

Fall 1997

Love Lifted Me

Richard Lange

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Lange, Richard (1997) "Love Lifted Me," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 48 , Article 23.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss48/23>

This Prose is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in CutBank by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

LOVE LIFTED ME

A shotgun blast at dawn separates night and day. I come awake awash in adrenaline before the echo has faded and roll off the bed to sprawl on the nappy motel shag, where I hope I'll be safe if war has broken out between the crackheads in the next room and the pimp downstairs. The carpet reeks of cigarette smoke and spilled perfume. I press my face into it and wait for another explosion, but there's only this dog somewhere, putting together long and short barks into combinations reminiscent of Morse code. I imagine that I'm able to decipher the gruff pronouncements: *He who feeds me is a liar and a thief. His hand upon me is a curse. God sees all and does nothing.*

The parking lot is quiet when I finally muster the guts to crawl to the window and peek between the drapes. The other rooms are shut up tight, and a perfect mirror image of the neon vacancy sign shivers in the placid, black water of the swimming pool. So I guess I dreamed the gunshot, or maybe it's Simone again, my dead wife, trying to drive me crazy.

Tracy is still sound asleep, too, but that doesn't prove anything. A stone speed freak, her standard routine is 72 hours up and 24 down, and when she crashes, she crashes hard. Right now she looks as serene as an angel or a sweet, dead baby. A blanket hides most of the damage: the tracks; the scabs that keep her nervous fingers busy; the bruised skin stretched thin over her ribs and spine, elbows and knees. She's 16 years old and has been raped three times, and I'm like an uncle to her, like a big brother, she says, because I let her stay in my room when it's cold outside. No, I'm not fucking her. I'd like to, but then Simone would kill me for sure.

I rejoin her on the bed, careful to keep to my side, and watch the walls go from blue to pink to white, until the river of grief twisting through me unexpectedly swells and jumps its banks. At the first rush of tears, I get up and shut myself in the bathroom, and it's as rough as it's been in a while, but by the

time the liquor stores open, I'm showered and shaved and empty enough to bob like cork on the surface of another day.

The listless winter sun doesn't do much to warm the chinky concrete of the pool deck where I sit sipping beer and tomato juice, my feet dangling in the frigid water. The pool is the heart of this place. From here, I can keep an eye on all of the doors and windows. I can see everything coming at me. I work on a letter I've been meaning to write. *Dear Simone, please leave me alone.* Relaxing my neck by degrees, I let my head fall back until I'm staring up at the sky, which is crawling with choppers and blimps and spectral silver jets. The wind steals half of every cigarette I light.

The bad guys sleep at this time of day, so the kids who live here are running wild, making the most of the few hours when it's safe for them to be out of their rooms. While their mothers cluster around the Coke machine, as vigilant as nursing cats, they play hide-and-seek among the cars in the parking lot and pedal tricycles in sloppy circles. I ignore them as best I can. They make me nervous. I'm afraid that at any moment they'll go off like a string of firecrackers and disintegrate into acrid smoke and drifts of shredded newspaper.

A couple of them, little boys, rattle the gate of the fence that surrounds the pool and beg in Spanish to be let in.

"Vamoose," I say. "Adios."

Undaunted, they snake their skinny arms through the bars and strain to reach the lock. I scoop some ice from my cup and fling it at them, and they fall back laughing as a police car eases into the lot, no lights or sirens. Before it has come to a stop, the boys' mother is herding them back to the family's room, and the other mothers, too, gather their children. Within seconds the parking lot is empty. The sudden silence makes my palms itch. Mrs. Cho, the owner of the motel, leads the cops up the stairs, and I lift my feet out of the pool and stomp some feeling into them in case things get ugly and I have to run for cover.

When the eviction party reaches the second floor, it's round and round she goes, where she stops, nobody knows.

210: old guy, Mexican, Cuban, something. Wears a cowboy hat and plays the radio loud late at night to drown out the whores' noisy comings and goings. The kids and their mothers watch from behind half-closed doors as one of the officers knocks with his baton. His partner cups his eyes to peer in the window, but the glass has been covered over with tinfoil. Mrs. Cho dials her cellular, and the phone in the room rings and rings and rings. After a bit of discussion, she unlocks the door with her passkey and moves off down the walkway so the cops can do their stuff.

"Police!" they shout in unison as the door swings open. Guns drawn, they roll into the room, one high, one low. Such caution is unnecessary, however—has been for a while, judging by the stench that billows out and settles over the motel like another coat of stucco. Mrs. Cho backs away, covering her nose and mouth. She bumps into the railing and slides along it toward the steps. Then the cops reappear on the walkway. One of them says something snide to the other and both laugh, but they're not happy, and neither am I. I'll be smelling death for days.

Are you happy now? I promise I'll take the blame, if only you'll let me be.

My shadow lies beside me, a wan and shapeless stain in the gutter. I drag it into the liquor store, to the beer cooler, the register and out again. The effort leaves me winded. Twisting the cap off my quart, I drop onto a bus bench, but I'm barely settled when a passing car's backfire sends my heart wheeling with the pigeons from the telephone wire overhead.

Eightball rolls up on his bicycle with Tracy perched on the handlebars. Eightball, because that's how black he is. He doesn't care for the name, but so what, the little dope fiend, the little thief. I don't care for how he professes to love Tracy one minute and pimps her the next. She's welcome in my room, but he is not allowed.

"S'up," he says. He feigns interest in a billboard across the street, a giant hot dog adorned with a bolt of yellow mustard. He can't look me in the eye.

Tracy slides off the handlebars and sits beside me on the bench, then immediately pops up again like something has stung her. She stands on one foot, using the other to scratch the back of her leg. She's tweaking, every hair of her platinum crewcut in frenzied motion, her nostrils rimed with dried snot.

"Fuckin' that dude killed himself," she blurts through clenched teeth. "We saw'm carryin'm out. Smelled like fuckin' I don't know. Like shit. You see it? Blew his fuckin' head off. C'n I have a hit of your beer?"

I give her one, and she tries to sit again, but is soon back on her feet, rocking from side to side like a metronome marking loony time.

"They took'm away in an ambulance, but he's dead for sure. What they do with guys like him, with no family and shit, they take'm to the hospital and give'm to the students there. They're learnin' to be doctors, and it's a law they c'n do experiments and shit on your body if you're poor. That's why I made a will and left it with my mom. If I die, they got to burn me and spread my ashes over Hawaii."

A car sidles up to the curb, driven by a kid with a mustache that looks glued on. He rolls down the passenger window and calls out to Tracy, "You for sale?"

"Yeah, she for sale, she for sale," Eightball says. He pedals to the window and practically climbs inside. "How much you got?"

The kid speeds away in a panic, tires squealing, and Eightball's lucky his head doesn't go with him.

"You fucker," Tracy wails. "I can't believe you."

"What you mean? I's just joking."

Eightball drops the bike and hurries to put his arms around her. She hugs him back. Don't ask me why people do what they do. After Simone jumped off the freeway overpass, taking our baby girl with her, the cops brought me to the station and wondered aloud what drove her to it. I was her husband, they reasoned, I should know. I didn't, and I still don't, and I think that's what pissed her off.

"We gettin' married," Eightball says over Tracy's shoulder. He grabs her wrist and forces her hand my way. I glimpse a

ring. Tracy's face ripples like the motel pool in a downpour, translucent and impenetrable all at once.

"My mom signed the paper," she says.

"And my daddy comin' to sign mine tomorrow," Eightball boasts.

"You can drive us to the place, can't you?" Tracy asks. "If I give you gas money?"

"Sure," I say.

"First thing tomorrow morning."

"Whenever."

I won't hold my breath. We've been through this before.

Eightball slides his hand under Tracy's thin white T-shirt, up under the black bra showing through it. He squeezes her tit and stares at me like, "What the fuck are you going to do?" This kid. This fucking kid. I pretend to doze off and picture him dead in the street.

"He all fucked up," Eightball snorts.

Tracy climbs back onto the handlebars, and the two of them wobble their way down Van Nuys Boulevard. When they're good and gone, I open my eyes. Traffic whips past. There's a loose manhole in the street that bucks and clatters whenever a car passes over it, and it's bucking and clattering like crazy right now, as if to remind me that it's Tuesday, 3 p.m., and everybody has someplace to be except me.

"Stop it," I say to Simone. "Please."

I wish she'd just get it over with. Hiding in palm trees and broken-down taco trucks and stray cats, she haunts this whole city, lashing out at me, dismantling my life piece by piece. My job, the house—I can't even keep a decent pair of shoes. Two days after I buy any, they're gone. They disappear right out of the closet. She wants me to suffer, and I have obliged, but the price of peace remains a mystery. I've offered to take the blame for her death and for the death of our child, but that's not enough. I'm beginning to think she wants me to die too.

The bar still reeks of Pine-Sol or whatever they swab it out with before opening. The TV's off, and Cecil is the only other

customer, at the far end, intent on the newspaper crossword puzzle.

"The hell's Jimmy?" I ask.

"In the can."

I slip behind the bar and draw myself a Bud.

"What a ruckus at your place today," Cecil murmurs.

"Somebody said suicide."

"Sounds about right. I smelled it way the hell down the block. Must have been a loner, to get that ripe."

"I don't know. I try to keep to myself with those people. They have problems."

Jimmy returns from the bathroom, collects for the beer. Nobody has much to say after that. I sit listening to ice melt somewhere for as long as I can, until I think I might start talking to myself. Then, feeling as brittle as improperly tempered steel, I get up and walk to the pool table.

The balls drop with a thud, and I arrange them in the rack, stripes, solids, bury the eight. Circling the table, I ignore the easy shots and try for miracles, and I'm on, I can't miss. The incontrovertible laws of physics have been declared invalid. Balls smack into other balls and assume impossible trajectories that always end in corner pockets. What goes up doesn't necessarily come down.

And if Simone had been given a moment like this? I wonder. Why, she'd have flown when she jumped, instead of falling. She and our baby would have sailed off that overpass and glided toward Pasadena, traffic glittering and roaring beneath them like a swift, shallow river in the evening sun. Oh, shit. Here I go again. I've also dreamed that I was there to catch them, and other times I've been able to talk her down from the guardrail; I've convinced her to give me the baby, then to take my hand herself. Next I'll be Superman or something. That's how stupid it's getting. I'll build a time machine or rub them down with Flubber. Whatever it takes to keep them alive. Whatever it takes to make things different than they are.

Eight a.m., and someone's knocking at the door. I shake myself

the rest of the way awake and pull on a pair of pants. Most likely it's one of the girls from down the hall, wanting to bum a cigarette. If so, she's out of luck. Those whores never have a kind word for me. It's always faggot this and chickenhawk that just because I'm not interested in buying what they're selling. I check the peephole to be sure.

A black guy wearing a purple suit leans forward to knock again.

"Wrong room," I shout through the door.

"I'm lookin' for Deshawn. Goes by Little D. He with a white girl, Tracy, and they gettin' married today."

Deshawn is Eightball's real name.

"So?" I say.

"I'm Deshawn's daddy. He give me this number to meet him at."

"They aren't here."

"But Deshawn give me this number."

Something in his voice makes me want to help him. He sounds civilized. I open the door and step outside, join him on the walkway. The sun is high enough to catch the second floor, where we're standing, but the first floor and the pool remain in shadow. It'll be a while before they warm up enough for me to move down there.

"They said they'd be by, but not when," I inform Eightball's dad.

"You know where they stay?"

I shake my head. In addition to the purple suit, he's wearing purple leather shoes and purple socks. By the way he keeps tugging at his clothes, constantly adjusting and straightening, it's obvious he's not used to being so dressed up.

"Well, then, how about where to get some coffee?" he asks.

"There's a doughnut place. Hold on and I'll show you."

I have him wait outside while I put on my flip-flops and a T-shirt. It'll be my good deed for the day, walking him over there. He's whistling something. I press my ear to the door and catch a bit of "The Wedding March."

. . .

He dumps a packet of sugar into his coffee and stirs it with his finger. The coffee is hot, but he doesn't flinch. He raises his finger to his lips, licks it clean, and asks if I've accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as my personal savior. I swear I've never heard as much Jesus talk in my life as I've heard since I hit bottom. For the sake of my daughter, I've held on to heaven, because I like to picture her snug among the clouds when I close my eyes at night. But that's as far as it goes, that's all I need of it.

"What's it to you?" I ask Eightball's dad.

"I just want to share the good news with you about God's plan for your salvation," he replies.

"Forget that, man. That's alright."

Eightball's dad chuckles and taps his tie clasp, a gold crucifix. "Oh, so you that rough and tough, huh? I got you. Just let me reassure you, though, you are loved."

I pick up a newspaper someone has dropped on the floor and pretend to read.

One of the fluorescent tubes in the ceiling has burned out, and the Cambodian who owns the shop stands on the counter to replace it. He slides the cover of the fixture out of its frame and passes it down to his teenage son, but the tube itself is jammed. His son hisses instructions at him while he struggles to remove it.

"Deshawn's girl, she saved?" Eightball's dad asks.

"I couldn't say."

"Deshawn saved. He was raised in the church."

The owner finally gives up. His son takes his place on the counter. The kid jiggles the tube and twists it. His baggy pants slip down to his knees, revealing Harley-Davidson boxer shorts. His father tries to pull the pants up, but the boy slaps his hand away. While he's distracted, the tube comes loose on its own and falls in slow motion, like a bomb dropped from an airplane. It hits the floor and shatters with a glassy pop, but none of this phases Eightball's dad. He's deep into something about the Israelites. Saliva thickens in the corners of his mouth, and he grips the little red table between us like it might try to run away. I interrupt with a question.

"How long's it been since you've seen Deshawn?"

"Deshawn? Four, five years. Five years it must be. His momma brought him up to Bakersfield to visit."

"And what was the last time before that?"

The guy's smile goes mushy at the edges. It's the kind of reaction I was looking for. I'm fucked that way.

"Alright then," he says. "Enough of that."

The Cambodian brings out a broom and begins to sweep the milky shards of the broken tube into a pile. Eightball's dad suddenly turns to him and crows, "Jesus loves you, you know that, brother?"

"Okay, okay, good," the Cambodian replies. He sounds like he's had a bellyful of that shit too.

"What's your name?" I ask Eightball's dad.

"Donald."

"You drink beer, Donald?"

The sun is useless for warmth at this time of year, but I like the feel of the light on my skin. Its gentle pressure keeps me from thinning into nothing like a drop of blood lost to the sea. Donald thanks me for freshening his beer and tomato juice, then reclines again on the webbed chaise and goes back to humming complicated tunes under his breath. He seems content to lie here and drink and watch the kids hard at their morning games on the other side of the fence. They don't make him nervous at all.

Room 210 has been cordoned off with yellow police tape. Mrs. Cho can't get in to clean up until the coroner certifies that the death was a suicide, so we live with the stink, which lingers one tiny step behind everything else. You fool yourself that it's gone, but then the wind shifts and you get a snootful and almost puke.

A syringe floats in the pool, spinning in slow circles whenever the breeze ruffles the water. After a while, it strikes me how disgusting this is. Someone has stolen the long-handled net Mrs. Cho uses to scoop trash out of the water, so I have to strain and stretch and splash to force the syringe to the side of the pool where I can reach it.

"What you got?" Donald asks.

“Nothing. A bug.”

There’s blood caked inside the cylinder, and the needle’s bent. I slip it into an empty beer can and toss the can into the dumpster. Donald pipes up again while I’m washing my hands in the pool.

“Deshawn should be here by now. I could of taken a later bus if I’d known, Been up since 3 a.m.”

I don’t tell him about the last time Eightball and Tracy were supposed to get married, or the time before that. He’s removed his purple jacket, hung it on the back of his chair, and loosened his tie. Now he untucks his shirt and unbuttons it. He has a big old belly, and a dull pink scar puckers the center of his chest from the top of his breast bone to right below his rib cage. None of my business.

I slide into the chair next to his and pick up my drink. The children screech like wounded rabbits, and the beetle-browed motel that surrounds us declares with a groan and a fresh set of cracks that it can’t take much more of this shit. A junky steps out of a room on the second floor. He flings his arms up before his eyes to protect them from the light and staggers along the walkway to the room next to mine, where it seems they’ve been expecting him. The door opens onto blackness, and he’s sucked inside.

Dear Simone. Dear Simone. Dear Simone.

Donald reaches over and shakes my chair. I flinch so hard, something in my neck pops.

“What you need to get for out here is a radio, put on some good gospel for these children. Some of that ‘Love lifted me, love lifted me.’”

Tracy and Eightball slink out of the same room the junky disappeared into. They know we’re here. Tracy waves as they walk toward the stairs, but Donald doesn’t notice. I don’t say anything. Let him be surprised. I light another cigarette and open another beer.

Eightball throttles the gate and shouts, “Yo, old man, you drunk already?”

“Little D. Lord, my lord.”

Donald pads over to let them in, buttoning his shirt on

the way. It looks like the wedding is still on. They've even gone so far as to dress for it this time, Eightball wearing a white turtleneck and an old suit coat, Tracy a pale green minidress.

Donald embraces Eightball. "Look at you," he says. "My little man." Then he turns to Tracy and holds out his arms, "Come on, girl, we all in this together." She moves forward and lets him hug her too.

He drags more chairs over, arranges everything in a circle, and Eightball and Tracy sit reluctantly. It's too much for them, as high as they are. Eightball fidgets and Tracy gnaws her lips. They lie shamelessly in response to Donald's questions, and at first I'm impressed that they even make the effort, but then it just becomes ridiculous. I laugh out loud when Tracy claims she's been offered a job as a nanny to some rich doctor's kids.

Donald wants to say a prayer. Tracy bows her head, and I can see right down the front of her dress. The crack and speed have gobbled up most of what was there, but what's left is right out in the open. Eightball catches me looking and drops his hand to the inside of his thigh to flip me off where his daddy can't see, and I close my eyes and grin like that peek at his girl's titties was the biggest thrill I've had in ages.

A flock of gulls descends upon the motel from out of nowhere. Some strut stiff-legged across the parking lot, running to avoid the kids, while others eddy overhead like trash caught in a whirlwind. They say this means a storm is coming, when they travel so far inland. Or maybe it's the smell that's drawn them, room 210. It's a fact they'll eat just about anything. I knew a kid once who fed them bread wrapped around fishhooks. The hooks were tied to 50 or so feet of monofilament, which the kid staked into the ground. It was a neat little trick, practically turned those birds inside out. And the sounds they made. My fucking god! It's like I used to tell Simone: You want nightmares, honey? I'll give you nightmares.

I said I'd take them to the County Clerk's office, so I do. Donald rides in front with me, and the happy couple slouches in the back seat. It's good to be away from the motel. The freeway sweeps up out of the Valley and swings us past Hollywood,

and the traffic zipping along in all four lanes makes me feel like I'm actually part of something that works. Donald fiddles with the radio and tunes in an oldies station, "Rockin' Robin," stuff like that.

Eightball has the window open. He holds his hand out, palm down, fingers together. The hand banks and swerves like a jet fighter in the air rushing past. "Red Team Leader to Red Team One," Eightball says, "prepare to engage." He purses his lips and makes machine gun sounds, tapping his tongue against the roof of his mouth.

Tracy watches, irritated, then finally says, "You're trippin', boy." She imitates his make-believe plane, exaggerates it into ridiculousness, until Eightball yanks his hand back inside the car and rolls up the window.

We pass over the four-level interchange where the Hollywood, Harbor, and Pasadena cross, the very one Simone jumped from. It's the first time I've been here since it happened, but, okay, I think, I can handle this. I keep my foot on the gas and my eyes forward, away from the guardrail. I treat it like any other stretch of road. Simone's not going to let me off that easy though. We haven't gone a hundred yards further when the car begins to shimmy and grind. *What?* I want to yell. *What? What? What?* But she won't answer. She never does. I manage to pull the car to the side of the freeway before it dies completely.

"I said I'd give you money for gas," Tracy whines.

"That's not it, I don't think," I reply.

I pop the hood and Donald gets out with me to see what's wrong. I'm lost looking down at the smoking engine. I was a salesman, for fuck's sake, stereos, TVs, etc. Cars are not my thing. Donald pulls out the dipstick, wipes it on his handkerchief. When he reinserts it and removes it again, it comes out clean.

"When's the last time you put oil in here?" he asks.

I admit that I can't remember, and the way Donald looks at me, almost wincing, it's obvious that he's finally figured me out, and I am filled with shame. I try to explain in a whisper. "It's my wife," I say, but right then Eightball pokes his head out of the window and yells, "So what we gonna do?"

Donald turns away from me to reply. "We're going to get us some lunch."

It's just as well. He wouldn't have understood anyway. That this was the car she rode in, and my baby too, and that now she's ruined it and left me nothing from our time together. *But it isn't over yet, is it?* I ask her. No, it isn't. I know what she wants.

The four of us walk to the next exit and come up off it on the edge of Chinatown. That sounds fine to Donald, a little chow mein, some eggrolls. To get there we have to cross the freeway on an overpass, and they pause in the middle to watch the cars gurgling by beneath them, but not me. It's all I can do to keep from running.

There's a fountain in the main square of Chinatown, tucked in among the empty restaurants and the stores crammed full of dusty souvenirs. Dirty water trickles down a rocky hillside studded with small gold bowls labeled LOVE, LUCK, MONEY and the like. The coins people have thrown at them glimmer so hopefully, I almost have to turn away.

Donald passes out pennies and dimes, and he and Eightball and Tracy line up at the rail and take turns tossing.

"Ooooh, yeah," Eightball crows when he hits his mark. He raises his hands over his head and does a victory dance.

"You cheated," Tracy insists. "You leaned."

"Bullshit, woman. Ain't no leanin' involved."

I sit on a bench a short distance away and watch the red paper lanterns strung overhead twist in the stiffening breeze. The gulls were right, a storm is coming. I can feel it in the air.

"Hey," Tracy calls to me. "Thanks for screwing everything up."

"Come on, now," Donald says. He takes Tracy by the shoulders and turns her to face him. "We'll figure something out. Don't you worry. You'll have your wedding yet."

I let my eyes drift to one of the store windows, and I swear I catch a glimpse of Simone reflected in it. It's the first time she's revealed herself, and a leathery strap of panic jerks tight around my chest. When I blink and look again, she's gone, but

I know what I saw. The day takes on a dead, gray quality, like someone's thrown a shovelful of ashes on the sun.

Tracy and Eightball and Donald approach me. They're talking and laughing, but I can't understand them anymore, and I don't feel anything when Donald lays his hand on me, I'm as numb as a tooth. I gurgle some kind of nonsense and pull away, and the next thing I know, I'm running down an alley and all the signs are in Chinese and the buildings are Chinese and everything smells like rotting meat. The wind in my ears is a woman screaming, and the clouds are boulders rolling in to crush me.

"What?" I yell. "What, you fucking bitch?"

Dizzy with fear I stumble upon a pagoda with a neon beer can in its window. They're churches over there, aren't they? Temples or something. That'll do. The door swings open before my hand even touches it, and sure enough, Buddha smiles down from a shelf above a dark and quiet bar. I take a stool and order whiskey. Its heat spreads through me, resoldering all the connections. The bartender lights some incense, and my heart slows to normal. I've got fingers now, I've got toes, and that makes me okay, I think. I wipe away the tears on my face and take a deep breath. It's close enough to hallowed ground that she can't set foot in here, and there's twenty dollars in my wallet. I'll just wait her out.

A woman steps out of the shadows and goes to the jukebox, and soon the music starts. She motions to the bartender, who picks up her drink and carries it over and places it on a fresh napkin next to mine.

"Is this too weird?" she says.

Ha ha ha!

We've cut through the crap by the time Donald comes in. We're laughing and telling jokes, and I'm resting my hand on her thigh.

"I need you outside," Donald says. "It's an emergency."

I have every right to ignore him. Number one, there's nothing between us—no money has changed hands, no vows of friendship. He merely showed up at my door this morning

and by nightfall will be on a bus back to Barstow or Bakersfield or wherever he's tumbled in from. And number two, I haven't forgiven him, and won't, for that moment back there on the side of the freeway, when, suddenly struck by the truth of me, his eyes showed nothing but scorn and disappointment. I don't demand understanding, but I do believe we're all entitled to a little tact.

So I hesitate. I sip my drink and let him dangle until he sucks in his bottom lip, rubs his open hand over his face from forehead to chin, and squeezes out a "Please." Only then do I say to my new drinking buddy, "Gina, don't move a muscle," and motion him to the door.

The clouds have thickened and swallowed up the sun, and the first fat drops of the storm splat onto the asphalt of the alley. Eightball is sitting on the ground, his back against the pagoda. His eyes are closed, and he clutches his stomach. Donald kneels beside him, reaches out to touch him, but hesitates as he's about to make contact.

"The girl stabbed him," he says.

"Who?" I ask. "Tracy?"

"They was fussing in the restaurant, and she up and took a knife off the table and stabbed him."

The shakes begin in my knees, and I worry that I'm about to lose it again. I need to get back inside where Simone can't see me. All I can think to say is, "So he's dead?" and as soon as I do, Eightball scrambles to his feet and rushes me, furious.

"I ain't dead, you stupid motherfucker, and I ain't gonna die."

Donald tries to hold him back, but he breaks away and gets right in my face.

"And you best tell that little ho she better watch her motherfuckin' back, 'cause I'm goin' to fuck her shit up when I catch her. I'm goin' to cut her a new pussy."

"Deshawn!" Donald shouts.

Eightball pushes me and turns to him. Spit flies from his mouth as he shouts, "And you can just step off, jack. I still owe you a fucking up for runnin' off and leavin' my momma all alone."

Pain finally gets the best of him. He grits his teeth and bends over at the waist, his hand going to the flower of bright red and deep black blood on his shirt. A jet screeches somewhere above the clouds, and the rain comes down harder.

Donald stands slump-shouldered, staring at nothing. Where are the hymns now? I wonder, and I don't know why I didn't see from the beginning that he's just as undone as I am. I head back to the safety of the bar, but he stops me with a hand on my shoulder and a beseeching look. What more can he want? I brought his goddamn son back to life.

"I got to get him to a hospital," he says.

"Try Union Station over on Alameda. You can find a taxi there."

"Could you help me?"

It's cold in the alley, and wet. Greasy puddles have begun to form where the rain splashes off the eaves of the buildings. Very faintly, I can hear the jukebox playing inside the bar, and I'm glad I don't believe in anything anymore, because that means I won't go to hell for saying, "No, I can't."

"Fuck all y'all," Eightball hisses. He lurches away like some wronged and wounded hero, and I think how funny it is that he gets to play that part.

"Deshawn," Donald cries. "Son." He hurries after him, but I don't wait to see what happens. I've had it up to here with tragedy.

When I've finished off my twenty, Gina takes up the slack. She works for the post office, and is in fact wearing her uniform, having come right over to get blasted after a particularly nerve-racking shift.

"Do you think they'd hire me there?" I ask.

"Sure. I'll tell them you're a good guy."

"But am I?"

"Sure you are."

We drink for hours, through the quitting-time crowd and the before-dinner crowd and the after-dinner stragglers. It's so nice to be warm and full of beer and whiskey, to watch the people come in out of the rain and shake off their umbrellas.

In a little while I've forgotten all about Donald and Eightball and my dead wife's vengefulness. Buddha smiles down on me, and I smile back.

Gina and I move to a booth where it's easier to kiss and cuddle. She keeps making me put my mouth on a certain spot on her neck—her G spot, she calls it—and she keeps making me put my mouth there and bite down hard. When I do, she rolls her eyes and moans “Oh, yeaah.” I get confused a couple of times coming back from the bathroom, because of her uniform. Once I think she's a cop, and another time a sailor.

“Anchors away!” I shout, and she laughs so hard, she spills her drink, but then the song playing on the jukebox makes me cry, and I lay my head down on the table and bawl like a baby.

“Do you love me?” I ask Gina.

“Sure,” she says.

“Can I live with you?”

“No problem, no problem.”

She gets up to go to the bar for some napkins so I can blow my nose. When I open my eyes again, she's gone. I sit and wait for her until the bar closes and the bartender tells me to leave.

Things have gone to shit in the last few hours. The buildings that line the alley are crumbling, the mortar between their bricks eaten away by the rain, their nails rusted. They lean into each other, forming a dripping, black tunnel that is the only way out, and I know what Simone is up to, but what else can I do? I throw my arms over my head and make a run for it. I say, “Okay, fuck it,” and enter her trap. I just want it to be over with.

There's a grating sound, metal on metal, and the heavy crash of collapsing masonry in the darkness all around me. Louder still is the slap slap of footsteps approaching from the rear. Simone, broken-boned and wormy, cracked and oozing like a rotten egg, pursues me with awful puposefulness. Her dirty fingernails clutch at my hair, and her graveyard perfume brings bile to my throat. My screams echo off the concrete

that closes in as I rush deeper into the slippery blackness. "Yes, I fucked her," I say. "Twice. And it was fan-fucking-tastic."

The tunnel narrows and the ceiling descends. I hit my head and drop to my hands and knees, and still she jerks and slides toward me. Scrambling over broken glass, I cut myself to ribbons, and the passage squeezes tighter, so that I'm forced to squirm on my belly with my arms pinned to my sides as Simone giggles and licks my heels. Down and down I go, my blood slicking the way, until the rubble finally clenches around me like a fist and forces the last bit of air from my lungs. I gasp once, twice, but it's no use. Simone's teeth work at my calf. She tears loose a mouthful of flesh and gobbles it down. Utter darkness descends over me like a condemned man's hood as I dig my toes in and give one final push, as I wedge myself even further into the tomb.

And then there's the rain again, cold on my naked body, its drops spreading across my eyeballs like spiderwebs. I lie on my back and run my fingers lovingly over the sidewalk beneath me, ignoring the police cruiser that jabs me with its spotlight.

A cop pulls himself out of the car and steps up onto the curb. He nudges me with his boot and asks, "Do you know where you are?"

"Chinatown," I reply.

"And your clothes?"

I point to the drainpipe I spurted out of, the one that now dribbles bloody water and the sound of Simone's frustrated weeping.

"My wife took them," I say.

He doesn't get it, and I really didn't expect him to. Trying not to laugh, he turns to his partner and says, "We've got a Godiva here, Pat. Dig that blanket out of the trunk."

So everything's okay for now, but I don't kid myself that I've beaten her. I'm not that crazy.

I open the bottle of pills they gave me upon my release from County General and shake a few of them into my hand. They're as blue as the sky is sometimes. The psychiatrist I talked to during my stay was a very busy woman. She ran quickly down

a list of questions only a lunatic would give the wrong answers to, and then asked if there was anything I wanted to discuss. I said no, not really, that I'd been under a lot of stress lately, thinking about my wife's suicide, and maybe that and the booze had led to what she referred to as my episode. She nodded understandingly and scribbled something in my file, and after 72 hours they cut me loose.

I swallow the pills without water. Tracy is looking at herself in the mirror. She moans and falls on the bed and starts to cry. Two black eyes, her nose probably broken—this is Eightball's revenge. He caught up to her this afternoon over at crackhead park and beat the piss out of her, and not one person stepped in to help her.

"They said they was my friends," she wails.

I dip my cup into the cooler to fill it with ice and pour whiskey over that. I'm living it up because this is my last week in the motel. I've run out of money, and the county checks I'm due to start receiving won't cover the rent here. Things are finally going to get worse.

Something crawling on the carpet gets my attention. I walk over and step on it. When I bend down, I see that it's a false eyelash. Where the fuck did that come from?

"Want to watch TV?" I ask Tracy.

She rolls over and reaches out her arms, and here it is again, a chance to get this over with once and for all. "Kill me," I tell Simone as I move toward the bed. "Kill me."

I lie down next to Tracy, and she spreads her legs. The pills have turned my brain into a cotton ball. She winces when I hug her, and says, "Careful." My fingers stroke her crotch, which is as dry as dirt, and I position myself on top of her. She draws the sheet over her ruined face.

"Could you give me some money when we're through?" she asks. "I want to go back to my mom's."

"Sure," I reply, but I won't, because I don't have any to give, and she knows it. She's just setting things up so later she can yell at me and call me a liar, and that's fine. Whatever it takes to make her feel better about this.

I'm pushing my way through the dead leaves between her

legs when the bed begins to shake. A low rumble fills the room, and the TV skips off the dresser and crashes to the floor. Every board in the building creaks with the strain of the wave swelling beneath it. Tracy rolls away from me. She scurries to the bathroom and crouches there in the doorframe as the toilet cracks behind her.

"It's okay," I say, and stand up to prove it. The carpet writhes beneath my feet like the back of some great galloping beast. A chunk of plaster falls from the ceiling, and Tracy screams.

"It's okay," I say again as the window rattles, desperate to be free of its frame.

I'm ready to die. I stand with my arms outstretched, a smile on my face, but we drop back to earth after a final jolt. The rumble fades away, replaced by the wails and chirps of a thousand species of car alarms, and my disappointment almost sends me to my knees. Really, her viciousness is astounding.

"It's just my wife," I explain to Tracy.

"What the fuck're you talking about?"

"She gets jealous."

Tracy looks at me like Donald did on the side of the freeway when my car broke down, like I'm not the same person I was a few seconds ago. While I'm making myself another drink to replace the one Simone spilled, she slips her dress over her head, grabs her shoes, and runs away.

I step out onto the walkway a few minutes later, but she's nowhere to be seen. There's a commotion in the courtyard. Someone panicked during the quake and jumped over the second floor railing. The body is lying in the parking lot, as still as a perfect summer night in the desert, and the blood that's leaked out of it looks like a big red pillow. My throat tightens and tears come to my eyes, and I almost cry out, "Simone!" until I see that it's one of the junkies from the room next door, a guy with long, dark hair. *Same joke, honey.* All of the tenants have gathered around him, the poor families and the whores and pimps and dopers. They're all standing together, staring down at him, while Mrs. Cho calls for an ambulance on her cellular phone.

The sun is hidden behind a thick brown haze, which means that either the whole Valley's on fire or summer is just around the corner. That dog I hear sometimes is barking more complaints against his master, but I'm the only one who understands. I listen to his snarls and watch a thin trickle of blood slither away from the dead junky's head, across the asphalt and under the fence to the cracked white concrete of the pool deck. It picks up speed there and spills over into the water, turning the deep end pink.

So now that's ruined too. Are you happy?

No, she's not. Not yet.