

OF MISSING PERSONS

by Jack Finney

Walk in as though it were an ordinary travel bureau, the stranger I'd met at a bar had told me. Ask a few ordinary questions – about a trip you're planning, a vacation, anything like that. Then hint about The Folder a little, but whatever you do, don't mention it directly; wait till he brings it up himself. And if he doesn't, you might as well forget it. If you can. Because you'll never see it; you're not the type, that's all. And if you ask about it, he'll just look at you as though he doesn't know what you're talking about.

I REHEARSED IT all in my mind, over and over, but what seems possible at night over a beer isn't easy to believe on a raw, rainy day, and I felt like a fool, searching the store fronts for the street number I'd memorized. It was noon hour, West 42nd Street, New York, rainy and windy; and like half the men around me, I walked with a hand on my hatbrim, wearing an old trench coat, head bent into the slanting rain, and the world was real and drab, and this was hopeless.

Anyway, I couldn't help thinking, who am I to see The Folder, even if there is one? Name? I said to myself, as though I were already being asked. It's Charley Ewell, and I'm a young guy who works in a bank; a teller. I don't like the job; I don't make much money, and I never will. I've lived in New York for over three years and haven't many friends. What the hell, there's really nothing to say – I see more movies than I want to, read too many books, and I'm sick of meals alone in restaurants. I have ordinary abilities, looks and thoughts. Does that suit you; do I qualify?

Now I spotted it, the address in the two-hundred block, an old, pseudo-modernized office building, tired, outdated, refusing to admit it but unable to hide it. New York has a lot of them west of Fifth.

I pushed through the brass-framed glass doors into the tiny lobby, paved with freshly mopped, permanently dirty tile. The green-painted walls were lumpy from old plaster repairs; in a chrome frame hung a little wall directory – white celluloid easily-changed letters on a black felt background. There were some twenty-odd names, and I found "Acme Travel Bureau" second on the list, between "A-1 Mimeo" and "Ajax Magic Supplies." I pressed the bell beside the old-style open-grille elevator door; it rang high up in the shaft. There was a long pause, then a thump, and the heavy chains began rattling slowly down toward me, and I almost turned and left – this was insane.

But upstairs the Acme office had divorced itself from the atmosphere of the building. I pushed open the pebble-glass door, walked in, and the big square room was bright and clean, fluorescent-lighted. Beside the wide double windows, behind a counter, stood a tall gray-haired, grave-looking man, a telephone at his ear. He glanced up, nodded to beckon me in, and I felt my heart pumping – he fitted the description exactly. "Yes, United Air Lines," he was saying into the phone. "Flight' – he glanced at a paper on the glass-topped counter – "seven-o-three, and I suggest you check in forty minutes early."

Standing before him now, I waited, leaning on the counter, glancing around; he was the man, all right, and yet this was just an ordinary travel agency: big bright posters on the walls, metal floor racks full of folders, printed schedules under the glass on the counter. This is just what it looks like and nothing else, I thought, and again I felt like a fool.

"Can I help you?" Behind the counter the tall gray-haired man was smiling at me, replacing the phone, and suddenly I was terribly nervous.

“Yes.” I stalled for time, unbuttoning my raincoat. Then I looked up at him again and said, “I’d like to – get away.” You fool, that’s too fast! I told myself. Don’t rush it! I watched in a kind of panic to see what effect my answer had had, but he didn’t flick an eyelash.

“Well, there are a lot of places to go,” he said politely. From under the counter he brought out a long, slim folder and laid it on the glass, turning it right side up for me. “Fly to Buenos Aires – Another World!” it said in a double row of pale green letters across the top.

I looked at it long enough to be polite. It showed a big silvery plane banking over a harbor at night, a moon shining on the water, mountains in the background. Then I just shook my head; I was afraid to talk, afraid I’d say the wrong thing.

“Something quieter, maybe?” He brought out another folder: thick old tree trunks, rising way up out of sight, sunbeams slanting down through them – “The Virgin Forests of Maine, via Boston and Maine Railroad.” “Or” – he laid a third folder on the glass – “Bermuda is nice just now.” This one said, “Bermuda, Old World in the New.”

I decided to risk it. “No,” I said, and shook my head. “What I’m really looking for is a permanent place. A new place to live and settle down in.” I stared directly into his eyes. “For the rest of my life.” Then my nerve failed me, and I tried to think of a way to backtrack.

But he only smiled pleasantly and said, “I don’t know why we can’t advise you on that.” He leaned forward on the counter, resting on his forearms, hands clasped; he had all the time in the world for me, his posture conveyed. “What are you looking for; what do you want?”

I held my breath, then said it. “Escape.”

“From what?”

“Well –” Now I hesitated; I’d never put it into words before. “From New York, I’d say. And cities in general. From worry. And fear. And the things I read in my newspapers. From loneliness.” And then I couldn’t stop, though I knew I was talking too much, the words spilling out. “From never doing what I really want to do or having much fun. From selling my days just to stay alive. From life itself – the way it is today, at least.” I looked straight at him and said softly, “From the world.”

Now he was frankly staring, his eyes studying my face intently with no pretense of doing anything else, and I knew that in a moment he’d shake his head and say, “Mister, you better get to a doctor.” But he didn’t. He continued to stare, his eyes examining my forehead now. He was a big man, his gray hair crisp and curling, his lined face very intelligent, very kind; he looked the way ministers should look; he looked the way all fathers should look.

He lowered his gaze to look into my eyes and beyond them; he studied my mouth, my chin, the line of my jaw, and I had the sudden conviction that without any difficulty he was learning a great deal about me, more than I knew myself. Suddenly he smiled and placed both elbows on the counter, one hand grasping the other fist and gently massaging it. “Do you like people? Tell the truth, because I’ll know if you aren’t.”

“Yes. It isn’t easy for me to relax though, and be myself, and make friends.”

He nodded gravely, accepting that. “Would you say you’re a reasonably decent kind of man?”

“I guess so; I think so.” I shrugged.

“Why?”

I smiled wryly; this was hard to answer. “Well – at least when I’m not, I’m usually sorry about it.”

He grinned at that, and considered it for a moment or so. Then he smiled – deprecatingly, as though he were about to tell a little joke that wasn’t too good. “You know,” he said casually, “we occasionally get people in here who seem to be looking for pretty much what you are. So just as a sort of little joke –”

I couldn’t breathe. This was what I’d been told he would say if he thought I might do.

“–we’ve worked up a little folder. We’ve even had it printed. Simply for our own amusement, you understand. And for occasional clients like you. So I’ll have to ask you to look at it here if you’re interested. It’s not the sort of thing we’d care to have generally known.”

I could barely whisper, “I’m interested.”

He fumbled under the counter, then brought out a long thin folder, the same size and shape as the others, and slid it over the glass toward me.

I looked at it, pulling it closer with a finger tip, almost afraid to touch it. The cover was dark blue, the shade of a night sky, and across the top in white letters it said, “Visit Enchanting Verna!” The blue cover was sprinkled with white dots – stars – and in the lower left corner was a globe, the world, half surrounded by clouds. At the upper right, just under the word “Verna,” was a star larger and brighter than the others; rays shot out from it, like those from a star on a Christmas card. Across the bottom of the cover it said, “Romantic Verna, where life is the way it *should* be.” There was a little arrow beside the legend, meaning Turn the page.

I turned, and the folder was like most travel folders inside – there were pictures and text, only these were about “Verna” instead of Paris, or Rome, or the Bahamas. And it was beautifully printed; the pictures looked real. What I mean is, you’ve seen color stereopticon pictures? Well, that’s what these were like, only better, far better. In one picture you could see dew glistening on grass, and it looked wet. In another, a tree trunk seemed to curve out of the page, in perfect detail, and it was a shock to touch it and feel smooth paper instead of the rough actuality of bark. Miniature human faces, in a third picture, seemed about to speak, the lips moist and alive, the eyeballs shining, the actual texture of skin right there on paper; and it seemed impossible, as you stared, that the people wouldn’t move and speak.

I studied a large picture spreading across the upper half of two open pages. It seemed to have been taken from the top of a hill; you saw the land dropping away at your feet far down into a valley, then rising up again, way over on the other side. The slopes of both hills were covered with forest, and the color was beautiful, perfect; there were miles of green, majestic trees, and you knew as you looked that this forest was virgin, almost untouched. Curving through the floor of the valley, far below, ran a stream, blue from the sky in most places; here and there, where the current broke around massive boulders, the water was foaming white; and again it seemed that if you’d only look closely enough you’d be certain to see that stream move and shine in the sun. In clearings beside the stream there were shake-roofed cabins, some of logs, some of brick or adobe. The caption under the picture simply said, “The Colony.”

“Fun fooling around with a thing like that,” the man behind the counter murmured, nodding at the folder in my hands. “Relieves the monotony. Attractive-looking place, isn’t it?”

I could only nod dumbly, lowering my eyes to the picture again because that picture told you even more than just what you saw. I don’t know how you knew this, but you realized, staring at that forest-covered valley, that this was very much the way America once looked when it was new. And you knew this was only a part of a whole land of unspoiled, unharmed forests, where every stream ran pure; you were seeing what people, the last of them dead over a century ago, had once looked at in Kentucky and Wisconsin and the old Northwest. And you knew that if you could breathe in that air you’d feel it flow into your lungs sweeter than it’s been anywhere on earth for a hundred and fifty years.

Under that picture was another, of six or eight people on a beach – the shore of a lake, maybe, or the river in the picture above. Two children were squatting on their haunches, dabbling in the water’s edge, and in the foreground a half circle of adults were sitting, kneeling, or squatting in comfortable balance on the yellow sand. They were talking, several

were smoking, and most of them held half-filled coffee cups; the sun was bright, you knew the air was balmy and that it was morning, just after breakfast. They were smiling, one woman talking, the others listening. One man had half risen from his squatting position to skip a stone out onto the surface of the water.

You knew this: that they were spending twenty minutes or so down on that beach after breakfast before going to work, and you knew they were friends and that they did this every day. You knew – I tell you, you *knew* – that they liked their work, all of them, whatever it was; that there was no forced hurry or pressure about it. And that – well, that’s all, I guess; you just knew that every day after breakfast these families spent a leisurely half hour sitting and talking, there in the morning sun, down on that wonderful beach.

I’d never seen anything like their faces before. They were ordinary enough in looks, the people in that picture – pleasant, more or less familiar types. Some were young, in their twenties; others were in their thirties; one man and woman seemed around fifty. But the faces of the youngest couple were completely unlined, and it occurred to me then that they had been born there, and that it was a place where no one worried or was ever afraid. The others, the older ones, there were lines in their foreheads, grooves around their mouths, but you felt that the lines were no longer deepening, that they were healed and untroubled scars. And in the faces of the oldest couple was a look of – I’d say it was a look of permanent *relief*. Not one of those faces bore a trace of malice; these people were *happy*. But even more than that, you knew they’d *been* happy, day after day after day for a long, long time, and that they always would be, and they knew it.

I wanted to join them. The most desperate longing roared up in me from the bottom of my soul to *be* there – on that beach, after breakfast, with those people in the sunny morning – and I could hardly stand it. I looked up at the man behind the counter and managed to smile. “This is – very interesting.”

“Yes,” he smiled back, then shook his head in amusement. “We’ve had customers so interested, so carried away, that they didn’t want to talk about anything else.” He laughed. “They actually wanted to know rates, details, everything.”

I nodded to show I understood and agreed with them. “And I suppose you’ve worked out a whole story to go with this?” I glanced at the folder in my hands.

“Oh, yes. What would you like to know?”

“These people,” I said softly, and touched the picture of the group on the beach. “What do they do?”

“They work; everyone does.” He took a pipe from his pocket. “They simply live their lives doing what they like. Some study. We have, according to our little story,” he added, and smiled, “a very fine library. Some of our people farm, some write, some make things with their hands. Most of them raise children, and – well, they work at whatever it is they really want to do.”

“And if there isn’t anything they really want to do?”

He shook his head. “There is always something, for everyone, that he really wants to do. It’s just that here there is so rarely time to find out what it is.” He brought out a tobacco pouch and, leaning on the counter, began filling his pipe, his eyes level with mine, looking at me gravely. “Life is simple there, and it’s serene. In some ways, the good ways, it’s like the early pioneering communities here in your country, but without the drudgery that killed people young. There is electricity. There are washing machines, vacuum cleaners, plumbing, modern bathrooms, and modern medicine, very modern. But there are no radios, television, telephones, or automobiles. Distances are small, and people live and work in small communities. They raise or make most of the things they use. Every man builds his own house, with all the help he needs from his neighbors. Their recreation is their own, and there is a great deal of it,

but there is no recreation for sale, nothing you buy a ticket to. They have dances, card parties, weddings, christenings, birthday celebrations, harvest parties. There are swimming and sports of all kinds. There is conversation, a lot of it, plenty of joking and laughter. There is a great deal of visiting and sharing of meals, and each day is well filled and well spent. There are no pressures, economic or social, and life holds few threats. Every man, woman and child is a happy person.” After a moment he smiled. “I’m repeating the text, of course, in our little joke.” He nodded at the folder.

“Of course,” I murmured, and looked down at the folder again, turning a page. “Homes in The Colony,” said a caption, and there, true and real, were a dozen or so pictures of the interiors of what must have been the cabins I’d seen in the first photographs, or others like them. There were living rooms, kitchens, dens, patios. Many of the homes seemed to be furnished in a kind of Early American style, except that it looked—authentic, as though those rocking chairs, cupboards, tables and hooked rugs had been made by the people themselves, taking their time and making them well and beautifully. Others of the interiors seemed modern in style; one showed a definite Oriental influence.

All of them had, plainly and unmistakably, one quality in common: You knew as you looked at them that these rooms were *home*, really home, to the people who lived in them. On the wall of one living room, over the stone fireplace, hung a hand-stitched motto: “There Is No Place Like Home,” but the words didn’t seem quaint or amusing, they didn’t seem old-fashioned, resurrected or copied from a past that was gone. They seemed real; they belonged; those words were nothing more or less than a simple expression of true feeling and fact.

“Who are you?” I lifted my head from the folder to stare into the man’s eyes.

He lighted his pipe, taking his time, sucking the match flame down into the bowl, eyes glancing up at me. “It’s in the text,” he said then, “on the back page. We – that is to say, the people of Verna, the original inhabitants – are people like yourself. Verna is a planet of air, sun, land and sea, like this one. And of the same approximate temperature. So life evolved there, of course, just about as it has here, though rather earlier; and we are people like you. There are trivial anatomical differences, but nothing important. We read and enjoy your James Thurber, John Clayton, Rabelais, Allen Marple, Hemingway, Grimm, Mark Twain, Alan Nelson. We like your chocolate, which we didn’t have, and a great deal of your music. And you’d like many of the things we have. Our thoughts, though, and the great aims and directions of our history and development have been – drastically different from yours.” He smiled and blew out a puff of smoke. “Amusing fantasy, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” I knew I sounded abrupt, and I hadn’t stopped to smile; the words were spilling out. “And where is Verna?”

“Light years away, by your measurements.”

I was suddenly irritated, I didn’t know why. “A little hard to get to, then, wouldn’t it be?”

For a moment he looked at me; then he turned to the window beside him. “Come here,” he said, and I walked around the counter to stand beside him. “There, off to the left’ – he put a hand on my shoulder and pointed with his pipe stem – “are two apartment buildings, built back to back. The entrance to one is on Fifth Avenue, the entrance to the other on Sixth. See them? In the middle of the block; you can just see their roofs.”

I nodded, and he said, “A man and his wife live on the fourteenth floor of one of those buildings. A wall of their living room is the back wall of the building. They have friends on the fourteenth floor of the other building, and a wall of *their* living room is the back wall of *their* building. These two couples live, in other words, within two feet of one another, since the back building walls actually touch.”

The big man smiled. “But when the Robinsons want to visit the Bradens, they walk from their living room to the front door. Then they walk down a long hall to the elevators. They

ride fourteen floors down; then, in the street, they must walk around to the next block. And the city blocks there are long; in bad weather they have sometimes actually taken a cab. They walk into the other building, they go on through the lobby, ride up fourteen floors, walk down a hall, ring a bell, and are finally admitted into their friends' living room – only two feet from their own."

The big man turned back to the counter, and I walked around it to the other side again. "All I can tell you," he said then, "is that the way the Robinsons travel is like space travel, the actual physical crossing of those enormous distances." He shrugged. "But if they could step through those two feet of wall without harming themselves or the wall – well, that is how we 'travel.' We don't cross space, we avoid it." He smiled. "Draw a breath here – and exhale it on Verna."

I said softly, "And that's how they arrived, isn't it? The people in the picture. You took them there." He nodded, and I said, "Why?"

He shrugged. "If you saw a neighbor's house on fire, would you rescue his family if you could? As many as you could, at least?"

"Yes."

"Well – so would we."

"You think it's that bad, then? With us?"

"How does it look to you?"

I thought about the headlines in my morning paper, that morning and every morning. "Not so good."

He just nodded and said, "We can't take you all, can't even take very many. So we've been selecting a few."

"For how long?"

"A long time." He smiled. "One of us was a member of Lincoln's cabinet. But it was not until just before your First World War that we felt we could see what was coming; until then we'd been merely observers. We opened our first agency in Mexico City in nineteen thirteen. Now we have branches in every major city."

"Nineteen thirteen," I murmured, as something caught at my memory. "Mexico. Listen! Did –"

"Yes." He smiled, anticipating my question. "Ambrose Bierce joined us that year, or the next. He lived until nineteen thirty-one, a very old man, and wrote four more books, which we have." He turned back a page in the folder and pointed to a cabin in the first large photograph. "That was his home."

"And what about Judge Crater?"

"Crater?"

"Another famous disappearance; he was a New York judge who simply disappeared some years ago."

"I don't know. We had a judge, I remember, from New York City, some twenty-odd years ago, but I can't recall his name."

I leaned across the counter toward him, my face very close to his, and I nodded. "I like your little joke," I said. "I like it very much, more than I can possibly tell you." Very softly I added, "When does it stop being a joke?"

For a moment he studied me; then he spoke; "Now. If you want it to."

You've got to decide on the spot, the middle-aged man at the Lexington Avenue bar had told me, *because you'll never get another chance. I know; I've tried.* Now I stood there thinking; there were people I'd hate never to see again, and a girl I was just getting to know, and this was the world I'd been born in. Then I thought about leaving this room, going back to my job, then back to my room at night. And finally I thought of the deep green valley in the

picture and the little yellow beach in the morning sun. "I'll go," I whispered. "If you'll have me."

He studied my face. "Be sure," he said sharply. "Be certain. We want no one there who won't be happy, and if you have any least doubt, we'd prefer that —"

"I'm sure," I said.

After a moment the gray-haired man slid open a drawer under the counter and brought out a little rectangle of yellow cardboard. One side was printed, and through the printing ran a band of light green; it looked like a railroad ticket to White Plains or somewhere. The printing said, "Good, when validated, for ONE TRIP TO VERNA. Nontransferable. One way only."

"Ah — how much?" I said, reaching for my wallet, wondering if he wanted me to pay.

He glanced at my hand on my hip pocket. "All you've got. Including your small change." He smiled. "You won't need it any more, and we can use your currency for operating expenses. Light bills, rent, and so on."

"I don't have much."

"That doesn't matter." From under the counter he brought out a heavy stamping machine, the kind you see in railroad ticket offices. "We once sold a ticket for thirty-seven hundred dollars. And we sold another just like it for six cents." He slid the ticket into the machine, struck the lever with his fist, then handed the ticket to me. On the back, now, was a freshly printed rectangle of purple ink, and within it the words, "Good this day only," followed by the date. I put two five-dollar bills, a one, and seventeen cents in change on the counter. "Take the ticket to the Acme Depot," the gray-haired man said, and, leaning across the counter, began giving me directions for getting there.

It's a tiny hole in the wall, the Acme Depot; you may have seen it — just a little store front on one of the narrow streets west of Broadway. On the window is printed, not very well, "Acme." Inside, the walls and ceiling, under layers of old paint, are covered with the kind of stamped tin you see in old buildings. There's a worn wooden counter and a few battered chrome and imitation red leather chairs. There are scores of places like the Acme Depot in that area — little theater-ticket agencies, obscure busline offices, employment agencies. You could pass this one a thousand times and never really see it; and if you live in New York, you probably have.

BEHIND THE COUNTER, when I arrived, stood a shirt-sleeved man, smoking a cigar stump and working on some papers; four or five people silently waited in the chairs. The man at the counter glanced up as I stepped in, looked down at my hand for my ticket, and when I showed it, nodded at the last vacant chair, and I sat down.

There was a girl beside me, hands folded on her purse. She was pleasant-looking, rather pretty; I thought she might have been a stenographer. Across the narrow little office sat a young Negro in work clothes, his wife beside him holding their little girl in her lap. And there was a man of around fifty, his face averted from the rest of us, staring out into the rain at passing pedestrians. He was expensively dressed and wore a gray Homburg; he could have been the vice-president of a large bank, I thought, and I wondered what his ticket had cost.

Maybe twenty minutes passed, the man behind the counter working on his papers; then a small battered old bus pulled up at the curb outside, and I heard the hand brake set. The bus was a shabby thing, bought third- or fourthhand and painted red and white over the old paint, the fenders lumpy from countless pounded-out dents, the tire treads worn almost smooth. On the side, in red letters, it said "Acme," and the driver wore a leather jacket and the kind of worn cloth cap that cab drivers wear. It was precisely the sort of obscure little bus you see around there, ridden always by shabby, tired, silent people, going no one knows where.

It took over an hour for the little bus to work south through the traffic, toward the tip of Manhattan, and we all sat, each wrapped in his own silence and thoughts, staring out the rain-spattered windows; the little girl was asleep. Through the streaking glass beside me I watched drenched people huddled at city bus stops, and saw them rap angrily on the closed doors of buses jammed to capacity, and saw the strained, harassed faces of the drivers. At Fourteenth Street I saw a speeding cab splash a sheet of street-dirty water on a man at the curb, and saw the man's mouth writhe as he cursed. Often our bus stood motionless, the traffic light red, as throngs flowed out into the street from the curb, threading their way around us and the other waiting cars. I saw hundreds of faces, and not once did I see anyone smile.

I dozed; then we were on a glistening black highway somewhere on Long Island. I slept again, and awakened in darkness as we jolted off the highway onto a muddy double-rut road, and I caught a glimpse of a farmhouse, the windows dark. Then the bus slowed, lurched once, and stopped. The hand brake set, the motor died, and we were parked beside what looked like a barn.

It *was* a barn. . . . The driver walked up to it, pulled the big sliding wood door open, its wheels creaking on the rusted old trolley overhead, and stood holding it open as we filed in. Then he released it, stepping inside with us, and the big door slid closed of its own weight. The barn was damp, old, the walls no longer plumb, and it smelled of cattle; there was nothing inside on the packed-dirt floor but a bench of unpainted pine, and the driver indicated it with the beam of a flashlight. "Sit here, please," he said quietly. "Get your tickets ready." Then he moved down the line, punching each of our tickets, and on the floor I caught a momentary glimpse, in the shifting beam of his light, of tiny mounds of countless more round bits of cardboard, like little drifts of yellow confetti. Then he was at the door again, sliding it open just enough to pass through, and for a moment we saw him silhouetted against the night sky. "Good luck," he said. "Just wait where you are." He released the door; it slid closed, snipping off the wavering beam of his flashlight; and a moment later we heard the motor start and the bus lumber away in low gear.

The dark barn was silent now, except for our breathing. Time ticked away, and I felt an urge, presently, to speak to whoever was next to me. But I didn't quite know what to say, and I began to feel embarrassed, a little foolish, and very aware that I was simply sitting in an old and deserted barn. The seconds passed, and I moved my feet restlessly; presently I realized that I was getting cold and chilled. Then suddenly I knew – and my face flushed in violent anger and a terrible shame. We'd been tricked! Bilked out of our money by our pathetic will to believe an absurd and fantastic fable and left, now, to sit there as long as we pleased, until we came to our senses finally, like countless others before us, and made our way home as best we could. It was suddenly impossible to understand or even remember how I could have been so gullible, and I was on my feet, stumbling through the dark across the uneven floor, with some notion of getting to a phone and the police. The big barn door was heavier than I'd thought, but I slid it back, took a running step through it, then turned to shout back to the others to come along.

You have seen how very much you can observe in the fractional instant of a lightning flash – an entire landscape sometimes, every detail etched on your memory, to be seen and studied in your mind for long moments afterward. As I turned back toward the opened door the inside of that barn came alight. Through every wide crack of its walls and ceiling and through the big dust-coated windows in its side streamed the light of an intensely brilliant blue and sunny sky, and the air pulling into my lungs as I opened my mouth to shout was sweeter than any I had ever tasted in my life. Dimly, through a wide, dust-smearred window of that barn, I looked – for less than the blink of an eye – down into a deep majestic V of forest-covered slope, and I saw, tumbling through it, far below, a tiny stream, blue from the sky, and at that stream's edge

between two low roofs a yellow patch of sun-drenched beach. And then, that picture engraved on my mind forever, the heavy door slid shut, my fingernails rasping along the splintery wood in a desperate effort to stop it – and I was standing alone in a cold and rain-swept night.

It took four or five seconds, no longer, fumbling at that door, to heave it open again. But it was four or five seconds too long. The barn was empty, dark. There was nothing inside but a worn pine bench – and, in the flicker of the lighted match in my hand, tiny drifts of what looked like damp confetti on the floor. As my mind had known even as my hands scratched at the outside of that door, there was no one inside now; and I knew where they were – knew they were walking, laughing aloud in a sudden wonderful and eager ecstasy, down into that forest-green valley, toward home.

I WORK IN a bank, in a job I don't like; and I ride to and from it in the subway, reading the daily papers, the news they contain. I live in a rented room, and in the battered dresser under a pile of my folded handkerchiefs is a little rectangle of yellow cardboard. Printed on its face are the words, "Good, when validated, for ONE TRIP TO VERNA," and stamped on the back is a date. But the date is gone, long since, the ticket void, punched in a pattern of tiny holes.

I've been back to the Acme Travel Bureau. The first time the tall gray-haired man walked up to me and laid two five-dollar bills, a one, and seventeen cents in change before me. "You left this on the counter last time you were here," he said gravely. Looking me squarely in the eyes, he added bleakly, "I don't know why." Then some customers came in, he turned to greet them, and there was nothing for me to do but leave.

Walk in as though it were the ordinary agency it seems—you can find it, somewhere, in any city you try! Ask a few ordinary questions—about a trip you're planning, a vacation, anything you like. Then hint about The Folder a little, but don't mention it directly. Give him time to size you up and offer it himself. And if he does, if you're the type, if you can believe—then make up your mind and stick to it! Because you won't ever get a second chance. I know, because I've tried. And tried. And tried.