

41. HOMEWARD BOUND

I walked around for a couple of hours. There was still enough daylight to make my way. I let the grime of the city collect on me until I looked like any other drifter. The hotel clerk had seen millions of kids just like me. These were people who no one cared about, so he didn't ask me any questions. The fact that I could reason through my nightmares said nothing about ability to deal with the real world.

I had promised myself to get out of this town as soon as possible. I just hadn't come up with a clear plan yet. If I took some time to recharge, then I might have a better idea what to do. I hoped that I wasn't ruining my head start. I had become a sitting duck; I had told myself that I didn't want this to happen.

If I could just get someone to buy me an airline ticket, I could immediately get out of this place. I was wasting my money hanging around here.

I felt as if I was losing touch with who I really was. I realized that there were adults who would spend countless hours trying to psychoanalyze me. They would all like to fit me into some well-known case study. I myself wasn't going to sit still long enough for them to pull out their magnifying glasses. Whatever happened between me and my parent was my business. And I didn't need some kind of professional snoop digging dirt about me. My life wasn't some kind of open book that allowed everyone to peek inside. June tried to form me according to that model. And she never believed that I could have thought independent of hers. I had done my best to escape such scrutiny.

Now I was more vulnerable than ever to interference with my personal life. Every Bo Peep was ready to add another lost lamb to her flock. And her intentions were driven by a desire to correct her wayward sheep. I hadn't runaway from one prison to hop into another. And I wasn't waiting to be rescued on the street. I realized that the worst possible fate awaited me if I remained in Saint Louis. I wasn't going to waste a moment's time being here longer than I needed.

It wasn't as if there was a guide book telling me what was my next move. And I just couldn't spin a globe and let my finger randomly come to rest on my next destination. There was a lot more planning that I would have to do to get to where I wanted. And I was going to need a great deal of help along the way. I needed to get used to scamming adults to do things for me. The more pathetic that I looked, the harder it would be for them to resist coming to my rescue. I felt like a lost puppy.

I didn't want to leave the hotel until I had decided once and for all what were my plans. I didn't relish a long bus ride. I thought about the train. It would be a little more spacious than the bus. I could get up and move around. Whatever form of public transportation that I chose, I would have to deal with inquiring adults. This wasn't going to be easy.

I called about the train. I thought about heading for Omaha. For some reason, Nebraska had been on my mind. So I thought that it might be a good first stop. The train cost about ninety dollars. It was steep, but money well-spent. Then I wasn't going to have to take train rides forever. At least, that was what I thought. It would still be long ride. Over sixteen hours.

Lee might have figured that this was a likely destination. He might have had people looking for me there. I could come up with a more complete plan before I arrived. But I didn't

have to worry about it today. I could always change my mind. I could go somewhere else. Or I could get off at any stop along the way. It was my choice.

When I woke up, I thought that I would have clearer answers to my questions. The day confronted me with its sheer immediacy. I should have headed down to train station and hopped on board the train to Omaha. I considered my alternatives. Saint Louis was a no go. And it was time to leave. But I didn't want to check out of my room. Staying here meant that I was postponing my decision. It wasn't so much that Omaha was a bad choice. Anywhere would be all right. But I wanted my decision to make a difference. There were too many factors that I couldn't control. As well, I had a place to stay. Sure, I was wasting more money here, but I didn't want to deal with all the issues of moving to a new place.

A quick shower and some breakfast, and I was ready to go. I couldn't avoid Omaha.

When I arrived at the station, I found out that I had miscalculated. The train was not a direct line to Omaha. It went to Chicago. There I would have to make my connection. I had missed the only connecting train. It was at six in the morning. So I paid for a ticket. And I decided to board the train to Chicago. I could keep myself busy in Chicago. Then I'd catch the train directly to Omaha at two the next day.

I should have checked the times. Then I would have had a room for another night. Instead, I would be wandering around Chicago. It wasn't as if I was going to find a cheap hotel room. What kind of life was this?

I counted my money in my mind. I could make splurge just this once. I'd be fine. Lee had unknowingly set me up. As I waited for the train to board, I was getting a little paranoid. I thought that I saw Lee wandering around the station. Of course, today was Thursday. He should just be getting back. So he wouldn't have enough time to rush up to Saint Louis and start looking around. Who knew if he didn't have more pressing matters?

I convinced myself that everything was well. I had nothing to worry about. This was going to be a long haul. There was so much that I was going to have to do just to stay above water. I couldn't worry about every single detail right now. I didn't have a credit card, so I couldn't reserve a room in advance. So I'd have something important to do when I arrived in Chicago. And it would be late. This idea didn't seem all that fantastic to me.

I envisioned walking around Chicago at nine at night without a place to stay. It was not going to be an hospitable place. I would have to act quickly.

All these experiences in my life were so disconnected. One minute, I'd be living in a nice house, then I'd be wandering the streets looking for a place to stay. I needed more consistency. I had my wits about me. I knew what I needed to do. I just wanted a little more consistency in my life. Hell, I was just a kid. I wanted a life that I could just walk into.

I found my train and sat down. I had to make sure that someone hadn't reserved the seat. Again I was lucky that no one sat next to me. The train was crowded. Almost sold out. There were people returning to their families. There were businessmen with clients the next day. There were a few college students enjoying the adventure of a train ride. This was once the lifeline of the country. But times had changed. And trains were rather expensive. It would probably be cheaper to get a flight to Chicago.

I wasn't up for observing other people. If they didn't bother me, that would be perfect. Looking at them only reminded me what I lacked in my life. I couldn't let it affect me. I just

didn't want to dwell. I had thought about reaching out. But it seemed too complicated. So I settled back in my seat.

The ride was pleasant at first. Then it just became boring. Driving in a car never seemed this interminable. I guess I had been in one place too long.

In Union Station in Chicago, I was overwhelmed by the crowd. I was supposed to hit the ground running. I just felt my engines grind to a halt. I panicked. I didn't know where to go or what to do. There were a number of lost souls that were wandering around the station. I made sure that I didn't make eye contact with any of these freaks.

They had a help window at the station. I went over there and told them my predicament. I added a few details. My cousin was supposed to pick me up. But her flight was delayed. Now I was stuck in Chicago. The woman took pity on me. She called up one of the hotels close by and explained my situation. She told me that a room would be waiting for me. It wasn't going to be too expensive. So I had succeeded for the time being. Whatever was happening, I was still treading water.

In another hotel room, I was reminded of the fleeting character of my life. It was going to be no easier this evening. At least, I was protected against the elements. And I didn't have to deal with more creeps.

As long as I was running, I seemed to have a clear purpose. I was trying to make myself scarce. It was almost heroic. For the time being, I was completely safe in my hotel room. There was no way that Lee was going to find me here. He was just waking up to the fact that I had escaped his clutches. His frustration meant that he wouldn't be able to analyze the situation clearly for a couple of days. Even if he started looking in Saint Louis, he'd lose the trail there. And he'd have no reason to track me down in Chicago. I couldn't imagine him looking at surveillance tapes from the train station. So I assumed that I'd be able to make my own way for quite a while. And I'd be totally free and clear once I hit Omaha.

It still wasn't clear what he was really afraid of. How could I document what he had done to Cody? It was all conjecture.

That night I had a dream about Lee. He waiting for me in the hotel lobby.

"You did a good job, Chloe. Only it wasn't quite good enough."

"Where are you taking me?"

"Back to the house."

"Why are you taking me back?"

"Cody needs to see you one last time. He needs to see the face of the girl who betrayed him."

Betrayed him? You were going to try to kill me."

"That's silly. I gave you money. I was going to take you to the bus station."

Then he started reciting all these numbers to me. I thought that it must be something important. Like a bank account number. So I just kept repeating it back to him.

Every time that I thought that I was getting off track, I felt this need to redirect myself. It was the nonsense logic of the dream. And the imperative was only becoming more intense. What difference could it possibly make? It made a world of difference. As I repeated the numbers, they assumed a mystical form. They could unlock the secrets of the universe.

I woke up from the dream ready to write down those epic numbers. Once I got them

down on a pad, they meant nothing to me. It had all been the kind of silliness dreams are made of.

If Lee was after me, he must be using some kind of code to give him an advantage. What did he know about me? I wasn't even sure if he ever knew my last name. I kept him in the dark. This made it more difficult for him to do a background check. I was just some girl in the night. And I was gone by dawn.

I had the strangest feeling that I couldn't progress to the next level until I could describe everything in my immediate vicinity. I stared at the end table next to me. This was more the stuff of nightmares. But I played a mental game with myself and tried to enumerate every detail in the room.

Who was my audience? It wasn't as if I was living my life in a novel. But I might as well have been. What did that really mean? Did I think of myself as bigger than life? What was my story?

June would have claimed that I exaggerated the drama in my life. Her abusive treatment could be chalked up as tough love. And my suspicions about my father were simply excuse so that I could do anything that I wanted. This was where things got really scary. Without any limits on my behavior, I was free to wander into the riskiest situations. And then things could truly get screwed up. I wouldn't listen to my mother. So I didn't take any precautions at all.

June's prescription for my life would have applied better to Rose. That didn't stop June from dispensing her wisdom to me. If June hadn't made a fuss about everything, I don't think that I would have fought her off so strenuously. She didn't give me a chance to grow. She just shoved her ideas in my face.

All the while, Bill was doing his own thing. The more that I distanced myself from both of them, the more that I understood how bizarre Bill was. Ultimately, June acted completely under his direction. So what made him so severe. Often, he never said a thing, but his edicts were all so clear.

This was where my story began. If I was performing at all, then it was simply an effort to gain invisibility. I never succeed in impressing the kids at school. And I did all my work for my teachers. But I never sucked up to them. And I wasn't looking for rewards from my parent. I only wanted them to let me live my life. They didn't have to come to my plays or my music recitals. I didn't want an audience. I wanted my appearances to be as rare as possible.

All my defensive efforts ended up creating a strategy in its own right. It required me to be constantly aware of what Bill and June were doing. And I adjusted my behavior accordingly. So I wasn't acting independently from them. Instead, I found a comfortable dissonance to counter their meddling.

I was hardly the heroine of this tale. I wasn't even a very good anti-hero. I didn't go around trying to stick it to the man. I was just trying to survive. But I did spend a good deal of my time living in my head. I was always trying to second-guess Bill and June. And if I wrote down and collected all my adventures, I'd have quite a book. However, I could never do that because it would have supplied Bill and June with the ammunition that they needed.

Although I felt a little hazy about my own background, I was skillful at tracking time. I would have been a great historian. I had been very observant of Lee Tate. And I learned a great

deal about Cody from living in his home. Again and again, I brought a careful eye to every situation. Perhaps that would have made me a great novelist if only I could discover a clearer purpose for all this mess.

I again looked at the end table with the eye of an artist. This room had seen its better days. People still hung around with the hope that they could recapture the ghosts of yesteryear.

If I stayed here too long, I would become one of the lost souls. My features would become frozen in the prints on the wall. And my body would vanish in the wood paneling. I hadn't come here for an embalming. I couldn't wait around for a more appropriate legacy. I had to take my chances outside.

What had made me perfect witness? Granted, I was involved in documenting my own story. But if that was where my story ended, it would be rather boring. I wanted to encompass the great tide of our era. I wouldn't mind watching it from afar. But that hardly diminished my need to sketch the tumult. That was what had drawn me to literature.

The ride to Chicago reminded me of a history driven by intention. And the iron rails flowed with an energy that had eventually eclipsed that of the mighty rivers. Freight could follow the geometric logic of the map maker. It could embrace the vision of man. He had escaped his exile in tragedy. Back water towns now could vibrate with the force of history. The railroad whistle would invigorate the groggy. And man could liberate the incipient power in his every muscle. With the railway's flourish, molten steel could make its embrace known from sea to shiny sea.

Chicago had been nourished by a belief that was expressed in the roaring locomotive. The sound of metal against metal linked this Midwest terminal with San Francisco and New York. What one man whispered in the alleyways could gloriously reverberate thousands of miles away. Chicago could welcome the barges from the Great Lakes. It could encompass the abundance of the bread belt. Even the horror of the stockyards helped feed the hunger of a generation.

The city expressed the country's deep longing. But it also designed a pathway where people could find satisfaction. While the pungent after-taste reiterated a more profound question, the excitement of the city pointed to a lively answer. No wonder the Roaring Twenties had gone off like a bang. The horse traders and the flim-flam men thought that their way was superior. And their theatrical impressions mocked the hard work that had made the city so preeminent. When robber-barons could no longer drive their work crews any deeper into the ground, a whole new crew of speculators had learned to milk the city for all its wealth. The St Valentine's Day Massacre made the people long for more straight shooters and less little Caesars and gun molls. But the assassination of John Dillinger in front of the Biograph let citizens know what might happen to them if they carried their rebellion too far.

Chicago had closed the book on the roar long ago. And it did its best to convince the world that this was the city that really worked. It was quite a juggling act. It had its moments. Michael Jordan and the Bulls. Festivals by the water front. Parks teeming with visitors and residents. Amidst the frivolity there remained a suggestion of rule by an iron hand. Meanwhile, the echoes of the Haymarket Riots or the Chicago fire spun a more desperate narrative.

I could look out my window at the traffic and recognize that something was going on. The buzz made its way up Lakeshore Drive. It twisted and turned on the highways and in the

houses. It was to be repeated in the words of the inhabitants.

Some strove to encompass the full picture. Skyscrapers told a complementary tale. It brought the map to life. A spectator could survey man's purpose from Shaumburg to Belle Isle. The L was the city's nervous system. Electricity pulsed along these lines as the trains linked the Loop to the suburbs. Again the city of trains embraced the rails at its heart.

Art found its voice in the city's grids. Grand boulevards massed cars in vertical and horizontal patterns. And architecture took to the air to express the same symmetry. And at the center of these grand edifices, beat the industrial engines that animated gigantic toys.. Even the sweet smell of pastries and candy filled the air. It was the city's waltz.

I listened closely to detect the harmony. The repetition verged on the annoying. But at any moment the crescendo would know the listener to the ground in naked admiration.

Self-love could not last for long within this dazzling symphony. I felt honored just to take part in the panorama. I revered my visit. But this was not my destination. Not only would I become overwhelmed here, I couldn't risk discovery. There were loads of places to hide. But the wonders of the city forced everyone to surface. In one of those incredible moments, I would be completely exposed.

At Cody's side, I had learned that the novelist's skill comes from learning to tell the story from his point of view. This wasn't some kind of crass manipulation that was practiced by June. It was important to let the events speak for themselves. And this was where things became tricky. It was almost like jumping the tracks. The tale just took off on its own.

June thought that it was simply a matter of putting on the right face for the occasion. She would work her make up to cover what she viewed as a flaw. She used this time to rejuvenate herself. But personality was more in flux than June was willing to admit. And you couldn't tame its variations with a little lip gloss.

I had already had these frightening moments when I seemed to come out of myself. It was hard to explain how freaky the experience was. It was analogous to dislocating a shoulder. Only this dislocation applied to the personality. And I could simply snap it back into place. I had already been familiar with these feelings of disassociation. My isolation at home only enhance that feeling. I'd get lost in this vision and would barely make it back to reality. I wasn't myself. I had little recollection of my past. I was floating in this dream-like state where I had memories of another life. Anything that was happening around me took me deeper and deeper into this alternative world. Even then, nothing was certain. Simply event after event with nothing holding it all together.

Once I was caught, I had trouble reconnecting. I had to get over the attack. Then I could just emerge as myself. In those moments, I was convinced that something was seriously wrong with me. And I was afraid of a recurrence of episodes like that. On the other hand, I was offered a new perspective on the unity of the self. Through it all, I never lost the ability to recognize objects. I had emotion. I simply couldn't organize them in reference to a single personal narrative. There were inconsistencies. Fantasy blended with actual experiences. I couldn't sort it all out.

I compared my instability with the certainty that dominated June's life. I didn't feel that I lacked anything at all. She could never pierce the illusions that organized her days. She didn't know the difference. If a world existed outside of her vanity circle, she had no idea what it could

be. Even the news sustained her in the bubble. It gave her the inspiration that she needed to be so ruthless in her personal dealing. Her might was her right.

I was able to detach myself from all her rules. I saw a clearer, more natural picture of life. It was one more rooted in scientific method. She had learned to raise her own whims to the level of universal truth. But her sacred infallibility was shot through with holes. Her son Josh was the best example of her failure. He was an expert at playing video games. But he struggled in school. He had friends, but all of them muddled through. They took a certain pride in their social advances. They rewarded their own lackluster performances. June didn't know the difference. He was her little angel. And she would make sure that he had every advantage to complement his own selfish desires. No wonder he thought it his duty to persecute me. I was lucky that he didn't get more out of control. I lived my life independently from both of them. But I could have never escaped if I had accepted June's rigid view of reality. I could see the crumbling foundation of her castle in the sky.

June had appropriately tricked the game. Once I had escaped her influence, I felt as if I was lost in a choppy sea. I did my best to put the whole picture together. But each facet only seemed to contradict every other one. And there were those times when I just snapped out of the puzzle completely. I tried to keep myself together. But it wasn't a matter of will. There were so many events that didn't fit in the one story. If June's version lacked authority, then where did I really belong. She had coddled all these experiences together to stake her claim as my parent. But I could only trace her lineage back so far. What was she imposing on me? Whose life was she forcing me to live?

Bill was a feeble accessory in this sordid tale. He would play his role as the enforcer. But he understood nothing about the mind control that she was practicing. He relied more on brute force. Sure, he had a mechanical way of viewing the world. That may have been his advantage. However, he let her fill in all the details. That only permitted her to spawn further damage. Through it all, there was something that really bothered me about his participation. And I couldn't figure out all the features of this dirty game. It was almost as if he and Lee were members of a secret club. They all practiced the same methods. And they were collectively driven by a raw viciousness. Bill and June were both waiting their instructions from a more insipid higher power.

There was nowhere for me to go. I felt as if I had a contagious disease, and I was being quarantined from the rest of humanity. June would take pleasure in such a feeling on my part. Her brainwashing had succeeded. Even if I wouldn't go along with her teachings, she made sure that I would face my exile without any recourse. There were no appeals for my sentence. Fortunately, I didn't put much stock in her judicial decisions. But that didn't get me back into the world. She didn't even toss me a life-jacket. If I went down and never came up, I was simply a casualty of her endless war.

It was entirely disorienting to have a mother who treated her role as the grand inquisitor. Adjusting her hair in the mirror, this fairest creature would deny her iron hand. Her desperate measures were simply a reaction to a daughter who could not appreciate the finer points of the cosmetic arts. June needed to make sure that the mirror was her friend. If she could find the needed discipline in the visual world, then she was certain that the hidden spiritual world was equally obliging.

As these two worlds to which she subscribed became more and more strained, I found myself wandering through dark hallways and hidden passageways. I did my best to come into the light. But she had all the illumination trained on her makeup mirror. And I was afraid to eclipse her shining moment lest it tipped her off that I wasn't buying into her eternal truth. I was hardly the runway model who could assume the beauty queen's crown. I was marching to a different drummer who wasn't carried away by the dance beat that enlivened June's carnival.

When the cheering stopped, the silence was deafening. If I listened closely, I could hear the sustained hum that came from inside. And this meditative tone sent me on a journey into the self. No wonder, I was able to detach myself from the strictures of personality. I wasn't the first prisoner who had taken her captivity as the cue to fly off like a robin. My body would still be firmly rooted on terra firma. But my soul was off on an extended vacation.

My withdrawal from the physical world made it nearly impossible to use its reference point to anchor my personality. So I really was floating in the outer reaches of existence. If I sailed off unable to return, that was all part of my sentence. Four walls, a prison would not make when the soul found her own accommodations.

I still had a few more hours to sleep. With my actual journey ahead of me, I would need the rest. I had tired of playing a game of roulette with my personality. For the time being, I settled on my role as traveler. And that required me to be alert as possible. I was leaving behind me a past of captivity. I did not want to carry any extra baggage with me. In case of emergency, I would have to be able to be as fleet as possible. I needed to travel light.

When the day rolled over me, I was already prepared for the adventure ahead. I would let its logic guide me and not try to fit it into some preordained plan. I could hardly pretend that this was a rebirth. But I was using the opportunity to start anew.

The streets were full of people rushing to various destinations. I had some time to kill before my train. After a hearty breakfast, I walked over to Grant Park. The walk was leisurely. The air was a little nippy. And the wind sailed off of the lake. But it was refreshing. I looked at the row of building that formed Michigan Avenue. The city was staring back at me. It was its way of saying good bye. This had been a pleasant visit. It gave me strength to deal with my confrontation with Lee Tate.

When the train to Omaha pulled out of Union Station, I became committed to my quest. Maybe, I wouldn't find a place that I could call home. But I could settle down for a little while. It was all up to me. I wanted to tell myself that I knew how the world worked. I had read loads of books. I had observed the game on the internet. I had come face to face with con artists like Lee and June. What more could the world have in store for me?

I pulled my book out of my pack. I made sure that no one would try to engage me in a conversation. The novel served as a suitable distraction from the events of the past few days. It reminded me of my time reading to Cody. Tomorrow was supposed to be my final day on the earth. I was still very much alive. I believed that I would stay that way for quite a while.

How was Cody adapting? Evidently, he had a long way to go. He was completely disoriented when I visited him. Without my influence, Lee would be able to guide him completely. He would completely accept Lee's tutelage. What would happen to all my lessons. Exactly as Lee anticipated, they would just serve as content for his master plan. Cody would end up mouthing all the platitudes that Lee had fed him.

If Cody became so subservient, what kind of model would this offer for the rest of the world. Any scientific question could be repackaged by this line of reasoning. Knowledge would dissolve into propaganda. And the individual would be unable to resist these changes. Cody would never know the difference.

I went back to reading. I couldn't let this bother me. How could Cody or Lee affect my life? It was mine to live without their interference. This was the fantastic things about books. They let us take the elements of our own lives and rearrange them in a creative fashion. This wasn't like the stunted thinking that Lee attempted. This was all about giving respect to our natural inclinations. My curiosity was the one trait that I tried the hardest to communicate to Cody. He needed to feel the vibrant power that pulsed through his veins. There was no substitute for the natural origins of freedom. How did Lee pervert this? Ultimately, he would depend on Cody to humanize his autocratic ideology. Cody could extol the will of children who went along with the discipline. This would be his version of the natural order. The rabbit would already be placed in the magician's hat.

In a sense, we had fought to standstill. If they wanted to claim that the world was flat, they had their scientific adherents to bolster their theories. They were just afraid that another Columbus would prove them wrong. So they had to make their fantasy more and more appealing. The wonders of nature were only a pale imitation of the amusement park rides at any Disneyland. And the acrobatics of the video game world were so much more involving than the joys of walking in the park in springtime. Once they had your soul, they could make your body do whatever they liked. Lee cherished the ultimate weapon.

The train continued along. Time and tide would stop for no man. And there was a necessity that was outpacing the stubborn determination of Lee Tate. His only victories would be over a captive audience. He simply had to figure out how to make the rest of the world into his band of admirers. Was this train full of the perfect candidates for mind control? Was that the price of admission for this ride?

I didn't want to believe that the rest of the world were a pack of zombies looking for direction. I just didn't feel right going up to people and asking them to deny Lee Tate's philosophy of life. On first hearing, they might see an ally for their own struggles. If Lee was so right, why did he need to get rid of me? Was that the weakness in his line of reasoning? If there wasn't some form of coercion that drew people to him, could he ever convince people that he was right.

I imagined that these folk were waiting for the appropriate signal to go into attack mode. All that it would take was a lonely train whistle in the night.

"Do you all want to follow this guy?"

No one spoke back to me. It was lucky that I hadn't voiced my doubts out loud. Was everybody a potential follower? Was there something that they hated deeply about their lives? If they heard a prophet point the way, they would all head in that direction.

I was growing restless traveling. What if I had decided to head to the coast. I would have a lot longer to wait. I was getting tired again. I was dozing off. I hadn't slept enough last night. My self examination had taken longer than I wanted. It had cut into my sleep time. I needed to catch up.

When the train arrived, I jumped. I hadn't known how long I had been sleeping. It was

early evening. I would again have to make my way. I felt a little like an expert. This time it wasn't that difficult finding a room. I thought about staying for a couple of nights. They were open to my plans. I paid for the first night and went up to my room.

Once I put my hotel room in order, I felt that I could relax. Things were so different from my stay in Chicago. I was no longer as concerned with observing the city. I was sure that I could have found a similar story to accompany my observations. It was just that I needed to turn inward. I had gone through a hellish few days. I was still on the run. But I had put enough distance between myself and Lee that it was much less likely that we would run into each other in Omaha.

If I went deeper into the heartland, the odds would be even more in my favor. I was deviating from the expected. And Lee would find it harder and harder to account for my decisions. I was going towards the unknown. All the while, I was entering a world where conformity was more an accepted way of life. Maybe these people weren't quite so vain as June. They were more rooted in the land. They had few distractions from the daily grind.

I hardly stuck out on the street. There was nothing unusual about the way I dressed. I didn't wear gaudy colors. I didn't imagine myself as performing for an audience. I went about my business. Perhaps, Omaha wouldn't be my ideal stomping ground. But I could make it work temporarily. There were other places that I could go. Nothing required me to stay here.

I couldn't afford to keep staying in hotels. A night or two more, and I would have to make other plans. I just needed some time to collect myself. I was careful not to draw any undue attention to myself. I was careful not to drop something on the ground so that I could avoid a stranger having to pick it up for me.

I was constantly checking to see that my money was with me. I kept looking for my wallet with my ID. I was in enough of a fix. I didn't want to add any accidents to the mix. I spent as much time in doors as possible. When I had errands to do, I did them efficiently. I ate out a few times. I also brought some food up to the room. I made sure that my room was neat. I didn't play the TV too loud. In fact, I tried to avoid watching TV as much as possible.

I was the invisible girl. I couldn't keep living my life like this. I wanted friends. I wanted to talk to people. It was just that now things were too complicated. I couldn't explain all the ins and outs to anyone else. There wasn't even a short version that made sense. If they believed that I had run away, they might try to report me. I was learning how to get older quickly. I couldn't appear weak to any of these people.

All this time alone could have made me insane. I wasn't talking to myself. But I was carrying on these conversations in my head. Thankfully, I had books to read. I kept busy. I was never idle. As much as it troubled me to leave the room, I kept taking walks. I needed to remain healthy. I tried not to become too attached to the city. Everyone seemed nice enough. If they were plagued by nagging questions about their lives, they did their best to hide their misgivings. For those souls who wanted to escape the norm, it must have been difficult. I knew that there were parts of the city where a more radical view was entertained. But if I hid out there, I felt that there would be too many demands on my time. People would want to know my story. I'd be another runaway who was heading to the big city for acceptance. As much as they might tolerate my freakiness, I didn't want to form an alliance with another Rose. I loved the girl. But my resolve made me believe that I had chosen a different path for myself.

When someone gave me that look of recognition, I immediately looked down at the ground. I didn't want to get caught shopping at some funky clothing store. I tried to define my needs in the most restrictive way possible. That way there would be few complications. When I needed to go, my backpack would be ready at the door. There would be no painful good byes in Omaha.

I hadn't come to some deep realization. Was that what I needed before I could figure out what to do next? This wasn't supposed to be my life, but what was? I wasn't going to get a job in Omaha. And I wasn't ready to pack up yet. Perhaps, I was almost there.

I needed to treat myself. I went out for dinner. I wouldn't have too many more of these luxuries. But I needed to splurge. It wasn't as if I was opening expensive bottles of champagne. So it wasn't going to cost that much. As I ate my salad, I just zoned out.

Back in the hotel room, things became clearer. I had been making all my decisions based on negatives. I needed to direct myself towards something that was a little more beneficial for me. It was like my meal. I didn't eat just because I was hungry. I enjoyed what I was eating. I needed to do the same thing for my mental health. It wasn't all about getting away from Lee and June. They were gone! This was all about Chloe. I wasn't acting in a self-centered way. I was just doing what I needed in order to get my life back.

I didn't know if I could make it in Omaha. But I wasn't tied to this place. It was a stop along the way. It was a pleasant stop. It had been restful. But nothing excited me about the place. I could wake up tomorrow with a new destination in mind. The world was my oyster! I was ready to feast on its wonders.

I had no queasy feeling about myself. There were no more flashbacks to frightful nights with my father. I didn't dwell on a hangover from a night of partying with Rose. I was doing just fine for me.