

## My Regulars

That peculiar stench, a combination of cat urine and body odor, warned of Mr. Adelbaum's presence. I hadn't seen him come in the store, but now I could see his stooped figure hidden among the wok cookbooks and cutlery pamphlets. My mother scurried to the back of the store. She refused to wait on him. "It's your store. I'm only the help," she said. This was something she conveniently remembered when it suited her purpose.

Mr. Adelbaum had been in the Culinary Corner almost every day since I opened it a year ago. Alice, my mother, called him "one of Julie's Regulars." She said, "Julie, why do you encourage those strange people to loiter here? It's bad for business."

"I don't mind talking to them," I said.

Mr. Adelbaum had worked for the University Medical Lab, where he took care of the rats and dogs used in experiments. He retired a few years ago and moved into a tiny house on Central Street. It was rumored he had no heat or running water, but kept himself warm in the winter by sleeping with his twenty-three cats. He always wore his tan trenchcoat — even in the summer. I was sure that when he died someone would find millions of dollars hidden in suitcases under his bed.

"Good morning, Julie," he said between wheezes. "I believe I'll have a quarter's worth of those carob covered raisins."

Mr. Adelbaum would spend hours staring at the glass containers of bulk items — peppermint tea, pumpkin seeds, mixed nuts, fruit mixes and all sorts of fun little things that I loved to eat — deciding which was the best buy of the day.

"When did you start carrying dried mangoes?" he asked.

"I just got a shipment in yesterday," I said, measuring out his raisins.

"They look quite good."

"I haven't tried them yet. Alice told me I'm on a diet." I patted my widening hips.

"She's a wise woman."

I handed him the bag of carob raisins.

He examined the bag. "I'd expect a few more for a quarter. You might consider lowering your prices just a bit — for business' sake."

I have to charge more than I pay for them, Mr. Adelbaum." Every once in a while, though, I give him a little extra.

"Truly, truly. It is a touchy situation," he admitted. "I'll save these for later." He opened the box he kept behind the wastebasket and stashed the bag in a yogurt container. Several months ago he asked if he could leave a cardboard box by the counter and I agreed, unaware he meant to leave it indefinitely. Every time he

came in, he pawed through his box of valuables like a pack rat, making sure nothing was missing. “Fine.” He stood and looked at me. “Julie, where can I find some paper clips?”

“Sturkle’s Drug should have them.” I sorted the ones so all the George Washingtons were facing the same way. Alice insisted upon this.

“No. I mean find. Not buy. They want forty-five cents for a hundred. And I only need about seventy. For my clipping.”

Alice was scrubbing cupboards in the rear of the store. “Why don’t you ask Alice?” I said.

“Oh! What an idea. She’d know where to find clips!” I suspected he had a crush on my mother.

The gray cloud of cat-urine smell followed him to the back. I popped a Tic-Tac into my mouth and sprayed the counter with Lysol.

When I opened the Culinary Corner last year, I couldn’t even afford Real Shelves. Alice and I ran through every garage sale in town one weekend, looking for cheap tables to serve as temporary shelves. Then Alice recruited her friends from every woman’s circle in town and they all came in to buy a token bundt cake pan or casserole dish. Slowly my inventory grew. We crammed glassware into the cupboards in back, stacked crock pots under the taller tables and I even piled wine racks in the back seat of my Duster. Finally, I ordered some durable simulated wood-grain Real Shelves. And later when I could afford to renovate a little, I made space for the bulk products.

My store was developing character. Alice complained about the “horrid beige wall-paper” and the “ancient linoleum,” but I liked them.

The store had been a run-down drug store for decades, and after Mr. Bergthold died it stood empty for three years before we bought it. Alice and I spent a week scrubbing the dirt and cobwebs from the walls and corners. We found boxes of corks, energy pills, broken combs, and tonics for baldness, morning sickness and warts squirreled away in the basement. Alice threw out everything she came across. I kept the corks and baldness tonic for no reason but to irritate her.

After Mr. Adelbaum left I had only ten minutes to myself before Micki Deacon appeared. She was Alice’s least favorite Regular. Micki used to teach kindergarten at Salter School, but when she met Lori Buchanan, “a strange creature herself,” Micki quit her job and moved out to Lori’s acreage to help raise Lori’s son, Hamilton.

They lived in a barn and grew vegetables inside. I actually liked the way they had their barn fixed up, but I would never admit it to Alice. Alice didn’t even know I’d been there.

Micki was a lesbian. I didn't care. I liked Micki. Sometimes we'd talk for an hour or longer while Alice huffed and puffed, occasionally telling me how much work I had to do.

"Lori sent me in to buy some more dried pineapple," Micki said, arranging herself on the other side of the counter. "Julie, you look like you've gained more weight."

She was also perceptive. "Not much. I'm on a diet," I said, as though that precluded further weight gain.

"You should try a new hair style. A pound and a half." She stared at my eyes.

"What?"

"Of pineapple. Maybe a perm. Not one of those kinky ones, though. Try big rollers for body. Maybe I could give you one this weekend." She pursed her lips, evidently contemplating the prospects of making me somewhat more attractive.

"I don't know."

"What about that guy? The salesman you like."

"Oh. He might be in today."

"But have you asked him out?" Micki placed her hands on the counter. "You have to be more assertive if you're going to get what you want."

"I suppose." I handed her the pineapple and she paid me.

"I've got to run. It's Hamilton's birthday." She twirled the pineapple bag around her finger. "Give me a call if you want to come out for a perm."

Alice appeared from somewhere beyond my peripheral vision. "You are not getting a permanent from a lesbian," she hissed.

"Why don't you take your morning break?" I said.

Alice hunched over a large cardboard box and dug through millions of S-shaped bits of styrofoam packing. "I just can't find that invoice anywhere," she said.

"Don't worry about it," I said. "I'll do the order this afternoon."

"Julie, dear. We have to find that invoice to know whether we've been overcharged. And we need to get these boxes unpacked."

"Mother, really."

"I mean it. You should clean those display windows, too. That new glassware would make a lovely display. Maybe I'll do it over lunch."

"Mr. Adelbaum should be back in later this afternoon, you could have him help you." I pinched her rear. "I bet the two of you could have a good time."

"Stop it." She slapped at my hand. "That man. . ." Alice rustled her arms through the packing again. Then she stopped and looked at me. "Julie, I think maybe it's time you tell those people they cannot use this store as a hang out, leaving boxes of God-knows-what anywhere they please. Ida Rhodes told me she's

scared to come in here. Because of the weird people — that’s what she called them.” Alice sighed. “And I think maybe you should find other interests. Like a boyfriend.”

“Oh, Mother,” I said, more interested in the idea than I wanted her to think I was.

I heard the door open behind me. “I think I’ll clean out those display windows, now,” Alice said. She took off for the back of the store where she kept *her* Windex bottle.

I turned around. Genevieve Le Blanc had walked in, an odd looking corset wrapped around her midsection. Another Regular. It was Tuesday morning: Genevieve never missed a Tuesday morning. “I tried that French bread recipe you gave me, only I didn’t use yeast on account of my allergy. I didn’t like it much,” she said.

“What’s that?” I asked, pointing at her corset.

“Oh.” She squinted at the bulk products. “Dried mangoes! It’s a back brace. My doctor made me wear it.”

“Shouldn’t you put it under your clothes?” I moved behind the counter.

“No.”

Twenty years ago Genevieve’s name was Gale Pratt; but she changed it after she read *Love’s Stormy Passion*, her favorite novel. The heroine, Genevieve Seraut, falls in love with Louis Le Blanc. Before they marry, though, he dies in a storm at sea. When she learns the tragic news she casts her body into an empty water fountain. Genevieve assumed the name because she says she is a reincarnation of the fictional Genevieve.

“This brace must be on for six hours every day.” Genevieve explained. “And I can’t sleep on a mattress. It’s my spine.” Genevieve ran her hands through her stringy hair. “Pumpkin seeds and malt balls again.”

I weighed out a half pound of each and mixed them in a bag.

Genevieve slapped a romance novel on the counter. “This is Deborah Dreyfus’ new one, *Burning Memories*. You should read it. It’s about a girl who thinks no one will ever love her, then she falls in love with a Duke. But he’s married to a woman who looks just like the girl no one loves.” Genevieve thinks all romance novels are self-help manuals.

“Does it have a happy ending?”

“I’ll never tell! ‘It’d ruin the story!’”

I handed her the malt balls and pumpkin seeds. “So how’s your love life?”

“Good. I just heard — a letter — from my real estate agent in Mount Pleasant. He sent me his college grades. He graduated in 1956 and he had a lot of A’s. But he’s retired now because he has a bad leg and his mother needs a lot of attention.”

“Have you met him yet?”

“No, but I think we’re going to France in September. We discussed it in a letter.”

When Genevieve first mentioned her real estate agent, I doubted his existence, but she finally showed me one of the letters. She had scrawled PRIVATE in large red letters on the envelope. I only hoped the man was more interesting than his letters.

I found the charge account pad and added her purchase to it, then handed her the new total. “I’ve got a million things to do,” I said in my most Alice-like voice.

“I know just what you mean. I have to have slip covers made for my couch and I have to buy Get Well cards for the people in the hospital.” She wiped her nose on her forearm.

Then Scott Long walked in. Scott’s cute. And he’s the same age I am, twenty-five. He’s the only guy I’ve been interested in since I left college two years ago. I like him because he knows what he wants. One day he explained to me how he’s going to be rich by the time he’s forty. He knows just about everything there is to know about investments and stocks.

“Hi, Julie,” he said. “Is Alice in? I brought that lasagne recipe I promised her.”

“Uh, yeah.” She’s supposed to be working on the display window, but she hasn’t come out of the back room for a while. “I’ll get her.” I didn’t want Alice to be alone with him.

“That’s okay,” Scott said. “I can find her.”

“I owe a letter to Bill,” Genevieve said. “We have to discuss our Europe plans.”

Scott walked past the counter and dodged one of the displays. He told me he’d been on his high school football team.

“He says we should have separate rooms on the cruise. But I thought we should share one. For the money. I can’t make love ’cause of my back, anyhow. What do you think? What are you looking at?”

“Nothing.”

“Him.” She sneered. “He’s not your type. I’ve talked to him. He says he likes older women. Like me, but I like older men better.”

“Genevieve, really. “I’ve got a lot to do.” I stepped from behind the counter. Genevieve picked up a pamphlet on how to make a superior white sauce.

“Does this work?” she asked.

I pretended I hadn’t heard her and walked back to my office. Scott laughed. “Hi,” I said.

“How’s business?” Scott asked. He always talked business with me, never with Alice.

“Oh, fine.”

“Scott bought a puppy!” Alice said. “But he hasn’t named it yet. You could call him Ricotta. He’s a Westy,” she explained.

“I thought you were going to take care of that display window.” But Alice didn’t move. “Would you like some carob mint tea?” I asked Scott. “We just got it in. It’s really good.”

“Sure,” Scott said.

“I’ll have some, too, dear.”

“Of course.”

I filled three little paper cups with samples of tea at the table just outside my office. I made sure Alice’s was too full, hoping she’d spill it on her dress. Instead it sloshed onto my hand as I carried it back to my office.

“Here,” I thrust one of the cups into her hand. “It’s really good with a few drops of honey, too.”

“Oh, really?” Scott sipped his tea.

“I invited Scott over for dinner — to see if I can do justice to his recipe — but he’s busy this week,” Alice said.

“But it does sound like fun. I’m just really busy this month,” he said.

“Of course I wouldn’t have to be there.” Alice said. “I mean you two young adults would probably have a better time without me. Just because I have choir practice on Wednesday night doesn’t mean you two can’t have dinner. Julie could whip up the lasagne; she’s a terrific cook. Right, dear?”

I could feel my cheeks flushing.

“I play basketball at the Y on Wednesday nights,” Scott said.

“I’m sure you two could work out something.” She winked at me.

“Mother, please.”

“Julie’s right.” She patted my leg. “I really should get to that display. You might want to check it as soon as I’m through.” Alice never asked for my approval when she put together a display.

I sat at my desk, where Alice had been sitting. “I’m sorry about that. Alice gets carried away.”

“I don’t mind. Doesn’t it bother your mother that you call her Alice?”

“Not any more. It used to make her livid, but she’s used to it.” Scott had pretty teeth and a perfect nose, no bumps and it wasn’t too big. I could tell he’d been in the sun recently. “You’re getting a nice tan.”

“Oh. Thanks. I helped a friend paint his house last weekend.” He opened his briefcase, meaning the small talk was over.

“You’ll have to try our dried mangoes,” I said.

“Okay.” He rustled some papers and jammed a pen behind his ear.

“Alice and I were thinking about adding a refrigerated section, for goat’s milk, kefir — thinks like that. We were going to put it up front by the bulk foods.”

He poked his head around the corner of the partition. I loved his little ears. I told him once and he turned bright red.

“You know, you have an interesting store. It’s so. . .different from all the others I sell to. I mean it’s half food and half cookware. Most of the stores I work with don’t sell foods.”

“I probably shouldn’t sell foods. It’s so tempting to eat during the day — especially now that I’m on a diet.”

“Your customers are different, too,” he said. He picked up my stapler and began stapling for stapling’s sake, making a neat pile of the bent staples. “Some of them are. . . .They seem like they belong here.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s like a family here. With you and your mother and. . .” His face reddened; he looked at his little pile. “Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize what I was doing.” He swept the staples into his hand and dumped them in the waste basket.

“That’s okay.” I smiled at him.

“I’m really sorry.” He wiped his hands across his face. “I saw that one woman out at Radio Shack last Friday. The one you were just talking to. She recognized me from here,” Scott said.

“She’s harmless. Just a little hard to take sometimes.”

“She asked me if I liked older women. I didn’t know what to say.”

“That’s what she was talking about. She told me you were interested in her.” I smiled at him slyly.

“What?”

“I’m kidding,” I said, brushing my hand across his knee. “But you have to be careful with Genevieve. She’s harmless unless she starts to think you’re after her. One innocent comment like that and she’ll be following you around. You won’t be able to get rid of her. Or else she’ll blow it all out of proportion. She’ll start telling people that you want her. That you drive by her house every night. Maybe even that you stop and peek in her bedroom window.”

“Sh,” he said. “She’s still here.”

“But she is that weird. Right now she’s ready to cruise off to Europe with some guy she’s never met.”

“Julie Kinney, I can hear every word you say!” Genevieve stepped out from behind the partition, her fists jammed righteously into her corset. “Some people.” She adjusted her brace. “Just because you think I’m gone you start saying cruel things and spreading my innermost secrets. You can flirt with young men all you want, but you just remember the Duke stays with his wife in *Burning Memories*.”

“Genevieve,” I said, glancing at Scott, who was staring at his feet. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean. . .”

Genevieve wiped her eyes and dug through her shopping bag. Several wadded up Kleenex fell to the floor. She blew her nose and ran toward the front door, stopping only long enough to grab her book off the counter.

“Genevieve!” I called, pushing myself to my feet. “I’ll be back in a minute,” I said to Scott as he stood. I raced after her.

She ran around the corner, then around the back heading down the alley, crying at full volume.

“Oh, Lord,” I said, leaning against the display window for a moment. Alice knocked on the glass and motioned for me to point out smudges. I ignored her.

When I walked back in the store, Scott was leaving. “I’m sorry,” I said. “I shouldn’t have said that about her.”

“This is a strange place,” he said. The door slammed behind him and I watched him cross the street to his car.

“Damn, damn,” I said.

Alice peered over the lower half of the display case door. “What happened? What were you doing outside?”

“Nothing,” I said. I weighed out a half pound of carob malt balls and went to my office.

A week later Mr. Adelbaum stood before me, his tan trenchcoat scorched so badly I couldn’t see any grease spots. “Missing,” he said. “Two of my precious kittens are missing.”

“Mr. Adelbaum, what happened?”

“My coat fell on my burner and the house filled with smoke. When I opened the door to let the smoke out, Galileo and Schweitzer dashed out. I haven’t seen them since.” He rummaged through a scorched pocket. “Even my clips were damaged.” He held out the scorched box of paper clips; I had given them to him last Friday.

“I’m sorry about your cats. I’m sure they’ll come home when they get hungry.”

“I need some granola and molasses to calm my nerves.” He stooped over his box and rooted through it.

I straightened the counter and then picked a few pieces of dried pineapple from one of the fruit mixes. I hadn’t seen Scott since Genevieve’s tantrum last Tuesday. Alice told me to call him and ask him to come over for dinner, but I didn’t have the nerve. I explained about Genevieve, and Alice said it was a good riddance. I wanted to apologize to Genevieve, but she didn’t have a phone. Alice told me I was crazy to encourage her to come back in the store.

Ida Rhodes stepped to the counter, staring at Mr. Adelbaum. She was a friend

of Alice's, a regular, but not a Regular. "I'll have a pound of sesame sticks and the same of the fruit and nut mix. Bridge club tomorrow. I just hope it doesn't rain. How's your mother been?"

"Good. She'll be in later this morning. She went to the dentist."

She looked around the store, her gaze finally resting on Mr. Adelbaum. "Julie do you know that every time I come in this store there is some strange person perched on a chair or by the counter?"

"That's not a very nice thing to say," I said.

"But it's true. At bridge club last week, Marge Hopley said she doesn't like to come in here. She said last time she was here, Fred Hansen leered at her the whole time, then followed her to her car. Poor Marge almost had a stroke."

"Fred's harmless. He's just a friendly man."

"Hmmp. And your store is beginning to smell very odd," Ida said, flicking her nose in Mr. Adelbaum's direction.

Mr. Adelbaum sat on his chair, digging through his granola with a plastic spoon. "Tsk, tsk," he said as he dumped a spoonful in the wastebasket. "Julie, you should be more concerned about the cleanliness of your store. I found rodent droppings in my breakfast."

Ida looked at me, then at him. "Malcolm Adelbaum, you aren't eating that?"

I had never heard Mr. Adelbaum's first name mentioned before.

"Just the granola. I removed the droppings," he said.

"But those are only the visible marks of the rats," Ida said, scrunching up her face. "They've laced their poison throughout the entire sack. And they carry horrible diseases — like salmonella and malaria."

Mr. Adelbaum ignored her.

"You really shouldn't allow such things in your store," Ida said. I didn't know if she meant rats, Mr. Adelbaum or granola.

She paid for her snacks and left, the nauseated look never absent from her face. I knew she'd file a full report with Alice.

"What an unpleasant woman," he said. "I went to grammar school with her."

"She was a little rude."

"Truly. Some people are just born without tact. They can't survive in a social situation." He munched on his granola, adding liberal amounts of molasses every few bites. "Whatever happened to Genevieve? I haven't seen her for a week."

"I hurt her feelings."

"You told her she should change her mode of dress?" he asked.

"Sort of."

"Well, I commend you. Honesty, be it ever so blunt, is a wonderful virtue." He licked the rim of his molasses jar and screwed the lid back on.

"You haven't seen Genevieve anywhere?" I asked. "Not at the library or the

hospital?"

"No."

Scott pulled the screen door open. His foot was bandaged and he was limping. He held his briefcase as if we were ready to get to business right away. "Hi, Julie," he said.

"Hello," Mr. Adelbaum said, digging through his pockets. Scott glanced at Mr. Adelbaum, then at me.

"Hi," I said. "What happened to your foot?"

"I sprained it playing basketball a few days ago." He limped toward the counter. "Is your mother in?"

I brushed my hair into place. "She should be back soon."

"That's good." He was wearing a short sleeve shirt. It was the first time I'd ever seen his arms. They were perfect, muscular.

Mr. Adelbaum wheezed, either from habit or to remind us he was still there. Outside, Alice walked briskly across the street, followed by Genevieve, who was waving her arms wildly. Scott rolled his eyes and I leaned against the cash register. ". . . two fifty-seven for beef and it turned green! I didn't eat it! But I took it back to that grocery store. Huh!"

Alice yanked the door open. "I need an asp'rin." The left side of her face drooped from novocaine.

"She's just been to the dentist," I explained to Scott.

"Thank God!" Genevieve said. "I thought she'd had a stroke. That's just how my father acted after his. We had to grind his food — even Jello! — in the blender. Couldn't chew until he died."

"I am having a s'roke," Alice said, glaring at me as if Genevieve's presence was solely my fault.

"I've got some Tylenol, Mother."

"I don't take aspirin," Mr. Adelbaum said.

Alice waved at Scott and made her way to my office. Genevieve started to follow her. "Don't worry. That stuff wears off," she said.

"Genevieve," I said.

"What?" She turned toward me.

"I'm sorry I hurt your feelings last week."

"Huh?"

"I'm sorry I made you mad."

"You should be," Genevieve said. "They told me you'd beg for forgiveness."

"I need to talk to you when you get a chance," Scott said.

"Sure. Go on back and comfort Alice." He limped off, his rear sticking out as he swung his bandaged leg. "Who told you I'd beg for forgiveness?"

"The women at church. They said it's Christian for me to forgive."

“Do you forgive me?” I asked.

“It’s Christian. Will you give me some banana chips?”

“I guess that’s fair.”

“And some vanilla covered raisins,” Genevieve said, clutching her hands together. “I still have some pumpkin seeds and malt balls. . . .But shredded coconut!”

After I sacked together over five dollars worth of food, I decided that was apology enough and excused myself. Genevieve had struck up a conversation with Mr. Adelbaum and didn’t notice me slip from behind the counter.

“Missing cats?” she asked.

In my office, Scott pressed a handful of paper towels against my mother’s chest. “She dribbled when she was taking an aspirin,” he explained.

A huge splotch of V-8 had soaked into her white blouse. “Mother, why don’t you go home and lie down until that stuff wears off.”

“I haf to s’raighten the counter and wait on cus’mers.”

“I just did the counter,” I said. But I knew she wouldn’t change her mind.

“Maybe you should go home,” Scott suggested to her. “You might feel better.”

Alice shook her head. She pointed to the counter. “Cus’mer!” she said and ran out of the office.

“She’ll do whatever she wants,” I said.

“Yeah. How are those yogurt machines selling?” He sat and opened his briefcase.

“We sold one last week,” I said, still standing.

“Good. I think you’re going to like this new juicer I’ve got.”

“Oh, really?” I smiled.

“Yes. It’s expensive, but it really works. You can make carrot juice in just seconds, and the clean up’s a cinch.”

I’d never seen anyone so enthused about carrot juice. “Why don’t you just fill out an order and I’ll show it to Alice. I really don’t care.”

“Are you sure?”

“If I tell Alice you did it, she’ll approve it.” I sat next to him and watched him scrawl on the order form. “I feel bad about your foot. Does it hurt to walk?”

“Not much. The doctor said I can’t play basketball for a couple more weeks. I’m supposed to stay off it as much as possible.”

“I bet you have trouble getting around. I could come over tomorrow night and cook dinner. That’s your basketball night? We could watch tv or something.”

“No. I wouldn’t want to make you go to so much trouble.”

“Oh, it’s no trouble. Really. I don’t mind.”

“I’m kind of busy this week. I’ve been studying some stocks. My broker says I should invest soon.”

“We could do it next Wednesday?”

“No thanks.”

“You don’t have a girlfriend now, right? You broke up with that Tammy.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, why not?” I crossed my arms.

Genevieve’s head craned around the corner. “You need some tea,” she said to me. “I’ll get it.”

Scott gathered the order forms together and stuffed them in his briefcase. “I’ll finish processing this order and show it to your mother sometime.”

“Why not?” I asked him.

“I’m busy,” he said. “Maybe sometime.”

“No one is that busy,” I said. “You’d probably rather have my mother come over and fix you dinner.”

“I don’t want to date your mother, for God’s sake.”

“You think I’m strange?” I looked at him.

“I . . . get enough of this place during the day.” He grabbed his briefcase.

“It’s no big deal. Just dinner,” I said.

“Just dinner,” Genevieve said, handing me a dixie cup of tea.

He turned without saying good-bye.

“It reminds me of *The Tender Moments of Our Summer*.” Genevieve was on the verge of tears.

“How touching,” I said. The door slammed behind Scott.

“Of course, I knew he’d turn you down,” Genevieve said. “It’s not your fault. His soul is searching for an older woman’s — like mine.” She smiled and ran her fingers through her stringy hair.

I strode past her, not listening to anything else she said. Alice was leaning against the counter, doing nothing for once.

At the door I turned toward Alice. “I’m going out for a while.”

“Wha’s wrong?” Alice asked. “Wha’ did he say?”

“He doesn’t like me! It’s no big deal. I’ll just spend the rest of my life running a shelter for peculiar people.”

“There are plenty of peculiar people here,” Mr. Adelbaum said.

“Yes,” Genevieve agreed.

The three of them watched me, and I thought how appropriate this store was for all of them. With its yellow linoleum, beige wallpaper and ancient copper light fixtures, it was an ideal home for misfits. And my tight office, with its constant hum of fluorescent lights, tidy compartments for paper clips and rubber bands, and nearly organized file cabinet was perfectly suited for Alice.

“I’m taking the rest of the day off,” I said as I opened the door.

“Please let me know if you see Galileo or Schweitzer,” Mr. Adelbaum called after me.

Outside, I sat on the bench across the street, watching. Genevieve and Mr. Adelbaum talked, and Alice looked at me every few minutes. Mr. Adelbaum drifted over to his box and Genevieve examined something in the cookware section, holding what appeared to be the top of a wok far above her head. Alice stood before the cash register. They were static — not moving from the territory they had staked out — as if their source of vitality had been removed.

I crossed the street. And all three of them moved to the front door as I walked back in the store.

— Steve Stiefel