

Poison Pie

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What I'd done wasn't exactly a crime. The "Help Wanted" sign I'd spotted just this morning was gone, but I knocked again and peered through the glass panel in the door. No sign of life. Maybe the sushi chef had caught one glimpse of me and ducked behind the bar. I had that effect on people. Oculocutaneous albinism, a gene defect, no melanin, no pigment but the blush of my blood. Hence my vanilla brows and lashes and the almond-hued frizz on my head; hence my watermelon-pink eyes. I got my mom's tidy nose, a white-girl nose, but my lips are my daddy's: black-girl lips you could bite into like a peach. That crime I mentioned? Sticky fingers in my mother's new boyfriend's wallet, but not before that boyfriend tried to get his own sticky fingers on me. Maybe it doesn't count as running-away-from-home if you're a deadbeat twenty-five, but last night the contents of that wallet bought me a bus ticket from Monterey to San Francisco where, rumor has it, everyone's a freak.

I'd been on my feet all day in the October swelter looking for work, but no one was hiring, or no one was hiring me. I knocked on the door again and shifted my knapsack—oof!—to my other shoulder. Mounted above the door was a gnarled limb of driftwood painted in faded black letters: KINOKO SUSHI. The restaurant itself was just a storefront squashed under a stucco story of living space squashed under a shingled roof with a creepy dormer window, the creepiness of

which I was still pondering when the door swung open right at me, making me jump back.

A tall willowy white man in T-shirt, sweatpants, and flip-flops stepped forward and peered down at me through icy-blue eyes spiked with long black lashes. “Yes?” said this man, mid-thirties, none too chipper.

Sun-stewed in my tank top and jeans, I postured up to my full five-foot-two and fixed my expression Nefertiti-cool. “Hi,” I said. “Still need a dishwasher?”

The chef—I guessed he was the chef—averted his gaze and tucked a wisp of dark cedary hair behind his ear, then surprised the hell out of me by stepping aside and gesturing for me to enter, which I did. He closed the door and flipped the lights on, illuminating a scene so spare and symmetrical, it tricked you into thinking your own life was in order. Centered on the black carpet was a U-shaped sushi bar built of blond wood and set with twenty-odd places, oblong red lanterns dangling overhead; in every doorway hung a short split curtain, blood-red cloth dappled with black woodblock mushrooms. Through the curtained doorway right behind the sushi bar came a ruckus of clanks and clinks and the whoosh of water.

The chef walked toward the noise and called out, “How’s it going back there?”

The din stopped. “Huh?” said whoever was in the kitchen. The curtain flaps parted, and out peeked a hyena-faced kid with a stringy green bob. “Dishes all clean, Boss.”

Dishes? My innards took a blender whirl. Smart chef: instead of shutting the door in the black albino girl’s face and risking deep

offense and a discrimination lawsuit, he'd brought me inside to see proof my services weren't required. But I needed this job, and it was getting too late today to find another one, so I asked, "Where's the rest of your staff?"

The chef crossed his arms and fixed his gaze on his rubber-thonged toes. "Gone." He lobbed a glance at his new hire. "Dirk, don't you have some oshibori to fold?"

Dirk slung me a look and skulked back through the split curtain.

Thinking quick like I sometimes do, my mind seizing on that dormer window, I said, "Okay then, how 'bout if I waitress in exchange for a bunk in your attic—just 'til I find a paying job!—see, I can't spend another night at the bus station."

"The bus station?" The chef frowned down at me as if speculating whether I might perhaps be an axe-murderer. I waited. With my luck, if this guy hired me, he'd be the axe-murderer. "Well," said the chef at last, "I suppose I could use a server..."

"Great!"

"And I suppose you could sleep here..."

"Fantastic!"

He held up his hand. "But just for one night."

One night? We'd see about that. "I'll take it," I said, hardly believing my luck.

The chef sighed. "All right, come along." He flip-flopped ker-slap-ker-slap ahead of me around the bar, through a curtained side door, and into the kitchen where the air was thick with the toasty-starchy perfume of steamed rice. "Dirk, I'm going upstairs to show, um...", he said, and gestured my way.

“Ocean,” I said. Blame my mother. “Ocean Fritz.”

“To show Ms. Fritz the attic.” The chef reached up to the split curtain hanging in the central doorway, slipped the curtain off its bamboo rod, and piled the red cloth on the counter. “While I’m gone, please hand-wash this noren and hang up a clean one.”

Dirk gave him a sullen nod.

The chef crossed to the back door, and I trailed him outside into a barren yard and up a ramshackle wooden staircase and across a rickety deck to a rear door. “To get to the attic,” he said, unlocking the door and holding it open for me on the shady living quarters beyond, “you have to go through the kitchen—the daidokoro.”

“Sounds divine.” I stepped inside and headed for this daidokoro.

“Hold it!” said the chef.

I froze.

“Your shoes. Please leave them in the genkan.” He pointed at the floor. I was standing on a square of linoleum, a playpen-size clearing in the mossy carpet. The chef closed the door and shed his flip-flops. “No kutsu in the house.”

“You got it.” I wiggled my feet out of my tennies and docked the shoes against the wall and sneaked a peak around, my vision adjusting to the gloom. Nearby, a collapsible footstool sulked by a card table and, farther off, a ten-speed bike slumped against a partition beyond which lurked the living room, funereal with drapes drawn. Built-in bookshelves, empty, lined one wall; the other walls were plastered with charts: Mushrooms of the Fields, Mushrooms of the Woods, Mushrooms of the World, Edible Mushrooms. Not one knickknack, trinket, tchotchke, or frill, and nary a family photo.

The chef indicated a half-open door. “We’ll have to share the bathroom,” he said, and shuffled off toward the kitchen with me and my knapsack on his heels. “You’re welcome to whatever you can scrounge in the fridge.”

“Thanks,” I said, hungry enough to eat the fridge.

The chef handed me a photocopied page out of a drawer. “Japanese phrases to learn.”

“Piece of cake,” I said, and meant it. My mind’s always been primed for words, any words, words like dyspeptic and reprehensible and shat.

The chef opened a skinny door by the stove and flipped the light on. “Here’s the pantry,” he said, showing me a closet with bare—I mean bare—shelves on one side and a narrow staircase on the other. “This kaidan leads to the attic.” He started the climb, and I dogged him up the creaky steps and into a chamber furnished with a futon, nightstand, and dresser lit by the sunset hazing citrus-blue through the dormer window. The slope of the ceiling forced the chef to hunch. “My uncle died years ago and left me this house,” he said. “As a kid, on winter visits, I used to sleep up here.”

I chucked my knapsack onto the futon and said, joking, “Home, sweet home.”

“For one night,” snapped the chef, “and I do expect you to work. Take a shower and be downstairs by six. Any questions?”

“No,” I said as in Jeez.

The chef stalked past me to the stairs, but paused at the top. Turning, he said, “Sorry, Ms. Fritz, but for reasons that have nothing to do with you, one night is all I can offer.”

“Got it,” I said, and batted at a spider lowering itself on a thread spun in the usual charming manner from the usual charming orifice.

The chef tilted his head and squinted at me, a slight curl to his lips. “Know what you remind me of, with your unique coloring?”

Up popped a memory of that high-school composition class, the F+ I’d received on a poem in which I’d likened my own skin to “powdered sunshine,” my own eyes to “sugared rose petals rimmed with dandelion lashes.” But I said, “I dunno, a rat?”

“No...,” replied the chef as if rat weren’t out of the question, “a young *Hebeloma crustuliniforme*. Cream and fawn and pale ocher, a ruddy tinge on the stem.” He started down the pantry steps, thump-thump. “A pretty mushroom, despite its English name.”

Great. I reminded him of fungus. “Which is?”

Already, he was out of sight. “Poison Pie.”

* * *

The chef’s bathroom was so clean it felt like sacrilege to use it, but use it I did, all the while chanting Japanese vocabulary to myself, drilling the words into my brain. A rack by the john boasted two mighty tomes, *Japanese Fluency Fast* and *Deadly Fungi*. I was sitting there anyway, so I leafed through their pages, ho-hum, before showering. Dinner was peanut butter and grapefruit marmalade spooned straight out of the jar because no way was I eating any whole-wheat bread.

I made it downstairs at a quarter to six, tied on the red apron pitched at me by Dirk, and scuttled out front with a tray. The sushi bar was filling up with cozy-looking characters—regulars, by the looks of them—snatches of conversation and slurps of tea mingling with the “music,” a brittle twangy flute solo fit for a prawn pas de deux.

Over at his chopping board, the chef was samurai'd up in a white cotton kimono stamped with black woodblock mushrooms, headband to match. He glanced at me, knife-action suspended, and said, "Komban wa." Good evening. He was testing me.

And I was ready. "Komban wa," I replied, with the tiniest bow. "Ikaga desu ka?" Good evening. How are you?

"Genki desu. Anata wa?" said the chef. Fine. And you?

"Watakushi mo," I said, Me too, and then whipped out a little something I'd looked up on my own: "Okagesama de." Thank you for inquiring.

The chef raised an eyebrow, then calmly resumed sushifying. I glided over to the bar and bussed a fan-shaped celadon plate glazed with bronze maple leaves out of the way of an Asian gent and his Latina lady sharing a honeymoon gaze. The groom ordered a brew, and I said Hai! and glided off to get him a cold one out of the fridge.

* * *

The evening raced along and I raced nimbly with it, so it came as a shock when I overheard the chef arranging with a bow-tied young customer—a pompous punk too quick with his cell phone—to get me an interview tomorrow at 3:15 for a go-fer job with the punk's lawyer aunt down at the Hall of Justice. As I had no references, the aunt required the chef to come along and vouch for me in person, and the chef seemed all too keen to oblige even though tomorrow, Monday, was his and the restaurant's day off. At night's end, with Dirk's help, the chef and I closed and cleaned; by the time we got upstairs and kicked off our shoes in the genkan, I was exhausted to the marrow but pissed off enough about being railroaded into that interview to drowse-mumble, "No wonder your staff bailed."

“They didn’t,” was the crisp reply from the chef, who hadn’t yawned once all night. “I let them go.”

“Huh-what? Why?”

“I’m taking a break,” he said. “Not that it’s any of your business.”

“So, like, when is it you won’t be needing a waitress?”

“Soon.”

“Like, before Tuesday rolls around and you’re in desperate need of a waitress?”

“That’s the plan.” He headed for the moonlit kitchen. “Come along.”

“Awww,” I said, and grogged after him.

The chef opened the pantry door and flipped the light on. “Now, you’ve been very helpful this evening, and—”

“Say it,” I slurred. “I’m Super Waitress.”

The chef tensed his cheek muscles, but the smile fell short of his lips. “Go get some sleep, now, so you’re fresh for your interview at the courthouse.”

“Oh, goody.” I started my bleary ascent. “Seeya at breakfast.”

“Teatime, more like,” said the chef, “and I’d appreciate some quiet.”

I teetered, confused, on the next step. “Late sleeper?”

“Nocturnal.”

“Noc—what?” I blinked at him through lead-lined eyelids.

“When d’you go to bed?”

The chef shrugged. “Sevenish. In the morning.”

“Buh whaddya”—I was half-speaking, half-yawning—“do ‘til then?”

“Do? Well, if you must know, I work out, study Japanese, handle chores, and then I go to the fish market at four a.m. Once I’ve shuttled the fish back to the restaurant, I tank up on sleep until two or

three in the afternoon, shower, then it's prep time until Kinoko opens at five-thirty and I have to deal with the public for six hours straight. Satisfied, Super Waitress?"

"Wha'ever," I said to my vampire host, and trudged on up to my futon and crashed.

Seconds later, it seemed, the doorbell blasted through my slumbers and kept razzing, no one answering, so I slogged out of bed in my panties and T-shirt and groped my way down the dark stairs to the genkan. The chef's bike was missing. The buzzer buzzed again, longer, ending on three dire spurts like LAST—CHANCE—BUB. I muddled down the back stairs and ferreted the key out of its absurdly obvious hiding place, let myself into the restaurant kitchen, and bumbled past the ghostly sushi bar to the front door. There, peering back at me through the glass, was a globular guy with grizzled whiskers.

I called out, "Who is it?"

"No name!" The guy, Slavic by accent, held up a paper bag. "Delivery!" Behind him, a beat-up trailer idled gassily under a street lamp.

I opened the door a crack, and No-Name passed me the bag. It had bulk, but no weight. "Any message?" I asked.

"With this order?" No-Name poked out his lips. "Da, tell him good-bye!" He turned and shambled off toward the trailer as if he'd seen enough scantily-clad, pink-eyed, blonde black albino babes for one night.

I trotted the bag all the way up to the genkan before I had to open the damn thing or spontaneously combust. Inside were two sandwich baggies, one labeled Fly Agaric and filled with red-capped

mushrooms flecked white, the other labeled Death Cap and bearing a single big beige 'shroom. Nonplussed, I laid the baggies out on the card table. A quick tour of the chef's mushroom posters revealed nothing, so I checked Deadly Fungi out of the "library" and hauled the book over to the light at the table. Standing there, I flipped to F for Fly Agaric and skimmed: "Symptoms include hallucinations, delirium, vomiting, convulsions, subcomatose state." Whoa. I dropped to a seat on the footstool, the metal cold through my undies. Right by my elbow sat the lone Death Cap. I butterfingered back to the D's and read: "Lethal in a single-mushroom dose." Oh, you could try administering salt water, said the text, but ultimately there was: "NO ANTIDOTE."

It hit me like a skillet, what the chef planned to do. What he planned to do tomorrow. The bare cupboards, the ship-shape bathroom, the dismissed staff—none of my business? Right. I rounded up the suspects and escorted them upstairs for lockdown in my knapsack.

* * *

"You're sure no one came by last night?" said the chef next afternoon, steering his antique purple Mazda through the heat and traffic to the Hall of Justice, gunning to make my interview at 3:15. The dashboard clock said 3:05. "No drop-offs or deliveries?"

"Sure I'm sure," I said, and clamped my ankles more firmly around my floorboarded knapsack all abulge with everything I owned, plus the assassin mushrooms. The chef's idea was, after my dazzling interview, he'd leave me at the courthouse to start work, and I'd get a bed at the Y, for which he'd already slipped me some cash. For the interview, he'd lent me a vest of indigo silk to wear over my tank top

and jeans. For my sun-shy pink eyes, he'd lent me his wraparound sunglasses. Slathered in sunblock, I felt like a gangster piglet buttered up for a luau. The clock said 3:07. "So," I said, neutral topic, "where'ya from?"

The chef swerved around an armored car. "Nowhere."

"Aw, tell me."

"Nowhere. Really. I grew up camping along the mushroom trail."

"The mushroom what?"

"Trail." He cut me a gaze like aquamarine lightning. "In summer you start high, like British Columbia, and travel down through Washington and Oregon in the fall, spend winter in California. In spring, you strike camp, pile into your rig, and head north to start all over again."

"What the hell for?"

"To pick gourmet mushrooms, of course."

Oh, I thought, like Fly Agarics and Death Caps? We turned a corner and coasted to a stop behind a mass of cars, shiny carapaces snagged in a broiling web of sun. The time was 3:08; make that 3:09. "Right," I said, keeping it going, "gourmet mushrooms."

"Chanterelles, morels, matsutakes, truffles." The chef angled into the next gridlocked lane. "I've even seen Candy Caps—*Lactarius fragilis*—featured on a dessert menu." Catching me fake-retching, he added, "They taste like maple syrup."

"So do my toes."

"Uh-huh." The chef turned right and zoomed down a street lined with bail-bond shacks. "There's the courthouse," he said, pointing at a slab of windowed concrete. "But unless we can park, like, now, we'll never make this appointment."

“Maybe you overslept for a reason.”

“Look! A spot.” The chef screeched down the block and, with the panache of a veteran valet parker, wedged the Mazda into a cranny between cars. The clock said 3:12.

We speed-walked to the Hall of Justice and queued up in the roasting lobby at the one metal detector in service, waited forever, then chipped through the motley throng to the elevators. The chef wouldn’t look at me, but suits and flotsam alike were ogling away at my physical singularities. One elevator opened, and the gang rushing out slammed up against the gang rushing in, and I got swept inside and jammed face-first into a rear corner. I squirmed around and found myself mashed cheek-to-chest against the chef.

“Hi,” I said into his sternum.

He propped his forearms against the walls, his elbows by my ears, and pressed himself away from me. “Sorry,” he said, gasping. “Trying not to squish you.”

The elevator doors closed, packing us in tighter. Garlic was the breath mint of choice. The pulleys groaned with our weight, and when the elevator reached our floor, I tunneled out after the chef and tagged along down a corridor paved in headcheese, past walls tiled in liverwurst punctuated by a gristle of busted pay phones. Twenty-six minutes late for my interview, we tiptoed inside the designated courtroom and claimed two spots just off the aisle. Baby-faced clerks were dashing in and out lugging boxes and files. An hour from now, I’d probably be one of these runners, if not reporting to one of them.

The chef nodded toward a lawyer in a va-va-voom pantsuit. “That could be our esquire,” he said in a whisper. “I think the judge

just excused her.” Sure enough, the woman gathered up a bundle of papers, hip-bumped open the little wooden gate, and started down the aisle. The chef lifted his hand. “Ms. Fleischer?”

Elke Fleischer, Esq., early fifties, stopped by our seats and bulldozed us with rancid coffee breath. Mascara clumped her lashes and tipped them with tiny black beads, spider limbs waving spider pompoms. “Duncan Marshall?” she said. The chef nodded; it was the first I’d heard his name. “You’re late,” said Fleischer. “We’ll have to talk on the fly.” And off she went.

I deadpanned Mr. Marshall. He closed his eyes with a shake of his head, but rose from his seat and beckoned me along. We caught up with Fleischer out in the hall barging through the crowd, swinging her armload of folders to carve out a path for herself. Without slowing, she threw me a low-lidded glance. “Can you type?”

At a jog, I replied, “I’ve seen it done.”

“Computer literate?”

I didn’t like her. “Just arcade games.”

“Ever operated a photocopier?”

I actively disliked her. “Not willingly.”

“How fast can you run?”

I really hated her. “Depends what I’m paid.”

The chef butted in. “Ms. Fritz is a quick learner and a hard worker,” he said, warning me with a look. “She’s also good with customers.”

Fleischer halted at the elevators. “Look around, Mr. Marshall,” she said, and jabbed the UP button with her elbow. “See any customers?”

The chef kept his cool. “All I can say is that, with zero training, Ms. Fritz did an outstanding job at my sushi bar last night, and I believe she’s equal to any opportunity.”

I blinked at him, my pulse stuttering. He believed that?

“So why not at your restaurant?” asked Fleischer, clearly a brilliant attorney.

I beamed at the chef. Yeah, why not?

Impassive, he shook his head. “No future for her there.”

An elevator arrived and spat out a mouthful of chewed-up passengers. Fleischer stepped aboard and pressed the OPEN button, detaining the muttering remnants. “All right then, Mr. Marshall,” she said, “I’m short-staffed, frantic, and desperate. If you wish, your protégée can cram in here right now and get to work.”

An alarm sounded, sending the elevator doors into spasms. The chef dropped his gaze to my sneakers; I wiggled my toes: S.O.S.!

“Well, Mr. Marshall?” Fleischer looked wickedly amused. “Make up your mind. The young lady can either climb my totem pole or”—she jiggled an eyebrow—“yours.”

No. Bitch didn’t just say that—not to my chef! In a huff, my cause spectacularly lost anyway, I shouldered my knapsack and moved forward with the vague notion of joining Fleischer’s legal posse and screwing her permanently UP. But just then someone latched onto my vest and yanked me backwards, startling me off my feet, and I stumbled against that someone as the elevator doors shuddered closed like curtains on my vendetta with Elke Fleischer, Esq.

That same someone reached around me and pressed the DOWN button. Wisely, I refrained from cracking a joke about his just wanting his vest and sunglasses back. Wisely, I refrained from opening my mouth at all. Our elevator arrived, by some miracle, empty. We boarded in silence and gravitated to opposite poles, me hovering by

the button panel and him sagging in the rear corner, head down, resting his hands on the rails the way a spent boxer might rest his gloves on the ropes. I waited for a clue, for a cue, for whatever he could dig out of his shrouded soul and give me.

The elevator lurched into its descent. The chef raised his head and tossed me a sad crooked smile, but I kept my face straight, my heart tight, and waited. And when, finally, he held out his arms to me in a bedraggled way, I rocketed over there and buried my face in his sweaty chest and felt my rose-petal eyes sting.

“This doesn’t mean anything,” he said.

“I know.”

* * *

The sound of footsteps on the deck and the rolling click-click-click of a ten-speed bike interrupted my Japanese grammar studies and announced my host’s return from his midnight ride. Flushed and clammy in his skintight cyclist togs, the chef ditched his cleats in the genkan and sock-footed it into the daidokoro, where he mortared together a peanut-butter-and-marmalade sandwich on, yes, whole-wheat bread.

As soon as he took a glum seat at the card table with his snack, I swanned over to the pantry and dragged out the auxiliary footstool and plopped down next to him for a parley. If he was really going to “off” himself, then why all the exercise and wheat bread? If he really didn’t need a waitress, then why snatch me from the jaws of Elke Fleischer? If he really wanted me gone, then why not dump me at the Y as planned? And as for Ocean Fritz, not only was this the first job I’d ever wanted and the first boss I didn’t despise, but, for a pigment

pauper like me, the hours worked. Ah, the glories of going nocturnal: no more toxic sunshine, no more greasy sunscreen, no more rubber-neckers (fewer, anyway, and no finger-pointing kids) at every turn.

So I said, "I'm going with you to that fish market."

The chef slapped his sandwich back down on its plate. "Ugh, the fish market."

"What, 'Ugh, the fish market'? Kinoko will be open tomorrow. Right, Chef?"

He glowered into space longer than I liked, but at last he said, "Shit. Yeah, I guess. And stop calling me Chef."

"Well then, Duncan," I said with a thrill, "I'm going with you."

"Think so?" He licked an amber bead of marmalade off his thumb. "Only if you're still coherent when I leave at four a.m."

"Deal."

"You'll never make it."

"Watch me."

Yeah, watch me. Two hours later, curled up on the living-room couch with my head wobbling on my neck as I tried to read a trade-journal article on a Tokyo sushi school that certifies chefs in the preparation of killer fugu, I closed my eyes for just for a second—it felt better than good news—and dissolved into the mist. And woke up at noon still alone on that couch but now covered, sweetly, with a quilt.

* * *

That evening at five-thirty sharp, I'd no sooner donned my red apron and cranked up the volume on the plinking koto music when the kitchen phone started ringing just as the front door opened on Kinoko's first customer of the night, a dainty little black man sporting a pinstriped paunchlet and a ponytailed mane of dreads.

Duncan, in kimono at his board, snapped out of his funk. “Irasshaimase!” he greeted our guest, and got busy mixing a bowl of spicy tuna that razzled the air with cayenne.

After seating our pinstriped friend, and then reserving the three seats he requested for his party and presenting the beer-and-sake menu for his perusal, I brisked back to the kitchen to fetch him an oshibori off the ziggurat of rolled finger towels on the steamer. Dirk the Dishwasher was just hanging up the phone.

Duncan made a lunge through the central noren and waved us in for a huddle. “Critic in the house,” he said, low. “Don’t make a fuss, just keep him happy. Got it?”

“Hai!” I said.

“No sweat, Boss,” said Dirk.

“Good,” said Duncan, and started back through the noren.

“Oh!” said Dirk. “And Boss?”

“Hmm?” Duncan leaned back in, balancing on one foot, holding up the noren flaps.

Dirk cocked his head, parrot-like, and peered through his green plumage. “I just got this weird phone call, guy with a growly accent, wouldn’t give his name.”

“Yes?” said Duncan, all ears now, both feet on the floor.

I took a step back and swallowed, my innards crumbling like a sand castle.

“Yeah,” said Dirk. “Something about a delivery? Guy said he was checking to see if you, um, if you really did it. He wouldn’t say what ‘it’ was.”

“A delivery?” Duncan blinked at Dirk, then locked those X-ray blues on me—me, an albino staving off a blush. “Oh,” he said, and a

trap door beneath my feet fell open and dropped me splash! into a piranha pool.

Dirk shrugged. “Guy said he knew you’d chicken out. I told him to go fuck himself. Hope that’s okay.”

Duncan was still staring at me. “Yes. Thank you, Dirk.”

“No prob.”

Duncan wrenched his eyes off the guilty party and exited into the chef zone. I was in the Doghouse, capital D, and stayed there all night though I worked my tail off—waitressing up a storm, bussing like no tomorrow, strewing the bar with petals of Japanese vocabulary—all to no avail. Right at closing, the chef sent Dirk home and cornered me in the kitchen. “The mushrooms, Ms. Fritz. Where are they?”

Knapsack, pal, but I managed to peep: “Um, garbage disposal?”

Duncan collapsed against the counter. “God damn it,” he said, and I gulped back a queasy pang and tried to dredge up some sunny prattle about how good it was to be alive, but then Duncan said, “You should leave.”

“Leave?” I gaped at him. “But then what?”

“Nothing,” he said, as if that were the answer.

A surprise choke welled up in my throat. I ripped off my apron and stomped over to the back door.

Duncan was staring at the space I’d just vacated. “Bye,” he said.

I bit down on my farewell and marched straight upstairs to sob my guts out and pack.

* * *

And I lingered up there in the attic, thinking slow like I sometimes do, until I heard the chef and his bike leave for their midnight ride.

With my knapsack hanging heavy on my shoulder, I padded down the pantry steps and, on the way out, made a detour by the card table and dropped off the purloined bag of mushrooms, next to which I placed a glass of water, a teaspoon, and a shaker of salt. Oh, I'd be back in time for the fish market. And if, upon my return, the chef was still extant—as I'd bet my own worthless life he would be—well, whatever was eating him, we could tough it out together, like normal freaks. Maybe he'd be mad at me; maybe he'd always be mad. Still, what I'd done wasn't exactly a crime. □