



Here's to —
A Happy
New Year

Gropp

Call It Love

You cannot tear out of your life ten years of living. But it happened to him as it had to others.
A short story by Alvah Bessie.

THE BAGS were heavy and the late afternoon sun beat upon the street. He could feel the sweat running down his neck, feel the weight of the sun on his back and shoulders, the heat on his face, reflected from the pavement. He shifted the bags, aware that he was tired and uncomfortable, that the bags were a burden he would gladly have tossed aside. It would have been more pleasant (pleasant!) to have taken a cab, but there would have been no address to give the driver.

On Seventh Avenue and 29th he saw a sign—*Furnished Rooms*, set the bags down, wiped his face and neck with his handkerchief, and rang the bell. He stood at the bottom of the three steps that led to the door and looked back into the street, thinking is this where I will live? Will I come out of this doorway every morning on the way to work? Across the avenue a sign said *Elite Laundry* and another *Cafeteria*.

The door opened and a heavy woman with dirty eyeglasses said, "Yes?" in the everlasting hypocritical voice of landladies.

"Have you a single room?" he said.

"This way."

He set the bags inside the door and followed her heavy body up the dark stairs, smelling that smell again (after ten years), the smell of dust and used air and cheap cooking from the downstairs apartment. Without a word they climbed two flights, the landlady breathing heavily, a slight odor of perspiration coming to him behind her on the stairs.

On the third floor she stepped into a narrow hallway, crossed a dark alcove into a space where two doors faced each other at a wide angle, and opened one.

"Now this is a very nice room," she said, turning at the door for him to walk in front. He took a step into the room and his heart sank, for there it was again: the small narrow room with the white enameled bed, the worn table and the worn chair, the dusty white curtains opening on an areaway—all that he had escaped so many years ago, and so nearly forgotten. The ten years of marriage, in New York, in New Jersey, in Connecticut, were as a day, and the personality of those many rooms he had inhabited so many years ago, returned to him. In their essentials they were all alike; in the very fact of their existence, they were unfit for human habitation: homes for the homeless, four walls for the lonely, shelter for the poor—sitting in shirtsleeves in the evening reading the newspaper, walking up and down over the worn scrap of carpet, leaning out the window, the ledge hard on your elbows.

For something to say that would conceal what he was feeling, he said, "How much?"

"Six dollars," the landlady said, and he turned and walked past her out the door, saying, "It's awfully small." He was embarrassed by her presence, by the intimation that perhaps she understood some of what he felt, that perhaps she thought him strange.

"I have a larger room," she said, "for eight."

His foot was on the stair; his hand was on the banister. He was overcome by a curious sense of helplessness, a frantic desire to escape from the place, and not enter another place like it, an urge to go back home and say to her, "What the hell, Jane; let's call the whole thing off," and she would laugh, and they would hold each other and laugh like hell. He sighed with the relief of that expectation, almost as though he actually believed it could happen that way.

"No, thanks," he said.

"Don't you even want to see it?" the landlady said in a querulous voice. It was an effort for him to turn in his rapid flight down the stairs and say politely, "Thank you, no. I think I know where I'm going to stay." And the moment he said it, he knew what an absurd thing it was to say.

On the street, the bags were heavy in his hands; there was a blister in one palm and he smiled, thinking how, during the three years they had lived in the country, in New Jersey, in Connecticut, his hands had been hard, calloused from the ax handle, the saw, from carrying the stone to build a garden walk. He knew as he walked that he could not take a furnished room, and he said to himself, "Look for a hotel," even though he knew it was more than he could afford, that a time was coming, not so distant now, when—why now it would be necessary to earn even more than he was earning, to support the kid, to support himself, to help till Jane could find work to do. This is ridiculous, he thought; this has not happened; in a day or so I'll go home, shove the bags through the door and say, Hi there, as though I were returning from a trip, and she will say, Hi there, stranger, and they would laugh and buy a bottle of Irish whiskey and get some ice cubes out of the Frigidaire, and sit down and have a good laugh at themselves.

It had happened to others; perhaps it would even happen again. For you cannot tear out of your life the roots of ten years' living, ten years of living in the same rooms, the same houses, the same beds, thinking the same thoughts, worrying over the same bills, sharing the few small triumphs of a meager life. Ten years had put some gray hairs in her head; some wrinkles in his face. And the kid was five. He walked now, shifting the bags from hand to hand every three blocks; he made a point of that—three blocks, no

more, no less. It was a routine; it was something to do.

There was a hotel down the block, at Seventh and 19th, with a blue banner hanging on a flagpole from the second floor. *Rooms*, it said, *With Bath, \$1.50 and \$2.00*. He was displeased by that banner; the mark of cheapness, sleaziness. A hotel that hung a banner out—it was a worn, converted apartment house; red brick with rococo ornamentation and fire-escapes on the avenue. The lobby was worn, the desk had an electrical sign that said *Room Clerk*, and there was an effeminate young man behind the desk, wearing a gray linen coat, his hair slicked down and parted in the middle.

"How much is a single room with bath?" he said, and the clerk said, "I can give you a very nice room for ten dollars on the eleventh floor. For one?"

He put the bags down and said, "For one. I'll take a look at it," and went up in the elevator with the porter. There was a husky young woman in a nurse's uniform in the elevator; her hair was bright and her cheeks were rouged.

"Afternoon, Miss Reilly," said the porter. "Nice afternoon."

"Too hot," Miss Reilly said, and got off on the ninth.

The elevator creaked and rattled and jarred from side to side as though it were loose in its tracks; it was slow. Down the carpeted hall the porter opened a room and drew a shade. There were warped French windows looking east over the city; there was a yellow bedspread on the double bed and a battered dresser with a red velvet throw. The walls were a faded yellow and cracked; the bathroom was dark, the equipment old and worn. He went downstairs and said, "I'll take it," and signed his name, John A. Field.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Field," the clerk said. "I quoted that room wrong to you. It's eleven dollars, not ten."

"Well," he said.

"I'm new here," the clerk said. "I'm sorry, sir," and suddenly Field was overcome with exhaustion. He said, "O.K.," and the porter took his bags and they were riding up again.

"That fellow's a fag," the porter said, turning from the lever that controlled the car. "He's a fag and he makes a lot of trouble around here."

Field wondered with faint interest what the clerk had done or did that made trouble, but all he said was "Is that so?" and they stopped short of the eleventh floor. The porter started the car again, stopped it a good foot and a half above the landing, then brought it down.

"That was a good guess," Field said with a smile, and the operator gave him a dirty