunset said as he walked in. -You need more flowers around here.

-Did I ever tell you that my sister Carla committed suicide and left me her business? It changed my life.

-Death is a life-changing experience,-Sunset told her as he sipped on the wine she handed him. Indeed.

-Well, it sure is.

There was nothing to say for some moments.

-But you—you have everything to live for! he shouted and swept his arm around the apartment.

-What—my mother? Video Fun? Get real.

-Me. You can live for me.

-Oh, I don't think so, Sunset. You're hardly ever home.

That moment she felt like killing herself. It was precisely these sorts of moments that prompted suicidal thoughts. It did no good to receive flowers—flowers wither and die.

-Flowers die Sunset.

-Everything dies, my pet, so what? Sex is what keeps us alive; it is what continues the line; it keeps the energy moving. Why don't we have sex and forget about death?

Making love to Sunset that evening was a splendid idea and brought forth the fruits of despair.

What is the point of enjoyment when everything is disintegrating right before your eyes? Anita thought. She could not see the point of enjoyment when in every moment of joy lie the seeds of destruction, decay and ruin. Everywhere she looked life was ebbing the very moment it flowed. The glass was half empty. Worse yet, it was not

even a glass, it was a collection of molecules that would become shattered pieces of glass that would eventually become slivers under your skin. Nothing stayed together. Everything fell apart. Nothing had cohesion or structure—cohesion and structure were illusions. Anita felt that the only reality was non-reality. The chaos of emptiness. The season of despair. The abject loneliness of one who lives in death every moment of every day.

Anita turned on her side, away from Sunset, smoking the rare cigarette. He lay belly up, breathing loudly, sighing with pleasure; patting her rump. Obviously, sex was the answer for Sunset. It was not her answer. Sex brought her to death. Life brought her to death.

-What are you thinking? he asked.

She stubbed her cigarette out.

-Nothing, she said and pretended to drift off into sleep. Sunset joined her; only he really slept. Maybe there was nothing to it, after all. Nothing but nothing. Nothing to nothing. The negative reprisals of a life built on the foundations of sand we call civilization: it was nothing but death anyway, she concluded, and slept, in spite of her denial.

The next morning she decided to take a leave of absence from the business and travel.

6

Anita decided to promote Robert VanDiver, the new-hire manic-depressive with schizoid tendencies, to full manager two weeks after he started. The shock was so palpable she could feel the sweat on his palms.

-Wow--I—Wow—I—just—I've never—

-Yes, we all get a chance to meet our Karmic destiny sometime, don't we Robert? You'll be managing the store—I'll train you in the next two weeks, so you can take over while I'm gone.

-You're leaving?

-I'm going on a Vision Quest.

-Oh, wow. My cousin went on one of those. He got really sick in Idaho and they had to airlift him back to my parent's in Maine.

-Yes—well—not that kind of Vision Quest. I'm going to Prague.

She thought she might meet a Czech film director who saw something wonderful and French and wild about her, a French, sweltering, exhaustive kind of woman-of-age thing. It would make her a film star with cigarette smoke and wrinkled brows and a certain world-weary disdain for everything but sex. *La vie! Elle est simplement ceci ou ce ou rien! Life! It's simply this or that or nothing!* This quote coasted through her mind—something she remembered from Balzac, Proust or Colette perhaps? Conceivably she had invented it. She felt she might be sitting on a novel somewhere (inside of her)—a really jaded tale about a worn out American woman dying of AIDS. No, scratch the AIDS. Her thinking was layered, *textured*, as she liked to remind herself—thinking like this could

never be contained in a small space! It needed allowances—thinking like this--her thoughts wound around potential scenarios much like the scarf she had started knitting for Bridget when her niece was fifteen. *She's nineteen now. She'll never get the scarf.* She had undone the knitting so many times the mohair was stripped from the skein. The balls of wool sat in a wicker basket by the fireplace with knitting needles sticking up from the top like scarecrow legs. It gave her place an earth-mother touch and convinced her that somewhere, deep inside, nestled the kind of woman she never was. Perhaps I will become French, she decided.

Robert stood before her, his loose body draped in a gigantic red T-shirt with the words: *When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist.*

-Are you a communist Robert?

-I'm not sure.

-Not that it matters. I don't care. Really I don't.

-So what does a manager do? I've never been able to keep a job longer than three months.

-Oh—well—we can talk about this later. After lunch.

-Mother?

-What is it dear? Are you a survivor of childhood abuse or neglect?

-Who knows?

-I am reading about the self-help way to treat Colitus.

-I don't have Colitus.

-Neither do I.

-Mother. I really need your help. This might give you a mission in life—something to do for a while instead of golf or gardening or Max Crow and Max Crow is not even his real name.

-I know that. I've known that for a long time.

-I'm going to Prague and then perhaps Budapest.

-That's wonderful.

-But—I plan for this to be more than just a holiday. More like a leave of absence.

-Oh.

-I need you to run the store for me. Clearly, this kid Robert can't do it and there's no one else I can trust—no one who has your incredible business sense.

-Yes, I've always had an absurd amount of business sense.

-I wouldn't call it absurd.

-What would you call it?

-I don't know. But you have it. Then it's settled. You run things. I know you'll do a grand job. You're much better with money than I am anyway. You'll keep the books, watch the videos; talk to the customers—

-How long is this going on? What about that boyfriend of yours?

-What boyfriend?

-I don't know—Asphalt or something—

-Sunset Mother. He's fine. He can take care of himself and he's not—

-All right. I'll do it.

-I am really not sure how long I'll be gone, mom—it might be—

-Look, you're in your forties. You've never been married, you have no children, you've got to do something!

"My thoughts exactly. Thank God you understand.

-I'll run the store.

-It might put Max on notice.

-He put me on notice.

-Oh. There was a rich, subterranean silence that hung between them like crushed dead baubles two months after Christmas.

-Well, so what?

-He has a retirement fund.

-Well, maybe you'll have a brain fart or something and invent some way to turn the store into a moneymaking scheme. Who knows?

-I'd like to turn it into an Art Gallery.

-Oh, mother—

Again the skein of wool, the skein of wool---she was haunted by wool.

The big problem was—what to do with Chandresh? She couldn't take the dog with her; she hated the idea of giving him away or, perish the thought, dumping him at the pound. Who would take care of the dog?

Evening in June descended on Grand Ledge like a scythe. Memories of past Junes flooded Anita's mind—those days when one had the actual feeling that there was a *future* somewhere—this vast plain of possibility stretched out in front of life, the hope, the expectation that something might happen, that she would be discovered, rescued, saved,

loved, wooed, paid a lot of money or excited by anticipation. None of that now. As she swept the store, emptied the cash box, got the bank statement ready, and piled the videos in the bin for Robert to put away the next morning, the bell over the door rang and some last-minute desperado walked in the store.

-We're closing now.

-Oh. The sign says open.

Anita looked up into the eyes of a man about fifty--sixty—she couldn't tell--with gun-colored hair curling around his face and ears, wire rimmed glasses, somewhat tall, neither fat nor thin—a full white beard covering his face. His mouth was a sardonic slash on his face; he looked too smart for Grand Ledge. Not the sort of person one saw in Michigan—perhaps a professor at Michigan State or U. of M?

-I know what I want. Blockbuster never has anything.

-I know.

-You guys have a reputation for carrying all the old stuff and foreign films.

-Yeah, that's what we specialize in. But I've got to keep the hot items because otherwise I'd never do any business.

He walked around the store perusing titles. Jeans, T-shirt, hiking boots—he looked like an aging, professor-hippy-artist on sabbatical.