

# matters familiar



e. g. fabricant

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## **DEDICATION**

For Frank and Betty, for the gifts of life and love—theirs,  
mine, and ours—and  
For M. A.; BeeEss; Tomiss; Jerome; J. L.; Fuffy; and The  
Brat, for helping me fill in the blanks.

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## 6 The Jewel of Genoa



It started like any other Friday at Maranatha Senior Residence.

*Just give it a few more hours,* she told herself.

Pearl O. Mutter gathered up her purse, gloves, and hat. *Oops—Almost forgot.* She stepped over to her freshly-made bed and retrieved the balled-up napkin she'd carried back from dinner last night and secreted under her pillow—a ritual begun at each meal, years ago. She opened the linen carefully and picked out the tiny, peach-colored oval. *Huh. Xōnoft. Get on it, like Fern, you don't give a shit. Get off it, you can't stop. If that pill-peddler Delroy hired ever saw me, he'd know I don't need it. Old Doc Morgan never would have stood for this. Oh, well—it'll come in handy today.*

She added the dose to the dozen others she'd squirreled away, in rotation, in an old breath-mint tin. She smiled at its more-pregnant slogan—'Curiously Strong!'—and returned it to the bottom of her purse. She walked around the other, vacant bed and stood

behind the half-closed door, finding herself in the full-length mirror. Even after all this time, she still couldn't believe her eyes. In another glass she'd seen a strong, brown woman with auburn locks, eyes that danced over a nose that drew more breath awake and alive than asleep, and a grin-prone mouth. Sturdy frame in a faded denim shirt, Levi's, and rough-out boots. A woman more familiar with the essences of lime, sweat, and just-singed cowhide than with those of Paris. Sinewy forearms and gnarled hands with the veins, knots, and calluses standard on the wife of a working cattle feeder. All she could find now were the eyes, if she allowed it, and the hands, which she couldn't help. *Where did she go? Pearl asked herself. Well, I'm going t' find her again, and the lookin' starts now.*

The door parted slightly and another, dark-haired woman with brown skin appeared—the nurse-assistant. "Señora Mutter, are you ready? You must hurry or you will miss the bus!"

Pearl looked grave and took the attendant's hands gently into hers. "Marisól, you've been real good to me for a long, long time. Made life in this place almost bearable—almost. I'm goin' to miss you the most."

Marisól Contréres patted Pearl's hands, puzzled. "But, Señora; you are only going overnight to the South Shore, like you do every four months." Her eyes flashed. "Maybe even to gamble a little, yes?"

"Whoop-tee-do," Pearl said. "If Miss Goody Two Shoes takes her eyes off us for five minutes." She dropped her hands and her eyes. "Anyway—Goodbye, Marisól." She sidled past her and pushed her octogenarian's bones determinedly down the dim hallway toward the lobby.



"Attention, 'Sprightly Seniors!'"

Anna Mae McDonald, Maranatha's Director of Recreational Services and Spiritual Development (although not necessarily in that order), stood beside the steps of the ancient, converted Blue Bird school bus and tapped her pencil on her clipboard. It was an uphill effort, quieting the gaggle of 20-odd residents queued up to escape, if only for 36 hours.

"Give me your attention, please, so I can review the slate of exciting activities we've planned for all of you!"

*We're going to the playpen of the Sierra Nevada over a Friday night, thought Pearl, to go to church. Is this a great goddamned country, or what?*

Anna Mae was warmed up. "We'll be meeting Reverend Alston at the First Church of the Evangelist, as usual, for a spirited afternoon of Holy Land slides. Then, a *yummy* early buffet at the Royal Plate—"

"Aw, fer Chrissakes, Anna Mae," complained Barney Rasmussen. "It's the same dern trip every time. Give us a little credit, willya? All the droolers are stayin' home, anyway!" His Adam's apple bobbed over a turquoise bolo tie and under a hat that would have made Roy Rogers jealous.

"There'll be no cursing on this bus, Barney Rasmussen," she scolded. "Remember: 'To say is to pray; to curse is worse.' Now, if I may continue ..." As she resumed her sing-song prattle, Pearl relived the parade of outrages that helped her crystallize her plan, beginning with getting dropped in this Bible-thumping Purgatory and culminating in the loss of her old friend. She'd known Hattie Gardner for 70 years on the outside. When Hattie's husband died of emphysema 12 years ago, Pearl had bargained with her son, on condition of good behavior, to move Hattie over from Minden. A third-generation Nevadan, Hattie Churchill

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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