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FAT FINGERS
STORIES AND POEMS

By

Patricia A. MacInnes

B.A., San Diego State University, 1972

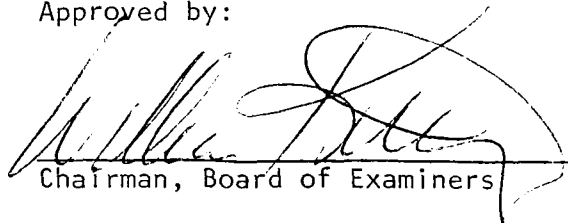
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TO A SON

I.

It was the hollyhocks this morning.
The smell,
one catching on my dress
as I bumped it in the garden.
I got dizzy,
held on to the ground
to still something moving too fast
the stalks swinging above me:

It would begin
with the sound of breaking plates,
Mama pushing us back
to lock herself in the smokehouse
threatening to swallow iodine.
For days she wore it
down her blouse, the orange
stain around her lips
to keep us in fear.

Running through hollyhocks
over my head, I would squat
in the cool of dirt
where no one knew me
and my family could be dead.

II.

Now, when I count a son unborn,
he can't know how I tense
at the rubbery fish bone of a child,
that I would have dreamed
myself alone in the woods
where he couldn't find me,
a blanket of pine needles
over my body
blonding in the sun.
Afraid
that too easy a mother
can realize
her child's neck in her hands
twisted like a chicken's.

But is there a boy
in corduroy overalls
beside a black Hudson
who waits still for the click
of my camera,
his arms guarding his chest,
his eyes refusing
to claim me his mother?
Too late then
to keep the dish from smashing
to the floor,
to end a story
that makes up a life,
and the next life.

There was no boy.
This morning in the hollyhocks
I told him
this is where it stopped
with the china
breaking inside
my own knuckles.

NOT JUST ME THIS TIME

You're wrong:
the egg tilts in the pan
because the kitchen floor slopes.
It's not just me this time --
even the refrigerator
has slid to one side of the kitchen.
It moved at the sound
of your voice over the line
giving me the number for you
and your new lover --
"Call anytime,
you won't bother us."
I watch lizards
in the toaster
move in and out of the slots,
dream of the desert
as the coils redden.
Their skins,
smooth as eyelids,
blacken before they know
to get away.
Now I light your number
watch it become ash in the sink
as I hear myself promising
to call soon. Now your voice
gone and wind moving along
the rows of electric wire.
The thought of you is already
taking its things and leaving
and I'm right behind
chasing it out the door
with a knife, saying,
listen to this, Old Man,
I lied.
It wasn't for you
that day I danced
on the Golden Gate Bridge.
I tell it this way now:
I danced,
eyes closed,
for no one but myself.

PUTTING TO BED

He is the one
I've suspected for years,
asking me to hold him, hold him,
put him to bed
like he'd been the child.
His eyes all over me
until I seal each
one with my thumb.
He is telling me,
his fingers under my clothes,
what a bright child I was.
His hand against my face
could be my own
or a stranger's
I trust the touch of neither.
Already I am not here,
easily forgetting the feel
of my own feet in shoes.
But I keep
putting him to bed,
putting each lover to bed.
Like you, as I hold your face.
I like
that you do not touch me
when I undo my hair
and pull it across your chest,
between your thighs
like a net gathering nothing.

BENNY

Believe me,
I've fooled more than one --
quietly
so the nuns would not hear,
feeling God and my dead family
circle the bed like flies.
When I touch myself,
the skin of the nuns
stings with my acid.
Her dirty eyes on me
for wetting the bed.
I promised I wouldn't
and every night
I went to sleep on the same wet sheet,
hid it from the nun each morning.
Stay silent, stay still.
But with this rage
I could hurt even Christ.
Once I took a cat by the tail,
whirled in a circle
until it hit the wall,
the skull splintering its weave.
I imagined the nun's face in the doorway
and felt a warm
in the crotch of my pants.
But I could fall on my knees,
become part of the filth
between the floor tiles
to feel holy again,
one step inside
to the victim.
I could be the child
who watches without a word
while a stranger runs his hand
over the hollows of my tensed ass.
Or I could be the other --
I look at the tiny shirt,
the pants given up on the floor
and wish I could be the one
who puts on those clothes
and leaves.
To again become like Him
as He twitched in the cradle
already knowing
the feel of nail through His hand
by someone like me.

GIVING OVER

Flour on your fingers
dusting the chicken as you
dream yourself alone in the woods, Mama,
where no one can find you.
A blanket of leaves
pulled over your body,
your breasts cut away,
and you underneath
pine needles blinding
in the sun.
You are as clean
as the circles in water
where one stone drops.

At sixteen
in the bushes with a boy,
penis stiffening in your hand
the thin skin, the feel
of an eyelid over the slick
of an eye. And the other eye
of the Bible Belt preacher
that never stopped.
Even then you knew
what he would take from you
through the years,
his God voice in the cancer
taking your white body.
And you
more than willing to pay
to be holy once more.
No one can touch you then.
No man can touch a breast
that isn't there.

Like one of those women
in a war camp
naked, lining up at the showers,
there was a curve on your mouth
the moment you realized
a giving over of your body
so simply,
escaping as smoke
in wind over the city.

FUGUE ON A RENTED GRAND

Piano and scene are double to the end
Like all the smashed-up baggage of the heart.
- Weldon Kees

Suddenly you realize
the piano keys are numbered.
But you nod anyway,
tell him you imagine
him naked at the keyboard as you
enter from the left in a blue dress,
lift your skirt
to straddle his lap. He will not
miss a note. You will
whisper through the chords
how you want to hear
the cool whistle of silk
pulled through his legs,
that you have fantasies
of standing him above you on the bed,
drawing loops with your tongue
up his leg, while he cleans
his nails. Tell him how you
desire to take him in your mouth,
weigh gently his balls
on the end of your tongue.
He won't be the first
to be fooled. Even now
as he slips on his gloves
to touch you,
your body will refuse
what it pretends to give.
You will trust only your sense.
It will be you
who knows
the real taste of control.

FOR A DAUGHTER

In the hospital
no one said why
you were there to see him
shake with D.T.'s.
You watched the floor instead,
the way his
bedroom slippers looked
with him falling out of them,
the toes bent up softly.
No more about seeing
Bikini Atoll blown up
by the H bomb,
or the half skull of a Jap
he used as an ashtray.
Too weak now to sit you on his knee,
drunk and holding on
until you thought your ribs
would snap like kindling.

But there was a time
when you watched him wash his hands,
liked the black hairs,
the sound of his palms
moving together quick.
Once when you hurt your arm
he held it gently under the faucet
until, embarrassed, you turned
to hide your face.

Now it's a kit of beads for you
that rattle in his hands,
spill on the hospital floor.
It's him kissing you
as you start to leave
and not seeing
that you look away
to rub off his spit
hard against your sleeve.

RAISING THE CHURCH FLOOR

I break through dirt,
remove it by the bucketful
until I hit floor, sunken
the length of a man's body.
Then lift the adobe brick,
one with the print of a dog's paw.
Deeper
I will find the priest
bending to place the damp tile,
his sleeves opening wide
as he shoos the dog with a curse,
then as he stands over
shaking the water, blessed from his fingers.
Below him the shirt,
a thought now,
six buttons
dropped through to a backbone.
At each wrist
a cuff link holding no cuff,
and the belt buckle
now surfacing.

HOW I COME BACK

You will be in the tub
regarding the ruffles of paint
on the ceiling, the mist rising.
I will lean into the towel rack,
refer to three by five cards
should the talk lull.
Oil on your eyelids glistens
when I hear about your latest. How charming
that she rides the carousel horse
in Safeway, as she thinks of you,
your quarter giving her orgasm.

When I enter the tub in heels,
steam rises through my dress.
Stockings wilt. Up to hips
in fog, possibilities are
endless. Thoughts quick
as blood from a razor cut.
Ice in my drink melts to dragonfly wings
while reasons for being here
dull under water. Let me
create need, make you
feel its urgency.
I push your head under,
my mouth over yours.
This is what I come for:
a counterpart breathing
in my rhythm.

FAT FINGERS

My brother Jessie was bound to get hurt on the saw sometime. At least that's what Joe, my other brother said. Jessie was mad that night after dinner and went back to the garage to work on the chin-chilla cages. "It was just an accident," Joe said later. I wasn't so sure.

It was right before dinner, before all that happened with Jessie, when I first found out what Joe wanted to do. I was on the front porch drawing flakes like I usually did when I got home. Every day that summer I would cross the highway to the desert and spend my time sifting dirt through a screen of quarter inch mesh for Indian artifacts. Mostly I found flakes -- the chips snapped off during tool making. I liked the andesite ones the best. If you spit on them, they turn black, then the air dries them back to a deep blue-green color. When I'd come home, I'd see flake shapes all over the place -- an upturned canoe in someone's yard, a guitar pick sticking in the carpet.

Joe walked out on the porch with his hands pushed down in the pockets of his corduroy shorts. He'd come home for a couple of days before the genetics conference in L.A. Joe was doing research on alcoholism at a university back East, using rats to find out if

alcoholism can be passed on genetically. He got interested in that because of his problem and the Old Man's.

Joe leaned against the black railing and looked at the sprinkler clicking over the dicondra. I thought of my mother whispering to me in the kitchen earlier, "I can't talk to him. He's just been sitting in the back bedroom with the door closed, reading and swallowing those antacid pills."

She wanted him to talk about the time in March when he drank himself into a coma. "He cut me off, Virginia. Cut me right off." She wiped her eyes with a mint green Kleenex. "Felt like a fool going back and forth to the bedroom trying to carry on a conversation with him. I can't force him to talk about it." I wondered when someone in the family would. "It's too late. Better to be mother to a cat for as much as he cares." She had joined a self-study group after Joe's "possible suicide attempt" and for the past few months had been talking about communicating and expressing feelings.

Joe came over and looked at what I was drawing. I showed him how you tell a flake by the fine edge on it and the slight bulb from the blow of a rock. He picked up some I had in a bucket of water and began scrubbing them with the toothbrush, not saying anything.

I'd been thinking about going to live with Joe after I got out of high school. He needed someone. I wasn't sure if I was going to bring it up then, but he started to talk about Jessie anyway. He asked if I'd ever noticed how Jessie's fingers were splayed out on the ends and the way the nails were real wide but short. "Look at his hands," he said.

"Haven't you ever noticed them before?"

Jessie's hands are big and freckled, with red hair on the backs and between the knuckles. One time we were fooling around on the patio with darts and I threw one at Jessie that barely caught on the back of his hand. He didn't say anything, just pulled it out and threw it across the yard into the honeysuckle.

Joe asked if I ever heard of someone having a frayed gene. He said they'd be like Jessie -- with fingers like that, fat fingers, and that they'd be slow like him. Not exactly retarded. "A dull normal," he said, squatting down and placing the flakes he'd cleaned in a row on the cement to dry.

I told Joe I had wondered about Jessie and that one time I'd told Mother how embarrassed I was of him -- the way he talked like he was a kid when he was ten years older than me. Somehow I'd grown up more than he had. "All you think about is yourself, Virginia," my mother had said, slamming the lid down on a skillet of frying hamburger. But she knew.

When Jessie was in school, he'd sit at the kitchen table trying to do his homework and my mother would stand over him yelling, "Think. Why can't you think? What's wrong with you?" He'd press down hard on the paper so the print would go all the way through and make marks on the red plastic tablecloth underneath. His hand would be in a fist when he wrote -- almost like he was hiding his fingers and knew what they meant.

"I can find out," Joe said, "if he really does have a frayed gene.

But I'd need a blood sample. He doesn't have to know why I want it. I don't have to tell him." Joe grabbed another handful of flakes. "I'll say it's for some experiment I'm doing."

I thought about him taking some of Jessie's blood, spinning it out and looking at it under one of those high-powered microscopes in his lab. "I don't know," I said. "What difference does it make anyway?" His head was tilted down and I noticed his hair was beginning to thin. He used to lie in bed reading and twist at strands of it.

"Don't you think it's important," Joe looked at me, "to understand why he's like he is?"

We could hear Jessie out in the garage building cages for his chinchillas. I thought of his fingers wrapped around the hammer or holding a piece of wood he was cutting, and how his neck would look when he leaned forward. It's thick too. Thick like a bull's neck.

Jessie spent all his time in the garage. Kept these records of exactly how many food pellets he gave each chinchilla, how much water, and the time of day he fed them. He'd put the numbers down slowly in each column. He made the columns by drawing lines that were exactly even. If they weren't perfect, he'd rip the paper out of the book, tear it into tiny pieces, then take out another sheet to put the pieces in, wad that up as tight as he could, then throw it in the trash.

"There he is," Joe said, and he turned to watch Jessie walk over to the garbage cans in the alley. Joe bent down and tapped on the aluminum arm of my chair with the toothbrush. "Wouldn't you be interested to know?" he said leaning closer. "I'm going to ask him for it

at dinner."

Joe stretched and rubbed his neck. He's boyishly thin, not thick like Jessie. I could almost lift him. At the hospital when he was in the coma, I imagined raising him up out of the bed, his freckled arms dangling as I'd carry him out of there. I'd thought about how I used to hold on to him when he'd ride me on his motor scooter through the desert. I was five. I'd try to breathe like Joe -- exhale and inhale at the same time he did.

"You could help out if Jessie doesn't want to go along with it," Joe said, picking up a quartz flake and bouncing it in his hand. "You know, act like it's no big deal."

I didn't look up at him. I pretended to be flicking ants off the bottom of my foot.

At the dinner table, Jessie had his fingers clenched so I couldn't get a look at them. I thought about the words "dull normal" and how a frayed gene would look -- maybe like the edge on a dish towel that's ripped. It would seem harmless, just broken threads. I wondered if Joe would really try to get his blood.

I watched my father, waiting for him to bring up the suicide attempt. A vein by his temple moved as he chewed. I felt sorry for it unraveling there on the side of his face. When I was six, I'd felt

sorry for him in the hospital. We didn't talk about why he was there or why we came to look at him shaking with D.T.'s. I'd watched the floor and the way his bedroom slippers looked with him falling out of them, the toes bent up softly. He tried to kiss me when we were leaving. But I looked away and rubbed his spit off, hard against my sleeve.

No one talked at the table until Joe asked Jessie about his chin-chillas and how the cages were coming along. He mentioned an experiment he was doing and that he wanted Jessie to be a part of it. Joe told him he might even get his name written up in this scientific journal. That's when he asked Jessie for the blood.

Jessie got down on the floor to give the cat his steak scraps.

"Jessie, what do you think?" Joe asked, turning around in his chair. Jessie skimmed his hand over the avocado shag carpet, playing with the cat. He wouldn't say anything. "Jessie, how about it?" Joe asked again.

"I don't think so," Jessie said.

Joe asked him why he wouldn't, but Jessie wouldn't answer him.

"It's the needle," my mother said. "Jessie doesn't like needles."

Joe told him it wouldn't hurt at all, and I told him it'd be okay and it wasn't any big thing.

"Then you do it," Jessie said. "You go ahead and do it."

"Okay," I said. "I was thinking about it. I can do it first, then tell you what it's like. Maybe you'll think about it then?"

Jessie didn't answer. He grabbed some foil from his baked potato and wadded it up to toss at the cat.

"Goddamnit, why do you have to be so stupid about this?" Joe said. Then he glanced over at me.

"I'm sick of talking about it. Leave me alone," Jessie yelled.

Then my mother said she'd be willing to give a sample of her blood. "No," Joe said. "I want one from Jessie. I don't need one from you, or you, or you." He nodded at all of us. "I want Jessie to give me it."

"But why does it have to be Jessie?" she asked.

Joe got up from the table. "Why Jessie?" she asked again, looking up at Joe.

"It's too much to go into."

"What do you mean?" She straightened in her seat.

Joe cracked his knuckles against the back of the chair. "There are just some things I'd like to take a look at," he said.

"What things?" my father asked.

"Shouldn't you tell Jessie about it? Shouldn't he know?" my mother asked.

"I don't know." Joe looked at Jessie on the floor. Jessie had his head down. I thought of a picture that I'd seen in the newspaper. It was this retarded man at an Easter egg hunt. The man's head was fat, and his hair shaved up the sides. He wore a kid's cowboy hat and was looking down into an Easter basket grinning.

"Joe," I said. "Stop it. It's not that important."

"What's going on here anyway?" my father asked.

"Joe, will you please tell us what this is all about?" my mother

said.

Joe leaned into the table and looked past me. "He has some interesting characteristics. His fingers are unusual."

My mother sat back in her chair. "Is that it? Is that what all this fuss is about?"

"It might mean something," Joe said.

I gave him a dirty look so he'd shut up. He looked away. "You know how he had trouble in school," Joe said. "How he's always been slow? There might be a reason for it." Then he told them about frayed genes and how it wasn't like being retarded, but the person would just have some trouble.

Jessie sat there and watched the cat bat the ball of foil around. His neck and face turned red and his neck strained in his shirt.

"Well it's a hell of a thing to say in front of Jessie," my father said. "There is nothing wrong with him. Nothing at all. We could have done without all this. Jessie, he's full of shit. Don't listen to him."

"What's wrong with knowing?" said Joe. "I could find out for sure if he'd give me a blood sample."

"Does it matter? What good is it to know?" my mother said, looking out the sliding glass door at the oleander alongside the patio.

"You think you can look at your brother's hands and tell something like that?" My father tossed his napkin down and it dropped off the table. "It doesn't mean a damn thing."

Joe turned around towards Jessie. He went over and grabbed for his hand, but Jessie pulled it away in a fist like he would hit Joe.

"Look." Joe pointed down at him. "Look at his fingertips. Haven't you ever noticed them?"

Jessie scooted back and knocked over the potted fern behind him. "Get away," he yelled and Joe moved over by the kitchen doorway.

"It could mean he was born with a frayed gene," Joe went on. "And we could find that out. You don't have to hide from these things, you know."

My mother went to get the vacuum to clean the dirt up from the plant. No one spoke while we watched her pull the vacuum out of the closet and unwind the cord.

"You think you have all the answers?" my father started in. "You think you know it all?" He began to yell when the vacuum went on. "Well, I'll tell you something. At least Jessie never tried to kill himself. At least he was smart enough not to try and kill himself. And don't blame it on some gene I gave you. It wasn't me who poured booze down you until you went under. Don't blame it on me." The vacuum motor was winding down, but he kept screaming.

"Jesus Christ." Joe stood there with his arms crossed. "You don't know what in the hell you're even talking about."

Then my father went on saying he'd never do that to his family, no matter how bad it got. And that Jessie wouldn't be stupid enough to do that either.

"That's enough of that," my mother said, slamming the closet door. "I won't have any more of it. That's enough." She told everyone to sit down in their chairs and finish dinner. Jessie looked at me. I

pretended I was trying to see the clock on the wall behind him.

"Now let's talk about something else," my mother said. "Forget this whole mess even happened. Erase. Erase." She made like she was holding an eraser and wiping off a chalkboard. "Jessie has joined a single's club." She smiled and looked over at him. "Meeting a lot of girls?"

"Leave me alone," Jessie yelled, as he went out the door to the garage.

"It was just an accident," Joe told me when we stood in the driveway after my parents had driven off to the hospital with Jessie. "Jessie just goofed up. He was upset, that's all."

I was in my room after dinner when it happened. I heard the saw going out in the garage, then Jessie yelling and come running in the back porch. The first thing I saw when I went in the kitchen was Jessie lying on the floor with one of his tennis shoes half way off. It looked like he'd just fainted and had knocked over a kitchen chair. My mother was stooped over him, tying her apron around the cut on his hand. Blood was on the floor. Someone brought in a stack of bath towels, and she began wrapping up his hand with a blue one. My father was trying to wipe the blood up with paper napkins.

"For Christsake, stop it," Joe yelled. He jerked the wad of napkins out of his hand. "Just get out of here. I'll take care of it."

In the driveway, I noticed a streak of blood on Joe's sleeve. "Blood all over," I said. "Did you get a sample?" I wanted to tell him this was all his fault.

"You're going to start sounding like them." He looked down at Jessie's tennis shoe he had carried out. "The hell with this family." He threw the shoe down in the ivy and went back in the house. I picked it up and stood there awhile twirling it by the worn shoe lace and trying to decide what to do.

When I finally came inside, I walked past Joe's bedroom a couple of times before I looked in. The door was part way open. Joe was sitting at the desk with his back to me. He looked frail now like he used to in the morning when he'd sit hunched over the table shivering. His sweater would be too big on him.

"You know it's your fault," I said. "Why'd you have to say it in front of Jessie? Didn't you even think about that?" Joe covered something on the desk and drew it in closer to him. He looked at me over his shoulder. "I didn't cause him to do that. You know it's a lot more complicated than that," he said.

"You never should have said anything in the first place," I said.

"I'm sorry it happened to him." He looked at the shoe in my hand. "But he shouldn't have gone out there and started working when he was so upset. Come over here. I want to show you something."

I stood in the doorway. "Come on, come on," he said, waving his

hand. I kicked a shirt on the floor out of my way. He put his arm around my hip and brought me in closer.

"What?" I said.

He looked up at me. "I did get a sample."

For a second I didn't know what he meant. I saw the white slide wrapper crumpled on the desk. It didn't look like blood on the slide. The color was flattened out and you could only see a few pale streaks of red.

"I probably won't be able to tell anything from it anyway," he said, tapping a slide cover into place.

"You wouldn't do that." I stepped back from the desk. I could see all of him, the way his lips opened and shut as he breathed through his mouth and how his knuckles looked big as he fingered the slide.

"You wouldn't after what you did."

"It was all over the kitchen," he said. "Why not? Doesn't it make sense?"

"You make me sick," I said. "You had no right taking his blood. Not after what happened."

Joe leaned back in the chair. "No one has to know what I find out, not even you."

"Why do you have to know? What the hell good is it going to do now?"

"I still think it's important to know," said Joe, looking down at the slide.

"I never should have gone along with you," I said. "Jessie knows

what I did to him too."

"Blame me if you want," he said. "You didn't do anything to Jessie."

I went along with you. Why'd you have to tell me about it anyway?"

He hit his knuckles against the desk. "I thought I could talk to you. You're smarter than they are. I didn't think you'd be afraid of finding out something like this."

"Why don't we just forget about it? Forget the whole thing," I said.

"Fine," he said.

A piece of ore was setting on the window ledge above Joe. I knew how easily the slide would smash into splinters under it, then into chalky fine powder as I ground it down.

"Let's get rid of it," I said.

Joe looked out the window at the neighbors getting in their car.

"Would you do it for me?" I said.

"I want to find out about this." Joe slipped the slide into a small wood box and put it in his briefcase on the bed. "No reason to be ignorant." The brief case snapped shut.

"That's it?" I said.

Joe sat down on the bed and pulled at one of the nubs on the pale yellow spread. The shadow of wisteria growing outside the window moved around on the gray briefcase. "I'd never come and live with you," I said. "I don't know why I ever wanted to."

"You wanted to live with me?" he said.

"I'd been thinking about it."

He picked up the briefcase and set it upright alongside the desk, then went over to his opened suitcase. "Why don't we talk about it?" He started digging under some shirts and pulled out a little bottle of Dewar's Scotch. "Would you like a drink while we talk?"

"I don't want to talk about it. I thought you weren't supposed to drink anymore," I said.

"I do just a little," he said walking in the bathroom. "Do you drink?" He came back with two yellow Dixie cups.

"What do you think is going to happen with Jessie?" I asked.

He poured the Scotch. "Try some." He handed it to me. "I'm sure he'll be okay. He'll be out working on those cages in no time. Things will go back to normal."

"I don't think he's going to forget," I said.

"I'll tell him I was wrong, or something," he added, his voice too loud. "Don't worry about it." He went back in the bathroom. I took a sip of the Scotch, shivered at the taste and took another sip, then set it on the dresser.

"You don't care how anyone feels, do you?" I said when he came back in the room. "You don't care about what you did to Jessie." It looked like he was about to say something. "Why did you try to kill yourself?"

Joe laughed. "I didn't try to kill myself."

"Did you think about me when you did it?"

"Why would I want to kill myself? It was an accident." He started going through his suitcase again.

"I don't believe you. You didn't care if you saw me again or not."

"You're sounding very silly and very young," he said.

"I thought coming to live with you would help."

Joe stood up and twisted the cap off another bottle. He was watching my reflection in the dresser mirror as he dipped a finger into his drink. "I could understand that," he said, watching the mirror until I turned to look. He walked over by me.

"What are you looking at?" I said.

"Look at your face." He turned my head gently toward the mirror. "You've got a nice face. Did you know that?" He ran a finger down my cheek.

"Don't." I turned away.

"Relax," he said, grabbing the back of my neck. "Why don't you just relax about everything?"

"Don't do that," I said moving out of his reach. "I don't want to be touched."

"Have some of your drink. You'll feel better. Believe me," he said.

"I don't want the drink. I want to know why you wanted to kill yourself."

"Don't be asinine," he said. I watched him in the mirror stretch out on the bed and shut his eyes. I thought of him in the coma and how I'd wanted to shake him, to snap the wires hooked to his arms. I would

have run my fingernails deep into his skin until he could feel it. Even now that wouldn't be enough.

Joe lay there holding the cup of Scotch on his stomach. His eyes rolled under his pale lids. "You didn't care how I felt," I said. I waited for him to tell me again it was an accident what happened to him. And to Jessie. Just an accident. No one to blame. I waited. His face looked relaxed. His lips, soft, a little open as if he were about to sleep. I felt the slight weight of Jessie's shoe in my hand and suddenly wanted to throw it at him. I wanted to see Joe's eyes open, the way he would look at me. I wanted to see blood come quick to his mouth from something more than just that shoe in my hand.

I ran out. He didn't look up. I left the house and went down to the garage where the table saw was still going. If Jessie had lost a finger, I thought, I probably would find it right there in the sawdust.

I noticed the record book on the work bench opened to a fresh page of even lines. Jessie had dripped blood on it. Big splotches that wouldn't soak into the slick paper. I ripped the page out and tore it up.

I wondered if Joe would walk in. He'd be leaving the next day. I knew that after he was gone, I'd still go through his room, looking for anything he had left.

I started thinking about when Joe and I used to ride on that motor scooter in the desert. Joe would wear his light pink shirt with the silvery threads -- the kind Elvis Presley wore, he used to say. It shimmered out there in the sun. I would feel his back, hot, through

the shirt. If I could breathe like Joe, I used to pretend, the ride would never be over. I could be with him and the desert would keep on going.

Goddamn Joe anyway. I just stood there. Blood was on my feet and the wood shavings kept sticking.

ARE YOU EVERYTHING YOU WANT TO BE?

We used to talk. You had to. Cleaning those motel rooms at the Breez would eat you up. It's the vibes people leave behind. You knew when they had been fighting, or screwing, or even when someone had been alone, sitting in their motel room with their ache. You could feel it -- pressed in on you like a wave of heat when you open an oven on a day in August. Times we ate mescaline at work, I couldn't be alone. I'd tell Laney keep talking; the vibes can't hurt you if you don't hold still.

Laney would worry at her hair until it'd come undone, leaving a trail of pins through the rooms. Her uniform, color of pink cake frosting would rise up on her, show the tops of her cinnamon mesh nylons that never fit right. I liked to watch her snap sheets when she shook them hard to spread down on a bed. Smell of the bleach so strong it'd come up at you and burn your nose.

"Tell me about yourself," I said to her the first day she started working. "Everything. All my friends do." And at first she would.

We'd talk about how we got out as soon as we could. At seventeen I changed my name to Crystal and left behind Naval housing and the smell of boiled cabbage and baby crap in the walls. Got away from anything

that reminded me of World War II -- like the half skull of a Jap my father used as an ashtray. Thirty years in the Navy. You could see it all in the snapshots of off-station bars. But sometime between moves in '65, my mother even tore each one of those out of the album. All that was left were pieces of tape at angles and names like the Bottoms-Up Club, San Pedro; Ace-in-the-Hole, Pensacola, printed neat in white ink on the black album paper.

"The military, scum of the earth." That's what my mother would whisper to me in the kitchen.

"Don't go running off with some G.I.," Laney's mother warned her. "I didn't," Laney told me. "I wouldn't have anything to do with them. I ran off with Lex instead."

Lex went to the civilian high school in town. His family had a regular tract house, decorated in their own Early American, and his mother bought food at Safeway -- name brands with colored labels, not like the Navy surplus dark green cans at the commissary.

When they first knew each other, Laney said they'd take his '47 Chevy truck out to Devil's Punch Bowl -- Laney riding on the running board and screaming all the way down the canyon road.

She said he was different, not afraid of anything. He used to pick up tarantulas he'd find out in the desert and let them crawl up his bare arm. He didn't care about what people thought. One time in the lobby at the Roxy in front of everyone he played "Red River Valley" for her on his harmonica.

"I thought it would be different, married to him," she told me.

"I kept waiting for it to feel right -- this is how it should be living in one place, this is what people do. Six years later and all it is, is a house with the desert across the highway, deciding what to have for dinner, and Lex getting lost in things," as Laney put it, "so he won't have to deal with me in a real way."

"I know what you mean," I told her. "I was married once. Can you believe it? To a Marine. I'll be damned if you don't wind up in the same mess you swear you'll get away from. But it didn't last two years. He got orders for Corpus Christi and didn't ask me to go with him."

Laney would tell me the only thing Lex got excited about now was what he'd buy next. Sundays they'd go to shopping malls for gadgets like a metal detector, a trash compactor, car accessories -- an automatic antennae for their Rambler, video games. But everything they brought home, he'd find something wrong with and would take it back.

"A scratch messing up the shine on the metal detector," she told me. "The dials on the video game, crooked; the trash compactor, too noisy."

"I had to do it," he'd say, coming in the front door, smiling, with a new one. "It wasn't perfect."

"Neither am I," Laney would tell him. "You can't stand it." But he'd act like he didn't hear.

I told Laney about the ex always wanting his uniform pressed flat as cardboard. I call him "the ex" so I won't have to think his name anymore. One time I ironed his pants on a picnic table and he came out and stood over me and started counting out the wrinkles. "What the

hell's wrong with you?" he yelled.

But I showed him. I pressed a spider in his pant leg. The hell with it, I thought. Then I walked out in the pants with a chicken neck poked out the fly to break him up. He just got mad about the grease spots.

"Screw them if they can't take a joke," I told Laney.

Laney's voice would go low. She'd bend over a bed, tuck and re-tuck a corner so I couldn't see her eyes, and she'd tell me, "Lex doesn't even like for me to touch him anymore." She said when she reached for him he acted like his skin was prickling and he had to get away. "You never want me near," she'd tell him.

"As if I haven't heard that a million times before," he'd say. "I don't need a woman all the time. I don't let that push me around. It's like not being able to breathe with you too close."

For awhile Laney thought he might have something shaking with someone else. A neighbor, this little blonde gal down the street. Laney said the girl had painted toenails. Something like "Magic Carpet Red" or "Watermelon Sugar". She said she could see that girl hugging her old man tight between her thighs and raising up her legs until those painted toes were vivid against his white ass. Seemed to me it was all in Laney's head, but what could she think with him acting like she wasn't there?

Then around that time there was that whole eagle business. Lex found a young Tawny up by the pass flapping around in some bushes. He brought it home in a box and was trying to tame it. Laney said he

always wanted to do that. He'd read everything on falconry. "You have to stay with the bird all the time at first so it gets used to you and trusts you. Then it's yours," he told her.

Laney told me he used to say that about her when they first knew each other. They did everything together. But it was different now. He was spending all his time out in the back with the eagle and didn't want to even come in at night to sleep. "Another excuse to get away," Laney said. "That's what it is."

I guess it was a lot of things that got her mixed up in the Blind Light group in Santa Cruz. I couldn't tell her any different. She always asked me, "What's missing, Crystal? This what living with someone for a whole lifetime is?"

"Far as I know," I'd say. "What are you doing? Picking up somebody's bad vibes in those rooms?" I'd get the radio on a good song. "Come on," I'd say. "Lose the blues." She'd hold back for a second, poke at her hair. "Shake it all out, dance it away." I'd tell her. We'd do a little funky-chicken and some turns around the room. She'd have on her orange rubber gloves and would wave them over her head, close her eyes and bump into all the furniture. We'd be laughing.

At first there were the blue brochures about Blind Light that she'd

bring into work. Each one had the picture of an eye with rays coming out and the words: "Are you everything you want to be?"

Laney said the idea behind the group was to free yourself so you could plug into the "higher powers" to get what you want. It was a technique only they knew.

I remember when she got back after her first weekend at Blind Light. I noticed some three by five cards she was carrying around on her cleaning cart. She'd take them out, look at them, and say something to herself.

"I can't talk too much about the session," she said to me before I even asked. "They said not to. It undermines the work."

I didn't say anything and we took our carts over to number seven. Number seven looks like half the other rooms -- the color of the vinyl chairs and headboard reminds me of cream of tomato soup. The rest of the rooms are done in turquoise. Wayne, the manager, warned us someone had really gone to town on it. That's the motel business for you. We get to clean up after somebody's good time. Like this joker. He set fire to a whole suit of clothes and some loafers in the bathroom sink. The Breez is nothing like the Sahara in Tahoe I worked one summer. They'd have class acts. Like Tom Jones. The hotel hookers had some stories about him. The maids used to flip to see who'd clean his room.

Laney was busy scrubbing "Arlene and Tomas" off the headboard. "They had me go into this room alone for my session," she said, sprinkling cleanser on a sponge.

"I thought you couldn't talk," I said to her.

"I guess a little is alright," she said. "You wouldn't believe it. They took me to this dark room and told me to lie on the floor."

"You did it?" I asked.

"They said you're more relaxed that way. The counselors came in after awhile. All of them wear blue jumpsuits. They sat around me and put their hands just so they were almost touching me. Then they said the things I'd told them I wanted to change in my life. I had to repeat them."

"Sounds crazy," I told her.

"It wasn't bad. I didn't know what was going on at first, but I understand now. It's to make the messages sink in. That's what those cards are for. I'm supposed to keep looking at them. You know what they had me do?" She walked in the bathroom where I was picking ashes out of the drain and pulled off her gloves. "At the end, in front of everyone at Blind Light, I had to get up and say, 'I am a worthwhile, valuable person. I am whole now.' They all clapped for me."

"Do you feel any different?" I said.

"Kind of strange -- like it's beginning to happen," she said. "I'm going back next weekend."

It wasn't any of my business to look at those cards. But when Wayne asked her to go down to the game room and clean up some pop on the floor, I couldn't help it. Each one had something different written on it in green ink: "I am good", "Lex loves me", "I am desirable", "I am a valuable person".

I felt embarrassed for her. When I was a kid, my mother would make me wear a paper heart under my dress the first day at a new school when I'd be sick to my stomach. "I am brave, I am not afraid" she'd pin to my slip and make me repeat it. It never made me feel any different. Can't invent it if it ain't there.

That week Laney would take out the cards every chance she got and say the messages to herself. I didn't mention anything about it.

After she had been going to Blind Light for awhile, she asked me to come with her one weekend. I told her I didn't know.

"I thought you'd try anything once," she said.

"I'm not sick," I told her. "I don't need it."

"Everyone does," she said. "You don't have to be crazy. We all have things we'd like to have different in our lives. I've started my list. Blind Light can make it happen."

"I've got plenty of other things to do on my days off," I told her.

"I think you're afraid," she said.

"That's stupid," I said. "I can take care of myself."

"Okay, forget it," she said. "Sorry I brought it up." Then later, "Better watch it, Crystal. You're getting pretty uptight in your old age. Before you know it, you'll be ready for the Marines again."

When I went up to Santa Cruz with Laney that weekend, I knew it

wasn't going to be like anything I'd ever seen before. I knew that as soon as we walked in the door. People in light blue jumpsuits and white tennis shoes were rocking people on the floor and talking in low voices while lullabies played in the background on a bad phonograph.

A man with gray hair and wearing one of those jumpsuits came up to us right away. He smelled like too much "Old Spice". "We're forming groups," he said to Laney. "You two go to the green room."

"Don't worry," she told me. "It's all part of the technique. These feeling sessions free us up so we'll be more open to the invisibles later."

"What?" I said.

"The higher power guiding the group," she said. "The brochure explains it. The counselors get their directions from them. We've got some famous ones -- Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, Louis Pasteur."

"They talk?" I said.

"I don't know how it works," she said. "All I know is Bob, the leader of the group, is in touch with them. Sometimes he sees Lincoln in his top hat standing in the room when we're having a session."

"You believe that?" I said.

"There's something here," she said. "Can't you feel it?"

All I felt was I didn't want to see the green room with or without Lincoln in his top hat.

Nothing could have made me ready for the session. Twelve people were crying, screaming, and some were beating on a saw horse with pieces of rubber hose. A woman in a yellow scarf was yelling, "You can

goddamn well wash the dishes once in awhile. I do everything around here," as she hit a dummy dressed as a man. Another woman in black stretch pants was in the corner crying, "Why don't they go away and leave me alone?"

The group leader looked up as we walked in. "Welcome," she yelled over the sound of rubber hose hitting wood. "We're getting out our feelings from the previous week." I thought about making a dash, but Laney was behind me.

We sat down cross-legged on the floor. The noise would come all at the same time. When it started to get quiet, someone would yell out something like "Why don't they like me?" or "I can't stand it anymore. You make me sick". The beating and screaming would start up. I looked at Laney. She had her eyes closed and was breathing like she was about to cry. I pulled at the green shag carpet.

After a few minutes, the leader clapped her hands and said, "Time to stop and form the group. We'll share the insight we've found." Everyone sat down in a circle and said their name. I felt like I shouldn't be there. One man talked about not being able to get it up anymore. A woman talked about wanting to kill her ex. After each person talked, they would say, "I am an important, valuable person and I belong in this world." Then the whole group said it.

"Would you like to share with us?" the leader asked me when it was my turn. Her eyebrows were penciled in with a hard black line and one was crooked.

"Maybe later," I said.

"You can say pass if you don't want to," she said. "And still feel good about it too."

I passed. But I wasn't feeling good.

The next person was a man who cried without talking for five minutes. "Where are you?" the leader asked. "Bill, you are an important, valuable person and you belong in this world. Tell us."

He cried harder. "I'm scared," he said. "I'm alone. There's no one there. I want someone to hold me." He leaned over and grabbed onto my neck, then started sobbing in my lap.

"Hold him, Crystal," the leader said. "He needs for you to just be there. We give from our overflow of good feelings for each other. Can you tap into that?"

I set my hand on the back of his plaid flannel shirt. I wanted to run. Bill cried through two more people, someone who hated their mother and someone who wanted to screw their brother-in-law.

It was Laney's turn then. "Crystal," the leader said, "I'm sorry, but sometimes it's harder with friends in the group. It might be better if you stepped out while Laney talks. You don't mind?"

I couldn't jump up too soon. Bill's head almost hit the floor.

"Bill," the leader said, "Crystal needs to leave the room. Come over here and I'll hold you."

I was gone. On my way out, the secretary asked me if I wanted to buy their cassette on positive thinking. I spent the rest of the afternoon drinking tequila sunrises in Mona's Lounge, the nearest bar I could find.

"Why'd you run out?" Laney asked after I came back to pick her up.

"It's too much for me," I told her.

"You didn't give it much of a shot," she said. "You should've waited for the other part. That's when the changes really start to happen."

"What the hell was all that crazy stuff?" I asked her, shifting down as I pulled up to a stop sign.

"It's like a wound, Crystal." Her eyes teared. "That's how they describe it. The feeling sessions clean out the wounds. Then you have to put something else in. Positive messages. It has to do with something in the brain."

"Are you really getting anything out of it?" I asked her.

"I wouldn't keep going if I wasn't," she said, looking away.

We passed fields of artichokes and people bent over carrying long sacks. Neither of us said anything for awhile.

"Well, I brought it up to the group," she said, looking out the window. "I have a right to be happy, Crystal. I need more from him." She turned in her seat and looked at me. "I'm sick of it the way it is."

"Then get out of it," I said.

"I want to make it work," she said. "I've got to be more assertive. Ask for what I want. I've got a right to do that, you know."

"What's the group have to do with it?" I said. "I think you're making things worse." I grabbed the steering wheel tighter.

"They warned me about this," she said. "It happens a lot to the Blind Light members. People on the outside don't understand."

"I don't see why you have to go up there and make a fool of yourself in front of other people," I said. "You can't let things get you down like that. Jesus Christ. I've always been able to help my friends. Why do you have to go there?"

"There's got to be something more." She started to cry and pulled out some Kleenex from the glove compartment. "It feels better after a session. I can picture how it'll be when it all works out. Maybe he'll be different."

"Don't let him get to you," I said. "The hell with him."

"There are other things," she said. "I want to change them. I want to make it right."

"Just relax," I said. "You get too upset."

She slammed the glove compartment. "At least I don't run from my problems."

"I don't tell the whole world about mine," I said.

"It just might help," she said. "You're afraid to let go."

I looked over at her. She had her head back on the seat and her eyes closed. "I'd watch it if I were you, Laney. People can get brain-washed in those kind of cults."

She rolled down the window. "You just don't know what's going on." She spit her gum out and tapped her nails against the outside of the door. "No idea at all."

I leaned my head out the window. The air was muggy and gnats flew up in my face. I turned to Laney. "You sure act like you're getting sucked in." We didn't talk the rest of the way home.

The next morning I picked her up for work. She was in the back, coming out of the pigeon cage with one of the birds in her hand when I walked up. I remember the way she looked at Lex and then that quick snap of the pigeon neck in her hands.

"Eagle food," she said to him, holding out the bird. I noticed the two others with their necks popped, lying outside the cage.

"I'll do it," he said. "I feed her only the heads."

"I was just trying to help," she said. Pigeon feathers stuck to the front of her uniform.

"I'll take care of it," he said and started to pick the feathers off her. She put her arms around him. "You'll be late for work if you don't get moving," he said. She stood there. "Come on," he said. "Crystal's waiting." Laney went inside to get her lunch.

Lex pulled out a folding Buck knife and took the pigeons over to a rock. "I always cut right above that rainbow-colored line on their neck," he said to me. "The head has the most nutrients." I watched his back as he bent over. "She said you went along to that group with her."

"First and last time," I said.

"She keeps trying to get me to go." He tossed a pigeon on the ground. "What do they do up there?"

"I didn't hang around long enough to find out," I lied.

"She talk about me?" he said, turning around. I always thought Lex looked like Clint Eastwood, except his mouth was bigger and his hair

was black. He had that half pissed-off look on his face most of the time. I kind of liked it.

"I wouldn't worry about it," I said. "They're crazy. I don't know why she bothers going back."

He wiped the knife on his jeans. "I've been tied up with the eagle. Laney hates it," he said. "But there's nothing wrong with keeping a bird. Emperors used to train them to hunt for sport." He threw the pigeons in the trash and walked over to the eagle cage. The bird had a blue bandana over its head. Laney told me that helped keep it calm. Lex moved slow toward the eagle, but it started to flap and make a screeching sound so he stepped back. The bird was a brownish color and the feathers stuck out. It looked too small for an eagle.

"Needs more time," he said. "Look at her." He waved the pigeon head toward the cage. "You should see her with her wings spread out -- all even like a deck of cards."

Laney came out then. On our way to the car, she stopped by the trash and lifted the lid. I looked in at the pigeons on top of a pile of fresh grass. The blood was bright against their smoke-colored feathers. Every morning Laney would do that -- open the can as we were leaving.

"The eagle doesn't look too good," she said as we pulled out of the driveway. "It's got boils on its feet. Did you see the bumps?"

"I wasn't close enough," I said.

"It's wild as when he got it," she said. "But you can't tell him that. He doesn't even want me near it."

"He said it takes awhile," I said.

"He's said that for a long time." She looked in the rear view mirror and started to brush her hair. "It's illegal, you know, keeping that bird. I told Lex. If someone saw it and reported us, we'd wind up in jail."

For the next few days, all she talked about was the eagle. At least she wasn't on me to join Blind Light. "The eagle's boring," I told her. "Talk about something else."

Not much was shaking at work that week. Nobody left anything good behind. The only thing I found was a copy of Catcher in the Rye ripped out page by page and thrown in the trash.

The motel business will be like that sometimes -- kind of dry -- people leaving the room practically the way they found it. Get this: one time somebody even stuck the paper strip back over the toilet seat before they took off.

I like it when people leave a story behind. Once I found a man in a business suit tied up to the shower stall in number thirteen. I had to run up to the office for a knife to cut him out. He wouldn't tell me what happened. It was okay though. I went around for days thinking about it.

It wasn't until the next week after one of her Blind Light sessions that Laney mentioned the eagle again. "A bird as big as that needs to be out in the hills where it came from," she said. "It's dying cooped up in that cage."

We had on "Search for Tomorrow" and she went over to turn off the sound. "He wouldn't let it die," I said, trying to watch the T.V.

"I think he's waiting for someone to do something," she said.

"I talked about it to the group and they agreed with me."

"You told them?" I said.

"Why not? We decided I might need to take some action. Maybe set it loose."

"He'd kill you," I said.

"Something's got to be done," she said.

"Do you have to tell that group everything?" I said. I flipped off the T.V.

"Don't start that," she said, looking in the mirror and re-pinning her name tag.

"Did you try to talk to Lex?" I said. "You should, instead of those people."

"You know Lex," she said. "He won't discuss it. Pretty soon it's going to be too late."

It didn't take her long to do something. When I went to pick her up for work that Friday, I could hear the eagle making that screaming noise. Laney had just got it into the cage. The bird was pecking the bars and trying to beat its wings. Laney threw down the catcher's mask she'd put on so the bird couldn't get her eyes.

"Lex went into town this morning," she said, looking up at me, mad

like I'd done something. "I'm going to do it."

"You're nuts," I said.

"Go on to work if you want to," she said. "I'm driving the bird up to the pass. It's ready to go. I don't need your help."

"Jesus Christ, did that group tell you to do this?" I said.

"I'm not going to stand around any longer and watch that bird die," she yelled.

"He's going to hate you for this," I said. "You know that? It's not going to make things better." I wondered if maybe she wanted him to kick her out. "It's his bird. If it dies, it dies."

"I already decided," she said.

"Your car won't even make it," I said. "Come on, I'll help you put the eagle back."

"Lex is wasting his time with the bird and he's killing it," she said. "I can't ignore it anymore." She started to lift the cage. "Go without me."

I could just see her stuck alongside the road somewhere with that eagle in the back seat. "Take my car, at least," I told her.

"I can't drive a stick," she said, setting the cage on the car trunk and turning to look at me. The eagle was crouched down on the perch like the top of the cage was too low. The wings spread out as far as they could. It started jerking its head up and down.

"That goddamn bird," I said. I noticed where Laney had caught her uniform on the cage and pulled a thread. Her white tennis shoes were dusty and untied, and she had a big run up her nylon. "You're

going to owe me one, Laney," I said. "Call in to work." I went to get my car.

When we got to Kitchen Creek, the bird wouldn't come out of the cage. Laney had to take the cage bottom off, and we stood back. Finally the eagle hopped over to a rock.

It was windy and cold so I got the sleeping bag out of my trunk. We wrapped up in it and stayed in the car listening to the radio the whole afternoon, waiting for the bird to take off. The eagle sat on the rock, looking around. Laney got out a few times and tried to scare it away. It'd go about ten feet then start making those screams.

"Maybe it wasn't right to begin with," I said.

"Lex ruined it," she said. "He took it when it was too young. Look at it."

"Something's sure wrong," I said. She dug a lifesaver out of her purse and threw it towards the eagle and hooted. The bird lifted its wings and turned around on the rock.

"I still don't know what we're doing here," I said. "Did those people in your group talk you into this?"

"I wish you'd try it again so you'd really see what it's about. I mean it, Crystal," she said. "You've got blocks. The technique could help release you."

"You don't seem any different," I said. She took some nail polish out of her purse and dabbed it on the run in her stocking.

"It's working for me," she said. "It's all on the inside, where it counts." She looked up. "Blind Light could help you feel good about

yourself too."

"Goddamnit," I said, turning around to her. "I feel great. I'm working at the Breez, paying off my color T.V. set, and I don't have to worry about ironing some man's uniform straight anymore or whether I'm going to get shipped off to Guam next month. Jesus Christ, Laney. You're beginning to talk like those Blind Light people."

By the end of the day, we had a few piles of cigarette butts outside the car and I was starting to get mad each time she'd open the door to go chase the bird. It was getting colder. About five she said we should leave -- and take the eagle.

We never did find out what was wrong with it. Laney ended up telling Lex she changed her mind out there about letting the eagle go. She didn't tell him it wouldn't fly. I guess he didn't take it too well. He told her she would have killed the bird setting it loose after it'd been fed for so long. "If you ever try a stunt like that again," he yelled at her, "don't bother coming home."

Laney started to go to the week night sessions at Blind Light after that. "Better than being around him," she said. She'd tell me how he was acting like she was invisible, and she couldn't stand being in the house with him. For awhile, she was driving around nights, beating the hell out of the car seat with her free hand.

"Why not come over to my place when you want to get away?" I told her. "You don't have to drive up to those sessions all the time."

"I'm starting to get into the deeper work," she told me. "My counselor said I was ready."

I noticed she was carrying around a bigger stack of the three by fives. She had a rubber band around them now. There was also an orange spiral notebook on her cart. I looked in it one time. She had the messages like "I am good", "I am a valuable person" written over and over.

I thought she was waiting for something to change. Things to be different with Lex. But it was the usual. He'd tell her, "You want us to sit around holding each other all day and night? It's not hearts and flowers all the time."

I knew she just wanted to get him. Like one of the times I was over there. I remember Laney put on these swim trunks of Lex's. She came out in those turquoise and red plaid trunks with the bunched-up elastic at the top, his white button-down shirt, and a pair of her high heels and was saying how Lex knew how to dress, how he could really do it up right. Lex and I looked at each other. I knew what was going on. He sat there steaming. I watched Laney's spiked heels make O's in the carpet as she danced with her eyes closed.

It all fell apart after the bird died. When I pulled up in back of Laney's house that morning, she was by the garbage cans. Lex had thrown the eagle out. She held the bird on its back in the crook of her arm and cried. The head hung limp over her arm. She pulled a Kleenex from

the pocket of her bathrobe. "He says it's my fault. It did something taking the bird to the pass." She touched the bumps on the feet and pushed the beak open a little with her finger. "I killed it. He said that." She looked up at me and wiped her eyes, then turned to go in the house.

Lex was sitting in the den with the T.V. on, drinking a beer. He hadn't shaven. "Look how beautiful it is," Laney said, sitting down next to him on the couch. She held up the bird and lifted one of the wings as far as it'd spread. "You can't throw it away." Lex didn't take his eyes off the T.V. Some Christian family was singing. Laney set the eagle on its back in her lap and smoothed the feathers on the chest. "If you want, we could have it stuffed," she said. "Like Roy Rogers had Trigger." I gave her a look so she'd be quiet.

"Are you through with the performance?" Lex said. "How'd you like it Crystal?" He stood up and walked out. I headed for the door.

That night Laney called me to come over. She didn't talk about the morning. I noticed Lex was in the den with the door shut, and he didn't come out when I got there. I could see from the window the eagle cage had been torn down.

Laney and I sat around and played cribbage. We didn't talk much, but every time a car went by, she'd look up like she expected someone.

I didn't figure it out until the three Blind Light people came to the door.

"Don't go, Crystal," Laney said. "I want you to meet them."

I recognized the middle-aged woman who was the group leader and the man with the gray hair. Another man with a black beard and moustache and wearing a red windbreaker closed the door. They walked straight in and came over to shake hands. I noticed Rick, the man with the gray hair, was wearing a blue Blind Light button -- the eye with rays -- on his v-neck sweater. Karen had a "Put the Light in Your Life" button pinned on the strap of her white vinyl purse. Laney was about to tell them to sit down when Lex came in with a magazine in his hand.

"How's it going, Lex?" Dan asked, grabbing his hand and shaking it hard. Rick and Karen rushed over to him.

"These people are from Blind Light," Laney said, putting her arm around Lex. "They're going to help us."

I walked over to Laney. "I better go," I said.

"Wait," she said. "I'd like you all to get to know each other."

"Lex and I could take this room," Dan said, rubbing his hands.

"What the hell, Laney?" Lex said. He looked at her and over at me. I could see he was starting a slow boil. "You know what's going on, Crystal?" he asked. I shrugged.

"You can talk about how mad you are at me to these people," Laney said to him. "They're counselors. They know about these things."

"That what they came for?" He turned to her. Laney moved back and crossed her arms. Lex's face tightened, and his eyes went into

those little slits like Clint Eastwood's when he's burned up.

"You seem angry," Dan said. "We can talk about it."

"Who asked you?" Lex said, turning around.

Laney stepped over to the couch and leaned over me. "Let's go in the other room with Rick and Karen. Dan's going to talk to Lex."

Karen sat beside me on the couch. "The invisibles picked Dan as Lex's counselor," she said in a low voice.

"Don't let me down," Laney said to me.

"Wait a minute," I said. "I don't think Lex is too excited about this."

"He could use a session. It'll help him," Laney said. I looked up. Lex was watching.

"Get these people out of here, Laney," he said.

"We'll leave the room and you can talk with Dan," Laney said.

"I don't want to talk to Dan. I want Dan and them gone." He pointed at the door.

"If you cared about me, you'd do it," Laney said, starting to cry. "I'm trying to make things better."

"And you drag these people in here?" he said, throwing the magazine on the floor.

"Lex," Dan said, looking him in the eyes and putting his hand on Lex's shoulder, "let's talk about it."

"What the hell's it to you, Buddy?" Lex jerked his shoulder away and stood there leaning forward with his thumbs on his belt.

"I'm not happy," Laney said. "I can't stand the way things are."

Damnit, Lex. They can help us, I know it." She held her arms straight at her sides with wads of Kleenex tight in her hands. Karen patted her on the back.

Lex looked at me. "Did you know about this, Crystal?"

"Are you kidding?" I said.

"This is crazy," Lex said. "I want these people out of my house."

"You've got to deal with your feelings head on, Lex," Rick said, hitting his fist into his hand.

"Laney," Lex said, glaring at her, "I mean it."

"No pain, no gain, Lex," Dan said, stepping up to him. "That's the truth."

"So you people know what it's about?" Lex said.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Laney," I said, grabbing my purse.

"Hang on." She walked over and put her arm around me. "Now's your chance, Crystal. We can have a session. Right here."

"Christ almighty, Laney," I said. "Give it up." Lex looked over at me.

"It won't be like what you saw before," she said.

"The invisibles are close," Karen said. "You're missing a perfect opportunity."

"What is it you want in your life, Crystal?" Dan said. He pulled a Blind Light brochure out of his pocket. "Same for you, Lex. Are you everything you want to be?"

Lex walked right up to him and took the brochure out of his hand. He wadded it up and threw it down.

"You're not acting from your real self right now," Dan said. "The real self is calm."

That's when Lex blew. He grabbed the front of Dan's shirt and jerked him toward the door. No one moved. Then Laney ran up to them and tried to pull them apart. Lex yanked Dan away and Laney fell against the arm of the couch.

"Hey, take it easy," Rick yelled and moved towards them.

"Dan's in a hurry right now," Lex said. He opened the door and shoved Dan out with both hands. Dan went stumbling down the steps. Everyone rushed outside except Lex and I.

"You bastard," Laney screamed at him. Lex slammed the door.

"Can you believe that crap?" he said to me. "My own goddamn house." He sat down on the couch.

"I bet they put her up to it," I said, looking out the window. Karen was rubbing the back of Laney's neck. Laney had on Dan's red windbreaker. I turned around to Lex. He was pulling on his cowboy boots with the curly designs on the sides. "Are they gone yet?" he said, and came over by the window. He smelled like oranges and clean sweat.

"I'm sure as hell not staying here," Laney said loud. Dan and Rick kept turning to look at the front door.

"What'd she expect anyway?" Lex said, and went back to the couch.

"They're heading for the car," I said. Laney and Karen got in the back seat. I could see Laney looking toward the house. The car pulled out.

Lex took a pair of nail clippers out of his pocket and poked at

callouses on his hand. The sleeves of his workshirt were rolled up and I noticed how dark his arms were. I sat down in the chair across from him. The stack of Laney's three by five cards was on the end table by the phone. "I am a complete person" was on top.

"I could sure use a drink," Lex said, looking up at me. "How about stepping out for one?"

I could see Laney's pink uniform drying on a hanger in the bathroom. "She's going to need her stuff for tomorrow," I said.

Lex stuck his nail clippers in his back pocket. He smoothed his hair.

"I think I'll be going," I said.

"Are you sure?" he said.

I owed it to Laney.

Laney never mentioned that night. And I didn't bring it up. Things were different. We didn't talk much about anything. I knew she'd be taking off soon. I could feel it. "Nothing more lonely than having someone and still feeling alone," she said to me.

"Seems like it never works out when you care about something," I told her.

"It sounds like you could use a little of the light," she said.

She quit at the Breez after awhile. A couple of months went by

before I heard from her. I got a postcard at work. She said she had a job on an organic mushroom farm outside Santa Cruz. It was helping pay for more sessions at Blind Light. She was still "working on it". "I'd get worse if I left now," she said. "Anyway, I'm becoming a counselor."

I didn't know what happened to Lex. I almost called him once, but I wasn't sure if we'd have much to say. It wouldn't be the same without Laney there.

Lately I've been thinking about quitting the Breez and maybe working the Sahara again or going someplace like Acapulco. It doesn't matter where. Even here at the Breez, I slip through okay, dancing out the vibes from those orange and turquoise rooms. I just turn that radio up loud and I keep moving.