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The Devil and Molly Kershow

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THE DEVIL AND MOLLY KERSHOW

JANICE SHOUTED AND LEAPT off the chair when we knocked over the Christmas tree. She covered her mouth and nose the way you do and hopped around and turned red and had her next whiskey straight and all that, but I just stood there. I'm not the kind of guy who's surprised by failure.

It was spectacular, though. Leaning tree, moving falling tree, bulb dust and the clinking jarring sound, the shepherds and angels all impaled upon their own various pointy aspects. The bulbs with dates on them, flattened or gashed; the one with the picture of Janice's parents, destroyed; the caramel corn I'd gotten at the party store, the paper dips we'd strung up, the string of peppermint lifesavers, all smashed. It would've been nice to have been surprised.

Later that night, Christmas Eve, we lay on the floor near where the tree had landed, facing each other on our sides, bracing against the spinning we felt from the drink. Janice smoothed the hair on my neck and sighed to me over and over. She had one of her legs poked between mine, pushing my calves apart. And it kept going onto the floor behind me.

Some of the smashed stuff, what we hadn't had the heart to throw out, lay in a solemn circle on the floor near the tree. This included Janice's parents, a headless glass angel, the nicer stuff. Were we going to have it repaired? The unbroken stuff was on my window seat—mostly paper clips. Then Janice asked me to marry her.

On my stereo was Bing Crosby who was so very competent, I thought. It was ridiculous, him at our apartment on a holiday. My shoes were on and their weight dragged me toward the core of the Earth.

"Yes," I said, because in my drunkenness I was sure Janice

spoke some language in which “yes” meant, “We are lying near caramel corn, neither of us will marry *anyone*.”

My body, I knew, was the pungent carcass of a polar bear she’d slit open and had crawled into to keep from freezing to death.

For Christmas dinner, Janice’s parents made roast beef, big and dry, with no seasoning or even a sprig of parsley. Earlier, first thing almost, on the 90-minute drive up to Grayling, Janice had said she’d been just talking, as far as that proposal went. I shouldn’t take it seriously. Janice’s parents gave each other very nice gifts for household duties—an electric drill, a pizza stone. For Janice, two self-help books, plus a fantastic wool sweater. They got me a gift certificate for Sam Goody’s, which was a bit wrong, since I owned a record store. They’d thought I collected music, rather than selling it.

I spent dinner adding gravy and salt and pepper, then dried the dishes Janice handed me with a grin, and then we sat down in the living room. I shared a love seat with Janice; her dad filled a rocking chair and looked at the place where ceiling and wall met. Her mom was on the sofa. Around us were cases, amber colored and made of pine, cases and cases. One held antique-looking hardcover books that appeared to be on subjects everyone assumes are interesting to someone else. There were a few newer, paperback ones with aqua cursive on the spine: self-help. The other cases held decorative china, very nice pens, and animals carved from wood. *Both* of her parents made the latter.

We didn’t converse, even though it was Christmas. Outside were six, maybe seven snowflakes. We each trained our eyes on something different, saying, “Yes, this point of focus is the right one for me, it is what I need to think my thoughts,” and it was warm, and we did think. The wooden animals were bears, turtles, a wolf I knew there was mathematically no chance of anyone or anything harming me at that moment.

I knew that at that instant, Christmas or not, some men were doing wild and dark things. Things that took courage and acumen. Maybe they were stealing cars or dumping the bodies of the other gang’s men into a river, or measuring ingredients to build bombs. They were jetting to Turkey to retrieve valuable jewels, or slashing through tropical underbrush in search of elu-

sive drug lords. Somewhere, someone was meticulously casing a house; someone was skillfully lifting a sliding glass door from its track, but it wasn't this house they were trying to get into. I knew that.

I could feel these violent men, I could see their unshaven faces, and I knew more clearly than anything, they had no idea I'd ever existed. They wouldn't be able to find this living room with its pine cases of china if they had a map. And I guess I wanted them to.

I wanted to meet them, the people who seep into the outside world only at night, who others fear and read about, but never see, or know when they do. I knew I couldn't be one, couldn't just choose. I knew even if I found them I wouldn't fit in. If I went to their meetings, trying to join, they'd laugh and laugh. I figured this living room was about as far as I was going to get. I was having roast beef and gravy while these men were chomping on lobster tails and tossing back imported gin from highball glasses or washing down roasted yak with grappa from animal skins. If they were lucky, they knew the guy they lolled was cowardly and irrational and to feel the knife entering his insubstantial flesh was like giving birth to a supernova.

When the snow really started to come down Janice and I wanted to walk in it, while her parents did whatever they did when we weren't around, which was likely to bear considerable resemblance to what they did when we were.

The snow was feathery and warm, ceasing to exist the moment it touched our red skin. We walked past great skeletons of trees and ditches filled with what had once been grass, but was now brown, frozen tangles. We held hands, and I felt the blood flush into Janice's palms, tablespoons at a time, warm and loyal.

"Maybe we *could* get married," Janice said, somewhere during all of this. "I think we should," she said, gazing at the gravel in front of us the way her parents gazed at their shag carpet.

She was twenty-nine and divorced for seven years. The other guy had cheated on her, had fathered a child with the other woman, and was now married to her. Once, Janice had seen the kid in the newspaper, a human interest photo, the kid sticking his tongue out in exertion, trying to hit a ball with a fat, red whiffle bat. Janice's ex, presumably, was just outside the frame, but I

think the kid himself was what got to her. I think she considered him hers, biologically, and felt he'd been snatched away. I myself have never been married. And I haven't remained friends with any of the women I've dated.

"I think we'll hold each other together," Janice said, vacantly. The snow was piling up in our hair. "I think we're both glue," she said. I guessed that glue and glue made paste. But proof that we wouldn't hold each other together was the fact she'd made the colossal mistake of characterizing me as glue. Or was she suggesting I become that way?

"It's an idea," I said, trying to stand on the positive end of middle ground. "We *are* already living together."

"Well, I think we should," she said. And we walked, and it snowed. And then, she turned and looked at me, tilting her head to announce she was looking for an answer, something definite. Which seemed to imply I could answer with a look, or with body language.

So I shrugged. And I slapped the snow off my hair, bending down and shaking my head. One problem was that for the last twenty-two months, I'd been dating Janice (living with her for five, on-and-off) largely under the pretense that she was Molly Kershow, a girl I'd known as an adolescent. Is it not true that there are only eight or nine possible human faces, and while there could be variations, there are many copies of identical ones circulating around the world? So, Molly and Janice have the same face, to an extent. Same sucked-in cheeks, dusting of peach fuzz on the jaw line, very aware blue eyes, eyes that overwhelm the rest. Pursed pink lips. An agitated face, perhaps, but certainly a lovely one. Both of them.

There are differences. I mean, the degrees of all these characteristics are different, and if you want to get technical about it, probably none are truly the same, but the overall effect is that I tended to forget Janice wasn't Molly, and sometimes projected the latter's personality onto the former. And even when I did acknowledge Janice's autonomy, it was impossible to lose the shadow of my childhood. I kept thinking she'd reveal herself as Molly, here to check up on me, and more and more, it was becoming a letdown she didn't.

Molly was a neighbor, a couple of years older than me. Like

Janice, she was tall, and especially seemed that way when we hung out the most, in the years when girls are taller even than boys their own age. She was wide-hipped and big-boned, with thick, dirty-blond hair. Her voice was textured, ten layers deep, smoky and raspy yet hushed. And she was bad. Or an early-bloomer in teenage malfeasance anyway. We became friends soon after she moved in down the street. We'd hang out in her basement with its blue carpeting and always-chugging washing machine, the kind that on the spin cycle rattles secret points deep within the walls. Her parents liked to entertain, to play Rook or Bridge or stand around with toothpicks full of salami and cheddar, so Molly and I felt rather at liberty down there.

I'd known her maybe a month when she introduced me to a game called "Sell Your Soul to the Devil." It was a great game, but one that shocked me to the core at first. It was very simple. The Mortal, as Molly termed it, would sell his soul to the Devil, played, of course, by the other person, and in return the Devil would give the soulless his most-entitled-to pleasure of choice. Molly was a big reader of archetypal tales and the Devil buying your soul was her favorite.

The assumption, of course, is that I asked for blow jobs when it was my turn, and while I must plead guilty, it wasn't that way at first. The first time, I asked for her "My Sharonna" 45, thinking that was really pushing things. Molly was older and I didn't know what realm we were supposed to dwell in. She laughed her saliva onto my face and made good with the record. Then it was her turn and she slipped my trembling hand inside her tee-shirt and led it—had to lead it—up to her breasts. I worshipfully explored the soft, small points, which were at the moment, the meaning of life, and tried to recall if she had my soul or if I had *hers*.

That summer I lived without a soul and walked with an easy swagger, chin raised, head high. Molly would look over at me when we were with others who had no inkling of what we did in the basement, wink and say, "I've got your soul." I was supposed to feel doomed when she did this, but I did not. I felt satisfied and sexually advanced and very, very successful in life. I hadn't felt my soul go anywhere and probably suspected even then that a soul was simply a marketing term dreamed up by those who would sell you Nikes.

Janice and I took a break, that month, from talking about marriage. It just didn't come up. But it was there. Oh, it was there. It was there before the new year had even begun, in the way Janice gobbled up both of her gift self-help books the day after Christmas, in the way she began rummaging for hobbies to fill the void of our unbearable status quo. On New Year's Day she began reading up on gourmet cooking (with a focus on crustaceans), leather craft and the raising of ferrets. Early in the month she decided to go back to the French horn, which she'd played in the sixth through ninth grade.

Her teacher was a guy named Edwin, thin and catlike, mid-thirties, with a face that wouldn't be changed after a weekend away when he'd forgotten his razor. Edwin was the kind of guy who would teach the French horn, or the molding of wildlife from cream cheese, or how to properly watch a television show. Conveniently, he taught her on the same two nights a week as I'd been regularly taking classes at the local tavern on playing an entire game of billiards without ever being able to tell someone, if they were to ask, whether you were stripes or solids.

When I came home the night of Janice's second lesson, it was just Edwin in the living room. From the kitchen I could hear the tinny clankings of something no less delicate than tea service. In life, I rarely have tea, and when it is around, I know its falsely polite tinklings. Janice's horn sat centered on the last cushion of the sofa, and Edwin was fingering my LP collection.

"Hope you don't mind my nosiness," Edwin said. His lips, on his narrow face, pinched his words out. It was the strained yet utterly aloof voice of someone reclined in an easy chair. I took my jacket off and sat it on the window seat where a few paper clips remained. I heard the ground swell of boiling water from the other side of the door and Janice called "Jim, is that you?" which caused me to fear the possibility that many black turtle-necked fruitcakes had been invited for tea and LP snooping.

"Well," Edwin said, thwacking his fingers together to rid them, it seemed, of the silt from my unclassical material, "I admire your completist approach." My record collection took up three bookcases and all the cabinets of the entertainment center, and

ran the baseboards of two walls. Edwin was in front of the bookshelves.

"What do you mean?" I asked, not because I didn't understand his comment, but because from the moment I'd laid eyes on the guy I'd felt an itch to ask that question.

"Not only do you have so much of each group but you seem to have an encyclopedia, of — well, people used to call it 'college rock,' right?"

He was referring to the dB's, The Pretenders, Television, and the rest of my collection which didn't stray very far from those. I liked what I liked, and I liked it on LP because records are the only format that, with time, leave their imprint on the packaging.

"But no longer," I answered, not liking my records thought about by Edwin.

"Yeah, it's really impressive that you have such a huge catalogue of one genre. Janice *told* me you run a record store."

She came in with a tray I'd never seen before, which held a silver tea pot and cups and saucers and three bags of tea. She sat this on the coffee table and stood next to Edwin, peering at me for my conversation. She was trying to rediscover me through the eyes of her guest. So many people in my life have done this that I've learned to avoid meeting people through my friends.

"I'm so glad to have met someone who can help me with my collection," Edwin said, smiling with arms crossed. "My popular music collection, that is. I'm very particular. I don't buy things just to have them, not with popular. I'm trying to sort of lay out a good encyclopedia of all of it, with best representations of each subset. I have hardly any of this kind of stuff," he said, waving toward my stash, Janice following his arm. "I have R&B and Soul and Easy Listening and Country, Top 40, psychedelic Rock, Rap, Reggae. I love it all. But I think that to really dig into one like you've done, and really understand it is so *admirable*. I just have to find a kind I like enough. I can't deny all the rest."

I wanted Edwin to back up an inch or two, out of my personal space, which I defined at that moment as a radius of two feet around me. But he didn't move, not even when Janice sat on the couch, where her French horn had just been, and started laying out the tea service and pouring. He kept talking about what makes Grand Master Flash more 'expressive of urban life'

than Run-D.M.C. and therefore the featured rap piece in his little music museum. I finally just moved, heading for the couch, but realized that was even worse, so I spun dizzily and walked into the bedroom, my back turned on Edwin's promises of dropping by the store sometime.

The tea became a regular cap to their lessons. I'd usually come in around the time they'd be finishing up with simple scales, some tuning of the instrument so it would be ready to go next time. Notes would warble in their muffled French horn way. So subtle and refined. I imagined Edwin spouting off on ways in which the French horn is expressive of suburban nerdy tea-sipping life. Janice would have feet flat on the floor, playing posture, but Edwin would invariably sit sideways on the couch, facing her, hand on chin, one leg tucked under him so what greeted me was the sole of his left foot. He specialized in navy blue socks: the same brand but different pair, I could tell, by the degree to which they were threadbare near the heel.

I'd wave to them, or maybe not, and pad off to the little kitchen for a sandwich, hoping, hoping, there would be some lunch meat. Not long after, it would be tea time. Janice would come in and exchange pleasantries with me and pull from the cupboard the teapot and the tray and service and burgundy linen napkins she'd apparently gotten for the occasion, I'd stay in the kitchen while they sipped their tea, and staged, with someone to overhear them, an exhibition of spirited conversation. They chatted on dog breeds and Edwin's Pomeranian, Fizzy, and the tricks it could do and the big trip Janice had taken to Hawaii with some girlfriends when she was nineteen; and volcanoes— which were biggest, which were hottest— and fettuccine and mostaccioli and alfredo sauce and pesto sauce and pine nuts, which you can never get anywhere. When Janice would say something interesting or cute the air would be jack-hammered by Edwin's laugh, a true 'hahahaha' that wiggled fast and hard into my spine. He would claim, every ten minutes or so, it was about time to get going but it would be hours before it would be safe for me to come back in and relax with a drink and a Television record. They'd try to wrangle me into the conversation whenever I'd cut a narrow slice from kitchen to stairwell, but I wasn't able to participate.

Molly and I had this movie. Or a script anyway; we didn't have a camera. Those were the days before camcorders, when only people who really made movies owned cameras. Every few days we'd add to it, one of us coming home from school with an inspiration to rapidly pitch to the other. Actually, it was Molly who came home inspired much more often. She was the chief creative force. The title was, *Kincaid's Happy and Miserable Life*. This was conceived not long after the Devil game. There was this guy named Kincaid, who quit his job in Australia as fire chief due to complications which involved his sleeping with some official's wife, and went to London, where he got lost. We saw Kincaid as a rust-haired, portly man who was a good enough sport but who knew when enough was enough. When the seven-foot man, for example, reached his arm up the subway steps and snatched Kincaid's umbrella, our protagonist dashed through the subway until he found the thief, who had slipped on— not a banana peel, of all clichés— but an orange peel, at which time he reclaimed his umbrella, and proceeded to strike the man just once, in the small of his back, before calmly walking away. To map this scene out for feasibility, which we did with many scenes, Molly and I ran through it in her basement, I, of course, playing Mr. Tall, and Molly actually hitting me with her dad's umbrella.

January in Michigan is a month of blankness. A white and buried, very, very cold month. It isn't a great month for record sellers, because, while the oppressive weather does cause people to crave entertainment, it also keeps them from opening their front door and daring to punch a footprint in the snow on their porch.

I spent the days of that month inside my steamed-over igloo of a record store, fists planted on the counter, listening, over and over, to the dB's, Television, Richard Thompson, one long guitar riff, thirty-one days in duration. Those customers who did present themselves would feel, from the music I played, that they weren't supposed to like what they'd come in for, but they would find I didn't stock it anyway.

Janice had her tuba lessons, or whatever the instrument was, and I began to develop a hobby of my own. I thought of the Devil. The real, adult Devil, black rather than red, a real former Lucifer, with a sunken gray forehead. I thought of selling my

soul for the ridiculous, easy pleasure you were supposed to get in return. What I wanted was a woman. Someone different than Janice.

It wasn't that Janice had put me in the doldrums I was in, and it wasn't that I'd be out of them if not for her. Not by myself. But with another woman. While I wanted to align myself with some evil and thrilling force, some component of it had to be female. I wanted of course, a beautiful, trappy woman, very curvaceous, who smelled of lipstick and nicotine. But mostly I wanted a woman who would shake me by the lapels. One who stole jewelry or counterfeited money; one who'd sold nude photographs she'd taken of herself; one who would climb into a dumpster for a stylish end table or scarf. One who would make me sell the record store, who would lead me to Europe or China. And leave me there. Lose me and free me up for the next one who would be even more bizarre.

Can I tell you that by the middle of the month I was beginning to feel stood up? I figured if you actually wanted to sell your soul, the Devil would come in a flash. It wasn't such a good gig. In the tales the subject was always a farmer, a good Christian man, thoroughly unsuspecting. Sure, he eventually warmed to Old Scratch's proposal, but at first he was revolted. The visit was the *last* thing he wanted. He had other things to do. I am not a man who measures well against the stuff of time-honored tales. No sir. I felt that the Devil should give me a break. My soul was perfectly fine. We're not talking hearts, here, and my soul was good enough for the Devil.

We went ice skating, Janice and Edwin and me. That was how the coach made the lineup. I'd invited Janice, had decided that, while the crimson landlord of the nether region would eventually come through with an exotic tart for my having, it wouldn't be a bad idea to try to be hospitable to the one I was with. It was nearly a month into her lessons with her teacher, and they'd become fast friends. He'd told her the day before I conceived of our ice picnic that he hadn't gone skating in ages, so Janice insisted, when I broached the topic, he be tugged along.

His skating attire consisted of a furry gray hat with the rectangular, wrap-around earflaps, a fleece jacket over a wool sweater

and since it was one of the three-hundred-sixty-five days of the year, a black turtleneck. He had hockey skates.

The sun was present that day, though squirming toward us through a sheet of Reynolds wrap. It wasn't enough to raise the temperature into double digits. The ice was gritty, the kind that rolls your knees in their sockets but keeps you standing. And thick. You could drop a garage on this ice without it falling through. The only other patrons of the lake were two young kids, seemingly brother and sister, whose parents had no preference as to whether they lived or died. When we arrived, the boy was sitting in the center of the lake, the girl behind him, pushing him in circles by his shoulders, every so often slipping and flopping into his back and strangling him to keep from hitting the ice. All around the periphery were fishing shanties that had probably been in use earlier that morning.

"I want to perfect skating backwards," Janice said in a dreamy voice which made it clear she'd been screwing Edwin.

"Then you will," Edwin said. "Thy will be done," he added with a flourish of his arms.

"On Earth as it is in Heaven," Janice answered with a laugh. So they were saying things that really made no sense but which made dear emotional connections due to the sub-linguistic level they were operating on. Shameless. Right in front of the not-engaged-to guy.

We sat on a bench and put on our skates, Edwin breathing hard already from high up in his mouth, his cheek bones. The kids were yelling nonsense with their hands cupped like megaphones. I was first on with my blades and I slipped onto the ice, pushing very slowly out several feet. It was my first time that season, and it felt good. Skating has always been a strong suit of mine. When I was a kid a neighbor and I would race each other, one hand resting on our belts in back, one swinging. I usually won, but it was just the feeling, the glide. Something about the side-to-side motion of your thighs, the way it leads you forward, is one of life's tiny satisfactions.

I got the blood running, zagging back and forth at a decent clip, trying to cut diagonally against the grain of the obstinate ice. Edwin complimented me earnestly on my technique as he scraped onto the lake, along with Janice.

"It's just that if I fall, I want it to be frontwards," Janice said, beginning to slowly glide. "I'm going to try that thing you showed me last year," she called to me, louder than necessary since I was only ten or twelve feet away. "The thing with the right foot."

"Oh, I plan to use *both* my feet," Edwin said with a giant smile and red face. He eyed the ice suspiciously, mincing forward but not really skating.

I skated up to Janice and took her hand. We went a few feet together and then I turned to face her, so that I was going backwards, Janice watching the way I would swish my right foot diagonally toward my left, using it as a rudder. And then we turned around, Janice going backwards. We headed toward the sun and the center of the lake and the kids, who seemed to be leaving, hitchhiking to Colorado where there would be a better life for them. Janice fell very quickly, with an embarrassing thud, my reach toward her not in time. She jumped up fast, laughing, reddening. We stopped and got going again, me facing backward. I looked at Edwin who was loping along with one arm out to the side, looking at his feet. Why did I think he'd be doing pirouettes by day's end?

Janice was wearing old blue jeans with long johns underneath, and by the fourth or fifth fall I was permanently wincing. She'd sliced two holes in the ass of her pants, was relying on the well-intentioned cotton of the thermals, and the future didn't bode well. She only fell when going backwards, and wouldn't be convinced to stop trying. She was beginning to set her jaw hard—she only laughed the first time she fell. Each time after that she'd exhale hard and jump up and grab my hands firmly and start again. She'd get going faster. But by the fifth time she was ready for a break.

Edwin said he admired Janice for trying to skate backwards, trying and falling. And I agreed with him. I admired her too. I admired this woman who was coming into my office, showing me a new type of rolodex. Whoever she was, she was great, right then, and if I hadn't have been me, I would've gotten to know her. Edwin began humming. Janice yawned and swam her arms back and up as if to put them around both Edwin and me but let them fall on the bench instead.

"Well, you've come a long way since you were six," el maestro

said to Janice, with a little puffy sound. I looked at the kids gliding across the ice, the girl standing on the boy's head, though they'd left a few minutes before. I assumed Edwin's remark had no meaning and would please Janice greatly.

"Since I was six," she said.

"Janice told me the jungle gym story," Edwin said to me confidentially.

Oh. Well she told *me* the finger puppet story.

"She's sure come a long way. Not that you should've done anything different then, Janice. What do you think, Jim?"

I think about the devil. About the devil and exotic, dangerous women and that is all. And you?

"Oh, maybe I haven't told you the story," Janice said, rubbing her neck. "*Have I?*"

"I don't think so," I answered.

"Oh, what a riveting story," Edwin said, sounding like the one who'd known her longer. His voice didn't reveal an understanding of the irony in this.

"It's a *sad* story," Janice replied, "Maybe you should tell it, Edwin. You're a better storyteller than me."

The kids who'd been with us on the ice were now grown and had a landscaping business. The boy was afraid of the riding mower because once it had tipped over on him.

"Well, you know I'd *love* to," Edwin said, telling the truth, "but I think it has to come from the source."

The heat in my body was ebbing away. My knees began to tremble.

"OK, OK," Janice said, exhaling. "So, I was six years old and we had this jungle gym. It's not that thrilling a story, really. It was this jungle gym and the bars were probably six feet off the ground, and I wanted to cross them. Or, how I think it went was, I could *cross* them, but I had to put both hands on each bar when I was doing it and I wanted to get to where I could really swing across, you know."

I could see, or was it feel, Edwin nodding to nearly every syllable of Janice's story.

"But it was really awkward, that motion, you know, of letting go with one hand and knowing the other one had to do all the work. So on the second bar, I froze. I got so both arms were on

the bar, and of course, my feet were way off the ground, and I just froze there.

"I couldn't think of the motion, couldn't really picture myself having only one arm on the next bar, I was sure I'd fall, and it felt like such a long way down."

"My God," Edwin said, thoroughly shocked by this story he'd heard before.

"So I just hung there," Janice said. "I just hung there, arms stretched out, until they got sore and I wondered if I was going to spend the night there and I just started screaming and screaming until my mom came out and grabbed me. Fortunately, she didn't make a big deal out of it one way or another. You know, she didn't panic from my screaming, but I don't think she called all the relatives and told them how funny it was, either. She was perfect."

It seemed the story had reached its conclusion. The landscaping kids were dumping wood chips on the lawn of Diana and I (Diana being the one who never takes off her black trench coat, beneath which are stolen diamonds), not knowing we were planning to move to Hungary the next evening without paying.

"That's *such* a story," Edwin the Gallant said. "You've come a long way. And you've got two holes in your pants to prove it." He chuckled and patted her thigh. Go ahead. "You've gotten very gutsy. Trying to get back to a musical instrument is gutsy." I was going to raise my arm to pat Janice's shoulder, but I didn't, letting the awkwardness of the angle, the way her shoulder was cocked from her arm being on the bench deter me. The wind was sliding inside the neck of my sweatshirt, thrumming the plates of bone in my chest

"You know what, though," Edwin said, "I was thinking. Perhaps it was more gutsy for you to hang on. I mean, the more you— didn't you wonder, the longer it got before your mom showed up, if maybe she was in the shower, perhaps, and just couldn't *hear* you?"

"It seemed like hours," Janice answered. "I hung there for probably thirty seconds before screaming my head off and Mom showed up, I don't know, less than twenty seconds after that." She laughed and pulled her right arm up over the back of the bench to push the hair off her forehead. The wind forced some

of it back down, and she flicked this away with graceful impatience.

“Yeah, I think you wanted it to end any way other than you falling. So you had to tough it out, and it *was* gutsier that way. Your mom just plucked you gracefully, like a mom, so you didn’t fall.”

I didn’t like listening to this guy’s drivel. I ordered the landscapers into the kitchen to grab me a soda. I cracked the blades of my skates onto the grass. A strange thing happened then.

Janice stood up and walked to the lake, as though Edwin and I weren’t even there. I guess both of us must’ve thought she was going to try skating backwards again, to confirm his claims of her gutsiness, but she didn’t. That was the strange thing.

There was me, and then Edwin, two feet from me, on the green bench, whose paint was brittle, some little chips pointing skyward. And there was Janice, with holes in her jeans, and she slipped dreamily onto the ice and glided straight toward the center of the lake, getting so much momentum, so much distance from each patient whoosh of her legs. She wanted Edwin and I together, alone, on the bench.

“There skates a great French horn player,” Edwin said, eyebrows raised.

Janice turned to sweep toward the far arc of the lake.

“Yep,” I said, mulling over what Edwin had said about Janice’s hanging on, wanting it to end any other way than falling. I thought about what may have gone on in Janice’s mind, in real terms, during the incident. I wondered if what he had said made sense that way.

“Janice and I are soul-mates,” Edwin said dreamily, but not absently. He followed her with his eyes, though his mind was gazing straight into *my* face. He held his palm flat on his chin.

Interesting, the way my brain works. I didn’t bat an eye at the comment, occupied instead with what he’d said earlier about Janice hanging on. I concluded it was far from drivel. He was right. He was right about Janice, that she was tough, that hanging on is tough, because it requires faith in something to hang on for.

And then there was the soul-mate thing. Imagine Edwin feeling, with any other guy on Earth, that he could get away with a comment like that. How gravely I’d failed as an entity. How did

he know that while I would feel that required shadow of jealousy, I'd ultimately sit paralyzed for as many months as it took him to steal her from me?

We fell silent and watched Janice make a lazy, satisfied loop around the big, big lake. No wave when she went in front of us.

Sometimes, when it was my turn to sell my soul, Molly wouldn't be up for the perversion I had in mind, so I'd miss out. She'd come up with something else, something she was in the mood for. What Molly said went. And I never complained. Instead I honed my impression of Horshack from "Welcome Back Kotter," and read Lord of the Rings to keep myself worthy of her attention. I was her pet collie. I admired her story-making ability and her husky voice; her resolute manner, her strength and dignity, her down-to-earthness. She could brim with enthusiasm at times, crackling with creative or emotional force, eyes ablaze as she told me what kind of first female president she'd be, or what kind of mother. But she was never ditzy or happy-go-lucky. There wasn't a false bone in her body. I don't know if I've ever loved since then, but no one has replaced Molly. If you were to ask me if I loved Janice, it would be honest for me to say no, but more honest for me to say I didn't understand the question.

The week after our skating expedition, Edwin kept coming over. He gave Janice extra lessons and wiped up the Chess board with me and turned Janice on to a bootleg of Smoky Robinson in Japan, 1966. One night when I came home they were fist-deep in vegetarian meat, making very odd burritos. Janice was singing *I Second That Emotion*. Edwin was fun, if thoroughly enclosed in bubble-wrap, and Janice was having a ball. She sang Smoky all week, usually the line 'I do believe that that would only break my heart.' Sometimes I'd hear just the words 'do believe' looping out from under the bathroom door, or from the kitchen.

I became a big fan of Edwin's. He took a considerable load off my shoulders, making Janice happy. And, really, he created an atmosphere of life and enthusiasm in our place. He made it easier for me to decide to leave Janice. I did want her to be loved. I figured pretty soon I'd pack up and take off. I just liked hanging around seeing her and Edwin together, to hear her singing Motown.

On Saturday, Edwin was in Lansing visiting his mother, and Janice and I went skating. She tried going backwards again and did improve, did start skating without holding on to me. Some-

times she'd make it forty feet confidently, before getting a frightened look in her eye and turning back around. She couldn't do anything but a straight sprint. Changing direction, completing arcs, was impossible. She would usually dump it there, tearing more holes in her jeans. She ended the bitter, snowy afternoon by flying berserk at top speed, failing over and over, collecting as many bruises as she'd gotten the week before.

That night I wanted to make love but Janice was too sore from the skating. We lay in bed, me naked, her wearing just an oversized Grateful Dead tee-shirt I'd rescued from the store years ago. It wasn't long after she began trying to appease me with her hand that she turned into Molly Kershow. Not a look-alike, but her, a her that knew Janice, and my life, and had come back to be with me. My eyes were closed and Molly was giving me a hand job again, and it was wonderful. I wondered, fleetingly, where Janice was and what she was doing. Above me, dozens and dozens of angelic devils played their red harps. The bed was sponge cake.

After I came, I said to Janice, who was Janice again, "I really like Edwin, I think he should come over even more than he does." The furnace kicked on, and we could feel the billowing air from the register beneath the bed. Outside, cars tried to stop but it was too icy.

"He's taking me out to dinner tomorrow night," Janice said quietly, but not timidly. "We love each other."

A few days later, I moved out. I stayed with my brother for a week or two before getting a small apartment by the river, above a dry cleaner's. As Winter oozed into Spring, I would drift to sleep to the comforting smell of steam and freshly laundered cotton. I still played billiards, listened to records late into the night, and waited for the Devil to appear. For a while, living alone was a pleasant novelty. I could indulge in my hobby of stretching out on the couch at sunset, watching the room grow dark, seeing the birth and death of shadows. Janice had always turned lights on.

Sometimes it got lonely, but I usually found something. Once in a while I would dash off a letter to Molly Kershow, not intending to mail it, of course, not knowing her address or how to get it. On good days I would tell her about my life, playing up the ownership of my business, putting my breakup with Janice

in magnanimous and astute terms. But sometimes I'd ask her why she had to begin recognizing the inadequacies brought on by my youth and start dating guys her age; why she'd come into my life so early; why I had peaked then. I wondered if she knew the secret, knew about other women like her, where they were, how to attract them, how everything worked.

A couple of months ago, I did come close to getting what I wanted from the Devil. I was at a hotel bar when a woman who was attacking a Michelob with a friend smiled at me from her table and came over to where I sat. She had high cheekbones and dimples, and wore a sleeveless shirt with a web of mesh affording partial view of her cleavage. She introduced herself and said she was in town going 'from point A to point B.' She said she was in either direct marketing or a traveling carnival. She wrapped her hand around mine and said she was the hunch-backed bearded lady.

We slept together assiduously and wonderfully, and I thanked the Devil, and hoped, hoped he heard me. The more I smelled the odd and thrilling citrus something that seemed to come from her hair, the more we rolled and laughed and pushed each other's backs into the mattress, the more I was sure I was about to be introduced to a world of adventure and depravity. And I was willing to keep my part of the bargain, whenever it would be presented to me.

After we'd finished, she lay with her soft hair against my shoulder, raking her fingernails up and down my arm. She told me she had a rare talent which was that she could tell fortunes with the numbers on a person's credit card. Her voice was tentative, as though she hoped that in addition to not falling for her scam, I wouldn't laugh aloud. I let her do it. I was either afraid of what the Devil might do to me if I didn't, or I just thought I'd be sporty. I reached over and took my Visa out of its cracked plastic holder. She smelled of tangerines and sweat and sex, and my credit card smelled of nothing. She told me one day I'd dream up an invention that would earn a pile. A kitchen tool. And then she left, without offering me a partnership in her scam, without inviting me to join her at Point B.

It was great sex, a funny story. I neglected to cancel my account until after she'd charged plane tickets to exotic Fort Wayne,

Indiana. So the Devil turned out to be perhaps something of a thief, but certainly a chintz, a granter of fleeting pleasures to people who are three hundred dollars from their credit card limits anyway.

Or, it was Janice who protruded. Janice, who, perhaps for the first time, was decidedly un-Molly-Kershowian in my eyes, from the very practicality of her ballooned stomach. They were thumbing through the maternity rack. Janice and Edwin.

"So, what have *you* two been doing lately," was my overture of choice, light bulbs and masking tape in hand. My legs were losing their strength.

Edwin's eyes bulged with his enormous, froggy smile. He nearly yanked my arm from its shoulder shaking my hand; Janice hugged me and kissed my cheek, apparently thanking me for having split so she could be with someone solid, could embark on something meaningful. I began to feel cold in the face. Edwin held a can of peanuts, Janice a sprawling white blouse with turquoise bunnies.

"You'll have to teach our son the history of rock and roll," Janice said sweetly. "We wouldn't trust anyone else." She seemed near crying.

I couldn't answer. I didn't even want to say I'd love to, or something ineffectual, to acknowledge the very empty place I occupied.

August's heat has nearly burned itself out, and tonight I have a date. She's someone I met while standing in the doorway of my shop, watching foot traffic and trying not to think of Janice, Edwin and the child who should be mine. The woman's name is Kim and she bears no signs of being dangerous or exotic. She wears shell jewelry and denim dresses and has all of John Fogerty's solo albums. Who knows if it will go anywhere, but I know I need someone like her, like Janice. That is my project for Autumn.

And then it will be December, and another Christmas Eve. I have an image, but it's flimsy, and it disappears, and it's one I have to make more solid, to believe in. I see myself at the doorstep of the sweet, nurturing woman I'll be with by then, real decorations in hand, tinsel, shiny bulbs, wearing a sport coat, hair neatly combed. I go in and we begin decorating the tree, both of us intending the damn thing will be standing in the morning and it is, sparkling the way it was when we left it.