

rock basking just off the shoreline. A day in Hollywood, the exhilaration of knowing movie stars breathe in the very same sunshine. Silk blouses brought home in delicate paper; dresses that require dry cleaning; lingerie so elegant it refuses to be scandalous.

Is that the life she knows she has ahead of her, the way she is sitting there, her feet rocking nervously after nearly a whole hour? Does she know how every young woman in town wants exactly this? Does she know that people turn their heads to watch them leave the café, to watch him open the door of his Ford truck for her? Does she know people discuss what they've seen, what his mother must think?

Summer carries on, the heat still scorching into September. Harvest time has arrived in Bakersfield and more people have come into town looking for work, whole caravans sometimes. Faces are not as familiar as before, not at the supermarkets, not on the downtown streets. Bakersfield is the open door to the southern part of the state, and the workers come pouring through. So many people have arrived that it becomes difficult to find parking spots, to buy fresh meat, even to get a bench at the Jolly Kone hamburger stand. But this will be short lived—by the end of October, after much of the late-summer crop has been brought in from the fields, the town will go back to normal. The strangers will leave, counting their money, and Bakersfield will wait for those first few weeks of November when the sky goes gray and the fog rolls in over the coastal range and lingers for months on end.

In all the commotion of the harvest boom, most people don't notice that the girl is no longer walking the streets to

work. At the lunch hour, she's nowhere to be seen over near Chester Avenue, where her apartment is. But at the shoe store, she's there sure enough, dutifully stepping from the back storage room when Mr. Carson snaps his fingers and tells her the sizes he needs. She never says a word unless a Spanish-speaking customer comes in: this is why she was hired. Mr. Carson cannot refuse the potential business from these customers and leaves the girl to tend to them, stepping away and occupying himself with other business. The girl points to several shoes—she never used to do that!—and smiles boldly at the Spanish-speaking customers, bringing out boxes and boxes for inspection.

Enough word has gotten around town about her eye for beautiful shoes, for high heels that don't necessarily strain the arches, for knowing a budget without having to ask. She moves with confidence and assurance, even if she is not allowed to ring up the sales on her own. She stands nearby to translate, and you handle the money: you, the girl who should be trusted, the kind of girl that should end up with a man like the one she has.

She is no longer walking the streets, but riding around with Dan Watson, her elbow resting on the truck door while they drive with the windows rolled down. The two of them at the café for lunch sometimes, the waitresses acting as if nothing could be less ordinary. The two of them stepping out of the record shop several times a week with brown-papered packages stuck under his arms. People saying, by late September, that she's picked up a second job, serving drinks to the patrons over at Las Cuatro Copas, the place where her boyfriend tends bar,

and the owner of the rival place across the street is peeved because even the white crowd has trickled over there just to get a look at her.

Las Cuatro Copas isn't the best cantina in town, but if you go there, you would do well to put on your best long skirt, the wider the better because there's good music for dancing. Farther up Union Avenue is a grander space—a real nightclub—with a terrazzo dance floor so smooth you have to hang on tight to your partner to keep from slipping, and gorgeous dining rooms off to the sides with a full wait staff and a Los Angeles menu of roast beef and rib-eye steaks and Cornish hens. But Las Cuatro Copas does just fine by itself. It welcomes everyone, the little tables crowded as people sit to eat and drink until the kitchen closes at eight thirty. All the while, that girl comes around with plates of chicken legs and taquitos and bottles of beer, along with the check on a green slip of paper with her neat handwriting, and she collects the bills and brings everything over to Dan Watson, hurrying people along with their meals because the tables get put away for the dancing. Not enough space for a wide skirt to flow out full, and a wooden floor that sends up dust, but it's dancing all the same. Friday nights or Sundays or Wednesdays, she's there, handing the green slips of paper over to her boyfriend and waiting for the change, the two of them running the place smooth as smoke.

But you don't have to go to the cantina to see all of that if jealousy gets to be too much. You can avert your gaze as they exit the supermarket, where he comes out holding two paper bags stuffed full of food. Or pretend not to see them loading boxes of tequila into the truck bed over at the discount liquor store.

They show up everywhere: just a little west of Bakersfield, just far enough away from the city lights, is the local drive-in theater, a line of cars idling at the dusty entrance at sundown. A concession stand sits in the middle, and everyone goes there for big striped boxes of popcorn and hot dogs and candy, cradling everything close so only one trip is necessary. Horns beep whenever a car pulls in with its lights on, even though the sky is still lit orange with sundown and the double bill nowhere near beginning. Music comes in over the speakers, old big-band numbers that no one listens to anymore. Some couples sit out on the hoods after the engines have cooled down. The people returning from the concession stand darken to shadows as dusk finally breaks into night and the first feature starts, always something of mild interest: a monster movie with a beautiful blond raising her hands to her ears and screaming, then a pursuit with gunfire popping through the speakers all up and down the drive-in lot. Laughter carries across several cars, friends having spotted each other and walking over to say hello. Car trunks pop open quickly for six-packs to be brought out. By the end of the first film, night has settled in deep, and the drive-in lights up once more to help people make their way to the concession stand and the bathrooms, where the girls walk together in threes and edge for space at the mirrors, everyone finding out who came with whom.

She's there, that girl. You looked for her among the faces surrounding the bathroom mirrors, but she was nowhere to be found. But you know she's there—you spotted Dan Watson's beautiful form gliding across the dusty lane toward the concession stand. He returns now to his pickup, just ahead, holding

a box of popcorn in his hand and sporting a cowboy hat, his jeans taut, everything lean and hard the way he glides from one end of the windshield to the other before disappearing into the cab of his truck. That girl is the other shadow. He is handing her the box. Ten minutes later, the lot darkens and the second feature begins—a detective story. You can tell by the hat the lead actor is wearing. No one wears hats like that around here, unless they're from Los Angeles. On-screen, a beautiful girl screams before a pair of anonymous hands close around her neck and she collapses as if struck by a sudden urge to sleep. She did not scream as terribly as the beautiful blond who was attacked by the monster in that other movie, but somehow it was more real, more probable, and enough to make you turn your head away and look out past the edge of the drive-in's lot, the stretch of oil fields, the ring of mountains to the south and east of Bakersfield, to Los Angeles. Is that where the movie is set, where something like this could happen?

No one seems to care about questions like that, not by how the shadows in the cars ahead begin to blend together, one by one. Some stay separate, but most don't. There's been beer and slugs of whiskey and lipstick applied in the bathroom mirror and cigarettes and sweet talk. Hands on knees and short whispers and legs shaved that evening, baby smooth. All over town, getting ready, everyone knowing—or hoping—the evening would come to this, a lot of sweet talk in a dark car and the squeak of the vinyl as your polite date slides over. The taste of the beer in his mouth, slightly bitter, but sweet, too, the surprise that men taste sweet inside. All of them. Rough but sweet. Your hand on his cheek to feel the itch of his whiskers, what you can't