

ROMANCE IN A TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY USED-CAR LOT

The car-dress stood on a pedestal in the Big Jim display window, and a sign beneath it said:

This beautiful new chemmy is going going gone for only \$6499.99! Generous trade-in allowance on your present car-dress—hardtop hat thrown in free!

Arabella didn't mean to slam on her brakes, but she couldn't help herself. She had never seen a car-dress quite so stunning. And for only \$6499.99!

It was Monday afternoon and the spring street was filled with homeward-hurrying office workers, the April air with the beeping of horns. The Big Jim establishment stood near the corner next to a large used-car lot with a Cape Cod fence around it. The architecture of the building was American Colonial, but the effect was marred by a huge neon sign projecting from the facade. The sign said:

BERNIE, THE BIG JIM MAN.

The beeping of horns multiplied, and belatedly realizing that she was holding up traffic, Arabella cut in front of an old man wearing a fuchsia Grandrapids and pulled over on the concrete shoulder in front of the display window.

Seen at close range, the car-dress was less dazzling, but still irresistible to the eye. Its sleek turquoise flanks and its sequinned grille gleamed in the slanted rays of the sun. Its tailfinned bustle protruded like the twin wakes of a catamaran. It was a beautiful creation, even by modern manufacturing standards, and a bargain worth taking advantage of. Even so, Arabella would have let it go by if it hadn't been for the hardtop hat.

A dealer—presumably Bernie—wearing an immaculate two-toned Lansing de mille advanced to meet her when she drove in the door. "Can I help you, madam?" he asked, his voice polite, but his eyes, behind his speckless windshield, regarding the car-dress she was wearing with obvious contempt.

Shame painted Arabella's cheeks a bright pink. Maybe she *had* waited too long to turn the dress in for a new one at that. Maybe her mother was right: maybe she *was* too indifferent to her clothes. "The dress in the window," she said. "Do—do you really throw in a hardtop hat with it?"

"We most certainly do. Would you like to try it on?"

"Please."

The dealer turned around and faced a pair of double doors at the rear of the room. "Howard!" he called, and a moment later the doors parted and a young man wearing a denim-blue pickup drove in. "Yes, sir?"

"Take the dress in the window back to the dressing room and get a hardtop hat to match it out of the stockroom." The dealer turned around to Arabella. "He'll show you where to go, madam."

The dressing room was just beyond the double doors and to the right. The young man wheeled in the dress, then went to get the hat. He hesitated after he handed it to her, and an odd look came into his eyes. He started to say something, then changed his mind and drove out of the room. She closed and locked the door and changed hurriedly.

The upholstery-lining felt deliciously cool against her body. She donned the hardtop hat and surveyed herself in the big three-way mirror. She gasped.

The tailfinned bustle was a little disconcerting at first (the models she was accustomed to did not stick out quite so far behind), but the chrome-sequinned grille and the flush fenders did something for her figure that had never been done for it before. As for the hardtop hat—well, if the evidence hadn't been right there before her eyes, she simply wouldn't have believed that a mere hat, even a hardtop one, could achieve so remarkable a transformation. She was no longer the tired office girl who had driven into the

shop a moment ago; now she was Cleopatra . . . Bathsheba . . . Helen of Troy!

She drove self-consciously back to the display room. A look akin to awe crept into the dealer's eyes. "You're not *really* the same person I talked to before, are you?" he asked.

"Yes, I am," Arabella said.

"You know, ever since we got that dress in," the dealer went on, "I've been hoping someone would come along who was worthy of its lines, its beauty, its—its personality." He raised his eyes reverently. "Thank you, Big Jim," he said, "for sending such a person to our door." He lowered his eyes to Arabella's awed countenance. "Like to try it out?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Very well. But just around the block. I'll draw up the papers while you're gone. Not," he added hastily, "that you'll be in any way obligated to take it; but just in case you decide to, we'll be all ready to do business."

"How—how much allowance can you give me on my old dress?"

"Let's see, it's two years old, isn't it? Hmm." The dealer frowned for a moment, then: "Look, I'll tell you what I'll do. You don't look like the type of person who'd wear a dress very hard, so I'll allow you a good, generous one thousand and two dollars. How does that sound?"

"Not—not very good." (Maybe, if she went without eating lunch for a year . . .)

"Don't forget, you're getting the hardtop hat free."

"I know, but—"

"Try it out first, and then we'll talk," the dealer said. He got a dealer's plate out of a nearby cabinet and clamped it onto her rear end. "There, you're all set," he said, opening the door. "I'll get right to work on the papers."

She was so nervous and excited when she pulled into the street that she nearly collided with a young man wearing a white convertible, but she got control of herself quickly, and to demonstrate that she was really a competent driver, first impressions to the contrary, she overtook and passed him. She saw him smile as she went by, and a little song began in her heart and throbbed all through her. Somehow that very morning she'd just known that something wonderful was going to happen to her. A perfectly ordinary day at the office had somewhat dimmed her expectations, but now they shone forth anew.

She had to stop for a red light, and when she did so, the young man drove up beside her. "Hi," he said. "That's a swell dress you're wearing."

"Thank you."

"I know a good drive-in. Like to take in a movie with me tonight?"

"Why, I don't even know you!" Arabella said.

"My name is Harry Fourwheels. Now you know me. But I don't know you."

"Arabella. Arabella Grille . . . But I don't know you very well."

"That can be remedied. Will you go?"

"Where do you live?"

"Six-eleven Macadam Place," she said before she thought.

"I'll stop by at eight."

At that very moment the light changed, and before she could voice her objection the young man was gone. Eight, she thought wonderingly. Eight o'clock . . .

After that, she simply had to take the dress. There was no other alternative. Having seen her in such a resplendent model, what would he think if she was wearing her old bucket of bolts when he showed up to take her out? She returned to the display room, signed the papers and went home.

Her father stared at her through the windshield of his three-tone Cortez when she drove into the garage and parked at the supper table. "Well," he said, "it's about time you broke down and bought yourself a new dress!"

"I guess so!" said her mother, who was partial to station wagons and wore one practically all the time. "I was beginning to think you were never going to wise up to the fact that you're living in the twenty-first century and that in the twenty-first century you've got to be *seen*."

"I'm—I'm only twenty-seven," Arabella said. "Lots of girls are still single at that age."

"Not if they dress the way they should," her mother said.

"Neither one of you has said whether you liked it yet or not," Arabella said.

"Oh, I like it fine," her father said.

"Ought to catch somebody's eye," said her mother.

"It already has."

"Well!" said her mother.

"At long last!" said her father.

"He's coming for me at eight."

"For heaven's sake, don't tell him you read books," her mother said.

"I won't. I don't, really—not any more."

"And don't mention any of those radical notions you used to have, either," said her father. "About people wearing cars because they're ashamed of the bodies God gave them."

"Now, Dad, you know I haven't said things like that in years. Not since, not since—"

Not since the Christmas office party, she went on to herself, when Mr. Upswept had patted her rear end and had said, when she repulsed him, "Crawl back into your history books, you creep. You don't belong in this century!"

"Not since ever so long ago," she finished lamely.

Harry Fourwheels showed up at eight sharp, and she hurried down the drive to meet him. They drove off side by side, turned into Blacktop Boulevard and left the town behind them. It was a lovely night, with just enough winter lingering in the skirts of spring to paint the gibbous moon a vivid silver and to hone the stars to pulsing brightness.

The drive-in was crowded but they found two places way in the rear, not far from the edge of a small woods. They parked close together, so close their fenders almost touched, and presently she felt Harry's hand touch her chassis and creep tentatively around her waist, just above her tailfinned bustle. She started to draw away, but remembering Mr. Upswept's words, she bit her lip and tried to concentrate on the movie.

The movie concerned a retired vermicelli manufacturer who lived in a boarding garage. He had two ungrateful daughters, and he worshiped the concrete they drove on, and did everything in his power to keep them in luxury. To accomplish this, he had to deny himself all but the barest essentials, and consequently he lived in the poorest section of the garage and dressed in used-car suits so decrepit they belonged in the junkyard. His two daughters, on the other hand, lived in the most luxurious garages available and wore the finest car-clothes on the market. A young engineering student named Rastignac also lived in the boarding garage, and the plot concerned his efforts to invade the upper echelons of modern society and to acquire a fortune in the process. To get himself started, he chiseled enough money from his sister to outfit himself in a new Washington convertible, and contrived an invitation, through a rich cousin, to a dealer's daughter's debut. There he met one of the vermicelli manufacturer's daughters and—

Despite her best efforts, Arabella's attention wandered. Harry Fourwheels' hand had abandoned her waist in favor of her headlights and had begun a tour of inspection. She tried to relax, but she felt her body stiffen instead and heard her tense voice whisper, "Don't, please don't!"

Harry's hand fell away. "After the show, then?"

It was a way out and she grabbed it. "After the show," she said.

"I know a swell spot up in the hills. Okay?"

"Okay," she heard her frightened voice say.

She shuddered and patted her headlights back in place. She tried to watch the rest of the movie, but it wasn't any use. Her mind kept drifting off to the hills and she kept trying to think of some excuse, any excuse, that would extricate her from her predicament. But she couldn't think of a single one, and when the movie ended she followed Harry through the exit and drove beside him down Blacktop Boulevard. When he turned off into a dirt road, she accompanied him resignedly.

Several miles back in the hills, the road paralleled the local nudist reservation. Through the high electric fence, the lights of occasional cottages could be seen twinkling among the trees. There were no nudists abroad, but Arabella shuddered just the same. Once she had felt mildly sympathetic toward them, but since the Mr. Upswept incident, she had been unable even to think of them without a feeling of revulsion. In her opinion Big Jim gave them a much better break than they deserved; but then, she supposed, he probably figured that some of them would repent someday and ask forgiveness for their sins. It was odd though, that none of them ever did.

Harry Fourwheels made no comment, but she could sense his distaste, and even though she knew that it stemmed from a different source than hers did, she experienced a brief feeling of camaraderie toward him. Maybe he wasn't quite as predatory as his premature passes had led her to think. Maybe, at heart, he was as bewildered as she was by the codes of conduct that regulated their existence—codes that meant one thing in one set of circumstances and the diametrical opposite in another set. Maybe . . .

About a mile past the reservation Harry turned into a narrow road that wound among oaks and maples into a parklike clearing. Diffidently, she accompanied him, and when he parked beneath a big oak, she parked beside him. She regretted it instantly when she felt his hand touch her chassis and begin its relentless journey toward her headlights again. This time her voice was anguished: "Don't!"

"What do you mean, don't!" Harry said, and she felt the hard pressure of his chassis against hers and his fumbling fingers around her headlights. She managed, somehow, to wheel out of his grasp and find the road that led out of the clearing, but a moment later he was abreast of her, edging her toward the ditch. "Please!" she cried, but he paid no attention and moved in even closer. She felt his fender touch hers, and instinctively she shied away. Her right front wheel lost purchase, and she felt her whole chassis toppling. Her hardtop hat fell off, caromed off a rock and into a thicket. Her right front fender crumpled against a tree. Harry's wheels spun furiously and a moment later the darkness devoured the red dots of his headlights.

There was the sound of tree toad and katydid and cricket, and far away the traffic sound of Blacktop Boulevard. There was another sound too—the sound her sobs made as they wrenched free from her throat. Gradually, though, the sound subsided as the pain dulled and the wound began to knit.

It would never knit wholly, though. Arabella knew that. Any more than the Mr. Upswept wound had. She recovered her hardtop hat and eased back onto the road. The hat was dented on top, and a ragged scratch marred its turquoise sheen. A little tear ran down her cheek as she put it on and patted it into place.

But the hat represented only half her problem. There was the crumpled right fender to contend with too. What in the world was she going to do? She didn't dare show up at the office in the morning in such a disheveled state. Someone would be sure to turn her in to Big Jim if she did, and he'd find out how she'd been secretly defying him all these years by owning only one car outfit when he'd made it perfectly clear that he expected everybody to own at least two. Suppose he took her license away and relegated her to the nudist reservation? She didn't think he would for such a minor deviation, but it was a possibility that she had to take into consideration. The mere thought of such a fate surfeited her with shame.

In addition to Big Jim there were her parents to be considered too. What was she going to tell *them*? She could just see them when she came down to breakfast in the morning. She could hear them too. "So you wrecked it already!" her father said. "I've had hundreds of car-dresses in my life," said her mother, "and I never wrecked a single one, and here you go out and get one one minute and smash it up the next!"

Arabella winced. She couldn't possibly go through with it. Some way, somehow, she had to get the dress repaired tonight. But where? Suddenly she remembered a sign she'd noticed in the display window that afternoon—a sign which her preoccupation with the car-dress had crowded out of her awareness: 24-HOUR SERVICE.

She drove back to town as fast as she dared and made a beeline for the Big Jim building. Its windows were square wells of darkness and its street door was closed tight. Her disappointment became a sick emptiness in her stomach. Had she read the sign wrong? She could have sworn that it said 24-hour

service.

She drove up to the display window and read it again.

She was right: it did say 24-hour service; but it also said, in smaller, qualifying letters, *After 6 P.M., apply at used-car lot next door.*

The same young man who had taken the dress out of the window drove up to meet her when she turned into the entrance. Howard, his name was, she remembered. He was still wearing the same denim-blue pickup, and the odd look she had noticed in his eyes before came back when he recognized her. She had suspected it was pity; now she knew it was. "My dress," she blurted, when he braked beside her. "It's ruined! Can you fix it, please?"

He nodded. "Sure, I can fix it." He pointed to a garagette at the back of the lot. "You can take it off in there," he said. She drove hurriedly across the lot. Used car-dresses and -suits lay all about her in the darkness. She glimpsed her old model, and the sight of it made her want to cry. If only she'd held on to it! If only she hadn't let her better judgment be swayed by so tawdry an accouterment as a hardtop hat! It was cold in the garagette, cold and damp. She slipped out of her dress and hat and shoved them through the doorway to Howard, being careful not to reveal herself. But she needn't have bothered, because he looked the other way when he took them. Probably he was used to dealing with modest females.

She noticed the cold much more now, without her dress, and she huddled in a corner trying to keep warm. Presently she heard someone pounding outside and she went to the single window and peeked out into the lot. Howard was working on her right front fender. She could tell from the way he was going about it that he must have straightened hundreds of them. Except for the sound of his rubber mallet, the night was silent. The street beyond the Cape Cod fence was empty, and save for a lighted window or two, the office buildings across the way were in darkness. Above the building tops, the huge Big Jim sign that pre-empted the public square in the center of town was visible. It was an alternating sign: WHAT'S GOOD ENOUGH FOR BIG JIM IS GOOD ENOUGH FOR EVERYBODY, it said on the first circuit. IF IT WASN'T FOR BIG JIM, WHERE WOULD EVERYBODY BE? it asked on the second.

Hammer hammer hammer . . . Suddenly she thought of a TV musical—one of a series entitled *Opera Can Be Fun When Brought Up to Date*—she'd listened to once, called *Siegfried Roads*, and she remembered the opening act in which Siegfried had kept importuning a sawed-off mechanic—supposedly his father—named Mime to build him a hot-rod superior to the Fafner model owned by the villain so that he could beat the latter in a forthcoming race at Valhalla. The hammer motif kept sounding forth on the bongo drums while Mime worked desperately on the new hot-rod, and Siegfried kept asking over and over who his real father was. *Hammer hammer hammer . . .*, Howard had finished straightening her fender, and now he was working on her hardtop hat. Someone wearing a citron Providence passed in the street with a swish of tires, and a quality about the sound made her think of the time. She looked at her watch!" 11:25. Her mother and father would be delighted when they asked her at breakfast what time she got in and she said, "Oh, around midnight." They were always complaining about her early hours.

Her thoughts came back to Howard. He had finished pounding out the dent in the hardtop hat and now he was touching up the scratch. Next, he touched up the scratches on the fender, and presently he brought both hat and dress back to the garagette and shoved them through the doorway. She slipped into them quickly and drove outside.

His eyes regarded her from behind his windshield. A gentle light seemed to emanate from their blue depths. "How beautiful with wheels," he said.

She stared at him. "What did you say?"

"Nothing, really. I was thinking of a story I read once."

"Oh." She was surprised. Mechanics didn't usually go in for reading—mechanics or anyone else. She was tempted to tell him she liked to read too, but she thought better of it. "How much do I owe you?" she asked.

"The dealer will send you a bill. I only work for him."

"All night?"

"Till twelve. I just came on when you saw me this afternoon."

"I—I appreciate your fixing my dress. I—I don't know what I would have done—" She left the sentence unfinished.

The gentle light in his eyes went out. Bleakness took its place. "Which one was it? Harry Fourwheels?"

She fought back her humiliation, forced herself to return his gaze. "Yes. Do—do you know him?"

"Slightly," Howard said, and she got the impression that slightly was enough. His face, in the tinselly radiance of the Big Jim sign, seemed suddenly older, and little lines she hadn't noticed before showed at the corners of his eyes. "What's your name?" he asked abruptly.

She told him. "Arabella," he repeated, "Arabella Grille." And then: "I'm Howard Highways."

They nodded to each other. Arabella looked at her watch. "I have to go now," she said. "Thank you very much, Howard."

"You're welcome," Howard said. "Good night."

"Good night."

She drove home through the quiet streets in the April darkness. Spring tiptoed up behind her and whispered in her ear: *How beautiful with wheels. How beautiful with wheels! . . .*

"Well," her father said over his eggs the following morning, "how was the double feature?"

"Double feature?" Arabella asked, buttering a slice of toast.

"Hah!" her father said. "So it wasn't a double feature!"

"In a way it probably was," said her mother. "Two drive-ins—one with movie and one without."

Arabella suppressed a shudder. Her mother's mind functioned with the directness of a TV commercial. In a way it matched the gaudy station wagons she wore. She had on a red one now, with a bulbous grille and swept-back fins and dark heavy wipers. Again Arabella suppressed a shudder. "I—I had a nice time," she said, "and I didn't do a thing wrong."

"That's news?" said her father.

"Our chaste little twenty-seven—almost twenty-eight— year-old daughter," said her mother. "Pure as the driven snow! I suppose you'll do penance now for having stayed put so late by staying in nights and reading books."

"I told you," Arabella said, "I don't read books any more."

"You might as well read them," her father said.

"I'll bet you told him you never wanted to see him again just because he tried to kiss you," said her mother. "The way you did with all the others."

"I did not!" Arabella was trembling now. "As a matter of fact I'm going out with him again tonight!"

"Well!" said her father.

"Three cheers!" said her mother. "Maybe now you'll start doing right by Big Jim and get married and raise your quota of consumers and share the burden of the economy with the rest of your generation."

"Maybe I will!" She backed away from the table. She had never lied before and she was angry with herself. But it wasn't until she was driving to work that she remembered that a lie, once made, either had to be lived up to or admitted. And since admitting this one was unthinkable, she would have to live up to it ... or at least give the impression that she was living up to it. That night she would have to go some place and remain there till at least midnight or her parents would suspect the truth.

The only place she could think of was a drive-in.

She chose a different one from the one Harry Fourwheels had taken her to. The sun had set by the time she got there and the main feature was just beginning. It was a full-length animated fairy tale and concerned the adventures of a cute little teen-ager named Carbonella who lived with her stepmother and her two ugly stepsisters. She spent most of her time in a corner of the garage, washing and simonizing her stepmother's and stepsisters' car-dresses. They had all sorts of beautiful gowns—Washingtons and Lansings and Flints—while she, little Carbonella, had nothing but clunkers and old junk-heaps to wear. Finally, one day, the Big Jim dealer's son announced that he was going to throw a big whingding at his father's palatial garage. Immediately, the two stepsisters and the stepmother got out their best gowns for Carbonella to wash and simonize. Well, she washed and simonized them, and cried and cried because

she didn't have a decent dress to her name and couldn't go to the whingding, and finally the night of the big event arrived and her two stepsisters and her stepmother got all chromed up in their car-gowns and took off gaily for the dealer's garage. Left behind, Carbonella sank to her knees in the car-wash corner and burst into tears. Then, just as it was beginning to look as though Big Jim had deserted her, who should appear but the Fairy Car Mother, resplendent in a shining white Lansing de mille! Quick as scat, she waved her wand, and all of a sudden there was Carbonella, radiant as a new day, garbed in a carnation-pink Grandrapids with hubcaps so bright they almost knocked your eyes out. So Carbonella got to the whingding after all, and wheeled every dance with the dealer's son while her ugly stepsisters and her stepmother did a slow burn along the wall. She was so happy she forgot that the Fairy Car Mother's spell was scheduled to expire at midnight, and if the clock on the dealer's Big Jim sign hadn't begun to dong the magic hour she might have turned back into a car-wash girl right there in the middle of the showroom floor. She zoomed out the door then, and down the ramp, but in her haste to hide herself before the spell ended, she lost one of her wheels.

The dealer's son found it, and next day he made the rounds of all the garages in the Franchise, asking all the women who had attended his whingding to try it on. However, it was so small and dainty that it wouldn't even begin to fit any of their axles no matter how much grease they used. After trying it on the axles of the two ugly stepsisters, the dealer's son was about to give up when he happened to espy Carbonella sitting in the car-wash corner, simonizing a car-dress. Well, he wouldn't have it any other way than for Carbonella to come out of the corner and try the wheel on, and what do you know, there before the horrified stares of the stepsisters and the stepmother, the wheel slid smoothly into place without even a smidgin of grease being necessary! Off Carbonella went with the dealer's son, and they drove happily ever after.

Arabella glanced at her watch: 10:30. Too early to go home yet, unless she wanted to leave herself wide open to another cynical cross-examination. Grimly she settled down in her parking place to watch *Carbonella* again. She wished now that she'd checked to see what picture was playing before driving in. *Carbonella* was classified as adult entertainment, but just the same there were more kids in the drive-in than there were grownups, and she couldn't help feeling self-conscious, parking there in her big car-dress in the midst of so many kiddy-car outfits.

She stuck it out till eleven, then she left. It was her intention to drive around till midnight, and she probably would have done just that if she hadn't decided to drive through town—and hadn't, as a consequence, found herself on the street where the used-car lot was. The sight of the Cape Cod fence evoked pleasant associations, and she instinctively slowed down when she came opposite it. By the time she reached the entrance she was virtually crawling, so when she noticed the pickup-clad figure parked in front of it, it was only natural that she should stop.

"Hi," she said. "What are you doing?"

He drove out to the curb, and when she saw his smile she was glad she had stopped. "I'm drinking a glass of April," he said.

"How does it taste?"

"Delicious. I've always been partial to April. May comes close, but it's slightly on the tepid side. As for June, July and August, they only whet my thirst for the golden wine of fall."

"Do you always talk in metaphors?"

"Only to very special people," he said. He was quiet for a moment, then: "Why don't you come in and park with me till twelve? Afterward we'll go someplace for a hamburger and a beer."

"All right."

Used car-dresses and -suits still littered the lot, but her old car-dress was gone. She was glad, because the sight of it would only have depressed her, and she wanted the effervescence that was beginning in her breast to continue unchecked. Continue it did. The night was quite warm for April, and it was even possible now and then to see a star or two between the massive winks of the Big Jim sign. Howard talked about himself for a while, telling her how he was going to school days and working nights, but when she asked him what school, he said he'd talked about himself long enough and now it was her turn. So she told him about her job, and about the movies she went to, and the TV programs she

watched, and finally she got around to the books she used to read.

They both started talking then, first one and then the other, and the time went by like a robin flying south, and almost before she knew what had happened, there was the twelve-to-eight man driving into the lot, and she and Howard were heading for the Gravel Grille.

"Maybe," he said afterward, when they drove down Macadam Place and paused in front of her garage, "you could stop by tomorrow night and we could drink another glass of April together. That is," he added, "if you have no other plans."

"No," she said. "I have no other plans."

"I'll be waiting for you then," he said, and drove away.

She watched his taillights diminish in the distance and disappear. From somewhere came the sound of singing, and she looked around in the shadows of the street to find its source. But the street was empty except for herself and she realized finally that the singing was the singing of her heart.

She thought the next day would never end, and then, when it finally did end, rain was falling out of an uninspiring sky. She wondered how April would taste in the rain, and presently she discovered—after another stint in a drive-in—that rain had little to do with the taste if the other ingredients were present. The other ingredients *were* present, and she spent another winged night talking with Howard in the used-car lot, watching the stars between the winks of the Big Jim sign, afterward driving with him to the Gravel Grille for hamburgers and beer, and finally saying good night to him in front of her garage.

The other ingredients were present the next night, too, and the next and the next. Sunday she packed a lunch and they drove up into the hills for a picnic. Howard chose the highest one, and they climbed a winding road and parked on the crest under a wind-gaunt elm tree and ate the potato salad she had made, and the sandwiches, passing the coffee thermos back and forth. Afterward they smoked cigarettes in the afternoon wind and talked in lazy sentences.

The hilltop provided a splendid view of a wooded lake fed by a small stream. On the other side of the lake, the fence of a nudist reservation shattered the slanted rays of the sun, and beyond the fence, the figures of nudists could be seen moving about the streets of one of the reservation villages. Owing to the distance, they were hardly more than indistinguishable dots, and at first Arabella was only vaguely aware of them. Gradually, though, they penetrated her consciousness to a degree where they pre-empted all else.

"It must be horrible!" she said suddenly.

"What must be horrible?" Howard wanted to know.

"To live naked in the woods like that. Like-like savages!"

Howard regarded her with eyes as blue—and as deep—as the wooded lake. "You can hardly call them savages," he said presently. "They have machines the same as we do. They maintain schools and libraries. They have trades and professions. True, they can only practice them within the confines of the reservation, but that's hardly more limited than practicing them in a small town or even a city. All in all, I'd say they were civilized."

"But they're naked!"

"Is it so horrible to be naked?"

He had opened his windshield and was leaning quite close to her. Now he reached up and opened her windshield too, and she felt the cool wind against her face. She saw the kiss in his eyes, but she did not draw away, and presently she felt it on her lips. She was glad, then, that she hadn't drawn away, because there was nothing of Mr. Upswept in the kiss, or of Harry Fourwheels; nothing of her father's remarks and her mother's insinuations. After a while she heard a car door open, and then another, and presently she felt herself being drawn out into the sunshine and the April wind, and the wind and the sun were cool and warm against her body, cool and warm and clean, and shame refused to rise in her, even when she felt Howard's carless chest pressing against hers.

It was a long sweet moment and she never wanted it to end. But end it did, as all moments must.

"What was that?" Howard said, raising his head.

She had heard the sound too—the whining sound of wheels—and her eyes followed his down the

hillside and caught the gleaming tailgate of a white convertible just before it disappeared around a bend in the road. "Do—do you think they saw us?" she asked.

Howard hesitated perceptibly before he answered. "No, I don't think so. Probably someone out for a Sunday drive. If they'd climbed the hill we would have heard the motor."

"Not—not if there was a silencer on it," Arabella said. She slipped back into her car-dress. "I—I think we'd better go."

"All right." He started to slip back into his pickup, paused. "Will—will you come here with me next Sunday?" he asked.

His eyes were earnest, imploring. "Yes," she heard her voice say, "I'll come with you."

It was even lovelier than the first Sunday had been—warmer, brighter, bluer of sky. Again Howard drew her out of her dress and held her close and kissed her, and again she felt no shame. "Come on," he said, "I want to show you something." He started down the hill toward the wooded lake.

"But you're *walking*," she protested.

"No one's here to see, so what's the difference? Come on."

She stood undecided in the wind. A brook sparkling far below decided her. "All right," she said.

The uneven ground gave her trouble at first, but after a while she got used to it, and soon she was half-skipping along at Howard's side. At the bottom of the hill they came to a grove of wild apple trees. The brook ran through it, murmuring over mossy stones. Howard lay face down on the bank and lowered his lips to the water. She followed suit. The water was winter-cool, and the coolness went all through her, raising goose bumps on her skin.

They lay there side by side. Above them, leaf shoots and limbs arabesqued the sky. Their third kiss was even sweeter than its predecessors. "Have you been here before?" she asked when at last they drew apart.

"Many times," he said.

"Alone?"

"Always alone."

"But aren't you afraid Big Jim might find out?"

He laughed. "Big Jim? Big Jim is an artificial entity. The automakers dreamed him up to frighten people into wearing their cars so that they would buy more of them and turn them in more often, and the government co-operated because without increased car turnover, the economy would have collapsed. It wasn't hard to do, because people had been wearing their cars unconsciously all along. The trick was to make them wear them consciously—to make them self-conscious about appearing in public places without them; ashamed, if possible. That wasn't hard to do either—though of course the size of the cars had to be cut way down, and the cars themselves had to be designed to approximate the human figure."

"You shouldn't say such things. It's—it's blasphemy! Anyone would think you were a nudist."

He looked at her steadily. "Is it so despicable to be a nudist?" he asked. "Is it less despicable, for example, to be a dealer who hires shills like Harry Fourwheels to sway undecided women customers and to rough up their purchases afterward so that they can't take advantage of the 24-hour clause in their sales contract? . . . I'm sorry, Arabella, but it's better for you to know."

She had turned away so that he would not see the tears rivuleting down her cheeks. Now she felt his hand touch her arm, creep gently round her waist. She let him draw her to him and kiss her tears away, and the reopened wound closed again, this time forever.

His arms tightened around her. "Will you come here with me again?"

"Yes," she said. "If you want me to."

"I want you to very much. We'll take off our cars and run through the woods. We'll thumb our noses at Big Jim. We'll—"

Click something went in the bushes on the opposite bank.

She went taut in Howard's arms. The bushes quivered, and a uniformed shape grew out of them. A cherubic face beamed at them across the ripples. A big square hand raised and exhibited a portable audio-video recorder. "Come on, you two," a big voice said. "Big Jim wants to see you."

The Big Jim judge regarded her disapprovingly through the windshield of his black Cortez when they brought her before him. "Well, that wasn't very nice of you, was it?" he said. "Taking off your clothes and cavorting with a nudist." Arabella's face grew pale behind her windshield. "A nudist!" she said disbelievingly. "Why, Howard's not a nudist. He can't be!"

"Oh yes he can be. As a matter of fact, he's even worse than a nudist. He's a *voluntary* nudist. We realize, however," the judge went on, "that you had no way of knowing it, and in a way we are to blame for your becoming involved with him, because if it hadn't been for our inexcusable lack of vigilance he wouldn't have been able to lead the double life he did—going to a nudist teachers' institute days and sneaking out of the reservation nights and working in a used-car lot and trying to convert nice people like yourself to his way of thinking. Consequently, we're going to be lenient with you. Instead of revoking your license we're going to give you another chance—let you go home and atone for your reprehensible conduct by apologizing to your parents and by behaving yourself in the future. Incidentally, you've got a lot to thank a young man named Harry Fourwheels for."

"Have—have I?"

"You certainly have. If it hadn't been for his alertness and his loyalty to Big Jim we might not have discovered your dereliction until it was too late."

"Harry Fourwheels," Arabella said wonderingly. "He must hate me very much."

"*Hate* you? My dear girl, he—"

"And I think I know why," Arabella went on, unaware of the interruption. "He hates me because he betrayed to me what he really is, and in his heart he despises what he really is. Why . . . that's why Mr. Upswept hates me too!"

"See here, Miss Grille, if you're going to talk like that, I may have to reconsider my decision. After all—"

"And my mother and father," Arabella continued. "They hate me because they've also betrayed to me what they really are, and in their hearts they despise themselves too. Even cars can't hide that kind of nakedness. And Howard. He loves me. He doesn't hate what he really is—any more than I hate what I really am. What—what have you done with him?"

"Escorted him back to the reservation, of course. What else could we do with him? I assure you, though, that he won't be leading a double life any more. And now, Miss Grille, as I've already dismissed your case, I see no reason for you to remain any longer. I'm a busy man and—"

"How does a person become a voluntary nudist, Judge?"

"By willful exhibitionism. Good day, Miss Grille." "Good day . . . and thank you."

She went home first to pack her things. Her mother and father were waiting up for her in the kitchen. "Filthy hussy!" her mother said. "To think that a daughter of mine—" said her father. She drove through the room without a word and up the ramp to her bedroom. Packing did not take long: except for her books, she owned very little. Back in the kitchen, she paused long enough to say goodbye. Her parents' faces fell apart. "Wait," said her father. "Wait!" cried her mother. Arabella drove out the door without a single glance into her rear-view mirror.

After leaving Macadam Place, she headed for the public square. Despite the lateness of the hour, there were still quite a few people. She took off her hardtop hat first. Next she took off her car-dress. Then she stood there in the winking radiance of the Big Jim sign in the center of the gathering crowd and waited for the vice squad to come and arrest her.

It was morning when they escorted her to the reservation. Above the entrance a sign said: UNAUTHORIZED PEOPLE KEEP OUT. A line of fresh black paint had been brushed across the words, and above them other words had been hastily printed: WEARING OF MECHANICAL FIG LEAVES PROHIBITED. The guard on her left glowered behind his windshield. "Some more of their smart-aleck tricks!" he grumbled.

Howard met her just inside the gate. When she saw his eyes she knew that it was all right, and in a moment she was in his arms, her nakedness forgotten, crying against his lapel. He held her tightly, his hands pressing hard against the fabric of her coat. She heard his voice over the bleak years: "I knew they

were watching us, and I let them catch us together in hopes that they'd send you here. Then, when they didn't, I hoped—I prayed—that you'd come voluntarily. Darling, I'm so glad you did! You'll love it here. I have a cottage with a big back yard. There's a community swimming pool, a woman's club, an amateur-players group, a—"

"Is there a minister?" she asked through her tears.

He kissed her. "A minister, too. If we hurry, we can catch ten before he starts out on his morning rounds."

They walked down the lane together.