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girl talk

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girl talk

— David McGrath

"YOU'RE NOT IN LOVE WITH HER," says Sid. "It's sex. At best, infatuation."

"Wrong. I could be celibate and still love her."

"Really? All right," he says, "tell me, excluding sexuality, what does she have?"

"It's hard to describe," I say.

I stall for time — for a thought. He cannot be right. She flashes that smile that makes you think you've just said something amazing and original. But he'll just say that's another physical, sexual ware.

Can he be right? Nothing but abstract modifiers occur to me: vivacious, gregarious, infectiously enthusiastic, invitingly warm. A hotel hostess, he'd say. A madam. So Sid wins.

Hmmm. How do I see her? She asks after you with hot toddy concern and she nods and follows up with coquettish questions, and then speculative observations on whatever flat data you've given her, but which she now spikes with irony. So she's what, like rum? Not as obvious. Tequila? More controlled. She warms you, relaxes you, lights a slow, lazy flame that waves rather than flickers, somewhere between your brain and your throat. An exotic intoxicant. But didn't Dickinson use "liquor never brewed" to reference erotica? Sid wins still.

Sex or not, I want to be with her every hour. So she's a place for me. Not a

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church. Not a carnival. She's a villa in the Alps, where I'm a privileged guest. I schuss through snowdrifts when I smell her oakwoodsmoke and know I'm home when I see the safe, dark mahogany of her seductive doors, which she scurries to bolt after I've entered. High, high ceilings, but warmed by a giant fireplace; and smooth, clean tables. The red-hued lights are soft and safe, and there are no dark spots anywhere. And although she wouldn't refuse my entry into the brighter, hissing kitchen behind squeaking café doors, I decide to stay in the outer room, because somehow — whether it's the vases of fresh flowers, or her rhythmic step, or her on-stage turn, or her humming to herself some whole-note tune with neither overture nor crescendo — somehow she makes me more patient, more thoughtful, more clever than I really am. I shall stay here all season.

But I can't say all this to Sid, for he'll think I'm insane.

"She's really neat," I tell him.