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This ain't the Amazon

Gwenyth B. Mapes

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THIS AIN'T THE AMAZON

By

Gwenyth B. Mapes

B.A., Hollins College, 1984

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

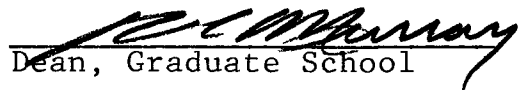
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1989

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BREAD DAY

The cement slab floors smelled of earth and left invisible pale blue marks on her face. Molly raised herself off the kitchen floor, pretending to do a push-up. She was hiding under the long wooden table waiting for her friend Nattie to wander on in. Molly wanted to grab Nattie's ankle or tag her feet to start the day's first game of chase. But pressing on the hard floor, Molly tired of waiting and watched Sarah's dark feet and ankles move from sink to cupboard to table and back again. Sarah was Nattie's mama. She was also the

family cook and housekeeper and called Molly "Miss" when company came.

Today was Bread Day. Come afternoon, the kitchen would be warm and moist with loaves and rolls cooling on the pine table. If Molly kept out of the way, she just might get a slice of raisin-cinnamon bread when it came hot out of the oven. And Sarah always let her put on as much butter as she wanted.

Sarah walked over to the counter and turned up the T.V. then took down the big bowl from the top of the cupboard where the dough was rising. She rolled the ball out on the table in a flurry of flour and began to knead. The hollow thump-thump-thump interrupted the soap opera and hurt Molly's ears as Sarah's palms seemed to come all the way down the table legs, through the gray floor and splash the color of chocolate into her head. She pounced out from under the table.

"You're trying to be a cat under my feet this morning. I told you already, don't mess with me when I'm making the weeks' bread. It takes an even hand, so I gotta be steady on my feet." Sarah glanced at the T.V. "And you're gonna make me miss today's best scene."

"Where's Nattie?" Molly asked, rubbing the floor spot on her cheek where the skin felt mashed and flat. "I'm just waiting for her."

"She's out picking some wild blackberries for both your breakfasts tomorrow. How's that sound?"

Molly didn't wait to answer. She knew where the best blackberry patch was. Nattie had shown her last year. Why, even later last summer and in the fall they'd gone down there and held secret councils amidst all the vines. "Nattie," she called out. "Hey, Nattie," not rushing because thorns scratched at her bare legs, and not caring if her white ankle socks got stained; Sarah would clean her up before Mama got a look at her.

Nattie giggled when she saw her friend plowing on through the blackberry patch, and Molly heard that giggle inside her head like it was the soft gray of a cooing dove that ate from the bird feeder. She grinned back at Nattie. Molly knew she always looked a sight, what with hair messed, dirt smudges on her dress or brambles and fruit stains on her legs and anklets; but neither one of the girls really cared yet. They were only five and it was just too hard to remember all the "shoulds" and "shouldn'ts" when they played together, especially because Nattie was always being told by her mama that she had "different rules" to live by. Molly didn't think it was fair. She just knew that Nattie was learning all sorts of things nobody was letting her know. Like how to pick berries so the juice didn't run out in your hand.

Nattie had to teach her that. And how to push the broom in front of you instead of dragging it behind so you could always keep an eye on the dirt you collected. Her mama never taught her that, but Sarah showed Nattie when she was just four. Yet Molly did admit to herself she'd just as soon not use a broom since the sound hurt her ears and made her think of a fresh scratch prickling with drops of blood. Sounds just did that sort of thing to her: became other things in her head. But even so, Molly didn't think it was fair Nattie got to know before she did.

There were some consolations, though Molly never told a soul. Even though she loved Sarah's soft chest and hugs which smelled familiar like the kitchen and made her feel warm and wrapped up in dark velvet, she loved her mama's hugs better. There was something so clean and magic about the way her mama smelled like the lilac water Sarah sprinkled on the sheets. And her mama's lips were so smooth and cool on Molly's cheek when she was tucked into bed. Molly loved Sarah more than anyone else in the world. But she wanted to grow up and be just like her mama. And she thought if Nattie knew any better, she'd want to grow up to be just like Molly's mama, too.

The girls clasped hands as if they hadn't seen each other in weeks. It almost felt that way to Molly since she'd waited and waited for Nattie to come up to the house that morning. They pressed their foreheads together then tried to fill up last year's green plastic Easter basket as quickly as possible before the mosquitoes got so bad they made red bumps all over Molly's pale skin. The sun shone warm and steady on their heads and the girls felt yellow inside, like honey on one of Sarah's breakfast biscuits.

They ate lunch in the kitchen and Sarah let them both have two whole glasses of cold, frothy milk. They laughed at each other's moustaches until Sarah scooted them outside. Nattie wasn't allowed to play in the rest of the house with Molly. Molly figured her father just didn't want her to have friends except from church since the only little girls he let play at the house were girls that came when her mama invited company after Sunday service. Even when Daddy found her playing outside with Nattie, he got mad and usually yelled because they got so dirty.

Unlike Molly, Sarah seemed to know when Daddy was likely to be in a bad mood. Mama just fretted about the possibility most of the time. But Sarah said it was a look in men's eyes that told. And she should know; she'd

once been married to a man who she said had turned into a "wild thing." He'd been Nattie's father but he left them not long after Nattie'd been born. Mama said he left because he had no respect for his family or for God. Molly wasn't sure what that meant but Nattie thought he'd left because she cried a lot at night when she was a baby. Later, Joe started coming around and stayed. Joe wasn't bad, of course. But he wasn't Nattie's real daddy.

So now Sarah could smell an angry man coming. She said Daddy smelled like whiskey and even his eyes got red. She'd tell Nattie to get inside their house and Molly to clear out of the yard. Seeing the girls together always made Daddy's mood worse. Particularly around supper time if he was running a little late. Which he usually was. He hardly ever tried to spank Molly because Mama wouldn't let him. But sometimes he smacked Nattie really hard when Sarah wasn't near. If Nattie told, Sarah'd yell at him later and threaten him with a law suit or something worse: quitting. But the way Molly figured it, Nattie was the one getting hit.

But tonight would be special, Molly knew. Her parents were going into Wilmington for dinner. It was their anniversary. And since Sarah didn't have to serve dinner, she was going to her sister's house to help with the new baby. Joe would be around, but he didn't count. He stayed

out behind the garage most nights smoking and staring up into the darkening sky. The garage used to be a barn, but with some fixing and some paint, it was better than new, Mama said. And she should know. She used to play in the old barn when she was a little girl.

After Sarah got Molly ready for bed, she'd go out back a ways to the house she, Nattie and Joe lived in and put Nattie into the little trundle bed. Molly thought it might be fun to have a bed pull out from under her parents' bed. But she liked her own high bed with white lace ruffles all the same. Tonight, when Mama, Daddy and Sarah were leaving, she'd pretend to be sleeping under the pillows and dolls piled high. Joe would never know.

The afternoon was slow and hot. Mama was visiting a neighbor and Sarah was singing snatches of songs from the Black Baptist church. Oh how Molly loved to lie down in the shadow of the porch steps and listen to Sarah's molasses voice as it rumbled out the door and over her, catching itself behind her closed eyes. Sometimes when she concentrated really hard, she could see the colors and images of the music pattern themselves inside her eyelids. Once, she told this to Sarah who said she'd never heard of white folks being seers.

"And don't tell your folks. They'll blame your fancies on me. You hear?"

Molly didn't know why inside her eyes she could see the songs or the colors of other things. Mama said Molly let her imagination run away too much but Molly thought it had something to do with the way her throat felt when she first saw Nattie in the mornings -- like when an elevator dropped suddenly -- and the way her fingers tingled when she was still enough so a butterfly landed near, its wings waving at her quietly. Sometimes Sarah talked about the old magic. Maybe that was it. But so many things were just special and she figured all you had to do was notice them. Like the feel of the floor still flat on her face, though nobody could tell to look at her. Some things just had to be secret so they couldn't be taken away from you and called names like "play-acting". She knew about secrets. And she was only five.

"Let's climb that tree," Nattie suggested, pointing toward the mimosa.

Molly bounced up and followed her friend, reaching for the lowest branch. "Let's have a conference," she whispered to Nattie whose bare foot was right in front of her nose.

Molly swung her leg over the branch and let go of the trunk carefully. Sometimes climbing up just a few branches seemed like an awful long way, especially when

you tried to get down. Nattie had her chest to the branch and her arms wrapped around it. Peering down she said, "We're all alone, Molly."

Nodding, Molly leaned her back against the trunk and traced her fingers against some flowers. Molly loved to touch the soft, hair-like flowers that fell from the mimosa. They felt like kisses on the skin and in make-believe they doubled as play brooms or limp umbrellas.

"It's tonight, you know," she said with great importance.

Sitting up, Nattie nodded, her eyes wide.

"I'm not scared. Are you?"

Nattie nodded vigorously. "If my mama catches me...," her voice shook and she tucked her head onto her shoulder.

"Ah, don't be scared, Nattie. Nobody'll find out. It'll be over before anyone gets home. And even if Joe finds out, he won't do anything. Besides, you've never seen my room."

Nattie raised her eyes to meet Molly's. "You just whisper outside the window, Molly," she said trying to sound removed, like her mama on company day. She pressed her chest to the branch, hugging it again, and watched her feet dangle in the breeze.

Molly closed her eyes and felt the bark like so many scratchy fingers through her white cotton blouse. She loved this shirt with the red piping around the edges. Mama said it brought out the pink in her cheeks and the auburn in her hair. Sarah didn't say anything, just ironed it. Molly also loved the sweet smell of mimosa that tickled through her hair, and being with her very best friend, and having secrets to share.

Sarah called: "Molly, Molly Sue! Let's get you freshened up before supper. And Nattie, get down from that tree now!"

First came Molly who couldn't help but scrape her thigh sliding down the trunk. She ran upstairs in her house while Nattie ran back to hers.

Sarah had clean, white anklets laid out for Molly in case Daddy wanted to see her before she got ready for bed. You never could tell with Daddy what little thing might set him off, Sarah often said. Molly slid out of her shoes and peeled off her socks. She could smell that fresh bread now, but mostly she could hear Mama humming in front of the vanity and knew she'd be dabbing some lilac behind her ears. With fresh socks on she squeezed into her Mary Jane's. She could brush her own hair just fine, as long as she didn't need it parted.

Bumping into Sarah on the stairs she said, "See, did it myself," and ran her hand over her smoothed hair. They headed to the kitchen where Molly held her hands over the sink; Sarah scrubbed them for her. The sink stool was in the upstairs bathroom, but Molly hadn't wanted to wait upstairs tonight. That bread sure did smell good and there was no use bothering Mama when she was humming so happily to herself. The pine table had been in the family for generations, Mama proudly boasted, and Molly could see the little moisture drops still on it where the bread had cooled. Sarah must have just wrapped the loaves in the linen cloths that smelled like flour even when freshly washed and ironed. Later, when they were cooled all the way, she'd put them in ziplock bags.

"You going to your sisters' tonight?" she asked, her mouth full of ham.

"Uh hmmm."

"To see the new baby?"

"Yes, her fifth one. I've only been blessed with my Nattie but I sure love seeing new ones in the family."

"She have a little girl?"

"No, another boy. You're sure asking a lot this evening," she said. "Uh-huh. And with your mouth full, too."

"Just wanted to know," Molly mumbled as she finished her green beans and asked for some vanilla ice cream with molasses for dessert. It always tasted so fine after cold milk.

She used to lick the molasses from the bowl but Sarah wouldn't let her do that anymore. Said she was too big a girl. All Molly knew was that Nattie still got to lick the last bit of sweet from her bowl. She thought maybe her Mama didn't want her to. All it took was a few quiet words from Mama and Sarah laid down the law for Molly to follow. And Molly couldn't even say anything back. She knew better than to do that with Sarah. It just wasn't fair. Not only did Nattie get to learn things before Molly, but Nattie didn't have to act so proper if she didn't want. She got the best of both parts.

Molly usually ate her supper with Sarah. She didn't get to eat with her parents very often because Mama always waited for Daddy, and sometimes he stayed out until long after Molly had fallen asleep. This made her mama sad, Molly knew. She heard her crying sometimes before Daddy came home. But mostly she just heard their tight voices like sharp knife edges when she woke up and could only see a line of light under her closed door. Usually she heard something about Daddy out with the guys. Molly didn't think she'd mind if she were Mama.

She'd just come into the kitchen, which smelled so much better than the dining room and where you didn't have to be so careful and neat. She thought that made sense but when she told Sarah, Sarah told her to hush.

They heard Daddy come in and Sarah tightened her lips and shook her head when the front door slammed and his feet tread haltingly up the stairs. "I hope he's behaving tonight," Sarah said quietly, as if she'd forgotten Molly was right there. Molly just hoped he was in a good mood for Mama's sake. They'd been fighting so much lately, and all because he drank whiskey. She'd heard Mama say it was from Satan. Since it made Mama so mad, you'd think he'd stop. At least he didn't do it at home; even Mama said that was a blessing. Sarah just shook her head: "I've seen it before."

Molly couldn't scrape any more molasses from her bowl so she sighed and leaned back in her chair the way she saw Sarah do after a meal. She let the spoon clatter in the bowl and slid out from under the table.

Shrugging off her clothes for Sarah's outstretched hands, Molly stood on the little bathroom stool and eyed herself in the mirror. Funny how you were supposed to watch your mouth all foamy while brushing your teeth. "Nope," she thought. "I always look at my eyes, my nose, my hair to see what they're doing." Smacking her lips

together with satisfaction, she rinsed her mouth out one more time and held her arms straight up over her head. She used to think putting a nightgown on was a little like disappearing. But she was too old to believe in that anymore. If you couldn't see, they could still see you. Sarah buttoned up the back of the yellow, cotton nightgown which brushed lace over the tops of her feet. When she was grown up, Mama said, she could wear nightgowns that looked like slips. They were so delicate with their tiny lace edges, little shoulder straps and sometimes embroidered flowers. She wondered if she'd still have Sarah to button her up at night. Molly just loved Mama's nightgowns. They reminded her of something angels might wear.

Molly snuggled into bed and heard Sarah at the door. "Night, child. You sleep safe and I'll see you in the morning."

Now came the best part. Molly wiggled her feet under the cool, crisp sheets. She wouldn't see Daddy tonight because he was still getting ready to go out, shaving and all that. She liked the smell of his shaving cream. Once, when he'd let her watch him lather his face, he'd put a button of it on her nose and she'd giggled until he wiped it off. But tonight, Mama would come in smelling better than usual; she'd be all fresh. She knew Mama would be

excited about going out. She didn't go out with Daddy very much. And Molly sure hoped Sarah's tight lips weren't a bad omen. She liked that word: "oh-men". It sounded round on her tongue and as full as the magic Sarah talked about. Molly and Nattie both knew about omens: they could be good or bad. And that was a fact. Sarah had told them.

Mama came in softly. "How's my little girl? Did you have a nice day and behave like a young lady?" But she didn't really listen.

Mama's thoughts weren't all there and Molly's stomach got heavy. "You're still going out with Daddy tonight, aren't you?" she asked, afraid the answer would be "No." "Has Sarah left yet?" She crossed her fingers for good luck like Nattie had taught her to do.

"Oh, yes, honey," Mama said slowly, patting Molly's knees. "You're not worried about us leaving are you? You know Joe will be watching out over the place. And we're coming back right after dinner."

"No Mama. I just asked," she said, relieved.

Mama brushed her lips over Molly's forehead. "Sleep tight, my little girl. I'll look in on you when we get back." And Mama was a gray silhouette until she closed the door behind her. The moon was not out yet.

Molly hated waiting. That was something else she was supposed to learn when she got older: patience. But tonight she could hardly keep still, and that just wouldn't do. So shutting her eyes, she thought about her plan and Nattie's teddy bear replaced the pattens in front of her eyes.

First she'd get Nattie and they'd both come back to the house. "I'll get my new doll from upstairs. And all the dresses and hats," she'd say. Both girls loved to change doll clothes, but Nattie especially loved Molly's dolls because they looked grown up with soft skin, pointed feet for high-heeled shoes and long blond hair. Their toes and fingers were so delicate, too. They were bigger and better than Barbies. And Molly wouldn't care if Nattie played with her dolls while she got Mr. Bear. She could play with her dolls any old time when Nattie wasn't around. Besides, Molly thought it was funny to see Nattie's teddy bear dressed up in people clothes.

The girls would lay out all the costumes. Molly would take the teddy bear, who'd lost his button nose, and begin tying a sunbonnet around his ears. Nattie would lean over and stroke the pointy nose on the new doll Molly had gotten for Christmas. It talked for a while, but the tape inside must've worn out. Sarah said there was no way to fix it except to get a new one. But K-Mart didn't have any more.

Once Mr. Bear was in a half-slip (the only thing with elastic that stretched big enough to fit around him), and Miss Doll was in a long white dress, the girls would walk them slowly across the rugs and down the stairs a way.

Nattie wouldn't talk very much, she never did, but Molly loved the way she smiled when they were alone. And Nattie was fun to play with because she listened and didn't make fun or tell Molly she was just imagining. Sometimes Nattie would repeat things Sarah said to her. Like why Nattie couldn't play in Molly's house and that when they went to school they might not be friends anymore. Molly didn't want to think about all that and she wasn't sure she believed the school part, either. She couldn't imagine not being best friends with Nattie. But no matter. They wouldn't talk about that tonight.

Molly smiled to herself in anticipation and imagined Nattie in her bed thinking about secretly playing together later tonight. She pretended to sleep in case Mama or Daddy looked in before they left. She tried to keep her ears open wide so she could hear their footsteps on the stairs and the car pull out onto the road. That would mean it was safe to get up. Just thinking about it made her skin feel restless and itchy. But with her eyes closed, her thoughts went soggy and far away.

A heaviness lifted from her eyes and she saw the moon high and bright in the sky. She'd fallen asleep while just pretending and now she couldn't be sure when Mama and Daddy had left. Surely they'd left; the house was silent and Molly could see Joe leaning against the garage, his pipe stuck out from his mouth like it grew there last week. Molly pushed past the covers and swung her legs on to the floor. Nattie was probably wondering what happened to her so she'd better hurry.

She felt her way down the wide stairs, listening to them creak. She'd never noticed how noisy just walking was. Why, she was barefoot but probably could be heard all the way in the kitchen, if there were anybody in the kitchen. And the grandfather clock by the door, so solemn in the dark, was louder than mosquitoes in August. "I'm scared. But only a little," Molly told herself.

The kitchen door barked open and Molly gasped in surprise. Rooted, she stood still until her heart was no longer in her ears beating blackness behind her eyes and she knew Joe wasn't coming over to see what all the noise was from. Cautiously, she opened the screen just a crack, glad she was little and could sneak through without prying a squeak from the hinges, and settled it quietly back into place. "This is harder than I figured," she thought. "But I can do it," she kept repeating to

herself. "I can do it." Nattie's house was not too far away. "Less than half a football field," Daddy always said. But the moon watched her the whole way and she never before knew how long that distance could be.

Nearing Nattie's door, she scooted around to the side and stretched to tap on the window. She broke the night stillness and wondered how far away the jagged edges could be heard. But Nattie didn't answer. Braver, yet scared of being all alone, she tapped again and whispered, "Nattie. Hey, Naaattiiie!" and she heard feet moving inside. She ran to the door and Nattie peeked around. "Well, come on out," she whispered to her friend, motioning quickly. "I fell asleep and then thought you'd never hear me. How long have they been gone?"

Nattie brushed outside in a white gown that Molly thought might have been hers from last year, but she couldn't be sure in the dark. "I don't know," she told Molly. "I got tired of waiting and fell asleep. You're not mad, are you?"

"No. Come on. Let's go inside where Joe can't see us. Your mama left the stove light on in the kitchen. We'll just go in there."

They'd planned on going upstairs to Molly's room because Nattie'd never been upstairs. But Molly wasn't too sure about all the night's noises and hadn't thought

about not being able to turn on lights for fear of Joe wondering what was wrong. So the kitchen was it. Nattie didn't seem to care; she kept turning her head this way and that, like a rabbit Molly once saw in a pen. Bolder now that someone else was in the house, Molly braved the dark stairs and raced to her bedroom to get Miss Doll. She left Nattie behind, gingerly peeking into the dining room. The grandfather clock tolled the quarter hour. Everything sounded so much louder.

Up in her room, Molly found the doll sitting on the dresser where Sarah had put it. She quickly grabbed a couple dresses in one hand and Miss Doll in the other, thinking "We'll just have to take turns," when she heard a car swing toward the house. For a few moments, she forgot all about Nattie at the bottom of the stairs, and was so afraid that she couldn't move. Blood pounded like drums in her ears.

The headlights flashed through the windows into the room and swept over Nattie's head. Nattie trembled. Outside, Joe nodded at the Simpson's as they got out of their car. Seeing no place to hide, Nattie crouched beside the serving table, out of their sight as long as they didn't turn the lights on but just went upstairs. Her hands were so cold with sweat that they kept slipping apart as she bundled her arms around her legs, trying to be so small she'd disappear from sight.

The Simpson's voices and feet came closer to the house. Molly's mama sounded like she was crying when she said, "But how could you expect me to overlook it? Tonight was just the same. You couldn't even make this one any different. Oh, Frank, I was really looking forward...." The door opened wildly, echoing off the wall. Nattie quivered, held her breath, and tucked her feet under the hem of the nightgown. Mrs. Simpson swished inside and threw a shawl on the sofa, her neck held stiffly.

Mr. Simpson paused at the foot of the dining room table and rested, leaning his hands on the edge. His head dropped between his shoulders. He sighed and let out a grunt as he shook his head from side to side. "Shut up," he said. "Just leave me alone for a minute."

Nattie's slippery hands came apart from around her knees, bumping the sideboard before she reclasped them. Mr. Simpson raised his head and looked toward the sound.

For Molly, it all happened so quickly. The front door slammed and Daddy yelled at Mama. Molly couldn't believe it. Then Daddy shouted, "Who's there?" That's when she could move again. Dropping the doll and clothes, she went to the top of the stairs and looked down through the railing, but couldn't go any farther. Her toes felt crowded and her insides were soft like when she had the

flu last winter. Sarah had bathed her hot skin with washcloths dipped in vinegar water and she'd felt better for a while. But there was no Sarah now. Just Nattie standing up slowly and both Daddy and Mama staring at her.

"What the hell's going on here?" he asked, staring at Nattie. "Is this your doing Emilene?" He turned toward his wife.

"Of course not. You're supposed to be in charge here, or so you always tell me."

"Oh, so this is my fault, too? I should've figured. I'm always to blame, huh?"

"Frank, I'm warning you. Stop yelling at me. You're probably too drunk to even know what you sound like." She began to cry silently, her shoulders still squared and her hands clenching and unclenching at her sides.

He watched his wife cry for a second then looked at his feet. "Christ, woman! I can't stand any more of your damn tears." She flinched as he hit the table with his fist. He sucked in air through his teeth, shook his hand and looked at it to check for damage.

"See what you've done," he yelled at her as she continued to cry. "And you," he moved toward Nattie. "I asked you what you were doing here."

Nattie stood still. Her feet peeked out from beneath her nightgown.

"Answer me!" He looked down at the top of her head.

"You damn nigger cub," he said as he grabbed Nattie's arm and tried to lift her up to his height. Her sleeve ripped loose and she fell back and wedged between the wall and sideboard.

He looked surprised. Molly's mother stopped crying and shouted at him, "What are you doing now? Can't you stop hurting people? Just stop." But she didn't move to help.

His face darkened and without looking back at her he said, "This isn't my fault. And I told you to shut up. Just stop nagging me, woman. I'm trying to handle something here." To Nattie he said, "Why won't you answer me? Trying to sneak in my house when no one's around to stop you? Answer me you little bitch."

Nattie shook her head "no", and tears spilled from her wide eyes.

Molly's mother moved a few steps toward them but stopped. She kept her fists clenched and shook her head jerkily, as if shutting out her husband's words.

"Liar. Damn lying nigger. I won't have you lying to me; I've had enough of this and I aim to teach you a lesson. I caught you sneaking in my house!" he said,

raising his voice to a thunder. "Now stay on out of here. Stay on out of my way, you hear?"

Getting hold of her hair, he held back her face and slapped her before he lifted her arm and body up, throwing her like she weighed no more than a pair of pants to be tossed down for laundry. Molly, who was still frozen at the top of the stairs, tried to scream, but couldn't find her voice. It was lost amidst all the colors and sounds fighting for space inside her head. All she could do was hear the ink-purple of Nattie's head hitting the kitchen floor and watch her body slide under the pine table where just this afternoon it was covered with Sarah's fresh bread and yeast rolls.

Molly felt the pain all the way through her own body and it got worse as Daddy stormed past Mama and came up the stairs. He walked right by her, too, as if she were not there. She could hardly see him through the blackness pricked by white dots which flashed behind her eyes, like she was a television gone bad.

"Can't have this in my own house. Not ever," he said slamming the door into Mama's room.

Molly felt her hand was being stabbed red. She looked down and saw it clutched around the stair railing, knuckles white and fingers stiff as her nails dug into the palm.

She expected her Mama to rush toward Nattie, but instead she sat on the sofa and began to rock herself and cry. Finding her feet, Molly ran to the kitchen and whispered, "Nattie? Nattie?" All she could hear were Nattie's soft moans as she touched the blood flowing from her friend's nose. Nattie sobbed quietly, tears pooling in the crease between her face and the cool cement floor.

"I'm sorry, Nattie. I didn't mean it," Molly whimpered. She looked back at Mama and began to rock back and forth on her own heels. "I didn't mean it."

ELAINE AND ME

"And then I opened the car door and spit it out. Well he couldn't have expected me to swallow it, could he? Not for just twenty bucks," Elaine says.

Elaine looks at me, waiting for my nod, which I give, long and emphatic. We are drinking down a gallon bottle of cheap white wine, and I swallow hard, feeling the vinegary sting rinse out my throat like mouthwash. There's just something about these spring afternoons which beg for bad wine and heart-to-heart talks. It's like we're not even in real world time, the kind that

brings us each day after the next, whether or not we want them or are even ready.

Instead, we sit out on Elaine's balcony, taking our clothes off, glass after glass, trying to capture the warmth and get an early start on this summer's tan, pretending, the closer we get to finishing the wine, that we're sometimes happy. And we almost are, sitting here with just each other and our lives.

Elaine fills up my glass, sloshing some onto my towel and her fingers. She lifts up her hand, letting the wine trace down her wrist and between the fine, blond hairs on her arm. I watch, thinking of the rain as it gathers on my windshield when I'm driving 70 down the freeway and cursing myself for not remembering to put new wiper-blades on; it's not as if they're expensive, you know. And then Elaine points her tongue and licks the wine off her arm, flirting and real sexy, though I'm not turned on. But if she were a man, I'd have to pretend I was.

"Don't want to get all sticky, do I?" she asks me, widening her eyes in a fake look I understand. Then she laughs.

I laugh, too, figuring she means it dirty, like I take it.

I close my eyes, settling my shoulders against the towel, picturing Elaine opening the rented car door and spitting that man's come out her mouth. That man she didn't even know. But she says he wasn't too bad looking. Would've looked better without that funky red valet's jacket people who park cars outside of exclusive clubs have to wear.

"Probably didn't have any diseases yet, that guy. Not over twenty," Elaine says. "And at least his uniform pants were baggy so he didn't have to take them down, just unzip them. I mean, hell, if you've got to blow someone in the back of a car, and have to do it quick 'cause you both have other places you've got to be, you don't want to have to take any clothes off or get them wrinkled. Then other people might wonder what you've been doing to make your face flushed and your skirt creased in front from bending over."

I asked if she washed her hands or just went back to the bar. That's the sort of thing I think about. Me, I'd want to wash my face and hands.

"No, you crazy," Elaine says, taking her frilly, red bikini top off and turning over on her stomach. "I wanted to clean out my mouth first. So I went back to The Marina bar and sat down on my stool, which was waiting as if someone had saved it for me. I was only gone twenty

minutes, at most. People probably thought I'd just gone to the bathroom to pee and snort a line. Then I ordered a martini, this time a double. I drank half of it down too quickly, then sucked the olives until they fell apart in my mouth, one at a time, in order to save the rest of the drink, all the while checking out the bar for someone to rescue me after being abandoned by my date."

And it was Elaine's idea, getting that valet off for twenty bucks. I would have just gone into the bathroom and cried if I'd been left. But Elaine can take care of herself. I mean, she went all the way down to Florida to meet this man for a week's vacation. First, he's hours late picking her up at the airport. I would have panicked and tried to get my ticket changed to go home that same day. Elaine just went into the lounge, got herself a seat where she could still see the guy if he showed up, and started running up a tab she couldn't pay for. She's always so cool.

Then he does show up, all sweet and kissing, not even apologizing, like he doesn't know he's kept her waiting until he sees her bar tab and knows how long she's had to sit in the airport without him. He paid it without saying anything.

"That's when I figured the trip was going to turn out okay," Elaine says smugly.

But it got worse. He'd rented a car, probably to impress her, Elaine thinks. And she tells me that the interior was a cream-colored leather, with air conditioning and smokey glass windows that slid up and down mechanically. Elaine loves those kind of big cars: posh. Probably a Lincoln. That's what her dad used to have, when he was still around. Elaine loves Lincoln Continentals.

I can just see her settling her small hips and round ass into that creamy leather and keeping her eyes open so the swirl of her airport tab doesn't go from her head to her stomach. Elaine's good that way. No matter how much she drinks, she never gets sick. Not me. And I can just see her watching him put the bags in the trunk after she pulls down the visor, and checks out her makeup and lipstick in the little lighted mirror that flips open with a snap. Then he gets in the car and they glide away.

Did you know where you were going? I ask. I always think about the practical things. Maybe that's why I don't have adventures drop in my lap like Elaine does. Men just seem to find her and offer her things. She gets all the romance.

"I didn't ask where we were going," Elaine tells me. "I was just living in the moment, not even feeling the bumps on the road 'cause the car was so smooth, his hands

so loose on the steering wheel as if he was born to drive me around in that very car. So I settled into my seat as if I were meant to be there and asked if there weren't any decent music on the radio. 'We need some music,' I told him. And he turned it right to a station that played sexy music. The beat made me hot, and he must have known it from the way I parted my legs just a little and turned to smile at him. Men are so easy."

Enough, I tell her, a little loudly. Then I have to laugh so as not to spoil the mood. You're making me hot now, Elaine. God, you always have the luck. I need some more wine before you go any further.

"You're right," she says, turning over on her side and grabbing the wine before my hand reaches it. Her stomach and chest have the imprint of terry on them from her towel. I notice the creases under her breasts where they've been mashed underneath her and where the perspiration has gathered. The wind probably feels good across her chest and beneath her breasts the way it feels good licking across my back where I've gotten hot lying down so long.

Sort of dramatically, Elaine sits up cross-legged, so I do too. Elaine holds her wine glass high: "Here's to perfect moments. May they come more frequently for us both," she says, touching her glass to mine.

And to good music, good men and Lincolns, I add, before taking a gulp of warm wine. Elaine just winks and takes another drink from her glass to include my part of the toast. Enough solemnity. I wink back.

"Well, as I said, we ended up at this club, The Marina. You had to be a member to get in and I was glad I'd dressed for the plane flight. I mean all the women had on heels and slinky dresses. There were no frumps to be seen, just class." Elaine settles onto her back and rests her wine glass over her belly button, tracing one finger around and around the rim. She's remembering.

I watch that finger circle and think that Elaine needs to take off her chipped nail polish; it ruins her image. And she should try a lighter color, too, since she's so blond. But I don't say anything, just turn over on my side and separate my legs so the sun can get to the inside of my right thigh. Maybe I'll tan evenly this year.

I wait for Elaine to finish the story. By now, I really want to know why that guy ended up leaving her. But she's quiet, breathing softly, her eyes closed and the finger stilled at the base of the wine glass. I know she's not asleep. We haven't drunk that much yet and besides, we took some speed this morning to start our diets.

So I lean over and lick her left nipple, real slow, like I would have licked the wine off her arm if she hadn't done it first. I see her eyes move under her closed lids and she smiles, her teeth shining, and moves her hips like she's positioning herself under some man. But she's just teasing, and so am I.

There's nothing queer between us, though other people wouldn't understand that if they saw her nipple all hard and me leaning my head on her chest, smiling as the nipple stays all puckered up. It's just that we know each other like no man ever has, even though some might disagree because they got between our legs and thought the arch of our backs meant it was good for us, too. What asses.

And that's why I laugh. Elaine too. We know it's not anything queer, just an understanding. Though we never talk about it.

And I'm getting her suntan oil on my hair, but I don't care. Because now she's paying attention and finishing the story.

"He was a great dancer, that guy. He could really turn heads on the floor. We danced and drank for a couple hours and I was feeling really good, let me tell you," Elaine said after finishing off her glass and not filling it back up, just setting it near the bottle. "He wanted

to go to his boat then. He'd had this boat stocked with food and alcohol for our week off the coast. But I liked The Marina and wanted to stay there a little longer, at least through the evening. I figured we could screw later, but he wanted to go RIGHT THEN.

"Well, I started getting pissed. There were some really cool guys there and I wanted to dance with some of them, get their business cards, you know. Just in case I ever got down to Florida again. Of course, I didn't tell him that. I told him that he really turned me on when we danced and I needed to do that a little more before I went back to his boat and gave him the night of his life. That made him pause, and he ordered us another round.

"When he was ordering, I asked the man next to me to dance. He took my elbow and we were on a cloud, humping and stomping out on that dance floor. I closed my eyes but I'm pretty sure some people cleared off to watch us move. I was hot, let me tell you," Elaine says with that sarcastic I-fooled-them smirk she never wears when men are around, unless she's about to pass out. Then I can't look at her too long, because that's not the Elaine I know, the one who's always in control and hiding her feelings except with me.

So what happened? I prompt her, reaching for more wine myself, wishing I could have been with her on that dance floor and leaned my head back to watch the glass ball sway over us and flicker lights and shadows over our bodies. I can almost feel the bass itching my feet, moving my legs to the rhythm my hips already know. No wonder I need some more wine. God, Elaine always gets the breaks. Lucky lady. So what happened? I ask again, breathing in too quickly so the wine makes me cough. Why didn't that new man take care of you after Jerk left?

"When I saw Jerk leave, I ran after him. He could at least have not slammed the door in my face. The valet had to open it for me and by then Jerk was in our fine car and leaving the lot with screeching tires, dust flying, the whole bit. Shit, he sounded like some teenage boy with his first hot rod. What a fool. I felt like crying, 'cause my suitcases were in his trunk and all I had was a little purse with my makeup in it. At least I had that.

"I went inside all stiff and proud, like I'd planned this and nothing was a surprise. I tried to find my latest, but he was in a huff since I'd left him on the dance floor, and he'd found some other chick. I was pissed. The bartender had cleared our drinks away, so I ordered another martini. He just eyed me and said Mr. Califf had closed the tab and was I paying cash? I

started to make a scene, but knew I'd get thrown out on my ass; this was a class establishment, Members Only, you know."

Elaine is really getting into it, now, propped up on her elbows and looking out off the balcony like we're in Florida and watching the surf come up or something. I like to see her get into a story: she's almost possessed. She doesn't even notice that my hair has wiped all the suntan oil off her chest and stomach, and that's something she'd usually notice.

"'Excuse me for a minute. I have to go to the little girls' room.' That's what I told the bartender," Elaine continued. "And he just nodded like bartenders are paid to do, no matter what they think. And who cares what they think?"

"I went outside and grabbed the arm of that valet and said 'Hey. How'd you like to get off?' His eyes bugged like all his teen fantasies were more than his pecker ever bargained for. 'I'm serious,' I told him. 'My date just left me, as you saw yet did nothing about, and I need some money for a few more drinks so I can meet my Prince Charming. Twenty bucks?'"

"That kid couldn't even stutter out an answer fast enough. He just nodded and we went to the far side of the lot to a car he'd just parked. That car was a Mercedes

convertible, but at least the top was up. I wish he'd found a bigger car, like the Lincoln I had just gotten very accustomed to. But what the hell. I wasn't planning on moving in.

"He probably thought I'd done that sort of thing before because he leaned back on the seat and just looked at me. I had to unzip his damn pants and fish through his shorts for him. But he had a live one. It took less than five minutes and he was one happy son of a bitch.

"He zipped himself back in while I spit, but I had to ask for the twenty. I couldn't believe how rude he was, making me ask. And he shouted THANKS after me as I was running back toward The Marina doors. What a loud bastard: no modesty. For all he cared, the whole world could know, with his kid's yell and shit-faced grin."

Elaine pats her stomach and reaches for the suntan oil, smearing it on her abdomen and pushing the bikini elastic a little farther down to make sure she gets as much exposure as possible. The oil glistens off her abdomen, making her blond tiger stripe stand up and shine between her belly button and the bikini's elastic. I realize my nipples are getting hard, probably the evening breeze picking up. So I turn on my stomach.

What guts, I think. Just spitting it out in front of him like that. And he didn't even seem to care. Swallowing isn't bad if you like the guy, but it's a chore and a matter of politeness when you're just pretending you do, or when you just met and don't want to offend him.

That makes me think of the guy I picked up when Elaine was having her adventure in Florida last week. He kept buying me drinks at the bar. So what else could I do but bring him home for the night. I mean, who's kidding who? Virginity was something I lost with my first finger fuck. And I'm not saving myself for the somebody special that a long time ago I stopped believing exists. Sure, I hope for that special spark, but he'd better burn down more than a few trees to make me believe in him.

So I brought him back to my apartment, drove him in my car even though I was too drunk to be impressing him with my driving techniques. But then so was he. So I hoped he'd be impressed anyway, since we got there without a cop pulling us over or anything. And I managed not to dump my purse out trying to find the damn door key.

Being Ms. Hospitality herself, I offered him a nightcap. Plus that gave me a minute to regroup. I always seem to get shy right beforehand, and I can't figure out why. There's no real reason to be reluctant.

We downed a couple straight vodkas since I'm always out of mixers. And he put his hand on the small of my back and pulled me toward him like his moves always work, and he called me Baby. BABY. Oh, God, like that makes me wet.

That's when I got down to business and figured the scene should get finished as quickly as possible. All those sex education classes where they warn girls about the effects of teasing: blue balls. I can't shoulder that guilt. I mean, when I've gone that far, I can't back out.

So I took his hand and pulled him back to the bedroom. I didn't even turn the light on 'cause the room was a mess and I knew where the bed was anyway. I just took my clothes off and hopped under the covers.

What're you waiting for? I asked him, thinking he'd gone to sleep on his feet or believed the movie stuff where you have to take each other's clothes off. That shit's for the birds. Well, he finally dropped his clothes and sidled up to me in bed, making drunken wet promises about a long night and a late morning.

It didn't take him very long to lick at my nipples, try to get my jaw to open as wide as it would go for his fat tongue, slide between my legs, and then shoot off.

I always wonder if I'm going to get someone who takes a little time, but by the time I'm drunk enough, they are too, and then I want to get it over with before I change my mind. So it all works out for the best in the end anyway. Elaine knows what I mean.

I look at her closed eyes and chug my glass of wine before reaching over to get her attention. I slide my finger down her tiger stripe and hook my pinky under her bikini elastic like I'm going to put my hand on her crotch. I lift the elastic high while she grins and then let it snap.

She jerks her head up and says "What the hell?"

So I tell her about my hot date, though I leave out the part about waking up in the morning and seeing his mouth open like a child's. He was on his back breathing gently, like a little boy I used to babysit.

I do tell Elaine I noticed he didn't have too much hair on his chest, which made me want to cover it up for him, but he was sleeping on top of the sheets. And as I watched him, I got real sad, 'cause I didn't even know his name and couldn't remember how to make small talk. I get like that the next morning: sad and real quiet, like I've got to think.

I mean, there's no reason to wake a guy up or stroke my hand down his temple and cheek as he remembers what day it is. Hell, chances are he won't remember my name either. And though I sometimes have these weird, fleeting urges to do it, I know it's stupid to want to trace his lips with my fingers, like you do around your wine glasses, you know Elaine, and watch his eyes learn to focus again as he feels my touch and sees me smile.

I mean, why should I do anything like that, or even stay in bed instead of getting a quick shower and leaving him there while I go get a paper and collect myself, hoping he'll be gone or at least be headed out when I get back? Why pretend?

Elaine's looking at me like I have gone stark raving mad. She sits up on her elbow, her breasts pointing at me from the early evening breeze that's picked up. Her nipples pink, as if they know we're bar-hopping tonight.

"Why?" she asks me. "Why do you ever let them spend the whole night, Barb'ra? Hell, I always make them leave. And no, they never talk back if you say it this way.

"You say 'NO BABY. See this alarm clock? It's set for 3 a.m. And when it goes off, you've got to leave. Don't wake me up, the door'll lock behind you.'

"That way," Elaine explains, "you don't have to deal with them in the morning."

I close my eyes and let her think I agree with her, because I usually do. I stop feeling the balcony's hardness under my head, instead I imagine me tossing my hair as we're out dancing at The Charter Club later this evening. And maybe the bar's not so crowded tonight, and people don't seem to be so drunk. So it's an off night. But I like the amps not so loud. Elaine's actually enjoying herself, not just trying to make a score.

I see some guy with an accent come and ask me to dance. I can't place the accent, but he's my height with soft brown hair, and -- No, I don't want to know what he'll look like or what his name'll be. I don't want to box him in.

He holds me and for once I dance well; the song seems to last forever. We talk while dancing and he's interested in my job, even my hobbies. I've forgotten I like to sketch. He likes art and that reminds me.

Elaine tries to cut in on the dance, but instead he buys us both drinks. And we talk. We really talk. I watch Elaine's eyes shine. She seems so real. I warm to his boyish laugh and listen closely like it's a rhythm I want to move with again and again. Elaine foregoes her diet and joins us for dinner on his expense-account. We decide on Italian at Luigi's. Of course. Elaine's and my favorite restaurant. And he follows us in his car, his practical Japanese car.

Later that night, I drop Elaine home and wait outside until through the balcony window I see her light come on. He follows me home and stands in front of my door as I fumble for keys, always my awkward self. Are you sure about this, Barbara? he asks. And I am. For once I'm not stalling; I just don't want anything to be over too soon.

I tell him we could talk first, and have some tea. Does he like tea? And I've got some shortbread my aunt sent last week.

Come inside. The shortbread's in a tin over the stove. Can you find it? Great.

Now the water's on and I feel his hand press mine while we're waiting for the tea.

Smiling and tracing my finger around his jaw, I can hardly believe it: him here, his smile like he's comfortable, the way we can talk, and how Elaine didn't call him a Typical Prick when we went to the bathroom at Luigi's. She even liked him and called me a lucky shit. But she was glad; I could tell.

I know what I'll do tomorrow: I'll make breakfast. But first I want to wake him up and hear him laugh. Then he can take a shower while I call Elaine to bring over the champagne and orange juice for mimosas. I wonder if I've got enough eggs for breakfast. I used to make a great omelet. Maybe he can dice the onions.

That's better than Elaine's suggestion. And I wouldn't have to just deal with him in the morning.

AGAINST THE FUTURE

You curl next to your sleeping lover. He has lived with you for three years now, but you know that no matter how many years have passed between the two of you, nothing is permanent: men always leave as quickly as they come. But he will not know this until he wakes by himself in a strange and empty apartment and realizes he will have to wash the towels himself. Tonight he is sleeping like the child you never want to bear, but dream of now and again. He cannot see the moon you see, or its

reflection repeated in the bedroom window flung wide, you hoping for a breeze to cool you beneath the sheets. He is dreaming and you cannot sleep because your dreams clamor in the air, press against your ears, and mold the future you now fight. Rising, you dress silently, knowing he sleeps too soundly so will never wake to find out what you fear and where you go.

At the bottom of the stairs, you peer out the door. This apartment building used to be a rich hotel. And look what's happened. The whole neighborhood has gone to hell and the drugs sold on your corner are a city income you will never be able to receive, even when you are forced to step beyond the building wall to live among the street people. How long will your job last? you wonder. Always these fears of losing everything. Only the bag ladies are visible tonight, huddled against buildings and garbage cans. The park benches must be full. You take the shopping cart abandoned next to the Puerto Rican laundry. You had your eye on the cart earlier. One of the wheels is sideways, but you do not bother to fix it. The moon is high now, and you need its light.

You wheel down Fulton, past the basketball courts. The Barbadian woman who runs the bakery throws away good food. Everyone knows that. So you kick her garbage cans with your shoe, hoping to scare the rats out before you

reach in your hand. Tonight is good. Rolls and some sweet bread. You brush them off quickly, look around you and smile. You beat the others tonight.

Quickly, you head toward Flatbush Avenue. Junior's is still open and you can hear the cars already. It's okay to push the cart across Flatbush, but people try to run you over. Your heart races and you curse the sideways wheel. But you weave through the cars and are singled out only once: "Goddamn bag lady! Get the hell off our streets!" You look authentic, even though you are just practicing. Junior's has Brooklyn's best cheesecake, but the meals are cheap. So their garbage is always rank, only the worst scraps survive to be thrown out. Yet someone's beaten you tonight, the can lids are strewn and the bags already ripped open. Even the cats have been here. You smell their urine, too. You dig through one more time. It never hurts to be safe, you tell yourself. You find chipped mugs, saucers and glasses. Chuckling quietly as you've heard real bag lady's do, you pretend to talk with the scavenger who made it to Junior's ahead of you, telling them they were too hungry to sort properly. They need to think of their future. Dishes might come in handy, you know. What a find. You load the cart with dishes, none that are too badly broken.

You clink and squeak down the street, past all the cheap shoe and imitation jean stores. You look in the lighted windows of the Indian store and see silver threads in one turquoise sari. You know the cups from Juniors will shine that brightly once they are washed, and you will not spend a cent. That's the difference between others and you. You search through the cans and knotted plastic bags on the sidewalks. You find shoes, string, paper bags without holes in which you wrap all the food you've found and brushed off, and one clean white envelope, the gum not even licked. At last you are in the Heights and you turn around on Montague street. Some ruggelah from the Jewish bakery and a baker's apron with holes. Paper cups from the ice cream store and a child's plastic umbrella with two spokes missing. You head for home and try not to retrace your steps, wheel past the backs of stores, mind the rats.

Suddenly you see her. Lady. She is sitting next to a dumpster full of broken glass thrown from the renovated department store. Lady has lost her legs and she is nude, but her mannequin body, arms and head are intact. Even the eyelashes are on, held stiff by glue. You hold Lady up, stretching your arms toward the street light. What a find. She's a catch. You know why no one else has taken her, and it's not her lack of legs. People sleeping

against your building and in the park cannot afford Lady. She takes up space and is heavy to carry. They cannot keep what could be a burden. You will think like that some day. But for now, you are practicing against the future and Lady is a prize. You put Lady in the shopping cart seat, hum softly to her as you wheel home. She bounces as you race across Flatbush, no one yells, and you worry about her hips or her fingers breaking. A crack or chip you could deal with. But she is safe as you move down Fulton and you show her the basketball courts, the Barbadian bakery. She does not close her eyes to the rats who are bolder as the clouds drift across the stars and sky.

Once home, you do not unload your bounty outside as you normally do, unhappy at the lack of a storehouse, though glad your skills are sharpening. Instead, you bring the whole shopping cart, Lady and all, into the building. You carry the shopping cart past the broken elevator and up the six flights of stairs, stopping at each landing to assess damage and rub your tired arms as you breathe deeply. You hope you do not wake the other tenants. Lady is quiet and good. You enter the two room apartment, confident that your lover is still sleeping. His dreams are warm, his breath moist in the air above your pillow. He has no idea of the moon, the stars, your

fears or your future. For that you love him, but will never let him know.

At the foot of your bed, you watch his chest rise and fall, see his fingers curled beneath his chin. The moon shines in repetition against the window pane and you think of the turquoise sari. Swiftly and tenderly you unload the shopping cart, piling your goods on the bed. You cover the impression your body left with bags, food, string, dishes. Last, you pick up Lady, run your hand over her wigless head and move her arms down by her sides. She's a catch. Your future is not here yet, and you know you can keep her for now. Later, there will be no room. Both of you know that; it is he who is sleeping.

BIG D

Stephen waited for Gary in front of the Cinema 3 not far from the DuPont Circle metro stop. Down the street was Titles and Tea, the bookstore and cafe they'd called "our place" these last fourteen months. As he saw Gary pass Titles, Stephen resisted the urge to wave his arm and yell in greeting, to pretend their relationship had not ended two weeks ago when he'd unexpectedly come home for lunch and found Gary bending over the sofa-back fucking Jeff, the thin transvestite they'd always made

fun of because he couldn't walk in heels unless he was on crystal. Gary had voluntarily moved out that night and the next day Stephen arranged for the steam cleaning of his furniture and carpets.

Today, he'd called, asked Gary to meet him, give him back the extra apartment key, arrange to pick up his records and plants, and see "Diva", a movie they'd seen before. Stephen waited for the light to change before Gary could walk across the street, tossing his shoulder-length brown hair from side to side as if posing for Stephen. Stephen bought the tickets and Gary picked the usual seats: center section, back row.

As Gary began to sit, Stephen rounded his hand over Gary's ass, and removed the wallet from the back pocket of Gary's 501's. Gary pretended not to notice -- always afraid of scenes -- and sat down. Still standing, Stephen removed his apartment key from Gary's wallet and riffled through a sheaf of bills. "Get a loan today, or did Jeff win a contest?" he asked Gary's profile, wishing he could still trace that line from forehead to lips with his finger. The old gentleness was still alive. Gary watched the previews up on the screen, refusing to respond; he never would argue or defend himself. Not feeling quite real, Stephen removed the wad of money, threw the empty wallet in Gary's shadowed lap and, before he turned and

left, said: "You owe me, lover. I get thirty days rent for no notice."

Tall, thin and blond, Stephen had often thought he'd look striking next to a black doberman. In his childhood, Gary had been attacked by two dogs, so couldn't stand to be near them, much less be part-owner of one. But that was no longer Stephen's consideration, just Gary's problem. So outside, he counted the \$300-plus dollars he'd taken from Gary and knew that's what he had to buy: a Doberman. After work the following day, Stephen took the metro one stop past the zoo and the pandas, and walked into the pet store a friend of his owned. Ten minutes later he walked out with his lean, black doberman who wore a red collar and silver chain. "What a pair," Stephen thought. "I'll name you Big D and drive Gary mad with fear. You can rest your head on my lap when he picks up his records." The thought of frightening Gary excited Stephen, but also brought a fist-sized weight of grief into his stomach. Stephen stopped walking; Big D looked back and rubbed his head against Stephen's leg. Stephen relaxed the chain and knelt down on the sun-warmed pavement. People rushed around and past the pair, pretending not to notice when Stephen put his arms around Big D's neck and buried his face between the dog's ears, trying not to cry.

A couple weeks later, Gary still hadn't called. Stephen thought about having a party to give the records away. Surely somebody would tell Gary about the party, and he'd call. Big D couldn't share in the cooking and seemed to take up more space than Gary had. But while space might be a problem come winter, they were outdoors a lot now. Their long walks every night put a new pattern into Stephen's life, filling the silences of no Gary with the companionship of Big D, whose liquid eyes responded quickly to Stephen. Big D's ears would even prick up at times when Stephen's mood changed in the white linen and shiny brass apartment just west of DuPont Circle. At those times, Stephen wondered how he had ever lived without Big D. Yet still angry at Gary, Stephen trained the dog to piss on Gary's potted plants.

One twilight, Big D and Stephen strolled past the National Geographic building and along some side streets lined with rundown brownstones. Big D sniffed around each tree and fire hydrant, but Stephen pulled him along. Stephen slowed in front of a particular broken, chain-link fence and Big D sat down, looked back at Gary, and whined for direction. A rectangle of light fell out of the building's doorway and Stephen saw Gary's silhouette leaning against the frame. His heart seemed to constrict within his chest and Stephen would have gasped

outloud if he'd been able to breathe. Gary didn't move; he always enjoyed a pose. Plus, he was scared of dogs.

"Just in the neighborhood, as they say," Stephen finally said, patting Big D who looked toward Gary. "This your new place?"

Gary moved slowly, consciously inside the doorway, shaking his long hair as he put his hands on the doorknob and focused his eyes on Big D. He waited just a moment before answering: "Jeff lives here. He let me move in." There was no wistfulness in Gary's voice, no emotion toward Stephen at all, and his fear of the large, unknown dog was controlled.

Disappointed, Stephen's finger's trailed down Big D's neck and Big D strained at his leash as Jeff's silhouette came to stand next to Gary. Jeff raised his arm and threw one high-heeled sandal into the air and toward the street. Thinking the shoe was aimed for him, Stephen ducked, but Big D lunged after the sandal and brought it to Stephen who still crouched on one knee. Big D's stump of a tail wagged as hard as it could while Gary and Jeff laughed before closing their door.

MIRIAM

Miriam brushed her apron crumbs onto the window ledge, a ritual of feeding. The window was her favorite place in the tiny apartment, probably in all of Brooklyn she thought to herself. Lived there forty-three years, though not always alone. Harvey, God rest his soul, died almost twenty years ago. Twenty years ago next January. Awful way to go, in the cold. But it's not like he had a choice, she knew. She couldn't really blame him when she had to stand in the slush to call an ambulance from the

corner phone, hoping he wasn't already gone. Lucky it wasn't late at night, was all she could say now, though she'd wanted to say a lot of things then.

More crumbs. The pigeons always needed more crumbs. She started feeding them the spring after Harvey, God rest his soul, died. Had a heart attack, they said. She liked their company at first, the small scratching sounds their beaks made on the bricks, their pink claws holding onto the sill. Her sill. Even outside the screen it was hers. And she didn't care what the neighbors thought. Dirty,

they said. How could she leave Harvey in the cold apartment when he was dying? Dirty. But how was she to know he would go before she returned from the phone booth? He never complained. Was always so silent. Not like the pigeons who cooed. They were good company. Miriam's fingers circled strongly around the teapot handle. Won't let arthritis cripple me. Fingers still tight as vise grips. The flesh on her upper arm wobbled, like a rooster's wattle, she thought, catching her reflection

on the pane of glass. How she loved that window. Prettiest one in the whole building if you asked her. Sure, she had no view of the Heights, just the alley and next building. But her window arched like

royal eyebrows. Crafted in brick, held together with cement, it created a miniature cobbled street for her pigeons. Harvey hadn't liked pigeons. But then Harvey had never liked the women in the next building either, whose windows looked into the arch of her window. He said they were gossips. He was right about that. And they didn't like her pigeons either. Said they were dirty. Thought Harvey's dead body was dirty before it was taken away. In the winter she would bring the blinds down before Harvey came to the little round table for dinner. That way he didn't feel watched by the women who had nothing better to do than watch her. Miriam. In her kitchen

she would fix

him chicken stew. The dumplings bobbed like so many waterlogged chicken brains. He said they looked like sponges, the dumplings. But Miriam thought they looked like brains. Brains bloated like dead bodies that floated in the East River before the City found them. Cleared them away. She remembered the sound of Harvey's voice when he tasted her stew, and told her it was the best. The best. As if he didn't eat it every Friday of his life. Which ended in January though no one expected it. Least of all the women who gossiped in the other building. From her round table, she could see their windows. But she tried not to look

when they carried Harvey's body away. She'd always heard it was best to remember them alive. But she couldn't remember Harvey, God rest his soul, very often. The way he looked. Just his voice about the women and her chicken stew. Every Friday she still made stew and whipped those dumplings as if they were alive until she dunked them in the scalding broth. Holding their life in her spoon. Her wooden spoon. Beautiful, though not to all those women who were gone shopping Monday and Friday mornings. Miriam loved those days. Probably as much as she'd loved Harvey. But that was okay because Harvey was dead. Almost twenty years ago. God rest his soul. Next January. And he would never again shoo away pigeons. He was safe from knowing how she fed them, killed them, kept herself alive. One each on Monday and Friday mornings.

Miriam's hands moved slightly when she snapped the pigeon necks. Her ritual of sowing and gathering. Sowing and gathering. She watched the pigeons land on her ledge and peck up the crumb offerings. Their little murmurs of delight and recognition. More comforting than any other sound, Miriam thought. The screen was down today and she had a better view of the feathers, their watchful eyes. Yes, Mondays and Fridays she slid the screen inside and rested it

below the window and the gossipy women could not see in because they were not home. Miriam waited, watched. Six birds gathered on her small ledge. The challah crumbs would soon be gone. Quickly, she reached out her hand and felt warm flesh beneath her fingers. Strong for being so small. She had chosen the gray one with pink eyes. No reason, just a choice. You had to make them quickly.

Miriam knew

the watchful women would be back soon. And they would never see the pigeons outside her window today. She felt the dulled Ssnap like the sound when she popped the joints of cold chickens to put in her stew. Painless. Ssnap. Miriam knew the pigeons died instantly, without fear stealing their last breath. Not like Harvey who surprised her with his pain and slumped over, still alive. Though not for long. She held the broken bird in her now gentle hands. Its glazed eyes could not return her stare. Still strong and swift, Miriam's fingers pulled and plucked, gutted and cleaned. With a deft display for the watching cats, Miriam deboned the pigeon. The alley toms could only flex their claws and drool. Almost finished. She would be done before the women returned. Carefully, she folded the remains in newspaper, the "Times". The front section. Her small package

still

warm as the incinerator where garbage flew to the basement fires. But her still warm package, wrapped neatly in yesterday's news, went down to the wire can on the street corner near the bus stop. Next to the pay phone she used in emergencies, though there had only been one in all the years. Twice a week the City picked up garbage there. Each time Miriam knew they had her careful package nestled in the bottom. Sealed so neatly in newsprint, the bundle could be mistaken for fish, fresh from the market because of the smell. Even on Mondays and Fridays when she laid the bundle down before the gossipy women returned to their kitchen windows. To see. To see the screen back up and the crumbs all gone. As if a breeze picked up and swept them away

the pigeons flew up, startled. They knew a bird was gone. They scattered up to the sun, their only natural spotlight, to squawk protests, rain down flutters of wings, droppings escaped through fear, loss of control. But Miriam was in control and she heard the wonder and dismay in their sudden flight. She watched the alley cats, normally lazy in the sun, raise themselves to heights of lust and lick their lips. Paws stretched; nails shining. "Give it to us," they purred, almost believing the deed theirs. Yet the

pigeons always came back. Returned to her crumbs: a sowing. Always came back. Like the watchful women. But not Harvey, who would never again taste her stew. They never cried "DIRTY" in beaked horror. It was not part of their language. Only the cats knew enough to disdain her hands slowly stirring the herbed broth, carrots floating like swollen eyes. Miriam always wondered about eyes, pinked with difference, and drew to them because they were unusual. So defined. Like raisins in bread she could no longer afford. Like cat paws, quick as lightning but low to the ground and jealous

her hands cradled the large wooden spoon up to lips that had never kissed a child, and shied even from Harry in the last years of his life. To her lips where she could feel the broth pass over her gums, and carrots swimming, too. Like eyes. Watching. Pigeon eyes. It was the pink that always made her decide. Something special. Like stew on Fridays. On the stove the big pot sat, relic from her childhood. Black and sturdy like the sweaters she wore. Never gave away, Harvey's sweaters. No need

greater than her own. The Salvation Army got all the rest. But with the sweaters, she knew she was safe. Harbored in a man's forgotten bulk. Safe from cold which ached arthritis, which weakened fingers, making

capture faulty and slow. Ah, Miriam loved the strength in her fingers as she made dumplings, broke stale challah into hunks, wrapped remains in yesterday's news. She could hear the cats complain to the moon, jealous of the strength and swiftness in her hands. They howled their pain at the night sky, ravaging each other's flesh with barbs, no pigeons in sight. But there would always be more pigeons.

The cats stalked the street possessively, their paws padding silent paths around the mesh garbage can. Urine, the neighborhood scent of possession. Sprayed like the disinfectant Miriam used to clean her apartment. Only on Mondays and Fridays, though the cats took no days off unless it rained. Then they were silent and less watchful than the women. Whose hands were not as lithe as Miriam's. Her hands which had life and breath of their own, she was sure. Though they could not live on after her to making dumplings. She would no longer need to eat them. Her hands their creator, the way her hands moved almost of their own accord, she learned. The women would scoff. Would scream "DIRTY!" if they discovered the pigeon remains folded in yesterday's news, nestled in the corner garbage can. Her world

in the kitchen, small yet opened by a royal arch: her window. With a narrow, cobbled street for crumbs and cooing. She worked hard for that, her ritual of feeding. It took her years to understand. The best years. Only Harvey, God rest his soul, could never know. The women did not know. They could only see, like the cats. Who stretched their paws and dreamed the images she brought to life. Stories and pigeons above them. What Miriam's hands knew she would never reveal. Never speak on street corners while waiting for the bus. She did not take the bus. No need greater than her own

for food. Miriam set the little round table. One napkin. One spoon. She ladled the broth into a rose-pattern bowl, one left from her mother's set all those years ago. She liked the reminder of easier days. One carrot eye floated on the soup's surface and Miriam sat down to eat. She faced the window. The women watched. She looked back. For a second. She knew the cats paced below, circled the garbage can. They smelled fresh pigeon. But only the beak and wings were left in the street.

SELECT SINGLES DATING

SELECT SINGLES, INC.
Client Profile # 1
for Elise Berkowitz

First Name: Stephen
Marital Status: single
Children: none
Pets: none
Education: Montgomery College, MD; U. Michigan law
school
Profession: tax lawyer
Income Bracket: \$100,000 - \$150,000
Residence(s): owns condo in suburbs, rents cabin at
shore, leases houseboat
Race: white
Age: 30

Height: 6' 1"
Weight: 190
Health/Fitness: good/above average
Hair Color: dark brown
Eye Color: hazel
Smoke/Drink: no/yes
Religion: inactive Brethren

Hobbies: Likes to play softball, travel, spend weekends on houseboat, play "Flight Simulator" on computer.

Pastimes: Listens to fusion, pop or space music and public radio, eats out, watches James Bond and foreign movies.

Favorite Quote: "Since brevity is the soul of wit, and tediousness the limbs and outward flourishes, I will be brief."
- Shakespeare

Misc.: Hasn't had much luck meeting available women out of the office, works long hours but doesn't bring business home.

Looking For: Professional, single or divorced woman in her late 20's to late 30's to be companion, friend and lover and who shares/understands his long working hours.

When Elise received Stephen's profile from Select Singles, Inc., she read it carefully though not too critically. She had requested no divorced men since she didn't like either ex-wives or children on weekends, though as she grew older, this limited her possibilities. She liked his profession, partly because he wouldn't need to shower and dress up just to go out to dinner. A tax lawyer could leave work and meet her at Venicio's at 9:00

for wine, pasta and flaming dessert coffees. Elise liked foreign movies as long as they weren't in black-and-white, though she preferred a bucket of buttered popcorn and Hepburn/Tracy flicks.

Good. He had trouble meeting people, too. That meant he didn't cruise bars all the time, but wasn't a total loser, either. She blamed her own "single" status on her career-minded tunnel vision, but ever since she couldn't get a date her first two years of college, she wondered if there was something wrong with her.

She hadn't mentioned anything about water or boating under "Hobbies", and hoped he didn't fish. She had dated men who fished and could no longer stand a man leaving her bed before the sun woke her up on a weekend morning. Pete did that, and then he stopped spending the night at all. Elise wasn't sure about Stephen's age: thirty seemed young for men, since they were still caught up in proving themselves and trying to be macho. But her friend from the women's support group, Suzanne, convinced her to put down an age bracket which included men a few years younger, saying: "They've got other advantages -- particularly in the sack." She knew the arguments for staying-power, but hoped he was past the fumbling stage. Pete cared little about her body, just his own satisfaction. And afterward, in the dark when she

complained, he only managed a few half-hearted strokes before falling asleep. She never found out if he had problems with staying-power.

"Call him at work to insure professionalism," the dating service representative had instructed her, then underlined the same advice in their glossy brochure "Dating Etiquette: a few suggestions". She picked up the phone and dialed his number. His secretary put her right through: good sign. She didn't like to wait. It made her nervous.

Following the brochure's advice, she remembered to stay in control of the conversation and to steer their first meeting to a neutral, public location: "Stephen. This is Elise. From the dating service. I've just got a minute, so how about getting together tomorrow evening for a drink? We can unwind a bit and check each other out." Fortunately he couldn't feel her damp palms.

"I'm glad you called, Elise. A messenger just delivered your profile information this morning. Great timing. I was intrigued by your favorite quote: 'I knew how to climb, whistle, and run, but no one ever suggested that I earn my living as a squirrel or a bird or a deer.' That's great. I didn't even know anyone actually read Colette."

She suggested 7:00. He said that was fine. He'd wear a paisley tie with grey pinstripes and would look for her jade suit, which he was sure would offset her blond hair to quite an advantage. She bristled at that remark; her evaluation noted her involvement in N.O.W. He was forewarned. "Well," she silently excused him, "maybe he was nervous and his comment just slipped out." Elise hung up after a few pleasantries.

Too jumpy to write the sales proposal for tomorrow afternoon's appointment with Johnson & Son Contractors, she straightened the industry magazines and price literature into piles on the far right corner of her desk. Occasionally she brushed her bangs from her eyes and wondered if she should get a trim.

The Club was just picking up momentum as she stepped through beveled-glass doors and stood in front of a large pyracantha in a shiny brass bucket. She recognized several people from the business community who belonged to her health spa: Joyce, a lawyer with Legal Aid; Eric, a realtor who rented offices downtown; Missy, who had just taken her C.P.A. exam but wouldn't know the results until September. She didn't know their last names, which was probably more a professional than social mistake, though she regretted not knowing for both reasons.

Glad that she had her hair trimmed at lunch, Elise turned her head slowly, trying to appear calm while looking for a tall man wearing a paisley tie and a grey pinstriped suit. (Maybe cufflinks?)

"You must be Elise," a voice behind her said.

She didn't jump, thank God, because she was wearing heels. Instead she turned and extended her hand which was dry after having squeezed a kleenex the past five minutes. He hadn't seemed to notice the kleenex fall to the floor when she hastily held out her hand. "And you must be Stephen. I'm glad you weren't waiting on me. Let's find a seat." Proud of her smooth delivery, she noted his receding hairline.

Elise led them to stools at the bar since all the tables were occupied. The Club was busier than she had expected. Behind Stephen's back, Missy winked and gave Elise a thumbs-up sign. Elise grinned quickly, wishing she knew Missy better, and reminding herself the Select Singles representative stressed that all first meetings were to be public in case one or both parties decided to leave. A private location could make excuses or apologies awkward .

They ordered drinks. She paid, thinking "control" and "protocol", and wondered how to break the ice.

She didn't want nervous small talk, so jumped right in as if she were at a sales meeting, something else Suzanne suggested. "I'm not interested in a committed relationship, just companionship."

He nodded and leaned more heavily on the bar. "So your profile said. Do you like boats?"

"Not to fish from," she answered, watching first his eyebrows and then his mouth for any adverse reaction. His face remained impassive. She added, "I don't get sea-sick, if that's what you mean."

He reached for his drink quickly, sloshing the gin and tonic. Elise felt comforted. "Did you bring your test results?" she asked, neatly opening her cream-colored, leather purse and taking out the envelope containing results from her last Monday's A.I.D.S., herpes, syphilis, gonorrhea and chlamydia tests: all negative, despite Pete's promiscuity.

He pulled out his paperwork and handed it to her. "I had my secretary make copies for you."

She wished she'd thought of copies. The dating service should have suggested it. "You don't mind your secretary thinking you need a dating service?"

"Yes," he laughed broadly. "Only by the time I thought of that, I'd already handed them to her and didn't want to look silly trying to retrieve them." His tests were negative, too.

While they looked over each other's results, the bartender asked if they needed another drink. "Sure," Stephen said, taking out his wallet. She watched his hands out of the corner of her eye, noting the long fingers and manicured nails.

"Done this before?" he asked her.

"No. You?"

"No."

They both nodded, then looked away.

"How long...", she began.

"How late...", he interrupted.

Elise leaned back on her stool, uncharacteristically waiting for him to continue. "I was going to ask you how late you usually work," he said.

"I usually finish around six or seven, unless I want to complete the paperwork after a late appointment. And I don't feel like doing that unless I've closed a big sale. Computers, you know," she said.

"Usually I work until eight or nine, though I don't normally have to," he offered.

"How long have you lived here?" she asked.

"I moved here when I was eleven," he said, "but went out of state to law school. I could have stayed, but wanted to come back since the ocean's so near."

"Me too. Though not law school. I went away to college. Mount Holyoke. Women's college, you know." She watched his face again.

"I know," he said, smiling. "Good school." Then rushing on he added: "How about dinner? I know we just agreed to drinks, but I'm starved and we seem to be hitting it off. Venicio's has great pasta."

He paused, shoving a fist in his pocket and looking apologetically at his drink. "It's just that your profile mentioned Italian food was your favorite, so I made reservations just in case."

Nodding, she put her purse strap over her shoulder and smiled at his hopefulness.

"By the way," he asked as they stood to leave, "the Select Singles counselor suggested we confess something to each other. Do you have anything to tell me?"

She'd forgotten that part. Her eyes darted from her shoes to his and back while she thought. "I drive a really hard bargain at work so don't be intimidated by that..." her voice trailed off in thought before blurting: "...and I'm still getting over my mother's death. She died last month and we never really talked." Startled at her own words, Elise looked over at the bartender who was too busy to have heard.

"I'm, uh, sorry. About your mother," Stephen stuttered, for a moment looking away from her blush. Then smoothly, he continued: "My only admitted vice is that I use softball games as an excuse to scratch my balls in public." His eyes crinkled around the corners and looked into hers. "Think we can stand each other?" He placed his hand between her shoulder blades, guiding her away from the bar.

She walked toward the door, conscious of the weight of his hand on her back and of the heat fading from her face. She laughed a bit too warmly at his confession, still worrying about her own. It would be spring before he might see her out hit and catch most of the amateurs around. She hadn't been Maryland's sandlot champ for nothing. And whether or not she was still seeing Stephen then, well, she had two more Select Singles' profiles coming in the mail and she promised herself not to be too revealing again. After all, she'd paid \$95, and could afford to play the field.

THIS AIN'T THE AMAZON

Alicia propped the stack of phone books against her belly as she banged on the door of apartment 36. She'd been working nights at the the Swing Shift bar since she came to town a month ago. She'd applied lots of places, but couldn't scare up a waitress job anywhere else. Even with tips from an occasional table dance she wasn't breaking even. So for the next two weeks she'd signed up to deliver this year's crop of phone books to residents on the east side of Newport News. Four dollars an hour

plus gas wasn't bad; it could buy a used couch and coffee table for her apartment. Maybe a throw rug, too.

Number 36's door opened and a young man in a light blue terry robe grinned at her as he dried his ears with a bath towel. His blond, sandy hair was almost dry and stuck up all over his head. "Hey," he said, throwing the towel over his left shoulder, "I just moved in this week. You want to come in?" He stepped back and held the door open wide.

Alicia looked at his wet feet on the dusty hardwood floor and noticed the tan line above his ankles. "I'm delivering phone books. Just take the one on top, and it's yours." She looked down at the stack in her arms. "I've got to hit all the upstairs apartments before I start work. At my real job, I mean."

"C'mon," he said. "Not even time for one cup of coffee? Here let me help you." With one quick motion, he lifted the stack of phone books from her arms and headed into his apartment.

Alicia followed him into the kitchen after shutting the door behind her.

"Listen..."

"Call me Bob."

"...Bob, I've really got to finish delivering these so I can get home in time to change clothes and get to work by 5:00."

"Where do you work?" Bob asked, spooning some coffee into his Melitta coffee filter.

"Uh, just down the street, actually," Alicia said, looking away embarrassed. "At the Swing Shift. It's a bar. I mostly waitress."

Bob turned and appraised her slowly, from her head to her toes, then back up again before he moved closer. Alicia noticed his eyes were pale green. "Yeah, that topless place, right? I heard of it."

Her stomach clenched at his gaze, and she said: "Like I said, I gotta get out of here," She reached for the stack of phone books.

"Not so fast," Bob said, grabbing her wrist. "The water's about to boil."

Alicia looked down at his hand circling her wrist and tried to pull away. He tightened his grip before dropping her arm and she stood still, rubbing her wrist.

When he turned around with her coffee, he placed the mug on the kitchen table and as she reached for it, he pulled his arms around her waist. "Hey, let's dance into my bedroom for a minute. I mean, I just moved in and for the first time in my twenty-six years I don't have

roommates. Celebrate with me," he pleaded, grinning, his hand still strong and demanding against the small of her back.

The Lovin' Spoonful's new hit was on the kitchen's transistor radio, though the reception wasn't good. The music would normally have made her more comfortable and Alicia tried not to appear frightened. She shrugged her shoulders then looked at her watch. This Bob seemed insistent but ultimately harmless, she rationalized. Besides, he was taking up more time trying to make her stay than he would if she let him have what he wanted. And he really wanted her to stay, she convinced herself. It couldn't hurt. "What the hell," she said, giving in to what she assumed was inevitable. "I'll give you fifteen minutes and you can keep the coffee."

"All right!" Bob exclaimed, and pumped a fist in the air.

She kicked off her sandals and began to wriggle out of her jeans. Bob put his hand over hers, and stopped her. "Shirt first. I want to see what you shake for the customers."

Alicia tugged off her t-shirt and held it at her hip for a moment while Bob stared and reached for a breast. She rolled her eyes and pulled away: "Hurry up. I really do have to get back to work."

Bob untied his robe and let it drop on the floor.
"All right!" he said, heading for the bedroom.

"Hey, thanks," he said climbing off her a few minutes later.

Alicia wiped herself with the sheet and swung her feet to the floor. "I really got to go, uh, Bob. I mean, I at least have to unload the phone books for these apartments before I go home to change." She quickly squirmed into her underwear and pants, and headed to the kitchen for her sandals and shirt.

Bob bounced off the mattress and followed her. "Can I see you again?" he asked. "I mean this was perfect timing. I'd just gotten up and was thinking about having my very own place when I said to myself, 'All I need to make this a perfect picture is someone to fuck.' And then you knocked on the door. It was just perfect timing. So, are we going to see each other again?"

Alicia tucked her t-shirt in carelessly, took a sip out of the still hot coffee and picked up the stack of phone books. She'd been so lonely since she'd moved to town that she was flattered he wanted to see her again, but said: "Look, I don't know...."

Bob grabbed her arm and swung her unsteadily around to face him. She looked confused and tried to blow a strand of her long, black hair out of her eyes. "Hey, Bob, don't get carried away."

"Just stop by after work sometime, okay? I'm usually still up when the bars close." He paused. "I know, I'll leave the outside light on when I don't have anybody else here. You can just stop by then. Okay?" He still gripped her arm.

Alicia moved slowly toward the door, Bob and the books in tow. "You know, I'm usually tired when I get off work. And we hardly know each other," she said facing the closed door and looking down at the phone books.

"Hey, no pressure, but I'd really like to see you again. On your terms. Hey, the light means you don't have to stop by unless you want to. It'll be our signal. What do you say?" He let go of her arm and put his fist around the door knob.

Alicia shrugged. "Okay. I'll stop by sometime when your light's on. If I'm not too tired. Now I've really got to go."

Bob stepped back from the door and grinned. "Great. That's great. I knew this was my lucky day."

Alicia shuffled her feet. "Uh, Bob, can you get the door for me. My hands are kind of full."

"Sure," he said. "No problem."

The Swing Shift was slow that night, and Alicia only served regular customers: the generic types who hid their redneck hearts. She tried not to remember their names, though they introduced themselves to her almost every time they came in. They thought she was mysterious.

"Hi, Alicia. Remember me? Jasper? How 'bout a Peach Pussy tonight, unless yours is free." He winked, mostly for his friends, and she brought him a peach daquiri and a bowl of popcorn for the table.

"Thanks, babe. Fred's just showed up. You remember him. He's the one with the tattoo of lovers who screw when he flexes. Hey, Fred, flex your arm for Alicia. She'll love it. God, it's so funny. Don't you think so? Now be good and bring Fred his usual: Jack Black with a water back. He doesn't want your Peach Pussy like I do."

At work, Alicia kept the smile on her face and hoped the candles put a twinkle in her eyes besides shadowing her breasts against the wall. She smiled and laughed more at work than she had in years. She only did it for effect, but the customers ate it up.

The regulars were easy to please. Only around closing when one got really drunk did he try to cop a feel. And then she would have to gently and firmly take his hand

away, reminding him he was only allowed to look. Sometimes she'd jokingly suggest he put his wandering hand in his lap and take care of the itch that way. The other men in earshot would laugh at their friend's expense while Alicia left the table, having successfully removed the focus from herself. Sometimes, the man who grabbed her would call out asking for a date after work, though most often he would joke with his friends, calling her "one of those women's libbers" who showed their tits but wouldn't put out. And a man couldn't help but be turned on, he'd say to his friends. Everyone would agree. Alicia knew they were just embarrassed at being turned down in front of their buddies, and were ultimately harmless.

Glenn, the bouncer, was pretty good about taking care of anyone who became too insistent. Some of the local businesses would bring out-of-towners to The Swing Shift, and those were the nights Alicia was asked to table dance. The bar music was always rock or dance music with a heavy bass line, so she could put down her tray right away, take off her black, crushed velvet vest that didn't have a front, and dance around and around the table, making sure her breasts and pasties jiggled while her hair swished across her back. Often, the whole bar would begin to clap in rhythm, and the men would yell out: "Oh,

baby, you're killing me. I'm getting too hot. Watch those jugs rock. You're straining my zipper, honey. Oh God, I'm hot." Or someone at the table would try to reach up her black, vinyl mini skirt and say: "Shake 'em don't break 'em. I can't stand the pain."

Alicia didn't really mind a table dance because she wasn't really there. She would go away in her head and think about other things, like how much she'd make in tips that night, or when she next had to do laundry, or she'd compose a post card to her parents in Ohio, letting them know her job as receptionist was going well and she was still glad she'd moved to the beach this May. It wasn't too hard to feel the bass line under her feet, wriggle around the table and press close to the men whose faces all seemed blank, and whose breath all came quickly and smelled of alcohol and nerves.

The dances ended after three minutes, or when a customer wouldn't stop trying to put his face between her breasts or cup his hands under them -- whichever came first. That's when Glenn would step in, put a hand on the customer's shoulder, and ask him to cool off in the bathroom or step outside until he was under control. And since Glenn used to be a linebacker at Virginia Tech, his 6'2" frame still convinced people that pinching a tit was not worth being hit with 250 pounds.

For three minute's work, Alicia usually got \$20, sometimes more, which she didn't have to split with the other waitresses, Denise and Lynn. They didn't do table dances since the owner, Mr. Orlando, didn't like the way they danced for him during the interview. As a result, Denise and Lynn didn't like Alicia and avoided talking to her. Not that she cared. Glenn seemed to think she was okay and took care of her.

Joan, the bartender, was her first Virginia friend. Joan had to wear tassles instead of pasties, and a red vest instead of black to match her red bow tie. Joan didn't like any of the customers, but had the bar's expanse to keep the men away from her, so she could afford to hide her disdain with smiles and graciousness. Besides, she had a knack for remembering people's names and their regular drinks, so the customers liked her even though they said she was frigid.

Alicia often tried to show up early and talk with Joan while she set up the bar before it was time to open. Joan was quick and efficient as she moved behind the bar bringing the liquor bottles up from the locked cabinets, checking the kegs, making mixes, and slicing fruit. She'd make Alicia a drink or two and get her to talk: "So, how's your place coming, Alicia? Got any curtains yet?"

"No, I just stapled sheets up. I'm working on a couch first. And I need a lamp, too, though I don't know why since I work at night." Alicia sucked on the cherry from her rum and coke, and reached for a fresh basket of popcorn Joan had scooped up.

Joan popped another maraschino in her drink. "I hope you're not having a liquid dinner tonight. You need all your energy," she said, nodding at the empty tables. "I don't know how you can deal with these guys anyway. Me, I keep The Baron at my feet in case people get out of hand."

"You got a dog in here?" Alicia raised her eyebrows in amazement and tried to lean over the bar to see underneath.

"A dog? You think Glenn'd let me keep a dog in here? No, The Baron's been with me for two years. Ever since I stopped waitressing and started bartending." Joan grinned and held up a baseball bat. "Say 'hello' to The Baron."

Alicia smiled and reached her hand out for the bat. She cradled it in her arms and traced her finger over the happy face drawn onto the bat. "He ever talk?"

"No," Joan said, reaching for the bat and putting it back under the bar. "I got drunk one night after closing and got hold of a magic marker. I figured The Baron was at least as intelligent as these guys here, and

infinitely more polite. So I gave him a face with a big smile and proceeded to tell him my troubles until I sobered up enough to drive home. It was quite therapeutic."

Alicia skewered the new maraschino with her straw and popped it into her mouth. "Yeah, but does he stare at your tits?" She swirled her drink for a moment.

Joan looked down at her tassles and gave them a gentle tweak. "Nope. He's a real gentleman, The Baron is. The only head he wants to come in contact with is one that's gotten out of line with me. Though I'm sure he'd come to your rescue, too, Alicia. Glenn's good, but he can't be everywhere."

Alicia finished her drink and Joan slid her another one. "Hey, Joan, how come you have to wear tassles and the rest of us have to wear pasties?"

"Mr. Orlando figures that since the customers can't get close to me, they deserve a bit more to look at. And the tassles are just the twitch and flash he has in mind. I don't care. The Baron still respects me." She shook her breasts and the gold tassles glittered.

Joan rolled the side of a glass over the cocktail napkins, fanning them out of their square stacks. "How do you do that?" Alicia asked. Joan showed her how to put pressure on the center of the stack and rotate the edges until they formed a circle. Alicia took over the job.

"Great. I'll let you do that from now on. You're my new recruit," Joan joked. "Seeing as how you have nothing better to do than sit there with your drink and eat all the maraschinos."

"Sure. I don't mind."

They were silent for a while, Alicia turning napkins, Joan wiping down the counters and putting extra drink garnishes in the bar cooler.

"You got a boyfriend, Joan?" Alicia asked.

Joan looked up sharply, then down at her hands as she wrung out a rag. "Had one. Drove him away. You know, being bitchy."

"I can't believe that," Alicia said, still turning napkins."

"You will. Just wait. Try being romantic and understanding with a man after you've worked here for a while. This place is a real education. You learn a lot. Then when you go home, you can't turn off everything in your head. At some point it comes down to bottom lines, and the bottom line at home seems a lot like the bottom line at work. So you get bitchy and he leaves. You're pissed and he's confused. You've changed and he's still the same. At least that's what happened with me."

"I'm sorry, Joan. That's rough. But maybe he was just an asshole, you know?"

"Yeah, but so was I. I just started seeing things differently and couldn't shake it. Like reality just descended, and I couldn't change it much less live with it. Or him."

"I don't know..." Alicia murmured, finishing another stack of napkins. "This enough for tonight?" she asked, tapping the eighth stack. "I can do more if you want."

"No, that's great. You've got to leave me some to do when it's slow. Anything's better than talking to these guys without something else to do, too. And I don't think they'd like me stroking The Baron in front of them."

Alicia only lived fifteen minutes from the Swing Shift, so it was no problem to walk home from work. In fact, she liked it because the night noises made her feel a part of the coastal town. At first, Joan scolded her for not driving, and warned her that men from work would follow her home. But with jeans and a shirt on, Alicia was invisible to the customers. Besides, the cool night breezes off the Atlantic were just what she wanted to clear the smoke and sounds of work from her head. Those walks to her apartment became her favorite part of the job, giving her things to write home about: the stars, the salty air, the sandy soil, and the constant sound of the surf echoing in the distance.

Bob's apartment was only two blocks from the Swing Shift, and for a couple weeks after she met him, she looked over at his apartment when she walked by on her way home. A few nights a week the outside light was on. But her feet never broke their rhythm, even though her mind paused for a second or two, wondering what it would be like to have Bob for a boyfriend. She wanted to talk with Joan about him, but figured Joan would tell her to forget it, particularly if Joan found out how she met him. And Alicia knew she did not want to tell anyone about their first meeting. At work, she still put her mind on hold as she smiled and laughed with the customers, all the while focusing on other things in order to keep herself sane. And what she thought about more and more frequently was Bob, his coffee, his grin, and his apartment conveniently located between work and her apartment.

One night in mid-June, Alicia's feet stopped in front of Bob's apartment building. She toed some grass in the sidewalk's crack and shifted her work clothes in their plastic bag underneath her arm. The light was on again, and she had become fond of what she considered his faithful sign. She knocked quietly on the door. A thump sounded inside, and then footsteps shuffled toward the door. It was 2:30 in the morning and she wondered if he'd been asleep.

"Well, hey," he said. "I figured you'd never stop by." This time he wore white tennis shorts, and she looked down at his ankles, remembering the tan lines. Still there. "Come in," he motioned with his head.

"I've been thinking about you," Alicia said.

"Well, good."

She followed him into the kitchen and he pulled open the refrigerator. Alicia saw some ketchup, mayonnaise, and tonic on the door, and cold cuts, milk, and an empty Budweiser carton on the top shelf.

"Uh, sorry. I'm out of beer," he said, pulling the empty container out and tossing it toward the garbage bag in the corner. "You could have tonic or tap water; the milk's probably bad."

"I'm okay," Alicia said, moving out of the dark kitchen and into the bright hallway to set her bag of clothes down. "I had a drink after work. But thanks anyway."

"Okay," Bob shrugged. "Still working down the street?" His eyes seemed to focus on her for the first time that night as he again looked her up and down.

"Yeah." She tried to change the subject: "But I'm through with phone book deliveries."

"Hey, you must be tired. Want to listen to some music, uh, uh...," he pointed at her.

"Alicia. I'm Alicia. Yeah, I'd like that." She kicked off her shoes and followed him into the bedroom.

"I've got a new tape deck," he said, perking up. "It's really cool. A Panasonic for sixty bucks with AM/FM."

She followed him to the bedroom and he pulled down the shades before popping in a tape: Bonnie Raitt. She liked the blues, too. Bob fell on the bed and pulled both pillows under his head. "Come on. It's too late to be shy." He patted the sheet and grinned.

Alicia laughed, thinking he looked like a mischievous kid. "It's just that you stole my pillow." And she settled down next to him, her head on the crook of his arm.

"This is nice," Bob mused. "Aren't you sorry you waited so long?" He reached over and turned off the bedside lamp. Light streamed in from the hallway and she watched the red lights flicker across the tape player to the beat of the music.

"Uh huh," she mumbled. "It's just that I've been so busy. Working late, you know."

Quickly, he undressed her as she pulled his shorts down to his knees. He pushed inside her, pulling her to him with his hand under her buttocks. Almost as quickly as before, he was finished and Alicia put her arms around

his neck as he rested his head between her breasts. She stroked his hair, sweaty at the scalp, and she listened to his breath slow down.

"Jesus, that caught me by surprise. Whew!" he said, eyes closed as he rolled off her and rubbed his face with his hands.

Alicia pulled the top sheet over her and moved his arm around her. She felt comfortable and did not mind too much that sex was so brief. After tracing lines around his nipples and down the middle of his chest, smoothing the sweat away, she fell asleep.

They never talked much when she got to his apartment, though sometimes they shared their dreams in the morning as he boiled water, spooned grounds into the coffee filter. He always made her coffee, insisting she drink it before she could leave.

"God, I dreamed I was driving on the Parkway. I had the speedometer at 120 and I was swerving to miss animals and logs on the road. It was like some kind of test. Everything became clear and precise and I knew I could handle every turn but the last. Then I woke up. It was right before I could see what I was going to crash into. Weird dream, huh, Alicia?"

"Yeah, you must have been scared. I dreamed I was at the creek behind my parents' house, only the muddy slope turned into a beach. I buried my feet in the sand, then when I looked up, the creek was expanding into an ocean and I was on the other side. I could see their house disappearing in the distance. I tried to scream, but woke up instead."

"Bunch of weird shit going on in that bed last night." Bob laughed as he poured himself another cup. "Think some shrink'd like to charge us for a session?"

"I don't know." Alicia swirled the coffee in her mug, trying to dissolve the last of the sugar. "I figure I sleep better when I don't dream at all."

"You always dream, just don't always remember."

"Yeah, but you know what I mean," Alicia said.

At night, she did not mind Bob's silence, preferring it to the mindless chatter at work. Over six or seven months, Alicia even came to believe that their lack of speech was much like the quiet comfortableness her parents shared after twenty-five years of living together and raising children. She felt fortunate to share that intimacy with Bob, particularly since he never seemed to judge her, despite knowing where she worked. And she even came to enjoy his delight in their abrupt lovemaking, thinking that he was like an enthusiastic child who never wanted to slow down.

She continued to work at the Swing Shift with Joan and Glenn, and had even given up looking for jobs elsewhere, though her parents now believed she had been promoted from her receptionist's job to a secretary position. She and Joan still talked before work, and while Alicia felt they had grown close, she realized neither knew much about the other's social life. Alicia just never found the right way to bring up Bob, figuring Joan would disapprove. She wondered if Joan had a secret social life, too.

The fall months had been mild at the beach, though winter brought cold rain and wind. Alicia stopped walking home, but continued to drive by Bob's apartment. Their signal was still the only way she knew whether or not he wanted to see her, and she now stopped in every time it was on: one or two times a week. She knew Bob was seeing other people, and that was okay, she supposed. They had never exchanged phone numbers much less talked about how long their relationship might last. In fact, after the way they got involved, Alicia felt she didn't have the right to bring up something like commitment or monogamy. Bob might laugh.

But still, she became obsessed with the white Honda outside Bob's apartment on most of the nights his light remained off. Alicia would slow down and turn her brights

on, thinking that if she could just know more about the woman who drove that Honda, for it must be Bob's other girlfriend, she would learn something about Bob, something which would make her relationship with him better, more secure. And as this obsession continued, it wore on her in much the same way the customers at work wore on her when they tried to grab a breast or feel up her skirt. Yet she never mentioned anything to Bob for he would think she expected too much, or was becoming a bitch.

Before Christmas, work slowed down at the Swing Shift. Alicia considered taking off for a few weeks and visiting her folks. Their letters made her miss them even more, yet she had discouraged them from visiting her, telling them she had such a little apartment and there would be no room. They offered to pay for her trip home, and even Joan encouraged her to go: "It'll do you good, Alicia. And you won't lose your job here, you know. Orlando'd never fire you. You've become part of his scenery. Besides, The Baron and I would stick up for you. 'Isn't that right Baron?'" she asked under the bar as she skewered a maraschino and an orange slice as garnish in preparation for the night's regulars.

Alicia bit her lip and nodded. Sure, she really wanted to visit her folks. But what she could not tell Joan was that Bob was staying in town, and she wanted to spend Christmas with him. Just the two of them. For a long weekend. No white Honda.

So Alicia told her parents she couldn't leave. They weren't too upset, or at least they didn't let her know if they were. Still, she asked for the three days off before Christmas. Mr. Orlando wasn't pleased, but said that as long as she made it back by the 26th, it was okay. He said business always picked up after holidays when men got over doing the family routine and would be great right after Christmas and through the New Year.

Joan didn't take any time off. Her parents knew what she did for a living and hadn't talked to her for years. With a tinge of guilt, Alicia wondered about Joan's personal life and what she might be doing on Christmas day.

The week before Christmas, she thought about buying presents for Bob, but decided against it. She didn't want to appear too eager, and presents might seem too much like a traditional relationship, something they didn't yet have. Besides, she might make him feel bad if he hadn't gotten her anything. Instead, she bought a bottle of champagne. She kept it chilled with a red bow around

its neck and put it in her car as she drove by his apartment each night for a few nights before he left the outside light on. This was the first time their signal bothered Alicia, but she figured she was too impatient. Besides, it was Christmas Eve: perfect timing.

They drank the bottle of champagne, and then Bob mixed rum and eggnogs until Alicia could no longer stand up. The room spun quickly to the sound of the Rolling Stones coming full blast from his tape deck. Closing her eyes, Alicia was afraid she was going to be sick. Instead, Bob carried her to bed and let her pass out.

In the middle of the night, Alicia was awakened from her dead and drunken sleep. At first, she didn't know where she was. Her limbs felt heavy, and she was so tired and drunk that she could not even move her head. Moonlight shone between the blinds and the windowsill, and Alicia became aware of Bob on top of her. As if he moved in her dreams, Bob felt very far away as he quickly rocked inside her, his eyes closed. Suddenly he groaned and she felt his arms go stiff for a moment as he shuddered and came inside her. Still half asleep, Alicia could not move to let him know she was even conscious. It was all she could do to keep her eyes open for the moment it took before he turned his back to her and fell asleep. Alicia cried silently for a few moments, feeling used and

thinking about undertakers who got off on dead bodies. Then she fell back asleep, wishing it had been a dream.

The next morning, she hoped Bob would mention something about the previous night, make a joke or anything. But he didn't. She remembered all those nights of few words and brief sex. And since she could not bring herself to say anything, she smiled her way through the morning's coffee, and left early, as if it were not Christmas.

The following evening, Alicia showed up at the Swing Shift early. The heavy bar door closed behind her and her eyes quickly adjusted to the dim interior. Only the bar lights were on, and since there were no windows, no other light illuminated the place. She looked around at the dozen or so tables with black, vinyl chairs, the booths and red-fringed hanging lamps, and the long, black bar. For the first time, Alicia wondered how a place so airless could exist at the beach. She went to the bathroom and changed into her work outfit.

Joan finished vacuuming and gave her a wave. "Denise closed last night and was too lazy to vacuum. So guess who gets the pleasure?"

"I would have done it," Alicia answered. "You know I come in early."

"Yeah, I know. But I didn't want you to see how the place falls apart when you take a few days off," Joan teased. "So, did you have a good Christmas?"

Alicia shrugged and sat down. Joan poured her a rum and coke, popping in two maraschinos.

"So what is it, Alicia? Talk to me. I'm your friendly bartender."

"You were right, Joan," Alicia began. "With men it comes down to a piece of ass, and if the piece of ass can be their fantasy instead of something real, then they're even happier." Alicia twisted her straw into a little ball and began to cry. "I'm just a fucking, interchangeable piece of ass."

"Whoa. Slow down." Joan interrupted. "Am I missing something here? Want to tell me what happened? Want to fill me in?"

Still crying, Alicia shook her head. "No. It's just over, that's all."

Joan looked down at her breasts and, with her right tassel between her thumb and finger, began to speak in an odd falsetto: "'IT?' I don't know what 'IT' is. You should tell Tit Tina what happened. We can make it better."

Alicia looked from Joan's breast to her face and back again and began to smile.

"If this is some local yokel," Joan continued in Tit Tina's falsetto, "he's probably not worth your emotions. You should know that men are as fickle as tourists."

Alicia wiped the tears from her cheeks and began to giggle.

"Take it from Tit Tina," Joan continued, moving the tassle back and forth, "men's emotions, like their dicks, are seasonal."

Alicia laughed, cupped a hand under her right breast and began to speak back in a high voice: "That's true, Tit Tina. But it took me a while to learn." She let the breast fall as she giggled, then took a swig of her drink before again cupping her breast and continuing: "So how'd you get to be so smart?"

"Oh, I've been around that block. This guy dumb-Joan here lived with used to really like me. Then one day, Joan here finds out he likes other tits, and I don't mean my twin sister." Joan flicks the tassle toward her left breast. "And he likes these other tits just as much as he likes me and Joan. So we packed our bags and left. Even gave him all the furniture and dishes we bought." Joan swishes the gold tassle back and forth as if it were a person walking away. "But we survived."

"I'm sorry, Tit Tina," Alicia says, looking at Joan's gold tassle. "How come you never told me before?"

"Cause it still hurts," Tit Tina answered.

"Yeah, but we'll both live. And this ain't the Amazon. I've just got to learn to take better care of myself," Alicia said, still in falsetto.

Joan let go of her tassle, straightened her bow tie, and said in her normal voice: "Yes. And now we've got to quit acting insane like this. I mean really. We're almost as bad as men who name their dicks."

Alicia dropped her breast and smoothed its pastie. Both women laughed until tears ran down Joan's cheeks, and Alicia got the hiccups. Joan patted her on the back until the hiccups went away.

Alicia sat up, leaned across the bar and cupped her hand behind Joan's head. "Hey thanks."

"Don't mention it," said Joan, reaching up to put her hand on Alicia's.

They worked on setting up the bar until Glenn arrived in time for the 5:00 shift.