

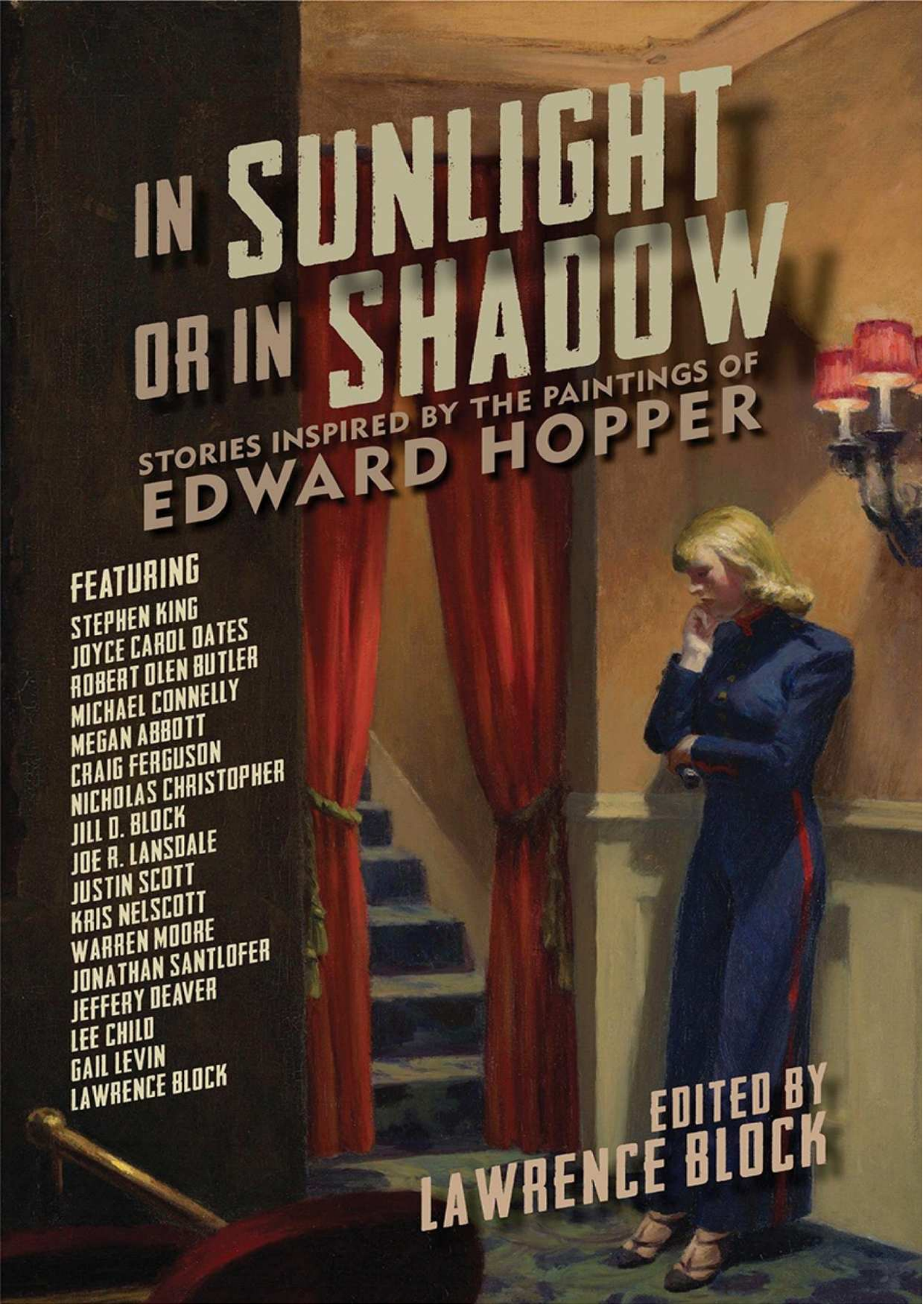
IN SUNLIGHT OR IN SHADOW

STORIES INSPIRED BY THE PAINTINGS OF
EDWARD HOPPER

FEATURING

STEPHEN KING
JOYCE CAROL OATES
ROBERT OLEN BUTLER
MICHAEL CONNELLY
MEGAN ABBOTT
CRAIG FERGUSON
NICHOLAS CHRISTOPHER
JILL D. BLOCK
JOE R. LANSDALE
JUSTIN SCOTT
KRIS NELSCOTT
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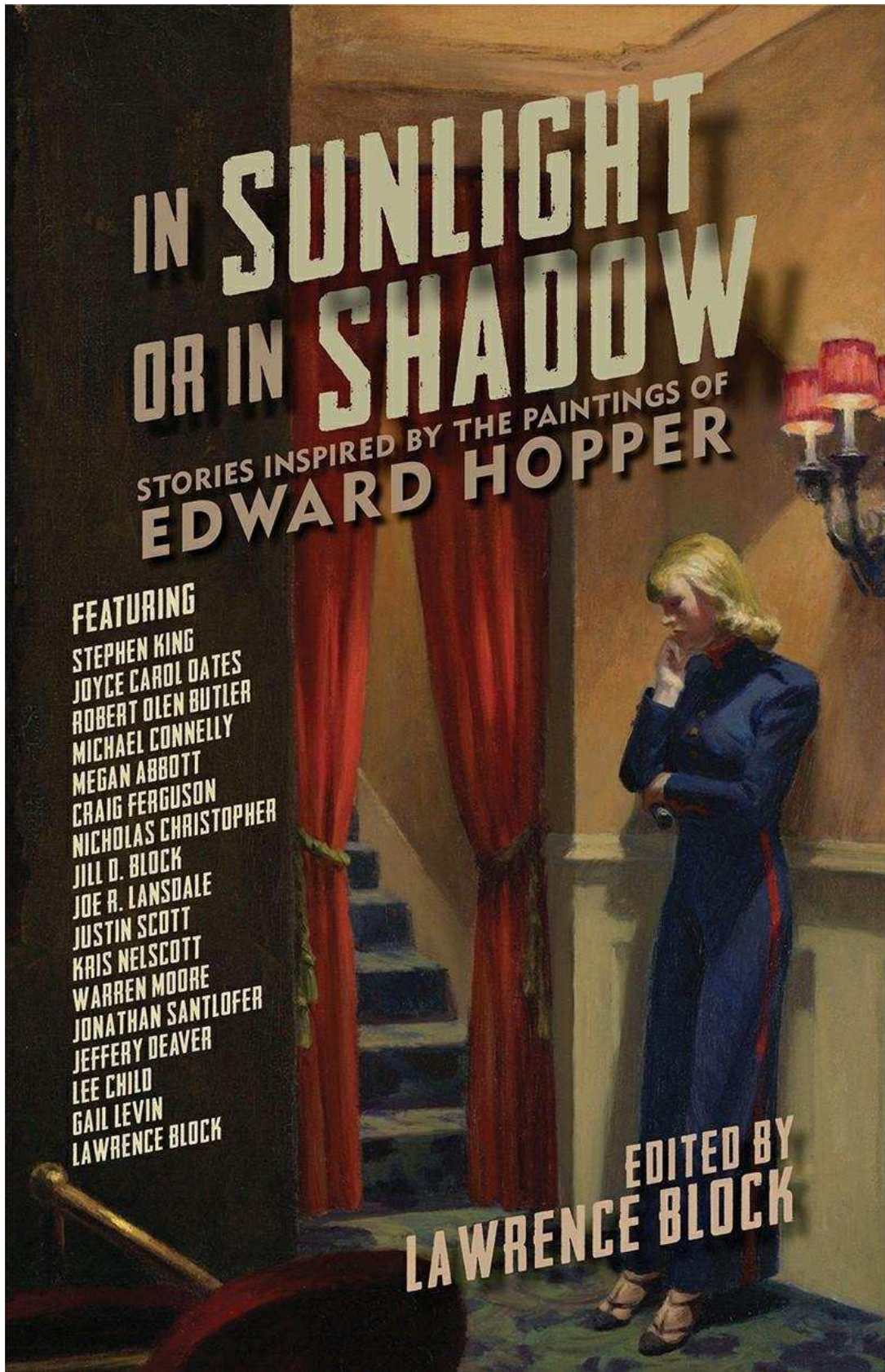
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PEGASUS BOOKS
NEW YORK LONDON



Cape Cod Morning

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FOREWORD

BEFORE WE BEGIN . . .

Edward Hopper was born in Upper Nyack, New York, on July 22, 1882, and died in his studio near Washington Square in New York City on May 15, 1967. The life that filled those years is an interesting one, but it's not up to me to recount it here; for that I'd steer you to *Edward Hopper: An Intimate Biography*, by Gail Levin.

(Gail, who also edited Hopper's catalogue *raisonné*, is one of our contributors. Her offering, "The Preacher Collects," renders as fiction an extraordinary little-known episode toward the end of the artist's life, of which she has firsthand knowledge.)

But I digress, and probably not for the last time. Let me say a little about how the idea for this volume came about, and why such an illustrious list of contributors signed on for it.

Over the years I've written a lot about writing, and about the generation of ideas, so you'd think I'd be able to tell you the source of this particular idea. But I can't. It was just there, premise and title and all, and without overthinking it I put together an A-list of the writers I'd most like to invite to the party.

Almost all of them said they'd love to come.

Not out of friendship (although they're all friends of mine). Not for lack of other things to do, or because they hungered for the pittance I was able to offer. The attraction was Edward Hopper. They all loved and responded to his work, and in a very writerly way.

A strong positive response to Hopper's paintings is by no means uncommon, in America and throughout the world. But I've come to believe that it's singularly strong among readers and writers, that Hopper's work resonates profoundly with those of us who care deeply for stories. Whether we delight in being told them or in telling them ourselves, we tend to be Edward Hopper fans.

And it's not because of the stories his paintings tell.

Hopper was dismayed on those occasions when his work was dismissed as illustration. No less so than any Abstract Expressionist, his concern was with shape and color and light, not with meaning or narrative.

Hopper was neither an illustrator nor a narrative painter. His paintings don't tell stories. What they do is suggest—powerfully, irresistibly—that there are stories within them, waiting to be told. He shows us a moment in time, arrayed on a canvas; there's clearly a past and a future, but it's our task to find it for ourselves.

Our contributors have done just that, and I'm gobsmacked by what they've provided. Thematic anthologies tend to generate stories that have rather too much in common with one another, and it's often advisable to dip into them from time to time rather than read one story after another.

But that's not the case here. These stories are in various genres, or no genre at all. Some of them spring directly from the canvas, making a story to fit the chosen painting. Others rebound at an oblique angle from the canvas, relating the story it somehow triggered. As far as I can make out, these stories have only two common denominators—their individual excellence and their source in Edward Hopper.

I think you'll enjoy them. And, while you're at it, you'll get to look at some pretty pictures.

Including *Cape Cod Morning*, our frontispiece painting, for which you'll note there is no corresponding story. And thereby hangs—or doesn't hang—a tale.

Cape Cod Morning was the selection of a prominent writer and Hopper enthusiast who accepted an invitation to the anthology and subsequently found himself unable to deliver a story. These things happen, and no blame attaches when they do.

But it left us with a painting. We'd already chased down the requisite permission for *Cape Cod Morning*, and had tucked the high-res jpeg in the folder of Our Man at Pegasus—who pointed out, helpfully enough, that it seemed to be unaccompanied by a story.

I recounted the circumstances of our having it in hand. "Fine," said Our Man. "It's a beautiful painting, and we can use it as a frontispiece."

"Ah," I said. "But there's no story to go with it."

"So? Let them write their own."

And so, Gentle Reader, we've provided you with an eighteenth painting, and isn't it a compelling one? Have a look at it, take it in. There's a story in it, don't you think? A story just waiting to be told . . .

Feel free to tell it. But, um, don't tell it to me. I'm outta here.

But not without jotting down a few words of thanks. To Edward Hopper, of course, and to the book's contributors; without his paintings and their stories, all we'd have is some blank pages and a title.

To Shannah Ehrhart Clarke, who chased down and secured the artwork and the requisite permission to use it, and who performed this thankless task efficiently, resourcefully, and with unquenchable good humor.

To Danny Baror, my agent and friend, whose faith in and enthusiasm for this project never wavered.

To Claiborne Hancock of Pegasus Books, who was quick to see the book's potential, and who—with Iris Blasi and Maria Fernandez—has been its passionate supporter throughout.

And, finally, to my wife, Lynne, who has been *my* passionate supporter for thirty-some years, and who knows just when to say, "You know, you've been at that computer forever. You must be exhausted. Why don't you walk over to the Whitney and look at some pictures?"

—Lawrence Block

MEGAN ABBOTT is the Edgar Award-winning author of eight novels, including *Dare Me*, *The Fever* and her latest, *You Will Know Me*. Her stories have appeared in collections including *Detroit Noir*, *Best American Mystery Stories of 2015*, and *Mississippi Noir*. She is also the author of *The Street Was Mine*, a study of hardboiled fiction and film noir. She lives in Queens, NY.



The Girlie Show, 1941

32 × 38 in. (81.3 × 96.5 cm). Private collection/Bridgeman Images

GIRLIE SHOW

BY MEGAN ABBOTT

She went udders out.”

“No pasties even?”

“Like a pair of traffic lights.”

Pauline hears them on the porch. Bud is telling her husband about a trip to New York City a few years ago. Going to the Casino de Paree.

Her husband says almost nothing, smoking cigarette after cigarette and making sure Bud always has a Blatz in hand from the metal cooler beside him.

“Nipples like strawberries,” Bud is saying. “But she never took off her g-string. And she never spread her legs.”

“That right?”

“Maybe you’ve seen things I ain’t.”

“Can’t say I know what you mean,” her husband says, flicking a match onto the lawn.

“Uh-huh.”

After, her husband comes inside, cheeks like dark flames.

The next day, she finds him in the kitchen, working, feet on the table.

It's the first time he's taken his sketch pad out in four months. Lately, he's started giving Pauline black looks when she came home from work at the ad agency, especially the time she wore the new beaver hat the man from Schmitt's Fine Furs had given her for all her hard work.

But now, he is sketching frantically, and she doesn't say a word or stand too close. They've been married fourteen years and she knows all his frets and stops, wood warps and sweet spots.

"But it's so cold," she says. It's been so long since he's asked her she almost thinks it might be some kind of joke.

He needs a model.

"Stand by the stove," he says, rolling his shirtsleeves above his elbows. That angry vein in his forearm.

She moves over to the cookstove, its frill of heat.

The memory comes back to her, nearly fifteen years before. The coldest January she'd known. Cuddling up to the potbelly stove at the train station, she felt something pressing against her back. Turning, she saw a man behind her, hands deep in his coat pockets, redcheeked.

She could smell Sen-Sen on his breath and the Macassar oil he used in his hair.

She was startled, but he was so handsome and she was twenty-seven, the only girl from her town without a husband.

They were married three months later.

My masher, she used to call him, affectionately, a very long time ago.

Sketch pad on his knees, he waits as Pauline pulls loose her housedress, unrolls her stockings.

The last is her underdrawers, which shiver to her feet.

"You'll see all the things I don't want you to see," she whispers, throatily. She doesn't know where this voice comes from.

Wifely duties, married intimacies have never been easy for her. Everything came as a great shock on her wedding night, even though she'd read *Ideal Marriage: Physiology and Technique*, the book given to her by her maid of honor, who'd already been married eighteen months and, as she whispered over creamed coffee at the luncheonette, was now "looser than a wagon tire" down there.

Pauline hadn't gotten as far in the book as she should have, or her Latin wasn't good enough, because it turned out the thing her new husband liked to do most was more than two hundred pages in, and the movements required, and the sounds he made, she could not find in the book at all.

The parts she liked were the accidental moments, often things she felt almost by accident while he was moving her, hands on her shoulders so rough she had marks like blue petals, and they recalled certain private moments when the subway train braked suddenly, coming to a long, shuddery stop.

Everything is off now, dress, stockings, slip, brassiere, step-ins, and she is standing on the kitchen stool. She wonders if a very tall man might be able to see her through the pane above the kitchen curtains.

“Turn to your right.”

She can feel the gooseflesh rise, the veins behind her knees like tickling spiders now.

She is forty-two and no one has asked her to take off her clothes in a long time. (*How about lunch, Mr. Schmitt said every time he called now. I'd love to see that beaver on you.*)

As she turns, she lifts her breasts, which she's always been proud of. No puling babies have ever hung from them and they have never *fallen like a pair of yeast cakes*, as some of the other women she knew confided. Once, Mrs. Bertrand, the head of the switchboard at the office, asked if she could touch Pauline's breasts, *just to remind myself*.

Catching a glimpse of herself in the chrome toaster, she smiles a little, but only to herself.

He makes her take many different poses, her arms high and twined like Marlene Dietrich, her legs apart, a boxer's stance. Hand on hip, like a department store model, and knees bent; hands on hips, like a momma saying *kootchie koo* to a baby in a stroller.

“What is this for?” she finally asks, her back aching, her body tingling head to toe. “Am I a dancer or something?”

“You're not anything,” he says, coolly. “But the painting will be called the ‘Irish Venus.’”

She used to pose for him the first few years they were married, but only for his pay-work. She posed as an aproned housewife (*Romance dies at the sight of dishpan hands!*), a bathing beauty (*Ten more pounds changed my life. A skinny girl hasn't a chance!*), a June bride, a beer hall girl in lederhosen. Eventually, once she started bringing in regular pay at the ad agency, where she drew herself all day (rows and rows of women's shoes, or men's hats, or children's pajamas), he suggested he start hiring girls from the art school, but she resisted.

“Don't be so jealous,” he would say.

“It's the only time we spend together,” Pauline insisted, gently.

But then one time, she came home late from work, soon after her promotion.

The canvas on his easel was torn in half and he was gone to McCrory's till four. When he finally returned, knocking over the milk bottles on the front step, he did some nasty things under their covers that she was required to be part of. She had to go to a doctor the next day and have some stiches put inside. Pushing through the train turnstile made her cry in pain.

He swore he didn't remember any of it, but the following week, he hired a girl from the art school. She had buck teeth, but he said it worked out because she always kept her mouth shut.

That night, he sketches her until nearly two.

When she comes out of the bathroom after washing her teeth, she sees him asleep on the bed, his shoes still on. Most nights, he sleeps on the sunporch.

She unlaces his shoes and removes them quietly, along with his socks.

At some point in the night, he must have taken off his trousers because just before the pink of dawn she feels his bare leg against her back.

“Honey,” she whispers.

He moves closer to her in the bed, the mattress springs making embarrassing sounds. She turns slowly so she is facing him, but he turns away. She can feel it, even though her eyes are closed.

The next night, he asks her to do it again. He's ready to move onto paint. He has everything ready by the time she gets home, paints mixed and a newly stretched canvas on the easel.

Her legs still ache from the night before, and from working all day, but she feels some excitement in her chest, like a pair of gypsy moths dancing.

She warms coffee on the stove and slides the stool back into place, under the fly-specked tungsten lamp hanging from the ceiling.

He sketches her for hours that night, her body aching, feet numb in her work heels, the smell of turpentine and linseed oil so strong in the air.

He is so caught up, a furrow from his browline to chin. He has caught fire.

"Can you just move that way?" he says, paint-streaked thumb jabbing.

It is even colder tonight, the sixth night in a row since he began painting. She's burned her hip once and her thigh twice on the cookstove as she swiveled, teetering on her heels, the stool squeaking.

The first time, her fingers fly to her mouth like a little girl in a cartoon, or one of those women on the calendars that hang at Al's Garage, the ones whose skirts are always flying up, flashing garters like black arrows.

He looks at her from over the top of the easel but doesn't say anything.

Late, late, her body aching, he suggests they end the session with a glass of Old Schenley's. Pauline isn't much of a drinker, but she thinks it might help with the pain.

He takes her feet and puts them on his lap. At first she doesn't know what he's doing, but then he reaches for an ice cube and rests it on her thigh, the two angry burns like open mouths.

Even later, in bed that night, she feels something. His fingers touching the grooves of the burn, fingers cold from the icy pitcher on the bedside table. And then the fingers trace circles that go wider and wider toward her inner thigh, to the center of things. She feels her lips part, a breath. The fingers move closer and closer, so slow.

In that moment, a picture flashes through her head, out of nowhere and it makes no sense: a sloe-eyed woman the next lane over at the bowling alley years ago, arm outstretched to hand Pauline a bright red ball, the woman's long fingers dipping into its holes. *I warmed it up for you.*

The next day, she leaves work early, a sneaking smile on her face. *Won't he be happy, she thinks. We can start early. We can work all evening.*

When she walks into the kitchen, just after four, she finds a box on the dropleaf table. Her smile grows wider as she lifts the cardboard top and parts the tissue inside. It is a pair of green slippers with tiny gold heels. Pressing one up to her face, it almost feels like satin, though she knows it can't be. The card inside describes the color as *absinthe*.

They are two sizes too small, but she won't say a word.

"You," she says, when he comes home, kissing his cheek, "you." She has made him his favorite beef stew with plenty of Worcestershire.

He gives her a strange look, so she points down to her feet, tapping her heels together like Dorothy.

There's a catch of surprise on his face. Maybe he'd wanted to spring them on her after she took her clothes off, she thinks, blushing to herself.

He wants to stop early that night. He keeps looking at her in the slippers. Eventually, he asks her to put her work shoes back on.

“The arch is better,” he says. “That’s what I’m saying.”

He tries for a while, but it’s not working.

He says the red is wrong. That he has to mix again, or go to the store tomorrow, or could she bring home a vermilion from work.

Then, he pulls on his flannel jacket and says he’s ducking out with the boys to “talk business,” which means shooting craps behind the butcher shop.

Before he leaves, he covers the canvas with the same old shabby muslin he always uses. She’s never been allowed to look, not until it’s done.

But his sketchbook is right there on the kitchen table. There’s nothing covering it and she’s never heard any rules about that. So she lifts its cover and takes a peek at the first sketch, a blaze of color from the special Dixon pencils he made her steal from the office.

It’s a woman on a dark stage, spotlight illuminating her. In the band pit beneath, a cadaverous drummer sits, facing away. Facing toward her are the charcoaled heads of several men in the front row, heads tilted up hungrily, like baby birds.

She is nude, save the narrowest, flimsiest blue fabric, far too narrow to be called panty briefs.

She is nude, and parading her nudity, nut-brown bob shimmering, a cream-pink body, breasts fulsome and high, arms lifted, almost like a bird, wings spread, a long blue fabric swinging behind her. The legs and feet aren’t done yet, but she can see the charcoal lines, the legs curved, strong, a faint skein of stretched skin along the left hip.

Head tilted, the face has an expression Pauline recognizes but cannot name.

“My, but that’s something,” she whispers to herself. “I look like a queen or something.”

She’s not a fool. She knows this must all be about Bud’s story, the dancer he saw with nipples like strawberries. Maybe she should be bothered by it, like her mother might have, or the Bible punches back home. At one time, it might have made her sad. But it doesn’t now.

It makes her start thinking of things she hasn’t thought of in a long time. Like when she was a seven or eight, looking for her father’s shoeshine brush in his chifforobe. On tiptoes, she reached inside the top drawer and felt the cool gloss of a photograph. Yanking the drawer further, it fluttered to the floor, a tinted image of a young woman wrapped around a longnecked swan, nude except for long curling red hair that reached her perfect white toes. It was the first time she’d ever seen a dirty picture and the first time she found out about certain things on a woman’s body, a grown woman. That flame of red between her legs.

Her mother found her looking at it and whipped her with boar bristle brush for what seemed like the longest time.

She hasn’t thought about that picture in a long time, had put it in a chifforobe in the back of her head, and shut the drawer.

The following day, on her lunch hour, she stops at the department store with the sumptuous window displays. Mostly, she buys her things at the Woolworth’s, with its corn cures and girdle supporter displays. But sometimes, especially at the holidays, she peeks in here to look at the sumptuous glass cases, especially the cosmetics department where the walls are pink damask and they sell perfumes in colored bottles and powder puffs like snowballs.

As she walks through the aisles, the cases like shimmering jewel boxes, she thinks of the woman in her husband's sketch, the proud lift of her jaw, those legs like calla lilies though a thousand times as strong.

The salesgirl behind the counter beckons her, holding the tiniest rose-colored bottle in her palm.

"It makes time disappear," she says, rubbing it into Pauline's hands, making stroking circles until her hands feel like warm silk, like she imagined the soft inside of a fur muff might feel.

Moments later, in the fourth-floor ladies room, behind one of the wooden stall doors, Pauline wriggles and squirms until she can slide her dress down a bit.

Slowly, she dabs the lotion over her collar bone, chest, her breasts—running her hand beneath them, dotting her nipples. The smell is suddenly too much, making her dizzy. She has to sit down and count to one hundred before she goes back to work.

Late, very late, the sky black as pitch out the kitchen window, he stops working for a moment and looks at her over the top of the canvas.

"How would you do it?" he asks, abruptly.

She lets her arms fall, resting them. "Do what?"

"If men were to see you like that," he says, his voice tightening suddenly, like a screw.

"Would you really stand like that? Would you really show them? Like that?" She knows these are not questions, and she knows better not to answer.

Without saying anything, she steps off the stool and takes two beer cans out of the refrigerator and punches them open.

They both drink them greedily, and then Pauline gets on the stool again. The smell of the afternoon's perfume is strong and she has never been happier.

In the morning, she finds him sitting at the kitchen table, Bromo-Seltzer before him, and a dark look in his eye.

The easel is in the center of the kitchen, and he's staring at it.

"Something's wrong," he said. "I didn't see it until just now." "Wrong?" she says.

"The painting," he says, eyes fixed on it. "She's all wrong."

There is no posing that night, or the next.

Saturday, he goes to play cards at the veterans' hall, but he's home before midnight.

She finds him on the sunporch, strewing his sketches all over the floor. They are, mostly, details: a half dozen of her legs, the soft bulge of calf muscles from every summer of her youth spent milking Holsteins at the dairy down the road.

"Met a guy tonight," he says, without looking up. "A new fella works in the city. Said he saw you having lunch with a fella this week at the Barrowman Hotel in the city. Said it looked pretty cozy."

"I told you about that," she says, trying to keep her voice even. "That was for work. He's our new printer."

In one clean move, he backhands her, a crack like a ball bat.

"You keep a cold bed, my girl," he says after, catching his breath. "And you never once made a good Sunday roast."

The next day, there are carnations.

He's working on the painting again but says he no longer needs her. There's a girl coming from the art school, and she only costs two bits an hour.

That Monday, just after dawn, she steps into the kitchen, eyes fixed on the easel, ghostlike with its tattered coverlet.

She prowls across the tiles and, without pause, lifts the cover, tossing it to the floor.

At first, she thinks something's gone horribly wrong. Grabbing for the kitchen matches, the dawn-dark space, she lights one and holds it up to the canvas.

What is this, she thinks.

It's nothing like the sketch at all. Yes, it's a woman, naked, a stage. The pose is the same, but different. Everything is different. The feel is different.

In place of her chestnut bob is a long hennaed mane, stiff as a wig. The cream pink body is chalkier, and the feet and legs look nothing like the sketches. They're narrow, spindlier, the hips bruised looking. On the feet are ankle-strap pumps with Cuban heels, electric-blue to match the woman's scarf.

Instead of her large but firm breasts, of which she is so proud, these jut out like little ledges, small and conical, the nipples garishly red, like the pointed hats of circus clowns.

The face, though. The face is what she can't stop looking at. From a distance, it's almost like a smudge. When she looks closer, the features look harder, the lips painted a hard red, the cheeks rouged, also like a circus clown.

"I lost my wallet," he says when he comes home that night.

The lining of his left pocket hangs loose, like a comic strip rummy.

"Where have you been?" she asks, the spaghetti noodles mashed cold in the pan. "Where were you all day and all night?"

"Looking for work. Met with the guy who owns the Alibi Lounge. Says maybe I could paint a mural on the back wall."

"Is that where you lost it?" she asks. "Your wallet."

"No," he says, and tells her it was probably walking home along the train tracks. "Like some kind of hobo."

There's an edge in his voice that shuts her up. He pours a glass of milk and drinks it over the sink. When he passes behind her, there's a smell on him she doesn't like. It's not booze.

He's stepping out of a smoke shop when she sees him. She can't guess what he's doing in the city during the day, especially without his portfolio.

She's returning from the printer and needs to get back to the office, but instead she follows him as he heads west.

It's hard to keep track of him, the crowds thick and the blare of car horns, barking newsboys.

The theater is one of the small ones, red brick and smoked windows.

Nipples like strawberries. But she never took off her g-string. And she never spread her legs. That's what she'd heard Bud say to her husband. Then adding, insinuatingly, *Maybe you've seen things I ain't.*

She isn't thinking at all until he slips inside.

A five-foot-tall poster shrieks at her: *Direct from the West: Rondell Bros's Burlesque! A MusiGAL Revue Feat. the Shanghai Pearl! Concha, the Snake Girl! Continuous Shows Daily!*
And beneath it, a banner: *Tuesdays: The Irish Venus Ascends!*
There is a drawing of a red-haired beauty emerging from the half-shell.

Standing in the alley, out of the crush, she smokes two cigarettes and thinks.

There's a tall man lingering by the box office. He may be looking at her.

Pauline turns away from him just as he calls out to her: *Hey, good-lookin'.*

"Got a light?" a female voice sounds out, and Pauline turns to see a woman walking toward her from the far end of the alley, the backstage door. Something about the way her body moves, her pale arm outstretched, her narrow legs and bright blue shoes, is familiar.

"Do I know you?" Pauline finds herself saying.

The woman pushes her up hat brim with one painted finger, and leans into Pauline's struck match.

The deep red hair, so brassy in the painting, looks so vivid in person. And the face, far from a charcoal smudge, is lively, bright.

"The Irish Venus?" Pauline asks.

The woman grins. "You can call me Mae."

The tall man loitering by the box office is now at the foot of the alley. He's looking at both of them.

"That man," Pauline says.

Mae nods. "He's a bad baby, that one. Grabbed my heater one night so hard I had bruises for two weeks."

She starts walking toward him. "I see you, Mr. McGrew," she shouts, cupping her hand over mouth. "Keep it in your trousers. I call Wade, you won't even have a tongue left to flap."

The man's face goes white and he scuttles away quickly, like a crab.

"Who's Wade?"

Mae beckons her to the mouth of the alley and points to a pair of dice on the ground. Or were they pearl collar studs?

Peering down, Pauline gets a better look. She remembers seeing something like this at a boxing match. The pale middleweight, his mouth like a red fountain, teeth scattering across the ring.

Mae kneels closer. One of these, she sees now, is a molar.

"Keeps a pair of pliers in his sock garter," Mae says.

Pauline wonders where she has found herself.

The man returns to the foot of the alley.

"Wade!" Mae calls out into the open theater door. "Wade, Bingo Boy is back." Pauline looks at Mae.

"Maybe," Mae says, "you should come inside."

The backstage smells strongly of smoke, old coffee, and the tang of sauerkraut.

"Greta makes her own every cold day," Mae says, winking. "You can take the Kraut out of Yorkville, but you can't take the Kraut out of her."

Pauline can barely hear her over the kick drum and caterwauls on the other side of the tall curtains, brocade so smoothed by time it looks like it would disintegrate between her fingers.

Quickly, they maneuver past a row of streaked mirror stalls, netted garments drying over radiators, coffee cups stacked, stained makeup towels, the ghostly remains of painted faces, scattered across folding chairs.

In one alcove, a girl in a golden kimono is slathering something from a bottle all over a naked six-foot blonde, transforming her in seconds from ruddy and veined to satin-skinned.

In another, Pauline sees two long-legged girls with matching brittle blonde waves straightening the green feathers on their costumes.

"Mae's mama's come to take her back to Kansas," one of them mutters, eyeing Pauline. "Get religion back in her cooch."

Pauline starts to say something, but Mae tugs her arm, moving them past. "Don't feed the parrots. You could catch trench mouth just by looking at those two."

They arrive at a tiny private dressing room with two mirror stalls, the air so heavy with powder, Pan-Cake, and perfume, Pauline can barely breathe.

"Come on," Mae says, beckoning her to a stool. "Cleo got bit by her snake again, so I'm solo today."

Once she's seated, Pauline begins to breathe again, and she wonders what she's doing here. A trombone wails from the stage and suddenly she's worried she might cry. Clenching her hands at her side, she steels herself from it. Refuses it.

Meanwhile, Mae is watching her and probably figuring everything out.

In the softer light of the bulbed mirrors, her hair is even more striking, specked with gold. And when she bends down to slide off her spectator pumps, creased with street soot, Pauline can't help but notice her legs, like stretched satin.

"So. You followed your old man."

Pauline doesn't say anything, her eyes snagging on something, a pair of slippers on the floor beside Mae. They are still sitting in their box. Pauline knows what they will look like before she reaches down to push the paper aside. Absinthe green.

"Ah," Mae says, following Pauline's gaze to the slippers. "That's the one, huh?" Pauline nods.

"He's a regular Romeo. Gave me those, too," she says, nodding her head toward a large, heart-shaped candy box perched on the edge of the next dressing table.

Pauline nods again, picking up the candy box and looking at it. She wonders at the absence of something inside her. She no longer wants to cry. Something else is happening.

"For what it's worth," Mae is saying, "he didn't get anywhere."

"It's fine," Pauline says, distractedly stroking the heart of the candy box.

"He moved on to Cleo. She's used to snakes."

Pauline fingers the candy box heart and can't make any words come, the boom-szzz-boom of the drums hovering in her ear.

Mae looks at her, twisting her lips a little, then turns to her mirror and begins painting her face. Taking a pot of rouge, blueish-red, she dips a finger in and begins swirling it on her cheeks, conflagrating them.

"Hey," she says, pointing one red-tipped finger at the candy box, "can you pluck me one? I'm famished."

Pauline sets the box on her lap. *Madame Cou's Crème Bon-Bons*. The inside is lined in coral satin and when she opens it, she sees a dozen confections, gleaming globes of brilliant pink, glossy white, gold-leafed and fairy sprinkled. "You too," Mae says, "you first, honey."

One tap of the tooth, and they give themselves away.

Gleaming maraschino jam, tongue-curling cream, nougat like sea foam, nose-tingling liqueurs of almond, bitter orange, soft apricot.

Huddled close, grinning like two schoolgirls at church, they eat two apiece, then two more. Pauline has never tasted anything like them.

"When I was seven, another girl caught me stealing a box of divinities from the Five and Dime," Pauline says. She's never told anyone this ever. "She promised if I shared she wouldn't rat me out."

Pauline thought of it now, the freckled girl with two skinned knees. They hid behind the leg display in the hosiery section and ate the whole box, stuffing the wrappers in bedroom slippers. The cardboard legs above them, all those candies, it was sugar and magic. Mae licks her index finger and thumb, smiling. "Trouble shared is trouble halved." Pauline grins.

"Have another candy," Mae says, holding her box out. "Or something."

The sweetness is making her drunk, is making her forget everything. Maybe it's the rums and liqueurs in the candy, or maybe it's just Mae, her curved white legs draped across Pauline's lap now, her head back, laughing. Her mouth as red and luscious as one of those cherried confections.

"Mae," Pauline says, "will you help me do something?"

Mae looks at her and says, "Sure."

"You might get in trouble."

"Haven't you heard?" They both laugh.

"Have another candy," Mae says. "Or something."

Taking everything off is easy. Easier than in the kitchen with him watching.

She should feel cold, her dress whorled at her feet, but she doesn't

Mae unrolls her stockings for her, Pauline's foot propped on the dressing table.

"Now, the first trick I ever learned," Mae says, dipping two fingers back in the red rouge pot. Leaning forward, she daubs both Pauline's nipples. "They love this." Pauline swallows her candy.

"Aren't you cute?" Mae says, swirling the rouge now, swirling them into tiny roses.

"Squirring like a mink."

It feels warm and sweet, like the candies, which maybe were sitting under the lights too long.

Mae points to the pocked mirror, a cold cream thumbprint in the corner.

Cradling her daubed breasts under her hands, Pauline looks at herself and smiles.

The costume is only a delicate patch of sequined peacock-blue netting between her legs. It covers her, barely.

"I'd've lined the flap with plush for you," Mae whispers, making sure the sequins lay flat, "if we had more time."

Pauline looks down at Mae's red-maned head, her fingers arranging things along Pauline's hips, between her legs.

For a second, unaccountably, she can't breathe.

“And you’ll need this if you wanna stay out of the paddy wagon,” Mae is saying, draping a peacock feathered cape over Pauline’s shoulders, tying it under her neck.

“I’m using to doing it much colder,” Pauline says. Mae just looks up her, slowly smiling, and winks.

They stand in the cool dark of the stage wings, the music so loud Pauline’s feet are vibrating in the absinthe-green slippers.

Mae’s head is ducked behind the masking curtains.

“Is he still there?” Pauline asks.

Mae nods. “I talked to the fellas in the pit. They’ll give you fifteen seconds of pure cooch. Any longer, the manager’s likely to wake up from his nap and give you the hook.”

“Okay,” she says, though she has no idea what Mae means. All she knows is her whole body is tight and tense, a spring ready to spring.

“You’re already peeled like an egg, so just parade like a Ziegfeld Girl, got it?” Pauline nods.

“Swivel the hips a few times, a flutter kick or two. And keep this on,” Mae whispers, draping the cape more tightly around Pauline’s shuddering shoulders, “or the cops’ll ticket you twelve dollars.”

Pauline steps onto the stage, which is no bigger than a boxing ring.

Taking a few steps, she has never felt more naked.

“Go on, gorgeous,” hisses Mae from the wings.

The lights are hotter than she ever imagined, and through the smoky brume she can’t seem any of the *ghouls*, which is what Mae calls them (*the ghouls just wanna see pink*).

Suddenly, the music kicks up and the spot lands on her and she sees herself.

Before she knows it, she’s moving, her thighs brushing against each other, her feathers tickling her neck, arms, hips.

As the horns slur, she stalks her space, loosening the cape’s ribbons, her breasts leading.

Her body is sparkling, her nipples red as American Beauties.

Her chin is high and she has never felt like this, her skin hot and magnificent.

Wolf whistles scream out, a few jeers, some keen laughter and raucous joy.

Her eyes adjusting, she can see the men, mostly smudges, but they’re there.

There he is, she thinks. And yes, he’s there, front row, beside the lantern-jawed pit drummer in shirtsleeves, just like in the painting.

Red-faced, eyes wide, he’s calling her name, first loudly, then more so.

Pauline, what are you— On his feet now.

Pauline!

The trombone slides forward like a slingshot, and she pivots, shimmies to beat the band, and makes one last turn across the stage, the cape unloosed, flying behind her now, like peacock wings aflight.

Her eyes shuttle past a man in front doing things under his sack of candy, showing her what he’s doing, showing himself to her, a fleshy bundle from his open pants.

Nearly to the wings, she watches serenely, a cool smile on her face, as her husband grabs for the man, tearing his shirt collar.

In seconds, a large man in shirtsleeves charges them both, lifting her husband up like a handkerchief. Crumpling him.

Wade, she thinks. *Oh, dear.*

Just as she reaches the curtain edge, the music giddy up to its end, she turns and offers one last shimmy, one kick, and strides into the wings.

Pauline, her body still warm and lit, walks through the wings, passing the six-foot blonde as she glides onto stage, a Viking headdress on, tassels dancing.

“Wade’s going what-for,” one of the green-feather girls is saying, pushing open the exit door into the alley. “C’mon for a free show.”

Walking over, Pauline peeks above the girl’s pale head and watches her husband take a roundhouse punch to the jaw from the man in shirtsleeves.

For a moment, looking at her husband’s small, angry face, she feels sorry for him.

“Pauline,” he cries out, spotting her. “Pauline, what have you done to me?”

But she’s already drifted away from the door, plucking one of the girl’s tail feathers as she does.

Slowly, slippers clicking, she walks backstage, toward the pink glow of Mae’s dressing room.

The door is halfway open, and she sees a long, freshly powdered arm dangling, hears that soft, flame-haired thing calling her name.

Stepping inside, Pauline shuts the door behind her.

JILL D. BLOCK, whose first story appeared in Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, is an author and a lawyer living in New York City. She vaguely recalls having taken an art history class in college during which she may have seen a slide of an Edward Hopper painting in the brief time after the lights were turned off and before she fell asleep.