

Failure to Zigzag

Chapter One: The Ainsworths' Good Name

“Why threes, Mom?” Charlotte was asking. This was in 1960, two years before the Airstream when Katrinka would finally get Charlotte back for good. The two of them were sitting in a booth in the soda fountain of the pharmacy on Honolulu Avenue in Montrose, California.

Charlotte was fourteen.

“Why not set of twos?” Charlotte asked. “If they went out in sets of twos, it’d be a whole lot cheaper, did you think of that?” She was watching the bottom of her soda glass where a hard blob of ice cream blocked the end of her straw. Katrinka snorted and Charlotte looked up to see her mother smirking, arching one eyebrow ironically.

“Price is no object with some people,” Katrinka said, “and these bastards are so damned rich they get no sympathy from me on the subject of mun-mun.” She sharpened the ash of her cigarette on the rim of the little plate where her rainbow sherbet sat in a steel goblet, untouched, melting.

“But if they went out in sets of twos, it wouldn’t be so noticeable, if you think about it? Why would they *want* to be so noticeable, Mom? If they went out in sets of one, you probably wouldn’t notice them at all.”

Katrinka put the cigarette out with a hiss in the puddle that had formed beneath the sweating goblet. “That, sweetie, is just my point,” she said, taking another cigarette out of the pack. “They want me to notice them, obviously. They want me to notice them and to fall in love with them.” She lit the cigarette, then squinted at Charlotte through the smoke. “But,” she exhaled, “I prefer not to be involved.”

Charlotte was frowning hard, moving the straw through the root beer scum. Why was it,

she wondered, that good things to eat always turned so quickly to garbage?

“Why are you acting so tragic?” Katrinka asked.

“It just doesn’t make sense.”

“All right then, Charlotte. Forget it. Forget, I mentioned it.” She snapped open her pocketbook and began digging out coins, holding each one to the window as if trying to see through it to the light. “And please remind me never to discuss anything with you ever again.”

“Mom!”

“Well, really!” Katrinka was still poised with one eye squeezed shut. “What is it that you *want* me to tell you? That the psychiatrists of the state of California are following me in cars in sets of threes because they’re trying to drive me crazy? Do you realize, Charlotte, that every other mental patient on Ward G-1 in the state hospital at Camarillo thinks the doctors are conspiring to drive her crazy?”

“But not you, right?” Charlotte asked.

Katrinka tipped her chin up. “I am,” she announced, “much more original than *that*.” She sucked her cheeks in and pressed her lips together elegantly.

Charlotte was frowning hard. “You say the one in the silver T-bird is Dr. Maudlin?” “Maudlin” was what Katrinka called one of the several psychiatrists she’d been *made* to go see; it wasn’t his real name. Dr. Maudlin was the one with the office on Wilshire Boulevard; if he really was following Katrinka around in his silver T-bird, which Charlotte did not for one instant believe, then there *might* conceivably be some sort of sound psychiatric reason for it.

“One half, sweetie, thinks the doctors are trying to drive her crazy,” Katrinka was going on, humorously. “Awwwwnd the other half thinks *she’s* the Virgin Mary.”

“But not you?” Charlotte asked again. In spite of herself, in spite of what she knew about her mother, she was holding her breath.

Katrinka smirked. “No one in our family goes in for any of that Jesus-and-Mary sort of crap, really really. All that is for Avenue B sorts of types. Remember the Castanzo, Charlotte? Big she, little he? Talk about the body and the *blood!*”

Charlotte squinted. She did remember Tony and Sylvia, next door down the hill on Avenue B in Redondo Beach, but she didn’t get the joke. She wanted to say to her mother: You know, Mom? that would be a really good joke if it made any sense.

“Your grandfather may have once attended the Church of the Lighted Window, but it was only to place the muscles of his brain under the bi-homosexual spell of the Congregationalist minister with the finest speaking voice, and not because Lionel believes in G.A.W.D. If your grandfather believed in God, Charlotte, he would go around acting a lot less shitty, believe me. Is he being shitty to *you* these days?” she asked pointedly.

Charlotte dropped her eyes and automatically stopped listening. Conversations in her family had a way of always being the same. Her grandparents, and her mother too, all spent their days talking out into the same thick time, a time in which an act, particularly that of speaking, was never really done, never completed, but always seemed to hang suspended in the time that was yet to be. Charlotte experienced time differently, still believing in its ability to go progress and go forward. Time was different for her, she felt, because she’d been born after Einstein, who had changed time around. It was after Einstein, after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, that time had started to expand, to speed up, and the particles of matter had begun to fly out from the center and ever out.

She was going to shake her head when she realized that Katrinka had gone right on, as if she had herself already forgotten the question. “Awwwnd all Winnie believes in is California

land values, the Auto Club, and the man in the lousy attic. “The Man in the Attic” is what Charlotte’s grandmother called whatever made a house creak and groan as it settled on its foundation. Which is really *gravity*, as Charlotte reminded herself. She loved the reasonable way science had of sculpting cool words, ones that exact, remote and shapely. It was the vocabulary of science, she found, that had the ability to cup itself around whole great chunks of chaos.

“Now, *I* believe in truth,” Katrinka said, pronouncing it “Awe-I.” She looked up at Charlotte from the piles of coins she had assembled along the edge of the table. Each pile held pennies, nickels, dimes or quarters, stacked in combinations to make twenty-seven cents. “Or aren’t you interested in the truth these days?”

“Sure,” Charlotte said, “but I have to go.”

“You don’t believe in Space Radio?” Katrinka asked her. Her whole face was lit up, humorous.

“It’s just that I have a French test to study for, and a bunch of other junk that I have to do.” Space Radio is what Katrinka, since Sputnik, was calling her voices. Katrinka liked call the voices “Space Radio” because she thought it was funnier than the phrase for what they really were: “auditory hallucinations.” And it probably *was* funnier, Charlotte realized, though she still preferred the latter.

“Go ahead then – be shitty about it.” Katrinka snapped her pocketbook shut and peered down over her piles. “*Be* just like your grandparents.”

“It isn’t that, Mom! It’s that I really have to go.”

“Go, then, if you really *have to*.” Katrinka looked out the window, her gray-green eyes flat, no longer interested.

“I guess I can stay ten minutes.”

“Lucky me,” Katrinka said, but she did look back and her smile was small, real, triumphant.

They watched each other appraisingly. Katrinka wouldn't bring up Space Radio again, Charlotte guessed. Instead, she would pick something else that was equally sickening.

“Awwwwnd it's a good thing, too, that I'm *not* the Virgin Mary, when you think of what happened to *her* poor bastard.” Charlotte looked at her perfectly levelly, saying nothing. Katrinka didn't need to talk about Space Radio, which – to Katrinka – was the exact same thing..

She smirked, then announced, “They tacked *her* poor bastard up!” She sucked her cheeks in and arched one regal eyebrow.

“Mom?” Charlotte asked. “Mom? Could you do me one small favor and keep your voice down?”

“Why should I?” Katrinka asked. “Have you ever known me to keep my voice down in the past? Then why should I start now? Awwwwnd just why exactly is it that you want me to keep my voice down? Because I'm claiming *not* to be the Holy Mother of G.A.W.D. in the soda fountain of a pharmacy on Honolulu Avenue? Do you *want* me to think I'm the Virgin Mary, Charlotte? Would that seem more *normal* to you? that would make us Jewish, you realize? Don't you think we have quite enough problems with persecution all on our very own without adding all *that* to it?”

“It's that people's feelings get hurt when you make fun of their religion,” Charlotte reminded her.

“Oh, I don't go by that. All my best friends are either Jewish or Catholic and they're always the first to agree they're much too sensitive to criticism. Anyway, sweetieheart, there isn't

a damned soul in this dump aside from you and me, so exactly whose feelings is it that I'm supposed to be hurting? Unless you think we are so *very interesting* these days that we're being taped recorded by Jack and Jackie? Or by the Ainsworths so they can play the tapes for Maudlin, Moody, and DePalma?"

Charlotte had stopped listening. Instead, she was thinking about the nature of paranoia, that it, like the color of one's eyes and the shape of one's eyebrows and upper lip, might be a gene-linked trait. The Sunday before, she had been standing in the dining room, taking some small pleasure in ironing her gym clothes, in the clean smell of the steam and in the physical act of pressing the required pleats and creases into the damp and heavy cotton of her white gym blouse, the blue shorts. The repetitiveness of the motion and its soft sounds were making her dreamy. Her face was tipped down, frowning. She was thinking about the Theory of Relativity, having just seen something on the subject on "The Twilight Zone" over at her friend Patsy's house.

She could hear her grandmother in the bathroom off the service porch beyond the kitchen, clinking things. Winnie was pretending to be using the toilet, but what she was really doing was working on a painting.

"Winnie!" Charlotte had called out. "Did you ever think about something like this? That maybe the Russian people are really *nice*, know what I mean? I mean, the people themselves, and it's only the two governments that are enemies?"

Winnie came shussshsing, screeching but altogether silently, the muscles of her face drawn upward and out, made catlike by her fear and anger. She came on her quiet shoes, cowering through the three long rooms, all the while looking out the windows into the tops of the oaks, as if the dry and rustling leaves could themselves see and hear her. She carried a brush in one hand. In the other she held a sloshing glass jar filled with azure water. "Hush!" Winnie hissed, right into Charlotte's steamy face. "You are *never* to say a thing like that again, never

even *think it!* This is 1960! You never know *what* they may have invented! *Who* it is who may be listening!” Charlotte believed her grandmother was about to slap her. Instead, Winnie sloshed the jar of blue water all over the ironed gym clothes. The color bloomed, the smell rose up. The water wasn’t water at all, but turpentine. Winnie had been working in oils.

“Your father’s mother was Jewish, did I ever tell you that?” Katrinka was saying. “She was the diminutive red-haired type, the kind who likes to compare shoe sizes at the dinner party, in order to make a point about how *large boned* other women are. Her husband, on the other hand, was six three, which is where your father got his height. Eleanor Ann was so mentally ill on the subject of being Jewish that she always insisted on belonging to all the country clubs that didn’t let Jews in – Chevy Chase, Oak Knolls, like that. Speaking of acting mental patienty! Jack and Jackie and the rest of the Roman Catholics> I mean really, Charlotte! *Fucked by God! Really really?* Believe me, sweetie, ‘fucked by God,’ is one sure way to get yourself locked right up.”

“I would like to discuss this,” Katrinka said.

“Discuss what?” Charlotte was suddenly full to stay awake. Eating made her tired, made her full and sick. She was so exhausted she felt ill. Winnie would make her eat dinner anyway.

“The issue of *paternity*,” Katrinka said.

Charlotte lifted her face. Despite herself, she now was listening. Just the sound of the word caused an ache of longing at the back of her throat, as if someone was squeezing lemons.

“Well, it wasn’t Joseph, obviously.” Katrinka announced.

“You mean *Joseph Black?*” Charlotte asked. This was her father’s name, the name of the man who’d died in the last days of the war when the *Indianapolis* was sunk by moonlight after delivering the uranium for the bombs.

“Honey, we aren’t talking about *ourselves*, right this very second, all right? We’re attempting to discuss the literary history of all this crap. The fact that even in the Bible you don’t get a halo for marrying the mother of your own child, *if* you see what I mean. Even *if* she is so completely off her rocker that she walks around with a crucifix pinned to her pregnant belly button, calling herself such mentally ill names as the *Virgin Mary* and telling people she’s been fucked by God. I mean really. I mean where would I be if Awe-I went around insisting to Maudlin, Moody, and DePalma that I’d been fucked by God?”

Charlotte’s gaze was sliding away, off toward the gleam that was the pay phone on the back wall of the pharmacy. She was thinking of calling Patsy up. Winnie hated for Charlotte to say she was going to call someone *up*, but Charlotte could never remember to say “telephone.”

“All right, then. So who was it really?” If we assume she had not actually been fucked by God?” Katrinka asked. She pronounced it awwwwwwctually.

Charlotte heaved a great sigh. “Oh, Awe-I don’t know, awe-ctually,” she drawled. Since this was not a rational conversation, and Katrinka, as always, was talking largely to herself, Charlotte didn’t see why it was so important that she keep trying to make sense. She was also falling asleep. “A.P. Giannini?” Charlotte asked, as she yawned. Lionel worshipped A.P. Giannini and had once met him *personally*. That was in 1932 when the Ainsworths’ First State Bank failed and was bought out by the Bank of America.

Thinking Charlotte was trying to be witty, Katrinka smiled. “Our *father*?” she asked. “Which *aren’t* in heaven?”

Charlotte suddenlyne3eded to take a short nap. She put her head down and rested the skin of her cheek right on the sticky table top. Sleep swam up. It was a yawning cavern, black and noisy as a sea cave, where the waves crashed, sucked at her, pulled her outward toward an ocean filled with bodies. By the third day, the sharks could not longer differentiate between the smell of

the flesh of the dead and those who were still living. It was the, on the third day, that the shark bites stopped, though sharks did still swim among them, bumping up below the life net, gliding in and around benignly among the pale forest of dangling bodies. Flesh changed: puffed, whitened, become soft, then ulcerated. There beneath the surface of the table top the ship still lay, her pipes gushing forth fresh water, the shape of the superstructure, both fore and aft, now strung with bright lights, as if rigged out for Christmas.

“Charlotte!” Katrinka was suddenly screaming. “Are you swacked? Pie-eyed? Then why in hell’s name are you acting like a falling-down drunk?”

Charlotte opened her eyes to a new vision of Katrinka’s face, her auburn hair sticking out from the way she’s been yanking at it. *This is my mother*, Charlotte thought, slightly shocked, as always.

“I just hate all this holy stuff, Mom,” Charlotte said. “It just isn’t *interesting* to me, okay?” She hated even the feel of the thin pages of the Bible, hated the way the paper stuck to the damp of her fingertips, how the reek of ink and guilt and piety seemed to come up off on the skin of her hands. She had to close her eyes again against the thought of it: the naked man tortured, dangling, his tongue swollen, his dying mouth given vinegar to drink.

“Well, Missy Miss, I’ll have you know that half the gals on Ward G-1 who *think* they’re the Virgin Mary have actually been fucked by their own fathers, I have this on good authority.”

“Space Radio?” It just slipped out.

“Actually, it was *Doctor De Palma*,” Katrina sniffed. “He was trying to get me to tell on Lionel and Winnie,. He always likes me to tell how I am *truly* feeling, when it is actually none of his fucky business.”

“Mom!” Charlotte was suddenly shouting. “Mom! Don’t you really think we could just

please talk about something else? Don't you want to know now I'm doing in school, for instance?"

"How are doing in school, dear?" Katrinka asked in her own voice, but by ventriloquy. "Just *fine*, Mom!" she answered herself, in Charlotte's own higher and slightly breathy voice. "I'm getting all A's, as usual!"

"Mother!"

"Well, really, Charlotte. Why is it that you're so self-conscious? *Are* Lionel and Winnie being mean to you?"

"Let's talk about the cars, okay? All right? If the cars really are following you around in sets of threes, then maybe they're just trying to *help*?" Her last word was thin and shimmery with air.

Katrinka sucked in her cheeks. "When I want their help," she announced, "I'll ask for it."

Out the window, moving away into the blaze of sunlight, Charlotte saw a boy with broad shoulders wearing a woolen Pendleton. Hoods wore these shirts over white T-shirts even on hot days. The only hood in honors English was a boy named Bob Davidson, who spent long minutes staring at the side of Charlotte's face or brazenly at her chest. He was smart but he didn't volunteer in class. He stared but never spoke to her. Even when asking her to dance, he just came up to her, took her hand, let her out onto the dance floor. He didn't dance like other boys. He held her against himself, so she was wrapped in the length of his body and they barely moved. His clothes smelled like smoke. Once when a monitor tapped them for dancing like that, Bob Davidson dropped his arms, turned and abruptly left, abandoning her in the middle of the dance floor. He was very handsome, though he narrowed, suspicious eyes and his skin was slightly wreck3ed. Charlotte always liked people better after she figured out what was wrong with them.

“Talk about psychotic!” Katrinka was saying. “Have you ever *listened* to a psychiatrist for any length of time? Most of them are Zero Sub Minus, I mean really. They all tend to name their children things like Sasha. Sasha, Sasha, Sasha, or Sasha. Aside from which DePalma has admitted it.”

“Admitted what?”

“That I’m his most interesting case. Which is why th4eo ones in cars are wasting all those fifty minute hours of their watching me, no doubt.”

“No doubt,” Charlotte repeated automatically, though she was actually thinking about something else.

It was impossible to argue that Katrinka was not being watched since she was, as they both knew full well. Winnie sat in the Nash parked in front of the bank across the street, watching them as they did their visiting, and thinking about her money. She was watching Katrinka to make certain she didn’t spend any of her twenty-seven censes on alcoholic beverages, and she was watching Charlotte to be sure she didn’t squander her allowance on anything “wasteful” or “teenaged.” These categories, in Winnie’s view, tended to include such items as chewing gum, tweezers, U-No bars, makeup, safety razors, and 45-rpm records by Bobby Vee.

Having been raised by grandparents, Charlotte knew better than to waster her money on foolishness. She was saving her money for her college education, as she would have piped up to tell Art Linkletter had she ever been a guest on “Kids Say the Darndest Things,” which was one of Lionel’s favorite TV shows. Having been raised by grandparents, Charlotte knew all about thrift. She put every single cent that ever came her way into her account in the bank across the street, all of her allowance, also her lunch money, and the extra dime Lionel gave her every

morning and ordered her to spend at break that was like a recess but was called Nutrition. She saved her money because she never needed it. In spite of being raised by the Ainsworths, she was still her mother's daughter. If she needed an item, teenaged or otherwise, Charlotte stole it, really really.

Charlotte was very good at shoplifting, was never caught, never even suspected. She imagined this had to do with the Ainsworths good name in Montrose, where Lionel had been the banker, where he still did the marketing and got his hair cut. Charlotte also dressed like a child who was being well brought up. She dressed like the sort of girl Nancy Drew's example encouraged girls to be, the type who did not chew gum or have pierced ears, who didn't go to the phone and call people *up*. The Nancy Drew-type girl first called out: "Oh, Fawthur! I shawn't be late!" then hopped in her little red roadster and went off to solve a tidy crime. Charlotte, on the other hand, knew she was the type who was more likely to have committed one.

Charlotte shoplifted on Honolulu Avenue, where the Ainsworths were known, where they had their good name. This was also one of Katrinka's favorite places to do what Lionel and Winnie called her "acting up" – talking to herself out loud, discussing whether or not the Virgin Mary had awe-ctually been fucked by Gawd, singing Johnny Mercer songs, dancing the hula in the Aloha Room with nameless drunken strangers.

Charlotte knew most of the merchants she stole from. Even if she didn't actually know them, they knew her, she imagined, She was recognizable as the Ainsworths' granddaughter because of the kinds of things they made her wear. Though Glendale High was a public school, they made her dress in what looked like a uniform: black and white saddle oxfords, the same kind Katrinka had worn when she went away to Cal: little white socks with tops that folded down; boxy plain wool skirts that mad ea person look big as a house so no boy would ever like her; white blouses with the Peter Pan collars. These blouses were made out of a fabric Winnie

reversed: polyester blend.

It was Winnie who insisted on the braids. Hair in the eyes was one of the principle causes of nearsightedness and hair in the food was another of the things liable to make Lionel sick to death. The hair was braided wet, braided ferociously, to last the entire week. Winnie parted it in the center with the jab of her knifelike comb, then painted it so tightly Charlotte felt like her scalp might rip. Her hair was long and thick, the washing was itself a major chore; it fell to Lionel to accomplish these shampoos. Charlotte's braids were so long they trundled all the way down her back.

Other kids in Charlotte's school who had dead parents or other similar tragedies all wore the same sorts of crappy things. Even if they did dress in a more normal, teenaged way, Charlotte could pick them out by their dour, shadowed, defiant faces, or by the scared look that made their eyes jump, as if they expected to be criticized momentarily. Having no parents, she had decided, was like coming to school every day as an immigrant from a foreign country. It seemed to her that Lionel and Winnie lived in a place called Before the War, a country where the language was English, but words were used in a different way. Even the word "war" meant something different to them: the war they spoke of was the first one, the war of their own youth. In the house on Vista del Mar, where they never had visitors, conversation seemed to be performed as if by rote, the words chiseled in the air as if written in a play that was never done, one that had to be practiced over and over. "Can't you ever think of anything *new* to say?" Charlotte frequently wanted to scream at them. Screaming at Lionel and Winnie, however, wasn't part of Charlotte's "role," as Katrinka called it. Katrinka got words like "role" from the group therapy she was "made" to attend when she was at Camarillo.'

Katrinka too repeated herself, always talking about the same damned things. Still, while her concerns remained the same, her version of how the various events of their lives had transpired did evolve over time. She liked to tell what she called "my side of the story." Her side

of the story was elaborated with teach telling, Charlotte noticed, while Lionel and Winnie's version simply became more calcified. Katrinka was insane, Charlotte did understand and tried hard to remember. Katrinka has been diagnosed as such and the diagnosis had been frequently confirmed. Still, insane or not, she was easier for Charlotte to talk to than were her grandparents. Crazy as she was, she would never do a thing as mean as dump turpentine all over ironed gym clothes just because a person had said some dumb thing about the Russians after seeing some dumb show on TV.

"So how's you-know-who?" Katrinka asked, referring to Winnie. Katrinka knew Charlotte had been thinking about the Ainsworths because being crazy had made her witchy. Charlotte knew what Katrinka meant because having a mother like that, having spent so much time trying to decipher what she was saying, had made Charlotte slightly witchy too.

"She bought a pair of pants."

"Christ Jesus! *Are* we going to have to have her committed? What'd he do, burn them?" Lionel had always hated the look of women wearing pants. Once, when Katrinka was at Cal and had been going through a phase of writing for *Pelican* under the penname, "Sidney," she'd come on the train wearing a jacket shaped like a man's and a pair of stylish trousers. Lionel had sneaked into her bedroom at night, taken these clothes from her closet, and had burned them in the incinerator. Charlotte was herself forbidden from owning any pants aside from the gym shorts, which were required.

"*He* was the one who helped her pick them out. They got them at Bullock's Pasadena."

"What is this all about?" Katrinka demanded. "Have they both finally cracked up completely? I promise you that when they do, sweetie, we're going to have to send them someplace very Oak Knoll-ish, very Chevy Chase Country Club Without Negroes and/or Jews. Your grandparents are much too Glendale to tolerate the California-State-Mental-Hospital-at-

Camarillo-type institutionalization, awwwnd I do mean *really*.” Her voice was now low down, confidential.

Charlotte went on. “She thinks the postman tried to see up her skirt when she went down the steps after the mail.”

Katrinka tipped her chin up and nearly laughed. “Now why in the lousy hell would he want to do *that*?”

Charlotte almost smiled. “Too get a peek at Herbert Hoover?”

Katrinka did then laugh, a short, throaty snort that exploded from behind the press of lips.

Winnie believed the flesh of her knees, when scrunched together with the ring made of a gathering of fingers, held the likeness of Herbert Hoover. She sometimes made Charlotte come look at this sight, just as she’d made Katrinka herself come to witness it when it had been she who was growing up in the house on Vista del Mar. “See?” Winnie demanded of first one and now the other. Charlotte never saw anything aside from the scrunches of white flesh, but then Charlotte didn’t really know what Herbert Hoover was supposed to look like. Even years later, when she had escaped from that thick time and was launched out into life, she still searched any roster of the presidents’ for the one whose face most resembled Winnie’s pale and dimpled knees.

“How’s Mr. Tweedy?” Katrinka asked. Mr. Tweedy was Lionel’s pet name for himself.

“Fine,” Charlotte said. “The same.”

They both smiled, knowing it was Lionel’s dream to be the same, that every day since the bank failed he had tried to follow the same exemplary routine. He would rise at the same time, shower and shave, eat the same foods for the same meals, chewing with great exactitude, walk the same six miles. He read the same books over and over again, the complete works of Charles Dickens. He read aloud while lying on his back on the davenport. He preferred for Charlotte to

listen, but he read out loud whether there was anyone to hear or not. It occurred to Charlotte that her grandfather tried to live the day in the same unvarying way in order to perfect it before he died. Just as he was getting it just the way he liked it, Katrinka would show up – down from the hospital or back from Sugarman’s carnival – and the whole thing would go straight to hell.

“I really do have to go,” Charlotte told her. “She gave me her last silver dollars, though, so let me pay.”

“Oh, *gawd!* Not her last silver dollars!” Katrinka cried out, Winnie had a huge sash of them, taken in bags from the bank on the day it closed, but she always claimed she had no more left except these last two or three. She had been giving these last two or three of them to one or the other of them since 1932, saying, “Now, these are my very last silver dollars! Now, I want you to have them on one condition – you are not to tell Lionel! Do you understand me?” She handed them over knotted up in a fancy handkerchief, the bundle tied to look like something might be carried by a baby hobo.

“These are her *very* last ones,” Charlotte said. “Really, really.” She smiled at her mother, a small smile that was actually shy then bent over her task that of untying the hard grip of Winnie’s many knots.

“Put that away,” Katrinka said, waving one imperious hand. “I’m the mother around here and this is my treat.” She said this grimly, out of the side of her mouth, like a gun moll She was busy now stacking the coins in a new way: quarters with quarters, dimes with dimes.

“Mom, really!” Charlotte said.

“Really, really,” Katrinka retorted, going on then in ventriloquy: “Now, I will be the judge of all this and all that, of who is and is not the mother around here, and of all things Nellie-ish and Tweedyish and all things monetary!” This voice was deep, male, authoritarian. It was Ogamer, Katrinka’s old man character. She hadn’t brought the dummies into the soda fountain

that day, but the voices were with her always, except when she could be persuaded to take her medication.

“All right!” Charlotte said. She did want the dollars, which still looked new. She like the heft of them and the soft, deep shine that made them seem more valuable than paper dollars. Still, taking money from her mother, who was so poor she sometimes got public assistance, made Charlotte’s skin crawl. Her whole epidermis, including her scalp, seemed to lift, to move. The skin was itself an organ, she knew – it was the one designed for the specific purpose of differentiation, to keep the self of a person in from the outside world. Was it scientifically possible, she wondered, for a human being to molt like a crab or snake?

“Anyway that Jew bastard Sugarman has given me my job back at his lousy crappy flea circus, so you don’t have to worry about me on the subject of mun-mun.”

“All right!” Charlotte said again, her flesh still crawling. She looked at the underside of either arm, where her skin felt like it was about to break out in hives.

Looking up from this self-appraisal, she noticed her mother’s thin fingers gathering the coins. Katrinka’s money was terrible to look at. It was clotted with some dark gunk into which were stuck the shreds of tobacco that always collected in the recesses of her pocketbook. Charlotte inclined her head, observing her own hands, which lay poised in her lap with the fingers curled and the palms turned upward. At times like this her hands tended to ache, pulsing in the center. She was always surprised that the act of leave-taking could cause such a physical and specifically martyrish pain.

“Oh, Lord God! *Now* what have I done?” Katrinka cried out, but Charlotte’s mouth, gasping, gaping open, watering, couldn’t speak to reassure her. She couldn’t speak nor raise her aching hands, nor do anything at all aside from moving her heavy head slowly from side to side. As she cried, Charlotte kept her eyes tightly shut. She did this to try to keep her tears in, to keep

her soul in, and to save herself from the sight of these, her gifts: her mother and her mother's dirty money.