

Alison's Restaurants
by Eleanor Lerman

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The first morning of my most recent visit to my friend's house—Anderson and Camille Dunnes—I got up earlier than everyone else, probably because I was still on New York time. I had flown into L.A. from New York the day before, which of course, for me, was already last night, and I was as confused as I usually am about the time when I fly from coast to coast. I have tried all the tricks and helpful hints they publish in the airline magazines—wear two watches; wear one but set it to the time of the place that you are traveling to; take off your watch altogether and wear a lovely bracelet instead—but nothing works. (And besides, I can't wear bracelets: they make me look like I'm trying to be someone I'm not, an impromptu kind of person, someone who waves a lot and likes to hear themselves clink and tinkle.) So, as usual, I arrived in a kind of a daze, climbed into Anderson's car, and drove with him and Camille through the red afternoon, the hour of the blazing sun, along familiar roads—from La Cienega to Sunset, left to Laurel Canyon Boulevard—and then up into the soft brown hills. It was late August in a dry summer and getting drier every day. Camille told me that people had begun putting out water for the coyotes; they were even selling nutrient enriched bottled water in the supermarket, a special coyote mix for the predators that otherwise people put up fences against so they wouldn't eat their papillions and poodles. Which, I remarked—making a point that I probably didn't need to—was exactly the kind of reason that, as much as I loved them both, Anderson and Camille, that I was still living in New York.

When we got to their house on Mulholland Drive, which is fairly modest for this area of the Hollywood Hills, just a low ranch with a couple of bedrooms, lots of Spanish tile and a hazy view of the city in the distance, we talked for a while, had dinner, and then talked some more. It was just general, easy conversation with not a lot of catching up to do: I am out here on an average of two or three times a year, and when I'm not, the three of us are on the phone twice a week. Anderson is nearly seventy; Camille is about fifty-six and me, Alison, I'm just a few years younger than Camille, so we're all well aware that time is passing and we have to keep in touch because you never know. Besides, I have known Anderson most of my life and it's become hard to imagine having anything

happen to me that I wouldn't think, immediately, of telling him about. It's been a complicated relationship for sure, but constant. There is some kind of harmony between us that really, should never have happened, because we are completely different people from completely different worlds.

I met Anderson when I was 18 and already out on my own. I was working in a restaurant called Nanny's, on Charles Street in the Village in what was, at that time—before the neighborhood was renovated and became chic and expensive—still a kind of industrial area of warehouses and machine repair shops. The restaurant was divey but well known for the way it changed character when the sun went down: it served truck drivers by day, drag queens and cruisers from Christopher Street by night. I was there, one morning, in Nanny's, preparing to pretend to be the cook (the truck drivers in the neighborhood weren't fussy and seemed okay with eating pancakes made from a mix, eggs a little too brown around the edges) and there were two other teenage girls with me, who were going to wait tables. The manager hadn't shown up and neither had the real cook; the bread delivery was late and even though it was six a.m., we hadn't reopened yet after the night crew had closed down around four in the morning. So it was just us in the restaurant, three slightly crazy, badly nourished (French fries, marijuana, cookies, wine), edgy girls.

Behind Nanny's, was a hidden, cobbled lane, a survivor from the late 1800s: very English, very Jack-the-Ripper, but pleasant, actually, during the day because it was shaded by hardwood trees and, for part of the year, grass and flowers grew up between the cobbles, which was as close to a garden as I ever expected to get. Across the lane was a carriage house that had once belonged to some ritzy but now-demolished private residence. The horses and coaches, of course, were decades gone, and the house had been converted into living space. We had been told, by the restaurant manager, that the carriage house was now occupied by someone famous, a movie producer, who, for the few months that I had been working at the restaurant, had never been home.

But around six-fifteen, when the three of us were still debating about whether or not to open the restaurant without the manager (And what had happened to him, anyway? Overdosed? Murdered by some manic boyfriend? Fired?), the back door was pushed open by a man wearing everything L.L. Bean (I hadn't even *heard* of L.L. Bean then, so I

am reaching back now, remembering how Anderson looked to me; rugged, rushed, wearing expensive casual clothes); he had curly, sand-colored hair and a belligerent, don't-give-me-any-shit-I'm-a-real-pain-in-the-ass expression. We were all instantly intimidated (and worried: what if, somehow, it turned out to be our fault that the back door was apparently left unlocked?).

“Listen,” he said, as if he knew us, as if we were all already in the middle of a conversation, “I just got back from L.A. and the phones in my house are out. I’m going to use your phone, okay? Just tell Anton to give me the bill when it comes. And can you get me a cup of coffee?”

So much information so quickly. Anton was the owner of the restaurant; if he and this guy (who had to be the producer; I had figured that much out already) knew each other, then letting him make a phone call was probably alright. And yes, we had coffee, but would Anton want us to give that to him for free or make him pay?

Anderson strode into Anton’s office—just part of the storeroom, really—to use the phone in there. One of the other girls ran in with a cup of coffee (free, we decided) and then ran out again, but she left the door open so we ended up hearing everything that Anderson said.

And the conversation turned out to be nothing we would have expected. To begin with, he was calling Italy, and I gathered that he was being connected to some hotel because I heard him say a room number and then, because of some confusion with the operator, he started yelling, “Si, Ponti, Carlo Ponti. Si, Si! Sophia Loren!”

Shortly, Anderson was, indeed, connected to Carlo Ponti, a fat, cigar-chomping larger-than-life personage who, at the time, was also a very famous man because he had produced a couple of movies starring Sophia Loren, who was his wife. (I knew this—all three of us in the restaurant knew this—because we read the supermarket gossip rags religiously, as did the truck drivers and the drag queens. It was one of a surprising number of things that both groups of Nanny’s patrons had in common.) Anderson—who had recently produced a movie involving another famous Italian, a director, whose recent exploits included hauling a crew of several dozen assistants, cameramen, actors and a bunch of union carpenters and stunt men out to Death Valley where he had proceeded to blow up everything in sight, including the catering trucks—then launched into a conversation

with Carlo Ponti about some upcoming project in which, it seemed, Sophia Loren might appear as either a hussy or a countess. (Well, what else?) Ponti must have spent some time complimenting Anderson on his recently released film because Anderson kept saying, *Thank you, thank you* and *Oh, you know Michaelangelo, you can't argue with him about things like that*. (The film, by the way was a big hit; this was the early 70s and blowing up things in the desert, especially in an artsy way, while beautiful actors and actresses stood around making bored comments about sex and drugs was something new and exciting, hard as that is to imagine now).

After he finally hung up, Anderson banged out of the restaurant, and I didn't see him again until the end of the month when the phone bill came and Anton sent me across the lane, to the carriage house, to collect the money for the call to Italy. I knocked on the door, which was made of some kind of dark, distressed planking, and was let in by Anderson's third wife, whose name was Jill. She was a kind of dilettante journalist, a rich man's beautiful daughter who had secretly been reading Germaine Greer and decided to become a feminist. (A few months later she had an article published in the *Village Voice* that expressed her desire to hit her husband over the head with a frying pan because he was an oppressive patriarch. On the Wednesday morning that the article was published, she read it aloud to Anderson over breakfast, packed a bag and left for good.) On that morning, though, without paying much attention to me, she just pointed the way to Anderson's study, where he was sitting beneath a triptych of stained glass windows (the whole house was dark and medieval, decorated like a friary), staring at a pile of scripts and loose papers on his desk. I handed him the bill, showed him where Anton had circled the obscenely expensive phone call to Italy, expecting him, simply, to write a check. But instead—maybe because he was bored, or maybe because I was a kind of wild-looking girl with long black hair down to my waist and Egyptian-style eyeliner that featured long, black strokes curved like wings above and below my eyes—he decided to talk to me.

For the next half hour he asked me questions that I barely answered because I was already angry at him and jealous of his wife. Who were these people, I thought, to live such privileged and magical lives in which they could make phone calls to movie stars, hang around their expensive, frightening house all day without having to work at real jobs and, to top it all off—as far as the wife was concerned—to be tall and blonde and

possessed, I was sure, of many wonderful, famous friends and a bank account that she hadn't earned. But I was also not used to anyone Anderson's age taking any kind of interest in me, so eventually, he cajoled me into opening up a bit. I eventually even admitted that no, I wasn't just some stupid kid who worked in a crummy restaurant; I was a writer, or was trying to be—that was why I had left home, why I had failed everything in school because I didn't care about anything else, why I went home every night to my tiny studio on 10th Street and did nothing but work until I fell asleep. He wanted to know what I was writing at the moment, and I showed him; I had a couple of pages of poems folded up in my back pocket because I wrote during my breaks, at lunch, any chance I got. He took the pages from me, told me to sit down (on the only other seat in the room; an old wooden chest studded with spikey nailheads) and read what I had given him. *Well, well*, he said when he was finished. *Well, well*. I guess it was somewhere during our conversation that he decided I needed to be saved and that he would be the one to do it, and somewhere along the line—maybe then, maybe sometime later, I'm not sure—I decided that I was going to let him try.

After that day, though, I didn't see him again for a few weeks until he came into the restaurant one afternoon with a young man—thin, Jewish, a nice looking guy with a friendly face. He introduced me, then, to Alan Goldmark, who turned out to be a screenwriter at the beginning of what went on to be a very successful career. He had already sold one script, though for not a lot of money, and was now working on another, which Anderson had decided that I should help him with. It was a tribute, I guess, to Anderson's intuition that he thought I could do this and to how important a force he was in the movie business, at that time that he had apparently persuaded Adam to let me hang around him for a while.

So the next afternoon when I got off work, and for many days after that, I took the subway to Adam's apartment on the upper West Side and wrote with him. To the surprise of both of us, in one of those serendipitous situations that just happens, that no one could predict or prepare for, we quickly formed an easy, fruitful partnership: though neither of us had ever worked with anyone else before, we wrote together easily and well. Adam would start a scene and I'd figure out how to finish it; he'd outline some dialogue and I'd know how to fill it in. He had expected the script—a dark and nasty story about a

mobster in the porn business—to take three months to complete, but we finished in six weeks.

Adam sent it off to his agent, took me out for a celebratory drink (I remember that I had a Singapore Sling) and the next morning I went back to work at the restaurant, expecting, really, that not much would happen. But maybe just a week or two later, Adam called me and told me to meet him at his agent's office, which was on Sixth Avenue, near 57th Street.

Barry Brown, who was Adam's rep, worked for one of the largest talent agencies in the country; his office was on what seemed to me to be the millionth floor of a building made of black glass that pierced the midtown sky like an upright blade. As soon as we stepped off the elevator, the first thought I had was that I had never been in a place so highly air conditioned (remember, I hadn't been to L.A. yet; not even once) even though outside, it was a pleasant enough spring day. Pictures of every famous person in the world, it seemed to me, were hanging on the walls.

I was also a little awe-struck by Barry's office, which offered an extraordinary view of the Chrysler Building through the window behind his desk and contained a sky-blue couch, an arrangement of orange flowers so large and vibrant that they looked like they could bite you, and two ivory-colored phones with lighted buttons that were blinking furiously. The phone lights went on winking at us throughout the meeting Adam and I had with Barry, in which he told us: 1) the script was great, 2) he was *this close*, already, to optioning it, 3) the actor whose production company was interested in the property (and then Barry named him, waiting to see if we would be impressed, which we were) felt that his real strength was as a comedian so, 4) he wanted us to rewrite it as a comedy in which he could play the lead.

"Do you guys think that you can do that?" Barry asked, smiling, smiling, as he sat behind his desk and played with a gleaming silver Zippo lighter engraved with the agency's logo. (This was 1970; everyone still smoked.)

I looked at Adam. It was, after all, still really his script, so it was his call. And he knew how this game was played: did we just go along with the proposed changes, no matter what we really thought, or did we stand up and leave in a huff? Did one of us throw something and bemoan the loss of our artistic integrity?

Adam closed his eyes for a moment, took a deep breath, and said, “Sure. We can do that.”

And we did. In less than a month, the mobster became a bumbling suburban podiatrist with a suspicious wife and two sarcastic kids who inherited a porn movie empire from his mobster brother-in-law, who’d been bumped off. Hijinks ensued. Barry loved the new script but informed us that he’d just heard from the actor, who’d called from the coast to say that he’d changed his mind—now he thought that his production company should position the script as a vehicle for a young dreamboat star they were hot to find a property for, so could we redo the script again, you know, leave some of the comedy but bring back some dramatic elements, make the lead a younger guy and set it in L.A. instead of New York, meaning they could shoot in Burbank, which would be cheaper, and by the way, the girl, the love interest, she couldn’t have a drug problem because it couldn’t be that kind of a picture. And one more thing, Barry said; we needed to write in a scene—maybe the dreamboat could be driving across a bridge with the twinkling lights of the city all around him, or standing by his car on a ferry, with the twinkling lights of the city in the distance—something where we could have some Phil Collins song swell up on the soundtrack, something moody and sad.

So we rewrote the story one more time, in two weeks. (Thus, *Blue Movies* became a story called *Feet First*, which metamorphosized into a script entitled, *Blue Money*) and a while later, when Barry asked for yet another rewrite, because the comedian’s production company had transferred the option on the script to a subsidiary company which was working with a new wunderkind director who thought it might be a great project if only it was about the news business or the advertising business or something like that instead of mobsters and doctors and sex, Adam finally refused to do it because he was getting other offers by then; the movie that had been made from his first script had been released and it was a hit (stock car racing in New Jersey; a boy, a girl, suburban love) and he told Barry to sign him up for something else.

But Adam also said—generously, I thought—that as long as his name came first on the credits, I could go on revising on the script for as long as I could stand it. So, since by now I had quit working at the restaurant because the option money was enough to keep me going for a while and my only choice was to go back to Nanny’s eventually or

rewrite the script, I made the changes Barry wanted. And then I rewrote the story again, and again—three more times, if I remember correctly—because the rights kept getting transferred from one place to another and everyone who got their hands on it had a new idea of what it should *really* be about. Finally, after another couple of months had gone by, Barry asked me to come to his office one day, so I went back to the black building, sat on the sky-blue couch and waited to hear what I was supposed to do to the script next: add dinosaurs? Cowboys? Spies? I was ready. I had a vivid imagination and no social life. I had just bought an IBM Selectric self-correcting typewriter (remember what year it was: no home computers yet, no word processing programs, no e-mail and no disks) and I figured I could do anything he asked.

But actually, Barry had something in mind other than yet another rewrite. Perched on the edge of his desk this time, he was sipping from a bottle with a Japanese label that had two English words on it, *Water Salad*, which he told me was what everybody was drinking in Tokyo; in fact, he'd just had a case flown in and, he said, he absolutely loved the stuff. (This was some time before the Japanese started buying all the movie studios, but Barry always had good gut feelings; he could spot a trend long before it even started happening.)

“So,” he said to me, “apparently you can write a story about just about anything, huh?”

“I guess so,” I told him, because that much had become clear to me over the past couple of months: apparently, I could.

He went on to tell me that he didn't only represent screenwriters and actors, he had a hand in other branches of the entertainment industry as well, including publishing, and, in fact, he had a book deal going on that he thought maybe I could help him with. It seemed that he had brokered a contract for a Very Famous Actor to write his autobiography, which of course was going to be done with a ghostwriter, but the VFA was a monster, a lunatic, and a nasty drunk who had scared off every writer he had worked with so far. The manuscript, therefore, was only half done and already very late; if I thought I could finish the job, I could probably make more than enough money to keep me going for the rest of the year, and then some. The only catch was that the book, if it was ever completed, was going to have to be published under the name of the VFA as told to the

original co-author (which is why I'm not naming names right now), because that's what the contract said. But if I could pull this off, Barry assured me, he, Barry, would know that I had done it, which would probably lead to more work for me. I needed the money, it was a writing job, and the possibility of having to go back to Nanny's still loomed, so I said okay.

And, as it turned out, the VFA and I got along just fine. He helped me discover another odd talent I have, which is that I can empathize with monsters, I can calm down crazy people and get the nastiest son-of-a-bitch to like me and wish me well. (I believe that this ability comes from having been raised by crazy people, in a crazy household. I had a stepmother who was mean and paranoid; a stepsister who, when we were both in our early teens, developed delusional beliefs and heard voices urging her to commit violent acts; and a father who was incapable of admitting that any of this was going on. Just to get fed a decent meal in that house involved a mastery of role playing and negotiation skills that anyone working, for instance, with the criminally insane would be proud of.)

I had to move out to L.A. for a couple of months while I was working with the VFA, and Anderson was out there again, too, because he was in the pre-production phase of another movie (though nothing he did after the film where everything got blown up in the desert was ever as successful for him, hard as he tried to attach himself to another project that would turn into a big hit like that). He got in touch with me and started inviting me places, like to screenings and to dinner parties where almost everyone was somebody important and I was completely out of my element. (For example, what did I know about dinner parties? I was usually dressed inappropriately and didn't understand the food. I remember once being told that we were going to be served a dish that featured hard sauce and I waited to be presented with some meat or fowl encased in an edible coating that would be stiff or crackable; I had no idea that "hard" meant the sauce was made with brandy.) But Anderson seemed to enjoy having me around: I was his protégé, his odd god-child or semi-daughter; whatever the relationship was, it certainly wasn't amorous or in any way sexual, but it was something that we both came to rely upon. I felt that I owed him a lot, but I also actually came to like him. And he liked me.

Not, as I think I started out saying, that the relationship hasn't had its share of give and take. Thankfully, Anderson has mellowed some with age, but when I first got to

know him, he was a difficult person to be friends with—at least he was for me—because he demanded a lot. After Jill left him, he began spending more and more time in L.A.; when I got back in New York, he asked me to take care of the carriage house, which became a kind of way station for his friends and business associates, meaning that there were writers and movie people in and out of there all the time. Sometimes they stayed for a weekend, sometimes for months on end, and they all needed things, they all needed services such as being picked up at airports, or having lists made up for them of local restaurants that served vegetarian meals or dry cleaners who could get wine stains out of leather pants; they needed directions to gay bars or straight bars or discotheques with private VIP lounges where they could relax or buy drugs. And the house itself often required my attention: cleaning ladies had to be let in, as did plumbers and repair men and once, even, a psychic, who had to make sure, in advance of the visit of a noted and notably sensitive Swedish actress who had a soft spot for animals, that the spirits of the long-departed carriage horses did not feel they had been ill-treated in life and so were still hanging around, troubling their former dwelling.

Then there were the girlfriends between Jill and Camille, Anderson's fourth and final wife, who need to be lied to or for or about, and the favors I had to carry out such as arranging something—tickets, nannies, transportation, medical care—for someone's child or pet or parent. And of course, let me not forget to mention the time he called me in the middle of the night, drunk and angry (at life, I guess, not at me) and suggested that I might want to talk him out of trying to get on a flight from Vancouver to San Francisco with a Beretta 950 Jetfire pistol tucked in his shirt. And even though he was in one of his macho, wild-man phases when he took that gun with him everywhere, I did manage to convince him that it wasn't the best idea he'd ever had, which was certainly true, because although there was a time when trying to get through airport security with a handgun didn't have the kind of horrific connotations that it does today, it was still apt to land you in a lot of hot water, especially on flight across an international border.

Anyway, anyway. After I completed the project with the VFA and returned home, Barry did what he promised: he got me more jobs, projects that I could actually put my name on. Though the script I had reworked so many times never actually did get produced and I never worked on another, I did, over the years, develop a career that I

have enjoyed and never, ever, would have thought of for myself or had the faintest idea how to pursue if I hadn't been pushed in that direction: I became one of those "as told to" writers, one of the best, I think, because along with the ability to make monsters like and trust me, it seems that I am also able to become obsessively interested, at least temporarily, in almost anything at all. So, armed with this skill, I have co-authored books on depression, the history of submarines, the secrets of the Mayans, Egyptian archeology and the Crusades; I have written about forgotten Civil War battles as well as pet psychology and home decoration, along with, of course, my bread and butter, a seeming library-full of "autobiographies," of entertainers, mostly, though there has also been one scientist and one explorer. Unfortunately, this talent for gliding from one thing to another, as if the last thing I was absorbed by had never really been important but the next one, surely, will prove to be the most extraordinary subject, idea or life I have ever encountered, is reflected in my personal relationships, where I have been much less successful. Left to my own devices, I am easily distractible, open to suggestion, and unable to decide which sex I am really attracted to. A psychiatrist I once worked with told me that he thought I was a product of my generation, willing to try just about anything, or anyone, in the hope that peace—pertaining to the soul, perhaps, or to the mind; not to the world, certainly since everyone knows that any chance for that happening is galactic light years away—might one day be achieved. I think my problems, really, are related much more to my years with the crazy family and a bad education, but I could be wrong. I've been wrong about all sorts of things before.

So now I was back in California, having just finished what I hoped was the final draft of the latest autobiography—of a singer, a mountainous woman who had once been a blonde bombshell on a big-band stage. The carriage house back in New York has long since been sold and this easier, more comfortable house in the hills where my oldest friend lives has become my favorite retreat. If I am ever happy, it is here.

Even so, I hadn't slept all that well the night before. To begin with, I just couldn't seem to get comfortable though all the windows were closed and the a.c. was set on max, I could still feel the heat slipping into the house, like breath, like creeper vines, lurking beneath the layers of cool air. And then someone—I was sure it was Anderson, not Camille—had been up half the night, banging in and out of the kitchen, which was right

near the room where I was sleeping. By six a.m., I couldn't even pretend to myself that I was dozing, so I finally got up, made myself a cup of coffee, and carried it out to drink by the pool. Morning in L.A. often starts with haze, but today there was nothing but flat, dry air and a red sun lifting itself into the sky; in this light, the still water in the pool took on a pink hue, so that it seemed to be the color of candy, or champagne.

About half an hour later, Camille emerged from the house and came to join me by the pool. She's also a rich man's daughter, but funny and self-effacing. In the past few years she's been fighting her weight, the gray in her hair and the urge to start smoking again, but she's been handling all these developments—which I follow with great interest, assuming that they're soon headed my way, too—with remarkable good humor. It's that ability to measure the good against the bad and come out evenly that has probably helped her stay with Anderson for nearly two decades now, longer than anyone else had ever managed. What also helps, I think, is that while Anderson is pretty much retired, she isn't; she still has things to do that keep her busy so she's not just sitting around the house with him, getting into arguments.

Camille is an art historian and, at the moment, deep into writing the catalogue for a show being installed at a Beverly Hills gallery that focused on the work of a strange, eccentric man who made collages dedicated to famous ballerinas and then framed them in boxes made of wood and remnant silver. The artist was long dead now, as were most of the ballerinas, but his work had recently experienced a resurgence of interest. The deadline for the show was fast approaching and Camille was working furiously, sometimes at home, sometimes in the research library at the nearby Getty Museum, as she tried to complete the catalogue in time for the show.

But this morning, she didn't look like she was ready to start work just yet. Still wearing the tee shirt and cotton drawstring pant she had slept in, she plopped down into a lounge chair beside me and sighed.

“So,” she said, “did you sleep at all last night? Because I didn't. I mean, I love that man, but I'm going to have to move into a hotel or something if he doesn't stop wandering around all night.”

“He was pretty noisy,” I agreed. “What's going on with him? Why can't he sleep all of a sudden?”

“He’s staying up to listen to Jack Sears,” Camille told me. “From midnight to three a.m., every night of the week except Sunday. He listens to the radio in the den, but you know, he’s got to have a sandwich and a beer and then he thinks he sees snakes in the yard so he has to go out and move the chairs around and turn on the sprinklers or howl at the moon...whatever he does when he’s restless.”

“Snakes?” I said. “Really?” I’m not afraid of them and I wasn’t about to jump up and run into the house or anything like that, but if something was planning to slither up to me and say hello, I kind of wanted to know in advance.

“It’s hot, sweetie,” Camille said, fanning herself with the bottom of her long tee shirt. “They’re looking for something to drink, just like everybody else.”

When I got the thirsty snakes out of my thoughts, I went back to what we’d started to talk about: Anderson’s new late-night hobby. “I thought Anderson told me that Jack Sears was off the air,” I said to Camille.

“He was,” she said. “But now he’s back.”

“And the bastard won’t explain where he’s been. If anyone asks him, he just hangs up on them.” That was Anderson speaking, shuffling up behind us, wearing a pair of pajama bottoms, sunglasses, and leather huaraches—a tough guy still, but with a touch of glamour. He kissed his wife on the lips, me on the top of my head, and then eased himself into another lounge chair. So now we were reclining in a row, three overheated, underdressed humans, baking in the morning sun beside a pink-tinged pool. Ah, California.

“Who cares?” I said. “He wanted publicity or he wanted more money, both of which I’m sure he got. Why is that keeping you up all night? What are you listening to him for?”

I’m doing research,” Anderson told me.

“Why?” I asked. “Research for what?” He didn’t answer, so I turned to Camille. “What’s he talking about?” I asked.

She had a reply, but it wasn’t exactly illuminating. “Poor baby,” she said to me. “You thought you were coming out here for a nice, restful visit, didn’t you?” She stood up then, stretched, and said, “Well, I’m going to get dressed and go do some work at the gallery. Why don’t you two pick me up later and we can have lunch somewhere?”

“Okay,” I said to Anderson as Camille walked back to the house, “now I don’t know what *she’s* talking about.” I looked over at him and saw that while his eyes were closed, as if he were napping, there was a hint of a smile on his face. “Anderson,” I said, and hoped I sounded like I was becoming exasperated with him, because I was, “you’ve got something up your sleeve. I wish you would just tell me what it is.”

I could ask, I could prod him for information—where years ago I would have waited for him to decide to clue me into his various plots—because I had earned that position in his life, grew into it when I stopped being afraid of him. It had taken me a very long time to reach that point, but I almost enjoyed being able to be cranky with him now, and I think he enjoyed it, too. I think he found it amusing.

“I have an idea,” he finally told me, “and it comes with a great opening shot. Fade in: a clear night sky, full of stars. Pan down to the ground: some scrub brush, rocks, a lizard scuttles across the foreground, stops for a moment and then hurries on. Camera pans right: we see a battered house trailer sitting all by itself in the middle of the mid-night desert. There’s a flickering glow of light from behind a window but we’re too far away to see what’s going on inside. Another POV: camera pans up, behind the trailer, and we see a transmission tower, a tall silver antenna—beautiful, with just a hint of menace: what it’s doing out here, who’s using it, for what purpose?—reaching up into the dark sky. Hold the shot for a few seconds, then music up, roll opening credits.”

And now I got it. Actually, all he had to do was say, “Fade in,” and I knew where we were going. “You want to write a screenplay,” I said. “But about *Jack Sears*? Why?”

“I want *us* to write a screenplay,” he said, ignoring the question I’d asked him.

“I haven’t done that in...forever,” I pointed out. “And you—well, Anderson, you’re a producer, not a writer.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, Alison,” he said sharply. “How many movies did I make? You don’t think I know how to write a screenplay?” He finally opened his eyes and turned to look at me. He was deeply tanned and, it seemed to me, getting tanner by the minute, which made his eyes—which were the kind of blue that the water in the pool should have been—seem all the more intense. Did I say before that I wasn’t scared of him? Well, at this moment I felt like I was back to being the baby protégé again; young,

naïve, and waiting to be told how to invent my life. The feeling didn't last long but what was interesting about it was that it wasn't completely unpleasant. It was like a game we were playing, visiting our old roles. Maybe it was more enjoyable for him—being the teacher is always better than being the student—but I didn't really mind remembering how we had started out.

“Look,” he continued, “we don't have to write a complete screenplay, just a treatment. Jack Sears is a hot commodity right now, and if we could get him to attach his name to the project, we could probably get a deal without even trying too hard. Think about it,” Anderson said. “The story's got a great hook, great visuals, and we could turn it into a hell of a script. It would be fun.”

As I listened to Anderson try to sell me on his idea, I did find myself willing to admit, at least, that it had a lot of interesting ingredients. Jack Sears was—is—a radio talk show host, whose program has a unique focus: UFOs, crop circles, psychic phenomenon, alien abduction, anything that comes under the heading of The Unexplained is reported to him by his network of coast-to-coast listeners and then discussed over the airwaves in the dark, troubled hours of the night by insomniacs and conspiracy theorists who believe that there is a shadow government making secret decisions about what we should and shouldn't know about the way the world really works and who's running it. Jack had been broadcasting for over a decade and his show was being syndicated on more than 500 nationwide radio stations nationwide when he suddenly announced, one night about a year ago, that he was going off the air. Maybe he would be back, he said; maybe he wouldn't. He wouldn't explain why—wouldn't even hint at the reason—but his listeners had lots of theories, which they speculated endlessly about with the head of a UFO organization who had been hired to do Jack's show. Jack Sears, everyone was sure, knew too much and there were forces trying to silence him, so he had to stop expending his energy on the program in order to concentrate on fighting back against those who wanted to make sure that the truth never came out. Wasn't that why he had moved out to the Nevada desert, where he had set up his broadcast studio? It wasn't only to monitor the mysterious doings at Area 51, a.k.a. Dreamland, the secret air force base out by the dried-up bed of Groom Lake, but also because it was safe there, he could see anyone coming at

him, there was only one road leading to his trailer home and his transmitter, and a three-mile stretch of that road was wired with motion detectors and monitoring devices.

It was a strange story. Larry King did a program about it; the magazines that came with the Sunday newspapers ran features about Jack and his self-imposed exile from the airwaves. Months went by with no word from him, not even a phone call to his own program. And then, out the blue, one night he was back on the air. CNN, the *New York Times*, everyone tried to get him to talk about what had happened to him, but he wouldn't, which made the whole situation, of course, all the more mysterious.

Anderson had become interested in the story a couple of months ago when he'd read about it in one of the trade papers: the UFO guy had taken a nosedive in the ratings and there were rumors that the show might get cancelled altogether if Jack didn't return. The article Anderson saw had included a rundown of Jack's career, and he had told me about it on the phone one afternoon because, although it was in an oblique way that irked him, since he wasn't actually named, Anderson was mentioned in the closing paragraphs. Or at least that movie was, the important one with the Italian director, which, it turned out, was apparently where Jack had kicked off one of the many careers he'd had—as an actor, a stuntman, a dee jay and a musician—before he'd ended up on the radio, talking about spooks and space ghosts. In the movie Anderson had produced, Jack Sears had played the small supporting role of an outlaw biker who robs a small-town bank and ends up in the desert with the beautiful girl and the sensitive boy, and then gets blown up. The shot of his bike getting lifted into the air by the explosion and then splintering into a million glittering black and silver shards is very famous, but Anderson doesn't like to be reminded of it because, the truth is, he can't stand Jack Sears.

From what I could gather, they had butted heads on the movie set, and I don't need the details to be able to fill in the rest myself: the actors and crew were out in the desert so long playing bandits and crazies that I imagine some of the macho posturing just got out of hand. Over the years, apparently Anderson and Jack continued to run into each other from time to time, and since the entertainment industry is not a place you want to burn your bridges if you can help it, I guess they were civil to each other, but that was about it. As I thought about this, it began to dawn on me that maybe trying to work on a project that involved both of them wasn't such a good idea after all.

“I’ll think about it,” I told Anderson.

“Good,” he said. “And think about money while you’re at it. We could make a bundle.”

But I didn’t. I didn’t think about money or movies or anything like that all day. I just lazed around the pool most of the morning, reading the papers and watching clouds drift by along the ridge line of the valley below. To the west, there was a great blue ocean; to the east, hot-tar roads led out to the high desert, to the salt flats and vast, rocky canyons. From this direction, from the realm of the rattler, the dry winds blew in, sailing the long miles between the Continental Divide and the coast. It was going to be fire season soon, the days of the Santa Anas.

Around eleven, I finally got up and went into the house to shower and change. Then Anderson and I drove to Beverly Hills to pick up Camille; she wanted to eat at the beach, so we turned around and took the Pacific Coast Highway all the way to Malibu, to a restaurant built on a jetty washed by waves. We ordered mahi mahi and drinks the color of jewels poured into thin, clear glass. As we lingered over our meal, I looked to the horizon, hoping to see whales (I always think they’re bigger than they really are, that like true leviathans, they will rise up from the deep and split the sea asunder with the great hump of their iron-colored backs). What I saw, instead, were young seagulls learning to crack clamshells on the rocks and a lone osprey riding the thermals. This is the reward for getting a little older, I thought, for having worked hard and earned an afternoon with nothing special to do except enjoy the sunshine and the ocean breezes. I don’t often feel that way—I am more likely to get up in the morning and find the face in the mirror unrecognizable, to think, *Who is that troubled woman with the sagging jaw? What happened to the wild girl, the one with the Egyptian eyes?*—so I tried to savor my sense of contentment in the hope that I would be able to remember a little of it when it was gone.

We all went home together and I spent the afternoon helping Camille sort through slides of the different pieces that were going to be included in the installation at the gallery. *Which ones will print better?* we asked each other. *Which ones do you like best?*

Anderson spent his afternoon on the telephone—probably, Camille said, talking to people about his Jack Sears project, though he didn’t bother me about it, didn’t even

mention it when we all sat down on the patio together for a late dinner. After we ate, Anderson helped Camille carry the dishes into the house and when they returned to the patio, he had a little black leather pouch with him. He unzipped it and out came a thin silver pipe with a tiny bowl and a brown block of hashish. He placed the pipe and the hash on the table, along with an X-acto knife.

I was so surprised that it actually took me a moment to register what I was looking at. Then I laughed. “Jesus,” I said. “Where did that come from? I don’t think I’ve even seen hashish in twenty years.”

“I still know where to get things when I want them,” Anderson told me.

But even Camille seemed caught off guard by Anderson’s after-dinner presentation. “What do you do,” she said to him, “sneak off the underworld when I’m not around?”

“Something like that,” he replied without the slightest hint of sarcasm.

Camille looked at me and then at Anderson. “Are we really going to do this?” she asked, but by then, really, she was only addressing me because Anderson was already using the knife to slice the hash into little, pipe-sized chunks.

“I guess so,” I said. “But I hope you have Oreos or something like that in the house.”

She sighed. “I probably have some Snackwells. But if we get the munchies really bad, we’ll just make Anderson drive to the store, since this was his idea.”

“And how many years have you been living out here with me?” Anderson said to her. “This isn’t New York, dear heart; you’re ten minutes from Bel Air. There is no little convenience store on the corner. In fact, there is no corner.”

“Well, fine then,” Camille said as he passed her the pipe and a book of matches. “Call Wolfgang Puck and have him deliver a chocolate cake.”

As it turned out, Anderson had stashed some ice cream in the freezer, so although we were predictably ravenous after we smoked the hash, we didn’t need anybody to deliver treats to our door. We also, of course, got very giggly—at least Camille and I did; what happened to Anderson was that he got the urge to dance.

He put on Van Morrison and then we all danced—alone, in pairs, all three of us together—to “Moondance” and “Wavelength” and “Tupelo Honey.” On a hot night, under a sky like silk, in a moment of freedom from work and worry. It was fun.

At some point, I stretched out on the couch in the living room where, through the open doors leading to the patio, I could watch Anderson and Camille dancing outside. I must have fallen asleep, because the next event of my evening was Anderson shaking me awake. I didn’t want to get up—I had smoked too much hash, eaten too much ice cream and danced myself into a backache—but each time I turned away from him he shook me again.

“I don’t want to go to bed,” I complained. “I’ll just sleep here.”

“I don’t want you to go to bed, either,” Anderson told me. “I want you to come listen to Jack Sears with me.”

I heard myself groan. It was theatrical, but I meant it, too. I had awakened with the absolute conviction that I didn’t want to let myself get interested in Anderson’s project. It wasn’t really that I was worried about being around two guys who didn’t like each other as much as I really didn’t want to get involved with anyone who believes that the universe is governed by secrets. It’s not that I think otherwise—I don’t. I know that life is mysterious and that strange things happen all the time—I just don’t feel that it’s necessary to invest a lot of energy in figuring out why. I have enough trouble coping with my own ordinary existence—I’m the one who had the crazy family, remember? Who didn’t know what hard sauce was and now can’t even figure out how to fall genuinely in love—without trying to explore the ramifications of all the extra-curricular stuff, too. Nope. I had decided to let my agent (still Barry; I’m nothing if not loyal) find me another elderly celebrity or pop tart princess who wanted to share their version of the true story of their life with an eager public. It’s what I’m good at; it’s what I do well. I figured I should stick to that.

But even if I wanted to bring up these points with Anderson, he probably wouldn’t have been interested in discussing them with me. He’s a stubborn man and once he gets an idea in his head, if it involves you, it’s remarkably hard to talk your way out of it. So after a few more groans that I threw in for effect (especially after finding out that Camille had managed to get herself excused from the midnight listening party be-

cause she had to work tomorrow), I followed him into the den and stretched myself out again, on a futon couch. Anderson positioned himself behind his desk, by his computer, in case he wanted to make some notes. Just before midnight, he turned on the radio and we heard the theme song of Jack's show, a hard jazzy tune which is probably meant to make you conjure up the kinds of images that form in your mind as a composite of scenes you've watched pass by on movie screens and tv sets. (Here's a good one, exactly what I'm sure you are supposed to imagine: a man with an uncertain future drives down an empty road at night, smoking a cigarette and thinking about how he's determined to find out What the Hell is Going On.)

After a few minutes, the music was cut off and Jack Sears finally spoke. I had never heard the program before and was surprised by how deep and smoky his voice was and how slowly he spoke. It was the voice of a wary man, someone who had grown cunning as a result of too many defeats. It was the rumbling echo of anger.

"This is Jack Sears," the radio voice said, "up all night, broadcasting coast to coast. I'm out here in the dark, thirty miles away from Dreamland, listening for the signals, watching for the signs. So greetings, my friends. Greetings. Let me tell you what I have on tap for you tonight."

He rustled some papers and then there was a profound silence. The thing you're never supposed to allow on the radio is even a few seconds of dead air, when all you hear is the background hum of the electrical universe vibrating through your speakers. But this seemed like a void that Jack had planned on, a moment to create a mood as sleepless listeners in their bed and at their tables tuned into the sound of the infinite crackling along their radio dial.

Then, in his slow, deep voice, Jack finally came back on the air and introduced a guest, a man named David Gordon who claimed not only to have worked at Area 51 but said that his job was to assist with the reverse engineering of a crashed space ship hidden on the base. He had been fired he said, when he had decided that the American people had a right to know what was going on inside the impenetrable metal skins of the research sheds that were protected, night and day, by armed guards. Undoubtedly knowing the answer in advance, Jack asked his guest—who had apparently been telling this story for years, who had, in fact, just written what he said was his second book about his ex-

periences—why no one had been able to find any record of the engineering degree he said he had earned at CalTech or of his employment by the Air Force. The man indignantly replied that of course nothing could be found because, after he was fired, the government had altered all his records, erased his university degree and as far as proof of his employment—since the base didn't officially exist, why would there be any verifiable evidence that he had ever worked there?

“The government did all that to you?” Jack asked. Close to the microphone, you could hear a match being struck, hear the end of a cigarette sizzle.

“Yes, Jack,” David Gordon replied in an aggrieved voice. “They most certainly did.”

Over at his desk, Anderson made a sound, a kind of snort, that was probably halfway between derision and agreement. I, personally, don't have any feeling about the government one way or the other, but Anderson has a habit of deciding, once in a while, that deep down, he's really a left-wing radical. A long time ago, he and the pseudo-journalist wife spent a good deal of time getting arrested at anti-Viet Nam demonstrations; now he still votes for third party candidates, supports enviro-terrorists and claims to revere the memory of Phil Ochs. Still, I assume that even he found the conversation we were hearing to be a little bit wacky. And if he didn't—well, he could believe what he wanted to. I closed my eyes and started to drift back to sleep.

I woke up again when Jack said, “Okay, now we're going to open the phone lines for questions.” Or maybe I heard that while I was still drifting and snapped back into consciousness when Anderson slapped the desk and said, “You watch, Alison. No one even has the guts to ask him about his disappearance anymore because then he'll never take their call again.”

“Well, then why don't you just call him up and ask?” I said. I don't know *why* I said it; the suggestion just popped out. Maybe it was because I was annoyed at having to listen to this stuff and I thought that if only Anderson would call and Jack hung up on him, I could finally go off and get a decent night's sleep.

“You know what?” Anderson said. “Maybe you're right. I should call him myself.”

He had to wait a while until Jack gave out his phone number, but then he picked up his desk phone and dialed. The call went through, and after listening for a few brief moments, he held out the receiver so I could hear the recording on the other end of the line, which said to hold on, Jack Sears would be taking calls in order, as they came in. “He doesn’t have a call screener,” Anderson said, which meant that Jack was willing to take any call, from anybody—though of course, that didn’t actually mean that he was committed to have a conversation with every person who got him on the line.

We waited about twenty minutes while Jack, his guest and three different callers—one from Canada and two from the Midwest—discussed the connection between the famous story about a flying saucer that had supposedly crashed in Roswell, New Mexico in 1947, the alleged spaceship in the hangar at Groom Lake and a new hypersonic jet that the Air Force was rumored to have built, which went by the code name Aurora. No one had ever seen the airplane; the only visible evidence of its existence were some blurry snapshots that David Gordon had obtained—and that were, he said, included in his new book—of an unusual vapor trail that had been seen over the skies of the far west. He called the contrail “donuts on a rope,” and described the image in the photographs as a series of white puffs strung together at regular intervals, which he claimed was evidence of a very sophisticated and heretofore unknown pulse engine. If this kind of engine had been built and installed in the Aurora, all the people participating in Jack’s show agreed that the technology must have been gleaned from a study of the Roswell spaceship, because where else could it have come from? All this was further evidence of the government’s duplicity; it was keeping this information from the public as it went about developing its black ops warplanes based on pirated alien mechanics.

Then, finally, the last person Jack was talking to on the phone clicked off and a taped commercial began. As it did, Anderson signaled to me that the recording had disengaged—apparently, he was going to be the next caller up.

We waited through yet another commercial and a recorded promotion for the radio station. After that, there were another few static-filled moments of dead air and then, I heard through the speakers what Anderson was now hearing through the telephone.

That voice. Sardonic. Poisoned by nicotine. Hyper alert. “Hello. This is Jack Sears, up all night. You’re on the air.”

“Hello, there,” Anderson said, and I could hear him changing his voice to match Jack’s tone. He too, was a man who knew too much. Who could see through the veil. He said, “This is Anderson Dunne, Jack. It’s been a long time since we spoke.”

“Yes, it has been,” Jack replied. “It’s been years.” Certainly, he must have been surprised to hear who his caller was, but he was a professional; he was smooth, and he wasn’t going to react.

“So,” he continued. “I take it you’ve developed an interest in the strange things that happen in the dark. Do you have a question for my guest?”

“No, actually,” Anderson said. “You’re the one I’ve developed an interest in. “And I have a question for you.”

“Really?” Jack said. “What’s that?”

“Well, like many of your listeners, I’m sure,” Anderson said, with just a hint of sarcasm, “I’m very curious about why you were off the air for what? Six months? Seven?”

Jack answered with the sound of righteous anger—whether it was real or even partly manufactured, I couldn’t tell. “I’ve been very clear on that subject,” Jack said. “I will not discuss it. Goodbye, Mr. Dunne. Don’t call again.”

The sound of the receiver being slammed down came across very dramatically on the radio. It was a nice effect. In my mind, I could see how the action would have been indicated in a script: *JACK slams down the phone. Takes a deep drag on a cigarette. Camera HOLDS for a moment and then CUT. INTERIOR. HOUSE. WOMAN on futon smiles.*

“Well, I guess that’s it,” I said to Anderson. “He’s not going to talk to you or anyone else, either. So case closed.”

“He really is an asshole,” Anderson said.

“Right. So why don’t we just stay away from him, okay?”

Anderson didn’t reply. He was sitting at his desk, staring at the blank page on his computer screen where he had hoped to be making notes. It was now almost one o’clock in the morning and even he was looking tired. In the lamplight that suffused the room, thinned and chilled by the ever-present air conditioning, he was also looking old. Still tough, sinewy, ready for a fight—but old. In those moments when I recognize that he is,

of course, a man in his seventies, it always makes me feel melancholy—for both of us. I'm not sure how so much time has passed; I'm not sure what we did with it all. There is so much that I remember about our lives—my life apart from his and our lives together—but it still doesn't feel like enough to have filled up almost thirty years. I don't know how that's possible.

I got up from the couch and kissed him goodnight. "Goodnight, Allie," he replied. He looked like he had decided to just go on sitting at his desk for a while, so I left him alone, the movie madman, sulking in the hills above the city where he used to be important. Off I went to bed: *WOMAN EXITS. CUT.*

The next morning, he didn't get up until after ten. Camille had already left to work in the museum library, the coffee was cold and he was cranky; he prided himself on getting up early every morning, so I guessed that he probably felt like he was already behind schedule, even though we had nothing specific planned. I actually had been thinking of suggesting that we go to Marina del Rey, rent a boat and go out on the water for the afternoon. When Anderson was still living on the east coast, he used to spend summers on Martha's Vineyard; I visited him often enough to remember lots of wild rides in a speedboat, out past Oak Bluffs and into the Atlantic chop. I had something a lot tamer in mind for today (blue skies, easterly breezes, full white sails), but before I even got to say more than good morning, the doorbell rang.

Anderson was still fussing with the coffeemaker, so I went to the door and opened it. Standing outside was a young man in a brown polyester uniform that was making him sweat. Parked behind him was a small van painted almost the same muddy shade of brown as his clothes. The van was unmarked, but in yellow stitching above the shirt pocket of the messenger's uniform were the words: "Pop Messenger Service. We're Quick!" And I guess they were, because the van had apparently zipped up the hill and into the driveway without either Anderson or me hearing a thing.

After consulting a clipboard, the young man said, "I have something for Anderson Dunne."

"Anderson," I called into the house, "there's a package for you."

"Sign for it, will you?" he called back to me, so I wrote my name on the clipboard and was handed, instead of the package I had assume was being delivered, a plain white

envelope with Anderson's name and address typed on the front, but without a return address. Right away I had a feeling that there was something about this. The envelope gave me a spooky feeling.

I closed the door, went back into the kitchen, and handed the envelope to Anderson. It must have seemed strange to him, too, because he didn't open it right away; he looked at the front, the back, and then turned it over again. "What's this?" he asked me.

"I don't know," I said. "A messenger service brought it."

Finally, after it was clear that any further examination of the envelope would continue to reveal absolutely nothing, he decided to tear it open. Inside was a slip of paper, a white rectangle with a few words typed on it. Anderson read it, muttered something I couldn't hear, and then handed it to me. Here's what was typed on the page:

*Thursday, 11 a.m. Take the Extraterrestrial Highway to the Alien Inn.
Sharon is waiting.*

I read it twice, then a third time, but the note didn't make one bit of sense to me. I handed it back to Anderson.

"And this means what?" I asked him. "Do you have any idea?"

"I can guess," he told me. "Sharon is the name of the town where Jack lives—and where he broadcasts from."

We were both, now, staring at the piece of paper as if we expected it, at any moment, to crumple itself up and vanish in a puff of smoke. "I don't get it," I said. "You think this note is from Jack Sears?"

"I know it is," Anderson told me. "It's just the kind of thing he'd do. He loves drama."

"I'm sorry," I said, "but I don't understand why he's sending you messages at all. He hung up on you last night."

"Maybe he felt he had to do that," Anderson told me. "He probably just didn't want to talk to me on the air."

"Well, I think you should call the messenger service, just to make sure. They must have a record of who asked them to deliver this...this note." I was stumbling over

the words because it was such a bizarre little communiqué that I wasn't even sure what to call it.

"Honey," Anderson said, "dollars to donuts there *is* no messenger service. Whoever was at the door was an actor. Whatever he drove here in..."

"A van," I interjected.

"...was probably rented," Anderson finished up.

"How could he arrange all that so quickly?" I asked. "And why?" Now I really felt like I was blathering. Like I was the dumb assistant in a grade B detective movie and the clever Inspector, as he unraveled the clues, was explaining the plot to me.

"He's showing me that he has connections," Anderson said, "and that he can find me as easily as I can find him. The question is why he cares."

"The question," I said, parroting some more bad movie dialogue, "is what that note actually means."

"Oh, we can figure that out," Anderson said, sounding positively gleeful. Energized. He started opening and closing drawers in the kitchen until he found what he was apparently looking for—an address book. Then, after flipping through the pages, he picked up the kitchen phone and started to dial.

"Who are you calling?" I asked.

"My travel agent," he told me.

In a minute, he had someone on the phone named Linda, and after an exchange of pleasantries, he asked her if she had ever heard of the Extraterrestrial Highway and the Alien Inn. Linda seemed to have a quick answer, because Anderson said, "Uh-huh, uh-huh," a couple of times, and then, "Really? You can really do that? I don't think I'd want to book that right now, but thanks a lot."

"So?" I said when he finally hung up the phone.

"Well, this is turning out to be interesting," he replied. "The Alien Inn is a bar in Sharon, Nevada. It's right on State Route 375, officially known as the Extraterrestrial Highway, because it goes out towards that air force base they were talking about on Jack's show last night. The one where they keep the flying saucers."

"Anderson," I said, "I don't really think they have any flying saucers there."

“Oh for God’s sake, Alison, I know that.” But after saying this, he went on happily rattling off the details that his travel agent had given him. “Do you know,” he said, “that you can actually book a trip to Vegas that includes a side trip to Sharon? It’s only about four hours north. A driver will take you for drinks at that Alien Inn Restaurant and then back out on the highway towards the base. They even guarantee that you’ll see a white SUV up on some ridge, which means that the security forces from the base are watching you.” Then he added, “But we don’t need all that—the Vegas part, I mean. We can drive straight to Sharon by ourselves.”

“What?” I said. “Why?”

“Well, that’s what this invitation is about,” Anderson explained, as if he were, indeed, talking to someone who was very, very dense. “So I think we should accept it. We should go see what Jack suddenly has to say.”

“There’s that *we* again,” I said, but I knew that even if I spent the next few minutes protesting against the idea, in the end, I was going with him. A long ride into the desert is not my idea of a pleasant outing, and I’m sure Anderson knew that, but if I refused to go with him, he would think that I was unwilling to extend myself on his behalf and it was too late in this long relationship to risk disappointing him in that way. I don’t think I ever had and I certainly didn’t want to start now.

Because she had to work, there was no question about the fact that Camille couldn’t come along, but when she got home that afternoon and Anderson told her about the trip, she didn’t seem too disappointed to be missing it. Later, when I was helping her with something in the kitchen and Anderson was somewhere else, she leaned over to me and said, “Allie, let me give you one small piece of advice. If you ever do decide to marry anyone, don’t dare let them retire.”

This was Tuesday. The note—if Anderson was interpreting it correctly—said to be in Sharon on Thursday and since, after looking at a road map, Anderson figured that the trip from L.A. could take us more than ten hours if we shared the driving (he speeds, I don’t), we should probably leave in the morning. I put some tee shirts, toothpaste and underwear in a bag and figured that I was all set.

We said goodbye to Camille after breakfast and drove off. For the first part of the trip we were headed along a familiar route we’d both taken before, I-15 from L.A. to Ve-

gas, a straight, easy run heading out of the city towards the great dry deserts that divide the western plains and their barrier mountains from the Pacific coast. Traveling this road on a hot, clear morning, you feel like you are driving into the sun, a golden balloon sliding in from the east and shimmering in the heat currents as it drifts up to the top of the sky.

We weren't yet all that far from the city when we started seeing green highway signs with branching white lines that showed the different exits you could take up ahead, each leading to a different national recreation area: Joshua Tree and the Mojave to the south, Death Valley to the north. The Death Valley exit set Anderson to reminiscing about *The Movie*, because that's where the explosion scenes were shot; every time he got to a part of the story where Jack Sears might show up, I steered him away from it, so mostly he talked about how drunk they'd all gotten and how many magic mushrooms they'd all ingested (they were in the desert, it was 1970, the landscape was an ancient, eerie amalgam of skeletal ridges and dry stream beds that summoned up thoughts of ghosts and spirits; what else were they supposed to do?) and how it was amazing that they managed to do any filming at all. This led to other memories: we talked for a long time about a mini-series about World War II that he'd line produced and that had been shot all over Europe; we'd known each other for a couple of years by then and he had called me from places I'd never heard of and couldn't pronounce to ask that I send him things he needed from his house or couldn't find in some far-away province (a copy of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Tom's of Maine fennel toothpaste, insulated winter socks; I spent so much time at the Village Station post office on Hudson Street mailing packages to him that I was sure I was going to be investigated for drug smuggling. This was, after all, still in the 1970's; we all expected that.) A couple of hours went by like this: he drove, then I did; we stopped to eat and drove some more, all the while telling each other about different times, different experiences that we remembered. Sometimes what we remembered was similar, sometimes very different, sometimes we both couldn't remember the same person's name and then one of us would suddenly remember it in the middle of a different story. So at least the first half of the trip was very pleasant. We laughed a lot and were enjoying each other's company.

But things got a little tricky as we approached the Las Vegas exits. We had to get off I-15 onto US 95 to go north towards Sharon, and while we hadn't seen all that many cars along the desert road between L.A. and Vegas, suddenly we were in the middle of a great stream of traffic that included buses, stretch limos and campers all heading towards the casino hotels, so we had to navigate carefully. We checked our maps, confirmed the exit we were looking for (due north, now, towards Ely) and when we were sure that we'd taken the right turn, we relaxed a little and remarked to each other how surprised we were that so many of the vehicles around us had been full of children; twenty years ago, almost all you would have seen between L.A. and Vegas were ragtops, with one guy driving a windblown blonde.

An hour or two later, we both were feeling pretty tired and thought that we should stop. We still had miles to go before we reached Sharon, but we hadn't expected to do the entire trip in one day; instead, we planned to stop at a motel, spend the night, and then continue on for a short drive in the morning. When we started seeing signs along the road that said the Desert Rose Motel was coming up, last chance for food, gas and lodging for 100 miles, we decided to take them at their word. (That's one of the things I don't like about the desert: signs are always popping up that warn, *last water, last mile of paved road, last outpost of civilization*. Me, I would prefer not to be reminded that it is even possible to reach the limits of any of the most basic human comforts.)

Fifteen minutes later we were checking into adjoining rooms in the Desert Rose, a motel that had probably been built and decorated in the 1950s and never changed: everything was the color of a charred vegetable, with burnt avocado being predominant, and most of the furniture was plastic. The landscape all around was flat and rocky, stretching all the way to the cloudless horizon. Even the cactus growth was sparse, except for a couple of hearty succulents bunched together in what I guess was supposed to be a cactus garden out by the pool. Seen from a distance, they looked like a group of short men with their prickly arms upraised in horror. *Great*, I thought. *Very nice*.

Because there was a pool, and I was hot, I decided to go for a swim while the air conditioner that I had just turned on in my room labored to lower the temperature below ninety. I didn't have a bathing suit with me, but I had brought those useful tee shirts and extra underwear, which served just as well. I floated around in the still green water, in

the silence (something else I don't like about the desert: it can be extraordinarily quiet) while Anderson took a nap. Later, we ate some of that last-chance food in the motel's restaurant, watched some tv, and then sat on the patio for a while, looking up at the stars (okay, that part—the view of the night sky—was terrific; it was dark enough out here, away from the city lights, to see the bright river of the Milky Way arching high above the desert floor.) When I got back to my room it was, finally, cool enough to sleep, and though I slept well, all my dreams were about the desert. They weren't bad dreams, but if I had my choice, I would have wished for something else.

We got an early start in the morning, intending to leave ourselves enough time to make the rest of the drive with ease and then wander around Sharon, if we had to, in order to find the Alien Inn. We got out on the highway—which was now, really, just two lanes of blacktop—and passed no one, not a single car, all the rest of the morning. About an hour into our drive, we started seeing signs that said, “Welcome to the Extraterrestrial Highway.” People who had taken this route before had apparently stopped to write graffiti and paste stickers on the signs: one sported a day-glo flying saucer next to a foot-high, green alien with a wide smile. The alien was affixed above a warning that someone had scrawled in cheery pink magic marker, and which I recognized at the tag line of an old science fiction movie: *Watch the skies!* When we reached the second sign, which was decorated in a similar fashion, Anderson pulled over to the side of the road to take some pictures, and while I hadn't even realized that he'd brought a camera with him I could tell, now, that he was already scouting locations and setting up shots.

As our map indicated, the road took us right into the center of Sharon, Nevada, but we needn't have worried about finding the restaurant because, apart from a tiny combination convenience store and gas station right beside it, the Alien Inn seemed to be the only going concern in the town. Or maybe it *was* the town, since all the billboards we'd passed for the last few miles had heralded our proximity not to Sharon but to the Alien Inn itself, “Home of the Annual International UFO Convention and Festival.” Each billboard depicted the same smiling green alien as the stickers on the road signs, only these were painted with a kind of amateurish brush.

As we turned off the blacktop onto the short dirt road that led to the Alien Inn, we could see that it was a little more—though perhaps not much—than just the kitschy res-

restaurant we had expected. There was a main building, if you could call it that: a kind of dusty, medium-sized trailer topped by yet another billboard featuring the green alien, who I was now beginning to think of as an old friend. This structure was surrounded by several smaller trailers, each with a short flight of stairs leading up to the front door and curtains in the windows. These, I gathered, were what passed for motel rooms out here—perhaps where the International UFO conventioners made camp along with the occasional tourist who wandered out this way in search of the mysteries of Dreamland.

There was one other noticeable feature of this otherwise flat and hunkered-down landscape: parked right outside the front door of the main trailer was a bright red, two-seater BMW convertible with a vanity license plate that read *AlwazUp*.

“Well, well,” Anderson said, glancing at the car and then at his watch. “We’re all right on time. Isn’t that nice.”

To be honest, I had been partly hoping, all along, that this was a wild goose chase and I was just a little disappointed to see the car there, which of course had to belong to Jack Sears. From the moment Anderson had received that note from Jack, this whole project had made me queasy. It was like the two of us had agreed to act out parts in some weird little home movie—our props were coded messages and portable radios, our sets were empty, two-lane roads—but we were playing our scenes in disturbingly close proximity (at least for me) to something very real and probably dangerous. There *was* an air force base out there in the desert and if they were as anxious as they seemed to be to protect whatever secrets they were busy hatching, I didn’t feel that I, personally, had any burning need to know what they were. I didn’t actually want to meet any aliens or see any strange airplanes going into hyperdrive or know anything else about things like that or how Jack Sears’ problems might be connected to them. As our car rolled to a stop next to Jack’s, I found myself wishing that I was back in my apartment in New York with its three nice, safe locks on the door and its windows facing a busy street full of fat, happy humans.

So, once the car was parked and we were walking towards the trailer, I didn’t appreciate hearing Anderson’s next comment, which was, “Okay, cookie, let’s go find out what kind of trouble the shadow government has been causing for our friend Jack.”

“What?” I said. I really knew what he meant, but I was nervous and I must have sounded pretty startled, so Anderson decided to provide me with more information that I didn’t need. “You heard Jack on the radio the other night,” he said to me. “He really does think that there’s some sort of secret government cabal running the country. I think the one we see all the time is crazy enough, but if the conversation veers off in that direction, I’m not going to argue with him. And don’t you, either,” he told me.

It was an absolutely unnecessary warning. “Me?” I said. “You’re not going to hear anything from me but name, rank and serial number.”

“Good girl,” Anderson said as we walked up to the front door of the main trailer. “Just let me do the talking.”

Inside, the Alien Inn resembled a kind of seedy diner: there was a small bar up front, a random arrangement of tables and chairs in the back. What set the place apart from any other watering hole you might find out on the roads in a desert county was the décor, which had apparently been unabashedly and unselfconsciously distilled from science fiction movies and tv shows. Little plastic flying saucers dangled above the bar, some of them lit up like Christmas lights; there were *Star Trek* posters on the walls; a large map of the solar system with the blue ball of Earth tucked smack at the end of a fat white arrow lettered with the words *You are here*; and—most interesting of all, I guess—the proprietor had seen fit to populate the place with six or seven permanent, nonpaying patrons: two seats at the bar and a couple at different tables in the back were occupied by life-sized (well, people-sized) blow-up figures of that same iconic alien with the know-it-all smile. Some of the figures had green plastic skin; some were made out of some shiny, silvery material, but they all looked a little tired and slightly deflated, like they could have used a quick trip back to Zeta Reticuli where they could be cleaned up and checked for slow leaks.

As we came through the front door, a large, cheery woman behind the bar said hello. Anderson said hi, and then, after looking around for a moment, started walking toward the back. I followed after him.

Sitting at a far table, next to one of the silver aliens, was a man with dark eyes, square glasses and a heavy black moustache. His body was square, too, like a block. He was wearing khakis and a yellow polo shirt—expensive clothes but well-worn and wrin-

kled: living out here, he probably had to drive all the way to Vegas or Ely in order to buy clothes like that, or else have them delivered.

There was a cup of coffee in front of him and a nearly full ashtray; apparently, he had been sitting at the table, smoking, for a while. He had a fresh cigarette going now, and it was the length of the ash at the end of the cigarette that he seemed to be paying attention to—deliberately, I guess, he didn't look up at us until we were standing right in front of him.

It was Anderson who decided to be generous and speak first. "Hello, Jack," he said.

Jack Sears examined his cigarette for another moment, long enough to be sure we got the point that he was deciding whether or not to speak to us. "Hello," he said finally. "I see you got my note." Then, glancing over at me, he added, "I don't remember it saying anything about bringing a guest."

"This is Alison Crawford," Anderson said as he pulled back a chair and sat down. I did the same and of course, ended up facing the smirking silver alien. "She's an old friend of mine," he added.

"She's a writer," he said, exhaling the words with a long plume of smoke. I was surprised he knew that, knew who I was. It caused me to look over at him, though I had been determined not to, which I thought would signal my disinterest in this whole affair. What I was pretending to be interested in was how the blow-up alien was affixed to his seat. Glue? Gravity boots? A magic spell?

"Alright," Anderson said. "Yes. She's a writer."

"Well, if you brought her here to write about me, forget it," Jack said to him.

"And I'm not kidding about that. I have lawyers—very good ones."

"People write about you all the time," Anderson pointed out.

"They write about my *show*" Jack replied. "That's allowed."

"Allowed?" Anderson said. There was color rising in his face and his cheeks looked puffed out, like he was about to start blowing out some very nasty words. Somehow, though, after a moment, he found the will to control himself. "Look," he said. "I came all the way out here to meet with you because I think you've got a great story..."

"Yeah?" Jack interrupted. "How would you know?"

“...that I think I can turn into a great movie,” Anderson continued, ignoring him. “All you would have to do is sign onto the project and then talk to me. To us. That’s what you do for a living, isn’t it? You talk. So it shouldn’t be too hard.”

I could see by the expression on Jack’s face that he thought he was being insulted—actually, even *I* thought he was being insulted—but it was hard to tell exactly how. Anderson was being sly and a little aggressive, but it seemed to be working: he had, at least, gotten Jack engaged in the conversation.

Jack stubbed out his cigarette, pulled another from the pack and lit it with a match that flared and fizzled, leaving behind the brief tang of sulfur in the air. “But there’s a catch, isn’t there?” he said to Anderson. I have to tell you where I was for most of last year. That’s what everyone wants to know, right?”

“It’s not a catch,” Anderson replied, “but yes, you have to tell me. I’m guessing that’s the whole plot of the movie, right there in a nutshell.”

“Bad choice of words,” Jack said.

Anderson looked puzzled. “What?” he said.

Jack didn’t explain; he just went on with what he was saying. “You want to know so badly? Fine. I’m going to tell you. But only so you’ll see that there is no story, no movie. And if you try to use what I tell you against me, I’ll deny everything. Remember—like I said—I have very good lawyers who can make your life very difficult. That goes for you, too,” he said, pointing to me.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I told him. “I don’t understand a word of English. He’ll back me up on that,” I added, gesturing at the fellow with the silver smile.

Jack glared at me but I wasn’t bothered by that because I didn’t really care what he thought of me, or what the outcome of his conversation with Anderson turned out to be. I was actually finding myself kind of amused by listening to the two of them spar with each other. I knew that, in his mind, Anderson was continuing to block out the movie he had started planning when we were on the road: this was a scene in which two men in a restaurant were exchanging tense, snappy dialogue about a threatening situation. So I knew, that for him, this conversation was actually taking part on two levels: he was speaking to Jack Sears but so was whatever character he was playing with, testing out.

Realizing what he was doing made me feel more relaxed. (He was making movies; I was used to that.) So did being in this surreal setting: I was sitting in a restaurant opposite an alien balloon, for God's sake, staring at a thirty-year-old poster of Mr. Spock. How seriously could I really take all this? My resolve to keep silent simply fell away. Movies I understood; movies didn't worry me: people involved with movies didn't get arrested for trespassing or poking around in government secrets. And if they did get into that kind of trouble, someone always apologized to them later and sent them a nice gift basket.

"You know what?" I said, addressing the balloon, "I think I'm hungry. How about you? No? Well, I think I'll order something." Reading from a chalk board hanging on the wall, I called to the woman behind the bar. "I'd like a moonburger," I said. "And a diet Dr. Pepper."

"You got it hon," she said. "Anything for the boys?"

"Boys?" I said, turning now to Jack and Anderson. "Want anything?"

Jack was still glaring, but what could he do? "No," he said.

Anderson asked for coffee and then kicked me under the table. "Are you through?" he said.

"For now," I told him. "I might want some moon pies for dessert."

"I'm sorry, Jack," Anderson said.

Jack nodded. Evidently, I had just done them a service: now they were united, at least, against me and my interruptions. "I was in Betty Ford," he said suddenly. "That's all there is to it. That's the big story. Loved my Dos Equis just a little too much. I stopped drinking, but then the depression kicked in, so they transferred me to Cedars Sinai. They put me on Prozac, which helped eventually. But between not drinking and vegging out on the locked ward, I packed on a couple of pounds, so after Cedars, I went to a fat farm in New Mexico and ate wheat germ for a month. So now I'm sober, thinner, and allegedly sane, but can you imagine the press I'd get if that little odyssey I went on last year became public knowledge? Especially the nut hatch. Jesus," he said, sucking on yet another cigarette, "I could do a show about pious Catholic nuns seeing a vision of the Virgin Mary and people would call me up and say, 'Oh yeah, Mr. Looney Tunes, and was she riding a bicycle and playing the kazoo?' Listen," he continued, "I'm serious about

what I do. My show is a serious investigation of all the things that the government doesn't want you to know about. I don't want any of that to be jeopardized by people labeling me as crazy."

It was an unexpected speech and I was sure, for Anderson, a disappointing one. The Jack Sears story he had in mind required a disappearance caused by something a lot more dramatic than the fact that a middle-aged man's life had become unmanageable. Twelve-step stories had been done to death. What he had been hoping for was some intrigue, some controversy—at least Jack being dragged off in the middle of the night by men with square jaws and blank faces who held him incommunicado until he swore he'd stop providing a forum for people who really did know where the bodies were buried—human and otherwise—or else that he'd been off on some quest like that himself, that he'd stumbled onto some mysterious phenomenon or black ops project so extraordinary that he'd wanted to investigate it himself and had to go underground to do it. From the beginning, I couldn't imagine why, if anything even remotely like that had actually happened, Jack would want to tell Anderson when he wouldn't tell anybody else, but then, to my astonishment—after being interrupted by the waitress who brought me a gigantic hamburger pierced by a plastic pick with a top shaped like a flying saucer—that was almost exactly what he did.

"There is something, though," Jack said. "Something important I want to talk to you about. That's why I wanted you to come out here: it's something you've got to see. And if you help me get the story out, not only will I cooperate with you, I'll make promoting the project a regular feature on my show. I'll talk about the fact that the **script is** being written; I'll promote the movie when it's in production and when it opens I'll make myself available to do the chat shows—*Today*, *Good Morning America*, all of those. And by the way," he added, "I think Gene Hackman would be great to play Jack Sears."

I had been happily munching on my moonburger—which was actually pretty good, by the way—and enjoying the curly fries that came with it, but when Jack started referring to himself in the third person, I stopped. I thought I'd better pay close attention to whatever was coming next because clearly, this guy was already seeing his name up in lights. *Gene Hackman stars as Jack Sears*. Along with that fantasy, he was obviously under the impression that Anderson could still pick up the phone, conference in some

movie studio on one line, a world-famous actor on the other and put together a multimillion-dollar deal just like that—which finally explained why we were here, why Jack was talking to us: it was because Jack, like just about everybody else, couldn't resist the idea of being in the movies. Because he thought that Anderson still had the power to make dreams like that come true. And Anderson, I saw, was going to do absolutely nothing to correct that notion. He just artfully arranged his expression to reflect the mixed emotions of someone who was disappointed but still willing to be drawn back into the game. (Arched eyebrows, a wan smile: it was a useful look, I thought, though I doubted that I could ever pull it off myself.)

"I've had a lot of time to think about what happened to me last year," Jack said, "and the thing that bothers me most is the episode of depression. Okay, the drinking? Totally my problem. But I've been through rehab before—twice, actually—and nothing like that ever happened to me the last two times. Nothing."

"Well, you get older, you react to things differently," Anderson said. "You never know..."

"I think they did something to me," Jack interrupted.

Anderson gave him a cautious look. "Who are 'they'?" he asked.

"If I knew the answer to that," Jack told him, "I'd feel a lot safer than I do now."

Anderson paused for a moment. Jack was leading him somewhere and he was trying to figure out how to follow—or if he really should. "Okay, then," he said. "What, exactly do you think *they* did to you?"

"I'm beginning to think my depression was engineered somehow," Jack told him. "Maybe chemically, maybe by hypnosis."

"Don't you think that's a little extreme?" Anderson suggested.

"No," Jack said. "They'd probably do anything they could to discredit me."

"Because?"

"Because I found the Aurora."

"What?" Anderson said. "What are you talking about?"

"I know where they're working on it," Jack told him. "I figured it out. I got some information from Dave Gordon—you heard him on the radio the night you called."

"I have to tell you," Anderson said, "that guy sounded a little flaky to me."

“Oh, he’s a complete crackpot,” Jack said with a dismissive wave of his hand that sent cigarette ash flying dangerously close to my food. “But people believe him, so sometimes he gets an interesting tip. About six months before I went to Betty Ford, somebody—some contact of his in the Air Force—sent him a map of this area. It looked like it had been photocopied from something hand-drawn on the bottom half of a memo from some General named Kenner to some other General named Littman; I haven’t been able to find any records on them yet, and the text of the memo is scratched out. But the map is clear: it shows the usual things—this town, the base out on Groom Lake, which of course never shows up on any official maps—and Arapaho Ridge, a cluster of hills about an hour north of Sharon. On the eastern edge of the hills, all the maps I’ve ever seen show a pueblo site, a protected archeological dig that tourists aren’t allowed to visit because the structures are in such a fragile state. Well, on this map, instead of the remnant pueblo village, there was a completely different site indicated.” Jack leaned in towards us, and this time the ashy tip of his cigarette hovered right over my fries, so I pushed the plate away. “They’ve built another base,” Jack concluded dramatically.

“What?” Anderson asked. “You mean, like, Area 52? Or maybe they call it 51A,” he mused. “Why would they do that?”

“It must be for Aurora,” Jack told him. “There hasn’t been a sighting of the contrail of a pulse engine in two years,” he went on. “I think the government was getting nervous about how many people were looking for evidence of Aurora around Area 51, so they moved it somewhere else. Close enough so they can drive civilian workers out from Groom Lake—you know they fly those people in from an airstrip in Las Vegas every day, right? And make them sign a confidentiality agreement? But far enough away from Dreamland to throw people like me off the track. Only it didn’t work. They fooled Dave Gordon—he drove out to Arapaho Ridge a dozen times, and all he could find was that the pueblo site was still there; you can look down at it from the ridge. He didn’t see anything else: no lights, no runway, no sheds, a big fat nothing. He decided that the map was a hoax, but I’ve been out there a couple of times myself since I’ve been back, and you know what? I think the map is real. I think Dave was just reading it wrong. He thought they’d have to demolish the village to build a runway, because that part of the desert is where the badlands begin: except for the flat plain at the base of the ridge where the

pueblos are, the rest of the terrain is all hills and ravines. But I don't think they had to tear down anything. I think the base is there alright—it's just underground."

Now it was my turn to ask a question. I had kept silent about Area 52—I almost said, *Well, they built Disneyland and then that wasn't enough, so they built Disney-world...* but I knew that kind of comment would cause trouble. Still, I couldn't contain myself any longer. I thought the conversation was becoming absurd. "So I have to ask you," I said to Jack, "how does this plane take off and land without a runway? Have they figured out how to make it dematerialize?" The poster of Mr. Spock was right behind me, and I could imagine that he was probably throwing me a sly wink right about now—after all, he knew all about transporters that took your molecules apart in one place and then put them back together somewhere else.

To my surprise, though, Jack took the question seriously. "No," he said. "But they do know how to build an anti-gravity engine. "There was an article in *Jane's Defense Weekly* a couple of months ago that said it's pretty clear that the Nazis were working on anti-gravity technology. At the end of the war, the head of the project defected to the U.S. and took the technology with him; they used some of the principles to build the B-1 bomber. *Jane's* said they think the U.S. has finally solved the last of the problems the Nazis were working on and has been able to build a true anti-gravity engine, which has been installed in a new prototype of the Aurora. That's what they must be working on at the new base. The government knew I'd find out about it eventually—I find out about *everything*—so they had to come up with a way to diffuse anything I might say about it. If I start talking about the fact that they've perfected anti-gravity flight, they'll reveal that I was locked up in Cedars, they'll claim I had electric shock and that my brain is fried, so who'll pay any attention to me? But if I work with you on this, if we get a big studio involved, then we can tell the Jack Sears story that *should* be told. The spooks, the suits—they won't be able to touch me."

Of course not, I thought. *How could all the power and might of the United States government fight off the forces of Dreamworks? Or Universal Pictures?*

"Of course not," Anderson said.

Jack glanced at his watch, then, and said, "Shit. I've got to go. Why don't you come out to my place in a couple of hours? Just go north on 375 until you come to a

white mailbox with no name on the side. The road goes right, but take a left instead and just head straight until you see the transmitter tower. We can all jump into my Jeep and head out to Arapaho. There's an old impact crater on the other side of the ridge. I think they've hollowed it out and that's where they're launching from. The Aurora can probably go straight up now—like a Harrier jet—only using anti-gravity thrust, it can fly right up to the edge of space, like in nanoseconds. Maybe it can even fly *through* space, like the shuttle. Wouldn't that be a head trip?" he said as he stood up. He left some money beside the ashtray, picked up his cigarettes, and quickly walked away from us, out the door into the desert afternoon.

Alone at the table, Anderson and I sat quietly for a few moments without saying a word. I spent some time watching the alien, who seemed to be shifting around in his seat, troubled by some random current of air. He kept on smiling, though.

Finally, Anderson said, "You know, that burger looks good. Is it?"

"It's very tasty," I answered.

"Then I think I'll have one." He signaled to the woman behind the bar, who came right over. "I'd like one of those," he told her, gesturing at my plate.

"Sure," she said. Then looking over at my half-eaten hamburger, she said, "Was there something wrong with yours, hon?"

"Oh, no," I told her. "It's just that we were talking and I think it got cold." I poked at it to test my theory, and it turned out to be right.

"Well, why don't I heat it up for you?" she said. "And how about some more fries? On the house."

"Really," I told her, "that would be very nice."

"She's very accommodating," Anderson said to me after the woman had walked away.

"A little extra service is always a good investment," I told him, "especially on a slow day. Customers think it means you've taken a liking to them, personally, and they leave you a bigger tip."

He smiled at me. "Oh, I forgot," he said. "You're the industry expert."

"Thank God, no," I said. "But there was a while there that I did think that place was going to be my fate. Nanny's. Wowie zowie. I still think about it sometimes."

“Oh? And am I there? Sitting at the counter? There was a time when I used to come in almost every morning.”

“You know, I really don’t remember that you were there all that often.”

“I’m disappointed,” Anderson told me.

“Well, I can’t imagine you eating there. The food was awful. I know—I cooked some of it.”

“I came to see you,” Anderson said. “I used to flirt with you.”

“What?” I said, in a tone of voice that actually sounded to me, like a screech.

“You’re making that up.”

“I am not. I used to flirt with you. I kind of thought you never figured it out.”

“Why would you flirt with me? I was an idiot kid. You were a rich, famous guy.”

“I wasn’t rich,” Anderson said, “and famous means that people recognize you on the street. No one ever recognized me.”

The woman brought over our food then, arranged it carefully in front of us and then went back to the bar. Anderson picked up his hamburger and took a bite.

“You’re right,” he said. “It is tasty.”

“Don’t change the subject,” I replied.

“I’m not. You were pretty. And smart. And very funny. Well, sarcastic, really. You still are. But I liked that. Then and now.”

“I was a lousy poet,” I said. “Was that part of the flirting? You told me I was pretty good.”

“Probably that was flirting. But you weren’t as bad as you think. There really was something there. Something about you.”

“Still,” I said. “I’m shocked.” Maybe that was true, but I was just about ready now to burst out laughing.

“Really?” Anderson said as he went on munching his hamburger. “I thought you’d be able to handle the news at this late date.”

“Listen,” I said, “I think even Camille could handle it.”

“She’d think it was charming,” Anderson told me. “A sign of life coming from an old dinosaur.”

“Hardly.”

“You know,” he said, “every morning when I’d head over there, I used to think about that Arlo Guthrie song, *Alice’s Restaurant*.” He began to actually sing a few bars. “*You can get anything you want at Alice’s restaurant. Excepting Alice.* To me, you were Alice in the restaurant.”

“Maybe it was just the song you liked,” I told him.

“Oh, I liked the song fine,” Anderson said. “But I liked you, too.”

“Well, I was scared of you,” I confessed.

“Ah. Now the truth comes out.”

“But I like you fine now.”

“I should hope so. Thirty years into this.”

“You know what I think?” I said. “I think we should start drinking. If we’re going to hunt Nazi aliens or alien Nazis, we should at least have a buzz on.”

“Now that’s an idea,” Anderson said. “I was afraid to even have a beer in front of Jack. The way the conversation was going, I thought Betty Ford might fly in through the window and knock the bottle right out of my hand.” He shook his head. “I’m amazed by how paranoid Jack’s gotten,” he continued. “I mean, he always was, but I think he really has gone off the deep end.”

We had both finished eating by then, so we walked over to the bar and told the woman who’d brought our food—the only other person, besides Jack, who we’d seen in the place since we arrived—to keep a running tab. So, since I guess she got the idea that we were going to be there for a while, she introduced herself—her name was Millie—and asked what we’d like to drink. We chose from a list of special house concoctions that she showed us, and then she quickly whipped up what we decided on: two frozen Zombie Margaritas, which came in wide, glittery green plastic margarita glasses with swizzle sticks that featured the same saucer-shaped topper as the picks that had been stuck in the burgers. The drinks were delicious; they had the tart sweetness of limes and coconuts, a wonderful taste on a hot day in the middle of a vast, dry county.

“Listen,” Anderson said as we worked our way through our glasses of frozen foam, “we could just turn around and go home. I think maybe you were right—maybe this was a bad idea. We’ll probably get arrested for trespassing on government property or fall into a meteor crater and never be heard from again.”

“We both have cell phones,” I reminded him. “We’ll call Camille from the jail or the bottom of the hole and she’ll come rescue us.”

“Bless her,” Anderson said. “She would, too.”

“So I think we should go. Jack’s story is pretty nutty, but we’re here, we’ve already come all this way. Besides,” I said as I finished my drink and smiled at Millie, which meant yes, please, hit me again, “there’s probably *something* out there. Maybe not the story you expected, but, well, something. On top of that, you have a pretty good track record with deserts. What did you guys blow up last time? Just a couple of cars, right? Well, maybe this time you can blow up something more interesting. Maybe a flying saucer. Or Jack’s transmitter tower.”

“Or maybe just Jack,” Anderson said. “But okay, you do have a point.” Then he gestured to Millie. “Me, too,” he told her, indicating his empty glass as she filled up mine.

A while later, about mid-way through our second drinks, Anderson stood up to go to the bathroom. He walked a couple of steps toward the back of the bar, but then turned around, strode right up to me and planted a kiss on the top of my head.

He said, “I think I forgot to say thank you for coming on this adventure with me.”

“Always a pleasure,” I replied because, as much as I liked to complain about him, most of the time, it was.

He headed back towards the bathroom and when it looked like he was actually going to make it this time, I hopped off the bar stool and started back outside, meaning to get Anderson’s camera out of the car because I thought that I would get Millie to take a picture of us, me and Anderson sitting at the bar at the Alien Inn. Maybe posed next to one of the extraterrestrials or in front of the poster of Mr. Spock.

I have lots of pictures like this, of me and Anderson in different places, doing different things, just as I have lots of pictures of me with other people, in other places, and of me by myself, pictures taken by friends at different times, in different settings. These pictures, to me, are like pushpins in a timeline: they help me keep track of where I am, what has been happening to me as my life rolls along. I got that idea—about the pushpins—a long time ago, back when I was still working at the restaurant, in the winter that Anderson went to Europe to produce the miniseries. He had lent his house to someone he

introduced to me before he left as Bob—just Bob—a tall guy with a long, sad face and a kind of shambling manner. I didn't think he was anybody special—in fact, after a week or so, I began to think he was maybe a little bananas, because he was afraid of Anderson's wife's cat.

The cat was named Corky, and Jill, who was separated from Anderson by then and staying with a succession of friends, had left him behind until she found a permanent place to live because Corky was not an easy animal to travel with. He weighed 37 pounds and, in hindsight, I can see how someone who didn't know him well could find him unsettling: he was a big, gray boy with big yellow eyes and he liked to sit in a particular armchair in the living room on the second floor of the carriage house. But he didn't sit like a normal cat, on his stomach, with his four paws neatly tucked beneath his body; Corky preferred to sit on his rear, facing forward, like a person, with his back legs played out in front of him and his front feet folded over his paunch. It was kind of like being in a room with Alfred Hitchcock. His all-knowing eyes would follow you around the room and you absolutely understood that he was studying you and everything you were doing. What use he planned to make of these observations was impossible to fathom.

As it turns out, Bob just couldn't bear to have Corky watching him like that and he was afraid to move him—or ask him to move—so he took to calling me at the restaurant and asking me to do it. Because I had promised Anderson that I would give Bob a hand if he needed anything (though I had expected to be asked how to start the boiler if it shut down on a cold night or where the fuse box was), I'd leave the restaurant on my break, cross the lane to the carriage house, go upstairs while Bob waited in the kitchen, and carry Corky downstairs to the guest bedroom where there was another armchair that he found acceptable.

One day, Bob called and told me that Corky was sitting in the chair at the desk in Anderson's study, where Bob was working. "I think he's trying to change something I wrote yesterday," Bob told me, "but if he's got something to say, he should write his own book." So Bob was a writer; I had been wondering what he was doing by himself in that house all day, since Anderson had already warned me that he was pretty reclusive (I had been told not to let anyone into the house—not repairmen or cleaning people, no one—

unless Bob was out) and judging by the fact that I was moving Corky for him morning, noon and night, he never went out anyplace or had any visitors.

Anyway, at my next break, I went over to the house and let myself in, assuming that Bob would be hiding in the kitchen, as usual. Corky was, indeed, in Anderson's chair, but as I walked into the room to pick him up, what I saw stopped me dead in my tracks. The rough plaster walls were covered with sheets and sheets of typing paper that had been taped together to form a continuous scroll that ran all around the room. The pages were covered with writing—I could make out short paragraphs, dates marked off at different intervals, and rough sketches, like little maps, of streets and buildings. At different places along this stream of information there were pushpins in a variety of colors stuck through the paper, into the wall. It was a confusing *mélange* of scribbled notes and drawings.

Bob came into the room then and I guess he saw the expression on my face (which was probably something between shock and worry: I was leaning toward the theory that Bob really was insane and that he was plotting the end of the world, or something like that), because he said, very casually, “Oh, that's just the timeline for this book I'm writing.”

After I moved Corky, he told me about the book—the novel—that later made him very famous and as a result, even more fearful than he already was of strangers and starting animals. The story he was writing was very complicated: it went backwards and forwards in time over a great span of years; characters came and went, disappeared for decades and then popped up again, sometimes in different guises, with different names. Bob explained that the only way even he, the author, could keep track of these wanderings and labyrinthian plot elements was by following the timeline he had constructed for himself and by using colored pushpins to represent the different characters so he could remember, where in time he'd left them last.

A year later, when the book was finally published, Bob sent me a copy inscribed, *To Alison, who got written into the story at the last minute.* A couple of my friends, to whom I've shown the inscription, think it means that one of the characters in the book might have something to do with me, but I don't think so. In any case, there are no cats in the book either. No carriage houses and no restaurants.

But there was a restaurant right in front of me now, so after I fished Anderson's camera out of the car, I decided to take a few snapshots of the Alien Inn. Then I went back inside to finish my *Zombie* and talk, some more, with Anderson. I had a feeling that he still wasn't completely sure what he wanted to do: maybe we'd head on down the Extraterrestrial Highway, or maybe we would change our minds again and start for home. Either way, I already had enough ideas to help him write a script treatment, if that was what he still had his heart set on. (Gene Hackman takes on the shadow government: now *there's* a thriller.) I'll admit that even a couple of hours ago I didn't see the point of getting myself involved in this project, but now I did. The pushpins had moved along the timeline a little bit: some new characters had been introduced, some old ones had revealed new traits. Surprise, surprise. Every day something else happens. The plot thickens. The story goes on.