Judy Dungey

ROADHOUSE

You can see that inside our roadhouse, it is warm. It is one of those places where noise and clatter are palpable things, with a temperature of their own that you can feel and see. When you open our heavy glass door with its big, old-fashioned knob, the warmth comes to greet you, to embrace you as if you are our prodigal son and not just a driver in search of fuel. It is one of those places where you don't mean to stay long, just fill up and go, but the mingled smells of hamburger and chocolate, the sounds of easy laughter and squealing children, the rattle of cutlery and the scrape of chairs, and the warmth, above all the warmth, cause you to linger for just a while longer.

You find yourself standing, backside in, in front of our roaring wood fire, and you watch the people at the tables, and at the counter. You watch little vignettes of their lives, as we often do, and you wonder. We wonder too, sometimes, when we're not too busy.

You wonder about the family groups, children dressed for bed, cranky in their dressing gowns and rabbit slippers, bribed with brightly coloured lemonade by guilty parents to please be quiet, don't make a fuss, soon we'll be at grandma's.

You wonder about the couples; some young and shy, away together for the first time; or dreamy honeymooners; or stony older couples concentrating steadfastly on their plates, ignoring each other, everything said. You wonder about other couples, somehow mismatched, holding hands across the table, who twitch and look up whenever the bell over the door tinkles.

You watch the buses come and go, passengers filing in the door, crowding the counter, staring with envious eyes at the patrons in the table section where they are forbidden to enter.

"Fifteen minutes, folk," you hear the bus driver announce to his flock. "Toilets are that way. Anybody not on the bus in fifteen minutes will have to walk."

He always says that—"folk," not "folks." It's an affectation. Someone laughed at it once, and now he says it all the time. You think about it and you decide it's probably more correct to say it like that anyway. But then you get bored and you don't think about it anymore.

You see the driver wink at the waitress, adjust his toupee and wander into the

table section near you and the fire, where his mixed grill is waiting for him, compliments of the bus company.

It comes to you that there are not many places left like this—old fashioned road houses serving baked beans and steak sandwiches and home made soup amid an eclectic disarray of newspapers, magazines and children's activity books, audio tapes, video hire, local craft. On the ceiling we've hung basketball singlets in famous club colours on wire coathangers. They jangle against the cardboard chocolate banners whenever someone opens the door. The walls are decorated with laminated photographs of film stars and old Coca-cola advertisements, framed and forgotten. They were here when we came. They've been here a long, long time.

You don't notice at first, but one of the photographs is a print of Marilyn Monroe. You can see it is just like any of the black and white prints that hang in hundreds of restaurants across the country. You have seen it before, usually in company with Humphrey Bogart, or James Dean, or Elvis. That one, the Marilyn print, wasn't here when we came. We put it there.

It is a wonderful picture. You like it. See how Marilyn stands, laughing, before a mirror, sprinkling perfume on her breasts with her fingertips, a large bottle of scent clutched in her hand. She wears a sparkling sheath dress. One shoulder strap is draped across her upper arm. Her head is flung back, her eyes half closed; her hair ripples with vitality. Her teeth look tiny and vulnerable; childlike. See how the soft light falls on one half of her body, highlighting her left breast, the valleys formed by her collar bones. Above her name at the bottom of the photograph you can make out smaller lettering that says the photograph was taken in New York, Spring 1955.

Do you see how the photographer has caught her, caught her right at the pinnacle of her life? Everything that is her, that is Marilyn, seems to come together in that photograph, in that one moment. Look at her—she's glowing with vivacity, with beauty. It's raging through her, shooting from the ends of her hair and even her fingertips. She is vibrating with life. It shows in her face, the way she's standing. And the photographer happened along with his camera and captured that very instant. She came running back for whatever reason to grab up the bottle of perfume—Chanel was her favourite—and just moved right through the prime moment of her life and didn't know.

Inside our roadhouse, it is warm. The reason you finally do observe the photograph of Marilyn is because of the woman who is sitting beneath it. Her name is Norma. Everyone knows Norma. I can tell you all about her. For instance, you can see by looking at her that it gave her a feeling of triumph to

watch the expression on your face when you noticed her. She likes it when the customers look up from their hamburgers and sundaes and see the effect. The effect of her sitting there, underneath the laminated photograph of Marilyn Monroe. Norma knows how she looks. She sits there on purpose. She always sits there. She knows about the contrast. It is startling. She likes that.

She thinks the photograph is a photograph of herself.

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I'll tell you about Norma. When Norma was young, people told her she looked like Marilyn. She suspected that they were right, which they were, and worked on the similarity. She did her hair like Marilyn, used bleach like Marilyn, wore clothes like Marilyn, affected Marilyn's walk, Marilyn's pout, Marilyn's voice. She envied Marilyn's natural beauty spot, and spent hours trying to create an indelible mark for herself.

She and Marilyn were of an age. Well, Marilyn was six years older, but near enough. Marilyn was already in the full bloom of stardom when Norma's body began to take on the voluptuous curves that caused people to note the likeness. She practised for hours at night, walking away from the mirror and trying at the same time to look over her shoulder at her swinging hips. It was your bottom—the tush—that you had to get just right. What was it called? "Jellow on springs" (*Some Like It Hot*, 1959).

Her mother despaired of her, didn't like her trying to be like Marilyn. Her mother thought Marilyn was cheap and common. She wanted Norma to be a good girl, a nice girl. Didn't like the values she was learning from those Hollywood types. Her mother wanted her to be like, well, like Doris. Doris Day. The girl next door. That's what her mother wanted.

But Norma didn't look like Doris. She looked like Marilyn. The sexy image she saw on the screen, and in those magazines, that was what she wanted to be. Something with pizzazz. She had the looks, but the sexiness was not something she had been able to cultivate in her sheltered life. She knew that to be truly like Marilyn she would have to overcome the priggishness which her mother had ingrained into her during her pubescence. Would have to find that healthy glow that bubbled from within. Sex appeal, they called it.

At night in her bedroom, hidden, she uncovered her swelling breasts to the dark, feeling a delicious thrill as the night air whispered about her nipples in the blackness. She felt erotic and sensuous. Secret. As nights went by, she began to slide from under the bedcovers and walk about in her room, unclothed. She

could feel tiny zephyrs, like soft hands, all over her body, and she revelled in the feelings her nakedness aroused in her.

In time, she learned more about her body, its softness, its secret places, the delight it could give her. In time, she understood about pleasure, and it showed in her face. She looked at herself critically in the mirror and smiled at what she saw there, glowing from within. Just like Marilyn.

She loved Marilyn, loved being compared to Marilyn. She loved it when boys stopped and stared as she passed. She laughed when they fell all over themselves to ask her out. Other girls, at once envious and admiring, contended for her friendship. They coveted her glamour, her hint of the exotic, of civilisation outside their ken, yearned for but unknown.

She did not accept every offer that came along, but when she did, she was very generous with Marilyn's body—for that is how she thought of it. Soon it was not only boys who were trying to catch her eye. Grown men were shouldering the youths aside, and many found Norma/Marilyn's favours to their liking.

But Norma grew, and learned, and kept control.

And time went by. With every new film that Marilyn made came a different nuance to Norma's life. She learned to sing in Marilyn's throaty, husky manner and used Marilyn's tortured elocutionary expressions.

"You're giving a necklace like that to—I?" she would squeal, wide-eyed, breathless, and hearts would melt.

For all the generosity of her friends, Norma did not prostitute herself. She became almost independently wealthy, but this good fortune was showered on her willingly, by happy and grateful lovers and friends who felt the better for knowing her. She gave nothing of herself that she did not wish to give, and they merely returned her favours in kind. Norma was very good at what she did.

But soon it became apparent that Marilyn Monroe, screen goddess, was not finding the happiness in her real life that Norma was finding in her shadow. Marilyn searched for meaning, to be accepted as a great actress, for her mind. Norma, noting the change in her idol, frowned, wondered, but went right on in the only way her life could go. Marilyn retired to study The Method at the Actor's Studio; Norma accepted a diamond tiara to wear to the Mayor's reception ball. Marilyn married Arthur Miller; Norma was given shares in BHP by an uncle of one of her girlfriends—who just happened to be taking out his yacht next weekend and would Norma like to come? Marilyn cried for a baby

she could not have; Norma was a big hit singing for the local children's ward, and danced until dawn with a paediatrician. Marilyn sang "Happy Birthday" to Jack Kennedy; fifty of Norma's friends surprised her with a thirtieth birthday party and three lifesavers jumped out of the cake.

Marilyn committed suicide.

When Marilyn became a tragic figure, something about Norma's sparkle began to fade. Something faltered. For the first time since she was fourteen, there were gaps in her social calendar. Her male friends started seeing new, younger girls, with skinny hips and long, straight hair with heavy fringes. Now, it was enough to be the girl next door.

Things had changed for Norma. Marilyn wasn't the trend-setter she once was. Marilyn had gone on to higher duties. Marilyn was an icon now. One of the Legends. Norma wasn't interested in being a Legend. She wanted to be just like Marilyn—the Marilyn she saw on the screen—still alive, still full of life. But Marilyn wasn't alive, and everybody knew it, and everybody was sad about it. No-one wanted to have fun with Norma anymore.

Oh, she had her moments. She was still a looker. In fact, she was a stunner. She was just—old-fashioned. But there were still plenty of old-fashioned men around, and for a long time her career, if you can call it that, continued. She was just less in demand than before. There was nothing new. Marilyn had come to a full stop, and there were no more nuances to add to Norma's repertoire. Her life became a series of repetitive affairs, of the same old parties with the same old people.

She missed Marilyn. It came to her that, although Marilyn was gone, Norma still had her body, the body she had nurtured and shaped in Marilyn's image for so long. She owed it to her idol to live out the life Marilyn had somehow thrown away.

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The effect is quite startling. If you look at the photograph, and then down at Norma, striking the pose beneath it, you can see what I mean. There is Marilyn, at the pinnacle of her life. And there, thirty-odd years later, under the picture, is Norma, still trying to look like Marilyn. But just looking blousey, and frowzy, and aged. Like the rest of us.

She looks just like Marilyn, if Marilyn had lived.

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I don't really know how Norma spent those thirty-odd years without Marilyn. You will have to imagine that for yourself. For instance, imagine—and this much I know is true—that Norma finally had that beauty spot tattooed upon her cheek. Go on, imagine how she kept the grey from showing in Marilyn's beautiful blonde hair. How she fought to keep the wrinkles at bay, how she covered and creamed, and strapped herself in. Imagine her poring over brochures for health farms and magic potions and even surgical remedies. Imagine her staring at her hands, her throat, and desperately fighting gravity, wrinkles, sunspots, failing eyesight, cellulite, pallor, thinning hair, thinning lips—Time itself. Imagine how she felt as she watched the blush slowly fading from her cheeks, the sparkle from her eye.

There was only one way she could cope. As her body sagged, and the lines crept across her face like fine cobwebs, as the colour drained—she simply stopped watching. She went on wearing Marilyn's clothes, Marilyn's hair. She had a photograph like that one—Marilyn's prime moment. It was the centrepiece of her home. You could see it from every room in the house. She looked at it instead of the mirror. She knew she looked like the photograph. She had always looked like the photograph.

When the men stopped calling and she was finally alone, she did not really mind too much. She still had Marilyn for company. She only married me because she felt sorry for me, I think, because I am not beautiful. She brought her photograph with her and put it there, on the wall. She is an ornament to the business, Marilyn, and Norma is living proof of that.

It is warm in our road house. It is one of those places where the clatter and chatter comes to greet you, and you find yourself, backside in, watching the little vignettes of lives around you and wondering. You try not to look at Norma, under the laminated photograph of Marilyn Monroe, but you can't help it, and finally you stare. She smiles at you, and strikes the pose. And you wonder what it must be like to live in the prime moment of someone else's life. The thought comes to you, as it came to me once, that we all have one supreme moment but that, like Marilyn, most of us do not even know it.

And you stand there, warm against the fire, and you turn your head, and the light strikes the side of your face at a certain angle, and your eyes are unfathomable.

The buzz of conversation and clattering plates, scraping knives, keeps up around you.

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