

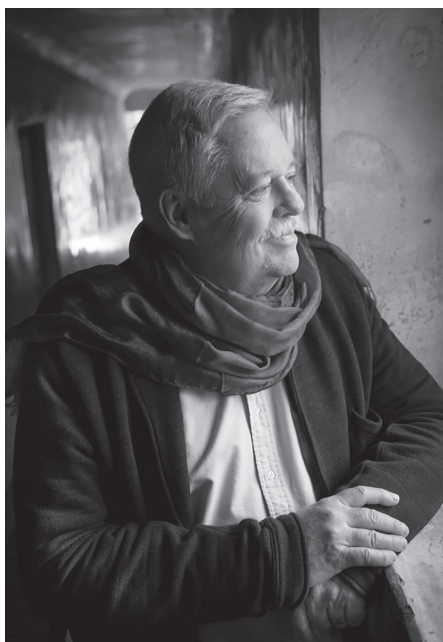
Armistead Maupin



‘Entertains, illuminates ...
leaves us wanting more’

WASHINGTON POST

TALES OF THE CITY



© Christopher Turner

Armistead Maupin is the author of *Tales of the City*, *More Tales of the City*, *Further Tales of the City*, *Babycakes*, *Significant Others*, *Sure of You*, *Maybe the Moon*, *The Night Listener*, *Michael Tolliver Lives*, *Mary Ann in Autumn*, *The Days of Anna Madrigal* and *Mona of the Manor*. He also wrote an acclaimed memoir, *Logical Family*. Three television miniseries starring Olympia Dukakis and Laura Linney were made from the first three *Tales* novels. *The Night Listener* became a feature film starring Robin Williams and Toni Collette. Maupin lives in London with his husband, Christopher Turner.

For more information on Armistead Maupin
and his books, see his website at

www.armisteadmaupin.com

Copyrighted Material

PRAISE FOR THE TALES OF THE CITY SERIES

'May well be the funniest series of novels currently
in progress . . . as engaging a read as you
are likely to encounter'

The Times

'Maupin with his elegance and charm, has found
a place among the classics'

Observer

'*Tales* remains an immensely readable accomplishment
that wears its significance lightly . . . entertains, illuminates
and as always leaves us wanting more'

Washington Post

'Tender-hearted and frolicsome . . . A tale of long-lost
friends and unrealized dreams, of fear and regret, of
penance and redemption, and of the unshakeable sense
that this world we love, this life we live, this drama in
which we all play a part, does indeed go by much too fast'

New York Times

'Old friends, good times and a powerful conclusion:
Maupin feels the love and shares it with his readers'

Financial Times

Copyrighted Material

'The cultural references are still fresh . . .

The characters still compelling'

Independent On Sunday

'A book of considerable charm'

Daily Mail

'Those who loved the last book will rejoice in the
fact that Maupin hasn't finished with these
much-loved characters yet. More please'

Time Out

'It's a joy to be reunited with the
Barbary Lane family'

Elle

'More than enough charm, wit and pathos
to keep even a Maupin virgin enthralled'

Independent

'Wonderfully engaging, warm and witty'

The Scotsman

'Perhaps the most sublime piece of popular
literature America has ever produced'

Salon

Copyrighted Material

By **Armistead
Maupin**

Fiction

**MAYBE THE MOON
THE NIGHT LISTENER**

The Tales of the City books

**TALES OF THE CITY
MORE TALES OF THE CITY
FURTHER TALES OF THE CITY
BABYCAKES
SIGNIFICANT OTHERS
SURE OF YOU
MICHAEL TOLLIVER LIVES
MARY ANN IN AUTUMN
THE DAYS OF ANNA MADRIGAL
MONA OF THE MANOR**

Non-fiction

Copyrighted Material
LOGICAL FAMILY: A MEMOIR

**Armistead
Maupin**

**TALES OF
THE CITY**

TALES OF THE CITY BOOK 1



Copyrighted Material
PENGUIN BOOKS

TRANSWORLD PUBLISHERS
Penguin Random House, One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW
www.penguin.co.uk

Transworld is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com



Penguin
Random House
UK

First published in Great Britain in 1980 by Corgi Books
an imprint of Transworld Publishers
Black Swan edition published 1989
Penguin paperback edition published 2024

Copyright © The Chronicle Publishing Company 1978

This work was published in somewhat different form in the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

Armistead Maupin has asserted his right under the Copyright,
Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work.

This book is a work of fiction and, except in the case of historical fact, any
resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Grateful acknowledgement is made for permission to quote lyrics
from 'It Never Rains In Southern California', © 1972 Landers Roberts
Music (US and Canada) and Rondor Music (International).

Every effort has been made to obtain the necessary permissions with
reference to copyright material, both illustrative and quoted. We
apologize for any omissions in this respect and will be pleased to make
the appropriate acknowledgements in any future edition.

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN
9781804994252

Text design by Couper Street Type Co.
Typeset in 9.75/12.5pt Palatino Pro by Falcon Oast Graphic Art Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68.

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable
future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is
made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.



Copyrighted Material

For my mother and father
and my family at The Duck House

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

It's an odd thing, but anyone who disappears
is said to be seen in San Francisco.

OSCAR WILDE

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Taking the plunge

Mary Ann Singleton was twenty-five years old when she saw San Francisco for the first time.

She came to the city alone for an eight-day vacation. On the fifth night, she drank three Irish coffees at the Buena Vista, realized that her Mood Ring was blue, and decided to phone her mother in Cleveland.

'Hi, Mom. It's me.'

'Oh, darling. Your daddy and I were just talking about you. There was this crazy man on *McMillan and Wife* who was strangling all these secretaries, and I just couldn't help thinking . . .'

'Mom . . .'

'I know. Just crazy ol' Mom, worrying herself sick over nothing. But you never can tell about those things. Look at that poor Patty Hearst, locked up in that closet with all those awful . . .'

'Mom . . . long distance.'

'Oh . . . yes. You must be having a grand time.'

'God . . . you wouldn't believe it! The people here are so friendly I feel like I've . . .'

'Have you been to the Top of the Mark like I told you?'

'Not yet.'

'Well, don't you dare miss that! You know, your daddy took me there when he got back from the South Pacific. I remember he slipped the bandleader five dollars, so we could dance to "Moonlight Serenade", and I spilled Tom Collins all over his beautiful white Navy . . .'

'Mom, I want you to do me a favor.'

'Of course, darling. Just listen to me. Oh . . . before I forget it, I ran into Mr Lassiter yesterday at the Ridgemont Mall, and he said the office is just falling apart with you gone. They don't get many good secretaries at Lassiter Fertilizers.'

'Mom, that's sort of why I called.'

Copyrighted Material

'Yes, darling?'

'I want you to call Mr Lassiter and tell him I won't be in on Monday morning.'

'Oh . . . Mary Ann, I'm not sure you should ask for an extension on your vacation.'

'It's not an extension, Mom.'

'Well, then why . . .'

'I'm not coming home, Mom.'

Silence. Then, dimly in the distance, a television voice began to tell Mary Ann's father about the temporary relief of hemorrhoids. Finally, her mother spoke: 'Don't be silly, darling.'

'Mom . . . I'm not being silly. I *like* it here. It feels like home already.'

'Mary Ann, if there's a boy . . .'

'There's no boy . . . I've thought about this for a long time.'

'Don't be ridiculous. You've been there five days!'

'Mom, I know how you feel, but . . . well, it's got nothing to do with you and Daddy. I just want to start making my own life . . . have my own apartment and all.'

'Oh, *that*. Well, darling . . . *of course* you can. As a matter of fact, your daddy and I thought those new apartments out at Ridgemont might be just perfect for you. They take lots of young people, and they've got a swimming pool and a sauna, and I could make some of those darling curtains like I made for Sonny and Vicki when they got married. You could have all the privacy you . . .'

'You aren't listening, Mom. I'm trying to tell you I'm a grown woman.'

'Well, act like it, then! You can't just . . . run away from your family and friends to go live with a bunch of hippies and mass murderers!'

'You've been watching too much TV.'

'OK . . . then what about The Horoscope?'

'What?'

'The Horoscope. That crazy man. The killer.'

'Mom . . . The Zodiac.'

'Same difference. And what about . . . earthquakes? I saw that movie, Mary Ann, and I nearly died when Ava Gardner . . .'

Copyrighted Material

'Will you just call Mr Lassiter for me?'

Her mother began to cry. 'You won't come back. I just know it.'

'Mom . . . please . . . I will. I promise.'

'But you won't be . . . the same!'

'No! I hope not.'

When it was over, Mary Ann left the bar and walked through Aquatic Park to the bay. She stood there for several minutes in a chill wind, staring at the beacon on Alcatraz. She made a vow not to think about her mother for a while.

Back at Fisherman's Wharf Holiday Inn, she looked up Connie Bradshaw's phone number.

Connie was a stewardess for United. Mary Ann hadn't seen her since high school: 1968.

'Fantabulous!' squealed Connie. 'How long you here for?'

'For good.'

'Super! Found an apartment yet?'

'No . . . I . . . well, I was wondering if I might be able to crash at your place, until I can . . .'

'Sure. No sweat.'

'Connie . . . you're single?'

The stewardess laughed. 'A bear shit in the woods?'

Copyrighted Material

Connie's place

Mary Ann dragged her American Tourister into Connie's apartment, groaned softly and sank into a mock zebra-skin captain's chair.

'Well . . . hello, Sodom and Gomorrah.'

Connie laughed. 'Your mom freaked, huh?'

'God!'

'Poor baby! I know the feeling. When I told *my* mom I was moving to San Francisco, she had an absolute hissy-fit! It was a zillion times worse than the summer I tried to join Up With People!'

'God . . . I almost forgot.'

Connie's eyes glazed nostalgically. 'Yeah . . . Hey, you work up a thirst, hon?'

'Sure.'

'Sit tight. I'll be right back.'

Thirty seconds later, Connie emerged from the kitchen with two airlines glasses and a bottle of Banana Cow. She poured a drink for Mary Ann.

Mary Ann sipped warily. 'Well . . . look at all this. You're practically a native, aren't you? This is . . . quite something.'

'Quite something' was the best she could manage. Connie's apartment was a potpourri of plastic Tiffany lamps and ankle-deep shag carpeting, needlepoint Snoopy pictures and 'Hang in There, Baby' kitten posters, monkey pod salad sets and macramé plant hangers and – please, no, thought Mary Ann – a Pet Rock.

'I've been lucky,' Connie beamed. 'Being a stew and all . . . well, you can pick up a lot of art objects in your travels.'

'Mmm.' Mary Ann wondered if Connie regarded her black velvet bullfighter painting as an art object.

The stewardess kept smiling. 'Cow OK?'

'What? Oh . . . yes. Hits the spot.'

Copyrighted Material

'I love the stuff.' She downed some more of it to demonstrate her point, then looked up as if she had just discovered Mary Ann's presence in the room. 'Hey, hon! Long time no see!'

'Yeah. Too long. Eight years.'

'Eight years . . . Eight years! You're lookin' good, though. You're lookin' real . . . Hey, you wanna see something absolutely yucky?'

Without waiting for an answer, she leaped to her feet and went to the bookshelf made of six orange plastic Foremost milk crates. Mary Ann could make out copies of *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, *How to Be Your Own Best Friend*, *The Sensuous Woman*, *More Joy of Sex* and *Listen to the Warm*.

Connie reached for a large book bound in burgundy vinyl and held it up to Mary Ann.

'Ta-ta!'

'Oh, God! *The Buccaneer*?'

Connie nodded triumphantly and pulled up a chair. She opened the yearbook. 'You'll absolutely *die* over your hair!'

Mary Ann found her senior picture. Her hair was very blond and meticulously ironed. She was wearing the obligatory sweater and pearl necklace. Despite the camouflage of an airbrush, she could still remember the exact location of the zit she had sprouted on the day of the photograph.

The inscription read:

MARY ANN SINGLETON

'Still Waters Run Deep'

Pep Club 2,3,4; Future Homemakers of America 3,4;

National Forensic League 4;

Plume and Palette, 3,4

Mary Ann shook her head. 'Rest in peace,' she said and winced.

Connie, mercifully, didn't offer her own biography for examination. Mary Ann remembered it all too well: head majorette, class treasurer for three years, president of the Y-Teens. Connie's waters had run fast and shallow. She had been popular.

Copyrighted Material

Mary Ann struggled back into the present. 'So what do you do – like for fun?'

Connie rolled her eyes. 'You name it.'

'I'd rather not.'

'Well . . . for instance.' Connie bent over her hatch-cover coffee table and dug out a copy of *Oui* magazine. 'You read that?' asked Mary Ann.

'No. Some guy left it.'

'Oh.'

'Check out page seventy.'

Mary Ann turned to an article entitled 'Coed Baths – Welcome to the World's Cleanest Orgy.' It was illustrated by a photograph of intermingling legs, breasts and buttocks.

'Charming.'

'It's down on Valencia Street. You pays your money and you takes your chances.'

'You've been there?'

'No. But I wouldn't rule it out.'

'I'm afraid you'll have to count me out, if you're planning on . . .'

Connie laughed throatily. 'Relax, hon. I wasn't suggesting we . . . You're a new girl. Give it time. This city loosens people up.'

'I'll never be that loose . . . or desperate.'

Connie shrugged, looking vaguely hurt. She took another sip of her Banana Cow.

'Connie, I didn't . . .'

'It's OK, hon. I knew what you meant. Hey, I'm hungry as hell. How 'bout a little Hamburger Helper?'

After dinner, Mary Ann napped for an hour.

She dreamed she was in a huge tile room full of steam. She was naked. Her mother and father were there, watching *Let's Make a Deal* through the steam. Connie walked in with Mr Lassiter, who was furious at Mary Ann and began to shout at her. Mary Ann's mother and father were shouting at Monty Hall's first contestant.

'Take the box,' they screamed. 'Take the box . . .'

Mary Ann woke up. She stumbled into the bathroom and splashed water on her face.

Copyrighted Material

When she opened the cabinet over the sink, she discovered an assortment of after-shave lotions: Brut, Old Spice, Jade East. Connie, apparently, was still popular.

Copyrighted Material

A Frisco disco

The discotheque was called Dance Your Ass Off. Mary Ann thought that was gross, but didn't tell Connie so. Connie was too busy getting off on being Marisa Berenson.

'The trick is to look bored with it all.'

'That shouldn't be hard.'

'If you wanna get laid, Mary Ann, you'd better . . .'

'I never said that.'

'Nobody ever *says* it, for Christ's sake! Look, if you can't deal with your own sexuality, hon, you're gonna get screwed but good in this town.'

'I like that. You should make it into a country-western song.'

Connie sighed in exasperation. 'C'mon. And *try* not to look like Tricia Nixon reviewing the troops.' She led the way into the building and staked out a battered sofa against the wall.

The room was supposed to look funky: brick-red walls, revolving beer signs, kitschy memorabilia. Henna-rinsed women and rugby-shirted men clustered decoratively along the bar, as if posing for a Seagram's ad.

While Connie was buying their drinks, Mary Ann settled uncomfortably on the sofa and commanded herself to stop comparing things with Cleveland.

Several yards away, a girl in cowboy boots, sweat pants and a red squirrel Eisenhower jacket stared haughtily at Mary Ann's polyester pantsuit. Mary Ann turned away from her, only to confront another woman, looking blasé in a macramé halter, black fingernails and a crew cut.

'There's a dude at the bar who looks *exactly* like Robert Redford.' Connie was back with the drinks. A tequila sunrise for herself, a white wine for Mary Ann.

'Warts?' asked Mary Ann, taking the wine.

'What?'

Copyrighted Material

'That guy. Does he have warts? Robert Redford has warts.'

'That's sick. Look . . . I feel like a little heavy bumping. Wanna hit the disco?'

'I think I'll just . . . soak it in for a while. You go ahead.'

'You sure now?'

'Yeah. Thanks. I'll be OK.'

'Suit yourself, hon.'

Seconds after Connie had disappeared into the disco, a long-haired man in a Greek peasant shirt sat down next to Mary Ann on the sofa. 'Mind if I join you?'

'Sure . . . I mean no.'

'You're not into boogying, huh?'

'Well, not right now.'

'You're into head trips, then?'

'I don't know exactly what . . .'

'What sign are you?'

She wanted to say, 'Do Not Disturb.' She said, 'What sign do you think I am?'

'Ah . . . you're into games. OK . . . I'd say you're a Taurus.'

He rattled her. 'All right . . . How did you do it?'

'Easy. Taureans are stubborn as hell. They *never* want to tell you what sign they are.' He leaned over close enough for Mary Ann to smell his musk oil, and looked directly into her eyes. 'But underneath that tough Taurus hide beats the heart of a hopeless romantic.'

Mary Ann moved away slightly.

'Well?' said the man.

'Well, what?'

'You're a romantic, right? You like earth colors and foggy nights and Lina Wertmüller movies and lemon candles burning when you make love.' He reached for her hand. She flinched. 'It's all right,' he said calmly. 'I'm not making a pass yet. I just wanna look at your heart line.'

He ran his forefinger gently across Mary Ann's palm. 'Look at your point of insertion,' he said. 'Right there between Jupiter and Saturn.'

'What does that mean?' Mary Ann looked down at his finger.

Copyrighted Material

It was resting between her middle finger and forefinger. 'It means that you're a very sensual person,' said the man. He began to slide the finger in and out. 'That's true, isn't it? You're a very sensual person?'

'Well, I . . .'

'Do you know you look exactly like Jennifer O'Neill?'

Mary Ann stood up suddenly. 'No, but if you hum a few bars . . .'

'Hey, hey, lady. It's cool, it's cool. I'll give you space . . .'

'Good. I'll take the other room. Happy hunting.' She headed for the disco in search of Connie. She found her in the eye of the storm, bumping with a Black man in Lurex knickers and glitter wedgies.

'What's up?' asked the stewardess, boogying to the sidelines.

'I'm beat. Could I have the keys to the apartment?'

'You OK, hon?'

'Fine. I'm just tired.'

'Hot date?'

'No, just . . . could I have the keys, Connie?'

'Here's an extra set. Sweet dreams.'

Boarding the 41 Union bus, Mary Ann realized suddenly why Connie kept an extra set of keys in her purse.

Mary Ann watched *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*, then turned off the television and fell asleep.

It was after 2 A.M. when Connie got home.

She wasn't alone.

Mary Ann rolled over on the sofa and buried her head under the covers, pretending to be asleep. Connie and her guest tiptoed noisily into the bedroom.

The man's voice was fuzzy with whiskey, but Mary Ann knew immediately who he was.

He was asking for lemon candles.

Copyrighted Material

Her new home

Mary Ann crept out of the apartment just before dawn. The prospect of sharing Trix for three at breakfast was more than she could take.

She wandered the streets of the Marina in search of For Rent signs, then ate a mammoth breakfast at the International House of Pancakes.

At nine o'clock she was the first customer of the day at a rental agency on Lombard Street.

She wanted a View, a Deck and a Fireplace for under \$175.

'Jees,' said the rental lady. 'Awful picky for a girl without a job.' She offered Mary Ann 'a nice Lower Pacific Heights studio with AEK, wall to wall carpeting and a partial view of Fillmore Auditorium.' Mary Ann said no.

She ended up with three possibles.

The first one had an uptight landlady who asked if Mary Ann 'took marijuana'.

The second was a pink stucco fortress on Upper Market with gold glitter in the ceiling plaster.

The last was on Russian Hill. Mary Ann arrived there at four-thirty.

The house was on Barbary Lane, a narrow, wooded walkway off Leavenworth between Union and Filbert. It was a well-weathered, three-story structure made of brown shingles. It made Mary Ann think of an old bear with bits of foliage caught in its fur. She liked it instantly.

The landlady was a fiftyish woman in a plum-colored kimono.

'I'm Mrs Madrigal,' she said cheerfully. 'As in medieval.'

Mary Ann smiled. 'You can't feel as ancient as I do. I've been apartment-hunting all day.'

'Well, take your time. There's a partial view, if you count that little patch of bay peeping through the trees. Utilities included, of course. Small house. Nice people. You get here this week?'

Copyrighted Material

'That obvious, huh?'

The landlady nodded. 'The look's a dead giveaway. You just can't wait to bite into that lotus.'

'What? I'm sorry . . .'

'Tennyson. You know: "Eating the lotus day by day, To watch the crisping ripples on the beach, And tender curving lines of creamy spray; To lend our hearts and spirits wholly to the influence of" . . . something, something . . . You get the point.'

'Does the . . . furniture go with it?'

'Don't change the subject while I'm quoting Tennyson.'

Mary Ann was shaken until she noticed that the landlady was smiling. 'You'll get used to my babbling,' said Mrs Madrigal. 'All the others have.' She walked to the window, where the wind made her kimono flutter like brilliant plumage. 'The furniture is included. What do you say, dear?'

Mary Ann said yes.

'Good. You're one of us, then. Welcome to 28 Barbary Lane.'

'Thank you.'

'Yes, you should.' Mrs Madrigal smiled. There was something a little careworn about her face, but she was really quite lovely, Mary Ann decided. 'Do you have any objection to pets?' asked the new tenant.

'Dear . . . I have no objection to anything.'

Elated, Mary Ann walked to the corner of Hyde and Union and phoned Connie from the Searchlight Market. 'Hi. Guess what?'

'You got kidnapped?'

'Oh . . . Connie, I'm sorry. I've been looking for a place . . .'

'I was freaked.'

'I'm really sorry. I . . . Connie, I've found this darling place on Russian Hill on the third floor of the funkiest old building . . . and I can move in tomorrow.'

'Oh . . . that was quick.'

'It's so *neat*! I can't wait for you to see it.'

'Sounds nice. Look, Mary Ann – like, if there's any problem with money or anything, you can stay with me until . . .'

'I've got some saved. Thanks, though. You've been wonderful.'

Copyrighted Material

'No sweat. Hey . . . what's on for tonight, hon?'

'Let's see. Oh, yeah. Robert Redford is picking me up at seven, and we're going to Ernie's for dinner.'

'Ditch him. He's got warts.'

'For what?'

'The hottest spot in town. Social Safeway.'

'Social *what*?'

'Safeway, dink. As in supermarket.'

'That's what I thought you said. You sure know how to show a girl a good time.'

'For your information, dink, Social Safeway just happens to be . . . well, it's just the . . . big thing, that's all.'

'For those who get off on groceries.'

'For those who get off on *men*, hon. It's a local tradition. Every Wednesday night. And you don't even have to look like you're on the make.'

'I don't believe it.'

'There's only one way to prove it to you.'

Mary Ann giggled. 'What am I supposed to do? Lurk behind the artichokes until some unsuspecting stockbroker comes along?'

'Meet me here at eight, dink. You'll see.'

Copyrighted Material

Love with the proper shopper

A dozen cardboard discs dangled from the ceiling of the Marina Safeway, coaxing the customers with a double-edged message: 'Since we're neighbors, let's be friends.'

And friends were being made.

As Mary Ann watched, a blond man in a Stanford sweatshirt sauntered up to a brunette in a denim halter. 'Uh . . . excuse me, but could you tell me whether it's better to use Saffola oil or Wesson oil?'

The girl giggled. 'For what?'

'I don't believe this,' said Mary Ann, taking a shopping cart. 'Every Wednesday night?'

Connie nodded. 'It ain't half bad on weekends, either.' She grabbed a cart and charged off down a busy aisle. 'See ya. It works better if you're alone.'

Mary Ann strode to the produce counter. She intended to *shop*, Connie's pagan mating ritual notwithstanding.

Then someone tugged on her arm.

He was a puffy-faced man of about thirty-five. He was wearing a leisure suit with a white vinyl belt and matching shoes. 'Are those the things you use in Chinese cooking?' he asked, pointing to the snow peas.

'Yes,' she said, as uninvitingly as possible.

'Far out. I've been looking for some all week. I've really been getting into Chinese cooking lately. Bought a wok and everything.'

'Yeah. Well, those are the ones. Good luck.' She wheeled sharply and headed for the check-out counter. Her assailant followed.

'Hey . . . like, maybe you could tell me a little about Chinese cooking?'

'I doubt it very seriously.'

'C'mon. Most chicks in this town are really into Chinese cooking.'

'I'm not most chicks.'

Copyrighted Material

'OK. I can dig it. Different strokes for different folks, right? What *are* you into, anyway?'

'Solitude.'

'OK. Skip it, just skip it.' He hesitated a moment, then delivered his exit line. 'Get off the rag, bitch!'

He left her standing in the frozen food department, white knuckles clamped around the rim of the freezer, her breath rising like a tiny distress signal. 'Jesus,' she said in a frosty whisper, as a single tear plopped onto a box of Sara Lee brownies.

'Charming,' said a man standing next to her.

Mary Ann stiffened. 'What?'

'Your friend there . . . with the sparkling repartee. He's a real prince.'

'You heard all that?'

'Only the parting endearment. Was the rest any better?'

'Nope. Unless you get off on discussing snow peas with Charlie Manson.'

The man laughed, showing beautiful white teeth. He was about thirty, Mary Ann guessed, with curly brown hair, blue eyes and a soft flannel shirt. 'Sometimes I don't believe this place,' he said.

'Really.' Had he seen her crying?

'The hell of it is that the whole goddamn town talks about relating and communicating and all that Age of Aquarius shit, and most of us are *still* trying to look like something we aren't . . . Sorry. I sound like Dear Abby, don't I?'

'No. Not at all. I . . . agree with you.'

He extended his hand. 'My name is Robert.' Not Bob or Robbie, but Robert. Strong and direct. She gripped his hand. 'I'm Mary Ann Singleton.' She wanted him to remember it.

'Well . . . at the risk of sounding like Charlie Manson . . . how about a little culinary advice for a hapless male?'

'Sure. No snow peas?'

He laughed. 'Not snow peas. Asparagus.'

Mary Ann had never found the subject so exciting. She was watching Robert's eyes respond to her hollandaise recipe when a young man with a mustache approached with his cart.

'Can't leave you alone for a minute.' He was talking to Robert.

Copyrighted Material

Robert chuckled. 'Michael . . . this is Mary Ann . . .'

'Singleton,' said Mary Ann.

'This is my roommate, Michael. She's been helping me with hollandaise, Michael.'

'Good,' said Michael, smiling at Mary Ann. 'He's awful at hollandaise.'

Robert shrugged. 'Michael's the master chef in the house. That entitles him to make life miserable for me.' He grinned at his roommate.

Mary Ann's palms were sweating.

'I'm not much of a cook, either,' she said. Why in the world was she siding with Robert? Robert didn't need her help. Robert didn't know she was there.

'She's been a lot of help,' said Robert. 'That's more than I can say for some people.'

'Temper,' Michael grinned.

'Well,' said Mary Ann feebly. 'I guess I'd better . . . finish up.'

'Thanks for your help,' said Robert. 'Really.'

'Nice to meet you,' said Michael.

'Same here,' said Mary Ann, pushing her cart in the direction of the paper-supplies aisle. When Connie rounded the corner several seconds later, she found her friend standing glumly by herself, squeezing a roll of Charmin.

'Hot damn!' said the stewardess. 'This place is Pickup City tonight!'

Mary Ann threw the toilet paper into her cart. 'I've got a headache, Connie. I think I'll walk home. OK?'

'Well . . . hang on a sec. I'll come with you.'

'Connie, I . . . I'd like to be alone, OK?'

'Sure. OK.'

As usual, she looked hurt.

Copyrighted Material

Connie's bumner night

Connie came home from the Marina Safeway an hour after Mary Ann did.

Noisily, she dropped her groceries on the kitchen counter. 'Well,' she said, walking into the living room, 'I'm ready for Union Street. I suppose you're ready for bed?'

Mary Ann nodded. 'Job-hunting and moving tomorrow. I need my strength.'

'Abstinence causes pimples.'

'I'll remember that,' said Mary Ann, as Connie stalked out the door.

Mary Ann ate dinner in front of the television. She had steak, salad and Tater Tots, the fare that Connie swore by for keeping men happy. She checked out Connie's record collection. (The Carpenters, Percy Faith, 101 Strings), then looked at the pictures in *More Joy of Sex*. She fell asleep on the sofa shortly before midnight.

When she awoke, the room was filled with light. A garbage truck rumbled along Greenwich Street. A key chain was clinking against the front door.

Connie lumbered in. 'I cannot *believe* the assholes in this town!'

Mary Ann sat up and rubbed her eyes. 'Bad night, huh?'

'Bad night, bad morning, bad week, bad year. Weirdos! Goddammit, I can pick 'em. If there's a weirdo around for a hundred goddamn miles, good ol' Connie Bradshaw will be there to make a date with him. Fuck!'

'How 'bout some coffee?'

'What's the matter with me, Mary Ann? Will you tell me that? I have two tits, a nice ass. I wash. I'm a *good* listener . . .'

'C'mon. We both need coffee.'

The kitchen was too perversely cheerful for an early-morning

Copyrighted Material

soul-baring. Mary Ann winced at the Doris Day yellow walls and the little windowed boxes full of dried beans.

Connie devoured a bowl of Trix. 'I think I'll become a nun,' she said.

'They'll love your outfit at Dance Your Ass Off.'

'Not funny.'

'OK. What happened?'

'You don't wanna know.'

'Yes I do. You went to Union Street, right?'

'Perry's. Then Slater Hawkins. But the *real* bummer was at Thomas Lord's.'

Mary Ann poured her a cup of coffee. 'What happened?'

'Fuck if I know. I was having a perfectly innocent drink at the bar when I noticed this guy sitting over by the fire. I recognized him right away, because him and me did a little number last month on his houseboat in Sausalito.'

'A little number?'

'Fucked.'

'Thank you.'

'So . . . I walked over to where this guy was sitting. Jerry something. A German name. Buckskin pants and a turquoise squash blossom necklace and a pair of those John Denver-type glasses. *Gorgeous*, in a . . . you know . . . Marin kind of way. And I said, "Hi, Jerry, who's keeping the houseboat warm?" and the asshole just stared at me like I was some whore on Market Street or something. I mean, like he didn't even *recognize* me. I was *mortified*.'

'I guess so.'

'So, finally, I said, "Connie Bradshaw from the Friendly Skies of United." Only, I said it in . . . like a really bitchy tone of voice so he'd get the point.'

'But he didn't?'

'Fuck, no! He just sat there looking stuck-up and spaced out. He finally asked me to sit down, and he introduced me to this friend of his named Danny. Then the asshole just got up and walked out, leaving me with this Danny person, who had just finished his goddamn est training and was spouting all this shit about making a space, et cetera.'

Copyrighted Material

'What on earth did you do?'

'What *could* I do? I went home with Danny. I sure as hell wasn't gonna let *him* get up and leave me there munching pretzels all by myself. There's such a thing as pride!'

'Of course.'

'Anyway, Danny had this really neat redwood apartment in Mill Valley, with lots of stained glass and all, but he was an absolute *nut* about ecology. As soon as we smoked a joint, he started babbling about saving whales in Mendocino and screwing up the ozone layer with feminine hygiene spray.'

'What?'

'You know. Aerosol cans. The fucking ozone layer. Anyway, I was really bent out of shape at that point, and I said I thought it was a woman's unalienable . . . inalienable . . . which is it?'

'Inalienable.'

'Inalienable right to use a feminine hygiene spray if she wanted to, ozone layer or no ozone layer!'

'And . . .'

'And he said that just because I have some *bizarre* notion that my . . . you know . . . smells bad is no reason for me to expose the rest of the world to ultraviolet rays and skin cancer. Or something like that.'

'Well . . . delightful evening.'

'I mean, get *him*. Not only does he subject me to all this ecology crap, but . . . nothing happened.'

'Nothing happened?'

'Nada. Zilch. He drives me all the way across the bridge just to talk. He says he wants to *relate* to me as a person. Ha!'

'So . . . what did you say?'

'I told him to drive me home. And you know what he said?'

Mary Ann shook her head.

'He said, "I'm sorry you sprayed for nothing."''

Later that day, Mary Ann moved out of Connie's apartment into 28 Barbary Lane. The move involved only a suitcase. Connie was visibly depressed.

'You'll still come see me, won't you?'

Copyrighted Material

'Sure. And you'll have to come visit me.'

'Cross your heart?'

'Hope to die.'

Neither one of them believed it.

Copyrighted Material

The employment line

On her first morning at Barbary Lane, Mary Ann scanned the Yellow Pages for the key to her future.

According to a large, daisy-bedecked ad, the Metropolitan Employment Agency was 'an individualized job placement service that really cares about your future.'

She liked the sound of it. Solid yet compassionate.

Gulping an Instant Breakfast, she put on her low-key navy-blue suit and caught the 41 Union to Montgomery Street. Her horoscope today promised 'matchless opportunities for a Taurus who takes the bull by the horns.'

The agency was on the fifth floor of a yellow-brick building that smelled of cigars and industrial ammonia. Someone with an eye for contemporary Californiana had decorated the walls of the waiting room with Art Nouveau posters and a driftwood-and-copper sculpture of a seagull in flight.

Mary Ann sat down. There was no one in sight, so she picked up a copy of *Office Management* magazine. She was reading an article about desktop avocado gardening when a woman appeared from a cubicle in the back.

'Have you filled out a form yet?'

'No. I didn't know . . .'

'On the desk. I can't talk to you until you've filled out a form.'

Mary Ann filled out a form. She agonized over the questions. Do you own a car? Will you accept employment outside San Francisco? Do you speak any foreign languages?

She took the form to the woman's cubicle. 'All done,' she said, as cheerfully and efficiently as possible.

The woman grunted. She took the form from Mary Ann and readjusted her chain-guarded glasses on a small, piglike nose. Her hair was done in a salt-and-pepper DA.

As she examined the form, her fingers manipulated an executive

Copyrighted Material

desk toy. Four steel balls suspended on strings from a walnut scaffolding.

'No degree,' said the woman at last.

'Like . . . college?'

The woman snapped. 'Yes. Like college.'

'I had two years at a junior college in Ohio, if that . . .'

'Major?'

'Yes.'

'Well?'

'What?'

'What did you *major* in?'

'Oh. Art history.'

The woman smirked. 'We've certainly got enough of *those* for a while.'

'Does a degree really matter that much? I mean . . . for secretarial work?'

'Are you kidding? I've got PhD candidates doing clerical work.'

She used the first person as if these struggling scholars were her personal serfs. She wrote something on an index card and handed it to Mary Ann. 'This is a small office-supply company on Market Street. The sales manager needs a Girl Friday. Ask for Mr Creech.'

He turned out to be a red-faced man of about fifty. He was wearing a burgundy polyester jacket with an oversized hound's-tooth pattern. His trousers and tie were the same color.

'You ever done sales work before?' He smiled and leaned back in a squeaky swivel chair.

'Not . . . well, not exactly. For the past four years I've worked as a secretary for Lassiter Fertilizers in Cleveland. I wasn't exactly *in* sales, but I had a lot of . . . you know . . . contacts and all.'

'Sounds good. Steady work. Always a good sign.'

'I was also an admin assistant for the past year and a half, and I was attached to several of . . .'

'Fine, fine . . . Now, I suppose you know what a Girl Friday is?'

'Sort of a gofer . . . right?' She laughed nervously.

'Pay's good. Six fifty a month. And we're pretty relaxed around

Copyrighted Material

here . . . this being San Francisco.’ His eyes were fixed on Mary Ann’s face. He began to chew the knuckle of his forefinger.

‘I like . . . an informal office,’ said Mary Ann.

‘You like Vegas?’

‘Sir?’

‘Earl.’

‘What?’

‘Name’s Earl. Informal, remember?’ He smiled and wiped his forehead. He was sweating profusely. ‘I asked if you like Vegas. We go to Vegas a lot. Vegas, Sacramento, LA, Hawaii. Lotsa fringe benefits.’

‘Sounds . . . really nice.’

He winked at her. ‘If you’re not . . . you know . . . uptight.’

‘Oh.’

‘Oh, what?’

‘I’m uptight, Mr Creech.’

He plucked a paper clip off the desk and tore it apart slowly without looking up. ‘Next,’ he said quietly.

‘Sir?’

‘Get out.’

She went home to her new apartment and cried, falling asleep as the afternoon sun spilled in the window. She woke up at five and scoured the kitchen sink for therapy. She ate some blueberry yogurt and made a list of things she would need for her apartment.

She wrote a letter to her parents. Optimistic, but vague.

There was a noise outside her door. She listened for a moment, then opened it. Plum-colored silk fluttered at the tip of the stairway and descended out of sight.

There was a note on Mary Ann’s door:

Something from my garden to welcome you to your new home.

Anna Madrigal

P.S. I’ll shoot you if you write your mother about this.

Taped to the note was a neatly rolled joint.

Copyrighted Material

Enter Mona

The woman down by the garbage cans had frizzy red hair and was wearing a country-chic cotton sharecropper's dress.

She dropped her Hefty bag with a disdainful wrinkle of her nose and smiled at Mary Ann. 'Garbage, you know, is *very* revealing. It beats the shit out of tarot cards!'

'What would you say about . . . let's see – four yogurt cartons, a Cost Plus bag, some avocado peels and assorted cellophane wrappings?'

The woman pressed her fingers to her forehead like a psychic. 'Ah, yes . . . the subject takes care of herself . . . nutritionally, that is. She is probably on a diet and is . . . furnishing a new apartment!'

'Uncanny!' Mary Ann smiled.

'She also . . . likes growing things. She didn't throw out the avocado pit, so she's probably rooting it in her kitchen.'

'Bravo!' Mary Ann extended her hand. 'I'm Mary Ann Singleton.'
'I know.'

'From my garbage?'

'From our landlady. The Mother of Us All.' She shook Mary Ann's hand firmly. 'I'm Mona Ramsey . . . right below you.'

'Hi. You should have seen what Mother taped on my door last night.'

'A joint?'

'She told you?'

'Nope. It's standard procedure. We all get one.'

'She grows it in the garden?'

'Right over there behind the azaleas. She's even got names for the plants . . . like Dante and Beatrice and . . . Hey, want some ginseng?'

'What?'

'Ginseng. I'm brewing some upstairs. C'mon.'

Mona's second-floor apartment was adorned with Indian wall hangings, assorted street signs, and Art Deco light globes. Her

Copyrighted Material