

## A TRIP TO CHINATOWN

I think I was always secretly in love with Gaby Rodgers. I first saw her on television in Omnibus in the 1950's. She played a fey young girl in Jean Giraudoux's The Apollo of Bellac, and I was enchanted. Later, after I had met her in real life, I was even more enchanted. To me, she seemed the epitome of glamour. It didn't matter that she was married to the songwriter Jerry Lieber. With his partner, Mike Stoller, Jerry had written Hound Dog and several other early Elvis Presley hits. By his mid thirties, the same age as myself, he had already amassed a small fortune, something I had most definitely not accomplished.

We were friends for a long time. Gaby and Jerry had been investors in Red Eye of Love. When I was running the Maidman Theatre, I had attempted, unsuccessfully, to produce Frank O'Hara's Try! Try! with her in the leading role. Even after I had moved to Nantucket we kept in touch.

But then, on a visit to New York, in the early sixties, I had an overwhelming desire to see her again. It was on a Sunday afternoon in March when the weather was exceptionally mild and balmy. It was the sort of day when any young man could not help but want to be out strolling with his wife or girlfriend. Finally, I could stand it no longer. I walked to the telephone, and, almost without thinking, dialed Gaby's number. As soon as the phone began to ring, I was filled with panic at the thought of what I had done. I was afraid that the maid or governess would answer, and when I asked for Mrs. Lieber, I would be told she was out, or she was resting, or, most embarrassing of all, I would be forced to identify myself before she would take the call. I was just about to hang up, when someone picked up the receiver. "Hello," said a woman's voice.

"Hello," I said, swallowing hard. "May I please speak with Mrs. Lieber?"

"Wulp, is that you?" said Gaby. It had been her voice on the telephone right from the start, but I had so steeled myself for the maid to answer that I failed to realize it.

"Oh, my God, Gaby, I thought you were the maid."

“Sorry to disappoint you. I can always get her if you want.”

“There's no need to make this any harder for me than it is.”

“Why, Wulp, what's the matter?”

“Gaby, I've got to see you,” I blurted out.

“Is something wrong?”

“No, I've just got to see you. Are you going to be home this afternoon?”

“We're probably going out for dinner around six, but we'll be home until then. Why don't you come up and I'll fix you a cup of tea?”

“Is Jerry there?”

“He's out with the kid in Central Park, playing father – big deal. He should be home any minute.”

“You're sure he won't mind?”

“Who can tell with him? Come on up. It will be fun to see you.”

I decided to walk. It was a nice day, and besides I didn't have any money to waste on bus or subway fares. At the moment, I had exactly one dollar in my wallet. But as I made my way up Fifth Avenue, the breeze lifted my coattails and all my cares were momentarily forgotten. I remembered back to the time when I first came into New York, and I smiled to think how sure I had once been that this entire city would someday be mine.

When I reached Gaby's apartment on Central Park West, I rang the door buzzer and then waited for what seemed like an interminable length of time. Finally, Gaby answered the door herself.

“Remember me?” I said.

“Wulpy!” Gaby shouted. She threw her arms around my neck and kissed me. Then she broke away, and still holding my hand in hers, she surveyed me from head to toe. “You look good,” she said.

“A little the worse for wear,” I said.

“No, you look good,” Gaby repeated. She linked her arm in mine and began to lead me in the direction of the living room. “Listen, I’ve got something to tell you,” she said, very confidentially, almost in a whisper. “You know Larry Rivers?”

“Yeah, what about him?”

“Well he’s here with his wife and son. Jerry brought them home with him from Central Park – I don’t know where he found them.”

I was expecting something more earth-shaking than this, but then I smiled to remember how for as long as I had known her, Gaby had always loved to dramatize everything – sometimes even the most simple statements took on an air of foreign intrigue. “I just know Larry Rivers slightly,” I said. “I met him once, years ago.”

“You don’t like him, huh?” said Gaby. “We’ll get rid of him.”

“No, no, there’s no need to do that,” I said. “As I say, I hardly know him. I didn’t even realize he was married.”

“He’s so married it’s sickening,” said Gaby. “Haven’t you heard? – It’s the smart thing to do this year.”

“You sound as though you’re opposed to the whole idea of marriage.”

“I’m just not the type, I’ve discovered.”



Jerry Leiber, Gaby Rogers,  
Oliver Leiber, Jed Leiber

On the way into the living room, Gaby and I passed the kitchen where Jerry was talking on the telephone. He waved to me as I walked past. "Yeah, well, I'll talk it over with my partner," he was saying in a voice loud enough so that he could not help but be overheard. "Look, I can't write out a check for four thousand dollars without talking it over with my partner first. Yeah, I know you're in trouble. Yeah, yeah, I know you need the money fast. But I'm a businessman. I've got to do things in a businesslike way. I promise you I'll talk it over with my partner first thing in the morning."

"Gangsters," said Gaby, in her most mysterious voice.

The apartment was enormous. One vast and cavernous room opened into another vast and cavernous room. A long, dark corridor ran down the center, and I guessed that the nursery must be at the end of this. I could just barely make out a child's high-pitched laughter coming from that direction, but the sound was so distant as to be almost indistinguishable.

In the living room, Larry Rivers was patiently waiting with his wife and baby. They seemed hopelessly out of place among the marble fireplaces, the Louis XIV chairs, the Aubusson carpets. His face was covered with several days' growth of beard, and he was dressed in a red lumberman's jacket, paint-splattered Levis, and moccasins. His wife, Clarice, was a pale and sallow girl, and she was made even more pale and sallow by the late afternoon sunlight that flooded through the tall windows behind the table where she sat. Her long, straight hair, which hung about her face in wisps and spilled from an untidy bun at the back of her neck, was unwashed, and the cheap, cotton dress she wore was soiled. Throughout the entire afternoon, she said no more than a few unintelligible words when she was first introduced, but rather sat and cooed and gurgled at the baby upon her lap. As for the baby himself, he also stared at the world with a peculiarly vacant expression. Even at his early age, he seemed to have been infected with the same torpor and lassitude that had seized both his parents, a torpor from which they had not been able to rouse themselves even long enough to think of a suitable name for him. They simply called him "Baby" or "Boy".

As Gaby and I entered the room, Larry Rivers stood up. He regarded me quizzically, but I could not tell from his expression whether he remembered me or not. Gaby was just about to make a formal introduction when Jerry breezed into the room and took complete charge. “Wulpy, old boy, how the Hell are you?” he said, holding out his hand for me to shake. Jerry was dressed in a T-shirt, unpressed Chino pants, and his stocking feet, and as I shook hands with him I thought I noticed a faint expression of distaste cross Gaby's brow.

“It's good to see you again, Jerry,” I said.

“Forgive me for keeping you waiting,” said Jerry. “It seems I can't get away from the telephone even on Sunday.”

“You don't need to apologize to me,” I said.

“Did you give my regards to the Mafia?” said Gaby.

Jerry ignored her completely. “You know Larry Rivers?” he said to me.

“We've met,” I said. Larry River and I shook hands.

“We have? Where?” said Larry Rivers. “I'm sorry I don't remember.”

“That's all right,” I said. “There's no reason why you should remember. I'm a friend of Arnold Weinstein.” Arnold was also a good friend of Larry Rivers.

“Oh yeah, I remember you now,” said Larry Rivers.

“Wulp produced and directed Red Eye of Love,” said Jerry. “You didn't see it by any chance? It was done Off-Broadway. Great show!”

“Yeah, I think I saw it,” said Larry Rivers.

“Great show, wasn't it?” said Jerry.

“Oh yeah, I know who you are now,” said Larry Rivers.

“I don't believe I've ever met your wife,” I said.

“Hell, I'm sorry,” said Jerry. “I thought you said you knew each other.”

“We only met once,” I said. “It was years ago before he was married.”

“Yeah, well, this is my wife Clarice,” said Larry Rivers.

Clarice raised her head from the baby just long enough to nod.

“Don't ask the kid's name,” said Jerry. “They haven't named him yet. Hey, Larry, when are you going to give this poor kid a name?”

“Who would like a cup of tea?” said Gaby, abruptly changing the subject.

“Are you kidding?” said Jerry. “What do you guys want to drink – Whiskey? Beer?”

“If it's all the same with you I'd prefer a cup of tea,” I said.

“What is this – some sort of gag?” said Jerry.

“Didn't Gaby tell you? I've developed ulcers,” I said.

“No, she didn't tell me,” said Jerry. “I'm sorry to hear it.”

“I'll fix you a nice cup of tea,” said Gaby. She got up and left the room, heading in the direction of the kitchen.

“Well, I'm going to have a can of beer,” said Jerry. “What do you say, Larry? – Can I get you one too?”

“A beer's fine with me,” said Larry Rivers.

“How about you, Clarice?” said Jerry.

“Yeah, a beer's fine with her too,” said Larry Rivers.

If Clarice said anything for herself, it was too faint for me to hear it.

Jerry got up and followed Gaby to the kitchen. While he was out of the room, Larry Rivers and I engaged in small talk.

“What have you been doing lately?” said Larry Rivers. “Your show isn't still running, is it?”

“No, it closed about six months ago,” I said.

“Are you working on something new?”

“No, I'm between shows. I believe that's an expression people in the theatre use when they mean to say they're broke and don't have a chinaman's chance in hell of raising any more money.”

“But Red Eye of Love was a great success, wasn't it? I remember it ran a long time.”

“It ran over six months and lost more than twenty-five thousand dollars,” I said. “So now I'm between shows.”

“I see what you mean,” said Larry Rivers.

Just at this point Jerry came back into the room carrying a carton of beer and a can opener. He deposited these on the table beside which Clarice and Larry Rivers had been sitting all afternoon, and then sat down next to them. I was left sitting all by myself in a comfortable armchair on the opposite side of the room.

Jerry must have overheard the end of the conversation because he immediately joined in. “How come you and I have never done a show together?” he said to me.

I shifted uneasily in my seat. “Have you got any money you want to lose?” I said.

“Money's no problem,” said Jerry. “With my reputation I can get money for anything I want to do. All I need is to say the word.”

“You shouldn't say such things to me unless you're serious,” I said. “I'm just a poor, country boy who believes everything that people tell him.”

“No, I'm serious,” said Jerry. “I really would like to do a show with you someday.”

“I won't hold my breath,” I said.

Jerry either did not hear or simply passed over this remark. He plunged the opener into a can of beer and a fine spray shot to the ceiling. This procedure was repeated two more times, and then the cans were passed around to Clarice and Larry Rivers.

“Prosit,” said Jerry raising his can of beer.

“Prosit,” said Larry Rivers.

Clarice didn't drink, but the two men took deep swallows and then set their cans down beside hers on the bare tabletop. All this while, Larry River had been regarding me intently. "You're a very moral person, aren't you?" he said at last.

"What gives you that idea?" I said.

"I can tell," said Larry Rivers, cryptically.

"You mean from what I said to Jerry before about doing a show with him?" I said.

"Not only that – it's your whole attitude," said Larry Rivers. "I get the impression that you're a very moral person."

"Wulpy has never been able to understand that a man in my position can't always do what he wants," said Jerry.

The inconsistency between Jerry's first and second statements was not lost on me, but I thought it best not to make an issue of it. "I'll have to watch my step from now on," I said. "I don't want to have people accusing me of being moral – my reputation is bad enough as it is."

However, even this feeble attempt at a joke was wasted on Larry Rivers. "Who's accusing you?" he said. "I just made the statement that in my opinion you're a very moral person. Does that mean I'm accusing you of anything?"

"Skip it," said Jerry.

"But –," Larry Rivers protested.

"Just drink your beer and shut up," said Jerry. His tone was one of light banter, but there was no mistaking the undercurrent of tension that flowed just below the surface.

I nervously began to glance toward the door, looking for Gaby. But when she finally did return, instead of improving the situation, she only made it worse. The first thing she saw were the watery rings the beer cans had left on the tabletop, and a spark of anger flashed in her eyes. Nevertheless, she obviously decided not to give in to her feelings. "Here's your tea!" she said, brightly, as she came into

the room carrying a tray on which was neatly arranged a pot of tea, a teacup, a spoon, a napkin, a pitcher of milk, a bowl of sugar, a small dish with a slice of lemon on it, and another small dish with two vanilla wafers. Then, moving with extreme caution so as not to spill anything, she placed this tray on a small table in front of me. Her whole manner was almost excessively sweet and loving, but I knew her well enough to realize she was putting on this performance solely for Jerry's benefit and it embarrassed me to be made a part of it.

Jerry was also aware of what was going on. But if Gaby knew just how to get at him, he was adept at the game as well. "See what a clever wife I have," he said. "She even knows how to boil water." He made a playful attempt to swat Gaby on the rear end, but she sidestepped the blow.

The afternoon was clearly not a success. Again and again someone would introduce a topic of conversation which the others would eagerly seize upon and discuss heatedly for a few minutes, but always the same embarrassed silence would eventually fall over the group. As for Gaby, she was on her very worst behavior. She had envisioned a wistful and tender reunion with me, in which, over tea and cakes, as the deepening shadows of late afternoon fell over the apartment, she confided in me her woes as a much-maligned wife, albeit noble and long-suffering mother, and now, thwarted in her attempt to play this role which she had rehearsed so carefully in her mind, she made no attempt to conceal her displeasure. She not only refused to engage in the conversation, but what was even more rude, she continually got up and left the room while other people were talking, only to return a few minutes later without offering any explanation or excuse for her actions. On one of the occasions she suddenly appeared in the doorway of the living room holding one of her little boys in her arms. When Jerry attempted to show off the child, Gaby, in what could only be interpreted as a pointed reference to Clarice and Larry Rivers and their theories of child-rearing, remarked that she felt children should not be allowed to intrude upon the pleasures of grown-ups, and, she shooed the child off to the kitchen with

his governess to have his evening meal.

As six o'clock approached, I began eyeing my watch with a sense of relief, but when I got up to leave, Jerry would have none of it. "You're not going?" he said.

"It's getting late," I said. "I thought I should start heading for home."

"Sit down! Relax!" said Jerry. He raised the can of beer to his lips and drained it off. Then he opened another.

Gaby glared at Jerry. "Do you suppose you could stop playing the gracious host long enough to decide where we're going to have dinner tonight?" she said.

"Is it that time already?" said Jerry. He glanced down at his watch. "Well, so it is – fancy that."

"My, how the time flies when you're enjoying yourself," said Gaby. She smiled facetiously.

Jerry paid her no heed. "I have a great idea," he said. "Why don't we all go out to dinner together?"

Gaby was aghast – this was carrying even spite too far. "I'm sure that Clarice is probably anxious to get home with the baby, aren't you?"

There was only one possible answer, but Clarice said nothing.

"That's all right," said Larry Rivers. "We take the baby with us everywhere we go."

"Count me out," I said. "I'm afraid I –."

Jerry interrupted me. "I thought I told you to sit down and relax," he said. "You know you're not going anywhere."

"But –," I said.

"Don't worry," said Jerry. "The treat's on me."

I reddened. I clenched my fists. For a moment I thought I would like to take a swing at Jerry,

but I did nothing.

Gaby broke the tension. "Ok, big shot, where are you going to take us?" she said to Jerry.

"I don't know," he said. "Where do you want to go?"

"I thought we could take Wulpy to Luchow's," said Gaby.

"Naw, Luchow's is out of the question," said Jerry. "We'd never get in there on a Sunday evening the way Larry and Clarice are dressed, and besides they've got the baby to think about."

Things were getting completely out of hand. "I know that Clarice is probably anxious to get home with the baby," said Gaby. She turned to Clarice a second time. "You are, aren't you?" she said, desperately. "If you don't want to go out and eat with us, just say so. We won't mind at all. You mustn't feel the need to be polite on our account."

Once again there was only one possible answer, but once again Clarice said nothing.

"That's all right," said Larry Rivers. "We take the baby with us everywhere we go. He's used to it by now."

"I have a great idea," said Jerry. "Why don't we all go to Chinatown? What do you say Larry? Is that a great idea or not?"

"Chinatown's all right with me," said Larry Rivers. "I haven't been to Chinatown for a long time.

Gaby was beside herself with rage. "You mean you're going to take a one-year old baby to eat in Chinatown?" she said.

"That's all right," said Larry Rivers. "He eats everywhere we eat."

"Give me just five minutes to change my clothes," said Jerry. He got up to leave the room.

Gaby stopped him in the doorway. "You're not serious about going to Chinatown?" she said.

"Have you got any better ideas?" said Jerry.

"I thought we could take Wulpy to Luchow's," said Gaby.

“Don't worry about me,” I said. “I don't care where we eat.”

“Fine friend you turned out to be,” said Gaby.

“Aw, come on, Gaby, you've been to Luchow's,” said Jerry. “Live dangerously!”

It was necessary to travel in two taxicabs. Jerry and Larry Rivers made careful plans as to the exact location of the restaurant where everyone was supposed to meet, and then the Rivers got into the first taxicab that the doorman summoned and sped off in the direction of Chinatown.

All the while Jerry and Larry Rivers were talking, Gaby stood slightly apart from them on the sidewalk, speaking to no one, not even me. The collar of her mink coat was turned up against the chill night air, and this gave her an air of splendid isolation. She appeared regal and remote, entirely removed from the cares of the rest of the world.

But actually she was just spoiling for a fight. As soon as the taxicab bearing the Rivers had vanished from sight, she turned to Jerry with renewed venom. “Did you have to invite them to go along with us?” she said.

“Oh, Gaby, will you please stop,” said Jerry. “What was I supposed to say? 'Sorry, folks! We have to go out and eat now. See you around sometime.’”

“If they had any sense they would have gone home by themselves. I can't imagine what they're thinking of, dragging a one-year-old baby around with them at this hour of the night.”

“I don't know,” said Jerry, distractedly. He was watching for a taxicab at the same time he was trying to hold up his end of the argument with Gaby. “They've got some idea that if they treat him normally, he won't grow up to be neurotic.”

“Neurotic!” snorted Gaby. “Let me tell you, with two parents like that, any kid couldn't help but grow up neurotic.”

“Yeah, and since when have you become such an expert on child care?” said Jerry. He saw a

taxicab in the distance, and, without waiting for the doorman, he put two fingers in his mouth and whistled for it.

Gaby winced. “Well, at least I've got sense enough to know it isn't normal for a one-year-old baby to be eating in Chinatown,” she said.

Jerry and Gaby were standing on opposite sides of me, so that I was caught in their cross-fire. “Please don't argue,” I said. “I see you both so seldom nowadays. Couldn't we have a good time together, just for this one night? What do you say? Let's have a good time together, shall we?”

The restaurant that Jerry had selected was not Gaby's style at all. She was so obviously out of place in her mink coat that when she walked in, several of the customers turned and stared at her. The Rivers had arrived before us and they were sitting at a large table in the corner, Clarice with the baby asleep on her lap. The plastic table-top was stained with fingerprints and traces of food particles, and it still had not been completely cleared of all the remnants left by the previous customers. We couldn't have picked a worse time to arrive, for the restaurant was not only over-crowded, but understaffed as well. There were two or three waiters serving about ten tables, and these poor, harried men, their faces wreathed in perpetual grins, despite the perspiration that poured from their brows, were kept continually on the run carrying trays loaded down with either newly-filled orders or empty plates. Whenever Jerry tried to get the attention of one of them, the waiter would put him off with, “I come! I come!” only to disappear into the steaming kitchen where the entire staff seemed to be engaged in a running argument with the cook.

Finally, Gaby could stand it no longer. “Do you suppose we could at least get a glass of water?” she said to Jerry, peevishly.

Jerry somehow managed to summon the waiter who promptly brought glasses of water and menus for everybody, but then hurried off again without clearing the table.

For the next few minutes, everyone studied the menus in gloomy silence – all except Gaby. She never once took her eyes off the waiter, and when it began to seem unlikely that he would ever return, she spoke again. “Would it be asking too much to have the waiter clear the table?” she said.

Jerry suddenly became violent. “You want somebody to clear the table?” he said, and with that, he brushed his arm across the tabletop sweeping to the floor chopsticks, paper napkins, empty glasses, dishes, and silverware. “There, now the table is cleared,” he said.

Gaby stared at him with an expression somewhere between hurt and anger. She was a wounded lamb. At the same time, she was a lioness.

The fuse had been lit. An explosion was imminent, but when it finally came, it took a form that was as grotesque as it was unexpected. After several more minutes had gone by, the waiter arrived with pad and pencil in hand to take our orders. Unfortunately, the menus were printed in Chinese and the waiter spoke very little English, so that no one had any clear idea of what they might expect to see come out of the kitchen. When at last the waiter returned, he placed several dishes in the center of the table and then removed their lids. I casually glanced down and saw that one of these dishes contained charred birds' heads, their black eyes shining, their beaks open as if in some final supplication to the cook.

“Ugh!” I said, and turned away in disgust.

“What's the matter?” said Gaby, but at that very moment she also noticed the birds' heads. She let out a small scream and covered her face in her hands. “Have those things taken away,” she said to Jerry.

But Jerry wasn't about to take orders from her or anybody else. “What's the matter with you two?” he said. “They're nothing but birds' heads.” He dug into the dish with his chopsticks and placed one or two birds' heads on his plate.

Gaby removed her hands from her face and stared at him in cold disbelief. “You're not going to

eat those?” she said.

“Why not?” said Jerry. He picked up one of the birds' heads and began to gnaw on it with apparent relish. Gaby kept staring at him with the same horrified expression on her face. “Go ahead, try one,” said Jerry, wiping his lips with a napkin and pushing the dish toward Gaby. “They're good.”

Gaby gave him one final look of contempt. Then, pulling her mink coat around her, she got up from the table and headed for the door of the restaurant. Jerry made no move to stop her, but instead went right on eating as if nothing had happened. He did, however, signal for me to follow her, and even though I felt vaguely irritated to be taking orders from Jerry, I did as I was told.

By the time I got to the street, Gaby was almost half a block away. I called her name but she didn't stop, so I was forced to run to catch up with her. When I reached her, I gently touched her arm. “Gaby, you mustn't act like this,” I said.

Gaby shrugged me off. “I'm leaving him,” she said.

“Don't say that.”

“Yes, I'm leaving him. I refuse to live with a man who eats birds heads.”

“Gaby, he's your husband. You married him for better or worse. You can't just walk out on a marriage.”

“Oh, can't I?” said Gaby. She turned away from me and started walking again.

There was nothing for me to do but follow her. As we moved along the crowded street, I tried by every means within my command to get Gaby to return to the restaurant. I begged, I cajoled, I attempted to soothe her hurt feelings. From time to time she would stop to gaze into a lighted shop window, and at these moments I would press my argument with special vehemence. But whenever I thought my words might be having some effect, she would look up at me with an agonized expression on her face or tears in her eyes, and then she would move on. Everywhere we went I was conscious of the eyes of Chinese men staring at me. I imagined they regarded me with disapproval as a weak-willed

Western husband who could not control his strong-willed wife, and I blushed to think how much more severe their disapproval might be if they knew my true position.

But all such thoughts were soon dispelled when suddenly, without any warning, Gaby veered off into a grocery store. At first I thought she was just looking over the vegetables, but then I saw she was handing one thing after another to the Chinese man behind the counter for him to weigh and put into paper bags. Within no time at all, her arms were filled with bok choy and watercress, with winter melon and bitter melon, with mustard green and white radishes, with bean sprouts and bean curds.

“What are you going to do with all these vegetables?” I said, as soon as I realized what was happening.”

“I'm going to make a soup,” said Gaby.

“For God's sake, Gaby, you don't even know how to cook,” I protested.

“Yes, I'm going to make a marvelous soup,” said Gaby. She opened her pocketbook and handed the man behind the counter the first bill she saw, without regard for the denomination. She didn't wait for her change, but instead went hurtling into the night again, clutching the bags of groceries to her. I didn't know whether to stay or follow her, but after a moment of indecision I made up my mind that it was best not to let her out of my sight. The bewildered store owner was left calling after us, “You wait for change! You wait for change!”

This scene was repeated in store after store, until within a very short time, Gaby had spent all her money. She was absolutely flat broke when, in the last store she visited, she happened to look down into the bottom of a barrel, and there she saw one lone turtle staring up at her.

She let out a gasp. “Oh, Wulpy, look at the poor turtle,” she said. When she raised her face to mine, I saw that her eyes were again filled with tears.

“What are you crying about now?” I asked.

“They're going to sell it, I know they are,” said Gaby, tearfully. “They're going to sell it to

someone who'll kill it and put it in a soup. Oh, Wulpy, buy me the turtle.”

“Gaby, be sensible. What are you going to do with a turtle in your apartment?”

“How should I know? I'll put it in the sink. I'll put it in the bathtub. What difference does it make, just as long as they don't kill it. Oh, Wulpy, buy me the turtle. I'd buy it myself, but I don't have any money left.”

“All right! All right! Only please don't cry.”

I asked the store owner the price of the turtle. I was told that the cost was \$1.50, but when I opened my wallet to pay for it, I suddenly remembered I had only \$1.00 to my name.

It took a long time for me to steer Gaby back to the Chinese restaurant. When we finally arrived, Jerry was sitting all by himself at the corner table where we had left him.

“Where are the Rivers?” I asked.

“They left long ago,” said Jerry.

The restaurant was nearly deserted now, and the few waiters who were still standing around were obviously just waiting to close up for the night.

Jerry didn't say another word. He must have already paid the check and left a tip, because now he simply walked out into the street, hailed the first taxicab he saw, and then he got in himself, leaving the door open behind him.

“Always the gentleman,” said Gaby.

“Shut up and get in here,” said Jerry. He turned to the driver and gave him the address.

Gaby hesitated for a minute, but then, perhaps realizing she didn't have any money to get home on her own, she climbed into the back seat of the taxicab. I got in after her, this time taking care to wedge myself between Gaby and Jerry – I was beginning to feel somewhat like a referee. As soon as the driver heard the rear door slam, he put his foot on the gas and the taxicab lurched off into the night.

Nobody spoke for a long time. I had a feeling that Gaby was crying again, but I couldn't be sure. She just kept staring out the window of the taxicab, all the while clutching the bags of groceries that she had brought. Finally, she sighed deeply – it was almost a sob – and then, addressing her words to no one in particular, she said, “I'm going to see my lawyer first thing in the morning.”

Jerry kept his eyes straight ahead. “What lawyer?” he said, wearily. “You haven't got a lawyer.”

Logic, however, had never been one of Gaby's strong points. As always, whenever she was confronted with cold facts, she lapsed into emotionalism. “When I think of those poor little birds' heads...,” she said.

“Oh, Gaby, will you shut up about those birds' heads,” said Jerry. “I'm getting sick and tired of hearing about them.”

“I'll never forget those poor little eyes staring at me...”

“Come off it. Plenty of people eat birds' heads. Do you think they would have served them if you weren't supposed to eat them. You know what your whole attitude is – it's affectation.”

“...those poor little beaks.”

“That's just affectation on your part. You eat calves' brains, don't you?”

“I wouldn't eat calves' brains if you paid me.”

“Well, plenty of people do. And what about fishes' heads? People all over the world eat fishes' heads. Look at the Japanese.”

“The Japanese aren't civilized.”

“For your information, the Japanese are the most civilized people in the world.”

“Who attacked Pearl Harbor?”

“I don't give a damn who attacked Pearl Harbor. What has that got to do with anything?”

“No, millions of people were killed, but you don't give a damn. I wouldn't expect anything else

from a man who eats birds' heads.”

“Gaby, will you stop? Will you please stop?”

“I wasn't the one who ate the bird's heads in the first place,” said Gaby.

“God damn it, you're always doing this to me,” Jerry exploded. “You're always trying to put me down as some sort of a slob. You're always trying to make out that you're some poor, sensitive creature who's married to an ignorant boor of a husband. Sensitive! Well, let me tell you, I'm the one who's sensitive, not you. It isn't sensitive to embarrass your husband in front of other people. It isn't sensitive if someone serves you birds' heads to turn away and say, 'Ugh, take them away, I can't bear to look at them.' If you're so squeamish that you can't stand the sight of something like birds' heads, you just don't belong in this world. You're just too pure and sensitive to breathe.”

The last part of this outburst was delivered in a high falsetto, so that I felt my own manhood had been called into question. “I didn't mean to start an argument,” I said. “It was just that when I looked down and saw those birds' heads staring up at me, it was, well, you know, a sort of shock, and I just instinctively said, 'Ugh!' and turned away. I swear I had no idea I was going to start all this trouble between you.”

“Horrible, huh?” said Gaby.

I didn't want to give the impression of siding with her against Jerry, so once again I was forced to clarify my position. “I don't know,” I said. “Maybe Jerry has a point. Maybe there is something wrong with people like you and me if we can't stand the sight of things like birds' heads.”

“How can you defend him?” said Gaby.

“Gaby, you've got to learn to accept the world the way it is, the good with the bad, the ugly with the beautiful,” I said. “Maybe you and I leave out too much because we have some sort of preconceived notion of the way we want things to be. I wish I could arrive at a state of mind where I just accepted everything for was it is without having any ideas about it ahead of time. I have a feeling

that the world probably divides up into people who can eat birds' heads and people who can't. I can't. I admit it. But secretly I wish that I could. Maybe that's why Jerry is successful and I'm not."

Jerry snorted at this, and then he shifted in his seat to stare out the rear window of his side of the taxicab. Gaby glared at him for a second, and then she also turned her head away and stared glumly out of the rear window of her side. I, for my part, kept my eyes riveted straight ahead. We were passing through the Bowery by now, and outside we could see bums huddled in the doorways. No one spoke for several minutes, but eventually the silence became so oppressive that I decided I had no other choice but to play the thankless role of a peace-maker once again. "Isn't there something I can say or do to patch things up between you?" I asked. "I feel as though I'm responsible for this whole mess. Come on. Come on, you two. It isn't too late for us to have a good time. I'll tell you what, why don't we stop off in Greenwich Village and have a soda."

"A soda?" said Gaby, with distaste.

"What the Hell would anyone want a soda for at this hour of the night?" said Jerry.

"My ulcers are acting up," I said.

"Yeah, well, if you want a drink, come on home with us and I'll fix you a real one," said Jerry.

"That's just the point – I can't drink," I said.

"Well, come on home and have a cup of tea," said Jerry.

I hesitated for a moment. "All right," I finally said. "But the only reason I'm coming along is to prevent the two of you from fighting. You've got to promise me you won't fight any more."

"It doesn't make any difference anyhow," said Gaby. "I'm going so see my lawyer first thing in the morning."

When we got back to the apartment, Gaby didn't even bother to say goodnight, but instead headed straight for her bedroom – she must have left the groceries in the taxicab because there was no

sign of them now. Jerry at least excused himself and then immediately followed after her. A door slammed at the end of the long corridor down which they had vanished, and then voices were raised on the other side of it. I walked into the living room and sat down. Here everything was quiet except for the faint and far-away sounds of taxicabs passing in the street four stories below. Five minutes passed. Ten minutes. The apartment began to close in around me. My eyes wandered over the debris of the afternoon, the empty beer cans, the tea tray that Gaby had prepared. I got up and started to walk from room to room, examining the books on the shelves, the paintings on the walls, the photographs. In one framed photograph that I picked up and held in my hand, Jerry stood with his arm around Gaby's waist while she rested her head on his shoulder and gazed up at him adoringly. I suddenly felt like an interloper in other people's lives. Swatches of material with which Gaby was considering having various chairs reupholstered were strewn about the room, while on the desk a china pug dog kept watch over all these possessions.

After about twenty minutes had gone by, it began to dawn on me that Jerry and Gaby were not going to return. I went into the hallway and listened, but the apartment was deathly still. I wondered whether they had simply forgotten about me altogether and gone to bed. I wondered if they were having sex. For a few minutes, I was at a loss as to what to do. I went back into the living room and sat down once again, but then I decided it was futile to wait any longer, and I got up and silently let myself out of the apartment. I walked all the way home to Greenwich Village alone.

The next day, I sat down and wrote a letter to Gaby. It read:

Dear Gaby,

Are you ok? I spent a miserable night worrying about you, and this morning I decided I simply had to get in touch with you in order to let you know how I feel about certain things. I thought it best not to call you on the telephone, so there was nothing left for me to do but write

this letter.

I guess I don't have to remind you how long I've been in love with you, and in all these years I've never once lost the hope that someday we could get married. I'll admit it all seemed pretty hopeless as long as you were married to another man, but now if you're really serious about leaving Jerry, I just want you to know that my proposal of marriage still holds good. I have no idea at the moment how I would support you and the kids, but I'm convinced that I could find a way. You might have to make do with a little less for a time, but I would try to make it up to you in other ways. After all, money isn't everything!

Love,

John.

A few days later, I had Gaby's reply. It was scrawled on a postcard and read simply:

Dear Wulp,

Thanks for your nice note. Friends are few.

Love,

Gaby.