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## COLLAGE

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### **Abstract**

"Garbo," the place is called, but for some reason, there's an enormous Elvis above the counter; also some bleak photographs of Nantucket taken last summer by a high school senior whose "collage fund" a presumably misspelled note invites you to endow; some bright red gingham placemats suggesting an Italian motif; in a somewhat dusty wicker basket, muffins dense as doorknobs from the adjoining health food store.

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"Garbo," the place is called, but for some reason, there's an enormous Elvis above the counter; also some bleak photographs of Nantucket taken last summer by a high school senior whose "collage fund" a presumably misspelled note invites you to endow; some bright red gingham placemats suggesting an Italian motif; in a somewhat dusty wicker basket, muffins dense as doorknobs from the adjoining health food store.

Against one wall, tall thermoses line up like gas pumps; apparently, everything's self-service. Nobody's here, so I help myself to the House Blend (awful: where's the sugar?) and open up my paper. A jolly middle-aged man in a down jacket emerges from the kitchen. "Got a bit of a late start this morning," he says. "Will you be perfectly comfy sitting here for three or four minutes while I step out to buy some cream?"

"Sure will," I answer, with that ready joshing Americans fall into, and which shields me from grasping, just for a moment, what we've said. Will I be comfy? Will I mind the store? Will I not be interested in breaking into the cash register? Who am I?

— That last question coming from nowhere, and tilting the room a little. I'm a stranger who walks into a small New Hampshire town with a *New York Times* under her arm, although

she doesn't live in the city either;  
somebody whose idea of  
reality requires a glance,  
over morning coffee, at violence.  
Look at this: before they found her dead,  
a girl, at her mother's bidding, mopped  
the floor with her own head.  
A twelve-year-old set a homeless man  
afire. And in the inevitable  
"positive development,"  
they've boarded up a dozen bodegas  
that fronted for the drug trade. Will I  
be perfectly comfy where the crime  
is coffee without cream?

Elvis is still alive and well  
on the wall, as the proprietor  
returns with two half pints of Half  
and Half. Think big, I want to tell him;  
have one whole idea and carry it through.  
But I don't; instead I say, "You must  
be proud to live in a town like this,  
where everything's run on trust."  
Why I should feed him this, in exchange  
for such coffee, I can't imagine unless  
it's to make *me* feel less strange.

What to do? I pay up feebly and  
step out, where overhead the buzz  
of a jet is drilling in the reminder  
there's nowhere to feel whole, nowhere.  
Not even in the sky, where winking  
flight attendants are hawking headsets  
for the movie promised after lunch –  
this month, "The Last of the Mohicans,"  
where stealthily, in moccasins  
or boots, people on little screens  
hack each other to bits.