

“Yes,” Mr. Phillips said, “ours is a city of churches all right.”

5 Cecelia nodded, following his pointing hand. Both sides of the street were solidly lined with churches, standing shoulder to shoulder in a variety of architectural styles. The Bethel Baptist stood next to the Holy Messiah Free Baptist, Saint Paul’s Episcopal next to Grace Evangelical Covenant. Then came the First Christian Science, the
10 Church of God, All Souls, Our Lady of Victory, the Society of Friends, The Assembly of God, and the Church of the Holy Apostles. The spires and steeples of the traditional buildings were jammed in next to the broad imaginative flights of the “contemporary” designs.

“Everyone here takes a great interest in church matters,” Mr. Phillips said.

15 Will I fit in, Cecelia wondered. She had come to Prester to open a branch office of a car-rental concern.

“I’m not especially religious,” she said to Mr. Phillips, who was in the real-estate business.

20 “Not now,” he answered. “Not yet. But we have many fine young people here. You’ll get integrated into the community soon enough. The immediate problem is where are you to live? Most people,” he said, “live in the church of their choice. All of our churches have many extra rooms. I have a few belfry apartments that I can show you. What price range were you thinking of?”

25 They turned a corner and were confronted with more churches. They passed Saint Luke’s, the Church of the Epiphany, All Saints Ukrainian Orthodox, Saint Clement’s, Fountain Baptist, Union Congregational, Saint Anargyri’s, Temple Emanuel, the First Church of Christ Reformed. The mouths of all the churches were gaping open. Inside, lights could be seen dimly.

“I can go up to a hundred and ten,” Cecelia said. “Do you have any buildings here that are not churches?”

30 “None,” said Mr. Phillips. “Of course, many of our fine church structures also do double duty as something else.” He indicated a handsome Georgian façade. “That

one,” he said, “houses the United Methodist and the Board of Education. The one next to it, which is the Antioch Pentecostal, has the barbershop.”

It was true. A red-and-white striped barber pole was attached inconspicuously to the front of the Antioch Pentecostal.

5 “Do many people rent cars here?” Cecelia asked. “Or would they, if there was a handy place to rent them?”

10 “Oh, I don’t know,” said Mr. Phillips. “Renting a car implies that you want to go somewhere. Most people are pretty content right here. We have a lot of activities. I don’t think I’d pick the car-rental business if I was just starting out in Prester. But you’ll do fine.” He showed her a small, extremely modern building with a severe brick, steel, and glass front. “That’s Saint Barnabas. Nice bunch of people over there. Wonderful spaghetti suppers.”

Cecelia could see a number of heads looking out of the windows. But when they saw that she was staring at them, the heads disappeared.

15 “Do you think it’s healthy for so many churches to be gathered together in one place?” she asked her guide. “It doesn’t seem... balanced, if you know what I mean.”

“We are famous for our churches,” Mr. Phillips replied. “They are harmless. Here we are now.”

20 He opened a door and they began climbing many flights of dusty stairs. At the end of the climb they entered a good-sized room, square, with windows on all four sides. There was a bed, a table and two chairs, lamps, a rug. Four very large brass bells hung in the exact center of the room.

“What a view!” Mr. Phillips exclaimed. “Come here and look.”

“Do they actually ring these bells?” Cecelia asked.

25 “Three times a day,” Mr. Phillips said, smiling. “Morning, noon, and night. Of course when they’re rung you have to be pretty quick at getting out of the way. You get hit in the head by one of these babies and that’s all she wrote.”

“God Almighty,” said Cecelia involuntarily. Then she said, “Nobody lives in the belfry apartments. That’s why they’re empty.”

30 “You think so?” Mr. Phillips said.

“You can only rent them to new people in town,” she said accusingly.

“I wouldn’t do that,” Mr. Phillips said. “It would go against the spirit of Christian fellowship.”

5 “This town is a little creepy, you know that?” “That may be, but it’s not for you to say, is it? I mean, you’re new here. You should walk cautiously, for a while. If you don’t want an upper apartment, I have a basement over at Central Presbyterian. You’d have to share it. There are two women in there now.”

“I don’t want to share,” Cecelia said. “I want a place of my own.”

“Why?” the real-estate man asked curiously. “For what purpose?”

10 “Purpose?” asked Cecelia.

“There is no particular purpose. I just want...”

“That’s not usual here. Most people live with other people. Husbands and wives. Sons with their mothers. People have roommates. That’s the usual pattern.”

“Still, I prefer a place of my own.”

15 “It’s very unusual.” “Do you have any such places? Besides bell towers, I mean?”

“I guess there are a few,” Mr. Phillips said, with clear reluctance. “I can show you one or two, I suppose.”

He paused for a moment.

20 “It’s just that we have different values, maybe, from some of the surrounding communities,” he explained. “We’ve been written up a lot. We had four minutes on the ‘CBS Evening News’ one time. Three or four years ago. ‘A City of Churches’, it was called.”

“Yes, a place of my own is essential,” Cecelia said, “if I am to survive here.”

25 “That’s kind of a funny attitude to take,” Mr. Phillips said. “What denomination are you?”

Cecelia was silent. The truth was, she wasn’t anything.

“I said, what denomination are you?” Mr. Phillips repeated.

“I can will my dreams,” Cecelia said. “I can dream whatever I want. If I want to dream that I’m having a good time, in Paris or some other city, all I have to do is go to sleep and I will dream that dream. I can dream whatever I want.”

“What do you dream, then, mostly?” Mr. Phillips said, looking at her closely.

5 “Mostly sexual things,” she said. She was not afraid of him.

“Prester is not that kind of town,” Mr. Phillips said, looking away.

The doors of the churches were opening, on both sides of the street. Small groups of people came out and stood there, in front of the churches, gazing at Cecelia and Mr. Phillips.

10 A young man stepped forward and shouted, “Everyone in this town already has a car! There is no one in this town who doesn’t have a car!”

“Is that true?” Cecelia asked Mr. Phillips.

“Yes,” he said. “It’s true. No one would rent a car here. Not in a hundred years.”

“Then I won’t stay,” she said. “I’ll go somewhere else.”

15 “You must stay,” he said. “There is already a car-rental office for you. In Mount Moriah Baptist, on the lobby floor. There is a counter and a telephone and a rack of car keys. And a calendar.”

“I won’t stay,” she said. “Not if there’s not any sound business reason for staying.”

20 “We want you,” said Mr. Phillips. “We want you standing behind the counter of the car-rental agency, during regular business hours. It will make the town complete.”

“I won’t,” she said. “Not me.”

“You must. It’s essential.”

“I’ll dream,” she said. “Things you won’t like.”

25 “We are discontented,” said Mr. Phillips. “Terribly, terribly discontented. Something is wrong.”

“I’ll dream the Secret,” she said. “You’ll be sorry.”

“We are like other towns, except that we are perfect,” he said. “Our discontent can only be held in check by perfection. We need a car-rental girl. Someone must stand behind that counter.”

“I’ll dream the life you are most afraid of,” Cecelia threatened.

- 5 “You are ours,” he said, gripping her arm. “Our car-rental girl. Be nice. There is nothing you can do.”

“Wait and see,” Cecelia said.