THE OUTCAST

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Manhattan lay at the farther end of a tunnel, a vari-colored vase formed on a glass-blower's pipe, growing on the fetid air blowing up the subway stairs.

She was a sailor — the ground tip-tilted under her feet and she walked with a swagger. The sun, lying low in the east, bisected the street, casting an equal shadow down the building walls. The streets were angled exactly toward dawn.

It was playing the game, acting all the parts and finding an immensity of variation in herself. She squinted slightly with her right eye against the glare of sunlight prying under her low-cast lid. Blobs of spittle spotted the cement. She was a mountain man in smoke-stained buckskins, toes in gripping the earth. She was a farmer, sun burned but showing pale where the overdue trim had clipped away the neckhair — a farmer outstaring the sun, refusing to submit and squint weakly at the sky. The world was huge. Her arm muscle twitched. Back to yesterday, it subverted, when there were voices rich and tight in the throats, and was, Alice, Sonny. Back beyond the time of agates and math, the mother breast a softness to rest upon, where mornings' sleepiness defied the dictum to dress hurriedly and run! run! to school. Back to the cold bars that lined the crib and an endless view of the ceiling. One dies slowly after birth, regretting the pleasures one's parents knew, the limitless time, the limitless world beyond the bars. And beyond the bars there was no ra coupling with Ma; and that would always make a difference.

A horn shrilled behind her.

"Ya crazy, girlie?" The cabbie leaned out the window. "Ya can't see straight, ya should buy glasses!" At some point the gears shifted higher till his was one yellow cab among brethren.

Monday in Manhattan had the dry-mouthed bitterness of early rising. Across the street (up the stairs iron rimmed, with multi-varnished wood bannisters) lay time for consumption. Numbers, records, reports. Calculating machines, adding machines. The clock in and out, the sandwich, smile, small talk. It ended at evening as if it had never a need to exist.

Red came wandering out to greet her in the discretely lit reception room
looking even more distracted than he had been at the job interview. Even as he talked to her his body twisted halfway as if straining to be elsewhere. Red she remembered was City College class of possibly '57. He wore a large class ring on his finger. When he spoke the Bronx accents brought replays of college cafeteria debates as to whom in the last analysis could decide the issue of individual morality. Was not one's integrity the ultimate guide? If not, then civilization be hanged and Walden pond here I come!

"Ah, Miss Magnus. I am sorry to be so long." He took her by the elbow as he spoke. He was like old uncle who pinched cheeks with ferocity till the screams in her throat were released as endearing cries, or so old uncle thought, for he would laugh heartily, clutch her arm and plant kisses carefully above the eyebrows.

"I'm a bit hurried, so if you don't mind I'll show you your desk." Holding her still by the elbow he guided her through to the inner offices. I had planned to work with you today, introduce you around...well...things have piled up so...." He pointed to a glass enclosed warren against the far wall. "That's us under the clock. The back part...up ahead, that's Sales...now over here," he indicated the coat rack. "You can hang up your coat. When you're done you see Steve. He's the blond fellow with the glasses. We'll tell you what to do till lunch."

She was spun through the doorway and aimed at the empty desk which stood squarely with a view of absolutely nothing. Before and to the side rose translucent glass partitions out of chipped green metal bases.

"You the new girl," Steve asked. He remained sitting at his desk fingerling the keyboard of a calculating machine. "That one's yours." He pointed with his chin. He snapped the Clear buttons causing the gears to grind out a high fine sound.

"Noisy bastard, isn't it? Well, okay, let's get you settled. Just throw your stuff in the drawer. Better use the bottom. No, not that one. It's full up with papers, Yeah, that's right, the left." He hit the Clear buttons again. "When you're done we'll get started."

The bottom drawer smelled of stale tuna fish. Towards the back she ran into a dust-powdered sweater and under that a pair of two different gloves. "Don't they give enough heat here in the winter, Steve?"

He leaned back in his chair even farther. "Fig hot all the time. Why. You the cold type?"

"No. Just wondered what else Mother McRee wore when she worked here."

"Since you're such a hotshot let's try you out on this. Steve arose, unplugged
the calculator and tripped over the cord. "Which one you write with?" he asked.

"Right."

He settled the machine on the right side of the desk and started away. His left arm hung short by about two or three inches. As he walked it swung awkwardly.

"Okay. Follow me," he called behind him.

Affixed to the apple-green wall above his head was the clock and next to that a noded owl of a fan. Someone with an artistic eye had wrestled one high lean file dead center between the two ornaments on the wall.

Steve opened the ledgers as one absorbed in events elsewhere. He yammered and mumbled his way down the lily path intricacies of the single digit, the honesty of the salesmen whose daily reports "we" would analyze — which meant add and accept — and all the while he ribbed bleeding streaks down the wood of his pencil with his thumb nail. He half yawned.

"Well isn't it?" he should have smiled but he did not. Sounds easy, too," he commented, "But all the dumb dames been doing this didn't seem to think so. Well, we'll start you on bras. Take this one down."

The book was very heavy but Steve failed to see the strain. She shifted the calculator over to the left side of the desk, cleared the key board, unlocked the carriage buttons, then cleared out the smart set of zeroes on the multiplier window. Steve watched her operate the machine left handed for a while.

"Thought you said you were righty?"

"Saves time this way. Carlo with the left, add with the right, works out."

He produced a key and proceeded to demonstrate the anatomical possibilities of the ledger. His voice droned tutorily on explaining the method of not the reason of the job. It occurred to her after a time that all this hue and pother were simply of alleged sales, alleged everything. And of George stayed afloat in a martini all night what harm a fair to middling report to the sub-clerk in the home office? Steve didn't know, what was more Steve wanted a drink of water and wouldn't she like to take a break now? Without waiting for an answer he walked away down into sales.

The ladies' room had three booths, two sinks, and a window ledge. She was jostled through the swinging door by a stocky black haired girl dressed completely in black. The door swung in and out on shorter arcs till finally it closed with a muted whoosh. The clacking office sounds washed through on every inward movement. It reminded her of the childhood game of clapping one's hands over one's ears repeatedly and listening to the world's sound effects on installment. Or listening to a conch shell held first close to the ear then slowly, ever so slowly, drawing it away until the distant drumming, the echoing sound of the surf ceased to pound. She would be left alone on the wide ex-
panese of beach, her feet buried deeply in the sand where the soles squirmed in the cool underlayers. Above her the sun would beat fiercely. So unbearably it would press.... When the sun was hot, soft cool the spring house door would open, envelop her soul and call her down to the joy of the beaded butter dish and the cream cooling half below the spring water smelling dankly, till she'd squeal and hold her nose. Sa would call "Mom" once. When spring back the screen door. Heavily, the stairs would settle in one dry creak.

"Hey, you! You awake?" Someone tapped her on the shoulder.

"Oh, sorry," she murmured and moved aside.

"You new here?" the other girl asked. She was a tall, slim brunette thickly made up to hide a faint mustache.

"Yes. Just started today. Statistics."

"Oh that. God, how do you ever stand it." With that she closed the booth door.

Two girls sat stuck in the window seat. The panes were painted black. A blank-faced woman stood nearby leaning up against the radiator, her cigarette was held as if to warm her palm.

Naomi nodded. "Smelly, isn't it?" she ventured.

"No Waldorf," the other conceded.

"Isn't there anywhere else to go? A sitting room of some kind?"

"You must be new," the other one cut back. "Look, they got a job, something boring with not much pay. They keep you a year or two. Or maybe at the end of the year they give you a five buck raise. Or maybe they give you the business and keep you waiting till you creep in and ask for it. If you wanna make a call, the switchboard witch, she hears a girl's voice not on her list, she asks who in hell are you, don't you know you can't make an outgoing call. If you smoke a cigarette you do it in here or you don't smoke it. She spread her palm upward while moving her hand so as to encompass the room.


"Paugh, union! Same crook."

"Well, it does smell bad," Naomi said lamely, sorry she had started the whole thing.

"Be smart. You get a nice boy, a good coat, a dress that shows enough and promises more. You get the boy hot and ready, and then you marry him before you get old and stone from hitting your head against the wall. She shook her head to emphasize what; Her own failure to have escaped.
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He went on. You take Illie over there." She pointed to a fragile girl in her early twenties. "My father, he's from the south of Italy. Siciliano. A lazy lump. Give him a bottle and he's happy. When he gets a bad back from the stevedoring he'll sit himself out back in the sun all day and watch the figs go purple. But her father; a big man. Sometime, a hundred years ago or more, they were land owners near Milano. Illie, she's like the duchess. But her boss, he thinks she is just one small secretary. And who runs his department other than him, is it not Illie!

"Well," she shrugged. It doesn't matter. She goes to school. She doesn't go to school. In any case she'll never finish. Her father nag's till finally she says 'yes'. Her boyfriend, he's old country, drives a truck. What he wants is a wife at home and the spaghetti in the pot at supper, not the philosophy and the English composition, eh? Angie knows."

Naomi found herself acquiescing. It was simpler. Yes, in the end the pot, the spaghetti, and a man were the answer. Forward to the pine carpentry. Away the plot young and get a choice location.

They stood silently for a long time. Her companion puffed to the dregs end of the cigarette. He dragged at it with a sanguine insistence. Naomi half expected her to field strip the butt to hide the act. When the other left the door swung in and out. It called to her.

The books were in bad shape, weeks behind on postings and totaled as if by guess. She worked alone at the desk racing the wall. Naomi slowly relaxed her awareness of her surroundings and resigned herself to a subterranean clutch on the figures crowding down the columns. At three she retired to the airless toilet to witness a three-way hair pull.

Each office she had discovered had its own character. Life here was pursued in the locker-room stench of the toilet, brief periods of reality to judge by the uninspired performances of the row whose desks seemed always awash with the same bits of paper. But on the floor one felt an odd disconnection. In a short time she had reduced the clerical operation to an efficient partnership between eyes and hands. Her thumb pivoted the lead pencil to a suspension position while a blue or red one flashed plus or minus conclusions. In time she would form firm opinions as to the validity of these results, but the figures would remain - as a completion if not a truth.

It was after all just another one of those now one's jobs. Sell out or be bought up," Lou had warned her. He'd been bright and wholesome there at the start, and dewy-eyed and idealistic, and all those mushy words you had used to describe her. You'll end up hiding. They'll tear at you and bring you down. You wait and see.

On Friday when she went for morning break there was marked excitement spilling out the swinging door. Illie's left hand was on display, the small diamond in her
ring turned this way and that for maximum effect.

"It's lovely," someone envied.

As many females as could crowded the room.

"When is gonna be?"

"Let'er alone. Can't ya see she's excited?"

To Naomi, Millie appeared subdued, almost sedated, a palpable deflation seemingly lost on the others.

"Well, we're going to have it formal. My mother insists on a church wedding."

Wedding...ding, echoed the black panes.

It was astonishing, the diamond-lore of this roomful of underpaid clerks and stenos. They assessed carats, points, cuts, and settings in the very words of the diamond-center worldlies, all the while refocusing their lenses as they bent over to breathe wetly on the carbon chip. Naomi bent and breathed but on arising found her eyes exchanging a veiled look of stupified amusement with Millie.

From diamonds the girls had moved on with a stepped-up tension to a discussion of the weekend tactics. "You don't just keep lettin' 'im take ya anywhere. Make him respect ya. First date always keep 'em waiting a bit, bet really sharpened up. We knows he has a real lady out for the evening. So Brooklyn sock and a hot fudge at Jahn's for me. So air." She reflection of her stone was meant to intimidate. She had her arm about Millie. She too had arrived. Where? Naomi wondered. The roomful glowed and perspired as one. At any moment they would all burst through to the promised land. Naomi felt a twinge of shame at the mocking voice within herself. Just to be. To be and accept.

Millie stole another drag and eyed Naomi. "So where are you going Saturday night?"

On a lung-chilling walk for a New York Times. Then padding swiftly downhill with the sure-footed thrust given by sneakers.

"Oh nowhere special, I guess." Her answer earned her a sharp look. Do better, it admonished. Shape up.

Naomi had learned how not to react. So now she non-reacted actively, deferred deliberately on a few trivial points, all the while counting the blue hexagonal tiles which haloed round her toe, mentally forming and reforming them in color-dominated patterns.

She tried to avoid the inevitable on Monday by concealing her statistics books in a market bag. Of course by the fourth time the bag appeared she was made to confess its contents. She hastily murmured something about taking a college subject or two, on a non-matric basis to be sure, for money, to meet me. — and was forgiven.
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discarded the bag.

In any case she had no effect on her male colleagues, most of whom wore marriage bands or spoke pointedly of fiancés to the lone female in their midst; if they spoke to her at all.

In class she was awed by the barnyard strut of them so elegant in distaff olives and browns. They wore exquisite gold tie pins. And when they shot their cuffs, they displayed ice-white cotton held by matching gold cuff links. They glowed in ski trip tans and alluded to impending promotions.

She felt a kinship with the other outcast, that somewhat bemused older man who responded he was "in aluminum" after she allowed as she was "in foundation garments." As it turned out he was actually an airline captain —"the reflexes go in time"— had a house in Westchester, something he called the Boat, and even the war decorations. It became their private sun in the barnyard.

She found herself on break mentioning him, Ian, how he'd repaired their shared calculator (that sad imitation of modernity) while the class looked on aghast. We'd just one evening upped and did it. Then afterwards he took her out for coffee. That's all there ever was to it, laughter and coffee. He never did return to class. No one spoke again of him. After that she worked alone at the far-end calculator. But between the sinks and off the blue tiles the incident had assumed the dimensions of a small triumph.

"What do you do for a living?" they persisted. "Fixes machines!"

"Fixes machines," she echoed. Ian would like that.

"Dark or light?"

"Blond. Very blond with smoke grey eyes. They sparkle and they're sad, all at the same time." Ian would like that too.

"So?"

She'd gone too far.

"So get to work. He sounds like a live one."

From then on she had a live one. Nothing was said for several weeks. They waited as they must have waited for Millie. He could feel the subtle increase in tension even as the grey autumn deepened and settled into her.

One night she dreamed of Lou. They were sitting again in his car. He lounged utterly relaxed, with his head black on black against the door, waiting. They were all waiting. She knew he was talking in a low seductive voice but in the dream his words were silent. If she could she would see in the dark his cold sneer. Lou the terrible. Lou the slick. Lou who knew where the honey lay: He loomed in the dark, then became a blur as he leaned in over her, thrusting roughly into her coat. His breath rasped in
her ear. Stay put, he warned, but her head cracked sharply on his chin. He reversed quickly, driving his elbow into her throat and wrapping his fingers around her wrist.

"I'll break it if you don't kiss me." The last thing she heard was her voice, icy and even. "Go ahead and break it."

The following morning she dreamed her mother had died. When she awoke she was sobbing aloud.

It didn't help any that day to be subjected to the sheer nightgown collection Millie had trawled-in instead of lunch. Naomi had seen the smirk on the men's faces when they saw the boxes roll in. This was strictly girls business the looks said, a kind of fluff and confectioner's sugar to keep them happy.

Millie had become hollow-eyed by her happiness. "You lovey doves live on air," was the consensus. "Hot air," muttered Naomi and bit her tongue. The others spun round and glared. Rowdy chicken, she cautioned herself, the flock's comin' in to peck, the whole frenetic lot of them with their arms up like curtain rods and that gauzy stuff trailing down onto the floor.

In a body they flounced out. Millie trailed behind. To the last moment it seemed to Naomi she would say something. But then she left, running a bit to catch up with the others.

Naomi walked out then, got her coat off the rack and winked once at Steve, a slow toothy wink. She patted the time clock once. "Rye kiddo." It was a good strong day. She walked. She sprinted. Ayed the hydrant and had an impulse to leap one. Then he came home. Lou found her on the stairs licking a jelly apple.

Lou was still the Lou of old. It was like the dream again, his hand cupping her bare breast and his lips searching across hers. He was lover and child, the bitter hard and the giving sweet. They drove at each other with a terrible joy almost too much to contain.

"Naomi the terrible! Nomi the slick! Nomi who knew where the honey lay!"