

*"...engagingly written. The voice
is shrewd, sharp, funny, and yet tender."
— Joyce Carol Oates*

Lily Steps Out

Rita
Plush





by
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Empty nest, retired husband ... after thirty-three years of marriage as wife, mother, nursemaid, and family mediator, Lily Gold has had it! There must be more to life than making beds and cooking dinners. A lot more, she discovers, when she decides she needs something of her very own – a job.

Re-entering the work force is harder than it seems, and Lily has difficulty finding a position that's just right for her. When she finally does, she knows it's a perfect fit. But husband Leon wants no part of it, and off he goes to the bank to put the kibosh on her chance of opening her own antique center.

This is marriage? This is war! Lily steps out of the tired old habit of always letting Leon have his way. This time she turns the status quo into quid pro quo and gives him a run for the money. And, while she's at it, with a little help from her friends, she breaks the mold of Lily Gold. But does she have what it takes to create a new Lily – a Lily's renaissance?

Lily Gold's journey is the journey of every woman who wants it all – love, respect, personal fulfillment, and real happiness.

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~PRAISE FOR LILY STEPS OUT~

“...engagingly written. The voice is shrewd, sharp, funny, and yet tender.”

—Joyce Carol Oates

“Charming and carefully observed, *LILY STEPS OUT* is a *First Wives Club* for the new millennium. *LILY* will win your heart as she ‘comes of age.’ A great read!”

—Kevin Misher, producer of *Public Enemies*

“...the writing is lively and true to life.”

—Francine Klagsbrun, columnist and author of *Married People: Staying Together in the Age of Divorce*

“With wit and wisdom, Rita Plush proves F. Scott Fitzgerald wrong – there can be second acts in American lives.”

—Charles Salzberg, author of *Swann’s Last Song*

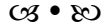
“It’s refreshing to read a novel about people whose desires and disappointments are so like our own.”

—Phil Wagner, editor/publisher, *The Iconoclast*



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I dedicate this book to Herb – husband, friend, and all-around treasure.



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“No man was ever shot by his wife while doing the dishes.”

–Unknown

“If it weren't for marriage, men and women would have to fight with total strangers.”

–Unknown

“The fact is, you have fallen lately, Cecily, into a bad habit of thinking for yourself. You should give it up. It is not quite womanly ... men don't like it.”

–Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), *The Importance of Being Earnest*



Lily

Sex... Lily thinks, lying next to Leon in their bed. *Everything is better after sex.* Even her thighs are a little thinner – but for how long? The afterglow will fade soon, and then it will be business as usual for them ... one with a scar down his chest, one with cellulite dimpling her thighs. Suburban New York housewife married thirty-three years, and what has she got to show for it? Making beds and fixing breakfast.

Resting on her side, she watches the filmy curtains. They ripple, they dance. Puffed up, they rise off the carpet and balloon into the room until, without warning, the earth's great breath sucks them flat against the window screen. Again they fill with air, flutter still and stay that way. The breeze has gone, turned on its heel, in search of another dancing partner? She puts an ear to Leon's chest.

"I'm alive," he assures, and throws an arm around her. His fingers play her bare arm. "That was dynamite."

"Ummm." She presses into him and, in the early morning silence of their room, she thinks what would she do if he had died? A sudden panic seizes her. Suppose he was in danger again? To safeguard his body from imagined assault, she gets on top of him. Chest to chest, legs to legs, she kisses his face and neck. That's how she is with him, with the warm beat of his body under hers, desperate to keep him safe. As if he feels what she feels, thinks what she is thinking, he murmurs, "What would I do without you?"

Him do without me? Is he kidding? She rolls off, sits up. "You? Women will take numbers just for the chance to make you a fat-free meal. It's me who'd have the problem. Some eighty-year-old looking for a nurse, that's who I'd get."

“One hell of a nurse. If it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t be here.”

He’s right. She was the one last spring, while Leon was driving and suddenly gasped, grabbing at his chest. She, who leaned over his slumped body and fumbled with the wheel ... swerving, accelerating, slamming the brake, blaring the horn. *Let me through! Let me through!* And begging Leon, “Please don’t die,” all the way to Emergency.

But outside of that, what has she done? Outside of all the work of wife and mother, what has she accomplished? She has a brain; why isn’t she using it?

She fends off his hand reaching for her breast. “No.” She swings off the bed and goes to her bureau drawers.

He sits up. “One minute, you’re screwing like there’s no tomorrow, and now it’s *no*? What about breakfast then?”

He wants a trade-off. *No feel? Then feed me.* But Lily isn’t in a bartering mood. “You fix it today. I bought Egg Beaters; you can make a nice omelet,” she says to the mirror, to Leon, who’s leaning back on his elbows, watching her get dressed.

She steps first one foot then the other into her cleaning pants, pulls on an old shirt over her head. She fluffs her hair. The phone rings. “Get that, will you?”

Leon picks up. “Hey, how’s the dynamo?” he says.

Diane, Lily thinks. If she’s five feet it’s stretching it, but the *drive* packed into that tidy little frame! *Because she’s been at the wheel all this time?* She had to be. Her husband took a hike and took along his masseuse, a Viking queen who’d come to the house twice a week to walk on his back. Diane got the kids and the mortgage, years ago. Now she heads an insurance agency. People work for her. It makes Lily think back to what Diane said last week when they met for a quick lunch. ‘Three meals a day, what’s with you? Get with the program, kiddo. June Cleaver traded in her apron for a brain and a briefcase a long time ago. Or haven’t you heard?’

‘Oh, I heard,’ was Lily’s reply. ‘Betty White is *Hot in Cleveland* and I’m nowhere. He wants me around all the time. I breathe in, he breathes out. *Where are you going? When will you be back?* That’s his favorite line. I never thought it would be this way when he retired. I just thought it would *be*. And his health is fine now. What am I supposed to do? Sit around and hope he doesn’t have another heart attack?’

‘You need a job,’ Diane had said, stabbing an olive on the iced oblong tray. ‘Come work for me. I’ll train you.’

Lily recalls throwing her napkin down on the table. ‘I’m so trained, a ball is

spinning on my nose.'

That's when Diane leaned in, scooped her hair back behind her ears, and said, 'Then maybe it's time the lady broke training.'

Lily's been thinking about it. It makes her depressed. She shakes her head when Leon holds out the phone. "Tell her I can't talk," she says. She wriggles her feet into her slippers.

"Madam is busy," Leon says into the phone. "She'll call you back."

He rummages through the sheets, finds his pajama bottoms, hitches them up, and ties the strings. "Don't do me any favors with breakfast – I can get my own meals."

"Good," she says, face to face with his bare chest. "Get mine while you're at it. I'm sick of cooking." She doesn't like the long pucker scar where Dr. D. Klott – formerly Daniel Klotsky – broke into Leon's chest. 'Bad hearts and bypasses, that's my business,' the young, chubby-cheeked surgeon had proclaimed outside Recovery. Paper hat still on, green scrubs and white booties, he grinned and gave two thumbs up. This was a doctor? An infant ... a child. She felt like writing him a bar mitzvah check.

She must look at the scar though. Leon's scar is *her* scar – what was done to him was done to her. But she took it too far. Like an ingredient in a recipe, she baked herself into him, and she isn't sure now if she can bake herself out. *Face it, Lily. He made your life. Wife. Mother. Widow, if he dies. He's been your title giver and title taker-away.*

She moves to the window, draws back the curtains, and looks out onto the street – a quiet residential street of three-bedroom ranch houses, just outside the city line. The maple tree they planted out by the curb, how long ago was it? For years, a skinny crooked tree that had to be pegged into the ground, and now look how it straightened out. The size of the trunk, the leaves!

She sits back down on the edge of the bed. He sits.

"I have to do something. Before some young *pisher* wearing *my* jewelry climbs into *my* bed and gets *you* to do over the kitchen. The second wife gets everything."

"Very funny. Like I'm going to outlive you."

"It's the healthy one who goes first," Lily says. "Look at Gail, a regular horse, and one day – *boom* – an embolism. Don't you see?" She shows him her palm as if Gail had been laid out in the flat of her hand. "And Sammy with his arthritis of the spine? He's a dance host on a cruise ship! Tell me about life expectancy!" She brings down her hand like a guillotine. "And he's seeing someone. Gail's gone three

months. Men have their pick, Leon. Nothing new there.”

“That’s what you’re afraid of? Who’s going to want you if I drop dead?”

What she’s afraid of doesn’t have a name, but it’s getting bigger by the minute. She can barely contain it. It pushes her off the bed and sends her stomping down the hall. He keeps up with her, stopping short at the closet when she stops.

“What is it then? Me? Haven’t I always let you...? It’s the kitchen, isn’t it?”

How she had wanted to gut that room, build out; put the dinette where the sink is, a big picture window and a full view of the yard. She could’ve watched Larry when he was young, playing out there. The contractors and their rolled-up plans – elevation A, elevation B. They would move the stove, the old fashioned soffits would go, and there would be cabinets up to the ceiling. But it was too much money then. And later on, when Leon was more established and she’d asked again, he’d said it wasn’t the right time.

“You want a new kitchen so bad, we’ll get some estimates.” His tone is airy, benevolent, but with an edge. *You win*, it says – but only because he says so.

She scowls. “You want to redo the kitchen now? So I can spend the rest of my life in there? No thanks.”

She swings open the closet door, stoops, and pulls out the vacuum. Then she grabs the hose and the attachments and deposits them into his receiving arms. “I’m fifty-five years old,” she says. “Do you realize that the fastest growing age group in America is people over a hundred? I could live another forty-five years. What am I going to do with all that time?”

“Larry’s not going to be single forever,” he replies amiably. “You’ll be busy with grandchildren one day.”

“One day when? And I don’t care about grandchildren.” *Not true*. She’s dying to be a grandmother.

“What the...?” he says, when she opens the door to Larry’s old room.

It gives her a shock too, the little feathers strewn all over the floor, as if someone had torn apart the pillow last night. Keeping quiet about her guilt, she recalls lying awake in bed last night, unable to sleep, staying very still so as not to disturb Leon. She had listened to the oil burner kick in, and a while later shut itself off. She heard the metal arm of the icemaker clink rows of cubes into its dewy tray. She put an ear to Leon’s face to make sure he was breathing. Then she slipped away and opened the door to Larry’s old room.

Earring-studded rock stars still clung to the wall. An old *Playboy* centerfold smiled emptily, leeringly, spread-eagle on the night table. She sat on the edge of her

son's abandoned bed, holding his pillow, so worn and thin and slept-on. Like a fine membrane, the ticking had actually dissolved in her fingers when she reached inside the case. As though under a spell, she flung the pillow up at the ceiling. Feathers drifted down, turning in the air, settling. She stood awhile before she brushed them from her shoulders and shook them from her hair. Then, barefoot, she padded back to her room, to sleeping Leon.

Bending over now, Lily picks up the ticking and folds it into a neat little square before dropping it into the waste can. "I have to get this mess cleaned up," she says.

Leon sets down the vacuum hose and the attachments, waits in the doorway. "I'll help."

"Go have breakfast."

He waits for a moment, then walks away. She plugs the cord into the wall and goes to work on the carpet, pushing the vacuum over the feathers. First she cuts a narrow path through the pile, then another path, a little wider, then wider still, until the feathers are gone. The whine of the motor and the mindless back and forth movement of her arm calms her, as housework often does. She snaps the floor brush into place, trails it along the baseboard, and finds herself thinking about Larry.

In high school there was that pretty exchange student from Hofstra College who was helping him with algebra. Lily had stood outside his door, the napkin-wrapped rugelach from her Hadassah luncheon in one hand, knuckles of the other poised to knock. She started to say his name but stopped. *His moans and the girl's high-pitched little cries.*

"No kidding?" Leon had said that night when Lily told him. "Nice ass on her." He cupped his palms and hefted the air.

"You're disgusting."

But he wasn't disgusting; he was just being a man, saying what a man would say in a case like that. But what if Lily would have said that about the darling boy in those snug jeans she'd hired to take over the tutoring? It's different for a woman. A woman can't get away with what a man can. *Sex*, she thinks, brush-cleaning the windowsills. *What would happen to sex if Leon died?* A woman her age, who *would* she get? What would it be like with another man? Would she be shy again like a young bride? Or would it be like smoking when she went back to it that time ... beginning right where she'd left off? She feels a little guilty thinking about sex with someone else while Leon is scrambling his Egg Beaters in the kitchen ... just a little.

She takes down Larry's posters. "*You* are disgusting." She jabs the brush at

pelvis-thrusting Mick Jagger, still tacked to the wall. “Married to Jerry, how long? And you come up with that cockamamie priest who wasn’t a priest, so you could get away without alimony. *Please*.” She rolls up the bony rocker and darts him into the waste can. “Who taught you how to dance? Who gave you those moves?” she says to the can. “A woman, thank you. Yaaay Tina.” She pops out the brush, reaches down for the flat-ended crevice tool. She tries out her catwalk, tosses her rough jungle hair, and hoists the vacuum hose over her shoulder. With the flat end to her mouth, she back-kicks the long cord that snakes on the just-vacuumed stage and bows humbly to her thrilled and mystified fans screaming, *Lill-lee! Lill-lee!*

“What’s *luuuhv* got to-do-with-it?” She struts, she stomps. “*Baaay-beh. Bay-yaay-yaay-beh.*” Fearless. Nervy. Endless legs in spandex capris. She’s moving. She’s grooving. She snaps the vacuum cord as if to subdue a beast. That Ike creep, those beatings Tina took. Unbelievable. Not really, though. People get used to their life; they don’t think it can be any other way. But Tina showed him. She showed the world. “*Priii-vait daaan-ser*, a dancer for *muuunnee...*” She stops, sniffs the air. *After shave.* She turns. “Leon!”

“Shake it baby. Shake it.” He grins broadly.

“That’s not funny, standing there watching me. You could have said something.”

“*Priii-vait daaan-ser*,” he mimics, rocking his hips under the breakfast tray he holds out to her. “Madam says fix her meals. Madam gets her meals fixed.”

“Thank you.” It isn’t easy being annoyed at a thoughtful man.

He sets the tray down on Larry’s desk. Once a stocky man, his sporty shirt and chinos fit his newly trimmed-down size – doctor’s orders – and make her suck in her paunch and vow another diet. His face glows and, except for the fleshy area under his chin and the slight pouched look under his eyes, he looks fit. He’s had sex and survived. He’s alive, he’s a man again.

She remembers him on the gurney, so still and chalky white. Her freezing terror that he might die. The nights alone in the house. She slept in his pajamas, willing herself to be inside him, pumping his heart, pushing the blood through his stopped-up veins. *Live Leon, live!* she begged. And now she’s not satisfied just to have a live Leon? What kind of wife is she?

She makes a place next to the tray and boosts herself onto the desk. A sip of coffee, a spread of butter on the toast he brought. She bites, chews, she swings her legs.

“Let’s get in the car and go,” Leon says.

"Where to?" Lily responds, working her legs.

"Wherever the car takes us." He opens out his arms. "I'm retired, remember? I have all the time in the world."

How could she forget? Their little jaunts to Waldbaums. *This cucumber? No that one. Do we have enough paper towels?* Last week he parked on a 'husband's chair' in Loehmans, waiting for her to go through the racks. Her life is *we* now. She wants *me* now.

"Come on, come on." He flips his hand at the half-cleaned room. "This can wait."

"I'm going to look for a job."

"Sure, sure, at the hospital, like we talked about. We'll sign up and be volunteers. Tomorrow." He churns the air with his hand as if to get her moving. Take-charge Leon knows what he wants. He knew it back then, when they first met...

* * * * *

A buying office, New York City, late seventies. Switchboard/receptionist. Hectic mornings and flirtatious married men. Some dictation. It was a job. Then one day, Leon. Compact, muscular, he marched in with his sample case and set it on her desk. He handed her his card and said, "Do you think that's fair?"

Bewildered, she looked up at him. "What?"

"You know my name, now. But I don't know yours."

"Lily Marcus, but I don't date salesmen. Too pushy."

With his Windsor knot and in his father's business, Leon Gold of Gold & Son Gift Boxes was a man of the world. "I asked for a date?"

"You were going to."

"Pretty sure of yourself. All I wanted was your name."

Her cheeks flamed up as though he'd slapped her. "Well, now that you have it, you can sit down." *Creep. Another creep.*

At five o'clock, the elevator doors opened, and there he was. Sample case in one hand, he offered a cone of fresh flowers with the other.

"Get lost!" She hurried past him, through the revolving door, and onto the crowded street.

He kept pace. "Admit it, you're crazy about me."

Facing him she said, "You are the most conceited, the most..." She turned away and picked up her stride.

"Watch it!" He grabbed her arm.

"Oohhh," she cried out as a taxi hopped the curb and missed her by inches.

"See, you need me." He took her by the elbow. "Come on, I want to show you something." He steered her down the block into Anna's Fine Fashions.

"How's business?" he asked the woman in Gift Wrap.

She wore harlequin-shaped eyeglasses and continued to curl a ribbon against a dull-bladed knife. "Low on number threes," she said.

"Blouse box," he explained to Lily.

"And I can use some double-0 ones."

"Handkerchiefs," he told Lily. Then he gestured at the cubicles behind the ribbon-curling woman. "My boxes."

Outside, the streetlights had come on. In the dusky half-light, she stood with him in front of the store and watched the people come and go.

"Don't let what you saw in there fool you." He said it as though he'd just shown off the Hope Diamond. "I'm not a rich guy. But I'm a hard worker."

"And a fast one."

"So ... when are you bringing me home to meet the folks?"

She laughed. "Got a pencil and paper? I'll give you my number."

"That's Queens," he said when she wrote it out. "I don't go to Queens. How about we meet after work?"

"How about you get lost." She about-faced and started walking.

"Okay, I'll make an exception." He followed along.

"You've got to be kidding!" She waved him off and headed for the subway.

"Hey, slow down a minute." He trotted along after her, running to keep up. "Some girls..."

"I'm not *some girl*." She proceeded down the steps, put her token in the turnstile. On the platform, she said loudly, "Stop following me."

The F Train screeched to a halt, its doors slid back. Inside the packed car, she gripped an overhead strap. He stood right beside her. The train rumbled along. "Can't you stand someplace else?"

"Where?" he said with an innocent shrug.

Billboards whizzed by. The matching white teeth of the Spearmint Twins smiled down at her. Dale Carnegie promised new friends and influencing people. She looked at Leon. "Don't think you're coming home with me. I'll call a cop. You are *not* meeting my parents."

* * * * *

Lily continues to chew her toast.

"Well..." he says. "Get a move on."

Now that he has no business to run, he thinks he's running *her*:

"I want a real job, and don't talk to me about lunch and car fare. I don't want to hear about taxes and take-home pay. I mean it this time."

"Go then," he says, with a broad wave of his arm. "Get it out of your system. I'm not going to stop you."

He knows me, she thinks, and he's counting on me to stop myself. To waffle and baby-step, to talk myself out of the job I haven't even found. But that was the other Lily. "I want to check the classifieds," she says. "Maybe I'll set up an interview. I almost forgot! Larry's coming for dinner. I'll defrost some meatballs. How about you pick up a few things? Let's eat in the dining room for a change. I feel like celebrating."

"Where's the fire? This precious job can't wait a few days?"

"No, it can't. I have to get started." She hops off the desk before she changes her mind – there's still some of the old Lily mixed in with the new.



Breadwinner

Late that afternoon, Larry is wearing a new suit. His blue shirt has a white collar and cuffs, a print tie. And he changed his hair. No more part; it's combed back and it gives him a daring look. Her son is a man. She feels about to burst with pleasure. "Somebody looks sharp. New girl?"

"What's wrong with Celine?" he snaps.

"Nothing. But I noticed she talks low. Is there something wrong with her voice?"

"She modulates, Ma. Not everyone shouts when they speak."

Mazel tov. Today it's a modulator. Every Monday and Tuesday he meets a girl who talks better and walks better than his mother.

"And you're always cutting down my girlfriends."

"I liked Veronica."

"Her name was Monica and she worked in the garment center. She got you up to Donna Karan. How could you not like her?"

The fortune she spent buying wholesale. "New leaf, Larry. I'll be sweet as pie."

He considers her, suspicious as a businessman sizing up a possible scam. His finger scratches his jaw. "What kind of pie?" he says with a little smile, and she's a mother in heaven.

"Come," she says. "I've been cleaning out your room."

"What for?"

"My Mick Jagger," he moans when they get in there. He pulls the poster out of the waste can. "You could have asked first."

"I didn't think of it."

A lie. She thought with a capital T. *I'm going through your room, Larry. Do you want...?* She envisioned them sorting his mementos. *Remember when...?* she'd say, and be tempted to keep them. Nothing doing. Fast, it had to be done, or it might never be done at all. She was clearing a space to breathe.

"Where's my pillow?"

"It was old. It fell apart."

"You mean it's gone?" he says, with one of his heart-crushing looks.

"Gone, Larry. And I want you to go through the drawers. Whatever you don't want, throw out." She points to a black plastic sack slumped on the floor. "The rest, take home."

"I thought this was my home."

"Well, it is. But not in the same way it was when you lived here."

"What's that supposed to mean?" he asks as he swings the laundry bag he's been holding.

She points to it. "For one thing, it means no more of that." The bag stops swinging.

"Why not? I'm not asking you to do it."

But it feels as if he is. Feels like he's going to march her back down to the basement to sort and fold and pair his socks. He has his own place doesn't he? Then why is so much of his stuff still here? What is this, he's moving out a tee-shirt at a time? "Aren't there Laundromats where you live?"

"Hey-ho, big guy." Leon's in the room now. He gives Larry a nudge in the ribs.

"Dad..." Larry responds with a little slap on the back. "Looking good."

"Not bad for a geezer." He pats his stomach, gives the air a one-two punch. "Let's eat, I'm starved."

They take their seats at the table set with cloth napkins, flowers, and wine. *That's Leon.*

"So how's the killer?" he says to Larry.

"The Beemer's on order, and my promotion is guaranteed." His fingers slide down the silk of his tie.

"A BMW," Lily says. "Wow."

"Can you believe this kid?" Leon says to no one in particular. "Youngest sales manager ever in the company."

"He learned from the best," Lily says.

"To Dad," Larry says. He raises his glass. "The best of the best."

The Gold's are getting along, in the same room, at the same time. *There is a God.* They drink their wine and eat their dinner. Lily made the meatballs, Leon the spaghetti. *Cooperation.* Couples do it all the time when the woman works. Maybe this job business isn't going to be as dicey as she thought. "Delicious salad, Lee."

"Capers. It's all in the capers." He puffs on his fingernails and buffs them on his shirt.

"What goes on here?" Larry asks.

As if introducing a stranger, Leon extends his arm. "Ask her."

She wants to be blasé about it. To be the woman who has always acted on her intentions – a risk-taker, a world-beater, who takes it all in stride. But who she is, is scared and excited Lily Gold, about to explode with a smile as wide as the table. "I looked for a job today, and Dad helped with dinner." She reaches for the wine.

"A job?" Larry says. "What would you do? Some more of that salad, Dad."

"Yes, a job! Plenty of women my age go back to work."

"Celine's mom just got her CPA," Larry says.

"There you go. To Celine's mom." She drinks to the absent Mrs. Cone.

"But she's focused, Ma. Next month, you'll be going back to school again."

"Maybe I will. Maybe I'll do both. Get a job *and* go back to school." *You little shit.*

"He has a point." Leon's fork is raised in testament, cherry tomato perched on top. "You can be flighty."

Lily bats around a meatball on her dinner plate. *Flighty, am I?* Not too flighty to use ground turkey instead of beef though – Leon's off red meat. But not off Mallomars. She found the box squirreled under a seat in his car. Flat-eyed and fuming, she looks from one to the other. Husband and son? Judge and jury are more like it. And she doesn't *like it*. "You think I'm unemployable. It's a big joke to you. You think *I'm* a joke." She smacks her hand down on the table. "You can't see me out there, can you? You want your wife, your maid, your cook, *here!*"

"Lil, I didn't mean..."

"Get a grip, Ma. I was only..."

She has more wine. Good for Leon's arteries, Dr. Klott said. She has arteries too; they're entitled. She drains her glass. "Well, grip this, you two." Fingers cocked like pistols, she shoots back her elbows. "Because – *bang-bang* – I not only looked, I found. *I got a job!*" Like the Pope puts on *teffilin*, she did.

Their eyes widen. Their jaws drop down. Even the wine in the glasses, the

meatballs on the plates, Leon's pretty flowers standing in the vase, all seem eager for details.

"What kind of job?" Leon says, breaking the silence. "Where?"

"How much?" Larry says. "Don't keep it a secret."

Yeah, Lily, inquiring minds want to know. She twirls the stem of her wineglass, thoughts racing. "Not that I'm superstitious, but it *is* my first job in thirty years. You wouldn't want to put a *kibosh* on it, would you?"

"Not me, Ma."

"Never," says Leon. "Just a hint?" he coaxes.

Tapping her fork on the table, she says, "It's hard to describe." *Tap, tap, tap.* "Actually the job is still being created." She sweeps crumbs from the cloth into her palm, brushes them onto her plate. "It's *in the raw* you might say. I just fell into it. To be honest, I can't believe it myself."

"I bet it's something in sales," Larry says. "You're good with people, Ma."

Thank God I'm good with something. She laughs, giddy with the wine and the idea of how much she can say by not saying much.

"I know that laugh. I'm right. It's sales." Larry insists.

"It runs in the family," Leon says, as though he had something to do with it. "I knew you had it in you. It was just a question of time." He says it as a mentor would.

Comedians, the two of them. Now? After they let me have it from both sides? After they bury me? Now they come with their lame praise? They can kiss my ass!

* * * * *

Next thing she's aware of, she's in bed. There's a tapping on her shoulder, a calling of her name. "Lil. Lily. Get up."

"Wha...?" Her hands press down on her head.

"... late for work," she hears.

She palms her flying head. "Go back to sleep. You're retired."

"Not me. *You*. Your job. You start today. In the raw? You fell in? Remember?"

She went for a job *in the raw*? How brazen! How embarrassing! And she fell? So that's why her head hurts. She'll just lie there in bed, nice and quiet, eyes closed, till it stops hurting. A good bed. Lily loves her bed, and her bed loves her. And there's not one single reason to leave it now.

"You okay, hon? All that wine last night. I'll drive you."

In an instant she's off the bed, staggering toward the bathroom, in the stall mixing the shower water. She stands under the flow – *think, brain, think* – lathering up her hair. How should she dress? What does a woman wear the first day to a job she doesn't have?

Out of the shower, she towels dry and one-two-three does her makeup, blows out her hair. A spritz of cologne, and she's back in her room, diving into her closet and holding up hangers. A skirt and matching jacket? Too executive. It hits the bed next to Leon, in his jammies, watching her. A dress? The bed. That great summer pantsuit with her new linen blouse. Perfect.

"So?"

"What so? I'm in a hurry." She's talking to the mirror. Doesn't he have something to do? She tucks, she zips, she buttons her jacket. "I have to get to work. Where are those earrings?"

"Slow down a minute. Talk to me. I said I'd drive you."

"I'm starting a job, Lee, not kindergarten. I can drive myself."

"What if I need you?" he shouts down the hall to her. "Call me at lunch."

* * * * *

The front door closes with a bright little click. "Ahhh..." The sweet morning air, the calming sun on her face. The straightened-out tree and a twittering bird on one of its branches. She unlocks her car, powers the engine, and noses it down the street.

Where to? The Help Wanted section of the paper she went through in the diner yesterday was no help. *Accounting. Administrative Assistant. Underling to some head honcho?* She's been that to Leon all her life. *College Grads. Computer.* Not for her. Neither were the two older men in suits at the next table. They spent the day in the movies instead of telling their wives they'd lost their jobs. 'Don't bother, lady,' one of them had called out to her. 'There's nothing out there.'

She's out there. She's Lily Gold, and there's work she can do. She knows clothes, but she doesn't want clothes all day and women frowning in the mirror. She could call Diane. *No.* She doesn't want to be given a job; she wants to get one for herself.

She turns off the highway at the business district and heads for a parking garage. Up the spiraling ramp, she pulls into a slot and cuts the engine. She sits

among the deserted cars for nearly half an hour, then she reaches down under her seat for yesterday's Help Wanted.

Telemarketers? She's good with people. Ask Larry. But does she want to push subscriptions and chimney cleanings? Into the barrel by the elevator go the telemarketers. Then she steps inside the elevator and hits the 'Street' button.

She walks and she walks, into one establishment and out of another. Here's a jeweler; she likes jewelry.

"Experience?"

"Not exactly, but..."

"Sorry," the owner says, turning back to his velvet trays.

In a wallpaper and fabric store they could use someone pulling samples in the back. *No thanks*. She's been *in the back* for too long.

She tries The Guilt Edge, an upscale antique store, bronze and crystal in the window, prices inked onto little cards and bow-tied to the goods. She feels underdressed for it, but goes in anyway.

"We're not looking for anyone," a woman in a French twist and pearls says. But her tone implies that if they were, they wouldn't be looking for her. *Snob*, Lily thinks, leaving the store. She's starting to worry. Is there anyone looking for her? Will she ever find a job?

Imposter that she is, she lines up with workers and buys a coffee from a vendor. She finds a bench nearby and sips from her paper cup. After a while, she checks her watch. It's after twelve, and she hasn't accomplished a thing. She fishes around in her shoulder bag for change, then spends nearly half an hour walking until she finds a pay phone that works – not many left. Obsolete ... like her? She calls Leon.

"I only have a minute."

"Hey! How's my breadwinner?"

"Great, just great."

"You don't sound it. Look Lil, you got a job, my hat goes off to you. You don't want to tell me where it is, fine. But day-in day-out, work is no walk in the park. Maybe you should..."

Throw in the towel and come home? In a way, she'd like to. She doesn't like lying, and she doesn't know what to do next. "I'll get used to it, Lee. Got to go."

She walks along. An old desk outside a store catches her eye. It's scratched and dented and layered with paint. But it's carved and routed too, with drawer pulls that could shine. She can see its potential. 'More Inside' says the cardboard sign

dangling from a pull.

Not a huge store, about twenty by thirty feet, but packed to the gills, and the conglomeration ... French, English ... she sees Moroccan. Mirrors with busted frames and blistered glass. Rolled-up rugs sit propped like corpses inside the display window. Lamps, chairs, curio shelves, stack and pitch. And the *tchotchkas*. Name it, and it's probably here. But who would know, the mess this place is in?

"Halloooo," she calls to the musty air. "Anybody home?"

"Who wants to know?" answers a voice.

Lily follows the sound to a wedge of light coming through a partly open door and finds herself looking down three cement steps onto an alley in back of the store. A man sitting in a worn leather swivel chair looks up at her. Sideburns, dyed hair waving back in a pompadour, ending at the collar of his vintage shirt, long-lidded eyes. *Elvis lives*. His face says, 'close to fifty.'

"That desk out front. What do you want for it?"

"Make me an offer."

"I'll give you sixty-five dollars."

"Five hundred."

"You'll never get it."

"It is solid oak, hand carved."

"It has routed drawers, tongue and groove. You'll still never get it."

"Are you a dealer? I do not sell to dealers."

"I'm not a dealer." She walks down the steps. "But I know what things go for, and sitting out there like a lox, that desk isn't bringing in any five hundred dollars." *Go, Lily, go. Go, go, go.* "You want your price, show the piece right. You've got a display window. Use it. Display something."

"I am listening."

"First of all, you should clean up that chair with the mother of pearl inlay work. And, while you're at it, the lamp next to those silver picture frames needs a new shade."

He nudges over a round movie-star hassock and props up his feet sporting black Keds. "You got an eye."

"I've been told."

"And you are no mouse. I do not like a mouse. Maybe I could use you."

He wants me. He wants me. Her heart is beating so loud, she's sure he can hear it. "I'm not looking for a job."

"Did not say you were." He leans back in his swivel. "Try it out a few days."

“What’s the pay?”

“Ten dollars an hour to start. If you work out...”

She turns and walks toward the steps.

“Twelve fifty,” he calls out.

She keeps on walking.

“I will give you fifteen!”

She turns back. “Cash,” she says, from the top step. “Plus commission.”

Later, out in the street, the beautiful street, the most beautiful street in all the world, she hooks her thumb under the strap of her shoulder bag and pulls it across her chest. “One, two, three, four.” She sweeps the strings of her guitar and belts out, “You ain’t nothin’ budda houndawg...”

