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AFTER MIDNIGHT

by

Julie Brown

B. S., Oregon State University, 1983

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements


for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Montana

1987

Approved by

  
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**AFTER MIDNIGHT**  
**Stories by Julie Brown**

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CutBank: "Mrs. Smith"

Northern Lit Quarterly: "Another Excuse for Drinking"

Puerto del Sol: "Gifts"

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**For All My Teachers**

## GIFTS

They put me in detention because I flipped off the basketball coach. He cut me off the team. After practice in the gym he said my grades were too low, and it was school policy, and he couldn't do anything about it. I asked for another chance to bring them up. He said no way--after all the meetings last quarter with my teachers and counselor he didn't see how I could let the team down. Or how I could let him down. I said what about B. J. Halicki, she had bad grades too, but he said there was a huge difference between a few D's and a few F's. Then he put his hand on my shoulder and said if I brought my grades up by next year I could play on the J.V. team, because I was one of their best freshman players. I didn't answer that. Then he said I'd have to turn in my uniform. Number 33, my favorite number. I wondered if he'd give it to someone else. I tried hard to stay calm, but I was pounding inside. I wanted to take a basketball and bounce it off his head. Instead, I flipped

him off--my hand went up before I could even think about it.

That was last Monday. Last Wednesday I was in detention. Above the detention room door was a sign we were all supposed to read: don't talk, don't sleep, no gum, no notes, no radios, no sunglasses, etc. The desks were arranged in a big circle facing out. Mr. Phillips sat by the door, but every ten minutes he'd get up and walk around the circle. Sure I brought homework like I was supposed to, but I wasn't doing it. I was drawing a picture of the yard at my grandpa's farm. The lake, where we always fished, and two horses.

There was a small knock at the door and we all looked up to see who'd be brought in next. Mr. Phillips went to answer it and I almost died when I saw my sister Angie at the door. She handed him a note. She was still wearing these ugly Goodwill clothes she's had for about a week, since the grade school had pioneer day: long skirt, bonnet, apron.

"Joanie," Mr. Phillips said. "Your grandfather needs you at home. You can go now."

"Oh sure," someone said. "Tomorrow I'll have my sister get me out."

I crumpled up my picture and made a basket in the garbage can, then I put on my sunglasses and followed Angie out the door and down the hall.

"What's going on?" I asked. We unlocked our bikes. "Is Grandpa OK?" I pictured him on the floor, too weak to move, or out of painkillers or something. He's been staying with

our family for the last two months, and we've been taking care of him.

"I don't know," she said. "He just gave me that note and said to come get you."

"Why didn't you ask him?" I yelled. I took off on my bike and she followed me.

We rolled into the driveway and I could see Grandpa outside on the steps smoking, even though he wasn't supposed to smoke. He looked fine to me. He dropped the cigarette and ground it into the pavement with his shoe.

"What's wrong, Grandpa?" I asked. "Are you OK?"

"Just bored. I thought you might like to play some pool," he said. "I thought you might be tired of sitting in detention." Grandpa was as tall as I was, 6'0, but years before he was way bigger. His chest was sort of caved in now and his arms were smaller. Plus you could see practically his whole scalp through his gray hair.

"You bet, great idea," I said. "But don't let Mom find out." Together we tromped down to the rec center of our mobile home park. He taught me to play pool a little while after he moved in with us, and we've been going down there in the evenings when I probably should be studying. We bet a nickel a game, for fun. So far I owed him \$2.25.

Grandpa was always lucky about winning bets. He made bets with everyone--people he knew, people he met in bars. Most people, he said, could be trusted to pay up their losses, and those who didn't he'd never bet with again. He

would win money on the World Series, the Superbowl, and the NBA playoffs. Then in the summer he'd go to the races in Portland. He usually had a system. In sports, he'd pick the underdog when they played at home. At the dog races, he'd look for the biggest dog on the inside track. At the horse races he'd wait for a rainy day and then he'd pick a non-favorite. When he hit real big he'd sink money into the stock market. I'm sure that's how he got the money to buy his farm.

We shot a few times each then he bought me a Coke from the pop machine.

"What's next, Joanie?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Now that you're not playing basketball."

"I might look for a job," I said.

"Then quit for softball season?"

"I don't know," I said. "I might keep working till next fall. I could use some extra money." He didn't say anything. I knew he wanted me to play softball. He knew I was turning into a great pitcher.

I looked at the table and saw I might be able to win the game if I could bank the 4. I'm pretty good at shots that are straight on, but bank shots still give me trouble.

"Grandpa, what should I do now?"

He circled the table, then squatted down to view the balls at eye-level. He took the blue chalk and made a tiny mark on the felt bank.

"Try for this spot," he said. "If you hit it soft you'll leave yourself the 2 down there."

I hit the way he said and the ball went in. "Hey, all right. Here goes the 2 now." I made that and lined up for the 8.

"Well, I think you're going to win this one," he said. The 8 went in. "Now you only owe me \$2.20." I gave him the high five.

"Loser racks," I said. But I could see then he was starting to get tired. He was breathing faster and was slightly bent over. "Wait," I said. "Why don't we sit on the couch for a minute, then I'll rack." He didn't say anything, and we sat together on this ugly vinyl couch.

"Hand me that ash tray, will you Joanie?" he asked. I brought one over. Of course he knew the cigarettes were bad for him, but it wasn't something he could help. "You're becoming quite a pool shark," he said, lighting up. "By the time you're my age you could be playing for big money."

"You're an awesome coach," I said. Then I told him my secret. "I've got a present for you, Grandpa. But I can't give it to you until Mom and Angie go to church tonight."

He raised his eyebrows. "Is that so?"

I looked over to the big window and saw Mom looking in with her hands cupped around her eyes on the glass. It was sunny outside and she was having a hard time seeing in, but I could tell when she recognized me because she made a little frown. Then she came inside.

"All right Miss Superstar," she said. "I told you before you were spending too much time here. Now get up to the house and help with dinner."

"Whatever you say."

"Wait a minute. You were supposed to have detention today."

"They canceled it," I said.

"I'll have to check on that."

"I felt like a little exercise so I asked Joanie to keep me company here," Grandpa said.

"You don't need exercise," Mom said. "You need rest." She still had on her uniform from work. She's a baker at Safeway. Her hair's cut in a modern style, chin length, and she always wears silver or gold hoop earrings. She also has brand new glasses with lavender frames. I could tell Mom was tired because her voice sounded like she might cry any minute. "And those cigarettes, Dad," she said. "Do you want to kill yourself?"

"Lynne," Grandpa said. He put his arm around her. "I feel fine. Let's walk back together, OK?"

"Joanie, run ahead and peel four potatoes," she said. "Make sure you wash your hands first, if that's not too much to ask."

"I suppose you don't need Angie's help?"

"Please don't argue, Joanie," she said. "Just do it." I started to run up the path. "And please put on a different shirt for dinner," she yelled, meaning my Quiet Riot t-shirt.

I put on a white blouse and clean jeans, then I put on my new white leather high top tennis shoes. They were official Abdul-Jabbar Adidas, and I'd painted the stripes our school colors with magic markers. It took me nine nights of babysitting to buy them.

Angie was watching The Flintstones on TV, stretched out on the shag carpet. At the same time she was reading a paperback book. She's pretty smart for a third-grader. Mom wants her to skip fourth and go straight into fifth.

"You look like a dork," I said. She still had the pioneer stuff on. "Mom said you have to change now. Put on some regular clothes for dinner."

I got four potatoes out from the bin under the sink and got out a knife. My hands weren't dirty but I washed them anyway, just to make her happy. I peeled the potatoes and had them boiling on the stove by the time Mom and Grandpa were coming in the front door.

"Angie, help me set the table," I yelled. I put on placemats, plates and salad bowls, then I started the salad.

"Grandpa said a mobile home was as good as a covered wagon," she said.

"He's just teasing you."

"No, he's not. He said you could hook up 10 horses and they'd pull you anywhere you wanted to go."

"Where do you want to go, into the Pacific?" I asked.  
"Oregon's as far west as you can be."

"No," she said. "Alaska."



"Great Angie," I said. "Let's all move to Alaska this summer. Jerry can ride on the roof. You can steer the horses." She was always into some other place or some other time period. Before pioneer days she was an orphan gypsy child. Before that she was a young French school girl. She was never satisfied just being Angie.

The phone in our kitchen rang and Mom answered it. It was Ruth from church. Every night just before dinner Ruth calls Mom or Mom calls Ruth and they talk for half an hour. Usually they just gossip about someone at church. Last week after chemotherapy Grandpa was feeling really sick, sleeping in Angie's room, and Mom talked about him the whole time. She told Ruth about his doctor appointments, his surgery, his oxygen, etc. Then she lowered her voice and said, "The doctor said it would be good for Dad to smoke marijuana. He said it would relieve the pain without side effects." She paused and I could imagine what Ruth was saying. Then Mom went on, "Oh, you're right, I know. You just can't." A few days before, when I was babysitting for a lady down the road, they talked about me. Angie said Mom told Ruth how she found this teen magazine in my room with an inventory-quiz about what men find attractive in you: your eyes are sexy, dreamy, or innocent. Your lips are kissable, pouty, or full of secrets. Mom was massively upset because I'd checked none of the above for every category. I told her the next day it was only a joke but she didn't believe me. Plus I said it was none of Ruth's

business. But this time they weren't talking about Grandpa or me, because we were right there. We were all sitting around the table waiting for her to hang up so we could eat. After the call she changed into a silky blue shirt and gray flannel pants, then she came to the table.

"They're having a special speaker at church tonight," Mom said. We passed the food around. No one said anything.

"Mr. Robbins," she said. "He's going to talk about spiritual gifts."

"What are those?" Angie asked. Grandpa and I were eating and not talking. I knew Grandpa wouldn't be going, because he usually went to bed by eight o'clock. I already volunteered to stay with him, so that meant Angie had to go to church with Mom.

Mom looked around the table. We were all listening. "Spiritual gifts are presents from God. He gives each one of us a special blessing, something we can do well. Everyone has a different gift, depending on their purpose in life. Angie has a gentle spirit," Mom said. She passed me the salad. "My mother's was probably administration. She was good at organizing things. I've always felt my own was honesty." I waited for her to say what my gift was, but she never did. She didn't say Grandpa's, either.

For dessert we had a day old pie from Safeway, then Mom redid her hair and told Angie to get ready. I was doing my algebra homework at the kitchen table and Grandpa was watching the news on TV.

Mom came into the kitchen and made a quick call to Ruth to see if they could stop at a pharmacy on the way to church. She pulled a waxed-paper bakery bag out of her purse and set it on the table. Then she scooted a chair up next to mine and did her lipstick. She blotted her lips on a piece of paper I had in my algebra book.

"Joanie," Mom said. "When do you make up that detention?" She checked her teeth in a pocket mirror.

"Tomorrow, I guess."

"Do you realize if you didn't always have that superstar attitude you probably wouldn't have detention? I don't blame Mr. Cobb for signing you up after what you did to him. It wasn't nice."

"I know."

"Not exactly feminine, either."

I was going to tell her I didn't mean to do it. I was going to tell her how rotten I felt about being dropped from the team.

"I'm glad you're doing your math," she said. "That shows me you're on the right track, anyway. You know if you get stuck you can ask Grandpa to help you. He's always been a whiz at stuff like that."

"Mom, I didn't mean to flip him off."

"Oh Joanie," she said. "Will you do one thing for me? Don't drag Grandpa down to those pool tables? I can tell he's really tired tonight."

"What do you have against us having fun together?"

Ruth honked in the driveway.

"There's a load in the washing machine. When it's done will you throw the clothes into the dryer and fold them? Thanks." She kissed me on my cheek and snapped her purse shut. "I brought some cookies home from work, share them with Grandpa. There's some cocoa mix in the cupboard, too. Angie, let's go now, Honey."

B. J. Halicki called and asked if I got out of going to church. I told her I did, and she asked if I wanted to ride my bike over to her house because her parents were out for the night. She said some of her brother's friends were coming over, and it would be really fun. I told her I didn't feel like it. She asked if I was still mad about being cut from the team. I said no, I just didn't feel like it. I had other plans.

When the timer went off I put the clothes in the dryer. After I had all my algebra problems done I unloaded the dry clothes and piled them into a basket, and carried it into the living room where Grandpa was.

"What are you watching?"

"A game show," he said. "This lady just won twenty-three hundred dollars and a new car." He flipped the volume off with the remote control switch and brought the recliner back to upright. "Feel like pool?" he asked.

"I can't," I said. "I have to get these clothes done for Mom or she'll have a spaz attack."

I sorted the clothes on the couch while Grandpa told me

about how he thought he could win lots of money on a game show. He said he would pick a show and watch it for a long time, until he could devise a system for winning. Usually it was a matter of figuring the odds. Then he would get on the show and stick to his system all the way, no matter what the crowd yelled he should do. I told him it would be fun to watch him on the TV.

When I was done folding, I carried Angie's clothes into her room. She's been sleeping in Mom's bed because Grandpa's been sleeping in hers, but all her junk's still in her room. Above her dresser there was a crayon drawing she did of Alaska with the mountains, cities, and major highways. She'd done a pretty good job, I thought. On the dresser was a clay model of her pet duck Jerry, the only animal Grandpa didn't sell when he moved in with us, and a picture of her with her dad on Mt. Hood.

I carried Mom's clothes into her room, then I spent a few minutes looking at the stuff on her dresser. I flipped through her bills and opened her jewelry box. I found a letter to my dad, but it was sealed. Probably telling him about my detention. She had a box of Tampax, a lacy slip that had to be hand washed, and one fake fingernail. Plus she had a mirror tray for displaying makeup: lipstick, lavender eye-shadow, nail polish, perfume, etc. I put a drop of perfume on my wrist--it smelled like carnations. I wondered why she needed all this stuff--she hadn't even dated anyone since she and Angie's dad split up. Or maybe that's

why it was so important to get fixed up for church. Maybe she was looking for someone new. I picked up a folded piece of pink stationery. On it someone had written a Bible verse in caligraphy: "And I will pray to the Father, and He shall give you another Comforter, that He may abide with you forever." And for some reason it made me think of Grandpa, and how he was sort of a comforter to me since my Dad moved to California.

When I went back into the living room Grandpa was still in his chair watching the quiet TV. He looked up at me and smiled but he looked paler than ever and I knew he felt crummy.

"How about that present now?" I asked.

"Where is it?"

"In my room, Grandpa."

I helped him out of the chair and we went into my room and shut the door, in case Mom got home early. If she knew what I was going to do, she'd kill me. We sat side by side on the carpet, leaning back against my bed, and I kicked off my high tops. Grandpa got my pillow from the bed and wedged it behind his back. Stashed in my purse was a pipe I'd borrowed and a baggie with weed in it, stuff I bought Tuesday from one of the kids at school. I filled the pipe and turned on my radio, then I lit the pipe. I was trying to keep the matches in one pile to flush when we were done.

"The idea is to inhale slowly, and keep it in your lungs as long as you can," I said. "Then let it out." I

demonstrated. He watched, then took the pipe from me without saying anything. On the radio Prince was singing "Purple Rain." That's a song I'd like played at my funeral, I thought. Sad and pretty.

He took the pipe again and I relit it for him, saw his thin chest puff out as he inhaled. He coughed.

"How long have you been using this?" he asked.

I answered carefully. I didn't want him to think I was a pot head, because I wasn't. But obviously this wasn't my first time.

"On and off for about a year," I said.

"How much did it cost?"

"Thirteen dollars."

"Is that why you need extra money?" he asked.

"Partly."

"Is it worth giving up softball?"

"I don't know."

"We had this in the Navy," he said, inspecting the pipe.

"But I didn't have much use for it then."

I took another hit and passed it to him. This time he didn't cough, and I could see he was relaxing some. I put the Purple Rain album on. After a few more hits he started to tap his foot to the music. I could see he was looking at the posters on my wall. There was one of Prince, one of Magic Johnson, and three of Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. "Kareem," I said. "He's my favorite basketball player."

"What do you like about him?"

"I like to watch his moves. He's a terrific shooter."

"Tell me about your boyfriends at school," he said. I got up and turned the album over, put on "When Doves Cry" and hit the repeat button so it would play over and over.

"What boyfriends," I said. Guys didn't like me in that way. I was too tall and my feet were size 10. Plus I never curled my hair or wore makeup. It made me feel retarded.

"Hey, tell me how you met Grandma." Then I remembered I wasn't supposed to ask that. When Grandpa moved in Mom said we shouldn't bring up Grandma, who died two years ago, or Grandpa's sickness, unless he brought it up himself, or the subject of death. But those were the things I most wanted to talk about.

Grandpa smiled. "It was a Halloween party," he said. "Back in 1946. Your grandmother and her sister came dressed as sailors. Ted and I were in uniform too, so the four of us sat together, then we danced. Afterwards, we drove out to Jantzen Beach. In those days it wasn't a shopping center, it was an amusement park, with rides, and we rode on the carousel. I've got a nice picture of Stella and Hazel in those uniforms, I'll show it to you next time we're at the house."

"Was Grandma fat then?"

He laughed. "No, and I wasn't either. We were both thinner in those days." He inhaled once more. "Of course I'm back to being thin now, aren't I?"

"Do you still have your Navy uniform?"



"Somewhere in that old trunk of mine."

"I'd like to have it," I said.

"It'd be plenty big for you, Joanie, but if you'd like you can have it."

I was feeling pretty high and I knew he must be too, so I put the weed back in my purse and scooped all the matches together into my hand.

"Kareem Abdul-Jabbar," my Grandpa said. "With love to Joanie. Did he sign that for you?"

"No," I said. "Mom gave me that poster for my birthday last year. I think she did the autograph with a felt pen."

"Did you ever ask her?"

"No."

"She's been upset lately because of me. She's worried about you too, though."

"She's jealous," I said.

"Of what?"

"Of us." He said something else but I didn't hear him. I'd put on a Lionel Richie tape and started to dance. Somehow my feet moved on their own, and my arms felt as weightless as empty sleeves. I closed my eyes and tried a couple spins. I was graceful, I was in good rhythm with the music. I was feeling absolutely wonderful. "Dance with me," I said.

"Not that way," he said. "Find a slower song." So I fast-forwarded the tape to a slow song while he kicked off his shoes. He took one of my hands in his hand and rested

the other gently on my waist. I wasn't sure where to put my other hand. "On my shoulder," he said. And we danced. We moved around in circles, then we took a few steps forward and backward, then we rocked side to side. We always stayed together. But the song was sad and I was feeling a little dopey and after a while I started to cry. I tried to hold it in, but I couldn't. He put my head on his shoulder and we kept dancing till the song was over. His flannel shirt was soft and smelled nice. Then he kissed me on my cheek.

"Let's go fishing this weekend," he said, "while Angie's skiing with her dad."

"Sure," I said.

I went into the bathroom and flushed the matches down the toilet. I put Visine in my eyes and brushed my teeth. Then I opened my window and sprayed my room with Lysol. I couldn't take any chances.

Grandpa picked up his shoes and went to his room. "Thank you Joanie," he said. "I feel a lot better now. Good night, Honeybunch." He shut the door and I could hear him fiddle with a dresser drawer.

Since I was in a good mood I decided to help Mom some more around the house. I emptied the dishwasher and put all the dishes away. I shook out the kitchen rug and swept the floor. Then I found the Ajax and scrubbed the sink till the porcelain was pure white again.

I made myself a cup of instant decaf and sat down with the cookies. The kitchen looked great. There wasn't

anything good on TV, and I had all my homework done, so I decided to give myself a manicure. I got out Mom's file and rose-colored polish, then I sat down at the kitchen table and started filing.

Grandpa opened Angie's door again and peeped his head out. He didn't have his glasses on so he looked kind of funny. "Say, Joanie?" he asked.

"Yeah?"

"I was wondering, would you mind if I kept that pipe and the tobacco with me? I might like to have a little while you're in school tomorrow."

"Sure," I said. But I got up so fast all the blood ran out of my head and I was dizzy so I had to hold onto the chair. Then I heard Ruth's car pull up in the driveway, and I heard Mom get out. I knew she'd be glad I helped around the house. She'd notice the sink and the dishes and she'd be glad I hadn't played pool. Then she'd sit down and have a cup of decaf with me, and I'd tell her about my gift.

## AFTER MIDNIGHT

After flying first to Mexico City then riding the bus to Puerto Vallarta, then here, all the way here to Cuyutlan, 200 miles through mountains and jungle, sitting on hot, dirty seats with her luggage at her feet, heavy Mexicans wedging her against cracked windows that would not open, she hates to see boards nailed over the windows of the Buena Vista, and the sign that says cerrado and closed. It is July. "The season," says the boy who drove her the last mile from the station to this hotel, rattling down the cobble-stoned street in an old Ford hand-labeled Taxi, "for rain." The season when no tourists come and all hotels are closed except La Fontana and La Fenix. "I tole you lady," he says again, "I tole you it was closed."

"Find me another place to stay," she says. It is seven in the evening. As the Ford continues down the avenue she looks for something familiar, something else she might have seen her first time here last winter, with Mitch, the last week they'd spent together, spent in the Buena Vista. All

the shops and fruitstands are closed. There are no cars driving in the streets. There are no people walking on the sidewalks. The buildings are smaller and the sky is grayer than she remembers.

"Here we are lady," says the boy. He brakes in the middle of the avenue, between two hotels with hand-painted signs: La Fontana and La Fenix. Both have outdoor cafes that run from the hotel to the street's edge. One customer sits alone in the Cafe Fontana, reading a newspaper and holding a coffee cup. In the Cafe Fenix two small girls play with a litter of brown and gray pups. When she gets out of the taxi two heavy women rush out from the cafes, both in white aprons, and they beckon to her in Spanish Senorita, Senorita, and more words that she cannot understand. She gestures for the taxi boy to carry her bags to La Fontana.

Her room is small. Three single beds in a row, two tables between them. In the bathroom a shower without a curtain and a toilet without a seat. In the kitchenette a refrigerator without a door and a sink full of dead flies. When she flips on the light switch a ceiling fan begins its slow revolution--it stirs the warm humid air and hums. The taxi boy drops her bags and with a comic book bats a small green lizard out the door.

"Tell me," she says, pulling a ten dollar bill from her purse, "about the Buena Vista." The boy stares at the money.

"It opens again in September, Lady,"

"Do you know the musicians?" she asks. She rubs the

money over her lips and the boy looks out the window. He fingers the sparse, fine hairs at the V of his cotton shirt.

"Si Lady," he says, still looking out the window. "They are not working now." She drops the bill. He picks it up. He offers it back, arm tentatively outstretched.

"What about the man with the guitar?" she asks.

"He lives in town," says the boy, arm still outstretched. She smooths back her waist-long auburn hair with the palm of her hand. "His name is Rafael."

She chooses the bed closest to the door and shakes the top blanket, hears sand spray onto the floor. She smooths the blanket and tosses the dirty pillow onto another bed. After she feeds a cassette to her tape player she strips and lies face down, arms and legs spread out on the scratchy blanket.

She thinks about her last trip here, about the night Mitch was upstairs in their room sleeping off too many tequilas, and she was too hot to sleep, damp and irritable in the strange humidity. She made her way down three flights of stairs to the open-air bar where she sat alone in the front row, fanning herself with the menu and licking her dry lips, listening to the music.

He sat with the heels of his black boots hooked over the lower rungs of his stool, alone in a circle of light, singing with head bent and eyes half closed. His slim quick hands fingered the strings, his slow caramel voice sang to her in Spanish words she could not understand. She could not take

her eyes off his guitar: its sensuous lizard with tiny painted feet, toes splayed, and a tail that curved along the waist of the guitar and up the delicate neck.

What she wanted most was for the man with the guitar to look at her after each song. What she wanted most was for him to finish singing, finally, to lay the guitar on her table and to take her by the hand and to lead her away, to the place where he lived, no matter where he lived and no matter who would know.

But the man with the guitar played until three, when everyone applauded except her. She inhaled deeply and leaned back, closed her eyes. When she looked up again he was using her ashtray to extinguish his cigarette. He stared at her then walked away, his boot heels rapping on the mosaic floor, guitar strapped over his back.

When she wakes up the room is dark. It is not her room. It is not her bed. She is in Mexico, she knows that much. She is in Cuyutlan and this is a hotel room. She is in the hotel Fontana because the Buena Vista is closed. Cerrado and closed. "It is the season," he said, and she remembers comic books, dozens, strewn about on the floor of his taxi, flesh-colored and red and blue human shapes, balloons from their mouths like white breath on a cold day freezing Spanish words, "for rain." Everything is quiet. She has slept hard for a long, long time. She picks up her watch from the night stand but it has stopped at 7:30. It could be late at night.

It could be the next morning.

She pulls a black tank top dress over her head and buckles on a pair of Roman sandals. She finds her brush and runs it through her hair, again and again, more times than it needs, enjoying the scratch of the bristles on her scalp and the heavy pull at the roots. She bends forward at the waist and continues brushing. She doesn't care if it's five in the morning. She's going out.

The man with the newspaper and coffee cup is still at his table in the Cafe Fontana, at the edge of the lighted circle. He sits near the only solid wall of the cafe, on which hangs a red papier-mache devil. She sits near the curb, facing the street, the only other customer, and when the waitress, younger than she is and obviously pregnant, takes her order, she asks for flan, coffee, and Kahlua. She catches a glimpse of the waitress's watch. Midnight. That was the time the man with the guitar always played.

The flan floats in caramel: she spoons heavy sweetness into her mouth. She drinks the coffee and begins to sweat. She drinks the Kahlua and asks the waitress for more of the same. The taxi is still in the middle of the dark street, but she can't see the driver. She can't see anyone in the street, anywhere, only the brown and gray bitch trotting away, her full tits swaying beneath her.

She turns toward the wall where the devil hangs and the man with the newspaper--he is closer. A new table. Or does she remember wrong? He sits the same way, holding his paper,



coffee cup in his hand. She appraises him drowsily. He seems closer.

If it's midnight here now then at home it's ten. She wonders what Mitch is doing. She wonders if he knows she's in Mexico. Maybe tomorrow she'll send him a postcard: I found your ring in the sand you son of a bitch. She remembers their last morning together. She woke up to an empty bed and pulled on a t-shirt and a pair of his boxer shorts, called room service for a pot of coffee and an orange, then stepped out to the balcony to see where he might have gone. She saw Mitch below haggling with someone on the beach over the price of a silver bracelet. The old brown man continued to shake his head, smiling. Finally she couldn't stand it. "Don't be so goddam cheap," she yelled down to Mitch, and everyone had turned in their lounge chairs. Two minutes later he was through the door into their room, and he grabbed her arm --"You're so fucking precious," he yelled. "You are the fucking center of the universe." Something else for the postcard: The center of the universe is in Cuyutlan.

She checks again. It seemed before that he was two tables from the wall, now four. How could he have moved like that without her seeing? She stands and pulls her dress away from her sticky skin, then wraps her hair around her head like a crown. She tilts her head back, a glamorous gesture.

He looks up and spits. He's about 50, tall and well-built. His brown hair has grayed in the front. His skin is

tan and his eyes are the palest blue she has ever seen, like tiny gas flames. He's staring at her now, too, still holding the newspaper.

"Who are you?" he asks in slow perfect English.

"Je m'appelle Simone de Beauvoir," she says.

"Oui?" he answers. "Et je m'appelle Jean-Paul Sartre."

Before he sits in the empty chair across from her he extinguishes his cigarette in her ashtray. American. And he can probably guess she's American too. She smiles. She pushes away her flan.

"Would you like a taste, Monsieur Sartre?" she asks.

The waitress hurries to their table, shuffling her sandals along the cement floor. She seems to be asking if he'd like anything more. He says nada, and something else, and motions for her to leave.

"Why do you sit like that?" he asks.

"Like what?"

"Like you're posing for a photographer. No one's looking at you. No one cares if you're beautiful."

She's not sure how to answer that--his face is straight, his mouth set firm without a smile or sneer. She thought he'd con her, try to be guardian angel. But she's hyper and drunk, too weary to play.

"Leave me alone," she says, "I just woke up."

"La pauvre Sleeping Beauty."

"Why did you move in on me like that?" she asks.

"You don't seem to mind." The waitress, or maybe the

cook, laughs a high, screechy bird-like laugh.

"Poor woman," she says, taking a cigarette from his pocket. He watches her hand. "Having to carry a baby in this awful heat."

"I guarantee it won't last long," he says. She wonders vaguely if he's referring to the pregnancy or to the heat.

"Have you been here before?" she asks.

"I live here," he says. "I live in Cuyutlan."

"Why?"

"I'm retired. Here I'm rich." He pauses, empties his cup. "Why did you come here?" he asks. "You look so bored."

She pulls a strand of her hair and twists it around her finger. She checks for split ends. "I'm looking for someone," she says.

"Perhaps I can help you."

She hesitates. "What's your name?"

"Allen."

She knows he's telling the truth so she asks, "Do you know a musician, a guitar player, named Rafael?"

"Sure," he says. "What do you want from him?"

"He owes me money," she says. She notices Allen's silver bracelet. She hates men who wear jewelry.

"Maybe I'll show you where he lives," he says.

"When?" She reaches over and takes another cigarette from his pocket. He lights it for her then buttons his pocket shut.

"You can't always have what you want exactly when you

want it."

"Screw yourself then," she says, dropping her cigarette into his drink.

"That's no way for a princess to talk."

The taxi door opens and the boy stumbles out, sleepy-eyed. He walks through the cafe, gets a sweaty Corona from the pregnant waitress and heads back for his car. He notices the two of them sitting together and smiles, makes the thumbs-up sign.

Allen asks the waitress for a bottle of tequila and stands to leave. He doesn't pay for anything. She decides not to pay either. She picks up his cigarette and takes a long drag, throws it into the street, still lit. She grabs the empty brown bottle and follows him.

When they're away from the cafe lights it's hard to walk on the cobblestones. She unbuckles her sandals and walks barefoot, feeling the warm humped stones under her feet, passing dark apartments, boarded up shops, a cantina, light and music pouring from its door and a man's deep laughter. The town is otherwise quiet. Its people are sleeping. She doesn't have any idea where Allen's leading her.

"Let's walk on the beach," she says.

"As you wish."

They veer off the avenue through a grassy lot to where the sidewalk meets the sand. An empty tour bus is parked in the lot, its windows are up and the tires flat. She smashes her empty bottle on the hood and runs. The sand is cool and

slow under her feet. She hurdles abandoned lounge chairs, runs to the water and wades out to her waist. Allen follows to the water's edge.

"Get out of there," he yells above the ocean noise.

"Why?"

"You're too drunk to be out so far, come back."

"I don't care," she yells back. The water is warm. The current pulls her dress up between her thighs. Fingers of seaweed curl around her calves. She steps on something sharp. He waits for a while, arms folded, yells that he won't care either, in that case, then walks north without her so she gives up, wades out and runs to catch him.

"Give me my sandals," she says, breathless. He hands them to her and she stops, squats down to buckle them on.

"It's so different this time," she says.

"Why?"

"Last time I was here with my husband there were at least a hundred people on this beach. The ocean was so crowded." She takes a long swig of tequila. It's sour and tastes queer after so much Kahlua.

"It's like that every winter," Allen says. "People come from all over. But by June the humidity goes up and it rains almost every day. People go other places. Different beaches, I guess. Other resorts."

"It's better this way," she says. "But it feels lonelier."

"I'm sure you weren't lonely last time you were here,"

Allen says.

She bends to pull a piece of brown glass from the arch of her foot. The wrinkled white skin flashes red.

"Have you ever spent a week in a hotel room with someone who couldn't stand you?" she asks. "Someone who hated you so much you found yourself looking for ways to make him hate you more?"

"Why did he hate you?"

"He thought I was conceited."

"Were you?"

"Fuck yes."

"How'd you make him hate you more?"

"Last winter when we were here I bought a new swimsuit. I was sunbathing on the beach one afternoon and Mitch came out and yelled at me to put something else on. He hated to see me wearing that suit in public and I knew it, but I liked the way it looked."

"So what did you do?"

"I unhooked the top and pulled it off," she says. "I ran out to the ocean and swam, then treaded water, watching him on the beach, till he finally turned and went back to our hotel."

"Then what?"

"Early the next morning he went for a swim and he lost his wedding ring in the ocean."

"A symbolic accident, no doubt."

"Except it was no accident. He threw it in to make me

cry."

"Did you?"

"Are you joking?"

"It's not that you're overconfident, Mademoiselle. Your problem--"

"I don't want to hear about my problem." She wrings out the wet hem of her dress. "I don't want to hear what you're going to say. I hate this beach," she says. "Show me where Rafael lives."

"Sweet Rafael," Allen says, and she doesn't answer. They continue to walk and he angles them up toward the sidewalk again.

"So, Allen, are you married?" she asks.

"Of course not."

"Divorced?"

"No. But you--you are divorced."

"So what," she says, "You're gay." He kicks an old plastic soap bottle, then walks over and picks it up.

"These wash down from the mountain streams, where women still wash clothes on the rocks. This could have travelled from miles away."

"Fascinating."

"How old are you, anyway?"

"Twenty. "J'ai vingt ans."

"And what's your name?"

"I told you," she says, "je m'appelle Simone de Beauvoir."

"Tell me or the party ends here."

Her favorite book: "Anna."

"Look, Anna," Allen says, "There's my house."

It's a large stucco house, up on a small hill overlooking the ocean. She sees four windows lit up in the front and the silhouette of a wrought iron railing around a balcony. Two palm trees in the front yard. An avocado tree on the side, taller than the house, heavy with dark, pear-shaped fruit. "I love avocados," she says. "If I lived near you I'd steal one every day."

She bends under the tree to pick up a soft, ripe avocado. She digs in her nails--its flesh, she thinks, feeling Allen's breath behind her, has almost begun to decay. She peels back the rough skin, and eats.

Allen reaches out to touch her hair. "Jesus," he says. "It feels--it feels--" She turns to him. Pilot lights. She waits for him to kiss her but he never does.

Inside, Allen walks from room to room, turning off lights. She follows. Finally the house is dark except for a crack of light under a door down the hall. They stand together in the livingroom.

"Do you live here alone?" she asks.

"In the summer."

"You must be rich."

"Relatively speaking."

"Who lives here in the winter?" she asks.

"I bought this place with four other guys," he says.



"Guys I knew back in Minnesota. One's an anchorman for the news. I've known him for years. James is his name. I think you'd like him."

She walks over to the window and sees her mirrored reflection, then looks past the glass to the ocean.

"Why is the ocean so bright?" she asks. "Is it because of the moon?"

"No."

"The stars?"

"No. Tiny phosphorescent animals," Allen says. "Millions. They live and glow." She closes her eyes and tries to imagine floating on the surface of the ocean, being buoyed and carried out by the glowing cells, floating, floating. And if Mitch could see her here, in this house, wet to the skin, drunk and shivering with some old queer who might try anything--get out, he'd say, and take a taxi, all the way to Mexico City where you'll be safe. Or maybe he'd just laugh.

"What's wrong, Anna?" Allen asks.

She opens her eyes and turns to him. He's touching her hair again.

"My husband's getting married today."

"Does that bother you?"

"I'm glad for him. He deserves someone nice."

"I see."

"He does," she says, her voice louder now.

"You're a liar," Allen says. "Why are you here?"

"I'm bored," she says, "No other reason."

"I own the hotel you're sleeping in," he says. She's taken aback and doesn't answer.

Allen sighs, lights up another cigarette but doesn't offer her a drag. She glimpses his face in the tiny red light: small lines around his eyes, a strong masculine nose. He's grinning.

"Do you like me?" she asks.

"Oui," he says, and she knows it, but still she asks "pourquoi?"

"Because," he says, "you're a scoundrel. You vandalize, you steal, you lie. You probably cheated on your husband and didn't even feel guilty. But now you want him back just to prove you're indispensable."

"You're not exactly flattering," she says. "You obviously don't know much about young women."

"Don't turn into a petty bitch," he says.

She folds her arms in front of her breasts. She decides not to talk until he apologizes.

"How do you like my men?" he asks.

Around the perimeter of the room stand heavy gray statues, a dozen, most of them waist-high. She can't make them out completely in the dark, but they seem to be mostly human shapes, some animal, some hybrid. She kneels close to one and sees it's a man, with an outrageous grin on his face, gripping a long erect penis tightly in both hands. The tip of his penis is the head of a lizard, sleepy-eyed, tongue

out-stretched. What a lovely wedding present he would make. For Mitch. For Mitch and his goddamned ego. The next one is a woman figure with huge, bulbous breasts and legs bowed gently like parentheses. The headdress is high and elaborate.

"How do you like these Anna?" he asks again, but still she's not talking.

She finds Allen's stereo. Clicks it on, pushes in a tape. Calypso music, steel drums like chimes and a Caribbean rhythm. She starts to dance.

"Still playing exhibitionist," says Allen.

She raises her hands above her head and closes her eyes, swaying her hips and falling into the music.

"Rafael likes that song too," says Allen, walking over to the front window. He stands there with his back to her for some time, so she dances over and stands beside him. The song ends. The stereo clicks off.

Far, far out in the ocean she can see a tiny light. A fishing boat, maybe. It's reflected light is a yellow smudge in the distance. She watches the smudge until it disappears.

At midnight tonight she was supposed to be at the Buena Vista in the front row and Rafael would come out, he'd bow to her, he'd sing. And when he was through and the guitar was quiet he'd take her hand and lead her home to the place where he lived and it wouldn't matter if anyone knew but she would have kept it a secret. But it will never happen now, and she'll never have Mitch back either.

For the plane ride home Mitch sat by the aisle, so she took the seat by the window. Between them sat an older man, probably seventy, with translucent pink skin and cottony hair. He busied himself by tracing a dark line over the highways of a map of Mexico, joining the cities like a child connecting dot to dot. She closed her eyes and leaned her head against the cold window. She could hear him folding and refolding the map. She could hear his pen on the paper as they taxied down the runway.

"This girl looks like she could use some company," the old man said in a confidential tone. "Why don't you trade me places?"

"I'd love to sit near her," Mitch whispered back, "but I think she wants to be left alone."

In the kitchen she flips on the light. The stainless steel sink glistens. She turns on the water. Bending forward at the waist she pours her hair into the water and drenches it, it pools in the sink dark as blood. A shower of cold water shocks her scalp.

She feels Allen behind her. He squirts soap on her scalp, it's warm and smells like limes. He reaches over her and massages her scalp, makes a lather. He works his fingers through her dirty hair, turns down the cool water and turns up the warm. She puts her head in the warm water and watches the soap slide down the drain. He pushes her wet dress up to the waist. She gives way to him, feeling the water wash over her head, feeling his hand on her goosebumped skin.

"You could live here too," he says.

She sees a a can of lye on the windowsill. Live here with Allen and James and the others. She sees Allen and James on the couch, watching Mexican TV. They are watching the world cup. They are sitting with beer cans in their hands. The others are in the kitchen. They are washing dishes and telling jokes, snapping each other with cotton towels. They are laughing. Where is she? She is down in the basement smoking a cigarette. She is folding their clothes. She folds the boxer shorts in half and arranges them in piles by size. The basement is dark. She is crying. The soapy water drips down into her eyes and stings. It runs into her mouth and tastes bitter. She hears the suck of the drain in her ears.

"Your stomach's so tense--relax," Allen says. "I'm spinning your hair into gold."

## LILY AFTER LILY

Paul comes home from work, checks the mail, and neatly hangs his tweed coat in the closet next to Yvonne's leather jacket. Whistling, he crosses the room and opens a cracked window. "What's the French word for sash-window?" he asks. "Isn't it guillotine?" In the dining room he squats down to where she sits, and looks at her porcelain handiwork. More lilies. She has been making porcelain lilies since she moved in with him two months ago. Before she moved in she was busy with porcelain shells.

"In Stendhal's novel," Yvonne says, "I read that the verb 'to guillotine' can't be conjugated in all tenses. You can say 'I shall be guillotined' or 'you will be guillotined,' but you can't say 'I have been guillotined.'" She works slowly, carefully, shaping the frangible clay with deft fingers. The petal is flattened first, then wrapped around the slender stamen like a wing around something sacred. The stem is more difficult. It's hard to achieve a certain gracefulness with enough strength to support the

heart-sized bloom. Before firing she'll spray with ivory glaze and the heat of the kiln will fuse the crystals, crazing the surface like antique lace.

He rises and stands behind her, loosening his tie. Then he rubs her back and massages her shoulders with his knuckles. Lately his touch has been only that--a touch.

"Why don't you put on some Stravinsky?" she asks, trying to sound encouraging. "How about 'The Rite of Spring?'"

\* \* \*

Yvonne's 24, Paul's 42.

Yvonne is tall and painfully thin. Her hair is black and splayed at wide angles like fur on an angry cat's back. Her skin is pale, a calcium pallor, her lips are the color of garnet. She designs and sews all of her clothes, but finds accessories at second hand stores. Vintage pieces appeal to her the most: a beaded flapper dress, high-button shoes, a pair of lace gloves. She tries to forget that she's from Coos Bay. Coos Bay: a nothing town with only a cold beach and houses painted in peeling surplus colors. A stifling school. One sad empty theater where she worked on weekends, taking tickets and watching the movies over and over for free.

Paul is tall, thicker than she. His hair is a graying brown, longer than hers, nearly shoulder length and curly. He has a short beard, a neat moustache, and he wears those

horn-rimmed glasses that make people look stylishly intellectual. He doesn't wear an earring any more because it's becoming cliché. He teaches film criticism at Reed, and writes occasional film reviews for the Oregonian. Whenever he hears a phrase he likes, he writes it inside a matchbook cover to recycle later. Lately he's been learning French. He considers himself a self-educated man, always hungry to learn more. He went into the liberal arts because it seemed to him that the human heart left more room for exploration than the physical world--then into film of all the arts because it was the newest and had said the least so far about the heart's condition.

\* \* \*

One evening he takes a beer from the refrigerator and finds her reading in bed. The room has become dark. She's wrapped the sheet sari-style around her shoulders and head; an emerald glitters from her forehead. Paul flips on the light.

"What are you reading?" he asks.

"La Jalousie," she says.

Paul sets the green bottle on the wood floor and opens a flat case that he keeps under the bed. Then he wipes off the mouthpiece and puts in a reed. After another swallow of beer he sets the bottle back on its wet circle, then warms up by playing the scales, his fingers a little stiff on the keys.



"What's it about?" he asks.

"A love triangle," she replies.

"Is it interesting?"

"I like Robbe-Grillet's writing technique," she says,  
"the plot doesn't interest me."

He blows a B flat. "Any requests?"

"How about snake-charmer music," she says.

"Easy." He closes his eyes and is quiet for a minute,  
then begins with a low, trembling note. His body slowly  
tilts forward then back as he loses himself in the snaky,  
intoxicating music.

She too begins rocking, lost in a trance of her own.  
Then she stands and dances, twisting slowly on a stockingless  
foot.

\* \* \*

"It's odd," Yvonne says to Paul as they leave a theater.  
The rain has been falling all day and the sky is a gray wash,  
melting into opal at the horizon.

"What's odd."

"Odd how all modern films are shot in New York or L.A.  
Why not Portland?"

"Maybe it has a boring horizon," he says.

"With all the bridges? Are you crazy? Let's walk to  
the big fountain," she says. "The one by the auditorium."

It's dead in this part of town at night. They cross

against lights, walk through gardens, cut through empty parking lots. Finally they stand together before the massive fountain. Yvonne watches water fall in sheets over lit cubic slabs of cement and wonders if her relationship with Paul has reached an impasse. It's becoming an effort to drum up enthusiasm for all the things he tells her about his work.

"After high school graduation," he says, "my friends and I jumped into this fountain, robes and all. My parents have a picture of it on their fireplace mantel."

Yvonne guesses at all the pictures on that mantel: baby picture, team picture, prom picture, wedding picture. She sighs. It isn't his fault the pictures are there. It isn't a crime to believe in the importance of family.

"Let's go home," she says. Her lavender parasol is lacing a wet line across his back.

\* \* \*

They met when Paul was making a film, a year ago when Yvonne was still in art school. He had wandered near the campus where she was sitting on the grass sketching. He came closer and she turned toward the camera and smiled. Then she lay back in the grass while he came closer, and she kept smiling, stretching her arms back behind her head. His wife had always turned away and panicked. He bought Yvonne lunch that day and she agreed to model for his film.

CUT TO--Inside a run-down cafe. Heavy glass door with a pay phone and a window beside it. It is dark outside, and the cafe is dimly lit.

(In medium shot) Yvonne enters through the door, wearing a black leather miniskirt. After looking around she picks up the receiver, puts in coins, dials, lights a cigarette. The camera slowly moves in.

(Close up) In the glass a faint reflection--she is laughing. The camera hovers at close range. She turns around and scowls. The camera pulls back to medium shot. She continues talking.

FADE TO BLACK

For the next three weeks his camera followed her around Portland, soundlessly filming her in grainy black and white. Somehow he never got around to editing and splicing the film.

\* \* \*

Face it: his wife was boring. He thought her much more so after he met Yvonne. His wife worked in a day care center, umpiring fights over wagons and tricycles. Once a week she would take the kids somewhere like "the zoo." Zero

at conversation. If someone asked her a question she would deliberately "pause" before answering, holding out as long as possible before relinquishing an "answer." It was as if she put key words in "quotation marks." She would introduce herself as "SAM" because her name was Shelly Ann Marie. He started picking fights with her, viciously interrupting her conversations with others and answering questions for her. She started to gain weight. She took less interest in her "career."

Paul's infatuation with Yvonne grew to obsession. He left "SAM," giving her everything to make separation speedier. How glad he was they had never had children. He photographed Yvonne often, entranced by her insolent eyes. He bought her presents: a pair of green silk pajamas, fishnet stockings, and a white piano, which she played well. They often drove to the beach in his convertible.

\* \* \*

Yvonne had been intrigued by the man whose camera had moved in closer and closer. She was surprised when he asked her to work for him for a few weeks. This was an art film, she understood, nothing indecent or compromising in it. Her favorite day of filming was when she walked down the railroad tracks near the old Union Station and he followed her from behind, filming her black boots as they pounded the ties and the gravel.

Yvonne grew fond of Paul. She enjoyed his company. She enjoyed his conversation, which was so intellectual, so sharply witty at times that she found herself using snips of his dialogue in conversations with her friends.

It wasn't long until he invited her to his house for French bread and wine. His wife was away, he explained, at a conference on day care licensing requirements. Yvonne watched Paul open the wine and fill two glasses. The glasses themselves were beautiful, lovely in form with the sun backlighting them.

When the wine was finished she took his hands in hers. "They're trembling," she said. "Your hands are trembling." He led her to the bedroom he shared with his wife. Yvonne sat on the edge of the neatly made bed and stared at the needlepoint landscapes on the walls and the pictures of several happy children. She bounced lightly on the bed, saying to herself over and over I am his mistress, I am his mistress. And she was happy with him and happy with herself.

\* \* \*

Yvonne takes Paul to a concert one night at the Satyricon, a vandalized building in the oldest part of town. She picks out clothes for him: a black T-shirt and Levi's. They chug a few shots of Mad Dog. He is nervous about the convertible so they park at the library and walk. They can hear the noise from two blocks away. Two of her friends are

in the Sin Hipsters: Lucinda, a bassist with a blond crew cut, and Gorky, an ex-boyfriend who plays the drums. Paul and Yvonne miss the warm-up band, M.F.A. When the second show starts she warns him it is dangerous to stand too close to the stage. They stand on a table in the back.

When the music begins, bodies crowd up to the edge of the stage. More bodies crowd up behind them, then all begin to dance madly, jumping up and down, falling forward, backward, all bumping into each other and elbows jabbing wild. A few guys in BLACK FLAG T-shirts take running starts and dive into the mob, then things start to get rough.

After the concert she takes him up to the stage to meet her friends.

"Great show," Paul says, smoothing back his hair. Lucinda moves closer to him. Her face glistens in the stage lights.

"Thanks," she says. "I'm hot. Let's go outside."

They thread their way through the curtains to the back door, passing the BLACK FLAG group. One BLACK FLAG guy politely murmurs, "excuse us." Yvonne and the others stand in the alley passing around a joint. The street light is broken, but a crack of light from the club door stripes the littered pavement. Gorky, in fatigues, stands between Yvonne and Paul.

"I liked that last song," Yvonne says. "Did you write it?" She hands him the joint.

"Yeah. I wrote almost everything we played tonight."

He inhales and grinds a scab of ash into the pavement with his boot. "My work is really starting to get political, did you notice?"

"Of course," says Yvonne. That was the direction Gorky was headed when she went out with him last summer. Drugs and politics. Extreme left. It's the direction she might have gone if she hadn't met Paul.

Lucinda smiles at Paul. "So what do you do?" she asks. Now she gets out a pipe and hashish.

"Teach film crit at Reed. Write reviews for the paper."

Gorky moves closer. "Isn't it depressing," he says, "to live off the creativity of others?"

"Screw off," says Yvonne.

"Not really," says Paul. "We all feed off others in one way or another." That was the sort of line that would have impressed Yvonne months ago. But now she means to make him back it up.

"What do you mean by that?" she asks him.

"I need movies. Lucinda needs a songwriter."

"I write my own songs," Gorky says.

"You need an audience," says Paul, "same as the rest of us."

"Sculpture doesn't require an audience," says Yvonne.

"I'm not feeding off anyone's creativity."

Paul turns to her. His brown eyes are on her, sad and full of love. "You feed off me," he says to her, so quietly that only she can hear.

\* \* \*

On a Sunday night Paul takes Yvonne to the symphony. She wears a strapless dress, lipstick red, which wraps her body like a tight sleeve. Her earrings are gem-cut onyx, black and sparkling like her eyes. She takes Paul's arm as they enter Schnitzer Hall. The concessions people whisper together as she passes--it isn't often they see someone with spiked hair at the symphony. At the intermission Paul leads her to the lower foyer and they drink martinis. "I think I'm in love," she says, "with Bartok." Halfway down the stairs she leans forward to kiss Paul's neck.

An archeology professor from Reed joins them. He isn't well-acquainted with Paul, but they have several mutual friends. He confesses he's always been an admirer of Bartok. Tonight's performance, in his opinion, has been first rate.

"The violins are a bit self-indulgent," Paul comments. "But the soloist--"

"What's the most exciting thing in archeology today?" Yvonne asks, tipping her glass.

"The terra cotta figures in China," he says. "No doubt about it. I'd give my right arm to see them."

After the concert the threesome goes out for coffee and dessert.

"Wasn't 'The Miraculous Mandarin' superb?" asks the archeologist. He lights a cigarette for Yvonne. Then he



slips a hand under the table to stroke her thigh. She digs her spike heel into the top of his foot and pushes down as hard as she can. She smiles. He removes his hand.

"I preferred 'The Wooden Prince,'" says Paul.

\* \* \*

They are invited to many parties. He always wants to go, begs her to go, picks out something seductive yet artsy for her to wear, like her tank top dress: slim and white as a cigarette. Then he times it so they're late, acts bored, smokes though he never smokes at home, even flicks ashes on the carpet if necessary. Cultivates friendships with other local writers. Watches her to monitor her flirtations with older men. Never the last to leave, somewhere in the calculated middle of it all.

At one party Yvonne meets a young engineer named Mark Samson. He tells her he'll be leaving for China in six weeks to build a new plant, working with the Chinese. His reddish-brown hair falls forward like a forelock, partly screening his coffee-colored eyes. Mark and Yvonne stand in a corner for a while. He doesn't say much. He just stares at her. His confident hands break off soft pieces of brie and feed them to Yvonne. She licks the salty crumbles of cheese from his fingertips. She notices Paul watching them from across the room and she mouths, "You are a fool." His lips form the words "I love you too."

\* \* \*

Blackfish Gallery, near Chinatown, hosts a champagne reception for Yvonne's exhibit. She's featured with one other artist, an older woman who works with bronze. Black pedestals line the main room at intervals; each supports a grouping of white porcelain sculpture: lilies, irises, or large-scale shells--soft light from overhead illuminates their delicate surfaces. In the second room oversize bronze figures sit, lie, or stand, in various postures, impressive in their size and coarse, stucco-like texture. Harsh light from above cuts them into sharp focus. People begin to enter the gallery, in pairs, small groups, some alone.

"What do you think of Madeline's work?" asks Paul.

"It's powerful," says Yvonne. They walk to a table in the center of Yvonne's exhibit, he pours two glasses of champagne then adjusts his tie.

"A toast," he says. "To a successful show." She smiles. He winks at her. They drink together and someone dims the overhead lights.

Soon the room becomes quite full. The owner corners Yvonne and says he's sold half of her pieces. A brownish-red-haired man just paid a very high price for the last lily. "They're wild about your work," he says. "You'll have to take a show down to L.A. this summer."

"How's Madeline's work moving?"

"The library bought one," he says. "It's quality work, no doubt about it, but people don't exactly want it in their living rooms. Yours is much more accessible."

Yvonne wanders into the second room and leans against the wall, staring at one of the statues. It's a smaller one, of a young woman, lying on her side in a fetal position. Her eyes are clenched shut and her mouth is open in an expression of fear and anguish. The woman is nude, the statue's texture resembles rough mud. Five or six people are circulating through the room.

"I want to buy two of the shells," says a young woman to her husband. "They'd be so perfect on our bookcase."

"Too bad they aren't heavier," says the husband. "They'd make nice bookends."

Yvonne acts as though she is too busy studying the statue to hear what they say but their words hit her like a punch to the stomach, hard and true.

"These are so disturbing," says the wife. "Can you imagine these anywhere but maybe in a backyard? Maybe on a patio?"

"Actually, these types of figures have already been done," says the husband. "I saw some at the Whitney in New York. Only those are white--plaster, I think. It seems like all Oregon artists ever do is imitate what they read is being done in New York."

"But those look so normal," says the wife. "These--" she pauses.

"Pompeii," says Yvonne, distractedly. They turn to her. She is so near the statue the light catches her rhinestone earrings.

"Mt. Vesuvius," she says. "These are based on the plaster casts of the victims. A civilization destroyed by nature. The buildings are in tact, but all we have left of the people are the hollows from their bodies in the volcanic ash."

"How interesting," says the wife. She turns away. "I want those porcelain shells," she says to her husband. They leave Yvonne and return to the main room. Yvonne runs a finger along the closed eyes of the statue. She knows what went into this work, and what it represents.

Paul enters the room, holding two more glasses of champagne. He hands one to Yvonne. "I'm so proud of you," he says. "I can't believe how well your show is going."

"Living room art," she says.

"What?"

"That's what I make. Living room art."

"What do you mean?" he asks.

"That it would look lovely in anyone's home."

"What's wrong with that?"

"I'm trying to tell you," she says. "There's too much missing. I'm not fooling myself or anyone who matters."

"I think what you do is wonderful," Paul says.

\* \* \*

At Virginia Cafe Paul and Yvonne take their favorite table, a booth between the pay phone and the window. Yvonne stares out at the dark street, watching people pass by on the sidewalk. She has become depressed lately--she's bored by her art, bored with Paul, bored with the conversations they inevitably have.

"Listen, Paul," Yvonne says, still looking out the window. "Let's go to Paris. Let's leave this weekend. I'm serious."

He turns to her. "I can't just leave my job," he says. "I can put in for a sabbatical if you want to go next fall."

"Now," she says. "Let's go right now."

"What's wrong with you?" he asks.

"A one way ticket out of Seattle only costs three hundred and fifty dollars. That's not very much."

"Let me think it over," Paul says, "OK?"

Mark walks in the cafe. He looks around as if someone is holding a table, then Yvonne calls him over--she stands and embraces him briefly, then asks him to join them. She scoots over to the window and he sits beside her.

Introductions are made. The men shake hands.

"I enjoyed your review of Stranger than Paradise," says Mark.

"Thank you," says Paul. "Have you seen the movie?"

"No. I'm afraid I've been busy packing."

Mark orders a coffee nudge and Paul pays. Mark insists

on catching the next round.

"One thing I like about the movie," says Paul, "is the way Americans are portrayed through the eyes of a foreigner."

Yvonne breaks in, "There's this really great scene where a Hungarian woman sees an American man eating a TV dinner. She asks him why it's called a TV dinner, and he tries to explain. It's a very funny scene."

"Sounds like satire," Mark says.

"What's wrong with that?" Yvonne asks. "Why shouldn't shallowness be satirized? Besides, people are usually too air-headed to know they're being mocked." She orders another light beer and extinguishes her clove cigarette. I mock myself, she thinks. She remembers one of Paul's reviews, about a junk-culture film: The parody is virtually identical to the real thing.

"I suppose you're right," says Mark.

"Of course she is," says Paul.

\* \* \*

Paul's teaching a class this quarter on femme fatale films. They've just seen One Deadly Summer, which he praises for Adjani's sizzling performance. Now they're watching That Obscure Object of Desire. After class one night Yvonne joins Paul and two of his students at a cafe near campus, and they discuss Bunuel's use of two actresses playing dual sides of the same persona. From there they go on to discuss film

itself as an art form.

"Film means control," says one student. "One must explore the medium to its utmost within definite boundaries. Exposition, for example, is not possible. The background must be subtly woven throughout the lines so that the audience gradually comes to realize the starting points of the characters. Secondly, thoughts cannot be voiced--soliloquy is passe. The actors must use their facial expressions, their gestures, their postures."

"Or result to gimmicks such as letters, diaries, etc.," says Paul.

"Exactly. Finally, flashback has been rendered unacceptable. All the action must be staged in the present. In the now." The waitress refills their coffee cups and asks if anyone would like raspberry cheesecake.

The other student stirs his espresso thoughtfully, then adds, "While I agree in part with your premises, I disagree with your conclusion. Film is not a limited medium. There are no boundaries." The ignored waitress walks away.

Yvonne yawns, then says, "Artists who nurture that sort of thinking usually get sloppy, end up producing kitsch."

"Exactly," Paul says.

The second student continues. "Consider the other art forms. Novels, for example, have been at a dead end since Joyce wrote Ulysses. In novels there is nothing else to be done. Contemporary paintings, if you notice, are basically new interpretations of old ideas. Film is the only art form

that has anywhere left to go."

"It's the medium of our generation, n'est-ce pas?" says Paul.

"If you ask me," says Yvonne. "Film is, quite simply, the most overrated art form. That and maybe haiku."

"Oh, I don't know about that," says Paul.

\* \* \*

Mark comes to see her one afternoon. It is a sunny day and she's opened all the shades. She is arranging some porcelain lilies in a green vase, carefully positioning them and buffing the petals with a cloth. She sets them on a table in front of a mirror when he walks in without knocking. He stands in a square of light on the oak floor, and holds out a newspaper cone filled with real lilies.

She finds another vase and arranges the fresh-cut lilies on the kitchen table. He follows her into the kitchen and pushes her up against the wall next to the window. She's not afraid. She runs her finger along the hard muscle of his forearm. He is so strong, so vital. She thinks of Paul's arm: thin, white, hairless. She traces her finger along Mark's cheekbone. He is like a Roman statue, bronze and magnificent.

"I knew you'd come," she says. "It was inevitable."

\* \* \*



Yvonne sits up in bed. She turns on the light. Paul rubs his eyes but doesn't open them. "What is it?" he asks. "Did you hear a noise?"

"Bad dream," she says quietly, still afraid. She reaches over and puts in a jazz tape to erase the bad dream feeling.

"Tell me about it," he says, touching the arm of her pajama top. "I want to listen."

"The bridge in Astoria," she says. "That real long bridge that crosses the bay. We were walking across it, no cars or anything. Just walking, in the darkness, but we could see the ocean glowing. And then a ways out we saw one of those glass balls they use to hold nets with--a big one--and I said I wanted it. You dove in but it kept bobbing away. And you kept swimming. I yelled 'forget it--forget it, Paul!' but you didn't hear me. You just kept swimming away."

"And then what?"

"And then it started to rain really hard. I couldn't see a thing. I just ran in the darkness. Afraid because I was alone. I was so alone."

"Well, we're both OK--you can see that we're both OK. Let's go into the kitchen and drink some decaf, OK?"

\* \* \*

Fog doesn't bother Yvonne. She wants to walk, to think; fog seems an appropriate metaphor. Laurelhurst Park is only half a mile from their apartment, only a ten minute walk in this cold grayness that dampens her face, her hair. She sits on a bench beaded with moisture, staring at the pond. Mist is rising from the warm water, mallards are huddled on the shore, preening their feathers. Across the water stands a figure watching her. Someone has followed her in this wet dimness of an evening. He slowly circles the pond, floating towards her. His coppery hair and face become recognizable. He stands near the bench looking down at her hands, which are red from the cold. "I leave next week," he says. "Come with me Yvonne. Come with me to China."

"Why should I?" she asks.

"You know you want to go," he says. "You're not happy where you are."

"I don't know you," she says.

"You don't know yourself. Maybe you'll find something in China that you can't find here."

\* \* \*

She begins by closing the curtains, locking the door. She lights a dozen candles, then puts them on a carpet in a semi-circle. Her shadow blooms large against the wall.

Sitting cross-legged on the floor, she sets the first yarrow stick aside and tosses the remaining 49 into two

piles. After removing one from the right pile she counts all remaining sticks in each pile, divides the number by four. Again and again she tosses the sticks, divides, and adds the numbers in her head. When finished, she arrives at the number 28, and consults the I Ching for the Ta Kwo hexagram.

Its epigram: Advantage in moving. For two hours she meditates on its wisdom.

\* \* \*

Paul is reviewing a Brazilian film the next day and Yvonne finds herself alone in their apartment. After a bath she puts on a pair of Paul's boxers and one of his tank top undershirts. Her hair is wet and her face is clean; in front of the bathroom mirror she makes an innocent expression, a seductive one, a pout, then a sneer. With a black liner-pencil she traces a heavy line around each eye, stands back to check. She leans into the mirror again and makes the line heavier, smudges it just a little with her thumb. Then she makes a beauty mark on her left cheek. The phone rings. After the seventh ring she picks up the receiver and casually lights a cigarette.

"Bon soir," she finally says.

"Yvonne? Is Yvonne there?"

"Hi, Grandma." It's been over a year since Yvonne's heard from her grandmother.

"Hi Princess, it's so nice to hear your voice."

Yvonne's grandmother has seen, in the Oregonian, a review of Yvonne's art show. She praises her, tells Yvonne how proud she is. She wants Yvonne to send her a picture of one of the shells. All of Coos Bay is happy about Yvonne.

"Sure Grandma." While Yvonne's grandmother talks, Yvonne blows smoke rings at her reflection in the living room window. Steam from her bath has made the window a little hazy, and her reflection is dulled. With concentration each group of smoke rings is a little better, a little rounder than the last.

"Yvonne, are you still seeing that man who writes for the newspaper?" Yvonne says that she is. But she wonders for the first time why she is. He's intellectual. He's nice. He's very nice, it's true. And he adores her. He even left his wife for her. But his goodness is repulsive to her now for some reason. She can't figure herself out. For some reason she wants something dangerous to bring her alive.

She hangs up the phone, then walks closer to the window. She wipes away a circle and says to her reflection: "Yvonne, you are a sinner."

\* \* \*

It is a Saturday morning and Paul cannot get out of bed. He reaches over to her side and picks up a green pajama top from the floor. He wonders if she left it behind deliberately. He smells it, puts it over his pillow, and

lies back, resting his cheek on the cool fabric. In the pocket he finds a valentine, one he gave Yvonne months ago. On the back she's made a list of adjectives. He realizes that these are the adjectives he uses in his reviews. The more reviews he brings to his recollection, the more embarrassed he becomes. He used the same words over and over: facile, glib, trite, cliché, sloppy, political, self-indulgent, silly, slick, witty, archetypal, erotic, and clearly terrific.

A Siamese cat pushes in through the door and jumps on the bed in one quick, easy pounce. It brushes its head under a lifeless hand, purring. Paul unbuckles the green collar. If it were longer he'd strap it around his own neck. He touches his neck. "I have been guillotined."

\* \* \*

"Tell me about it," he remembers saying, stroking the arm of a green silk pajama top.

"The bridge in Astoria," she said. "The long bridge that crosses the bay. We were walking across it in darkness, and we could see the ocean glowing. And way out we saw one of those green glass floats, the ones that come from the Orient. I said I wanted it. You said forget it, but I took off my clothes and dove in the water. It was cold and delicious. You yelled something at me but I kept swimming after the float. The waves pulled it further out, but I kept

swimming, determined to have it. I heard you yelling, 'Forget it, forget it, Yvonne,' then the waves washed over me and your voice disappeared."

"And then what?"

"Then I was inside the glass ball, laughing, and I floated to China."

"Well, we're both OK--you can see that we're both OK. Let's go into the kitchen and drink some tea, OK?"

\* \* \*

On a legal pad Paul conjugates finir:

je finis	je finis	je finirais
tu finis	tu finis	tu finirait
il finit	il finit	il finirait
nous finissons	nous finimes	nous finirions
vous finissez	vous finites	vous finiriez
ils finissent	ils finirent	ils finiraient

\* \* \*

First he has to find the movie equipment, packed away in boxes since they took their small apartment. He loads his camera with a film that records only the starkest blacks and whites. The title of this short piece, simply: Y. He finds all the still photographs he has ever taken of Yvonne,

hundreds of them, and carefully cuts her out of each one with a razor blade. He puts her in odd places, such as windows, mirrors, car dashboards. He begins to film them as if he were a stranger passing by, seeing her form everywhere, surrounded by two dimensional versions of Yvonne. He walks down Broadway, placing her in shop windows, phone booths, taping her on advertisements. Drops her in puddles and films her through the quivering water. He finds women on the street who look like her. He films them from behind. At the end of the montage he fades to black, then opens with a close up on a vase filled with ceramic flowers. He tones this section green. Fade to black again. Open to a life-sized photograph of Yvonne tacked to the wall, one where she's leaning forward with an angry look in her eyes, and in slow motion lily after lily is hurled at the picture, from nowhere, shattering, over a dozen of them, the tiny pieces of porcelain falling to the floor like a million milky tears.

\* \* \*

Yvonne has a window seat on the 747; Mark sits beside her. Below them the Pacific shines a hopeful cobalt blue. Floating in that ocean, she knows, are hundreds of glass floats, from China and Japan, escaped from the heavy nets they were meant to lull. Some of them will reach the Oregon coast. One or two will make their way to Coos Bay. When Yvonne was 17 she found one on the sand. Her friend Linda

told her it was a crystal ball and that in it she could see her future. This is what she saw: she saw herself in the Coos Bay movie theater, taking tickets on weekends and watching the old movies for free, every long weekend for the rest of her life.



MRS. SMITH

Say it to yourself three or four times when you wake up and you're alone in the bed. You're a widow, you're a widow, you're a widow. Maybe one day you'll begin to believe. The bed feels so empty. You're still sleeping way over to one side, knees pulled up and your back to the middle. You haven't changed the sheets for over a week and the pillowcase still smells like him. On his night stand, Revised Manual for Safety Engineers and small perfect stacks of coins: pennies, nickels, dimes. Only Michael's keys are missing.

Put on his bathrobe and go downstairs. Max isn't in his room, he's watching cartoons in his pajamas. "Hi, Mom," he says. You tell him he's going to spend the day with Grandma. Pick him up and carry him down the hall to change his clothes. He's wet the bed again. You bathe him, dress him in the corduroy overalls your mother made, and fix him some oatmeal. He seems to be in pretty good spirits, spooning in the steamy cereal. Mornings aren't so bad, regular routine helps. You decide to skip breakfast yourself.

Get dressed and get into your rental car, driver's side. Put Max in his car seat. Buckle up. "Where are you going, Mom?" he asks.

"To pick up your other grandma."

"At the train station?"

"Yes." You still can't decide if he should go tomorrow or not. He steers the little wheel Michael fastened to his car seat, pushes the knob in the middle and beeps.

"Which way, Mom?"

"Left." You point. He makes a motor sound with his lips, his voice rising and falling as you shift.

Can't spend much time at your mother's, just give her a hug at the door. Squat down to kiss Max and tell him to be good. Your mother looks tired, her eyes are a little puffy. "Say hi to Marian for me," she says. You wish you were spending the day with your mother instead.

Marian waves from a window as the train slows down and you push yourself to the door where you figure she'll get out. First time you've ever picked her up alone. Her window's steamy but she's wiped away a circle that frames her face like a halo. Same blue coat she wore last Christmas. Wearing a hat this time. She sees you and you both begin to cry.

Driving back to the house makes you feel nervous, full of a million stupid things to say but none that really matter. Think of something polite. Ask about his niece. "How is Jenny? Is she doing OK in school? Sorry she can't

make it. But I understand." Secretly you wish that no one could have made it. Secretly you wish that you yourself had been hospitalized until it's all over. But you didn't even get scratched and somehow that makes you an accomplice.

You take the highway that follows the coast and look out over the ocean as you drive. You and Michael met near this beach, four or five years ago. You count. Five years ago. And you've been married for four and your son is nearly three. The sun coming up over the mountains hurts your eyes and you put on black sunglasses. "There's the new jetty," you say. "Just finished it this winter. Keeps the water calmer on this side for the boats." She's mildly interested. You go on. "The rocks are all from eastern Oregon, blasted out of the side of a mountain with dynamite." You're making this all up. "Three men were killed in one bad explosion that misfired." Suddenly she takes more of an interest in what you say and sits up a little straighter.

You enter the long tunnel and take off your sunglasses, turn on the headlights. Michael always honked the horn in tunnels and you find yourself doing this now. It makes an eerie tension in the blackness. The tunnel ends in bright light and you put your sunglasses back on. The car feels small and you open your window and the sun roof. You turn on the radio to a station you know she'll hate and shift into fifth.

"Here we are, Marian," you say, a little skip in your voice. "Max is at my mother's for the day. He'll be home in

time for supper."

"I can't wait to see him," she says. "How's he holding up?"

"O.K." How can she look so pale and be so talkative?

"We have so much catching up to do," she says. You see now that taking him to your mother's was a mistake.

You carry her bags upstairs and show her where she'll stay. You're polite, courteous. "What time would you like breakfast tomorrow?" you ask. "The funeral's at eleven." You show her a pile of clean towels by the tub and notice a hair in the sink. You know she'll notice it, too.

Over tea she asks what sort of financial situation you're in. You know she's thinking about Max, and now you're touched in a small way. "Fine," you say. "We can live off the life insurance until Max is in school, then I can go full time at the nursery." Her thin fuchsia lips curl into a tight smile and she puts a wrinkled hand over yours. She says to let her know if she can help. You look her flush in the eyes, see how blue they are, surrounded by star-shaped wrinkles. They are your husband's eyes, you think, they're watching for your mistakes.

First time you met him was at a penny arcade on a hot day in July when your girlfriend wanted to ride the bumper cars. What the hell, you said, climbing into a tiny brown station wagon. The man at the booth started you and off you went, around and around in an eddy of metal gadgets and thumping and children screaming. Good looking guy in a

police car wheeled by, running his siren. He looked at you and winked. You winked back and he was off. The cars were swirling faster than, fire trucks, sports cars, a taxi, all tethered to the electric ceiling by silver poles. Your car stopped. Pushed the gas but no go and you looked up to see that there wasn't a spark when BAM he got you from the back. And BAM in the side. He was really grinning then, laughing, his blond hair flipped back, his siren singing and a wild look in his eyes. He swiveled his wheel and BAM into the side of your car again but you were cornered next to another dead car and there was nowhere else to go.

"I've got a little headache," says Marian. "I think I'll go upstairs."

"Aspirin's above the sink," you say. "I hope it goes away."

You change into cutoffs and grab your basket of tools. Pass through the sliding glass door to the patio. That brown circle's still there from Max's wading pool. You haven't worked in your garden for over a week and it feels good to kneel in the fragrant grass. Michael wanted to extend the patio, pour cement here over your small garden and get you to plant things in hanging boxes. You clean out around the snapdragons. Bright orange, unfurling to red and yellow. Pretty. Your gloveless hands pull the weeds one by one, feel the gentle suck of rootballs leaving the stubborn soil. It feels good to be out here alone, sun warm on your shoulders, and you wonder why you didn't do this sooner. You wonder how

Max is doing today and if he'll keep asking about his daddy. You wonder how long Marian will stay.

Open a canvas bag of bulbs. Next spring they'll be red tulips. Their layers look like tissue, peel off like dead cuticles. You plant them along the house under the kitchen window, pushing them into the dirt with your thumbs. The row isn't straight so you try to rearrange the crooked ones. Try to force some sort of order on them. With a trowel you turn over soil to pack them tight and notice how dry the worms are, like bits of twisted string. Go deeper, worms, you think.

Hear the toilet flush upstairs. You first met Marian on a Thanksgiving when Michael had you over for the big dinner. Her golden turkey, the stuffing, everything--it had all been perfect. Even her cranberries were fresh, not jellied in a cylinder. You brought dinner rolls in a cellophane bag. The thought of so much food now nauseates you.

Sit back and look at your knees with a bored fascination. Wrinkled and creased, worse than Max's cheek after a long nap. Lie back in the grass. The sun makes you sleepy, makes your eyes a little watery, and they begin to run at the outer corners. Say it to yourself again. You're a widow. Is it better than being divorced? More respectable? Dwell on all the crummy things he did and maybe you won't feel so bad.

For one thing he was always so sarcastic. At your wedding rehearsal you wore blue jeans, walked down the aisle

with your brother at your side. Reached the end where Michael was and smiled, took his arm. In thirty-six hours you'd be married, would be Mr. and Mrs. Michael Everett. You hummed Mendelssohn and didn't feel nervous. After the ceremony he helped you on with your coat and then he made some crack about your father's not being there. You smiled a little. Afterwards, at dinner, he repeated the joke, that he'd never have in-law problems as long as they were always away on business, to a few of your friends, and to your brother. You picked up your water and tried to smile. That was the first time he really hurt you.

Shift your basket to where the marigolds are, scoot yourself over and bend forward to thin them a little. You always loved helping your mother in the garden. Her marigolds had such large blossoms, red petals trumpeting through a brassy orange. You remember once when you were about nine, how you asked your mother if you were pretty. You had snipped a dozen flowers with your small scissors, braided their thin stems into a wreath. You balanced it on your brown hair like a crown and waltzed into her kitchen, humming a little song, smiling with your shy question. She set down her sewing and returned your smile. Yes, she told you, you're beautiful.

Time to get up, go inside and make some kind of lunch for Marian and yourself. You don't feel like eating much. You put your tools away, throw the weeds on the compost pile, and see in the kitchen she's got sandwiches on the table and

a pan of soup on the stove. The kitchen's filled with a split-pea aroma. Why does she have to be so nice? Over lunch she stresses how much she wants to help you and Max. "We don't need a thing," you say. "Just time to sort through it all." Maybe she's afraid you'll drift away and she'll lose Max, son of her only son. "I might need you to babysit now and then," you say. Her nose gets a little red and she almost begins to cry.

"Was he in pain when he died?" she asks. Picks up a sandwich and nibbles at it.

"I don't know," you answer. You were knocked out and you don't remember much. Just the sound of the sirens. He died before you came to. But why not lie? Make her feel better. "I don't think so," you say. Stir your soup. Jesus Christ, she'll figure it out when the funeral starts and his coffin's closed. She asks if you're hurt anywhere. "Just where the lump on my head is," you say. "My legs are a little bruised."

She washes the dishes, you dry. It's nice to have someone to help, you're used to doing them alone. "Marian," you say. "Some time you'll have to help me go through his things." Old pictures held with rubber bands, filed in shoeboxes by year. Dry-cleaned clothes, hung by season and type. Stamps arranged by country of origin, chronologically within country. He was so damn tidy about his possessions. Filing systems for everything.

"Just let me know when," she says. "Whenever you're up



to it." When you finish washing she opens a cupboard door and brings each stack of clean dishes down and sets them on the counter. Then she takes a damp cloth and wipes out the cupboard shelf, catching all the crumbs in her other hand. You're a little embarrassed. Then she restacks the dishes in a new arrangement, glasses on the bottom shelf and plates above. This annoys you but you smile and tell her thanks.

Later on, it's time to get Max. She wants to come along and on the way home she holds him on her lap. His eyes are sleepy, you know he didn't have a nap at your mom's. He asks Marian if Dad's coming back today and she says, "No, Honey." He asks if she's moving in and she looks at you and says, "No, Honey." He opens the glove box, finds your sunglasses and puts them on. He looks like a large-eyed beetle and it makes you laugh.

You remember drives you'd take with Michael. Before you were married, up and down the coast highway, his hand moving up and down your thighs and the tape deck turned up loud. The time you drove down to L.A. and slept on the beach. You woke up early and the blankets were damp and you were both shivering. After you were married, drives to Portland, visiting friends and sometimes a night in a nice hotel--he'd sign you in as Mr. and Mrs. Smith and you'd both snicker. And how whenever he'd get mad at you he'd get in the car, take off, come back maybe eight or ten hours later. Still mad, pout till you went to bed and then he'd forgive you in time to have sex. It seems to you now that he was mad quite

often.

For dinner you fix pot roast with gravy, Marian tears lettuce leaves for a salad. She slices tomatoes and tosses everything in a wooden bowl. You pare potatoes, watch the long strips of peeling wind away from your knife and curl in the sink. Michael's favorite dinner. You start to feel sorry for him. The three of you will sit down to eat and he's dead and tomorrow they'll put his body in the ground. As if he reads your mind, Max starts to cry. "Where's Dad?" he asks. "When's he coming home?" You put him on the booster and push him to the table.

"He's gone, Max." You cut his meat in small pieces and mash his potatoes down with a fork. "Be good for Grandma and eat all your supper." It hits you how you'll be raising him alone for the next fifteen years. But what did Michael ever do but yell at him, spank him for little things like tracking in mud?

Last summer after Max turned two the three of you went to the state fair in Salem. It was a hot day and the fair was crowded, so crowded it was hard work maneuvering the stroller through clusters of people. Michael wanted to see the livestock, took Max's hand and led him into the barn. "Cow," he'd say, or "pig, sheep, horse," pointing each time for Max to learn. Max was happy, playing with Michael's watch and imitating his words. Then Max wet himself and Michael gave him back to you. You changed him and pushed the stroller for the rest of the day.

"Good roast, Honey," Marian says. Max isn't eating, just kicking his feet against the table. She moves her chair over next to his and picks up his fork. She plays a little game with him and he eats his food without complaining. He's even laughing with her. Meanwhile her food's getting cold. You play with your salad, watching them. Her spotted hand flies the fork around his head, pops it into his mouth. He laughs again, gravy on his fat cheeks and his bib's a mess. Then Marian starts to cry again. Maybe she sees a young version of Michael eating. She sets his fork down and takes off his bib. He stops laughing and looks scared. She carries him to the kitchen counter and sponges off his face, his hands, in the webs between each sticky finger. Then she turns away toward the sink and really cries. Her rounded shoulders are rising and falling with each teary breath. He doesn't leave. He clutches her leg, still looking scared, as if she too will disappear. You stack the plates and carry them to the sink, then give him a cookie.

You knew this was coming. Knew she'd start to cry and you'd feel helpless. Her tears fall in organized furrows down deep wrinkles; one droplet settles at the tip of her chin. There is no reason why you can't be kind to her. Even though when you'd cry he'd tell you to buck up. You put your right arm around her soft shoulder and say, "I know it hurts. I'm hurt too. Every time I see my son I think of Michael. Everything I look at in this house reminds me of him. The yard even reminds me of him. I feel awful inside. And it's

been hard arranging this funeral and everything. I'd like to just run away, but I can't."

You've said more than you wanted. You carefully fold the dishtowel in half, then into fourths. You line up the sides until they're even and smooth out the fringe.

"Mom, why is Grandma crying?"

"Because she misses Dad like you do."

"Grandma, I want Dad back." Marian picks him up and kisses him on the cheek. She sets him on the counter and ties his shoelace.

"Let's have coffee in the other room," you suggest. You sit between them on the couch and smooth his yellow hair. He's had a bad week. Take a sip of coffee and when he reaches for your cup you say no. He whines a little, reaches again. Marian fills her cup with milk and hands him the beige mixture. Let her win. Let him drink it.

"Go sit on Grandma's lap," you say.

They sit on the couch, you take an armchair, put your feet up. You'll be going back to work part time in two weeks. Fall's always a busy season at the nursery. You'll have to remember to bring home a tree for the front yard. Apple tree maybe. Or something with pink blossoms, maybe cherry. You think about how much work it is to dig holes in clay soil. You've been wanting to plant a tree ever since you bought the house. He said it would make lawn mowing hard, and the roots would tear up the sidewalk. OK, you decide, you'll plant two.

"What are you thinking about, Honey," she asks.

"The funeral," you say. "I hope I ordered enough flowers." Take a sip of coffee, set your cup on the table. She slips a magazine under your cup and you smile.

"What will he be wearing?" she asks.

"It doesn't matter," you say.

Max asks if the flowers are for Dad.

You go into the kitchen and come back with the coffee pot, fill up your cup and add some to hers. Max falls asleep. "I know how much you miss him," she says. "You had a good marriage, didn't you? Not like these people who marry and divorce in a short time. Over small things that don't even matter."

Your scalp feels tight and you drink the coffee hot. It sloshes around and makes your stomach feel hollow. The tension is really killing you. You close your eyes and imagine what you'd like to say to her: Marian, our marriage was great for a while. But I wasn't happy the last couple of years. I was smothered by him. I was considering divorce. I even called a lawyer. You imagine what she'd say: Well, now that you mention it, I wasn't so happy the last years of my marriage either. Like father like son. Both bullies, I suppose.

"Yeah," you say.

After a time Max wakes up. "Would you like to put him to bed?" you ask.

"Doesn't he need a bath?"

"Sure." He had one this morning. But she might enjoy it. "Would you do it please? I'm going for a drive."

The cold air whips through the sun roof and blows hair into your eyes and mouth. Pop in Hotel California and move onto the freeway, driving fast in third gear, pushing the motor. Build up power and speed. You shift into fourth and your muscles relax some. You catch up to a white van. After the next bend you pass him and shift into fifth. You find yourself wishing for a beer, or even a joint. Catch up to the tail lights of a station wagon. Easy. Pass it on a straightaway and move back into your lane without hitting any bumps on the center lines.

Sing along with the tape. "We haven't had such prisoners here since 1969." A little off key, but who cares? He always hated it when you sang. You'd be happy, having a good day, and you'd start singing a corny song from an old musical. Always made him mad and he'd turn on the stereo to drown you out. Quit singing those goddam songs, he'd say. You were going to leave him, but couldn't decide about Max. Why wouldn't you just try to work it out with him? You eject the tape, push your foot down till it says 85 and grip the wheel tightly. Your fingers and ears are cold but you don't care. Driving south in the dark makes you feel good, less edgy. You imagine you're going down to California. Or even Mexico. Why not? She'd take care of Max. Why do you want to go to the funeral anyway? You aren't old enough to be a widow. Then you remember something. You haven't seen the

car yet. Must still be at the junkyard. In a weird way you're curious, want to see what it looks like. You don't have any idea.

You take the next exit, loop around and glide back on. See a hitchhiker holding a sign for BC, slow down to look, but pass him by. Too dangerous. Back track a few miles then slow down when you get near the city. You can't exactly remember where the junk yard is, but you know it's on the right side of the road near a little bridge. Slow down. There.

Pull in the gravel driveway. All the floodlights are on but the office is closed. You get out of the car and the lights are so bright they make you squint. RESCUE TOWING AND STORAGE the sign says, above a small building with two large windows. Three tow trucks parked in front and a huge, fenced-in lot behind. Maybe you could climb the fence. Look up to see barbed wire coiled all around the top. Jesus, like some concentration camp. You're a little afraid but your adrenalin is flowing and you've got energy in your hands, your legs. You walk around the perimeter of the fence and remember that hitchhiker. Hope he doesn't walk this far and see your car.

At the back side behind some brush you see a hole in the fence, big enough for kids to break in and maybe you can squeeze through it too. It's one of those cyclone fences with the stupid plastic slats woven in and out of the wires like a giant brown basket. You squeeze through and look

around.

Your shoes crunch on the gravel and an odor of dust rises. Hundreds of cars, a lot for the dead and dying, the stolen, the abandoned, the illegally parked. Everything filmed with a sheer gray coating of dust. One after another, arrayed in rows like tombstones in a cemetery. Each one dented, crumpled, windshields broken, tires flat and doors twisted off at strange angles. You walk down the first aisle, a little bit afraid. Your footsteps sound loud, conspicuous. All sorts of cars, a station wagon with two flat tires, a truck with its motor pushed into the dashboard, a convertible with one side caved in and a shoe on the seat. You think about all the people hurt in these cars. All the ones who died. You imagine explosions, people trapped in burning vehicles, but you keep going, around the first corner and up the second aisle. You want to find your car. You see a blue metallic one, a 280 Z like yours was, but it's got different plates. Its rear window is cracked like a jigsaw puzzle.

Down the third aisle. You stop when you see it. Your plates, your car, but it looks so bad you can't believe it. You tremble and cry out. The car roof is folded up like a tent. You step closer and look in the left side where the window was, but there isn't enough light to see much inside. You notice three beer cans on the floor behind his seat and you remember that you were on your way to a movie. The left side of the car is completely shoved in, you see flecks of



red paint on the ridges. Run your fingers along one of the dents. You were hit by a red car.

Tears fill your eyes. What he must have looked like. How funny that you weren't badly hurt. You sit on the hood and cry aloud, wiping your face on your jacket sleeve. You feel so guilty. Sometimes before you almost even wished he was dead. Well he's dead now. Now you can sing all you want, spend money, plant your stupid trees--all the freedom you wanted is yours. You wished him away. Pound your feet down hard on the hood, hear more glass fall out of the windshield. You wince. You're ashamed that you'd called the lawyer but you had no way of knowing. You say Michael's name. "I'm sorry," you say aloud, crying. You sit and whimper for a while. There's a cool breeze from the ocean and you can hear the cars on the highway.

You apologized. But wasn't that what you were always doing, apologizing? How many times you said it, over and over. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. You were sorry for so many things. You were sorry about getting pregnant so soon. Sorry for the time you threatened to leave. You'd say it just to get him off your back. Then you'd cry so he'd believe it. You sit up and spin around, sit on the hood facing the broken windshield.

Wait a minute. He's sucking you into it again. You have nothing to be sorry for. That son of a bitch was always after you, always monitoring, always perfecting. Like the way he always said you were getting fat after Max was born.

You lift up your right leg and with the heel of your boot you kick the window in. Jagged glass splatters all over his seat. The day he bought this stupid car he said he'd never let you drive it. Only gave in weeks later when he got tired of driving you to work. You kick in more glass, kick off the little pieces until there's nothing there but a big hole. How much you admired him at first--his intellect, his self-confidence. How you worked to please him and all you did was mold yourself to his idea of perfection. Spit it out: you hated him.

You're trembling a little but you feel relieved at the same time. Almost feel like laughing. Slide off the hood and look around. The lights are so bright it's impossible to see beyond them. You kick up a little gravel as you walk back. Breathe deeply. First time you've been honest with yourself for a long time. You feel bad that he's dead but it wasn't your fault.

You drive back home, pass the hitchhiker again. Barely notice him this time. You follow a camper into the city and up the hill to your neighborhood, turn and stop at the store. You're really hungry now. Pick up one of those frozen pies and some milk. Grab a bag of Oreo cookies. If Marian's still up she might be hungry too.

Pull in the driveway and see that all the lights are out except a small one in the living room. The door's unlocked, you go in and toss your jacket on a chair. She's on the couch with some mending on her lap--one of Max's shirts. She

jerks open her eyes and acts like she's been awake the whole time.

"Hi Marian," you say, "I brought home a pie. Let's go into the kitchen and I'll heat it up."

While the pie's in the oven you dump the Oreos into a bowl and grab a few. Shove them into your mouth.

"Have a nice drive, Honey?" she asks.

"Sure," you say. Hope she doesn't ask where you went. Get the pie out and cut two huge pieces. Pour some milk. Too bad there's no whipped cream.

"Where'd you go, down to the beach?" she asks.

"No," you say. "I went to the church and prayed."

"Looks like it did you a world of good."

The truth is you haven't stepped into a church since the day you married Michael and won't again until his funeral. You wonder what will bring you there next. Maybe your mother's death. Maybe Marian's. Maybe a million years from now you'll get married again.

"What did you do, Marian?"

"I gave Max a bath, then I went through his clothes and sorted them. I washed some things and hung them out to dry. I'm just now mending a few shirts."

"That's nice," you say. "That helps."

## ANOTHER EXCUSE FOR DRINKING

I walk down Front Street with Bruce, my ex-boyfriend, and we share a few beers on our way to the bar. All around us a heavy layer of new snow whitens Missoula; usually this much snow absorbs sound and muffles noise, but not tonight: teenagers are drunk and screaming in the streets, cars and pickups squeal by at dangerous speeds.

"How's my car running?" I ask. He's been using my car. His truck needs a new transmission and he can't afford to have it fixed right now. And he can't do without a car since he's working part time over in Milltown.

"Great. When I get paid next month and fix the pickup I'll deliver it right to your front door. I'll tune it up and change the oil, too. It'll be good as new."

"I suppose I'll be selling it this summer anyway," I say. "Before I move." He doesn't answer.

"Do you miss me?" he asks, packing a snowball. He throws it at a tricycle and hits the small seat dead center.

"No," I say, which is a lie.

"Are you blushing, Colette?" he asks, rubbing a small amount of snow on my cheeks. His heavy gloves feel rough on my skin. I push him away and he laughs. "Are you seeing anyone else?" he asks.

"No," I say, which is the truth. I haven't even talked to another man since we split up. "I've been too busy studying."

We cross Front Street and he packs a new snowball. A low-rider car passes, it looks like kids from the high school. "Make a prediction on this snowball," he says. "I'll nail their windshield."

"I'm tired of that game."

"Come on, Colette," he begs. "It'll be the last one, I promise. Come on, 'If I hit the windshield--'"

"If you hit the windshield you'll win the Washington lottery," I say. "If you miss," I hesitate, "you'll spend spring break in jail."

He pegs it right on the windshield, the snowball splats in a white asterisk. I expect them to pull over, I expect trouble but they only flip on their wipers and drive away. They would have been afraid of Bruce, his enormous body and shaggy beard. I imagine him lifting the end of their car with grizzly strength, the car revving its engine but going nowhere, the back wheels spinning helplessly, spraying snow into the air. Then he'd laugh and ease the car down. "We'd better make a trip to Spokane," he says, "to buy that lucky ticket."

We're almost to our friend Karl's house. Bruce pulls two last bottles from his down vest and opens them with his teeth, hands one to me. He cups the bottlecaps over his eyes like monocles then curls his arm dancing-style around my waist. His eyes shine like quarters in the streetlamp's silver light. Then he sings to me without seeing me, his baritone voice booming through opaque breath: "I only have eyes for you." His black curly hair and beard are dusted with snow: he looks strangely older than 28; he's acting predictably younger.

"If you trip and fall," I say, "you might blind yourself."

Karl yells come in when we knock, and we wait for him on the couch. He enters the living room with a towel around his waist and offers us some weed. Bruce lights up, I shake my head and finish what's in my bottle. I've decided I might have a few beers tonight but that's it--and no drinking after tonight until I know for sure. It's still only a chance that I'm pregnant. Even so, it depresses me to think about it. I start to worry again about what I'll do, then push it out of my mind. Think about something else. On Karl's coffee table rests a copy of Man and His Symbols. A page is turned down at "animal totems as emblems of initiation." I consider this for a minute. I wonder if the totems were chosen to match the character of a person or his physical strengths. Bruce's totem might be a black bear, strong yet less ferocious than other bears. Karl's might be a hawk, or maybe a crow. I

wonder what mine would be. I'd like to read a few more pages but that would be rude; I set the book down. Karl steps into the other room to get dressed, Bruce leans over and kisses my cheek. I hesitate, then pull away. "Only a friendly kiss," he says, "Don't get the wrong idea now."

Karl pulls on green corduroy Levi's and a Grateful Dead t-shirt. His pony tail's held by a green rubber band. Bruce has on a heavy olive sweater that looks good on him, but then he looks good in almost anything. Rugged. "I don't have anything green," I say. I am wearing a red sweater and black pants, which I hope look good on me. I tug at the waistband of my pants and try to decide if they're tighter than last time I wore them. "At least your eyes are green," Bruce says.

I walk between them. When I first met Karl I thought it might be the two of us--I was attracted to his liquid eyes, slim build, and soft, barbiturate voice. And even though he'll probably never graduate, I thought he had a keen intelligence, thoughtful and introspective. He's always talking about biographies he's read: Tolstoy, Ghandi, King. Sometimes he gets a bit eccentric, though--for one thing, he loves to dwell on catastrophe: plane wrecks, floods, murders. More than once I've heard him talk about the man who fell into the cement at Hoover Dam. He doesn't act like a geology student, either. But maybe none of us does. Before things could spark between us, though, Bruce came along with his fishing pole and pickup, and we spent all our sunny days out

at the Blackfoot River fishing, camping, sleeping in the back of his truck. Bruce was so patient with me, showing me again and again how to cast the right way, how to bait the J-shaped hook. How to hold a worm firmly though it wriggled in my hand, soft and wet as a tongue. We lived together for eight months then, till last month. Last month he was thrown in jail for a weekend and they made him pay all his fines. Four or five DUI's. That's why we're walking to the bar tonight, so he can walk home. "Let them give me a WUI," he said on the phone tonight. "What do I care about a police record? I'm not going to teach kindergarten, for Christ's sake." Snowflakes fall onto his bare neck, I turn up the collar of his denim jacket. That weekend I got a small loan from my Dad, but I didn't tell him about Bruce--that would have killed him. I packed all my books and clothes and moved into another apartment.

We pass a gas station. Funny, I never noticed this one before. Under the snow is a room-sized tank full of gasoline, delivered here by truck, first shipped across the Atlantic from the Middle East, maybe from Saudi Arabia. Next fall I will be in Saudi Arabia myself, searching for oil in the desert, finding the exact place to drill. Nearly all the grad students applied for the job, including Bruce and several of our friends. I haven't told anyone but Bruce about it. It's hard to believe I could be so lucky. I imagine myself in a Jeep with a hard hat and clip board, driving through the windy desert. I see myself stopping at



an oasis, picture palm trees and stone wells, tents. But a child. Maybe a little girl. I'm not sure how that would be. I start to feel sad again. But then again maybe I'm thinking about all this for nothing. "Here we are, little star," Bruce says. "Ladies first."

He pushes open the heavy tavern door and I go inside. It's one of those places with the walnut paneling, few lights, and black vinyl booths around the perimeter. A pool table stands in the center of the room with small tables scattered around it. Although it is still early, only 9 or 9:30, there must be 20 people here. Bruce pulls two tables together, Karl helps me with my coat. We gather chairs around for friends who are still on their way.

Again and again the door creaks open, college kids, townies, no one we know--among them a large man, obese in fact, wearing a foam rubber cowboy hat that's three feet high, something he probably found in a gag store. His dirty t-shirt is the same army green as his hat. "Let's party!" he yells above the music. People cheer. The waitress brings us a pitcher of green beer. She wears a button over her heart that says Kiss me I'm Irish so Bruce kisses her, hands her a five dollar bill and says to keep the change on a three dollar pitcher. Now why would he kiss a stranger like that. Trying to prove something to me, likely. Trying to show me he's glad he's free.

Bruce wants to play pool but the table is being used --two large women are playing each other. From behind they

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drive in the snow if the roads aren't too bad."

"You won't do something with Bruce?" he asks.

"No." I imagine snow hiking with Bruce, see him stopping after an hour, pulling the first six-pack out of his bag. I can hear us arguing about something ridiculous, how much the beer cost, who should drive back. Then he'd set up the cans to knock down with snowballs or rocks and I'd sit there wishing I was home.

Karl leans back in his chair and looks at me without saying anything. It feels like he's interpreting every detail of my face, my hair. I feel myself blush. Then he stares at my hands like he's trying to read them too, when Bruce comes back with a fresh pitcher and a bag of popcorn. I dig a few kernels of popcorn and rest my hands in my lap.

"I feel like some serious drinking," Bruce says. He leans over and kisses me hard. "Drink up Baby Colette."

"OK Bruce," I say.

When this pitcher is almost gone Bruce says "Here they are," and we look toward the door. It's Ed. And he's brought Kim. Ed's a geology student like the rest of us, will graduate with Bruce and me, but a few years younger--he entered college at 17 and will have his master's at 22 with a perfect g.p.a. They see us and he leads her by the hand to our tables.

Kim looks around then sits between Bruce and Karl, kisses each one on the cheek. Ed gets a pitcher.

"Hi Colette," Kim says. "You look great tonight." She

says this every time we meet. She only knows us because Ed's her math tutor--she's a sophomore in home ec--but she enjoys being with us. Especially Ed and Bruce. I notice her sweater, celery green, softest mohair. The neckline is scooped and a tiny emerald necklace twinkles in her deep cleavage.

"Thanks," I say. "I like your hair cut." Last time I saw her she had shoulder-length hair, a sunny blonde color and beautiful. Now it's ear-length and boyish. "I think I'd cut it even shorter," I say. She wrinkles up her nose.

"I think you should let it grow," Bruce says.

"I think it's my turn to get a pitcher," I say, standing up. My chair flips over but I leave it. "Does anybody want anything else?"

"Irish whiskey," Kim says, looking at Karl. "What do you think? Does that sound good?" Karl frowns and nods. The room is filling with people and there's a crowd around the bar. I wait ten minutes and no one takes my order. I notice that the button waitress has a boyfriend sitting at the very end of the bar; she goes back to him between each order like a yo-yo. I stand beside him and start a conversation. Then she notices me. Then she comes to take my order.

I carry my drinks back, jostled by elbows and shoulders of drinkers. I pass four bar stools where some Indian men are sitting in a row. They watch me go by. One of them is nice-looking and for some reason I look back and wink at him.

I don't know why. I ask myself what I'm trying to prove.

Bruce and Karl are shooting some balls around the pool table, so Kim moves to sit between Lewis and Mark, two more geology friends of ours. I set the drinks down and sit at our other table. Kim reaches over for her whiskey and thanks me but doesn't offer to pay. She's talking to Lewis and Mark about a car she wants to buy, is asking them for advice. They recommend different things and she listens attentively to both. Mark is wearing a baseball cap with felt moose horns that protrude from either side.

I pick up Bruce's cigarettes and begin to pull one, then remember and set them down. Of course if I am pregnant it's Bruce's child. There hasn't been anyone else since my divorce three years ago. And since Bruce and I split up I've spent my time alone. I remember some sort of kit you can buy at the drugstore. You can test yourself at home. Maybe I'll buy one tomorrow. Or maybe I'll wait a little longer. I've heard stress can make you late.

"Hey, let's play pool," Ed says, sitting down with two empty glasses and a full pitcher. He slides the glasses down to Mark and Lewis. "Drink up guys," he says to them. "Colette," he says, "Let's challenge Bruce and Kim."

"Sure Ed," I say. Ed's father teaches high school math in town, and Ed has been the brain in every science and geology course we've taken together these two years. He's exact to the point of being ridiculous, it seems to me. So bent on getting the right answer, even if he doesn't

understand the problem. A 4.0 g.p.a. He will be furious when he learns that I got the job we all interviewed for last week. Maybe I can keep it a secret till school's out this summer.

Of course Bruce wanted the job too, would love travelling and meeting new people. He makes friends so easily, sometimes I wish the job had gone to him. Or at least another job with the same company, it would be fun to go over together. When I called him yesterday with the news he took me out to dinner and bought champagne, afterwards took me dancing. We jabbered about all our fishing trips, and talked about our dog that died, our golden retriever, Pyrite. Bruce asked how my dad was, and I said I thought he was fine. Then Bruce told me about a test he has next Monday in computer science, and how he'll have to study hard all week, but knows he'll get an A. I'd sure like him to get an A. Somehow the subject of my job never came up, and neither did the fact that I'll be moving away. It was hard to say no when he asked me to stay the night.

"OK, the table's ours," says Ed. "Find a cue Colette, then rack 'em up." Karl sits in my chair and I take his cue stick. Bruce gives me a bear hug, squeezes me so hard I can't breathe. I'm anxious about him, wonder if he'll drink too much tonight. But then I'm drinking more than I planned myself. St. Patrick's Day is just another excuse for drinking in Missoula.

Ed makes me break. I line up my cue then look up for a

second. The Indian on the bar stool is watching me--no expression on his face at all, just watching. I break and the balls only spread a little, nothing goes in. I can't even blame the beer. I'm just no good at pool.

It's Kim's turn and she hits quick and sure, scatters them and sinks two solids. "Did I do good?" she says to Bruce in a baby voice I've never heard her use before. Maybe she learned it up in Whitefish, the town she's from. I've heard her parents own a restaurant up there and that she's expected to return with her degree and help run the place. I think of my parents. They'd be pleased if I married Bruce. They'd like me to move back to Portland with him and rent a small house in their neighborhood, to come over for dinner after Dad gets home from work. He's a mailman in the neighborhood where I grew up. My dad liked Bruce instantly when we drove back to visit last fall. Dad took Bruce hunting and even gave Bruce his old gun. My mom was always fussing over him, giving him huge pieces of pie after dinner. She said a geologist was bound to make a better husband for me than a lawyer ever could. She never did like my ex-husband.

After a time the door opens with a chilly gust of wind and the paper man walks in. He's about 50, wild gray hair and a white beard with zebra stripes in it. A paper-carrying bag is slung around his neck and he's wearing an Angels baseball cap. For some reason he reminds me of the Devil. His eyes are so dark, with dark shadows under them.

Sinister. I'm sure he's seen a lot in this place. "Get your paper here," he yells, and sports fans gather around him as they always do. Tonight they want to see if the Grizzlies won or lost, and how the Bobcats did. It's past midnight, Mountain Time, and all the games have been decided. The man is followed by a beagle, swollen in her belly and clearly pregnant. Or maybe she's already had the pups, I can't tell. Her eight heavy tits keep her close to the ground. I lean down and stroke her head. "Take her, she's yours," the paper man yells, but I don't think he's serious.

Bruce chalks his cue and takes aim. "Bet I can bank the 3," he says. He wants to bet five dollars, Lewis bets him one. It's a tricky shot because if he isn't careful he could sink the 8. He misses and Lewis takes his money. Bruce wants double or nothing on the next bank shot.

"You could make it easy if you weren't drinking," I say to Bruce.

"That doesn't have anything to do with it," he snaps. "I've only had three beers. You love to exaggerate."

"Sorry," I say. He's right, I do exaggerate.

I'm left with an easy 12 in the side pocket, take aim carefully. It's just simple Newtonian physics, I say to myself. Action and reaction. Angle of incidence equals angle of reflection. Even so, I miss by several inches. Sometimes it's hard to judge how things will go, even if you know the rules to play by.

"Great shot," Ed says sarcastically. "Way to go,



Colette." Ed walks over to Bruce and says to him, "Watch Kim." I'd like to break Ed's glasses.

Kim is short, can't make the shots in the middle of the table without reaching. She leans way over and lines up her shot. I notice she's positioned the cue stick under her right breast. She slides the wood forward and back this way several times, getting her aim right, then shoots. First she ticks the ball and it only moves a centimeter. "Wait," she says. "I didn't mean that--can I shoot over?"

"Of course you can Baby Kimmy," Bruce says. She shoots again. Bingo.

"It's me, I'm lucky. I'm part Irish, you know," Kim says. I'm surprised that I'm not jealous, even when Bruce tweaks her hair.

Ed takes on an Elmer Fudd voice, says to Bruce "she's as cute and soft as a baby wabbit." Kim giggles and wrinkles her nose.

Then Kim stands right next to me. She looks up and says in her baby voice, "You're so tall, Colette." I feel clumsy and awkward enough tonight. I'm probably six inches taller than Kim, and three inches taller than Ed. I ignore her.

After I have missed five consecutive shots I grow tired of the game, ask Lewis to stand in for me. Ed doesn't complain about the change of partners. Bruce asks me to get another pitcher. He calls me honey. He says not to worry, that my pool's getting better little by little. I try to imagine him as a father. I know he'd enjoy so much caring

for a baby, loving it. I can picture him feeding a toddler, I can picture him playing one-on-one with a child. I think I'll try to find a way to tell him. He has a right to know.

"So has anyone heard who got the job?" Mark asks.

I sit at our table and dig through my purse for more money. I think I have enough for one more pitcher.

"No, but I'm sure Ed got it," says Lewis. "He had great recommendations from all the math professors."

Ed steps nearer and joins in. "Thanks guys," he says. "But it could go to anyone, really." Ed's watch beeps, quick and embarrassing as a lie detector.

"How much does it pay?" Kim wants to know.

"Forty thousand a year," says Lewis.

Kim whistles. "That is a lot of money," she says. She asks me if Bruce applied.

I look at Karl. He can read my face. He knows I got it and knows he shouldn't tell. Not tonight. It would spoil things. Karl winks at me. I finish off my beer.

"Hey watch this shot," yells Bruce. Lewis bets three dollars Bruce won't make it. I feel sorry for Bruce. Why does he keep betting? He shoots hard, the cue ball caroms off the bumper and flies free, then hits the door of the women's room. Everyone cheers. The music blasts even louder now, George Thorogood and the Destroyers singing "I want bourbon, I want scotch, I want beer." Everyone sings along. The smell of cigarettes is making me sick, but still I want one. I stand to get beer, my head rushes a little.

First I stop in the women's room. Above the sink someone has written with orange lipstick Enjoy Penis Envy. I'm not exactly sure what it means but I laugh anyway, I'm laughing and washing my hands when Kim walks in. In her purse she's brought a whole stash of makeup--she reapplies everything with confident fingers: green on eyelids, pink on cheeks, black lashes, red lips. I'm surprised then how she bends over and furiously runs her hands through her hair, making the curls and wisps messier and wilder than they were before. She checks in the mirror and likes what she sees.

"You were great at pool," she says.

"Oh, thank you Kimmy," I say in her baby voice.

"Hey you're not mad about spring break, are you? I mean, Bruce says it's OK." This is a shock to me. But I can see what it's all about. I'd like to drop her makeup bag into the toilet.

"Where are you going?" I calmly ask.

"Vancouver B.C.," she says. "After we visit my parents in Whitefish."

I push open the door and leave.

The bar's still crowded, I push my way to the counter and lay my money out. The good-looking Indian stands next to me, presses his arm into my arm, his leg against my leg. He lays money on the counter too, fans out his bills like peacock feathers. We watch each other in the back wall mirror. I'm reminded of the murals in the St. Ignatius mission, the crucified Jesus, the Madonna and child, painted

as Indians: coffee-colored skin and braided black hair. They wear beaded buckskin with fringe and the infant Jesus is in a papoose sling. What if I went home with him tonight?

The man who takes my order wears a plastic leprechaun mask and a bowler hat. He's talking to a waitress, she's about 45 and wearing green lipstick.

In the mirror I see Lewis and Ed tossing the moose hat back and forth over Mark's head. Bruce joins in, they tease Mark and tire him out. I see Kim slide a pool ball into the side pocket with her hand. No one else notices. No one notices me here.

I turn and stare into the Indian's eyes. He strokes my hair, I close my eyes and feel a tremor deep inside my body. But I can't bring myself to touch him.

Kim and Bruce continue their game, I put the pitcher down and sit with Ed, Mark, Lewis, and Karl. Ed is wearing Mark's hat now. They are quiet.

"So you got the job, huh--well congratulations," says Ed. "That's really great, Colette." His mouth twitches slightly at the corners, like the mouth of a child who wants to cry, but knows he can't because he knows the other boys will tease.

"Thanks," I say.

"Arabs like white women," says Lewis. "We all know that." He laughs to assure me it's a joke.

"I don't think you're funny, Lewis," I say.

Mark and Karl say nothing. Mark's grades are low, and

he's afraid of interviews. He knew he wouldn't get it. He has no reason to be mad. I look at Karl and he looks over at Bruce, so now I know how they all found out. Across the room Bruce whispers something in Kim's ear and she giggles. He has to bend way down when she whispers something back. Then they come back to our table. They sit together.

"So when do you make the big trip over," Ed asks.

"August," I say. "I start work in September."

"Bruce isn't going with you, is he," Kim says. Her voice is adult-like now. She asks Karl "What could there possibly be for him in the desert?"

Karl shrugs. "Beautiful architecture," he says.

Bruce and I look at each other. His eyes are bleary. We haven't even talked about it yet. I assume that when I go that will be the end of things for us, yet a small part of me says maybe we should marry and go over together, on account of the child. But maybe there is no child. Then what's left?

"I doubt it," Bruce says. "I'll probably look for a job somewhere else. Maybe on Mt. St. Helens." Everybody laughs but me. It stings me to hear this. "I'm expecting a lot of money soon," Bruce says to me as a joke, "aren't I Colette?"

"That's right Bruce," I say. This gets Kim's attention.

"So what went on at your interview?" Ed wants to know. "Did you wear a short skirt? How many buttons did you leave open?"

I can't answer. I'll probably think of something smart

to say an hour from now. I look to Bruce, he's looking at Kim's necklace.

"Does she threaten your masculinity?" Karl asks.

"I'm only joking," says Ed. "She knows that."

"We're all so goddam happy about Miss Colette," says Bruce. "Miss Smarty Pants. Miss Self-Discipline." He punctuates this remark by downing a shot of whiskey.

I look away and the Indian is holding a book of matches. He swivels his wrist and flips the match book back and forth, regular as windshield wipers. He's trying to hypnotize me. I sink into my chair and drink one last beer. Spill some on my shirt. George Thorogood sings "Who do you love?"

"Your teeth are green," Kim says. Now she's on Bruce's lap.

I look up and he's still flipping them, side to side, back and forth. I watch for a while, mesmerized. Then he sets them on the counter, balanced on their side. He and his friends leave. I keep staring at the red matchbook cover. The phone rings. I know why the matches are there.

Bruce makes his way to a poker machine against the side wall. Pot of Gold it says along a three-colored rainbow. He slides quarters into the machine, presses the button and curses each time he wins nothing.

I watch him play for a while, then step closer and say "That wasn't very nice, Bruce."

"What are you talking about?" he asks. He hasn't taken his eyes off the card-display part of the machine. I can

tell by the tone of his voice that he knows exactly what I'm talking about. I've had enough of this tonight.

"Can't you be glad for me? What are you trying to prove to those guys?"

"I took you out to dinner, what more--" he misses a flush by one card and doesn't finish his sentence. It's hard to carry on a conversation with that machine beeping and whizzing.

"You're jealous," I say.

"So are you," he says, and I know he's talking about Kim.

"Does she make you feel lucky, Bruce?"

"I'll let you know after tonight."

"Give me back my car key," I say.

"I don't have it with me."

"There's something else you should know."

"Hey Bruce," Ed yells. "How about a little more pool?"

"Alrighty dighty," Bruce says. He doesn't want to hear the something else. He's cutting me off. He's not even looking at me.

"Hey Eddie, watch this--I know how we can play free all night." He takes the cue ball from the middle of the table and puts it in Kim's lap. "Hang onto this," he says. I see her smile pretty for him.

Bruce gets the bartender over and says the cue ball's jammed in the table somewhere. He says we need the key to get it out. After ramming the pool cue up the ball slot the

bartender agrees it's jammed and the two walk back to get the key. We hear Bruce say "I'll bring it right back." He opens the panel where all the balls collect after they've been sunk, and lays the cover on the floor. All this on the side away from the bar. Then he returns the key, good as his word.

Bruce and Ed take on Mark and Lewis. Kim sits on the table, facing them, and leans forward a little to make her neckline gape open. I'm not going without him.

I take Bruce aside for a minute, rest my hands up on his shoulders, look him square in the eyes.

"Please Bruce," I say. "Let's go home now."

"No," he slurs. "One more game. Make some money on this one."

"Let's go to your place and I'll make you something to eat. Some pancakes."

"Later, Colette," he says.

"Your shot Bruce," Ed says. "Let's go, Buddy."

We need to talk, only I know how stupid it would be to discuss anything serious right now--I just want him to look at me and say he's willing to talk. I just want him to look at me. "Let me walk you home," I say again. "I'll stay over and you can drive me home in the morning."

Bruce moves around the table. Now I don't know what to do.

"I could stay out all night," Kim says.

"Want to see where I work?" Karl asks me.



"Sure," I say. Nothing better to do. As we walk along the bar I scoop up the red matchbook and slip it into my pocket. "Just a second," I say to Karl, and I go into the women's room. I open the matchbook. I was right. Alden, it says, and there's a phone number.

What would Bruce say if he knew I'd called this number? Or maybe it wouldn't matter to him. I read the number three or four times, balance the matches sideways on the shelf above the sink. If I can remember the number by the time I see the next phone booth I'll call.

Karl leads me to the far end of the tavern. The Butte Irish twins are passed out in a booth, and the table between them holds three empty pitchers and a few glasses, one emerald drop at the bottom of each.

There's a door in the corner that's painted the same dark color as the paneling. Karl opens it with a key, and puts it in my hand. It's one of those old-fashioned keys, long and elegant. He flips on the light and we go down the stairs.

It smells like tire rubber and oil, but it's a nice smell and doesn't make me sick. It's cobwebby and dusty down here, and I expect it to be cold but the furnace is on, projecting warmth into the room. There's a crib-sized mattress on the floor next to the furnace.

"How many people work here?" I ask.

"Just me and one other guy."

"Do you sleep down here?" I ask.

"Sometimes."

He takes off his down jacket and spreads it open on the mattress. He pulls the mattress over a few feet and props it up against some boxes. We sit on it and lean back, side by side.

Above the stairs is one lit lightbulb, but the room is otherwise darkish. Karl opens the furnace door and we can see the fire going. Along one wall are a dozen bicycle frames, wheelless, a matrix of various sizes and colors. There's a big work table with boxes, parts I guess. I look up and see 50 or 60 bicycle wheels, arrayed in orderly rows of six or seven. The whole ceiling is covered with wheels. It makes me laugh. If only the bar could take off and roll down the street.

Karl gets out a pipe and lights up some hashish. He offers it to me but I say no, just lay back, rest my eyes and head. I'm tired. For a while I listen to the muffled music and footsteps from above. I wonder where that pregnant dog went, if she's outside in the snow, still following that paper man from bar to bar. My totem, I realize. Only I'm not as faithful as she is.

"I'm happy about your job," Karl says. "Don't worry about Bruce. You don't need him where you're going."

"Will you come visit me?" I ask.

"Of course I will," he says. "I've been thinking about taking a break from school anyway."

Karl finishes what's in his pipe then carefully empties

the ashes into a foil gumwrapper, throws the wrapper into the furnace. He leans over and kisses me. It's cozy and warm down here and the soft kiss is nice. But when he tries to kiss me again, tries to touch my face, I turn away. "I'm not ready for this now."

"OK," he says. He strokes my hair then snuggles down, rests his head on my belly. I wonder if he can hear anything in there. We lay like this until I feel his breathing fall into a steady rhythm. I can barely hear Bruce's laughter from upstairs but it sounds so far away. I can't hear anyone else, only music and footsteps.

Karl's right. I don't need him anymore. Even if I have a baby. It's time to figure it all out. Make a flow chart in my mind. At the top, I go to a doctor tomorrow. If I'm not pregnant, there's no problem: I sell my books and car, leave for Saudi Arabia, and work as hard as I can to build a career for myself. If I am, I still go to Saudi Arabia. I tell them I'm a widow and raise the baby alone. Or with that much money I could hire a nanny to help. I write to Bruce and let him know. Then when the child's four or five I come back to the states. Find a new job. "It's all so simple," I say.

"Simplicity is usually an illusion," Karl says, half asleep.

I tell Karl I'm going home and creep up the stairs. The light of the bar hurts my eyes and I squint as I walk over to the women's bathroom. I'm surprised to see Kim sitting on

the sink, leaning forward toward the mirror under the Enjoy Penis Envy to check her lipstick. Her hair is flat and her eyes are bloodshot. She's surprised to see me, too.

"You didn't go home with Karl?" she asks.

"No."

She fishes a pack of cigarettes from her purse and picks up Alden's matches. She lights up but doesn't see the number.

"I was curious," she says. "Maybe it's none of my business, but what did you and Bruce mean about him getting some money soon? I mean, it's probably none of my business but I'm just curious."

"Bruce didn't tell you?"

"Well, when I asked him he smiled and winked. It wasn't like he didn't want me to know, though."

"Bruce won the Washington lottery," I say. "Not the big one, but it's over 35 thousand. He collects next week."

Kim whistles. "Wonder what he'll do with all that money."

"Probably invest it. But Bruce is trusting me to keep it a secret."

"Don't worry," Kim says. She yanks her makeup bag out of her purse and lines up the tubes and bottles along the shelf. I can see she's going to be in here a while.

In a corner booth I see the back of Bruce's head. That's something I left out of my flow chart. How to act toward Bruce between now and August. Probably I should get

my key in the morning and have nothing more to do with him. He turns around and I see he's got his monocles on again.

"Please be careful on your way home, Bruce," I say. He cocks his head sideways, then pops off the monocles. His eyes are clear.

"I'll bring your car over tomorrow," he says. He's making the same effort to be nice, although I can't figure out why. "I think I can borrow my brother's motorcycle for a while." His voice is steady.

"Go ahead and keep it," I say. "I don't want you missing your job." I smile.

"So you're going to Sleeping Child for spring break?"

"Yeah."

"All by yourself?"

"Yeah."

"It might be more fun if you had some company," he says.

Ed walks up to the booth and sits next to Bruce. "I thought you went home with Karl," Ed says.

"No."

Ed laughs, "I wonder if we'll ever find out how you got that job."

"Shut the fuck up Ed," Bruce says. This surprises me.

"She knows I'm only kidding."

"I don't think you are Ed," he says. "But don't you worry, I'm sure your old man can get you on at the high school."

Kim swings out of the women's room and makes her way to

our booth.

"Christ Jesus," Bruce says.

"Hi everybody." A big smile. She stands right in front of me, right between Bruce and me.

Bruce says, "Ed, why don't you take her home now."

"Oh, I'm not ready to go home yet," Kim says. "I could stay out all night."

"Take her home Ed," I say. "Bruce and I have some talking to do." Ed takes Kim by the hand and leads her away. She turns around and offers Bruce one last smeary smile.

Bruce hums with the music for a while, then stops abruptly and turns to face me. "I know you miss me, Colette," Bruce says. "That tricycle I nailed on Front Street predicted it."

He scoots out of the booth, wraps his arm around me, and we walk together out of the bar. Next to the front door is a pay phone, and I have a dime in my pocket, but I can't for the life of me remember that number.