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## The Bone Yard

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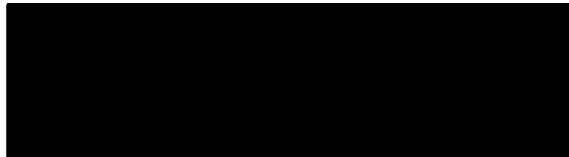
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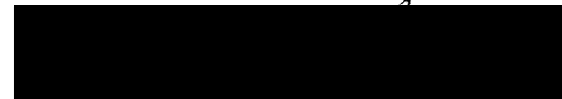
## THESIS APPROVAL

The abstract and thesis of Katherine Bartolomucci for the Master of Arts in Writing were presented October 16, 2000, and accepted by the thesis committee and the department.

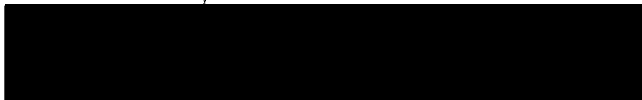
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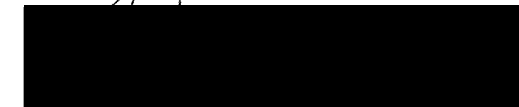
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## ABSTRACT

An abstract of the thesis of Katherine Bartolomucci for the Master of Arts in Writing presented October 16, 2000.

Title: The Bone Yard

This novel explores the everyday lives of two blue-collar workers – Levi and Cressida – over the course of one summer in a rural fruit processing plant. The main protagonists exhibit contrasting forms of faith and courage, which drives their divergent fates.

Levi is a soul-searching twenty-five-year-old high school dropout who feels extraordinary obligation to family and is engaged to his pregnant girlfriend. Although Levi's father wants him to stay home and take over the family's strawberry farm, he intends to amass the courage to return to school and get a degree in agronomy.

In contrast, Cressida is a twenty-year-old senior in astronomy who is driven by a personal code of honor but misguided by a flawed definition of courage. Confused by her father's philandering and her mother's alcoholism, Cressida loses touch with her dream of becoming an astronaut and finds a dubious stability in her relationship with an unhappily married supervisor, Richard.

Over the course of the summer, while Cressida struggles to believe in Richard's mercurial promise of marriage, she pursues various excesses as convenient forms of escape, which send her into a decidedly downward spiral.

Contrastingly, Levi steadily pulls himself upward. After his girlfriend's miscarriage and sudden departure, he resolves to take advantage of his second chance. Guided by intense resolve and a viable definition of courage, Levi focuses on leaving the plant behind, while consistently discouraging Cressida's ostensible friendship with Richard, who he believes to be craven and lacking conviction.

In the end, the self-centered Richard coldly informs Cressida that things are over between them. Trying to cope with the unanticipated betrayal, Cressida flees with coworkers to a favorite party spot on a trestle where she inadvertently slips to her death.

Cressida's untimely end is rooted in the convergence between the momentum of bad decision-making and the capricious nature of external forces. Levi, having successfully faced the various demons that had held him down, leaves the farm for the valley university in order to pursue his dream of becoming an agronomist.



THE BONE YARD

by

KATHERINE BARTOLOMUCCI

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

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2000

With infinite indebtedness to my husband Dan,  
without whose support there would be no writing.

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SHIFTING GEARS

“There’s nothing I hate worse than waiting,” said Cressida.

A tall and lithe beauty hidden beneath loose-fitting berry-stained clothes and knee-high rubber boots, she paced nervously in front of the scale shack. Under her hardhat worn backwards, a braided wad of blonde hair sagged against the confines of a black hairnet. Her red and swollen eyes watered, as if she had been crying.

“These goddam contacts,” she said.

“I can think of a lot worse things,” said Annie, her best friend. “Worse than waiting, I mean.”

A blunt cut of light brown hair hung to Annie’s shoulder like a mat of straw. Gentle wisps poked through her hairnet and waved in the warm evening breeze. Her glasses reflected the colors of the sunset.

The two women were life-long friends, but the men at the plant hardly noticed

either of them, at least not for looks. They were both going to be seniors at college in the fall, and both liked to party, which made them popular with the men and women alike, regardless of looks.

“Waiting sucks,” said Cressida, rejecting Annie’s assessment of things. “It’s a total loss of control. Here we are, just sitting around waiting for the bastard. I’d rather go out and get the fucking fruit myself than wait for some stupid tractor-jockey to bring it to me. At least I’m doing *something*.”

Annie – completely ignoring any reference to her brother being a stupid bastard or a tractor jockey – recognized that lately, for unknown reasons, the once carefree Cressida had become unusually irritable.

“Be patient!” said Annie. “It’s a virtue. Levi’ll be here any minute. And besides, what’s the big deal? Unlike those poor women standing on the sort-line for twelve hours a day, you’re getting paid to sit on that cushy forklift and wait. Can’t you recognize a good deal when you see one?”

“I can think of better deals.”

Annie laughed and said, “I just realized the reason you’re so skinny is because you don’t know how to relax. Can’t you just enjoy doing nothing? Knowing when to relax is an important part of being a Weatherby. You act like a jumpy race horse, or one of those caged cougars at the zoo. Weatherbys aren’t so high strung.”

“I’m *not* a Weatherby,” said Cressida.

“I know,” smiled Annie, “but Levi and I like to think of you as one.” She

thought for a moment, then asked, “is something bothering you?”

“No,” said Cressida.

“Something is definitely bothering you,” Annie mumbled.

“Huh?” Cressida snapped.

“Oh nothing,” said Annie.

\* \* \*

Oblivious to Cressida’s insistence on rushing, and still a couple miles away from the processing plant, Annie’s brother Levi Weatherby made love with his gear box. Taking the time to do things right, he recalled his mother’s favorite axiom. *Haste makes waste*. He shifted with unnatural ease, listening to the engine hum and the turbos whine, while pushing and pulling the stick in and out of gear at precisely the right time.

No crunching and grinding like Walter, the day shift driver for the Carnival Canning Corporation – a man who used the clutch relentlessly, and whom Levi hated for things a lot worse than his lack of shifting ability. Levi was thankful to be on nights, effectively limiting their exposure to each other, otherwise he believed he might have to kill Walter, or at the very least, run him out of town.

Between gear shifts, Levi ran his hand through his hair and remembered he didn’t have any. That morning, he had shaved his head. He got the idea from a PBS

show on Buddhist monks. The son of a land owner, he was fascinated with the idea of giving up attachment to the physical world, but mostly he wanted to horrify his fiancé Martha.

As chunks of strawberry blonde hair had fallen past his ribbed stomach to the bathroom floor, that morning, his defining characteristics had stubbornly remained. Deep-set hazel eyes with dark flecks. With a sturdy angular face that expressed both inquisitiveness and vulnerability, he was not as practical as Annie, more driven by impulse and an unquenchable enthusiasm, but always tempered by family obligation. He was expected to take over the Weatherby strawberry farm.

What Buddhist would own so much land, Levi asked himself? Yes, leaving the farm was a good idea. Cast off those encumbering physical possessions in order to be free. At least that's what they had said on the PBS show. Levi could already see that his brief encounter with Buddhism would offer him some useful themes to help him get through the summer. Often, he grabbed on to such bits of philosophy and shared them with Annie and Cressida, in order to show them that *he too* was learning. He was not going to school like they were.

Throttling up the gentle grade, Levi down-shifted smoothly, and continued to head toward the fruit processing plant where Annie and Cressida were waiting – a place they all simply referred to as the Carnival. He didn't look at the tachometer for hints on timing. Back at the Carnival, they called him God of the Gearbox. The title amused him, but he was not happy about driving his father's truck back and forth from



the field to the processing plant.

At twenty-five, he felt the pressing weight of age. One quarter of my life gone, he kept reminding himself. Even though the next shift was unclear, he knew it would have to be a big shift, a shift that could take him away from gearboxes and clutches.

Behind his semi-tractor, he hauled a full-length flatbed trailer loaded with twenty pallets of strawberries. Eighty flats per pallet. That made sixteen hundred flats per load, he thought. The berries had been handpicked from the field over the last two days and were still warm from the sun. Levi watched the last of the sun bowing down in burning red and purple smears – just like the colors on Dad's over-ripe strawberries. He grinned in the late June air was hot, and thought about how happy the steaming load of fruit were making his dad. The market for strawberries had never been better. Good thing for Dad, Levi mused, but not for a Buddhist.

For the last fifteen years, the Carnival Canning Corporation had been writing big checks to Levi's father, Old Weatherby, the biggest strawberry grower in the Multnomah Valley. He owned the largest chunk of arable land in the little community of Carnival, and smartly, he had devoted every available acre to strawberry production.

The community itself, located twenty miles southwest of Rosemont, was nothing more than a four-way stop with a Plaid Pantry on one corner, a few farm houses sprinkled nearby, the fruit processing plant two miles south of the four way stop, and the cold storage warehouse called the Multi-Freeze which sat a couple miles

east of the intersection. The Weatherby land was sprawled out over a five mile section going north from the intersection.

Levi knew the processing plant and the cold storage facility better than he wanted to. As the oldest son of a third generation farmer, he was expected to participate in the various chores which had made the his father's generation a lucrative one. Levi was responsible for hauling the raw fruit to the Carnival and the "finished product" to the Multi-Freeze. During his many trips up and down the same five miles of country road between the Weatherby farm, the Carnival, and the Multi-Freeze, he promised himself he would not become a fourth generation farmer, lucrative or otherwise.

The promise was wearing him out. He practiced.

*Dad I'm going to college at the end of the summer.*

*Why?*

*Agronomy!*

*What's that?*

*Soils, Dad!*

*You mean dirt.*

*They don't call it that...*

*You already know everything you need to know about this farm.*

*I want to know about other farms.*

*Why?*

*Because I'm not spending the rest of my life on this one.*

*Why?*

*Because...*

*Things always degenerated from there.*

*Why do I always have to explain myself?*

*You're a terrible explainer, son.*

*Dad, I've explained to you a thousand times already.*

*My point.*

*You only care about berries.*

*What else is there?*

*Dad, you're such a bad farmer.*

*I should put you over my knee.*

*And then some expletives.*

Every day was a fight against the obligation of an oldest Weatherby son.

Fitting his position in the family, he was the most responsible of his four brothers – all younger than Annie. Unbridled determination made him good at whatever he did. By five, he had proved himself a marvel with equipment – hopping on a small tractor and bouncing across several strawberry fields without hurting anyone or crashing into anything. This had made Old Weatherby grin with pride and lift his boy to the sky. Levi became the one person his father considered appropriate for hauling the family's produce to the scale shack at the Carnival. Levi considered his mechanical gift a

bane. It was inextricably coupled with the widely accepted belief that he would take over the farm.

Levi lit a cheep cigar – the kind with the white mouthpiece – and drew heavily. Continuing to shift fluidly, he slowed and turned onto the potholed asphalt driveway leading to the processing plant, which was a large L-shaped two-story building surrounded by yet more strawberry fields – fields owned by one of the Weatherbys' small-time competitors. Levi knew his father wasn't worried. The Weatherbys simply owned too much land around Carnival for anyone else to challenge them.

Levi brooded, wishing he could be a small-time farmer so he could be driven out of business and leave Carnival forever. He hated where he was – dreading a wedding date in August, living with a beautiful but unreliable girlfriend in one of the small houses on his father's farm, and still without the formal education he so desperately wanted. Levi was ashamed that he had not gotten his high school diploma. His predicament was killing him inside, but he was too good-natured to let it show.

Cheered to see Cressida waving him toward the scale shack, he quickly crushed his cigar out on the face of the mirror and threw it into the strawberry patch. He was sure she hadn't seen him make the toss.

Cressida hopped off her forklift. She was anxious for conversation and walked over to Levi's truck to help him untie all the ropes that held down the load of berries. She was ready for anything that would help her to get her mind off all the things that

were bothering her – her parent’s divorce proceedings, her loneliness, and a relatively new consideration. She wanted to talk to Levi about the first two problems. The new consideration would have to wait for a better time.

While Cressida helped Levi, Annie walked into the scale shack, a portable building the size of a two-seat outhouse – and just as ramshackle. As a lab intern, Annie was responsible for calibrating the finicky old scale which sat on a rotting bench inside.

The scale shack was right next to the dreaded weigh-scale, designed for forklifts – a three-section diamond-plate steel ramp that tested the abilities of every Carnival fork driver. The entrance and exit ramps of the three-piece fabricated ramp were unpleasantly short and steep. Old pallets or flats with broken corners made for very unstable loads going over the scale. Cressida could always see a bad load coming. She hated hauling wobbly pallets over the scales – a time consuming and nerve-racking process. Many a grower’s berries had to be scooped from the scale and the adjacent pavement.

Douglas Pazzo, the money-grubbing owner of Carnival Canning Corporation was not about to pay for the installation of an underground scale – one large enough to weigh tractor-trailer rigs like Levi’s. According to Pazzo, the forklift scale served its purpose. Growers got their price-per-pound. Pazzo got his product and its resultant profit.

Cressida understood that it was better to lose a load *after* being weighed,

instead of before. If flats of berries fell from a rickety pallet *before* the scale, the fork driver – and whoever else was nice enough to help – had to hurriedly scoop the mess from the pavement, slop it back into the flats on the rickety pallet and somehow get over the scale.

This was embarrassing to the fork driver and costly to Pazzo. He wound up paying growers for the weight of rocks and road grease which had been added to the load during the scooping affair. If berries had to be dumped and rocks had to be scooped, it was much better to do so on the way *off* the scale. Pazzo expected the fork drivers to be good and truck drivers to be patient. *This was not a McDonald's*, he reminded anyone who complained about the inevitable backup of trucks at the scale shack.

Because it was not a McDonalds, Pazzo begrudgingly paid his union employees fairly well for their efforts – almost twice minimum wage. He willingly paid growers fairly well for their produce, and in turn got paid a small fortune for selling finished product to ice-cream and jam companies who used his fruit concentrates in their own products. It was rumored that black raspberry concentrate went for ten thousand dollars a barrel. Some plant workers assumed this was a gross exaggeration, while others considered it an unformed underestimation.

Douglas kept profits a secret and felt that good employees should only be worried about what the *they* were earning. What *he* was earning was nobody's business. Because the Carnival was a union shop – a small local of a little known

affiliate of the large and powerful Teamsters – and because employees were paid reasonably well as compared to other jobs offering similar forms of torture, Douglas demanded gratefulness, not inquisitiveness.

Cressida was indeed grateful. In the summer of 1981, where else could a twenty-year old college student make six dollars an hour? She and Annie were returning for their third summer of beloved abuse, along Levi who made even more because he drove trucks.

The threesome made a close team – both in friendship and in the business of fruit. Each was most happy when it was Levi who was hauling, Cressida who was unloading, and Annie who was running the scale shack.

At the other end of the process, Cressida often loaded barrels of finished product onto Levi's flatbed, which he in-turn hauled to the Multi-Freeze. This was additional to Levi's truck driving obligation to Old Weatherby. He worked on contract for Douglas, hauling barrels until midnight on most nights. By no accident, this allowed him additional time with Cressida and Annie and less time with old and new Weatherbys alike.

Levi stood by the scale ramp and watched while Annie calibrated the scale for the combination of Cressida and her forklift. While waiting, he tossed out a bone for debate. His mind was never idle. "Why can't women be more like transmissions?"

"Yesterday you said women were exactly like transmissions," Cressida replied, looking down at him. "You said there was the whole in-an-out thing, and doing it by

feel, and knowing what type of gearbox you're dealing with."

"Yes," Levi agreed, taking his hat off and running his dirty fingers over his sprouting stubble, "but there are only so many transmissions. If you know which one you're dealing with, the rest is cake. But, I haven't figured out what Martha is yet."

"What am I?" Cressida asked.

"You're tough, low-maintenance, easy to understand. I'd therefore have to put you in a class with the almighty Road Rangers."

"Jeepers! Did you hear that, Annie?"

"Just a minute," Annie called back, "I'm in the middle of something here."

Annie's fingers flew through the calibration process. At that moment, she was all business.

"Jeepers"? Levi interjected, "nice touch!" He recognized Cressida's ostensible avoidance of stronger language.

"I suppose Annie's a Road Ranger too," Cressida continued.

"No, she's a hydrostatic transmission," Levi explained. "There's no shifting with her. Annie doesn't care about sex."

"I heard that," Annie called out.

"What about Martha," Cressida urged.

"If pressed on the matter, I'd have to throw her in with the old Brownings. You know, the kind with *two* gearboxes. Half the time your hands aren't even on the steering wheel. Your pulling one stick out, pushing another one in, splitting gears



with your two speed rear-end, and of course you're constantly about to run off the road. Big hassle. No time to let your mind wander. You have to think about what your doing all the time. Real easy to blow a shift!"

"Have you been blowing shifts with Martha again?"

"Here's the deal. Even if I double-clutched, watched the tach', crossed my fingers and prayed to Jesus, I'd still blow it with Martha." Levi rubbed his sunburned face and neck.

"Why are you getting married then?"

"I don't know," Levi lied, putting his hat back on and pulling the bill down over his eyes.

"Yes you do."

"No, *really*, I don't. I'm trapped. What can I do? The date is set."

"I don't fucking believe that for a second," said Cressida. "You're only as trapped as you think you are. You *always* have choices. Walk out! What are you afraid of?"

"Lots!" Levi exclaimed. Then he switched gears in order to make note of her word choice. "What have we here? You couldn't go fifteen minutes without your favorite word. Guess who's bringing beer to the willows tonight. I think I'll have me a smoke."

"I'm not bringing anything anywhere until you let me smell your breath."

Cressida said, leaning down toward Levi's mouth. A couple hours before, they had

made a deal that Levi could go longer without smoking than Cressida could without swearing. Quickly and unexpectedly, she snatched his fingers from the top of his head. She jerked them toward her nose. “All bets are off, pal. You’re a lying sack of-”

..

“Roll ’em,” Annie called through the shack window, instructing Cressida to start unloading the truck.

“Alright,” said Cressida. “But going back to my question about Martha, one of you is gonna fess up before the night is over.” Cressida looked back and forth between Annie and Levi. Then she stared into Annie’s glasses. “Why is Levi getting married?”

“You’ll have to ask Levi,” was all Annie would say.

Cressida turned immediately back to Levi. “Don’t be such a chicken-shit. Just tell me.”

“You’re searching for something I can’t give you?”

“I just want the truth,” Cressida called after him, as she pulled the fork lift off the scale and began unloading Levi’s flatbed. “That’s all. And FYI, unlike you I’m not afraid of anything!”

Just as Levi knew that good shifting was the result of understanding your gearbox, he also knew that *everyone* was afraid of something. Cressida simply hadn’t discovered what it was yet. Levi, on the other hand, knew exactly what was killing him.

He could not bring himself to say, “I can’t marry you. It makes me feel trapped.” There was so much cowardice in backing out at the last minute. What would it do to Martha? He loved her, but not in a husbandly, rest-of-your-life sort of way. He knew he couldn’t be with Martha that long, anymore than he could continue driving trucks for the rest of his life.

But there was obligation, commitment, and doing the right thing. Levi was in the process of convincing himself he was not afraid of doing the right thing. He just wasn’t sure what the right thing was anymore. It used to be his father’s idea. Then for a while it was Martha’s idea. And here was Cressida trying to convince him that it was her idea. And regardless of who’s idea it turned out to be, he knew a hard road lay ahead.

Changing the subject, he asked Annie, “Where’s the little bastard tonight?”

“He’s in the lab, doing mold counts,” Annie replied. “How’s Dad’s stuff looking today?”

“Moldy!” said Levi.

“That will make the line very happy,” said Annie.

She referred to the large group of college girls and Mexican women who stood on four conveyor-belt sorting lines. Moldy berries were made into a juice product, which required a lesser level of sorting. Juice stock was made from the lowest grade of berry. The higher the grade, the harder the sorting. Juice stock was a breeze. Hard objects and non-consumables were the only things that needed to be removed. Things

like twigs, hunks of mold, insects, and the occasional rotting condom. Rocks were of special concern. One small rock could jam up the heat-exchanger – the long multi-tubular piece of equipment that heated the juice stock before additional processing.

“You know,” said Levi, “I think of Mario as a piece of gravel. He’s that annoying little rock that gets scooped into the fruit, dumped out on the sort-line, and missed by all the women who are constantly blabbering. Then, he travels into the heat exchanger, plugs a line, and brings productions to a standstill. He’s the yellow jacket that goes down the back of your pants. He’s just like his dad. He’s a cackling little baby rooster. He’s poison oak on my-”

“I don’t know what you’re so worried about,” Annie interrupted “after all, I’m the one who has to work with him. Speak of the devil!”

“Here comes our favorite little piece of gravel!” Levi smiled.

Mario, the seventeen year old son of Douglas Pazzo came strutting out of the lab, which itself was also a portable shack, but a much larger and nicer shack than the scale house. And the lab was located *inside* the plant.

Cressida finished unloading the truck and joined Levi and Annie. They stood in front of the scale shack and watched Mario walk toward them. He was trying to walk with an air of importance, like a dignitary, like the almighty son of Pazzo, but because he was so short, he looked choppy and awkward.

“Short people should never strut,” Levi whispered to Cressida and Annie. “It makes them look retarded.” The threesome tittered.

Mario wore a pink I-Zod shirt, Calvin Klein jeans, a *white* hardhat, and Sperry Topsiders, as if he was *so* superior that he would never have to worry about getting his feet wet.

The plant floor was always covered with juice and running water. Regular plant personal, including Annie and Cressida, always wore their knee-high rubber boots with steel toes, trashy jeans, berry-stained T-shirts, and *green hats* – the hats of the laborers, the hats of financially-strapped subjects in a night shift domain ruled solely by Pazzo.

As Mario walked under the huge blowers – mounted above each of the plant’s four bay-doors to prevent insects from flying into the processing area – his white hat blew off.

The threesome’s titters turned into unrestrained laughter.

Mario lost his strut and ran after his hat. Trying to regain his posture of self-importance, he yelled, “something funny?” and walked with heightened determination toward the scale shack. He was practically stomping.

“Oh no, Mario,” said Levi. “Nothing around here is ever funny. We were just talking about our favorite little pieces of gravel. Did you ever have a favorite little piece of gravel when you were a kid?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Mario snorted.

“You know, like a pet rock,” Cressida offered.

“You guys are all so full of shit,” Mario scoffed. “By the way Levi, my dad

said you need to take me with you to the Multi-Freeze tonight. He wants me to learn about cold storage. 'Cause you know, one day, I may own the Multi-Freeze too."

"You know I don't take riders," said Levi.

"My dad said."

"Let's go have a talk with your dad then."

"He's not here. He's gone home for the day. Guess you'll just have to take me and ask questions tomorrow."

"Guess *you'll* just have to wait until tomorrow," Levi corrected, "No riders. This is my truck, not your dad's."

"Come on Levi," Mario whined. "I don't want to ride with Jeezus."

"What's wrong with *Hey-soos*?" said Levi, putting emphasis on the correct pronunciation. "He's a fine driver."

"He's insane and you know it," said Mario. "And I can't understand a word he says, and he's always yelling. He scares me. Come on, why can't I go with you?"

"Why do you want to go with me?"

"Because everyone says you're OK."

"No, that's not what they say."

"OK, they say you're good."

"No, that's not quite it either."

"OK, goddammit, you're the God of Gearboxes. Come on Levi! Let me ride with you tonight?"

“Of course, my boy,” Levi winked at the two women, knowing full well that Mario was bluffing, “I’d be happy to have you ride shotgun, but you have to ask Annie first. I can’t take you, if it’s going to inconvenience my sister.”

“Knock yourselves out,” said Annie. She grabbed her scale papers and walked toward the lab.

“OK Mario,” said Levi, “I have some paperwork to do for your dad. Meet me at my truck in one hour.”

“Thanks,” Mario smiled. “Nobody says, ‘no,’ to my dad.” Reclaiming the walk of a nascent dignitary, he followed Annie back to the lab.

“Hold onto your hat,” Levi called after him, as Mario walked under the blowers. A wicked smile stretched across Levi’s sunburned face.

## II

### COLD STORAGE

Inside the Multi-Freeze, it was quiet as a morgue. Among the silent columns of frozen barrels, the warm evening's buzzing crickets could no longer be heard.

"This isn't bad at all," said Mario, in the first chamber of the cold storage facility, standing just inside the dirty plastic flaps hanging from the main entrance. The cool room was a garage-sized, forty-degree entrance way.

"Just wait," said Levi,

In the cool room, Thurston drove his forklift toward a huge sliding metal door opposite the flaps. The door was several inches thick. When his fork lift tripped a proximity laser, the two-story door slid to the left with an icy whoosh. Thurston drove into the transit room. The sliding door closed quickly behind him, and he was gone. The transit room was the second-coldest place in the warehouse – a place where barrels-in-transit waited to be delivered further into the cold or outside to the loading



docks.

Levi instructed Mario to go through a regular-sized door, not too far from the giant sliding door. The regular door was coated with insulation and weather stripping.

Together, they entered the transit room. Twenty pallets of steaming barrels – just unloaded from Levi’s truck – sat waiting. Shortly, Thurston would be moving them to their final resting place in the main warehouse. Before the next sunrise, the warm barrels of strawberry concentrate would be frozen solid.

“Totally manageable,” Mario quipped, feeling prickly wafts of air-conditioning stab through his flimsy I-Zod. His cheeks were rosier than his pink shirt.

“We’re not quite there yet,” Levi smiled.

Thurston had already gone through a second sliding door – one just like the first, but covered with a noticeable layer of sparkling white frost. Thurston was in the coldest part of the Multi-Freeze where the lighting was dim and the oppressive silence was unnerving.

Levi opened a second small door and led Mario into the heart of the vast warehouse. The minute they stepped into the main freezer, they were assaulted. Feeling as if absolutely naked, their bodies were pounded by the intense weight of the quiet cold. The building’s ubiquitous insulation muffled everything. Thurston’s forklift pattered and sputtered along in a muted fashion.

Levi and Mario’s nose hairs shriveled and became brittle. Breathing was uncomfortable, forcing each of them to draw shards of cold dry air into their tightening chests. The air-conditioning sucked the moisture off their eyeballs. They

blinked constantly, trying to subdue the frightening feeling that their eyeballs were about to freeze in their sockets. Nostrils and eyeballs were no match for thirty-below zero.

The main warehouse was a compartmentalized affair with thousands of barrels in organized sections. Four gleaming barrels to a pallet and four frosty pallets high. An imposing site. Frozen solid walls of frosty barrels. Hushed rows under shadowy ceiling lights.

A rare shaft of light traveled down between some nearby barrels – like a sunbeam between darkened skyscrapers – and illuminated a rigid, white cobweb woven into the corner of a second-story pallet. A crusty little spider was frozen on a crystalline web.

Levi caught sight of it and shuddered. He was thankful that Mario hadn't seen him. The climate was not what had made him convulse. He was scared of winding up like the spider. Stone dead. Dead inside anyway.

Mario resorted to spitefulness to keep himself alive. Under crossed arms, he pushed out his chest as far as he could manage and asked Thurston, “Does dad know how high you're stacking his barrels?”

At the Carnival, empty barrels were sometimes stacked three high, but full barrels of expensive concentrate were never stacked more than two high. One of Pazzo's few rules that fork drivers were thankful for. With a single barrel of concentrate weighing up to six hundred pounds, one pallet of four barrels became a heavy load to raise into the air. The higher the load was raised, the more the forklift's

risers swayed. Especially on the smaller forklifts at the Carnival, a swaying load, at ten thousand dollars a barrel, was an nerve-wracking sensation.

Thurston was well beyond the nerves of an inexperienced driver. He was also a religious, often opinionated, but sincere WWII vet of sixty-something, who always wore a black captain's hat over his black head sock, and his forklift was twice the size of anything at the Carnival. Unharmd by Mario's trivial attack, he responded gruffly. "Ten minutes too long in here and yer balls'll drop off. Fifteen minutes after that, you're dead. Would yuh like to donate yer balls to my collection tonight?"

"Thurston, you don't have to scare him. He's just a boy," said Levi, patting Mario on the back

"I ain't no boy," Mario sputtered, stepping away from Levi's hand, "and I sure as hell ain't scared." He was sure the word "ain't" would make him sound tough – ingratiate him with the likes of Thurston.

"If yuh ain't scared boy, then how come yuh got yer arms wrapped around yourself like you're hugging yer mama? Maybe he's scared we'll find out he ain't got no balls, leastwise nothin' worth addin' to my collection anyways."

Thurston winked at Levi who promptly returned the gesture.

"I think he's cold," said Levi. "Balls or no, we should probably step outside. Mario looks like he's getting tired of hugging himself."

Seeing that no one else was acting cold, Mario forced his arms to his sides. He felt a wave of cold whack him in the chest. He grabbed his clattering chin and rubbed it as if it itched. He felt a tantalizing wafts of warmth from Thurston's forklift's

exhaust glide past him. It was a great temptation, but since Levi made no move toward the fork lift, Mario restrained himself.

“You know, working in this cold has probably taken some years off me,” explained Thurston, “but I’m ready to go anytime. Always ready to go.”

“Ready to die?” the boy blurted, staring at Thurston’s wrinkled eyes.

“Ready to get to work, stupid!” Thurston grunted. “Hop up here `n` ride with me, boy. I’ll take yuh to the deepest part of this system. I hear Papa wants me to show yuh ‘round. Levi, we’ll meet you back outside in a sec’.”

Levi waved good-bye to Mario.

Thurston carried Mario through numerous squared archways which allowed passage between insulated partitions. In the confusing labyrinth, Thurston drove through partition after partition. The Multi-Freeze was setup like the baffling in a tanker – compartmentalized to ensure that no single air-conditioning failure would melt down the whole place.

After a turn through the tenth archway – which might have been both the second and the sixth archway – Mario was no longer sure where he was.

“OK, boy, get off while I raise this here pallet to the fourth level. Multi-Freeze rules. No riders while I’m liftin’ to the fourth.” Thurston had made up the rule to suit the moment.

Utterly devoid of joy, Mario watched Thurston do business. He quickly raised the pallet above three others, waited briefly for the elevated load to stop swaying, squared the corners of the new pallet with the four underlying barrels, set the load

down, and smoothly backed his forks away from the steaming barrels of strawberry concentrate. Within half an hour the barrels would be too cool to steam.

“Why don’t you walk back through that archway over there and meet me outside,” Thurston pointed. “While I’m in here, I gots to pull me a frozen load and bring it to the transit room. I got someone comin’ to pick up a couple hundred barrels of frozen puree tonight.”

Mario looked toward the ambiguous direction Thurston had been pointing to. His teeth clacked at each other like hammers on steel.

Thurston drove further into the bowels of the storage facility, leaving Mario in dim shivering silence.

\* \* \*

“The beauty of it,” said Thurston, “is that when we go back in to find him, even *we* won’t know where he is? Unless of course we underestimated him, and he just walks out on his own.”

“There’s little chance of that,” Levi replied. “The only question is how long we leave him in there. I can’t afford to have Douglas firing me for killing his son.”

“True enough. You know the first thing he’s gonna to do is run back to Papa, but my little brother Douglas can’t fire me. Sometimes he wishes he could, but he can’t. I don’t work for him, and it’s not as if he can freeze his fruit somewhere else. The stingy little bastard is stuck with me.”

“Why don’t you let someone else do the work? Why do you work your own business?”

“Someday,” mused Thurston, “yuh might discover the joys of working yer own business, even if yuh don’t necessarily get along with every single person yer doin’ business with. Don’t be so quick to write off your father and his farm. When me and Douglas’ dad died and he willed us the land, we made a good business on it. We done sold the rest, and never looked back. Hell, we don’t even look at each other no more. We just look at what the good lord gave us, and I thank Him for both of us. As you well know, Douglas ain’t the prayin’ kind.”

“I think I’ll go look for Mario,” Levi glared and blew out a large mouthful of tensely held air. He knew his decisions were being called into question.

“Now, now,” said Thurston, “yuh know I’m on yer side, even if I don’t fully understand why yuh think you need to run off to school, or why you don’t come to church no more. I’m just tryin’ to answer yer question, and it comes down to this. I come in and drive forklift for my own company because I like it. It’s my way of showin’ the good lord I’m thankful. I don’t take nothin’ for granted. When you take things for granted, the lord takes things away from you. Sure, I could sit home, and count my money, but then I’d be like Douglas. One day the lord is gonna take somethin’ from my little brother. You just wait.”

“That’s not very Buddhist of you.” Levi explained, “I saw this show the other night. They believe that peace comes from acceptance. Your not supposed to wish bad things on your neighbor, and especially not your brother. That’s what they say, I

think. It's like bad karma. You need to think nice things about people, no matter what they do to you."

"It's called turnin' the other cheek, Levi. If you walked through the door of our lord – just right down the road – more often, you'd see that we're all sayin' the same thing. It wouldn't hurt yuh to pop yer head in the church once in a great while. Might even help you and Martha to figure out some things."

"Like what things are we talking about," said Levi. He lit up another cigar nervously, suspecting Thurston might go down another unpleasant road.

Thurston got quiet. He sat on his forklift, warm propane exhaust pattering into the blackening sunset, and considered how to formulate a difficult question. He took a deep breath and said, "did you ever consider the idea that it weren't yers?"

Levi's smile slid right off his face. "I can't believe you'd ask me that. Of course it's mine. Martha and I may have our problems, but we love each other. Sort of. I mean I know the baby pushed a wedding date on us, but we probably would have gotten married anyway." With that remark, Levi coughed on his own cigar smoke, and looked carefully at Thurston. "What! Don't you believe me?"

The community was too small for Levi to pull one over on anyone, especially Thurston who had known Levi since he was born. Still, Levi was reluctant to tell Thurston the whole truth about his momentary loss of faith, his lack of belief in love's ability to solve problems, and his rejection of kids as a blessing, and especially his rejection of the church as a viable solution for real problems. And certainly, he was far from sure that acceptance was the key, regardless of what they said on PBS.

Thurston recognized the distress, knowing Levi all too well. “It ain’t what I believe that counts, Levi. You know I love you like a son, and I ain’t gonna to sit here and question whether you wanted to marry Martha *before* you wet your whistle. But I wouldn’t be much of a friend if I didn’t tell you what the whole town’s been wonderin’. Pretty girls from poor families make the most o’ what they got. Martha’s one of the most beautiful young women I ever seen, but she weren’t no virgin when she met you, and some folks think she can’t be true. Especially after runnin’ off to Winnemucca in the Spring with that Walter fella. Is that situation really put to bed? I mean dead and buried?”

“Is that what people around here do?” said Levi. “They just sit around and wonder about my business. Is that what you think?”

Levi took off his greasy Ford hat, a hat worn to snub his father’s loyalty to John-Deere, and rubbed his head vigorously. Had he known about all the itching, he might not have shaved off his hair. All Levi could think was, *kill that son of a bitch Walter!*

“Course people got better things to do than talk all day ’bout yer shit, but it don’t make no difference what I think,” Thurston repeated. “Why should you care what anybody else thinks? The way I see it, if you know Martha’s true, yuh ain’t got no worries. This place’s full o’ hypocrites, but the lord always knows who’s who. They get somethin’ taken away from them in the end. Me, I just thank the lord every day for what I got. That’s why I’m here. You see?”

“Sure, Thurston, I see fine. I see that I have to go to school in the fall and get



the hell out of here. After the wedding, Martha and I will build a new life for ourselves in a place where people don't know when I took my last crap."

"Not to be rude or nothin'," said Thurston, "but I think she don't wanna leave Carnival. And see, that there gets back to why people wonder, not that they ain't got better things to do. But they wonder if maybe she don't wanna leave, because she's finally got the biggest thing around. Who wouldn't wanna marry the next in line for the Weatherby estate?"

"You're just killing me tonight, Thurston." Levi puffed furiously.

"Thought you were trying to quit?"

"That was just for Cressida's sake. She hates smoking? She rides my ass about it?"

"Ain't never met the women who could convince me to give up my pipe."

Thurston pulled his pipe from a coat pocket and struck a wooden match on the side of his yellow forklift, leaving another faint line in the same section of paint. On breaks he could be found sitting in a folding chair in front of the main door's plastic flaps – a place where he could feel cool air stream out over his sock-covered face.

"And by the way," he said, "I don't like tellin' people what they don't wanna hear, but sometimes it's what they *need* to hear."

"Thanks for nothing," Levi smirked, and drew until the end of his cigar glowed like a dragon's eye. "People in this town don't know everything. You tell whoever wants to know that I said that."

A grimace took over his face as he recognized the necessity for pinning Martha

down on the question of whose baby she really thought it was. Levi grunted just thinking about the confrontation. To change the subject, he said, “maybe you ought to go save the little bastard. His balls are probably in his throat by now.”

Thurston nodded. The thick plastic flaps hung over the main door slapped against the sides of his forklift as he entered the warehouse. Levi heard the transit room door open and close. And then there was silence.

Levi sucked hard and inhaled with gusto, feeling the pleasant buzz calm his clammy hands. He lowered his shaking fingers and realized how angry Thurston had made him – not actually Thurston the man, but the constant worry about why he was getting married and how he could get out of it. In the warm June evening, a chilling shudder overwhelmed him. If the baby was his and she still had a thing for Walter, that was a problem. If the baby wasn't his and she still had a thing for Walter, that was an even worse problem.

Again, Levi grappled with what constituted doing the right thing. How could he marry someone who didn't love him, and yet he readily admitted to himself that he didn't love her as much as he once thought he did. The whole thing felt wrong. Was she still harboring feelings for Walter – the short, cocky drifter who lived near the interstate and showed up one day to drive a leased truck for Douglas for the summer, someone who reminded Levi of an adult version of Mario, a man whom Levi detested because he was older than Mario and therefore should know better. He couldn't be expected to marry a woman who was in love with another man. But lately she had shown no signs of straying devotion. How could Thurston, or anyone else in Carnival,

question her motives? In fact, Levi believed *he* was the one doing *her* wrong, because he could not find the courage to do the right thing. Whatever that was.

Levi heard the sliding door open again.

“Thanks for the tour Uncle Thurston. OK, Levi, let’s blow this Popsicle stand.”

As Mario walked stiffly toward Levi’s truck, Levi could not resist saying to Thurston, “I guess you know your nephew better than I do. I thought for sure he would start balling and threaten to tell Douglas how we mistreated him.”

“That’s the beauty of it,” Thurston smiled, “he won’t ’cause he’s scared of me. Always has been. Today, I told him the pig balls – the ones in the jar of formaldehyde in my office – belong to all the Japs I shot during WW II.”

“He may not be able to get out of the Multi-Freeze by himself, but I think he knows ham *huevos* when he sees them.”

“No he don’t. He ain’t never been out to my farmhouse. Remember, Douglas lives on the other side of I-5, in that new gated community, kind of like a Street of Dreams thing. He don’t know what to believe. He’s dumb that way. Don’t know nothin’ ’bout people and things. He still don’t believe you can castrate lambs with yer bare teeth. Thinks yuh need more sophisticated tool for a proper castration. Probably too scared to believe a women could do that to him without tools.”

Levi suspected Thurston was talking about Martha again, but he chose not to respond.

Thurston continued, “Douglas also knows I’m the older son, for what it’s

worth. He don't dare tell me what to do. His whole business depends on me. Mario knows the family structure, which makes me sort of the patriarch, yuh know.”

Levi wasn't listening. He had lost interest in making Mario miserable. The only thing Levi wanted was for Martha to tell the truth, which would help him figure out what to do.

### III

#### THE BREAKER BOX

“How come you don’t use the clutch?” Mario asked on the way back to the plant. “Walter uses the clutch!”

Walter appealed to Mario. He was a flamboyant mystery man without a clear past, as apposed to Levi who was well known and without surprises. Walter was a man in his late twenties – shorter, scruffier, and less attractive than Levi – who rolled his cigarettes in his white T-shirt sleeve, and spent a lot of time in a weight room increasing the definition of his oversized chest and biceps. Whether his stomach muscles compared with Levi’s was unknown, but Walter certainly felt no obligation to family and community. He referred to his motorcycle as his “crotch-rocket,” and drove without the protection of a helmet or leather. His only safety was afforded by his snake-skin boots and his upper arm tattoos. The road runner on one side and the coyote on the other, which Mario absolutely loved. Levi, or course, had no tattoos.

“Walter’s still in diapers, when it comes to trucks” Levi explained “He uses the clutch the way kids like you use training wheels.”

“Fuck you on those training wheels, but seriously, how can you shift without the clutch?”

“It’s a whole lot easier than spending fifteen minutes in thirty below.”

The color was returning to Mario’s lips. He said, “Fuck you on that too. Did you know – I’ve been thinking – when I take over the Carnival, I’ll build my own cold storage unit, and then I won’t ever have to deal with Uncle Thurston again. Hopefully he’ll be dead by the time I take over. You know it just wasn’t that cold in there – warmer than I expected.”

“If it was so darn warm, how come you’re still rubbing your hands all over yourself?”

“Oh, I just need a smoke is all,”

“Since when do you smoke, Mario?”

“Since when do you think you know everything there is to know about me?”

In good conscience, Levi took the boy’s point. “Maybe I just assumed you didn’t smoke because I know how your father feels about smoking.”

“Just because he won’t let those fat-ass line-*Chihuahuas* smoke in the plant, doesn’t mean I can’t.”

“Well your dad doesn’t smoke either. Maybe I was thinking ‘like father, like son?’ Maybe that kind of thing.”

“Oh, just like you and *your* dad,” Mario corrected. “The only reason you’re a

Ford man is because your dad likes the green machines? Am I right, or am I not right?”

“Where did you learn what a green machine was?” Levi asked, surprised Mario knew that all John-Deere equipment was green.

“See these two eyes,” Mario pointed with one finger. “I use them for seeing. You aughta try it sometime, Levi. It really works.”

“See these two eyes, Mario?” Levi pointed into his own eyes with *two* fingers. “They’ve never seen you smoke.”

“I just don’t smoke at the plant, that’s all. Dad’s rules. How ’bout sharing a cig’, Levi?”

“Sorry kiddo. See this cigar,” Levi took the cigar out of his mouth and reached toward Mario’s nose. “See it? It’s my last one. I lit it while you were inside the Multi-Freeze taking inventory.”

Levi realized, despite himself, that a conversation with Mario was helping him to bounce back from his upsetting conversation with Thurston. He was cheered by his own remark about inventory, and found himself looking forward to Mario’s reply, sure that it would amuse him in some way or another.

“If you were me, you’d be counting barrels too. I’m set for life. Just like you.”

“You think I’m set for life?”

“Of course. Look at what you own. A huge farm. A hot babe. Big *chiches!* *Aye cabrón!* What else is there?”

“First of all, it’s *cabróne*, not *cabrón*. I wouldn’t go around using words I don’t understand if I were you.” Levi also realized that young Mario had not yet experienced the part of love that involved loss of control, unhappiness, and betrayal. He cleared his throat and asked, “Mario, have you ever been in love?”

“Sure, many times.”

Levi laughed heartily, coughing out his last puff of smoke.

“What’s so funny, asshole?” Mario sounded like a whining child who had just fallen off his tricycle.

“Asshole?” Levi almost choked. “Who’s the asshole? At least I not making up stories about how many times I’ve been in love. And if you’d been in love as many times as you say, then you’d have all sorts of stories about getting your heart ripped out and mashed to pieces by a whole fleet of John-Deeres. Love isn’t all fun and games, kiddo. There’s a part of love that’s a total piece of shit – a part that takes a whole mountain of courage to contend with. Courage, Mario. Are you familiar with courage? Can you see it? There are a hundred times when you’re not even sure what the hell you’re supposed to do. If you’d really been there, love’d scare the shit out of you.”

“Huh?” Mario looked blankly at Levi.

“Oh never mind,” Levi sighed.

He pulled into the truck yard. The Carnival was alive with activity. The front of the plant was lit up like a Christmas tree. White light radiated out into the flat agricultural darkness of the Multnomah Valley. With the chain link fence surrounding



the facility and the yard lights shining down on the blacktop, Levi felt as if he were driving into the state penitentiary. The gate to the compound was always open though, and people could come and go as they pleased, except when Douglas got tipped off that Immigration was coming for a surprise visit. Then the place was locked down – gates and doors closed tight. But immigration never came at night, so the plant’s four bay-doors were wide open. Fluorescent light poured from the two-story high doors onto the well-lit yard.

From the roof on the back section of the plant, thirty-foot columns of steam shot from exhaust pipes into the moonlit sky, fluttering like tall translucent ghosts. At midnight, the concentrator was going full bore – pulling excess water from thickening strawberry juice and belching clouds of steam into the night sky.

Watching the steam shoot out from the top of the building, Levi knew he would be yarding refrigerated trailers until sunrise – backing empty trailers up to the dock, pulling full ones away, and parking them neatly, one right next to the other, equidistant from each other and perfectly aligned. Thurston always shut down the Multi-Freeze at midnight, which was what always forced Levi to spend the rest of the night in the truck yard.

All Walter had to do in the morning was back his tractor into the full trailers, one by one, hook up to them, crank up the landing gear, and haul them to the Multi-Freeze to be emptied by Thurston. Levi hated being so accommodating to Walter, but he knew that the neatly parked trailers – with only two or three feet of clearance between each – represented his own handiwork and had nothing to do with Walter.

Levi would not allow himself to park trailers haphazardly just to screw Walter.

For Levi, the only saving grace was that he and Walter were on opposite shifts, although that was what encouraged Martha to run off with Walter in the first place.

Levi backed his empty flatbed trailer off to the side of the building, under moonlight and shadows and out of the way of scurrying forklifts and fresh pallets of strawberries.

Mario sat in silence, acting as though he was observing Levi's every move.

Without saying a word, Levi jumped from the cab and pulled the pin on the fifth-wheel. While Mario remained rooted to his chair, Levi jumped in and out of the cab, hooking up to a reefer unit, starting the reefer engine, and then backing the trailer down one of Carnival's sunken truck ramps. When the trailer's rear end gently touched the black rubber affixed to the dock, Levi gently stepped on the brake. Then he pulled the large yellow and red knobs on the dash of his old cab-over-engine Freightliner – letting out the familiar blast from the air brakes which signaled his return to the women on the line just inside the bay doors.

A fork driver opened the trailer doors, and began bringing hot barrels of concentrate from the back of the plant and loading them in the cool trailer.

In the silence of the cab, Levi finally looked at Mario. “In love many times, huh?” he smiled. “By the way, I'm outta smokes, but I've got some chew. Would you like a pinch?” Levi reached into a side pocket on his captain's chair and pulled forth a new can of Kodiak. “It's mint flavored. Easy to swallow.”

“Sure,” said Mario anxiously.

Under Mario's observing eye, Levi pinched a quarter can's worth of loosely shredded, wintergreen-flavored tobacco, and mashed it between his lower lip and front teeth.

Mario reached for the can and did the same.

"You might not want to take so-" Levi said, knowing that feigned intervention would only encourage Mario.

"I know what I'm doing!" Mario squawked. "And remember, Levi, no spitting in the plant."

"I know the rules," Levi grinned. "Just don't get caught yourself."

"I can do whatever I want. Remember, it's going to be *my* plant one day."

"Sure, sure, Mario. I'll catch you later." Levi said. He could hardly wait, knowing it wouldn't be pretty.

After Mario left the truck, Levi did his paperwork and then decided to go looking for Cressida. When he was yarding, he had plenty of time to kill. He wanted to find out whether Cressida already knew about the baby. The only people he had actually told the truth to – about why he was getting married in August – were his family and Thurston.

Though he hadn't yet confided in Cressida, her opinions still mattered to him. Did she think it wasn't his either? Did she think he was playing the fool to Walter? A *cabrón*? Did she know that Martha had served coffee – and who knows what else – to Walter at the I-5 Denny's, and that Martha had run off with him to Winnemucca in March for a weekend of gambling, while Levi was working sixteen hour days to get

his dad's John-Deere tractors ready for spring planting. Levi groaned just thinking about it.

He walked into the plant, and headed toward the lab, which was a large-windowed mobile room in the corner of the L-shape, at the hub of the plant, right between the fresh product at the front end of the plant and the concentrating activities that were happening in the rear.

On his way past the sort-line, he waved to the Mexican women who had heard his truck's air breaks signal his arrival. They had enormous affection for him, always citing his predictable smile as reason enough to like him. The college girls and the lifers ignored him. For them, his consistency was boring. No mystery at all.

One of the Mexican women, Lupe – the generously-shaped, thirty-something wife of Jesus – screamed out, “*Aye, carumba!*” She swiveled her hips and blew Levi a rubber-gloved kiss. He ran up to the line and grabbed her. He knew it was OK, because Jesus was on an extended road trip to Canada, getting barrels of frozen raspberries that would be processed later in the season. Levi tilted Lupe backwards and gave her a gentle kiss on her bruised cheek. He was disgusted by the fading bruise and knew Mario was right for not wanting to ride with Jesus. Levi had great compassion for Lupe's marital predicament. He hoped for Lupe's sake, she would one day find the courage to leave the abusive Jesus.

Lupe's already rosy complexion turned scarlet from the attention. Her ample breasts bounced with laughter, and her tummy pouch heaved in and out. She turned back to the line and spoke to her friends in gasps and giggles – blabbing at ferocious

speed about how it was a good thing Jesus was out of town and how she was thankful. She also explained to her friends that nice *hombres* like Levi were what made the world a better place.

Levi left Lupe at the strawberry-stained conveyor belt where the women sorted fresh fruit for hours on end. He walked passed the silent, un-used barrel dumping station – a sequence of roller-tracks, a barrel dumper, and a stainless steel receptacle that augured product into the heat-exchanger in preparation for processing. The frozen barrels Jesus was hauling – full to the brim with last year’s Canadian raspberries – would wind up there. Lids would be taken off, plastic barrel liners cut open, and barrels would be pushed along the roller track into the barrel dumper, which would lift and invert the contents into the receptacle called the *gusanos* tank, for the worm-like action of the auger at the base of the tank.

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Because it was only late June, the Carnival was still processing fresh berries, which traveled straight from Lupe’s sorting line, passed the un-used barrel dumper, into the stainless-steel *gusanos* tank, and then directly into the heat exchanger – a twenty-foot horizontal sequence of steam-filled tubes which passed heat on to the parallel fruit-filled tubes. From the end of the heat exchanger, a series of pumps and valves – purchased at Cressida’s father’s pump store on I-5 – directed product into one of five large tanks, each capable of holding twenty-five

barrels of fresh fruit. From the catwalk running along near the rim of each tank, Three-by-three-foot sheets of thick white paper were thrown into the tanks of hot juice. Steel blades that dangled into the tanks from vertical propeller shafts were turned on to cut up and mix the paper pulp. Then a special enzymatic chemical was added to the hot fruit pulp to break down the long complicated pectin molecules in the fruit. After that, pear concentrate was added when the juice was not sweet enough, which was against the law, but who was going to tell the FDA? If the plant was shut down, paychecks would stop. The code of silence worked to everyone's advantage.

From the five mixing tanks, the hot strawberry pulp – which looked much like red paper pulp – was pumped into a press which mashed paper, seeds, stems, and other large impurities from the juice. Fist-sized chunks of caked paper ran out of the bottom of the press onto a conveyer belt. The conveyor belt carried the steaming red paper-cake through a hole in the wall to a large cake-filled dumpster. The remaining juice that steamed out of the press was sent through more shining stainless piping and over to the filter. With extremely fine screens, the filter pulled out the unseen impurities – mold, insect antennas, and fruit fiber. Juice that left the filter was drinkable. From there, the cleansed juice was sent to the back end of the plant where it ran through the concentrator – the most critical phase of production.

The concentrator was by far the most temperamental machine in the plant. Few could get it to co-operate, except for Richard, who was pure genius with equipment, and a long-time lifer in his mid-thirties. He had been working for Douglas since he dropped out of college in the late '60's – when his wife Suzie had become

pregnant with twins.

Richard had never recovered from his marriage. His parents died in a head-on collision, shortly after the wedding, and he inherited their modest three bedroom rambler, two blocks from Carnival's four-way stop. Unemployed and with a pregnant bride, he got the job at the Carnival within weeks of the funeral. Douglas was always happy to capitalize on desperation. He gave Richard a salary that no one else in the community could compete with, but not a salary that was commensurate with Richard's contribution to Douglas' immense profits.

Richard believed his contribution to Douglas' bank account could not be ignored forever. He hoped Douglas would one day recognize him, make him a partner, or at least a plant manager, which Douglas had held up as an illusive carrot for years.

Richard devoted himself to his tasks with hope and resentment. He had designed the current plant's processing sequence, and had fabricated all the custom equipment like the barrel dumper and the steep ramp at the scale shack. Although he had not been responsible for the design of the concentrator, he seemed to be the only person capable of running it.

The concentrator consisted of a series of high-speed heating plates and vacuum chambers which heated and then sucked water vapor from boiling juice and pumped the vapors into the midnight sky. Each of four cylindrical vacuum chambers had a tiny window. At the first and largest chamber's window, the juice flowed like an energetic boiling river. At the fourth and final chamber's window, the juice had the

consistency of ropy red lava, and was ready to be barreled. The evaporation process took seconds – the time it took to walk forty feet from the first to last window. The finished concentrate commanded a high price because of the energy, labor, and equipment necessary to create it. Richard’s role at the concentrator was pivotal, and any mistakes were costly.

\* \* \*

Levi entered the lab, which was even more brightly lit than the main plant. As night turned to early morning, Levi always found the glowing white counters and chalky linoleum a mild shock to his system.

“Are these colors for cleanliness or to keep you awake?” Levi asked Annie.

She was counting mold on a slide under a microscope and didn’t look up.

“Wakefulness is good,” she said.

Annie hesitated to say anything else, not wanting to irritate Luther Bud, the corpulent and insecure lab supervisor who was forever hovering nearby. Levi called him the Dough Boy behind his back, because of the unflattering profile he presented in his too-small lab coat and white hard hat.

“At midnight,” said Levi, “some would say that sleep is also a good thing. Would you not agree, Annie?”

“Did you want something?” Annie asked. She was unceasingly concerned with being responsible – a trait she shared with Levi, but one she carried further. She



didn't want to appear as if she was mocking the lab or the serious nature of her responsibility. She graded all the in-coming fruit according to strict FDA standards and ensured that only the worst loads of strawberries – typically her dad's – were made into *juice* concentrate, the cheapest kind of concentrate, instead of into *puree* concentrate, which was more expensive because it required more labor. Currently, the women on the line were sorting out all visible mold which rested on infected berries like hoar frost.

“You're no fun tonight. Where's Cressida,” Levi asked.

“She's running the press.”

Levi walked back to the fifteen-foot-high, tubular press and saw gallons of juice pouring over the top of a holding tank at the bottom of the press. The pump for the holding tank had overheated and tripped the breaker. Juice was flowing all over the concrete floor and through the nearby floor grates to the plant's septic system. From there it would be pumped out to the sump pond surrounded by weeping willows – a favorite place for parties after work.

Watching the spilling juice, Levi became frantic. He wanted to run to the giant electrical panel and flip the breaker back on, but he didn't know which one went with the press pump. The panel box encompassed one living-room-sized wall, and was not his responsibility to know. He ran through a nearby side door, where the paper-cake was pouring out of the building and into the industrial-sized dumpster. He hoped to find Cressida shoveling the strawberry paper-cake to the corners of the dumpster, or drinking a beer from her hidden cooler. She was not there.

Only Mario. He was behind the dumpster, right next to the illegal barrels of pear concentrate. He was on his knees, doubled over with wintergreen-flavored heaves. Levi had not noticed him under the dark shadow of the dumpster, until he had heard the violent retching sounds of a person who had swallowed chewing tobacco. Levi had no time for sympathy or satisfaction. Product was running down the drain, and everyone who worked for Douglas was programmed to react with haste.

Levi stepped back inside, splashed through the spilling juice, and jogged toward the back arm of the plant. It was there, at the first vacuum chamber of the concentrator that he came to a sudden halt. He saw Richard's hand falling from Cressida's shoulder. Something about the way they looked together bothered him. Levi wasn't sure what he saw or why a falling hand would make him think twice.

They weren't lovers, he reminded himself. She would have told him. Cressida always told him. He knew where her cooler of beer was hidden in the dumpster – in the corner under the steaming strawberry paper-cake. He knew about her father's infidelities and her mothers drinking. He knew how she had lost her virginity and who she was likely to sleep with in the future. A creep like Walter certainly wasn't one of them. But, Richard? Had Levi been so caught up in his own problems with Martha that he had missed the obvious. No, he told himself. It just couldn't be! Richard was thirty five and Cressida was about to turn twenty-one. No chance. And besides, he was married. She wasn't like that. Cressida respected the institution and wanted to be married herself someday. Levi convinced himself he was being silly, and then remembered why he had rounded the corner in the first place.

“The press,” he screamed from five yards away, still unable to make himself move closer.

Cressida was already walking toward him, smiling. She hadn’t heard his alarm call. He remained rooted. He screamed again, “The pump, the pump is off!” He pointed toward the press.

Cressida began running.

The sequence of motors and valves – from the worm-tank all the way back to the concentrator – had to be set just so. Otherwise the smallest pump in the sequence – the half-horse press pump at the bottom of the press – would overheat while trying to keep up with the flow of all the larger pumps.

Someone had opened the valve behind the ten-horse pump all the way, sending way too much juice to the top of the press. Cressida knew Mario wasn’t smart enough to understand the system, and besides he would have been puking by the dumpster at the time that the pump kicked off.

Cressida splashed across the plant in her heavy rubber boots toward the electrical panel. She flipped a breaker switch in the middle of the electrical panel – a panel full of hundreds of uniform switches. At the bottom of the press, the pump started immediately, creating the tell-tale whirlpool on the surface of the collecting tank. The rim of the tank stopped overflowing. Steaming juice began flowing back toward the filter.

With two long garden hoses, she and Levi jointly sprayed the overflowed juice down the grates criss-crossing the smooth concrete floor. That was all there was to

Cressida's obvious problem – except a nagging wonder about the possibility of a saboteur. She let her suspicions go for the time being, deciding instead that she had made a rare mistake.

## IV

### TUNNEL OF LOVE

When paper-cake from the press was rolling up the conveyor belt and through the hole in the wall, Cressida always hid a cooler full of beer in a corner of the large dumpster outside. She entertained often, and Levi was a frequent visitor.

Sitting together on an upper corner of the dumpster, they drank in silence.

Cressida thought about the delicate balance that made things run inside the plant. She looked toward the impossibly distant moon, and it smiled back in a kindly fashion on Cressida's increasingly tenuous existence. Her father's departure with his latest girlfriend had disrupted Cressida's belief in the permanence of things. Things like love and marriage.

In turn, her ability to concentrate on her lifelong goal of becoming an astrophysicist had also suffered. The idea of taking more math classes in the fall – doing yet more calculations on variables like mass, velocity, and momentum – was

decreasing in appeal. All those calculations stood between her and interplanetary travel. She looked at the moon and thought about being on the starship Enterprise instead. *That* crew really new how to have fun. Always a new adventure. None of the problems of earth.

Levi watched the moon too – white, small, and far away compared to the steaming piles of strawberry-flavored by-product that were filling the dumpster. He raised his cold can of Schlitz toward the pale moon and said, “here’s to you.”

“Yes,” said Cressida, “here’s to me!”

“You certainly you know your equipment.” Levi referred to the speed with which Cressida had resolved the problem with the press pump.

“Apparently I don’t know my equipment as well as you think. The only time that’s *ever* happened to me is when some dickhead from dayshift opened the wrong valve too far, just to fuck me. I absolutely hate it when both crews are in the plant at the same time. And, I don’t know why Richard doesn’t swap that little press pump out for a bigger one. All he has to do is go to my dad’s pump store on I-5.”

Levi noticed Cressida’s far off look at the mention of Richard’s name. He said, “There’s no mystery here. Richard doesn’t swap out the pump, because Douglas isn’t going to buy something new when something old is still working. You know that.”

“Yah, I guess your right.” Cressida stared at the moon, looking forlorn.

“What’s going on?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m getting some strange vibes from you tonight.”

“I can’t keep anything from you, can I?” said Cressida. “You’ve always been my closest guy-friend.”

Levi watched over Cressida like a little sister. “So tell me the truth,” he said, encouragingly. “What’s up?”

“Well it’s hard, but it’s nothing new. I just don’t see how a perfectly decent man can flip out and go for a women half his age.”

“You mean-” Levi said, instantly thinking of what he had seen by the concentrator a couple hours before.

“Yah, my dad.”

“Oh,” said Levi. “Oh *that*.” He was rapidly tiring of Cressida’s preoccupation with her father’s infidelities.

“Yes. ‘Oh that’ *again!*” said Cressida, slamming her beer down on the side of the dumpster. Foam bubbled out of the can’s opening. “Give me a break. If you were me, you’d be worried too.”

“True enough,” Levi agreed.

“I just hate my dad now,” she went on. “We were so close, before his girlfriend. He had time for me. He cared about my dreams. He always told me I was going to be on the space shuttle one day. This whole divorce thing is bizarre, but nothing you haven’t heard a million times already. I’ve been talking to Richard about it.”

“Oh?” Levi perked up again.

“Yah, he’s got a different perspective than you. You’ve been extremely supportive and all, but sometimes it helps to talk to someone who’s more detached, someone who has *really* suffered.”

“What?” said Levi, taken aback by Cressida’s intimation that he hadn’t suffered enough to be Richard’s equal, or that her sympathies might be aligning with such a man.

“Oh, you know,” Cressida explained. “Suffering makes you a good listener, and Richard is one of the best.”

“Hey, now you’re really hurting my feelings,” Levi cautioned. “Nobody’s a better listener than I am. I’ve been listening to you my whole life! Who cares about you like I do? I’m the closest thing you’ll ever have to a brother.”

“Oh sure, that’s true,” Cressida said absently, “But Richard is one of those people who is-”

Cressida went to the opposite corner of the dumpster and pushed away the paper-cake that covered the lid of the lab’s borrowed cooler. Annie had promised Cressida that Luther would never miss it, stating that he was way too busy ogling over Joleen, the plant slut. What a fat stupid old man for fantasizing about Joleen, she thought. Can’t he see, she’ll never give him the time of day? Most men are so dumb, she mused, and reached for her second beer, but failed to offer Levi anything.

“Richard’s one of those guys who’s what?” Levi demanded.

“Oh, I don’t know. He’s just been really sympathetic. He’s a smart guy, and he’s really fair. He’s helping me to see my father’s decision differently – in a way I



can forgive. Almost. You see, Richard understands me because he lost his parents so young too – you know, a big loss like that – and dealing with having to get married, instead of *choosing* to get married.”

“I swear, I don’t know you tonight,” said Levi, glaring at Cressida. “I distinctly remember you saying to me a couple of hours ago that *everyone* has choices. What’s all this slack you’re cutting Richard?”

“Don’t you see? His situation was different,” Cressida continued calmly. “He felt like he had to do it – like the marriage was the right thing to do at the time. He’s not like you. He’s got that guilty Catholic thing going. He told me he was real religious, before his parents died. He said he thought it’s what God would have wanted him to do – to marry Suzie that is. After that, he stopped believing. He just goes to the church for Suzie, to keep up appearances. If I were Suzie though, I would have gotten an abortion. I would never have married someone just because I was pregnant. I would have always wondered whether Richard really loved me, or whether he was forced into it. The marriage, that is.”

Levi thought his earlier wonderment might have been answered. Maybe Cressida really didn’t know about Martha’s condition.

Cressida continued, “I think, if he’d had it to do over, he wouldn’t have married Suzie at all. She’s such a mean bitch. You know he practically comes out and says so, but it’s not in a complaining feel-sorry-for-himself kind of way. That’s what *does* makes me feel so sorry for him – the way he just *accepts* it all.”

“Oh, how very Buddhist of him. Who in the hell believes that acceptance is

the key? Life's a fight!"

"The fight's still in him, Levi. He just doesn't show it the way you do. You've got to admit, he's come out the other side of some tough stuff. And, as you know, if there's anyone who can reason with Douglas, it's Richard. Anyway, there's something about him that makes me think he understands what I'm going through. He's been helping me. You should give him a chance."

Levi was critical. "I think you're all wrong about Richard. All he understands is giving up. He's a coward. A nice harmless coward – great with equipment – but a complete coward, nonetheless. He works the night shift so he doesn't have to be around his nagging wife. He has learned how to get along with people like Douglas, because being married to a witch like Suzie teaches a guy how to get along, or be killed. And he got married because he made a dumb mistake, and he didn't have the gumption to fix it – like you would have. He stayed here in Carnival because he sold himself to Douglas." Levi took a quick breath. With each declaration, he found himself becoming more irritated. He couldn't stop. "What a mess, that guy. A real short-term-solutions kind of guy, not looking at the bigger picture, at the rest of his life. Never taking control. Never having the courage to make the *big* decisions. He bugs the shit out of me. Don't you think he's a pathological mope? You only feel sorry for him because he's got those big sad puppy-dog eyes, all weepy, and always looking for sympathy. Don't fall for it, Cressida. You need someone stronger, someone like *me*, to help you."

"That's a laugh. You're not available."

“Available for what? I’m right here. Talk to me, babe.”

“You’ve got your own problems. You don’t have the time for me like you did before. You’re just like my dad. No time for me. And besides, your parents are alive and happy. I’m not sure what I’m trying to say here.”

“Then it’s my turn to talk. I need to ask you something really important? Do you have any idea why I’m getting married?” Levi became serious. He wanted Cressida to understand that he could comprehend big problems.

“Sure, everyone knows.”

Unsurprised by the revelation that she already knew – because everyone in Carnival always knew everything – Levi asked, “then why do you think I can’t understand big problems? What makes me any different than Richard?” Not realizing the words were going to come out like that, Levi stunned himself. The comparison had been completely inadvertent.

“You and Richard are nothing alike,” Cressida replied quickly.

They were silent again – each hoping that several more swallows of Schlitz would wash away the unpleasant exchange.

Levi sneered at the smiling moon. Instead of successfully showing Cressida that his problems were equal to – or greater than – Richard’s, he had likened himself to someone he hated – a person he inextricably associated with cowardice and loss of control. Levi shook himself, in the same way Mario must have tried to shake off the cold at the Multi-Freeze. Levi was afraid of Richard’s passive acceptance, his complete relinquishment of control to his wife and to his employer.

Richard was the community's hard-luck case, and with the exception of Levi, most of Carnival felt sorry for him. He played the role of a tragic figure – perfect for the part with his sullen disposition, sunken brown eyes, and prematurely aged face, his somewhat lethargic gait, slumped shoulders, as if he had been beaten one too many times, and his rickety knees from abusive high school football. Richard acted like life had been meaner to him than to everyone else, and the community bought into it, mostly because Richard went out of his way to be kind, especially at the plant. He was forever jump-starting employees' dead batteries, giving a Mexican laborer a few gallons from Douglas's personal gas tank to get the poor employee home from work until the next paycheck came, or letting anyone who asked leave early – no matter how lame their excuse. By way of his perceived generosity, he made himself attractive to the white college girls, who overlooked his physical shortcomings. In a plant poll, the girls had decided that he was one of the cutest amongst the crew, which Levi couldn't understand at all. In fact, Levi thought all the college girls were desperate and stupid for not being able to see the truth.

Levi himself was ranked a distant fourth, after Walter, and Leyland who was a running back on the local college's losing football team. When informed of his ranking, Levi had laughed, convinced in his own heart that he was much better than the losers who had beat him out. At least the Mexican women were on his side. He assumed the foolish college girls had ranked Richard so favorably because he was such a pushover, so easy to manipulate. Did they actually consider that desirable?

Levi thought too many women were suckers for hard luck cases. Their

maternal instincts were forcing them to help those who were falling. There must be something very female about wanting to rescue losers. Levi didn't want to be rescued. The idea made him sick. He was glad for his ranking. He took it as a sign that no one was feeling sorry for him, which was good because only losers wanted pity.

Cressida broke the silence. "You know what it is with a guy like Richard? He's had one of those lives that was trouble from the start. Got a lot of bad breaks. Had nobody to count on but himself. Done the best he could with a bad situation."

"Bullshit. He's completely lame. A total loser. Why can't you see that?"

Right then and there, Levi decided he was going to have a major talk with Martha in the morning, when she got up, before she went to work at the truck stop and started serving coffee to all those losers at the I-5 Denny's. The idea her serving coffee to a lost cause like Walter made his blood boil.

\* \* \*

At 4:00 AM, the late June sky had gone from black to deep blue. A group of eleven piled into Curtis Dexter's '57 step-side Chevy. Curtis was the wacky, long-haired, in-house dealer, who was the same age as Levi, but whose hair was already graying, which gave him a safe somewhat fatherly look and secured his position as the most honest upstanding dealer around. He drove slowly on an old bumpy road, heading west into the rolling hillside and toward the foot of the trestle.

Standing seventy-five feet above solid ground, and spanning a small steep

drainage with a road at the bottom, the trestle's sturdy wooden cross-members were a testament to the ingenuity of the early rail engineers. Cressida smiled at the feat which had come to represent permanency – one hundred years worth.

The drunken band crossed the trestle carelessly. Working nights liberated Carnival employees from the normal behavior of their daytime counterparts. Nightshift workers ate, slept and celebrated the end of the workday at odd hours. They were separated from family, friends, and the rest of society. As a consequence, especially after partying, they protested the cautious rules that governed most people's lives. Each of them showed a thrill-seeker's lack of caution, but they also had limits. They wanted to get across the trestle, and then in and out of the tunnel, before the morning train came rumbling through.

The eclectic group included Cressida, Levi, Richard, Lupe, Curtis Dexter, Gustavo, Joleen, Leyland and several of the younger college boys who were all hoping to get some before the sun came out. Annie was not among them. She had gone home early citing a head cold, which Cressida thought was strange but for once decided not to push it.

Back at the plant, they had started as a larger group in the usual location – three huge weeping willows behind the plant that surrounded the sump pond. This was a place where Carnival grunts and their full coolers were hidden behind the curtain of willow strands and low-lying fog, like vampires avoiding the harsh light of day.

After shooting a minimum of four beers each – with a funnel and a foot-long

rubber hose – and after some had snorted coke, compliments of Curtis, the lightweights headed home. The more radical faction had decided to walk the trestle – an activity which separated men from boys. If Annie had been there, she would have been considered one of the men – short-haired, flat-chested, and unadorned. No one was ever after her. Joleen, on the other hand, was the honey pot. Leyland and the boys buzzed around. Cressida was also after something, feeling anxious and sweaty. Not sure what she really wanted, or how to get it.

Earlier that morning, under the willows, Levi had watched Cressida stand next to Richard. Levi had found himself staring at Richard's arms, as if they were poisonous tentacles. It was then that Levi had suggested the trestle. He wasn't sure why, but he wanted to remove Cressida from Richard's reach. He also wanted to do something crazy to toughen himself for the morning's conversation with Martha – the one he had promised himself he would have.

Then there was Richard. Levi could not figure him out. In previous summers, Richard would have been a rare participant in the nightly parties with the younger plant employees, most of whom were college students, but this summer he was undergoing a change. He had shut down the concentrator at 3:00 AM, allowing the crew to finish at 4:00 AM, giving them additional time to get to the trestle before the sunrise could rob them of their cheap thrill. Walking in daylight over the trestle was nothing. The timely shutdown of the concentrator had ingratiated Richard with the group, and especially with Cressida. She couldn't find one bad thing to say about him, which sickened Levi. Disgusted, he jumped from the back of the truck and stumbled

up the hillside.

The trestle was not constructed with strolling or stumbling in mind. There were no guard rails, no safe walking paths, only the railroad ties, spaced sixteen inches apart, with enough distance for one grown man's leg to fall through to the crotch – a less painful consequence than falling all the way through.

The entire group bumbled along the rail-road ties, as if in a dream, with stars still twinkling in the morning sky. The time between night shift's end and sunlight was a mystical time – a time when rules could be broken, and nobody got hurt.

“You know I'm a running back for Elmsburg State.” said Leyland. He put his arm around Joleen.

“Aren't they the worst football team in the country?”

Leyland ignored her. “The fact that I'm a running back means I could probably carry you across this entire trestle without breaking a sweat.”

“I'd like to see you try,” Cressida yelled out, encouraging the beefy Leyland, who always had a goodly sum of stout man's sweat pouring from his face. “Do it, Joleen, do it. Let him carry you. I don't think he can.”

“The hell I can't.” Leyland grabbed the somewhat protesting Joleen and swept her into his arms. He quickly realized he could no longer see his feet. He put Joleen down. “Get on my back. It's safer. I wouldn't want to hurt you.”

“Sure,” Joleen smiled.

Cressida smiled too, knowing it would only be a matter of time before Leyland got what he was after. Cressida thought Leyland's game was ridiculously obvious.



Real love was more dangerous, like Apollo 13. Big risk meant big reward. The crew could have died, but they came back heroes.

Far from heroic, Levi was testing the acceptable limits of risk. He was visibly drunk – more so than the rest – which was unusual for him. Feeling unsettled, he didn't bother looking down as he stepped forward – neglecting a prudent glance here and there to ensure secure footing on the oily black rail-road ties.

Taking shallow breaths, he tried to avoid smelling the creosote-soaked timbers. Wishing for the smell of Martha's perfumed black mane, he envisioned her long curved eyelashes like delicate rakes scraping the sky, the same way John-Deere harrow-tines scraped the soil. The warm smell of morning dust rose through the railroad ties and stifled the odor of creosote. Levi wished for the smell of freshly plowed soil, full of wriggling worms and blackened humus, and he wondered what color his forthcoming child's hair would be. During his imaginations, he broke all his hard-and-fast rules about being smart. He skipped quickly from one tie to the next, stumbling every fourth or fifth step, but not falling through. His thoughts of impending fatherhood upset him. The Schlitz had failed to dull the pain.

Levi, Cressida and Richard entered the tunnel first. The train tracks curved into the hillside, and within fifty feet, they were in total darkness. The rest of the group followed several yards behind, with the exception of Leyland and Joleen, who lagged way back. They chose not to enter the tunnel, but their voices carried into the darkness.

“Joleen, you're the prettiest girl I've ever laid eyes on,” Leyland could be

heard shouting near the mouth of the tunnel.

“You’re so full of shit,” Joleen grumbled loudly, as if to show she would have to be won with something better.

Within minutes, there was no more noise radiating inward from the mouth of the tunnel. The members of the main group lost sight of each other as they walked deeper into the earth. With respect for oncoming diesel engines, and with the exception of a few muffled giggles or a subdued conversation, silence overtook them.

Each anticipated a run for the entrance, except Levi. Walking down the center of the track, he began calling, “Cressida, did you make it over the trestle? Are you OK? Where are you?” He waved his arms and stumbled forward.

Cressida, who stood within inches, backed away from him, and put her hand over her mouth, stifling her laughter. Levi had forgotten, or had been unaware, that she was right next to him. As she backed away, she felt a hand upon her shoulder encouraging her to continue moving away from Levi. Approaching the tunnel wall, she continued to feel wafts of damp moldy air. Levi’s arms were waving furiously nearby. After a few seconds, he gave up and left her behind. Going further into the thickening darkness, he kept calling out. Pitifully drunk, he dropped to his knees and succumbed to the increasingly unpleasant effects of the Schlitz malt liquor bull. He lay down on the track and felt his world spin out of control.

“Come on Cressida,” he said, laughing toward the roof of the tunnel, “tell me where you are, so I can save you from the train. I’m spinning!”

Cressida pushed her hand harder against her mouth, continuing to hide,

knowing that if a train came, she would have to save him. She had never seen Levi let himself go this far.

“Can you feel the warm breeze blowing into the tunnel?” asked Levi.

“Morning’s coming alright. A whole new day for Levi Weatherby. Yup, new day. You’ll see.”

Levi continued mumbling to himself. “And goddamit, I’m the bravest son of a bitch you’ll ever meet! There’s a big difference between running from trouble and standing your ground.” He kicked against the ground with the soles of his boots, feeling no pain. “When did I never not stand my ground. Ever not. I mean never not ever-. Well hell’s bells, you know what I mean, girl.” he laughed and sputtered, and went silent.

“Oh the poor guy is probably passed out,” Cressida whispered.

Still holding onto Cressida’s shoulder with one hand, Richard reached around her chest with the other arm and pulled her backward along the tunnel wall. He pressed her against his chest, clutching her silently with both arms, and then reaching up and putting his hand over her mouth. The others were already heading out of the tunnel. Muffled silence, like the bottom of a cave, overtook the remaining threesome. Richard whispered softly into Cressida’s ear, “Don’t let him know where you are.”

She nodded her head, and he lowered his hand around her waste to pull her in more tightly.

“I think I’m in love with you,” she whispered, trembling.

Weak-kneed himself, Richard leaned his head down, brushed Cressida’s long

blonde hair aside, and gently kissed her on the neck.

Unable to get on his knees, Levi rolled onto his side and began puking. Bubbling, frothy juices went down his airway. Barely coherent, he gagged and coughed violently.

Reluctantly, Cressida left Richard's side and moved quickly across the track.

"Richard, I need your help. He's too heavy."

Richard obliged, but said nothing. A medium-sized man, but deceptively strong, Richard turned and lifted Levi to his knees. He acted resentful about being forced to help Levi, about getting sucked into someone else's desperate situation, as if he only wanted to be the Good Samaritan when it suited him.

Cressida assumed he was aggravated by the danger Levi had placed himself in. Frightened by his condition, she began crying and rubbed his back as he continued to throw up what was left of the Schlitz. With each heave, if not for the continued support from Richard's arms, Levi would have crumpled on the tracks.

Cressida smiled at Richard through the tears and said, "Thank you so much for helping. I don't think either of us intended for tonight to turn out like this."

## THE GOOD SAMARITAN

Back at the plant, they all split up.

Richard left Cressida in the Carnival parking lot to deal with Levi. He said he had problems of his own, like figuring out what kind of excuse would pass muster with the weasel.

He called Suzie the weasel because he said she was the quickest-biting little thing he'd ever known. He said he always got his head chewed off for being late. He explained to Cressida that he couldn't possibly tell Suzie that one of the employees got sick, and he had to render aid. No, that wouldn't do. It was too late in the morning. He couldn't tell Suzie that they had been drinking after work either. Her sense of propriety didn't allow for supervisors pounding beers with subordinates. She would yell at him for being stupid, and once again he'd wish for freedom. He told Cressida not to worry, because a good lie always worked wonders. He would figure something

out to avoid a tongue lashing.

Cressida thought it was unfortunate that such an honest man had been reduced to lying. For all Richard's professed miseries, Cressida put the blame square on Suzie's feisty little shoulders. Cressida aimed to help Richard free himself from such a sharp-toothed little creature. She also knew Richard would have helped her with Levi, if he hadn't needed to scurry home and patch things up with the weasel.

Meanwhile, Levi fell into Cressida and leaned on her shifting arm as she delivered him home. His little farmhouse was grand in its own small way, with a covered wrap-around porch, colonial banisters, and a large shake roof with two dormers on either side. Cressida loved the place, because it was so homey. Old Weatherby had given Levi the house with great pride, hoping that one day Levi would marry, settle down, and take over the farm like a good eldest son should.

In the coming afternoon, Old Weatherby would be expecting Levi to drive the family truck to the fields where the pickers would load flats of berries to be hauled to the Carnival. Cressida doubted he would be able to work. He was still hopelessly incoherent, which wasn't a good sign for how bad he would feel later, and was also the reason why he didn't drive his tractor-trailer rig home like a good eldest son would have.

As she drove up to the house, Cressida gasped. Walter's motorcycle stood in the middle of the driveway.

Even in his drunken haze, Levi noticed. "That son of a bitch! I'm going to kill-. Let me in!"

Cressida helped Levi to his front door. "I need your keys, Levi."

"I don't lock my door. Just open it."

"It's locked. I need your keys."

"Back in my tractor at the plant."

"You mean the keys?"

"Yah."

Cressida knew she herself was not sober, so she tried the front door handle a second time. It was definitely locked. She rang the bell, hoping Martha was inside, even though she knew Martha was always at work by sunrise, and here it was already midmorning. At the same time, Cressida didn't want to believe that Martha was off with Walter, regardless of the motorcycle.

Cressida peered through the oval window on the heavy wooden door. Despite the situation, she felt warmed by Levi's house, which had been very much like a second home to her over the last few years. She and Annie had been constant visitors, just to talk or laugh or watch old reruns of Star Trek on Levi's console TV.

"I've got to lay down," said Levi, reaching his palms out flat in the air, as if to brace himself for a fall.

"No!" said Cressida. "If you go to the ground, I won't be able to lift you. Just hang on."

"Standing makes me wanna puke."

"Lean against the wall then." Cressida propped him gently against the door, and wished Richard hadn't left her.

After ringing his own doorbell three times, Levi sank to his knees and leaned his head against the base of the door.

Watching Levi in such a state made the lump in Cressida's throat return. She ran around the back of the house looking for open windows and trying not to cry. She climbed into the master bedroom and hurried to the front door. As she opened it, Levi fell forward onto the hallway rug.

"Come on, big brother, you have to help me," she said encouragingly, trying to drag him by the arms.

Levi grunted, "I need to lie down. Just leave me alone. Quiet. Shhh...." He reached his fingers to his lips. "Church mouse. No sounds. You're making me dizzy."

While Cressida considered the practicalities of puking on the hallway rug rather than on a bed, she heard the crunching sound of the gravel driveway, and she looked out the opened front door. Confused, she watched Martha's car pull in. Until then, she had assumed Martha was already at work, serving coffee and who knows what else to the truckers at the I-5 Denny's.

Cressida was shocked to see Walter step out of the driver's seat and open the passenger door. Martha looked entirely unwell. Cressida didn't know what to do. She wished more than ever that Richard had not left her alone to deal with this.

She felt awkward and scared. There she was taking care of Martha's drunken fiancé, and there was the fiancé himself passed out in the middle of the hallway, and worst of all, there was Walter rendering aid to Martha.



Walter put his arm around her waist and rushed her unceremoniously toward the porch. His manner was so abrupt that Martha looked as if she was being dragged. Still, to Cressida, they looked like a couple, and that was what made her feel most strange. Martha was supposed to be done with Walter.

“What are you doing here?” Martha said, breathing heavily. The black circles under her eyes looked like grease paint, and her face was the color of porcelain.

“Well,” Cressida began, not knowing what to say, and feeling like Martha needed to do some explaining herself.

“Well what?” said Walter impatiently.

“Levi’s really sick, and–,” Cressida began again.

Walter and Martha entered the front door and saw Levi sleeping restlessly on the floor.

“Move him out of the way,” said Walter. “For christsakes, I need to get Martha to the bedroom.” His lip curled and quivered like a dog about to bite. “We’ve got real problems. Dammitall to hell.”

Confused by Walter’s manner, Cressida hurried to Levi’s side and gently shook his shoulder. “Levi, Martha’s home. Please? You have to wake up now.” More softly still, she whispered, “Walter’s here. I think there’s something wrong with Martha.”

Levi grunted, “please leave me alone. I’m sick. Don’t shake me like that, or I’ll throw up.” He was incoherent, unaware of who was present.

Without waiting for Levi to get out of the way, Walter snatched Martha into

his arms and carried her over Levi and to the back of the house. His snake-skin boot missed Levi's head by an inch.

Again, Cressida found herself befuddled. The situation was strange beyond compare. Should she offer to help? Surely Walter wouldn't accept. In fact, he acted like Levi should leave and be sick somewhere else. Cressida remained in the hallway, listening to a relatively quiet exchange from the bedroom. Every now and then, she heard loud words from Walter like "cocksucker" and "bitch." How could someone who was supposedly trying to help be using such words, acting so angry, being so loud?

Within minutes, Walter returned to the hallway. Snarling, he said, "where was Levi last night? Does he know that his future wife almost had a miscarriage? Weatherbys don't take such good care of their women, so she had to call me. Fine son-of-a-bitchin' husband he's gonna to be. Tell him I said so after he wakes up. What a dumbfuck."

Cressida was enraged. Who the hell did Walter think he was, storming into Levi's house and insulting everyone she cared about? If only Richard hadn't gone home and made up some dumb lie to Suzie, then he would have been there to set things right. He was always helping people. A true Good Samaritan, unlike Walter. She could just see Richard lifting Walter up and tossing him out of the house. Walter was a scary man, with his bulging arms and furrowed brow, always sneering at people, but Richard would have put him straight. And what kind of a jerk was Martha for calling Walter instead of a Weatherby anyway? That made no sense at all. She could

have called Annie who had gone home from work early, or Levi's parents who would have been there in a second. Anyone but Walter.

Walter continued loudly, "you can stay there with your drunk-ass friend if you want. I'm not gonna kick you out, but be quiet about it. The doctor said the next few hours are critical. Otherwise Levi's gonna be responsible for Martha's losin' 'er baby."

"Who the hell do you think you are?" Cressida hissed. "It's Levi's baby too, you know, and if he weren't sicker than hell, he'd throw you out."

"Throw me out? I don't think so. I could kick his ass from here to Winnemucca – drunk or sober."

"You're so full of shit, Walter!" said Cressida, "and if I were a guy, I'd kick you out myself."

"One more word outta you, bitch, and you'll be sorry."

With that, Cressida decided she was dealing with a crazy person. There he was yelling at her to be quiet and calling her a bitch in Levi's house. She realized she should have kept her mouth shut. Did she actually expect to win an argument with a lunatic? Still, she wished she could threaten him, make him leave. She wanted to call Annie, but what would Walter do if he heard her calling? She was scared to do anything.

The whole thing was just nuts. Cressida labored with indecision. Should she try to wake Levi? Should she run over to Old Weatherby's house a mile down the road. No. Levi was still too sick to do anything, and Old Weatherby wouldn't

understand what was going on, especially when Cressida herself didn't get it. Afraid for her own safety, but afraid to abandon Levi, and not knowing what kind of a lunatic she was really dealing with, she decided to stay quietly in the hallway next to Levi until he awoke. Then she'd explain what happened and get help.

Cressida sat against the wall, feeling a desperate need for sleep. It was several hours past her bedtime. She listened to the twittering bird through the opened front door, and she then stared at the dark green paisley wallpaper. Still mildly drunk, she could stare at the paisleys until they turned into spiral galaxies. Then galaxy clusters. Then a part of space so dense with galaxies that they were crashing into each other, mutating shape, transmogrifying, and turning back into paisleys. The wallpaper was defying all the laws of physics. Then, Cressida imagined taking a space ship with Richard to the far reaches of the universe, transcending both physical and social boundaries, going to a place too far away to be judged by the inhabitants of Carnival, free to pursue their love for each other without concern for fatally flawed marriages or the limitations of space travel.

Looking down at the sleeping Levi, she wondered who chose the wallpaper and imagined Levi would have chosen waving stalks of wheat and yellow corn cobs on golden wallpaper instead. He always told her yellow was his favorite color. Such a happy color. Not red, like strawberries, she had joked? He had laughed and said there was nothing more beautiful than a ripe strawberry under the June sunshine, but there was no wallpaper that could duplicate the color. She had to agree.

She watched him and wondered what she would say to him when he woke up,

and how he would react to Martha's decision to call Walter. There must be more to that twosome than Levi realized. She was convinced of it.

If Cressida really thought Levi was going to marry Martha, if she really believed Levi loved Martha, or more importantly that Martha loved Levi, she would have risked her life and stormed into the bedroom. She would have demanded that Walter leave, explaining that she – Cressida – was the real friend of the Weatherby family and that she would handle things from there. It was her knowledge that Walter had been asked to be there, or so he said, that stopped her from intervening, kept her motionless in the hallway, feeling like she should have taken Levi to her own house instead, a place where Levi would have gotten all the sympathy in the world from Cressida's drunken mother – an aging woman who was no stranger to dry heaves and noon hangovers, and a woman who believed Cressida should stop thinking of Levi as a long lost brother and start thinking of him more as a potential lover.

Cressida could hear her mother say, "If you married someone like Levi, such a kind boy, responsible, tall and sturdy too, your life would be set. Fuck men like your father. He's just a dumb pump salesman. That's all. You don't need him looking after you. You're not daddy's little girl anymore. You're too big for that. Who knew you'd be so tall? But Levi doesn't care. He must be six foot. You should pursue a boy like Levi, start thinking about marriage. Grow up, Cressida! If I were your age, that's what I would have done. Pursued me a steadfast, suntanned farmer, instead of a pale-faced slippery salesman like your damned father. Your father's nothing but a con artist. A cheap schmoozy-whoozy salesman. And boy did he sell me a bill of goods.

I drink because of him you know, to forget what he's done to my life, and what someone like that could do to yours. Don't throw your life away on some cheap-ass salesman who'll convince you that you can have the moon and stars. Physics, shmysics. Marry for practicality, not for love. Love will destroy you. I loved your father once....that sad sorry son of a bitch.”

Cressida believed that her mother had never loved her father, and that her mother had done what she was indirectly telling Cressida to do, which was marry for money. Cressida believed that her mother was wrong, and that love was the only reason to marry. Which was why she thought Levi should not marry Martha, and why her mind kept drifting back to Richard. She believed Richard had made the same mistake as her mother, married someone for all the wrong reasons. For Richard, love had not even made the list. He often told her so.

She sat quietly in the hallway for several hours, watching Levi sleep and thinking of what had happened that morning in the tunnel. She replayed the moment over and over. She rewound all the way back to the sump pond and thought of Richard choosing to stand next to her instead of next to any other woman, and how she had felt something growing between them, something “responsible and sturdy” in her mother's words. When she replayed the embraces in the tunnel, when she had turned around and kissed him on the cheek, imagined looking into his twinkling brown eyes, which she could not see in the blackness, and then kissed him on the lips, she wondered if he could feel her shaking.

Did he know what his friendship had come to mean to her, how he was helping

her to redefine the meaning of love? She was a person who believed that love should be pursued at all costs, that love could save people from themselves, that love was stronger and sturdier than a mountain of money.

When he had returned the kisses and held her firmly against himself, she had felt bolts of lightening shoot through her chest, as if she was on a roller-coaster, soaring like a bird, flying through space, diving and climbing, elated and spinning, almost as if she was under the same kind of influences that had incapacitated Levi in the tunnel.

He stirred just before noon, moving from a prostrate position on his stomach to a curled position on his side. He opened his eyes and looked up toward Cressida, but said nothing. Cressida got up and went through a curved archway into the kitchen. She felt the warm afternoon sun streaming through the window, as she got a tall cold glass of water.

“Levi, can you sit up?” she asked. “I think you should drink some water. Please?”

Levi sat up, miserable and shaking. “I’m freezing. I need a blanket,” he said. He tried to choke down some water, afraid if he moved too much, his stomach would rebel.

Cressida moved close toward him. “I have something to tell you,” she said.

“Can you move away from me?” Levi protested. “I feel sick.”

“Yes, but first I have something to tell you.” She locked her arms around him, as he leaned up against the wall, afraid he would do something stupid if she didn’t

secure him to the floor with the weight of her own body.

“This is really not helping me,” he groaned.

“Listen,” said Cressida, holding him in place with all her might, “When I tell you, I need you to promise me not to do anything.”

“I’m not in the mood. Please leave me alone. I need to lay down.” Levi collapsed in Cressida’s arms, too weak to protest.

“Walter is in your bedroom, and—,” Cressida tried to explain, then realized her big mistake. She should have told him about Martha’s extremely fragile condition *first*, knowing that he would never do anything to hurt her. Without this knowledge, Levi went into a rage. She had re-ignited his vague memory of the motorcycle in the driveway.

With a superhuman burst of strength – defying the delicate nature of his own condition – Levi jumped up and ran to the bedroom. “You son of a bitch!” he bellowed, “get the fuck out of my house.”

Without saying a word, Walter himself jumped up and ran toward Levi. He punched the unprepared Levi in the stomach with the force of a major league bat swing, and brutally silenced him. Then Walter dragged the doubled-over lump back into the hallway, and dropped him within inches of where he had been lying all morning.

Martha, who was sedated, said nothing, did not beg Walter to stop, did not call out. Silence. She was only worried about saving the baby, and possibly herself.

As Levi gasped for air, unable to breath, on his hands and knees again in the



putrid green paisley hallway with galaxies spinning all around him, Walter explained in a spitting raspy whisper, “listen you drunk motherfucker, I suggest you clean up your act at home, before you start fucking with people like me, because you’ll never win.”

Levi reeled on the floor, dying inside. He felt like he was being disemboweled and his guts were being pulled out and strung around his neck. The feeling left him speechless. If he wanted to hurt Walter, it would have to wait until another time.

Cressida had just witnessed the absolute last straw. Her eyes bulged. She felt ill with rage. In the split seconds before deciding what to do, Cressida wished for being a man, so she could do to Walter what he had done to Levi. Then she thought about getting Levi’s rifle and making Walter leave at once. But she was scared he would get the gun away from her and kill them both. She realized she had only one choice. She ran to the phone and dialed 911, citing a violent domestic dispute over a women who was about to have a miscarriage. The police were on their way.

## VI

### DERELICTS

Two days had passed since Walter was hauled off to jail. He would be incarcerated for another three, because Levi had refused – against Martha’s pleadings – to pay Walter’s bail with Weatherby money. Levi himself had not returned to work, citing the need to take care of his fiancé which overrode any obligations to Douglas. Levi believed that family matters always took precedence over work obligations. Richard was of a different mind.

He and Cressida stood at the edge of the bone yard. They watched the brilliant purple sunset cast gentle shadows over the area behind the plant where defunct equipment was laid to rest and usable parts were periodically scavenged.

“Levi should not let his problems at home affect the workplace.”

“You can’t really believe that,” Cressida replied, sure that Richard was exaggerating his feelings on the matter.

“Look at the inconvenience his absence has created. We have no fresh fruit coming in from the Weatherby Farm – our biggest grower – and now I’ve got Jesus hauling in frozen barrels from the Multi-Freeze, so we can keep the concentrator going with that crappy Canadian stuff he brought back, the stuff we weren’t supposed to be using until fall. Why are you looking at me that way? Do you think production should stop just because Levi got drunk, and his wife got sick?”

“Sick is kind of an understatement, don’t you think?” said Cressida, looking quizzically at Richard.

“If you’re asking me,” he continued, “I think their whole relationship is sick. Why is Levi even with that women? He should get out before it’s too late, or he’ll wind up like me.”

“Like you? What’s wrong with you? Your life is changing. Anything is possible. We found each other. Life has an infinite number of choices. What? Don’t you believe me?”

“No,” said Richard sternly, then he looked at Cressida and softened. “Well maybe. You catch me off guard sometimes. You should stay away from me. The only thing I can do is hurt you.”

“I’ll be careful,” she replied facetiously. “Besides, you can’t hurt me. I’m a lot tougher than you think. And I want to make you believe that anything is possible. I’m here to help you.”

“You can’t help me. I’m old enough to know that certain things are not possible.”

“You can’t seriously believe that?”

“Of course I do. When I look at you, I see this gorgeous young woman with her whole life ahead of her, and all those infinite choices you love to talk about. I just wish I had met someone like you when I was your age. You are everything I’ve ever wanted. You’re tall. The weasel is short and feisty. You’re self-confident. You have presence. You are bright and funny. Suzie doesn’t have a sense of humor, she’s overly thin, eats like a shrew and acts even worse. You would think someone so little couldn’t have such a huge temper. She’s the meanest woman I’ve ever met. She makes me so unhappy. But you. You’re not a thing alike, you and her, which is probably why I enjoy being with you so much. When I’m with you, my problems evaporate.”

Cressida glowed. She gained strength from the comparison, and she said with pride, “I know all about making problems disappear. I’m going to do that with my parents. I’m going to leave them behind and be with you. And I know I can do whatever I want with my own life. I’ve never questioned those things. But when it comes to changing your life, following your dreams, I’m not the one who needs convincing. You are!”

“Convince me then,” Richard replied, stepping closer to Cressida.

The two hid behind the single-wide maintenance trailer which stood between the bone yard and the back of the plant. Cressida looked back toward the rumbling plant to make sure no one was coming around the corner of the trailer. Richard moved closer. He stepped behind Cressida, reached his hands forward and pulled apart the

top two buttons of her 501's.

“What are you doing?” Cressida whispered. “If you unbutton anymore, my jeans will fall down.”

“Sssh,” he whispered, and pulled her toward him. Continuing what had been prematurely aborted in the tunnel two days earlier, he carefully reached his calloused hand toward tender flesh.

Cressida's knees shook with fear and delight. She felt as if she had just been transported to a forbidden universe – a place from which there was no return. Forgetting the rear door of the plant, only fifty feet away, shielded by the dilapidated trailer, she struggled for air and shivered in the fading purple light.

“I want to fuck you,” he moaned. “I'm sorry for the words. Just let me go crazy. Please?”

“Don't be sorry for the words. I love you,” said Cressida, her throat knotting. “Say whatever you want. I know what you *really* mean. You are the first man to make me feel like a real woman.”

“You are more woman than you know.” He pulled her hips in toward his. She felt the pressure of her heart, throbbing like a twenty horse pump pushing hot fruit down stainless steel lines. Cressida imagined herself losing consciousness, seeing stars, her heart exploding like a super nova. Then he stopped. “Come over here.”

Hastily re-buttoning her pants, Cressida followed Richard further into the bone yard, toward an old derelict pulper – a stainless steel, cylindrical container, three feet in diameter, laying on the ground, after once having successfully removed seeds from

fresh fruit. He grabbed her by the waist and pushed her forward, face down, over the rusty cylindrical tank. With roughening purpose, he unbuttoned her pants again, and yanked her jeans to her knees.

“No I don’t think so, Richard,” Cressida said with alarm, reaching for her pants.

She was afraid of getting caught, afraid of being exposed.

“Oh yes, I think so,” he countered firmly holding her down. “I’ve never wanted anything so much in all my whole life. You can’t lay there and tell me you don’t want it too.”

Surging forward, he drove inward like an expert fork driver shoving steel forks into a pallet at high speed and without hesitation – the base of the forklift bumping firmly against the precious load of barrels, while the long penetrating forks lifted the load and transported it to another place.

Cressida’s mind was numbed by the pounding sound of her heart – boiling blood beat through her brain, smashing against the bottle neck of capillaries like high speed fruit smashing against a poorly-secured stainless steel elbow, and like a water hammer loosening the clamps and breaking open the pipes, spilling its precious red strawberry juice all over the floor like blood.

Cressida felt the strength of her own two-cycle pump, pounding away inside her chest, keeping up with the boiling flow. The fruit never stopped. It just kept coming. But there was no breaker switch that could flip off her heart.

Back in the plant, the steaming lifeblood of the whole operation flowed quickly

toward the concentrator. The powerful smell of the thickening strawberry juice poured out over Richard and Cressida from the building vents, masking the smell of diesel that saturated the gravel under their feet.

Richard's pounding thrusts belied his restrained demeanor. He was uncharacteristically liberated and penetrating, almost hurtful. Cressida tried to grab for support on the smooth curvature of the pulping cylinder, but found nothing. He saw the motion, and whispered. "I've got you."

"So you have," Cressida acquiesced.

"I can't believe I'm doing you," Richard gasped with pleasure, still gripping her hips firmly, "I've dreamed of this for days, weeks. My whole life. I love you. Promise me you'll wait for me."

Cressida felt a tremendous weight on her heart, flattening her will to resist. Richard's stocky compact frame surrounded her and squeezed against her feelings of apprehension, forcing out her resistance. "You are the first man to ever tell me he loves me. Do you know what that means to me? I have waited my whole life for someone to love me, believe in me, always be there for me. There will never be anyone else for me," she struggled for the words, afraid to declare them, but knowing she had to. "There will only be you."

"I hope so," he said and released her, dropping his hands and raising his own faded black work pants.

"I know so," she said encouragingly. "What else do I have to do to prove to you that I can wait."

“Listen to you, and look at us. How convincing we are,” Richard laughed a melancholy laugh. “We don’t even have the resolve to wait until this shift is over, let alone years.”

“Years? That’s not what you said earlier. Why would we have to wait years? I thought you only wanted us to wait awhile after you left her.”

Cressida referred to an earlier conversation when Richard had told her he was finally going to ask for the divorce he had been dreaming of.

“Well, it’s not like I’m going to start strutting you around town next week. How would that look?”

“You’re too worried about what people think.”

“Look, I’m not in the mood for a teenage lecture,” Richard shook his head and spit.

“I’m twenty,” Cressida corrected, feeling like a knife had been plunged into her chest. She had never seen Richard like this.

“So you’re twenty. You don’t have to worry about the community condemning you for leaving your wife and kids for someone half your age.”

“I thought you said my age wasn’t an issue.”

“Not for me it isn’t,” Richard warned, “but you can’t deny how we’ll be judged by people who can’t understand my choices. They’ll see me as this lecherous old guy stealing a pretty young thing. An innocent. I don’t want to hurt you. I’m worried about what this will do to you.”

“Worry about yourself,” Cressida quipped, trying to be nonchalant, pretending



not to be afraid. "I'll be just fine."

"Sure you will," Richard replied. "I'm scared. Why aren't you?"

Cressida's face flushed with fear. Longing for the distant future and reticent about the current state of things, she wondered what Levi would think of her. The big lie seemed to be getting bigger all the time. Cressida was torn. She wanted to do the right thing – not to be blamed for breaking up a marriage, even if it was the worst marriage around. What would Levi do?

Without saying a word, Richard ran toward the concentrator. She watched his gimpy knees, his receding hairline, and his jostling stomach bounce toward the back door of the building. He was losing weight. His beer gut was not quite as pronounced as it had been earlier in the summer. She watched his clenched hands swing back and forth, and marveled at how young he was beginning to look. She thought about the fact that she was going to be twenty-one in August, old enough to know who she wanted to spend the rest of her life with. It didn't matter that he was closing in on forty.

"Why is life so hard?" Cressida mumbled to herself. She imagined her heart at the center of the concentrator's first vacuum effect – being sucked dry, drained alive.

"What you do back here," Gustavo called out from the doorway to the back of the plant, the same doorway Richard had just run through.

Anticipating the possibility of being discovered, Cressida had already prepared a lie. "I'm looking for some replacement pipe for that rusty ten-foot section leading to the press."

“Well, you get inside! You *stupido* press overflowing again.”

“What?” Cressida looked at Gustavo with confusion, wondering the same old question. How could the press be overflowing after she had just reset all the valves again? She watched Gustavo, checking for signs of evil, wondering if she was talking to her saboteur. The overflowing press always seemed to coincide with her clandestine meetings with Richard. Did Gustavo suspect them? Was this his way of saying, “I know.”

“Hey, see Richard?” Gustavo called as she jogged toward him.

“No, sorry,” Cressida said as she brushed passed his shoulder. Gustavo was standing in the center of the doorway, making it difficult for Cressida to pass.

“Strange.” Gustavo took his white hard hat off and scratched his head. “I just pass him at the concentrator. He tell me I find you out here.”

“Then why did you ask me where he is?”

“No reason,” Gustavo smiled – the gold edges of his blackened teeth flashing in the moonlight.

\* \* \*

At 10PM, after cleaning up the mess at the press, Cressida went on lunch break with the rest of the crew. They clustered around four splintery wooden picnic tables located near the outside corner of the L. She sat next to Annie and watched Leyland attempting to teach Mario how to ride his motorcycle. Leyland’s dinged-up ’76

Honda 500 was not a sleek machine like Walter's beloved crotch-rocket, and up until Walter had shown up at the Carnival, Leyland had been happy to offer all the women on the crew rides at break. Now he was letting Mario ride it.

Mario was notoriously bad with equipment, the worst case being the time when he took it upon himself to pull one of the leased tractor-trailers from the loading dock. Mario wanted to be like Walter. He knew enough from Levi to know how to release the air brakes, after which he throttled the turbo-charged diesel engine and dumped the clutch, snapping the driveline instantly. It clattered and clanged as it rotated against the pavement, and Mario couldn't figure out why the truck wasn't moving forward. He called to Levi for help. When Levi saw what had happened, all he could say to Mario was, "you used the clutch, didn't you!" And Mario's only explanation was, "Walter uses the clutch."

Cressida decided Leyland must not care about his bike anymore.

"Why don't you send Mario to the Plaid Pantry for some beers," Joleen called out to Leyland.

"That's a wonderful idea," Cressida smiled with delight.

Mario pulled up to the unpainted picnic tables, which were fine until it started raining, and said to Joleen, "I'm just a natural, aren't I?" He winked at her.

"Go get us a couple short cases," Joleen persisted. "That was the deal. Leyland teaches you to drive, you do us all a favor. We may even let you drink with us after work." She winked back at him and uncrossed her legs.

"I hear, before Walter went to the big house," said Cressida, "that he could

make a run in less than ten minutes.”

“He’s not in prison,” Mario corrected, defending the integrity of his idle.

“County jail, or state penitentiary. What’s the difference. He’s locked up, and that’s all that counts.”

“I can’t believe you called the police, just because Levi can’t take a punch. What a dork!”

“You know what Mario,” said Cressida, feeling her face heat up, “there’s no way you can do the Plaid run in less than ten. I’d love to see you try. But don’t kill yourself.”

“Fat chance of that,” said Mario, and without taking the usual donations from the group, Mario sped from the compound along the darkening country road, determined to equal the supposed accomplishments of his jail-bound mentor. What he didn’t know was that Walter never bought beer for anyone, much less tried to carry it back to The Carnival on his crotch-rocket.

“Why did you go and do that?” Annie cautioned.

“He’ll be fine,” Cressida frowned and got up. Annie followed her to the bathroom.

“Are you OK?” Annie asked. “Your face is all flushed, like you’ve already had a couple, or you’ve been crying? You haven’t been crying?”

“Hell no. I’m just pissed off. I think I know who’s been sabotaging the press.”

“Really,” Annie perked up.

“It’s got to be Gustavo.”

“No,” Annie protested. “A supervisor? No way!”

Cressida explained how she was looking for a section of pipe in the bone yard, leaving out the rest. “Gustavo asked me where Richard was, then admitted he knew where Richard was, and that – oh, by the way – the press is overflowing. I think he’s jealous of my friendship with Richard.”

“Maybe he just doesn’t want your friendship with Richard to get in the way of your work,” Annie offered.

“What do you mean by that?” Cressida said, suddenly afraid that Annie knew more than she was letting on.

“I just mean, you spend a lot of time back at the concentrator, and technically Gustavo is your supervisor, and it irritates him when you are not at your station, even if you don’t always need to be right there to make things run. I overheard him talking to Luther yesterday.”

“Really? What did he say?”

“Just that people should always be at their station, and that there were a couple times when he couldn’t find you.”

“Big deal. The truth is Gustavo is picking on me because I’m not Mexican. He hates the college students. You’ve seen for yourself how he stands on the line and talks up a storm with the Mexican women, and then if one of the college girls so much as farts, he’s all over their ass!”

“Yah, he does prefer his own, but I think he’s got a point. You should pretend to look like you’re working, just to get him off your ass. When you’re walking all

over the plant with Richard or Levi, it makes the women on the line jealous, like you're getting paid for walking around, and they have complained about you, even the college students. Just play the game, like I do."

Annie was all business, detached, and neutral when it came to work. She lost herself in the many QC tasks at hand, and for Carnival lab technicians, there was a constant stream of testing. Everything was monitored, even the rotten fruit which was pulled from the line and thrown into the five-gallon buckets that stood on the grates between the sorters. Annie had to check for mold in the flats at the scales, on the line, in the barrels, and in the throw-away buckets.

Still, she always seemed to be at the hub of plant gossip. Showing that she was clued in, Annie continued, "have you ever seen how Luther always gets a throw-away sample from Joleen's bucket? She's got the cleanest bucket on the line. She throws *everything* away, skewing the good efforts of everyone else. She should be fired. He jumps up there, nice as can be, stuttering to beat the band – probably fantasizing about Joleen rolling around naked with him in a vat of cooling concentrate. So then he scoops a cup of fruit from her bucket, takes a mold count, then remembers that she is throwing away pounds and pounds of good fruit every single night, and then he comes back to the line and yells at the Mexican women to work harder. It's totally unfair, but I use it to my advantage. Luther is so busy thinking about how he can get Joleen to notice him that he couldn't give a shit about me. He just lets me do my work and leaves me alone. But the trick is, I always *look* like I'm working, and to tell you the truth, I really am. I wish I had a job like yours where I could just set some valves and

let the system run itself for hours at a time. The reason Gustavo picks on you is because you look like you are *not* working. It goes against the Carnival way. And your other problem is that you've made a friend out of a lifer. Big mistake. With Gustavo and Richard competing for Douglas's attention, you've just become Gustavo's enemy. They want the same promotion. Douglas is thinking about a plant manager position again. Maybe you shouldn't spend so much time at the concentrator. Just have a beer in the dumpster instead, and when Gustavo comes looking for you, start shoveling paper-cake."

Cressida wanted to tell Annie the delicate truth of the matter. She hated being dishonest, and was equally afraid to trust anyone. Her secret was too large, even for Annie. And she knew, with Richard still married, that Annie – whom Cressida perceived as a straight-laced virgin – would not support her behavior. Cressida wanted to keep her secret until the fall so that the Carnival community would not blame her for breaking up a bad marriage.

Cressida knew there was nobility in her feelings. She was preserving the hope for true love, for a decent life. She wanted to save Richard from unhappiness. After all, he had rescued her from the despair she had felt over her parents' divorce. He had restored her belief in the strength of love, and he had given her the courage to take necessary – if not frightening – steps.

"You ready to go back outside?" Annie asked.

Cressida nodded.

They returned to the break area and sat on the pavement, several feet from the

main group at the tables. Cressida continued to talk with Annie, but about Levi instead of about herself. After what she had seen two days ago, Cressida explained that she thought Levi's relationship was deeply troubled, and she wasn't sure how to help him. Remembering what Richard had said, Cressida wanted to tell Levi to get out, that Martha was poison, and that Levi could still be a father to his baby without being married to Martha – anything but getting married to a woman who didn't love him completely.

While she talked to Annie about Martha, Cressida's thoughts drifted to Suzie's lack of warmth. Cressida knew in her heart how much more she herself could give Richard – give him hope, give him love and a kind of happiness he had never thought possible, something he had stopped pursuing years ago. To Cressida, there was nothing worse than giving up. But not in the way Levi thought Richard had given up, Cressida corrected herself. The way she saw it, Richard had just put his life on hold until the timing was right to start over. Yes, that was it.

“Levi will do what's right for him,” Annie said, after listening to Cressida's concerns. “He always has. He's smart that way. You shouldn't worry about him.”

“Hey, where the hell is Mario anyway?” Joleen blurted out, interrupting all other conversations. “I thought he'd be back by now.”

Annie looked at her watch, and said, “he's been gone half an hour.”

“That's not good,” Leyland interjected. “I hope my bike's OK.”

“Thought you didn't care about that bike anymore,” Cressida smirked.

“Maybe one of us should go looking for him,” Annie suggested.



“How ‘bout I go,” said Cressida. “It’s my fault he took off in the first place. Sorry, Leyland.”

“I’ll go with you,” said Annie, “but let’s tell Gustavo we’re leaving first.”

“Forget it!” Cressida retorted. “He’ll just say no.”

“No he won’t,” said Annie. “He’s a reasonable man.”

“Your talking about the asshole who is fucking with my press,” Cressida reminded her.

“OK, let’s just go then,” Annie relented, “but I’m at least going to run in to the lab and tell Luther where *I’m* going. Maybe he’ll offer Joleen a lab position while I’m gone. They could do the nasty in there while no one’s looking. Wouldn’t that be funny.” Annie chuckled at the thought.

“Just meet me at my car,” Cressida sighed. Annie’s words had made her feel unsettled again. Was Annie holding back? No. She couldn’t possibly know. No one had seen them in the bone yard. No one could know.

As they drove out of the compound, Annie suggested they go straight away to the Plaid.

“Mario probably forgot how to start the bike,” she said, “and he’s too embarrassed to call for help, especially after dropping the driveline on that leased tractor. Remember how fried Douglas was about that? Like Levi should have been there to stop him from getting in the truck in the first place. Like suddenly Levi’s job description included watching over the little bastard.”

“Let’s just hope the little bastard’s OK,” Cressida smiled nervously, feeling as

though she had been wrong for encouraging Mario to compete with a false record. No one had ever made a Plaid run in less than fifteen minutes. And in Mario's case, at least ten minutes would have been wasted getting the cashier to believe he was twenty-one.

Leyland's bike was not in the Plaid Pantry parking lot. Annie ran in and asked the attendant if Mario had been there. "Yup, little kid on a big bike come in here 'bout half an hour ago, said he was twenty-one but looked like he was twelve. I let him buy two short cases of Hamm's 'cause he had a crispy fifty. I haven't seen a fifty in so long, I half wondered if it was counterfeit, held it up to the light and everything. Seemed like a good kid, but sort of –"

"OK, thanks," Annie said. She ran to the car. "Let's drive back and see if we missed anything."

They drove slowly along the two mile stretch. If not for the headlights, the road would have been indistinguishable from the sky. Everything was a uniform shade of black. Annie craned her head out the window, looking into the darkness, hoping for a sign, but not sure what she was looking for.

As they drove around the only bend in the road, Annie shouted, "there, there, going into the corn field."

"What? I don't see anything," said Cressida.

"See that mashed down trail of dirt? Over there, he must have driven clean off the road, right into the corn field. Shit."

Cressida backed up, pulled onto the narrow shoulder, activated her hazard

blinkers, and the two went into the waste-high, end-of-June corn.

“Good eye, Annie!” Cressida said, and found herself shaking again, hoping like hell she would not find Douglas’s son dead in the dirt.

“There’s the bike,” Annie called. Shortly after, she found Mario lying on his back, dazed and incoherent, but without any obvious gashes or splattered guts. They half-carried, half-dragged him back to the car, thankful that he was so short. They propped him on the front seat, buckled him in, and then took him to the hospital. He had a severe concussion.

The hospital called Douglas. Although he seemed thankful to Annie and Cressida for rescuing his son, he swore that the imbecile who loaned Mario the bike would be fired. “Why in the hell was my son riding a bike in the middle of the night anyway?”

“I’m not sure,” Cressida lied over the phone. “I guess you’ll have to ask him when he wakes up.”

When Annie and Cressida got back to the plant, they were confronted by both Gustavo and Richard.

“You no leave plant like that again, *Creseed!* Production first. You let someone else go next time, or we let *you* go. *Comprender?*”

“Come on! You’ve got to be kidding me,” Cressida protested. “Douglas’s son was lying in the ditch. Don’t you think he’d rather have his kid alive than have a few more barrels of concentrate?”

“The work comes first,” Richard looked at Cressida sternly. “You should

know that by now.”

Cressida assumed Richard was going along with Gustavo as a ruse. She was unable to believe he would seriously chastise her.

Richard continued, “I can’t shut down the concentrator every time you decide to take off without telling anyone. If you don’t feed enough juice through the press, I don’t get enough juice to run the concentrator. OK?”

Cressida was afraid to look at Richard. She was convinced he meant no harm, but his previously unseen ability to act mad was disarming. She was continuing to discover unsettling sides of Richard, but assumed they were the consequence of their unfortunate circumstances. Circumstances that could not be helped – for the time being.

Cressida new the problem would go away at the end of the summer, when she went back to school, and Richard promised he would ask for a divorce. They had both decided it was better if he gave Suzie the news when all the college students had left for the winter. He said he had been falsely accused before, therefore he wanted to ask with a clear conscience. It would be smoother that way. “I don’t want to destroy Suzie, I just want to divorce her,” Richard said repeatedly. Cressida found nobility in his reasoning. Richard kept saying he had to ask for himself, without thinking of Cressida. Didn’t she think it was better to go about things with a clean slate, without complicating other people’s lives, he would say all the time, and Cressida would agree. Her mind drifted toward the future, to another place and time, a paisley galaxy hidden in Levi’s green wall paper.

Gustavo brought her back to reality. “Yes work first. You call *policía* next time. You good at that. But now, you stay *aquí* and work.”

“But we saved Mario’s life—”

“Douglas no happy if he know you also trying to kill Mario. *My* line workers tell me what you say at break.”

Cressida looked pleadingly at Richard. He stood quietly, staring at her without expression – his puppy-dog eyes looked as black and lifeless as the midnight asphalt.

“You better get back to the press,” Richard encouraged.

“And stay there,” Gustavo cautioned, otherwise I take you off press and put you back on forklift. Or maybe I put you on *línea* with other women. No?”

“Go on,” Richard tilted his white hard hat toward the press. He had kept it going during her absence.

## VII

### THE VOICE OF REASON

On the third day after the scene with Walter, Levi returned to work. Cressida was waiting for him to come back from the Multi-Freeze, so she could talk with him. She knew he would make her feel better. He always did. She needed the consistency of his personality to help her through. Though she could not tell Levi about what was really bothering her, she knew his company would help her to forget her problems.

The previous morning, after the strange exchange with Richard and Gustavo, Cressida had gone home without saying good-bye to Richard, which seemed like a strange way to start treating her future husband. She had wanted to talk with Richard, but after Annie's advice, Gustavo's warning, and Richard's ostensibly disloyal behavior, she was afraid to. She waited – a pattern she was trying to get used to, a pattern that went against every grain in her body.

The women on the sort line, the ones who only knew how to pick moldy fruit

from the conveyer belt – or *not*, in the case of Joleen – had been sent home for the next few days. The strawberry season was slowing down. By Mid July, the Carnival would be processing fresh raspberries almost exclusively. Until the raspberries ripened, and the new season could go into full swing, Douglas used the stored barrels at the Multi-Freeze to keep production going, hence the departure of the line sorters who had already done their job on the contents of the frozen barrels.

With flatbed trailers, Levi and Jesus were shuttling barrels of finished concentrate up to the Multi-Freeze and frozen barrels of fresh berries back to the processing plant. If they had liked each other, they might even have waved in passing. But they didn't.

Inside the plant, Cressida was feeding the barrel dumper with pallets of thawing barrels, off-loaded from Levi's and Jesus' flatbeds. Barrel dumping was a noisy and fast operation. Barrel lids were being thrown to the floor in sloppy piles, barrels were being pushed down the conveyor and then slammed into the dumper assembly which lifted and inverted the barrels, letting the cold contents splash into the grinding worm-tank.

On a forklift, Cressida had no reason to leave her duties and go looking for Richard. The idea of walking back to the concentrator was like walking to the moon. Forklift activities were completely independent from concentrator activities. She wondered if this was Gustavo's way of punishing her – removing her from contact with Richard, who had been buried in boiler problems since the onset of the shift.

At the Multi-Freeze, a weary Levi sat down on a rusty metal folding chair, next to Thurston's sturdy wooden rocker. To Levi, Thurston was a reliable and impartial voice of reason. He functioned like a spare father to Levi and to anyone else in the community who needed a solid shoulder. Levi desired conversation, wanting to explain to someone the choices he had made in the last couple days.

He braced himself for Thurston's inevitable criticism, knowing that in less than twenty minutes, he would have to haul a load of barrels back to the plant. Otherwise Gustavo and Richard would be screaming. But tonight he cared less about the consequences of being irresponsible than he had in all his previous years. His only reason for leaving sooner than later would be to miss a conversation with Jesus, who would soon be headed back to the Multi-Freeze after being unloaded at the plant.

As a consequence of his overexposure to Walter and Jesus, Levi considered the company of other truck drivers something to be avoided. For now, in the brief time he had, he wanted to explain to Thurston the events of the previous days.

"Are you ready to hear what happened?" Levi asked.

"Yup," Thurston replied, lighting a rare cigar – instead of his usual pipe – and offering one to Levi. "If this ain't the mellowest thing you ever smoked, I'll eat my hat. Enjoy."

"Thanks," Levi smiled. He lit up. His hands felt more clammy than the last time he had been smoking at the Multi-Freeze. "OK, so I assume you know they



hauled Walter off the county jail. After he was gone from the house, I didn't know what to do. I wanted to ask Martha why – why in the hell – she had called Walter for help instead of my Mom and Dad, but I guessed I already knew the answer to that. You were right. She's still seeing him. I wanted an explanation, but knew that it wasn't the right time. So I agreed to myself that I would straighten it all out in a few days when she was feeling better – when she and the baby were out of danger. So, there I was, still sicker than hell and needing to sleep, so I called my mom and asked her to come over.”

“With yuh so far,” said Thurston, blowing out a curling plume of blue smoke.

“So, before my mom gets there, I try to go to sleep in the spare bedroom, knowing my mom will be looking after Martha, and I don't have to worry about taking care of her myself while I'm sick as a dog. I figured I could rest easy, and within fifteen minutes, Mom would be over to save the day, except for being mad about my drinking and being irresponsible. Anyway, I go to lay down in the spare bedroom, not wanting to disturb my own bed, knowing how fragile Martha's condition is. I'm almost asleep, and Martha comes into the spare room, crying, sits on the bed next to me, scaring the shit out of me. Being upset is the worst thing for her condition, and she starts begging me to go to the jailhouse and bail out Walter.”

“For the love of Mike,” said Thurston. “If that ain't the livin' end.” He exhaled a long luxurious stream of finally rolled tobacco smoke into the early evening sky.

“No lie,” Levi said, wide-eyed. “And I said no fucking way! I mean I said

‘no,’ not wanting to upset her further, but absolutely having to draw a sensible line in my life somewhere. Martha won’t take no for an answer. I mean there is my pregnant fiancé, begging me to bail out her ex-lover – the son of a bitch that assaulted me in my own home, and right before my mother gets there she starts bleeding again. Mom drives the three of us right back to the hospital. I’m having a hard time breathing, and I’ve got this pain in my chest that won’t stop. Finally, I go to the counter and say I think I need an X-ray. They tell me I have a cracked rib and it will heal itself. There’s nothing they can do. So I spend the rest of the day laying on an a hard hospital bench, while they are giving Martha medications to stop her contractions.”

“And how far along’s the little sprout?”

“Three months. March. You know she went to Winnemucca in March with Walter. So I’m sicker than hell the whole time I’m there, and my mom is trying to understand what is going on, but she’s just too proper to even start talking about it. You just don’t talk about marital problems in the Weatherby household. I’ve never seen my parents argue. Never. You just button your lip and do what you’re supposed to. You honor your mom and dad. You do what’s right for the family, and you don’t ask too many questions. Leaving Martha – if the baby’s not mine – is not an option in the eyes of my parents. A Weatherby is supposed to stand by a women in need. Which would be fine if I weren’t expected to marry her. Mom probably thinks its mine – has made herself believe it’s mine, the way I always thought it was mine, until Martha called Walter for help – and Mom thinks, like dad thinks, that I would make the family look like shit if I told a women in trouble to get the hell out of my house, a

Weatherby house, a house one mile away from mom and dad's house. Too many family obligations. Talk about torn feelings. I don't want Martha to suffer. I don't want her to lose the baby. And I don't want her to ever see Walter again. Just three little things. That's all I ask for. So Martha is still at the hospital, and she'll be there until she stabilizes. They thought a day or two. At least Walter's going to be in the slammer for the next couple days, so he can't come near her. I don't want him going to the hospital and upsetting her."

"Upsetting you, yuh mean," Thurston laughed. "Sounds to me like he's stuck in *your* craw, not hers? What make you think Martha's gonna commit the whole rest of her life to you?"

"I don't know. It used to be simple. When I was in high school, she wouldn't give me the time of day – treated me as if I wasn't good enough, too much of a nerdy, dirt-under-my-fingernails farm boy. She was always with someone else, and I was always wishing for things I couldn't have. There was a time there when she was all I could think about. Especially after I dropped out my senior year and started working for my dad fulltime. Dreaming about the possibility of a life together kept me going, gave me a reason to get up in the morning. Haven't you ever felt like that about anyone?"

Thurston looked mystically into the sunset. "When I graduated from high school," he said, "I was sweet on this real beaut'. We was all fightin' for her affection. She was like Martha – long legs, black shiny hair and a big ol' twinkle in her big brown eyes. She could sure fill out a dress. She was with someone else, but I

knew, if I kept after her, one day she'd marry me instead of all them other guys. I signed up with the Air Force. Wouldn't you know it, them damn harbor bombers put me in a war. Before I know'd it, they flowed me to the South Pacific to sweep a goddam runway for four years, on a tiny little shit hole of an island out in the middle o' nowhere, no less. Only thing I could count on was heat, rain, and feelin' sorry fer myself. Didn't wanna be there. Anywhere, but there. The infernal boredom. Everyday, I thought about that dern girl. I ain't gots to tell yuh what I thought."

They sucked on their cigars in recognition of life's simple pleasures. Levi grinned and rubbed his growing head-stubble, remembering how he had once felt about Martha.

"So when I finally got myself home," Thurston continued, "I went looking for her. I found out she'd run off to Vegas with some 4-F dufous who couldn't see any further than the end of his belly. The half-blind bastard got a job on some paving crew somewhere in the Southwest. I never figured out how that son of a bitch could've beat me out of the runnin'. After a while, you stop caring. Someone said she left him. There weren't no way I was gonna pursue it. By then, I'd stopped carin'."

"Are you saying you think I should stop caring?"

"Not *stop* carin'. Maybe just *start* carin' more about yer own welfare. That young beaut' got me through the war, and I thank her and the lord fer that, but she weren't nothin' but a cock-eyed dream. Is Martha yer dream?"

"No. This is different. Maybe I fell for Martha to get myself through hard times after dropping out of school, and to get away from the constant arguments with

my dad about the way we should be farming, but Martha's carrying my own flesh and blood now."

"Wait a second. How d'you know?"

"Look, we've had this conversation before. It just doesn't matter anymore who's baby it is. I still owe her something."

"Do you? Alls I'm sayin' is you should talk to her. Maybe she don't want marriage any more than you do. Maybe she knows something. Maybe there's things you ain't got a clue about."

"Like what? said Levi, looking suspiciously at Thurston.

"Now how in the hell would I know," he said. "What I'm tryin' to say is that maybe you can strike a deal. Sometimes women like Martha don't want their own sprouts. You got no idea what's in the future."

"That's way out of line, Thurston."

"I'm just sayin' she appears to be more worried about the jailbird than the baby."

"OK, thanks for making me feel so damn good. I see that my truck's loaded now, and I've got to get back to the plant before they run out of barrels."

\* \* \*

Cressida unloaded the trucks as they returned from the Multi-Freeze, and then brought the pallets of barrels inside the plant. After the crew unscrewed the lids,

Cressida moved the pallets to the front of the roller track. The men tilted and rolled the barrels, one-by-one, onto the roller track and then into the barrel dumper. One man ran the lever that raised and lowered the dumper, and he kept a tab on how many barrels had been dumped.

Hand trucks were used to haul empty barrels to the yard where they were then stacked three high. They would eventually be cleaned, brought back into the plant, filled with fresh product, hauled off to the Multi-Freeze and then brought back to the barrel line, continuing the cycle until the barrels became too rusted and bent to be used and were hauled off to the scrap metal place in Rosemont.

The process from there was the same as for fresh fruit. The frozen fruit went through the worm-tank, through the heat exchanger, was heated to two hundred degrees, and then pumped into the one of five mixing tanks.

On the catwalk along the top of the tanks, Lupe was standing with Gustavo, watching the barrel dumping crew. Gustavo was training Lupe how to run the press. Cressida saw this as a maneuver to further limit her proximity to Richard, and she was resentful.

At the same time, others were envious of Cressida's position on forklift, which allowed her to keep working when most other women were laid off. Occasionally Cressida even worked on the barrel line, which all the other women refused to do. As for the men, they knew that driving forklift was much easier than pushing a four hundred pound barrel of fruit around, even though moving a full barrel was pure technique.

At five-foot-nine, Cressida had the strength and skill to man-handle barrels with the best of them, which allowed the men on the barrel line to forgive her for being on forklift – each thinking that they instead should be sitting in the driver’s seat.

Cressida wanted to be running the press. She watched Lupe and Gustavo with envy. Every half hour or so, Richard walked up onto the catwalk and talked to the two of them, to ensure there were no problems and the juice was going to continue flowing toward the concentrator. The threesome laughed and peered down toward the barrel line, ten feet below.

At that moment, Cressida wanted to be Lupe. She wanted Gustavo to suddenly get sick and go home. Then the secret couple could spend time together on the catwalk next to the tanks. It hurt Cressida to watch other people speaking freely with Richard, the one person she couldn’t be near. They talked to him without caring about him. They had no vested interest in his life or his future happiness.

Life was so unfair. They did not appreciate his company the way Cressida did. They did not know about how he had come to love his twins, watching the babies becoming boys, showing different aptitudes for music and sports. Suzie had at least given him something to love. But Lupe and Gustavo did not know how Suzie cooked mashed potatoes with lots of butter after Richard had repeatedly said he like baked potatoes with sour cream instead, nor did they know how he was a night owl and she was a morning person who purposefully slammed the cupboards while he was trying to sleep in broad daylight after a sixteen hour night shift, nor did Gustavo and Lupe know how his desires had been rebuffed repeatedly by the frigid skinny little weasel.

Instead of giving him affection, she complained about how cold his hands and feet always were and then she moved as far away from him as she could. She did not know how to love him, understand him, be good to him.

That was what Richard had told her, and she had imagined how she would warm him. They would someday lie together in their new and different bed, a million miles away from the constant flow of marital complaints Richard had shared with Cressida. Night after night.

Sometimes Cressida felt like the weight of Suzie, the boys, and their fifteen years of marriage was on her shoulders, and it was too much to bear. It was the same burden that had consumed Richard, eaten him alive years ago, until there was nothing left but the Carnival and the concentrator. Sometimes she felt as if his battle for freedom would consume her too. She was at the beginning, and needed to be strong, but she was already growing weary.

\* \* \*

After Levi returned to the plant and Cressida unloaded his flatbed, it was time for break. Cressida led Levi back to the bone yard. She wanted to be near the place where she had shared closeness with Richard, a place where she had felt deeply alive.

They began talking.

“Thurston told me an interesting story,” said Levi.

“Oh?” said Cressida, only half interested.



“He told me about this woman he was in love with while he was in high school, before he left for the South Pacific during WWII.”

“So?”

“So, his whole point was that sometimes people fall in love for all the wrong reasons. I got to thinking about how love sometimes isn’t love at all – it’s something else. And I wondered about how I really felt about Martha, and whether I had loved her for myself – to get me through hard times – or whether I had loved her for who she really was – for all time – which I’ve already told you, I didn’t think I could do, at least not in a way that keeps a marriage going.”

“What does Thurston know about these things?”

“You’d be surprised. There’s more to Thurston than you think.”

“I think he’s a surly old bible banger. Give me a break. Since when was Thurston the voice of reason?”

“Since always. I’m telling you. He may come off as gruff and ignorant, but it’s just a cover for the caring side. He’s a unique man. He’s intelligent and he helps me. Maybe it’s the same way you feel about Richard, only I don’t see how Richard could be Thurston’s equal. Thurston is older and wiser.”

The annoying comment made Cressida want to punch Levi and run away. She felt guilty for being mad at him, but it was his fault. He kept insisting upon insulting her future husband.

Oblivious, Levi continued. “Thurston makes no excuses. He’s clear cut. He’s not asking anyone to feel sorry for him. He just tells it like it is, unconditionally.”

“You need to give Richard a chance,” said Cressida, feeling snappy but restraining herself. At the same time, she sincerely wanted Levi to understand. “He’s one of the kindest people I’ve ever met!” she sputtered, practically choking on her words, feeling as though yesterday she could have believed them, but after the way Richard had treated her, she felt confused and somewhat beguiled by the apparent ruse.

“Let me know when you’ve got a good example of what you’re talking about, Cressida. OK?” Levi sneered, somehow disliking the man who had helped him not to choke on his own vomit in the tunnel. He remembered nothing of that morning, only the mid-day punch that broke a rib.

They were momentarily angry with each other, unable to speak.

Cressida wanted to scream out to Levi about how brave Richard was, about how he had more balls than Thurston could ever collect on a shelf.

“Sometimes, you just have no idea,” she said, angrily.

“What are you talking about?” Levi stared at Cressida as if he was looking at a complete stranger.

“I have no idea what I’m talking about,” said Cressida. She looked out into the darkness. The sun had set on the beginning of another night shift.

## VIII

### LOVE & WAR

Cressida kept her secret from Levi, and it gnawed at her slowly, whittling away at who she was. There was a time when Levi and Annie accused her of being too open, a complete romantic, revealing her entire heart and soul to anyone who would listen, which had caused her to suffer at the hands of lesser boyfriends more than once.

But she was changing, learning how to be something else, something less revealing, more difficult to understand, a nut less easily cracked by casual conversation, even with the closest of friends.

Cressida retreated into her dreams of the fall, refusing for the thousandth time to tell Levi anything about her other life, the one that had been developing all summer and slowly removing her from the world that the rest of Carnival lived in. She was doubly removed from normal life, once by the night shift and secondly by her secret, and she didn't know if she could stand it for much longer.

A small part of her was having second thoughts about the whole thing. She kept thinking she was crazy for wanting what she wanted, and perhaps, if she could find the strength, she would tell Richard she couldn't see him anymore – at least not until he was a free man and there would be no more doubts. She would no longer be someone's dirty little secret.

\* \* \*

The next afternoon, Levi drove his tractor to Cressida's house and pulled on the air horn. With a drink in her hand, Cressida's mother came to the front door in her bathrobe and waved. After pulling her mother back inside and chastising her, Cressida walked out to the idling tractor.

“What are you honking that thing for. I just got up. Are you crazy?”

“No,” said Levi, “Just lonely. Come on out to the fields and keep me company. Don't be so mad at me. Just because we're friends doesn't mean I have to like all the same people you like. And besides, where's your heart? I'm the one with the broken rib and a fiancé who's carrying someone else's baby.”

He caught Cressida's attention. “Do you believe that?” She stood near the open door of Levi's tractor and stared up at him.

“I don't know,” he said, rubbing his forehead, and then pulling a can of chew out of his shirt pocket. He took a large dip and said, “I've been doing a lot of thinking about the whole situation. Why don't you ride with me. I'll tell you all about it.

Please?”

Cressida climbed in the cab, and they rode out to the nearby strawberry field. A crew of migrant workers were cleaning up for the end of strawberry season, bringing in all the empty flats scattered amongst the hundreds of rows. The few ripe berries being loaded on the truck were some of the year’s last, and most were shriveled and sunburned. The unfilled flats would be hauled back to the main barns – by Old Weatherby’s house – and stored for the winter.

Levi pulled his flatbed trailer to the edge of the field. The twosome remained sitting in the cab together. “Thurston said the most amazing thing to me last night. I never got to finish telling you,” said Levi.

“Thurston said something amazing?”

“Now don’t start with me. I’d like to tell you about it OK?”

“I guess,” said Cressida.

“After you listen to my story, you can tell me something amazing that Richard said”

“Deal,” said Cressida.

Levi set the wheels in motion. Cressida began wracking her brain for something amazing Richard had said. Something she could actually share with Levi. Her eyes drifted off toward the Mexican workers, stacking flats on the truck, and diligently walking every row of strawberries looking for garbage that might get caught in cultivating equipment later on in the fall.

“Are you listening?” Levi waved his hand in front of Cressida’s face.

“Of course I am. Don’t I look like I am? Do I have to stare straight into your eyeballs the whole time you talk?”

“No, but you could at least pretend to look like you’re interested. You might actually get something out of it.”

“Whatever, Levi.”

“So here’s my story. Thurston told me that if love feels like a battle, you should be afraid of becoming a prisoner. You see, I don’t want to be Martha’s prisoner. She always made me fight for her. It was never easy. Thurston said, if you’re in love, and you feel like you are engaged in battle, feel like you have to defeat the opposition, or kill one thing to get something else, if you feel like there needs to be a victory over someone or a victory over something standing in your way, if one or all of these things are true, you should run for your life. That’s not love. It’s a battle, and it’ll always be one. Things that start out hard never get any easier. Thurston has really helped me to see that.”

“You know I don’t believe that,” interrupted Cressida. “If it isn’t hard, it probably isn’t worth having. That’s my motto. Like going to the moon.”

“I know what you think,” said Levi. “That’s why I’m telling you this story. Thurston said that Mrs. Pazzo was the easiest thing he ever won, but he didn’t have to defeat someone else to win her, didn’t have to wear down her resistance over several years, like I did with Martha. You see, they were always on the same team. They just had to find each other, and when they did, it was love at first sight. Did you know that they were childhood sweethearts, and they had known each other their whole lives? It

took coming back from the war to see things the way they were meant to be. So I guess it was kind of like love at second-first sight.

“He didn’t want the daily battle of fighting for the prettiest women in town anymore, feeling like a bull elk that has to ward off every horny yearling in sight. That kind of bull ends up wasting himself away trying to protect his rights. The war made Thurston realize he was sick of battles. He didn’t want to fight anymore, especially not for love. It’s not war. And it’s not a sporting event. You shouldn’t have to compete for affection. I walk around in my own house afraid some damned referee is going to pop out of that hideous green wallpaper and call me off-sides. In my own house!”

Cressida looked at Levi and laughed. She liked the part about the wallpaper. “Look, I’m sorry.”

“For what,” asked Levi, smiling back at her.

“For what you’re going through, and for being so snappy lately.”

“Oh, don’t worry. Anyone can have a bad day. Look at me.” He started to laugh at himself, but quickly grabbed his side. “Please don’t make me laugh. It still hurts too much.”

In Levi’s warm presence, Cressida softened. What was wrong with the easy kind of friendship that Levi had to offer? Still, she was convinced that what was harder – what required a demonstration of courage and resolve – was the thing which would yield the greater long term reward. The greater the difficulty, the greater the triumph. Right? That was what made heroes – people who had to face their fears

head on, not run away from something that scared the shit out of them. A great victory always took a great deal of suffering. Those were the battles that people remembered.

Cressida reminded herself that she was not afraid of suffering, but there were better and worse ways of getting to your goal. She wanted a better way. And she kept coming back to the idea that she and Richard should return to friendship until after his divorce. She wanted to rediscover with Richard the kind of friendship she felt with Levi. Simple and easy.

\* \* \*

At work that night, Cressida was curious to see whether Annie was of the same mind as Levi. She found Annie peering through a microscope in the lab, and Mario sitting on a clean white counter in his dirty Calvin Kleins.

“I thought you were responsible for keeping the counters clean, not sliding your dirty little ass all over them,” Cressida quipped.

“No,” Mario shot back, “that’s Annie’s job. She’s the maid.”

Annie did not move her gaze from the microscope’s eye piece, but she was no longer looking at mold. “Mario,” she said calmly, “I need you to go talk to Joleen again. Her buckets are full of the best berries your dad’s money can buy. See what you can do to help her out. OK?”

“Sure,” said Mario. He was unable to posture or rebuff. He liked the request.



“This may take some time,” he cautioned, “she’s a slow learner.” He left the lab.

“I know. Take all the time you need.” Annie winked at Cressida.

“Good old Mario,” said Cressida. “So easy to control. If you played him right, you could get him to eat his own shit.”

“Poor guy,” replied Annie. “He can be a real pain in the ass, but sometimes I feel sorry for him.”

“Sorry! Why? Because he’s so stupid?”

“Sure. Why not? What’s wrong with a little compassion? Maybe, if Mario had been raised in the Weatherby household, he wouldn’t have turned out so bad.”

“No, he’s a lost cause,” said Cressida. “Boys like Mario are born bad. They grow up to be men like Douglas, and my Dad.”

“You’re still that mad at you’re dad?”

“It comes and goes,” Cressida lamented.

Annie changed the subject with a surprise question. “When was the last time you had sex?”

“Why?” Cressida asked nervously.

“Only because I can’t remember the last time I had any,” said Annie. “I’m feeling sorry for myself tonight. Can’t you tell? I’ve been staring through this microscope for hours, thinking about how if I had to choose between Han Solo and Luke Skywalker, who would I choose?”

“Ah,” said Cressida, “the infamous Luke and Han dilemma.”

Cressida watched Annie counting the remaining mold on a slide, and kept quiet

about her suspicion that Annie was a virgin.

Annie never talked about real men, only Hollywood fantasies and other unattainables. As far as Cressida could tell, Annie had never had a boyfriend, only a handful of dates which were more friendships than dates, and there was no specific guy associated with her ambiguous loss of virginity.

As the mystery around Annie's sex life had grown, Cressida thought how strange it was that her very best friend wouldn't just tell her the truth. Cressida wanted to break down the wall, shatter the silence, get to the bottom of the mystery. She hadn't pursued it because she was pretty sure she already knew the answer.

The more difficult question was why? Cressida harbored the nagging suspicion that Annie never talked about her sex life because she wasn't interested in Luke or Han. Maybe Annie preferred Leah. And maybe her staunch Weatherby upbringing would not allow her to admit such a thing, even to herself. It was possible.

"OK, I'm done counting," said Annie. "You can talk to me now."

"Let's think about the Luke and Han question a little more," said Cressida. "I think what we are really asking here is whether we go for brains or brawn. Luke of course being the brains."

"I'd rather have Han," Annie replied quickly. "He's more straightforward, more obvious to know, not all mixed up in saving the empire and figuring out who is father is. Luke is fighting too many battles. He doesn't make love his top priority. But Han – he's in it for the romance. He comes right out and tells Leah how he feels. No mystery there."

“So you don’t want someone who has a higher calling like becoming a Jedi and saving the universe? You just want some cute smuggler to romance the hell out of you? Wear down your resistance with his cutesy-wootsey talk?”

“Maybe. What’s wrong with being pursued by a *simple* straightforward guy, with no strings attached, and no overpowering obligation to save everyone?”

“Because after a while, he’s probably got nothing to say. Great sex only lasts so long, Annie. I want a guy with a mission – a struggle I can believe in. A quest. I think I’d have to go for Luke. You can have Han. He’s too easy for me. Luke’s more of a challenge. He’d need my help. In the end, being with him would be more rewarding. Besides, I think he’s sexy.”

“Sexy?” Annie questioned. “Nobody thinks Luke is sexy. He’s almost as short as Mario. You always had such strange taste in men. Someone like Luke’s too much of a challenge. You’re never going to be his top priority.”

Cressida jumped at the chance to repeat her favorite line. “Annie,” she said, “love is a lot like going to the moon.”

“Here it comes,” said Annie.

“Remember what Kennedy said?” Cressida cleared her throat. “He said, ‘we choose to go to the moon, and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard!’ That’s what he said alright. What he meant was, it takes courage to do the hard things. There’s a big reward at the end of all the hard things. Neil Armstrong would know what I’m talking about. Too bad you and Levi don’t.”

“You can’t convince me. Remember what Levi always says? ‘Hard is always

hard. Hard never gets any easier.’ Why start with hard? Hard just gets harder. No thanks! I like my guys easy and up front.”

“Like your last five boyfriends?” Cressida said sarcastically. She wanted Annie to admit she’d never had a boyfriend.

“Ouch!” said Annie. “Spit and vinegar! That’s what you are tonight. You’re so dang mean. What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing!” said Cressida. “I’m just sick of this conversation.” She left the lab.

\* \* \*

After break and all the way until sunrise, Cressida fed the sort lines *and* the barrel line without enthusiasm. There wasn’t enough fresh fruit to keep the concentrator going all night, so Douglas had night shift mixing fresh and frozen stock.

Cressida’s lack of enthusiasm made the night drag unbearably. Catching rare glimpses of Richard every now and then, she realized how detached she was becoming from Levi and Annie. She could no longer trust and confide in them like she once would have.

The only person she could now trust was the unreachable Richard, off limits to her while she was on forklift, as if on another planet or in another universe, somewhere by the concentrator or back at the boilers, or in the maintenance trailer with Gustavo, or in the bone yard with a flashlight, looking for some limp-along part.

The bone yard was the last resort, the place where desperate night shift employees went looking for something to patch a problem until sunrise. The permanent solutions almost always came after daylight.

Cressida recognized the many limitations of night shift. In the morning, she went home feeling empty. She went to bed without eating. After tossing and turning for an hour, she fell asleep and had nightmares. She dreamed Richard was yelling at her for leaving the press, for trying to break up his wonderful marriage, and for killing Mario. After that scene, she found herself in a trench war. Smoke, bodies and guts everywhere. From the other side, Richard was shooting at her – trying to kill her. The dream was red and slimy.

She woke up feeling sick. She wanted to call Richard and tell him, hoping he could tell her it wasn't real and make all the bad feelings go away.

She ran to the bathroom and leaned her head down toward the toilet. Her stomach convulsed, but nothing came up. Her whole body was vibrating, tingling. She felt poisoned by the notion that Richard – the one person who shared her deepest secret – could be against her. She blamed Levi for putting the ridiculous notions of love and war into her head.

By 8:00 AM, Cressida was watching television – anything to keep her mind occupied. She ran in place and did sit-ups, trying to purge the poisonous thoughts from her body, and telling herself that such nutty mental wonderings meant absolutely nothing.

During her tormented morning, her mother was no help at all. She was

sleeping off last night's martinis, oblivious to Cressida and her problems, filled with the grief of her own problems – the departure of Cressida's father and where the money would come from, if the divorce proceedings went unfavorably.

A small part of Cressida thought of Levi and wanted to call him. She wished Martha wasn't there, and that he didn't have such large problems of his own, so he could focus on her instead. He had always been there for her, up until now.

That morning, Cressida felt abandoned – detached from her father and Levi. More importantly, she was unable to call the man she loved on the phone, or simply go see him. He was with a different family, one he had been with for fifteen years – more than half of Cressida's entire lifetime. How strange to think of it that way.

## IX

### SHOWDOWN

Walter was released from prison on Friday night at the end of June.

Saturday night, Levi's forehead began to pound when he pulled into the compound and saw Walter backing a truck into the dock. "I can't believe Douglas didn't fire the insane son of a bitch," Levi muttered. "Do I really have to continue working with him? The school year won't come soon enough. I've got to get out of this madhouse."

Gaining control of his emotions, Levi decided the best strategy was to avoid the crazy man, to pretend that in fact he himself had the upper hand, and that Walter could do no harm. To acknowledge Walter was to be reduced to his level.

Levi wondered what Thurston would do, or a wise pacifist like the Dalai Lama, or even what his own father might do in such a situation. Levi felt like a ball of snakes were wreathing in his stomach. Screw the Dalai. What he wanted to do was

beat the hell out of Walter. And screw Thurston too. Levi wanted to defeat his enemy and make him leave town. Although Thurston did have a point. If what Levi had with Martha was meant to be, he would not have to fight Walter for it.

Levi came full circle and decided that non-violence was best. His plan would have been fine had it not been for Walter.

“I asked Martha to come home to Winnemucca with me,” Walter called toward Levi.

Levi ignored him, hearing only the word Winnemucca and hoping Walter had said he was leaving town for good.

Walter called again, “Hey asshole, I’m talking to you.” Walter was walking across the yard toward Levi, who was standing by his truck near the scale shack. Mario was in the scale house, and the rest of the crew were inside the plant. It was 6:30 PM and Walter was dropping off his last load before going home to his dumpy studio apartment overlooking the interstate.

*Just ignore him,* Levi cautioned himself.

“Hey dickehead, I’m talking to you,” Walter persisted.

When they were within spitting distance of each other, Levi called on every fiber of restraint. “Look Walter, I don’t want to kill you right now, so just get the fuck out of my way.”

“She’s mine, and as soon as she’s well enough to travel, we’re leaving for Winnemucca. She just hasn’t told you the truth yet. She’s mine, and so is that goddam baby.”



“Here’s the deal,” said Levi, trembling with anger, “I’m not interested in anything you have to say, so why don’t you just get lost.”

“Why don’t you make me.”

Levi decided he was talking to someone with far lesser reasoning powers than poor Mario. “Step aside, Walter. I don’t have time for your shit.”

The fact that the two were standing within hitting distance in broad daylight had caught the attention of the women on the line. Lupe talked furiously with her friends, pointing in the direction of the scale house. The employee who was dumping flats at the head of the conveyor belt had stopped dumping fruit onto the line. Everyone was waiting to see what was going to happen.

When Levi tried to step aside, Walter stepped with him. Levi felt like he was back on the playground.

Walter was not going to let Levi into the plant. He wanted to make Levi throw the first punch, giving himself another reason to beat the shit out of Levi as a thank you for the jail time.

Not wanting to create a scene on Douglas’s property, Levi turned away from Richard and headed toward his tractor. Walter was craven. He jumped on Levi from behind and punched him in the side that had the broken rib, bringing Levi to the ground once again, this time with Walter on top of him. Before Levi could even turn around and fight back, Walter started punching him in the head.

Acutely sensitive to unfair beatings, Lupe – who had received her fair share – had seen just about enough. She yelled to three of her Mexican friends and stepped

off the line. She shuffled quickly toward the two men on the ground and began kicking Walter in the legs with her knee-high, steel-toed rubber boots, as hard as she could.

“You like? You like?” she shrieked, and stomped on his ankles.

One of Lupe’s counterparts joined in on the kicking, careful not to kick Levi, while two others opened the water valve full bore and dragged a cleaning hose toward the battle. One of the women frantically adjusted the nozzle to a laser sharp blast and pointed it on Walter’s head. They blasted him and screamed vehemently, demanding – in their own language – that Walter get up and leave at once.

“Goddam bitches. What the fuck!” he yelled back at them, wanting to hit them. He got up and ran toward his motorcycle, yelling, “Crazy motherfuckers! Goddam place. You’ll be sorry, Levi.”

Mario had run to the lab to get Gustavo, who came out just in time to see Lupe helping Levi get to his feet, and Walter tearing out of the compound in high gear and almost wiping out on one of the many large chuck holes in the Carnival’s driveway.

Gustavo shook his head, saying, “trouble, trouble. Only one person more trouble than you.”

Levi assumed he meant Walter. Gustavo had actually meant Cressida.

Gustavo would have loved to have an all Mexican crew. “Back to work, *andela*, *andela*,” he admonished the women. “This not our *problema*.”

Cressida had remained at her post at the press, afraid to leave, unable to hear because of the noise inside the plant, and oblivious to the events that had transpired

outside. When she saw Levi hobbling into the lab, she stopped caring whether Gustavo was trying to fire her and immediately ran toward him.

Levi had torn up his palms in the gravel where Walter toppled him, and he had a small cut near his eye. He was heading for sterile water and Band-Aids.

“What in the hell happened to you?” she cried out.

“Walter got me again.”

“How?”

“Trying to get me to throw a punch at him near the scale shack. It took everything I had, but I resisted. When I turned to walk away from him, he jumped me.”

“What a goddammed back shooter! That’s what he is,” exclaimed Cressida.

“Yah,” Levi agreed, “this whole thing with Martha has turned into a showdown. It just can’t be right.” Levi held his side.

“You said it,” Cressida agreed. “I’d like to kill that son of a bitch myself.”

“No,” said Levi. “Walter is not the root of my problems. Martha is.”

\* \* \*

At 3:00 AM, when Levi got home, his mother was waiting for him. She explained to him that Walter had come to get Martha around midnight. Walter had waited in the car, while Martha claimed the doctor had said she was well enough to travel. She left with Walter around 1:00 AM. She asked Mrs. Weatherby to tell Levi

she was sorry.

“You’re kidding,” Levi said. “Sorry? That’s all she said?”

“No. Not quite. In what little time she spent packing her things in one suitcase, she told me to tell you the marriage would have been a mistake, and that she only would have married you to get the Weatherby name – some respect. She said she loved you, but not as a husband, not as someone she wanted to spend the rest of her life with, even though she said you had always been more than kind. You’re just like your father. A good man. And she said she was sorry Walter hurt you. She didn’t want that to happen again, so she left. Mostly she kept saying how sorry she was for causing you all sorts of trouble.”

Levi sat down in a chair in his living room. All he could think of to say was, “I may be a good man, but I’m not like Dad.”

His mother, who remained standing, continued. “Oh, Levi, don’t be so silly, you’re father is a wonderful man. And maybe Martha had the right idea.”

“But she’s carrying my baby.”

“Oh,” said Mrs. Weatherby, calm but purposeful, showing little emotion. “She told me to tell you it wasn’t yours.”

“How can she know?”

“I asked her that. I even told her that she and the baby would be taken care of if she chose to stay. It’s the Weatherby way, of course, but she insisted that the only time she didn’t take her pill was when she was with Walter – that first time – in Winnemucca. She said she forgot to take her pills with her, when she left with him

from the Denny's that first morning, and that was when she thinks she got pregnant, in Winnemucca. She said she never forgot to take them when she was with you, so it had to be Walter's. That's what she said. Who knows about these things, Levi?"

"How comforting," said Levi. "She never forgot when she was with me."

"She said she couldn't have you taking care of someone else's baby for the rest of your life. She kept saying she was sorry for all the trouble. And she said, maybe she would write and let you know what happens."

"You know what's funny," said Levi.

"Is there anything funny?" his mother replied.

"The fact that he came back to work on a Saturday – which I'm sure Douglas doesn't know – just to pick a fight with me. What a crazy person."

"Not a very nice man, is he," said Mrs. Weatherby.

\* \* \*

As the sun came up, Levi felt a strange sense of relief. Things seemed to have come to their rightful end. He thought about the first time they had slept together, and how disappointing it had been. The fantasy he had built in his mind couldn't compete with reality. Martha's heart had never been in the relationship. Levi remembered how badly he had wanted to help her put her life straight, fix everything that had ever been wrong, make her feel like a worthwhile human being. He thought he had loved her enough to be able to do that.

In the early morning hours, as the golden rays of the new day poured over the fields surrounding his house, Levi realized he couldn't save anyone but himself.

X

## ABSTENTION

“She said she might write and let me know what happens,” said Levi in dismay. “Can you believe that?” He looked at Cressida and Annie.

Three hours in to the night shift, all three sat on the edge of the dumpster and drank beer with caution, holding the cans below the rim of the dumpster when they were not taking swallows.

Levi was doing remarkably well for someone who had hardly slept since getting the news in the early morning.

“Do you even care what happens to her?” Cressida asked.

“Of course I do. Don’t you know me at all? For god’s sake, I’ve been sleeping with that women – on and off – for the last four years.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in god, and besides, you haven’t slept with her for four months,” Cressida corrected, having reverted back to being mean and snappy

after her apology in Levi's tractor several days before.

"You are something else lately," Levi said, staring at Cressida. "Sometimes I don't think I even know you anymore. Why are you being so hard on me lately?"

"Because," Cressida explained, "it's just that she made you so miserable, and I guess I assumed you would be glad to get rid of her. That's all."

"I can't even respond to that," said Levi, shaking his head. "I thought you understood me. You know exactly what kind of a guy I am, and what I've been through. Even if she caused me problems, I *did* love her, and I really couldn't believe how quickly she changed her mind and moved on to someone else. The whole thing just happened too fast for me. It's going to take a while for me to adjust. Don't you get it?"

"No," said Cressida. "When someone makes you miserable, you should be happy when they're gone. The love stops there."

"Listen, little sister, the whole world is not as black and white as the moon and the sky. There's all sorts of gray out there."

"I'm not your sister and don't lecture me."

Cressida jumped from the dumpster and left Levi and Annie to stare at each other in amazement. They didn't understand, and couldn't have known. Cressida had wanted to hear Levi say he hated Martha for making him unhappy, in the same way she wanted to hear Richard say he hated Suzie enough to leave her.

"She's been so strange lately," said Levi.

"Yah, I've noticed," Annie agreed. "She really hurt my feelings the other day



in the lab.”

“How?”

“We were talking about what the most important quality in a man was, and Cressida basically implied that I didn’t have the first clue about relationships, just because she thinks I’m-”

“Well she’s right, you know.”

“See, that’s where you’re both wrong. Just because I haven’t slept around doesn’t mean I don’t know what I’m talking about – what’s important.”

“OK, OK,” said Levi, “I’m sorry.”

“You better be.”

“I am,” said Levi, “but, what’s the big deal? Why don’t you just tell her?”

“She doesn’t have to know every detail of my sex life.”

“Sex Life? What sex life? I think she already knows,” said Levi, “and that’s what makes her mad. She just wants you to be honest with her, like you would be with your own family. Just tell her you’re a virgin – unless you’re not – and that’ll be the end of it.”

Annie did not contradict Levi’s assumptions about her. She moved gracefully back to Cressida. “I used to think she was like my sister. Lately, I don’t feel like telling her anything that matters to me. Sometimes I wonder why we’re even friends anymore. Ever since her dad left, she’s been nuts.”

“Like she’s mad, or sad, or hiding something,” Levi offered, “something that goes beyond her Dad’s departure.”

“Yah, like that,” Annie agreed.

“I’ve noticed too. Maybe I should try to get to the bottom of this.”

“Good luck,” said Annie.

\* \* \*

Cressida and Richard stood near the maintenance trailer, overlooking the bone yard. The moon cast shadows on the dirty gravel and the shining metal parts littered all over the ground – parts that people were reluctant to throw out, parts they thought might be put back into service someday, parts that looked too good to throw out, but each had something wrong, otherwise they would not have wound up in the bone yard.

“I need to ask you something,” said Cressida, “and I have to make it quick, before Gustavo comes looking for me. OK?”

“Sure,” said Richard. “I have no secrets.”

“Are you still sleeping with Suzie?”

“What kind of question is that?”

“I mean have you slept with Suzie since you’ve been with me?”

“Why are you asking me?”

“You mean the answer is yes?” said Cressida. Her heart was pumping furiously, skipping a step here and there, like juice that failed to flow smoothly through the pipes, causing a pump to become air-locked and quit pumping altogether.

“I mean I can’t believe you don’t trust me,” said Richard. “Whatever I’m

doing, I'm doing it because I'm trying to make sure she doesn't think there is something going on. You and I both agreed it would be better in the long run, if the reason I got a divorce was because I couldn't live *with her* anymore, not because I couldn't live *without you*. Don't you agree?"

"Agreed, but that wasn't my question. I need to know. Please? Are you sleeping with her?"

"If you need to know, then the answer is no."

"Is the answer really 'no'? I mean are you really not sleeping with her? Because if you're still sleeping with her, I can't be with you anymore."

"I'm still sleeping in the same bed with her, if that's what you are asking?"

Cressida was frustrated and angry. "You know that's not what I mean. I would find it hard to understand, if you were still sleeping with a woman you intended on divorcing. You see, the deal is, you know my situation. You don't have to wonder about it. And I don't want to have to wonder about yours."

"We're in this together, aren't we. You and me. Aren't we?"

"Of course we are," said Cressida, feeling defensive and insecure. "Why would you even ask a thing like that?"

"Well, when you start asking me questions about what I'm doing, I start to wonder. After fifteen years of knowing a person, I think I can figure out what's the right way to go about asking for a divorce? She would start to wonder if I suddenly stopped sleeping with her, stopped showing any affection whatsoever."

Cressida wanted to scream. Why in the hell he was still showing affection to

someone he was planning on leaving? Instead, she thought about her height, and how some guys she dated had accused her of being overbearing, and how one guy had slept with her and then proudly exclaimed that he had slept with his first Amazon women. All Cressida had to do, this lover explained, was die her hair black before the next go around. Cressida didn't want Richard to get angry, insult her, make her feel ugly and worthless. She backed down, resolving to be more submissive, afraid that if she wasn't, she would drive Richard away too.

She said, "I guess I don't know why you have to wait until September then. Wouldn't it be easier to just do it now? Why postpone the agony? Don't we have much better times to look forward to after that?"

"Maybe if you were in my shoes, you'd understand."

Her short-lived resolve was being tested. "What's there to understand?" she said. "Either you're unhappy enough in your marriage to need a divorce or you're not. What else is there? It's seems pretty simple to me."

"You have no idea," he said patiently.

Throughout the conversation, Richard maintained a stoic lack of expression, as if to show Cressida that he understood her youngness and lack of experience in these matters. How could she know the delicate nuances of divorce? He reached for her hand and held it tightly.

"There is the fact that I still care about her as a human being," he said, "and she is the mother of my children. As unhappy as she makes me, I still think she loves me and wants to be with me. I know that must be hard for you to understand. Just

because she makes *me* unhappy doesn't mean I have made her unhappy, so unhappy that she wants a divorce. These things are not the two-way streets that people would like to have them be. I am not divorcing her because she's evil. I am divorcing her because we can't work things out, because she never made me feel the way you do. I've waited to feel this alive my whole life. I can't tell you what it's like to feel dead inside, trapped. I'm sick of feeling like that. There's a selfish part of all this. And if you really loved me, you would try to understand how I have to make it right."

"If I really loved you? Is there any question? My life is insane because of you. Do you know what I've become because of you? I can't even talk to my closest friends anymore. Levi and Annie think I'm a jerk. I can't share my happiness with anyone. Hell, I can't share my pain either. I'm going crazy. This is really hard. The biggest thing in my life is a nasty little secret. I feel like I'm walking around with a fifty pound bag of sugar on my back. Sometimes I feel like I'm on a 6-G planet, and I'm being crushed. Being me right now is no fun. I'm living for September."

"I told you that you would be afraid, that being with me was going to be a hard road."

"I'm not afraid," Cressida insisted. "Loving you is the easiest thing I have ever done. You've given me a reason to live. You've shown me the amazing power of love. If we can make it through this, I know we can do anything together. Don't you see?"

With weepy sad eyes, Richard looked into Cressida's. She stared at him, confused as to whether he was moved by her suffering or by his own. Was he

recognizing the mutual difficulty that they were going through, or was he sad because Cressida didn't understand the burden of his specific problem, a problem she didn't share. In any case, she was afraid to ask. She didn't want to upset him further.

Richard reached for Cressida and hugged her deeply. "I love you. Don't worry so much. Things will work themselves out in time. The only thing you have to do between now and September is work on your patience. Think about what it's like to end a fifteen year marriage and tell your children your are leaving their mother."

The issue of the children scared Cressida. She searched for courage, and said, "I just want you to know, I will love your twins in the same way that I love you. Because they are yours, I will love them with all my heart. I want to do right by them. And I do feel guilty about all this. I never thought I would be the type of women who would get involved with a married man. I'm not trying to pull you away from your kids. That's not who I am. I was never like that. If you could ask Levi, he'd tell you. This whole thing is so crazy. I know we didn't plan for this to happen. You can't plan falling in love with someone. Things just happened."

"And just because I'm married doesn't mean I can't appreciate a beautiful women with her entire life ahead of her. Sometimes I don't know about all this. I'm afraid I'm going to wind up hurting you. Maybe you should be afraid. I'll be honest. Sometimes I am afraid of what I'm doing. Sometimes it scares the shit out of me, and I don't know if I can do it."

"Don't say that," Cressida admonished. "You don't mean it. You're the bravest, kindest person I've ever met. Who else would worry so much about hurting a

women who has been so mean to him? Who else would be so concerned about doing it right? And because of that, I know you could never hurt me either. I love you with all my heart.”

“I love you too. You have made me feel whole and alive, in a way I’ve never felt before. At thirty-five, I was starting to feel way too old, like my life was already over, and I’d be stuck here until I was dead, without affection, without someone who was ready to give me everything they had to give. I feel young again. You’re an amazing lover. You make me feel reborn, like I have found something that makes me want to live, in a way I haven’t felt in years, probably since my parents died.”

“We’ve got a lot in common, I think,” said Cressida. “Take my parents. Even though they’re not dead, they might as well be. My mother drinks like a fish, and my father is out with that slutty bitch on the other side of the highway. I can’t count on either one of them. My mother was always too drunk to be reliable, and my father has abandoned me. He doesn’t have time for my problems anymore, like he did when I was younger, when I could count on him, before his bitch. I feel like I don’t have parents. They might as well be dead.”

“You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“Yes I do! Living with a problem that has no resolution is worse than being dead. Look at my mom. She has nothing left to live for. If I were my mom, I think I’d do myself in.”

“You shouldn’t say things like that. Aren’t you the one who goes around telling me – and everyone else – that there are always choices?”

“I don’t know what I’d do if I couldn’t be with you though.”

“Now you’re scaring me.”

“Why? What’s wrong with telling you I can’t live without you? There’s no harm in it. After all, we’re going to be together in September.”

“Sure we are,” said Richard. His dark brown eyes looking intently at her. He pulled her closer. “I love the way you smell,” he whispered, running his fingers on the skin under her shirt. “Promise me you will wait for me, no matter how long it takes?”

“I will.”

“Please meet me back here, in the bone yard, at the end of the night. Don’t go home. I need you.”

“OK,” said Cressida reluctantly.

She was angry with herself for not telling Richard she couldn’t see him anymore. She was also frustrated by his unwillingness to answer a simple question, a question she felt she had a right to ask. She was hurt by the vision of him sleeping in the same bed with his wife, possibly servicing her when the need arose – to prevent undo suspicions or complications before September. She was not fully satisfied with Richard’s reasoning for postponing the inevitable, but convinced herself that the results were what counted. As long as he was free in September, that was the important thing. She decided she was not in a position to judge him harshly for sleeping with his own wife, when she herself was involved in an affair with him. At the same time, she did not feel right about what was continuing to happen in the bone yard. She had to be patient, do the right thing. In light of her convictions, she



promised herself she would summon the courage tell him she couldn't meet with him until September.

If he went forward with his plan of asking for a divorce in the first part of September, and since they were already in the first part of July, that meant only two months of waiting. Cressida told herself there was very little time – a completely endurable amount of time – standing between right now and a lifetime of happiness.

She was sure that how the future would play out was dependent on how they acted during the next couple months. She wanted to do it right, make sure that she and Richard made none of the mistakes that people around them were making, none of the decisions that led to feeling trapped, led to feeling lost and confused, and led to wandering.

Yes, she told herself. She would break the news tonight for sure. Entering a marriage with a clean conscience was important, and she wanted to be sure he was divorcing his wife for the right reasons. Perhaps a part of her also wanted to be sure that Richard had incentive to leave. Why should she be giving him all of herself, when he couldn't do the same. Exclusive commitment. That was all she wanted. Yes, she resolved. She would tell him at the end of the night.

\* \* \*

Cressida went back to the press. Her heart was fluttering out of control, and her chest hurt. She rehearsed the way she would tell him she could no longer see him.

She sprayed the floor with water, shoveled paper-cake around in the dumpster, threw sheets of paper into processing tanks, checked sugar levels on the fruit mixes in each of the five tanks, and ran up and down the stairs to the catwalk that bordered the tanks. She watched pressed juice swirl in the collecting tank at the bottom of the press and get sucked into the lines which led back to the filter and then to the concentrator. She knew Richard was watching the same juice.

She thought about how the juice connected all of them, how the fresh strawberries came from Weatherby's fields, how they got dumped onto conveyor belts by the men, and how all the Mexican women and college girls' hands sorted the berries, and how the pumps from her father's shop moved fruit through the worm tank, through the heat exchanger, the processing tanks, and the press, and how all the lines in the plant led to Richard. Everything converged at the concentrator. How ironic it was, she thought that she was in love with the one person who controlled it all, the one who concentrated Douglas's profits, and the one who would soon be making her his bride – sometime after the fall, when he felt that it was appropriate.

Thoughtfully, Cressida reminded herself – if the entire process were to be included – the truckers like Levi were the true start and the finish of the process. Levi hauled the fresh fruit in, and then he then hauled the finished product away. If things were thought of in that way, then Richard was the bottle neck, the convergence zone where all things came together for a brief moment, then passed on to other places.

And all the people who ate ice-creams and jams and syrups with strawberry or raspberry concentrates in them could never imagine the all the efforts and all the

people who had gone into their desserts.

Cressida felt proud of her notion, and proud of the role that one man – soon to be her husband – played in the production of the final product. She also realized that she did not want to lose her friends in the process of becoming a wife. She thought a second apology was in order.

When she could see that Gustavo was talking to the Mexican women on the line, she set all her valves to drain a processing tank and run the contents through the press. With nothing to do but wait for the tank to empty, she went looking for Levi and Annie. She owed them a few sorries for her recent behavior.

She found her friends in the lab. Luckily, both Luther and Mario were out. Mario was taking samples from throw-away buckets, while Luther was staring at everyone's rubber-gloved hands moving on the sort line. Each said he wanted to make sure no one – other than Joleen – was throwing away high quality berries. Just like Gustavo, both Luther and Mario liked to spend time on the line with the women of their choosing.

Levi was sitting in his usual chair in the corner of the lab, just before midnight. While waiting for a truck to be loaded for the night's last run to the Multi-Freeze, he talked with Annie.

“You know,” said Levi, “Joleen is just not that good-looking.”

“Mario and Luther would disagree with you there,” said Annie.

“Exactly my point,” said Levi. “If they are the best thing she can attract, she isn't all that good.”

“If you ask me,” said Cressida, “that threesome is the creepiest thing going on around here. Can you see Joleen doing it with either Luther or Mario?”

“Sure why not,” said Annie, “after all, she did it in Walter’s sleeper with Leyland before Leyland got fired for loaning Mario his bike.”

“No!” said Cressida.

“Yes!” said Annie.

“Can we please avoid all conversations having to do with Walter,” Levi sighed.

“Sorry,” said Annie. “What I wanted to tell you guys is that I think Mario has joined the coke club.”

“No shit?” Cressida gasped.

“Yah,” Annie continued, “on a break, I went to my car to get my thermos, and I saw Dexter, Luther, Joleen, and Mario pulling into the parking lot in Dexter’s truck. They were packed like sardines in the cab, and Joleen was sitting on Mario’s lap.”

“You actually think Mario was out snorting with them?” Levi said in disbelief.

“Why not?” Annie argued, “stranger things have happened here.”

“Like what?” Cressida asked cautiously.

“If you really want to talk about creepy Carnival gossip, and if you are asking me what I think is the absolute creepiest, I think it would have to be Lupe and Gustavo.”

“No way,” shrieked Cressida. “What makes you think that?”

“You can’t be serious,” agreed Levi, clearly disappointed in Lupe’s taste.

“Where do you get all this information?”

“It’s true,” said Annie. “Look, the lab is the hub. Everyone comes in and out of here. Just like you Levi. They come in here, sit in that chair you’re sitting in, and start telling me things. I’m like the Carnival counselor. You’d be surprised what people tell me. They think I’m little Miss Innocent, and either they’re trying to shock me, or they think I won’t say anything.”

“They were right about the innocent part,” Cressida smirked.

“What makes you think you know all my secrets,” Annie said defensively.

“Just because I don’t fuck around—”

“OK, OK,” said Cressida. “Sheez, can’t anyone take a joke around here? Forget I said it. Just tell us about Lupe.”

“All right,” said Annie, “Just remember, sometimes there’s more to people than what meets the eye.” Then she became quiet and thoughtful.

“I’m waiting for you to finish about Lupe,” Cressida prodded.

“Listen Cressida,” said Annie, “I’ll tell you a secret before the night’s over, if you’ll tell me one of yours.”

Cressida’s mind started spinning. She wondered if Annie was trying to get her to admit something she already knew, in the same way Cressida herself was already pretty certain about the virginity secret. What if she told Annie about Richard? At least she would have someone to talk to then.

Cressida smiled and said, “Deal. A secret for a secret, but Levi, you are out on this one. Sorry. So finish your story Annie. What about Lupe?”

“So I walked out to the dumpster to get a paper-cake sample, while Gustavo was teaching Lupe the press, and there they were kissing by the conveyor belt, right next to the door. How tacky, if you’re asking me.”

“Yah, that’s tacky all right,” Cressida nodded nervously.

“You’d just about have to be insane to get involved with someone from the Carnival,” said Levi. “Although, I will admit that Gustavo is slightly better than Jesus. Gustavo may play favorites with the Mexicans, but he’s not an abusive son of a bitch like Jesus.”

“Sure he is,” Cressida argued.

“Now what would make you say that?” Levi asked.

Annie interjected, “Cressida thinks he’s been sabotaging the press pump, because Cressida is spending way too much time away from her post. She thinks he’s psychologically abusing her.”

“Doubtful,” said Levi.

“That’s what I told her,” agreed Annie. They both looked toward Cressida.

“Then who the fuck is tampering with my valves? Tell me, who?”

“Not Gustavo,” said Annie. “He and Richard are bucking for that plant manager position Douglas has been talking about. Remember we had this discussion days ago. Why would he go and do something stupid. I just can’t see him purposefully letting Douglas’ product pour down the drain, just to get at *you*?”

“I told you why,” said Cressida.

“Because you’ve been spending too much time around Richard?” asked Annie.

“Not a good enough reason!”

“Agreed,” said Levi, “besides why do you spend so much time around that loser anyway. I don’t know what you see in him. He’s one of those guys that—”

“I know what you think,” Cressida interrupted. “Let’s not talk about it.”

Feeling like she needed to hurry up and apologize before the conversation made her feel like she didn’t want to, Cressida said, “listen guys, I have to go back to the press. My break is over. But I did want to say I’m sorry. I know I’ve been kind of a jerk lately, and I’m just sorry.”

With that Cressida left the lab, not allowing Annie and Levi to thank her, ask her why, or tell her that her apology was unnecessary. She wondered what secret she might tell Annie, and what Annie was going to tell her. Not planning to tell Annie the whole truth, she knew she still needed to preserve her sense of friendship with others. Anticipating the loneliness that would set in after she told Richard she couldn’t see him anymore, she knew she would need people like Annie and Levi for comfort, even if they didn’t know why.

“I can’t remember her ever apologizing to either one of us for anything,” said Annie.

“She never needed to before,” said Levi. “There’s something wrong. She hasn’t been herself this summer.”

## XI

### THE LAST TANGO

Monday morning, the shift ended at 4:30 AM. Everyone went home except for Cressida and Richard who were preparing to flush out all the pipelines with chlorine. Cressida had successfully gotten through the night without revealing any secrets to Annie, which was a good thing, because she still wasn't sure what she was going to say. Conveniently, Annie also appeared to have forgotten their agreement, and went home with only a parting wave from across the plant.

Richard had made the decision to flush the lines. It was an excuse to allow Cressida to stay behind and help him without things looking funny.

She poured twenty ounces of industrial strength chlorine into the worm tank, and watched the stainless steel auger – the *gusanos* – at the bottom of the tank, spin around and push chlorine into the piping system. She also ran a hose from a spigot into the tank, allowing the cold water to carry the chlorine toward the heat exchanger



where it was heated to boiling and pumped into the five processing tanks, then pumped through the press, through the filter, and through the concentrator to the finishing tank that stood near the vacuum effects.

Cressida thought how ironic it was that she was using an activity she hated – cleaning with the chokingly powerful chlorine concentrate – to get closer to the man she loved. She poured the remaining concentrate in the bottom of a small bucket onto her hands and watched the berry stains disappear. Before the chlorine started burning beyond the rough outer calluses and into her flesh, she held her hands under a hose and let the cold water wash away the hot cleansing reaction. After that, she went to the lab and washed her hands with soap and warm water to try and remove the awful smell.

“Are you almost done?” Richard popped his head into the lab.

“Yes, I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

She met Richard at the edge of the bone yard, behind the maintenance trailer per their usual *modus operandi*. Under a clear sky and new moon, the bone yard was exceptionally dark, which gave Cressida a strange sense of discomfort.

“What took you so long,” Richard teased.

“I got here as fast as I could,” Cressida replied testily.

“I was teasing.”

“Oh.”

“Thanks for meeting me,” he went on, smiling like a child who had not yet gotten a treat. “It was important for me to see you tonight, because I want to tell you

how I couldn't stop thinking about you all day. I feel crazy, like I'm twenty again. And I wanted to thank you for helping me to see that I could change my life, if I wanted to."

"I wanted to talk to you about that too," Cressida said seriously, trying to change the mood of their meeting and summon the resolve to do the right thing — break off the physical relationship until after the divorce.

"Me first," Richard cut in. "I was talking first. I'm the one who invited you here. I wanted to tell you that Suzie is not getting to me as much as she used to. Now that I know it's going to be over soon, my relationship with Suzie has become amazingly manageable, like how a person must feel when they've given two weeks' notice and the boss can't hurt them anymore. When Suzie complains about me working night shift, it doesn't upset me. I don't try to defend myself. I just think about you and about how much a part of the night shift you are, and how I can't wait to get here and see you in the bone yard. You see, Suzie knows what makes the money come in. And when I get my paychecks from Douglas, I don't get so mad about how he's cheating me, not paying me what I'm worth, about the unfairness of it all — me making Douglas rich, and not getting a fair wage in the process. But I'm getting better than most in this screwed up little community, and so now I think about what I've got, and I'm thankful instead of bitter. Working for Douglas has delivered you into my hands. Please don't stand so far away."

"Well, there's something I've been meaning to tell you."

"Whatever it is, it can wait. I need you now."

“You’ve got me.”

“No, I mean I need to have you. I’ve been waiting all day for this. Please. I need you. Don’t be standoffish. That’s not what our relationship is about.”

Cressida’s resistance was waning. She stepped toward Richard and hugged him. She felt the strength of his arms and had a bizarre thought. She noted that Levi’s arms were bigger than Richard’s, that Levi was younger, taller and more muscular, and that in fact his whole body was in better proportion than Richard’s and for the briefest instant, she wondered what Levi would look like with his clothes off.

As she remembered how Martha had left Levi, she hugged Richard harder and thought how strange it was that certain relationships – like Levi’s and Martha’s – never quite made it to marriage. Though she would never admit it to Richard, the thought unnerved her.

“I don’t know about all this, Richard.”

“Why? Are you scared.”

“I told you before. I’m not scared of anything, when it comes to you.”

Richard had struck a chord. Suddenly, Cressida felt determined to prove she wasn’t scared more than she wanted to stick to her guns and tell him she couldn’t see him anymore.

Instinctively sensing an upper hand, Richard led Cressida over to the derelict pulper where he had had her the first time. Other times had been on the metal floor in the maintenance trailer, in the nearby storage barn surrounded by barrels, buckets, and pear concentrate, and then in the lab after everyone had gone and he had asked her to

bend over onto the counter. There hadn't been enough room, and her head kept bumping into the microscope that Annie used for counting mold. They never did it face to face. Cressida assumed that it was because they could separate more quickly, if caught. Stand up and look like they weren't doing anything. It seemed lame, but it was the only reason she could think of. But there was no one left at the plant that night.

"I've got a better idea," said Cressida. "Why don't we go over to the willows and make love in the tall grass, away from the smell of diesel and creosote. No one will see us there. It's nicer. The vetch and clover smells so sweet this time of year."

"But I like it here," he protested. "The equipment turns me on. And I don't smell anything."

As he took down her pants and gently pushed her forward, she looked into the darkness and tried to stifle the tears. He did not talk to her, console her, or ask her if she was OK. She assumed he took her strained breaths as the breathing of someone receiving pleasure. She felt disgusting, as if it was just for him, dispassionate, and remote. She passed it off to her own distraction – her aborted desire to tell him she could no longer see him.

She felt a sadness that she could not explain – the same feeling she had had when she had gotten in trouble with Gustavo for leaving the press, when she and Annie took Mario to the hospital, and Richard had sided with Gustavo, pretending to be mad at her for abandoning the press. She knew he had to do it, and she had forgiven him for the ruse. She reminded herself that unusual situations brought about

unusual behavior, and that after September, things would be normal.

Through his aggressive thrusts, she felt neither pain nor pleasure. Her mind drifted off to a time in the future when they would have their own bed, when they could cuddle under satin sheets and make love face-to-face, with maybe a fire in the master bedroom and candles burning on a grand mantel, and an album playing in the background. She did not question Richard's choices, always blaming his actions on the awkward and unusual circumstances that had brought them together.

When Richard was done he stood up hastily. "Can I see you tomorrow after work?" he asked. "I was thinking we may be able to shut down early and then, if you really want, we could drive somewhere for a change."

As he addressed the vision of what she was hoping for, she found it impossible at that moment to tell him what she was really thinking, that tomorrow she would have to cut things off. She no longer wanted to feel sad, and assumed the situation was cheating her out of the man – the lover – she knew Richard could be in the fall, in the confines of a house and under the blessing of a marriage certificate.

"I really need to talk to you, Richard."

"I know," he reassured her. "I have many things I want to say too, but I have to go home. It's late as it is, and I don't want Suzie to start wondering where I am. She might call Douglas's office trailer and leave a message asking where I am or something. I can't risk her doing that again. That's what she did when I got back so late from the trestle. I have to be extra careful now."

"OK," Cressida said reluctantly, feeling empty and unsatisfied. "But I really

need to talk to you tomorrow. I'll meet you out here at the ten' o'clock break. OK?"

"Deal," said Richard. "I gotta go."

Richard practically ran back through the building to the parking lot on the other side. He seemed happy and smiling, which gave Cressida reassurance that everything was OK with him and with their plan. And she knew that her little mini-plan, which she would divulge at 10:00 PM the next day, would be the right thing in the long run. She never wanted to make love leaning against a rusty old piece of processing equipment again.

\* \* \*

Throughout the next morning, Cressida wrestled with her resolve. She had difficulty sleeping and got up around noon with less than five hours of sleep behind her. She tried to listen to music, thought about going to the mall, thought about her mother who was still sleeping in the quiet house. Cressida wondered whether her mother would try to find a job after the divorce was final, or whether her father would willingly give the kind of settlement that would ensure her mother would never have to work again. He could, but it was doubtful. Cressida herself had always worked, knowing full well how her father felt about giving anything away for free, like his own hard earned money to his daughter. Before he would ever bale her out, she always had to earn as much as she could on her own. Although the attitude might hurt her mother in the settlement, Cressida herself didn't mind. She liked to work, was even glad for

the work because it kept her out of the house, away from her mother, and with the friends she enjoyed like Levi and Annie, and now Richard.

Levi called around 2:00 PM and said he and Annie were going to get breakfast, and asked if she wanted to join them. She was glad for the distraction and met Levi and Annie at the I-5 Denny's.

"Levi?" said Cressida.

"What?" Levi smiled. His reddish-blond hair sticking straight out like a small child's crew cut. He rubbed his own calloused knuckles and looked out the window.

"Why don't we go somewhere else," Cressida offered. "There's a Shari's down the road."

"I'm not running," said Levi. "This is fine."

"You know Levi is not going to let a memory control his life," explained Annie. "This was always our favorite spot before Walter blew in and then blew out."

"I'm fine guys," said Levi reassuringly. "Let's drop the subject. I'd prefer not to talk about either one of them for a while, if that's alright with everyone else. Annie, why don't you share some plant gossip or something, instead."

"Anything new," Cressida asked, pretending to be interested, but always fearful of what Annie might say.

Annie obliged. "Have you guys noticed how Joleen isn't being quite as mean to Mario as she used to be? She just loves all the attention. The worse of a job she does sorting, the dumber she acts, the more attention she gets from Luther and Mario, but especially from Mario. He's hardly ever in the lab anymore, which is fine by me.

He's always out on the line with that group of college girls."

"That's nothing new," Cressida said half-heartedly. "So what's up?"

"Well, the words out she's actually kind of sweet on him."

"No!" said Levi, putting his dirty Ford hat back on his head with an unbelieving jerk. "Even Joleen's taste isn't that bad. I bet they hang out together because Mario is buying. The coke club. That business. We all know Joleen's got sticky fingers. And she'd never say no to anyone who's buying."

"Drugs yes," said Cressida, "but sex, no way. There's no way she would sleep with a creepy little worm like Mario."

"Wanna bet," said Levi. "She'd sleep with anything. She'd probably even have slept with Walter if... never mind."

"OK," said Annie, rapidly redirecting the subject back to Mario. "I bet twenty bucks she sleeps with him by the end of the month, if not sooner. End of July. That's my bet. Any takers?"

Levi and Cressida agreed.

"And there's something else I've been meaning to mention," said Annie, getting serious. "Cressida, people have been talking. They think Richard's got the hots for you or something. Maybe you should stay away from him."

"What?" said Cressida, trying to be dismayed at the notion, but trying not to overdo her reaction.

"The further away from him," said Levi, "the better. That's what I say. He's no good to anyone, not even himself."



“Levi, don’t wreck my breakfast,” said Cressida, getting annoyed. “I told you guys how nice he’s been to me. I can’t believe people think he’s got the hots for me. That’s ridiculous.”

“What’s not to be hot for?” said Levi, increasing his volume. “You act like you’ve never looked in the mirror or something. Don’t you see what other men see? You’re beautiful. Why don’t you see it? You’re ten times better looking than Joleen. She’s just easy. That’s all. But you? You intimidate men. You’re too smart for a lifer like Richard, or for any of those young guys at the plant. You need someone who sees you for what you are and can give you what you deserve.”

“Levi, not so loud,” cautioned Annie. She watched Levi’s passion as he spoke. His face was red. “Levi, did you hear me?”

“Sure I did. I just don’t want Cressida, over here, to make the same kinds of mistakes I’ve made.” He looked at Cressida. “You need to stay away from a guy like Richard. He’ll suck you dry. He pretends to be nice because he’s got a guilty conscience. Anyone who talks about his wife the way Richard does should be ashamed of himself. That poor women. If she only knew.”

“I thought we agreed not to argue about Richard,” pleaded Cressida. “Look if we don’t talk about Walter and Martha, I say we don’t argue about Richard anymore either. Please? You’re going to wreck my breakfast any minute.”

“OK,” Annie agreed. “Let’s end this discussion, but Cressida, big brother over there has got your best interests in mind. Just think about it. You don’t want people laughing behind your back because Richard’s following you around like you’re a bitch

in heat. Just think about what we said.”

“We?” said Cressida, “What’s this ‘we’ shit? Do you guys really think he’s after me?”

“Well,” explained Levi cautiously, “I bet he’s not after you exactly, but maybe after what you’ve got. I think a guy who’s stuck like that looks at someone like you, a gorgeous college girl, with long blonde hair and a nice bod’ hidden under those big dirty T-shirts and saggy jeans, and maybe he’s just after a fantasy, a feeling, an escape from the predicament he’s gotten himself into. A cheap thrill.”

“Levi,” said Cressida, blushing, “what’s with you. Just shut the fuck up about the body and hair shit OK. You have no idea what I look like naked any more than Richard does.”

“I’ve got eyes.”

“Well, use them to look at your tachometer, not my asshole.”

“Now, why in the hell would I be looking at your asshole? I said bod’, not asshole. Even though I am an ass-man, and you do have a decent one.”

“Is that all men care about? My ass?”

“How cliché. I’m not *all men*. And I’ll thank you very much to keep that in mind.”

“If the shoe fits.”

Annie laughed and cut in. “If I didn’t know any better, and I was sitting at that table over there, I’d guess you two were a squabbling married couple or something. Cut it out. Now the two of you are wrecking *my* French toast. Be friends. OK?”

Deal?" she asked, sensing some underlying tension between the two that she had not seen before.

"OK," said Levi and Cressida in unison, though Levi was smiling and Cressida was sneering. She wanted to leave the table for what they had said about Richard, but she was scared to let any excess emotion flow out. She might give herself away.

\* \* \*

When the 10:00 PM break came, Cressida's heart was racing. She was anxious to tell Richard she couldn't see him anymore. She knew she would feel better after she lifted the burden of lying. Then Richard would be the one who would have to do something.

She went looking for him. He was not in the bone yard or the equipment trailer or Douglas's office, or even in the storage shed with all the empty barrels and five-gallon buckets, and pear concentrate. She finally found him at the outflow to the sump pond.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, feeling irritated by the breach in their agreement. "I thought we said we'd meet at the bone yard."

"Things come up all the time around here. Don't make me feel like I'm talking to Suzie," Richard warned. "I don't need to defend myself. That crappy sump pump your father sold me has been overheating. I don't know. Maybe there's a plug in the line. I came out here to see how much water is flowing into the pond. I can't let

the floor inside the plant get flooded just because you want to talk.”

His cold explanation of priorities made Cressida feel good about what she was about to say.

“You won’t have to worry about choosing between talking to me and flooding the plant anymore. I came back here to tell you I can’t see you anymore.”

“What?” said Richard, suddenly giving Cressida his full attention. Disappointment was all over his face.

“You heard me. I can’t do this anymore. I’m not this kind of person. I hate sneaking around as much as you do.” She turned around and scanned toward the building, reminding herself that she needed to be careful. She stepped closer to Richard and lowered her voice to a whisper. “It’s just too damn hard for me to hold all this in, and walk around the plant like there’s nothing between us. It hurts too much.”

“I know what you mean,” Richard agreed. “There are times when I want to sweep you in my arms, the way Levi does with you and Lupe when he’s joking around, and show everyone that you are mine – not anyone else’s – just mine. I’m the lucky man who has you, who wants you, who does you.”

“I can’t wait for that time too, but I can’t go on the way we are going on right now. It’s killing me to hold all this in. It’s just too much. I’m sorry if it seems selfish, but I would feel a whole lot better if we didn’t have to sneak around. We can start again in September, with a clean slate and nothing to hide.”

“How am I supposed to wait until September?” he said loudly, as if trying to

be heard. "You're asking me to leave you alone for two months? Or more? How am I supposed to do that? I need you in my life. I need you to be mine."

"I feel the same way. Don't forget, this is going to be hard on me too, but I'm hoping it will be easier than what I'm feeling now. I can't sleep at night anymore. I'm not hungry. I can't think about anything else. I feel like I'm going crazy. It's only two months. We can do it."

"I don't know," said Richard, grinning.

"I mean it. I can't see you anymore like this. It has to be September."

"I don't know about this. What if it's not September. What if it's later? And what if you find someone else in the meantime?"

"That's insane," said Cressida, losing her whisper, getting caught up in the moment and forgetting the world around her. "There is no one but you. How can you say that?"

"People change their minds all the time. Life is full of choices. Sometimes I'm afraid you won't wait for me, that you will think I'm too old for you, or you'll decide you don't want the baggage of being a step-mother at such a young age. My boys are almost as old as you are, for christsakes."

"I can handle it," said Cressida. "If you know me at all, you should know I'm not worried about the boys or about the wait. Doesn't the idea of splitting until September show just how much I believe in us. I can wait. Trust me. Once I am committed to something, once I finally give in to something, it's a one way trip for me. I am the most loyal person you'll ever know. You have to believe me."

“I was never one for unconditional faith. Things change. And then, being a reasonable man, I have to change with them.”

“But you’re in control of your life,” said Cressida, “and in control of our destiny together. There’s no reason to ever lose faith in me, in us. I know *I* never could.”

With that, Cressida looked at him sternly, trying to convince herself as much as him, and repeated one word. “September.”

She walked away from Richard without looking back, feeling courageous and scared as hell. Feeling the need for trusted company, she went to the lab. Break was almost over.

“You never told me a secret,” Annie reminded her. “Remember we made a deal last night? How ’bout telling me something, right now. A secret for a secret?”

“I’ve got a better idea,” said Cressida. “If you buy the beer, I’ll go with you to the trestle, we can watch the sunrise, and I’ll tell you anything you want to know about one thing. And in return, I can ask you one question, and you’ll promise to tell me everything about that one thing. But only *one* thing.”

“Deal,” said Annie. “But let’s do it tomorrow, instead of tonight. There’s no way we’re going to get out of here before sunrise.”

“Agreed. Next early night, we go to the trestle and have confession.”

## XII

### CONFESSIONS

In semi-darkness, at about 5:00 AM on Wednesday morning in the middle of July, Cressida and Annie scrambled up the steep grassy slope below the trestle, trying to beat the sunrise. Each with a six pack of Hamm's in hand, they got to the railroad grade and walked ten feet onto the tracks before sitting down on the rail facing east. They looked out into the sprawling Multnomah Valley and the dark silhouettes of familiar shapes. Barns, hedgerows, farm houses, and the foothills of the Cascades. The outline of Mt. Hood was barely visible through the growing cumulous clouds on the distant horizon.

That morning they were not interested in the tunnel on the other side of the trestle. They only wanted to get drunk, watch the sun come up, and share secrets.

"OK, who gets to go first?" asked Annie.

"You can ask me the first question," said Cressida. Too many hours had

passed since her resolution to be somewhat honest with Annie about Richard. She had chickened out, deciding instead to allow Annie to ask some innocuous question, and then Cressida would ask her to come out with it – just admit once and for all that she was a died-in-the-wool, honest-to-god virgin.

“I’ve been thinking for several hours,” said Annie, as she started guzzling her first beer, “and I know what I want to ask, but I’m afraid to ask, because I’m afraid of the answer.”

“Oh come on,” Cressida laughed nervously, hastily gulping her own beer. “Don’t be such a chicken shit. Just ask me. There’s nothing I can’t tell you.”

“OK, then,” said Annie, “here goes. I’m not sure how to ask this, so I’m just going to come right out and say it. Promise, you’ll be honest?”

“Yes, yes,” said Cressida, “of course. Why would you even ask?”

Annie threw her first beer can off the trestle. They were not far enough out on the trestle to be over the road. The can landed quietly in the sloping tall grass below. As she popped the top on the second can, she asked, “is there something going on between you and Richard?”

Cressida sucked in her breath and accidentally drew beer into her wind pipe. She began gasping and coughing. She hacked and spit off the edge of the bridge, then opened her second can and drank several swallows to clear her throat. Her eyes were watery from the fit of coughing.

“Are you OK?” asked Annie.

“I’m fine,” Cressida coughed, and cleared her throat repeatedly. “You just



surprised the hell out of me. That's all. What in the living hell made you ask me that?"

"People aren't so dumb as you think. I've seen you talking with Richard. Levi has seen Richard putting his arm around you by the concentrator."

"You can't listen to what Levi says. He hates Richard. He's not a reliable witness."

"That's ridiculous? Levi never lies."

"I didn't mean Levi was a liar. I meant what have you seen for yourself that would make you ask me that?"

"I don't know. Hey, this isn't even fair anyway. I thought we were going to tell each other something without having to defend the question. Are you going to answer me or not?"

"Do I even have to tell you the answer? Don't you already know? Of course not! That's ridiculous."

"I don't know," Annie said with trepidation, while finishing her second beer. "You ought be careful then."

"What are you talking about?" Cressida forced out a laugh.

"If there's nothing going on, then you ought to be careful, because I could see Richard trying to make a move on you. He acts like a stupid puppy dog, wandering around lost, looking for you all the time. Sometimes I watch him from the lab. I can tell he's looking for you. He walks up the stairs to the catwalk by the tanks. If you're not there, he wanders down by the press, or out the side door around the dumpster, and

then back in. Sometimes I see you go back to the concentrator and you are gone long enough to make people wonder. I know you like talking with him, but he's a guy, and they all want the same thing."

"No they don't. What experience are you basing this on? Which leads to *my* question. Who was the last guy you slept with?"

Annie became quiet, looking seriously at her Hamm's can. "Promise you won't tell Levi?"

"I'm good on my word," said Cressida, trying to recapture the better part of herself, the part that didn't feel like a hypocrite and a habitual liar. "You know I would never betray a confidence. I just want you to be honest with me."

"Leyland," Annie blurted. "I slept with Leyland. Three weeks ago, before he was fired."

"What?" Cressida lowered her beer from her mouth in disbelief. "Leyland? How could you? He must have fucked every white girl in the plant. Do you know how many times he came over and told me he was going to fuck so-and-so before the night was out. He's the biggest male-slut I've ever known."

"Exactly," Annie frowned. "I used him the same way he uses other women. We did it in the back of Dexter's truck on the 2:30 AM break. I don't even know whether he had asked Dexter for the use of his truck in advance or not. But it was convenient that Dexter didn't park near any yard lights that night. I just wanted to see what it was like. I was curious. That's all. It sucked." Annie threw a nearly empty can outward with a spin, and beer foam sprayed into the sky. "He was drunk. It felt

sloppy and awkward. When he tried to kiss me, I felt like the dog was licking me. I don't even know whether he came or not. At first it really hurt, then he went limp and practically fell asleep on top of me. I pushed him off, pulled my pants up and went to the bathroom. I was embarrassed. I felt ashamed of myself. I could smell it. I wanted to make sure no one else could smell it, especially not Luther or Mario standing so close to me in the lab all the time the way they do. Do you think other people can smell it?"

"Put it this way," explained Cressida, "I've never smelled Joleen before. "If you could smell sex, Joleen would reek!"

"She probably does," argued Annie. "Maybe women just can't smell each other."

"Aargh! This is so disgusting. I don't want to think about Joleen's putrid sex organs. Let's change the fucking subject. Lordy!"

"Sorry. I was just trying to explain about how I was worried. I felt gross until last week when I got my period. I was kind of worried about being so stupid. Leyland didn't use a condom."

"Maybe you should go on the pill."

"No way," declared Annie. "I'm going back to what Grandma Weatherby told me when I turned sixteen. She said I should never give away the slices away for free, because then guys don't want to buy the whole loaf. I gave away one slice and that was enough. I have no intention of giving away anymore, until I find the right one and get married. Sometimes it's not so bad to be old fashioned. I don't care what anyone

thinks. If everyone's like Leyland, I'm not missing anything anyway."

"Amen to that, sister. Hallelujah."

Annie and Cressida clinked beer cans, polished off the last of their thirds and moved onto fourths. Going back to the question of preferring Leah, Cressida wondered whether the bad sex with Leyland was further proof of her suspicions. Annie saying she was going to wait for the perfect guy was like saying she might never have sex with a man again. Nobody was perfect, not even Richard. She concluded Annie was making excuses, and probably didn't like men in the first place.

"Can I ask you another question, Cressida?"

"Sure, why not," said Cressida reluctantly.

"Are you on the pill? There's no one in your life right now. You're not planning on sleeping with Richard are you?"

Annie was not convinced Cressida was telling the whole truth. Annie knew about the half-dozen men Cressida had slept with and been hurt by.

"Don't be ridiculous," said Cressida defensively, knowing that Annie knew about her bad judgment when it came to relationships.

Annie always told her she was a candidate for a mistaken leap of faith, and that she was always putting her trust in the wrong guys, reading a little too much into some bad situations.

"Why do you keep bringing that up?" Cressida continued. "Sleeping with Richard would be insane. He's a married man, and I'm not that way. I would never stand between a man and his marriage. I respect the institution. You know me. I

would never do that. It's not right." Cressida felt sincere in her answer. Having cut things off with Richard, she was once again practicing what she preached.

"You don't have to convince me of who you are," said Annie. "We've been friends long enough, and I know we agree on these things. It's the Weatherby way. You're like my adopted sister."

"Most of the time I think of you guys as my family. You are better people than my real family. My mom's a stupid lush and now my dad's a bogus pump-pushing philanderer."

"My family isn't perfect either. My dad's a dictator and my mother stands in the shadows, cooking and cleaning and waiting on him and the whole rest of the family. Not that dad doesn't work his ass off too, but I'd hate to be like my mom. That's why I'm getting my degree. Times are changing."

In the chilly morning air, the twosome drank the rest of their cold beers and stared at the streaks of red cirrus clouds cutting across the sky.

"It looks like rain's coming," said Annie.

"Yah," said Cressida. She shivered and looked at her goose bumps. "I was hoping for a warm sunrise. I hate it – in the summer – when it's too cold to be comfortable in a T-shirt. It feels like something's wrong, and it's the only part I don't like about night shift. How the cold comes before sunrise. I hate the cold."

"That's only because you never remember to bring your jacket. It's like you're mind is somewhere up there in the clouds. Sometimes, it's like you're not even here – like you're off in some unexplored galaxy out there." Annie raised her last beer

toward the sky.

“It’s probably not so bad out there,” said Cressida. “Sometimes I wish I could just fly away from all this. I hate my life here. For me, looking at the sky is like looking into the future, to someplace much better than Carnival.”

“I thought you said looking into the sky was like looking into the past. That’s what you told me last time we had this conversation.”

“It’s whatever you want it to be,” said Cressida, stubbornly.

“OK. Whatever,” Annie sighed, and threw her last beer can out toward the sunrise.

\* \* \*

On the following Wednesday night, a week after Cressida and Annie went to the trestle, Gustavo came into the yard to where Levi was unhitching a refrigerated trailer from his tractor. As Levi hastily cranked down the landing gear on the trailer – never wasting too much time with anything he did – Gustavo called to him, “You’re mother is on the line in the lab.”

“What’s wrong,” asked Levi, stopping what he was doing. His mother would never have called at 3:00 AM unless there was trouble. Gustavo shrugged. Levi ran to the lab and greeted Annie nervously.

She said, “I asked Luther and Mario to step out. I told them it was a family matter.”

“Is everyone OK?” Levi asked, looking at Annie.

“Sure, sure. The family is fine. It’s Martha.”

Levi grabbed the phone. “Martha?” he asked in confusion.

“No, honey, this is your mom. The hospital in Winnemucca called. They said Martha had given them our number at the main house. She is trying to contact you. She’s in danger of having a miscarriage again. I guess Walter left her. That’s all I know.”

\* \* \*

Thursday afternoon, after driving all morning, Levi was in a place he had never been – an arid patch of land in northern Nevada where no strawberry would be able to grow. He was befuddled by fatigue and strangely obligated to someone who had betrayed him. In some of the driest flattest country he had ever seen, he felt emotionally and physically out of place. On a small bump in the landscape above downtown Winnemucca, he sat uncomfortably in the antiseptic hospital room,

Suffering from hemorrhaging, Martha had lost the baby before he got there.

“Thanks for coming,” said Martha, forcing a weak smile. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t need to say any more sorries. I think you’ve said enough. I just wish I could understand what happened between us. Did you know that there was a time when I really thought I wanted to spend the rest of my life with you?”

“Yes, and I did love you for that. But my life has always been a mess, and you

can't help me. It would have been wrong for us. I wanted what you had."

Levi looked out the window into the bright sun and the swirling dust devils.

"I did love you," she continued. "You were a wonderful lover and a decent person, and someone whose life I admired. But I spent a lot more time thinking about the house I would wind up in, not the man I would wind up in it with. And then I thought about how much I hated farming, and how I hated Carnival, and how at the same time I wanted to stay in a Weatherby house to show all those righteous bastards back home that I'd finally made it. I didn't think nearly so much about you. That's why I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I'm just trying to understand, so I can put this thing between us behind me. I can't for the life of me understand why you got involved with Walter."

"It's not what you think," said Martha. "I wasn't in love with him, if that's what you think. I don't know if I've ever been in love. You always made me feel safe, like I was worth it. But who wants to be in love and get rejected? That would have hurt too much.

"When Walter came through town and started coming on to me, it was a relief at first. I had already started thinking about telling you it was over between us. We'd been doing this on-again-off-again thing for long enough. I thought it would be easier to break things off if there was someone else.

"When we went to Winnemucca the first time, I realized he was dangerous. I forgot my pills, and my period started. I was embarrassed. He said he didn't care – that he didn't take me all this way for nothing. I said no. He said too bad. He was



real rough, Levi, and I was too ashamed to tell you.

“After that, I was afraid to say no, afraid that he would hurt me or somebody else. He hurt you and me anyway. That night he took me to the hospital – before you came home – we’d been fighting. He kept saying I needed to go with him to Winnemucca. I didn’t want to. I told him he’d better leave, before you got home. He told me that no one tried to tell him what to do without getting hurt. That’s when he started pushing me around, and I fell over the coffee table, and started bleeding. I tried to go for the phone and call you, but he wouldn’t let me, saying that if it was his baby, then he was going to be the one who took me to the hospital. That morning, when you were in the hallway, he swore he was going get me off Weatherby property as soon as possible, and he did. When we got here, he said he didn’t want to be a father, said he didn’t believe it was his, hit me in the stomach, and took off. I’m glad he’s gone. I had always wanted to have a Weatherby baby – be the wife of the biggest landowner around. Now there’s respect.”

When she stopped talking, a feeling of relief overwhelmed her, and she cried helplessly. Levi cradled her in his arms and tenderly stroked her long black hair. Large tears welled in his own eyes, as she shook uncontrollably and let go the secrets that had tortured her for months.

“We never shared the same dream,” said Levi matter-of-factly, wanting to explain once again why he was leaving Carnival and going back to school. How strange it was that he had already told her a hundred times, and she had never listened.

They wept together like children. For the first time, Levi felt they were

sharing a genuine moment. But it was not enough to erase all the half-hearted feelings, even before Walter had come into the picture.

“I’m OK,” said Martha, pushing away from Levi, and laying back on the bed. “Thanks for the money. This baby was the end for us, and I *am* sorry about what Walter did to you. By leaving, I was trying not to hurt you.”

Levi couldn’t help himself. Certain things needed to be said. “I just don’t understand how you could think getting involved with Walter and lying to me would hurt me less than just telling the truth. How hard is it to just tell the truth? This whole thing just goes to show how little you ever understood me.”

Levi sobbed involuntarily. Grieved by her complete lack of understanding, he said, “how could we have been together for all those years, and you never knew what kind of person I was? Everyone talks to me except you, the one person I almost married. How crazy is *that*?”

“Yah,” Martha agreed, with tears streaking down her flushed cheeks. “This life is nuts. Where’s the big payoff? When does it stop hurting? By the way, I’m going to Reno to be with my mom, as soon as they release me. She says she can get me a decent paying job as a waitress at the casino she works in. She says they make decent money down there.”

“Oh,” said Levi absently, pondering the contradiction. If Martha’s mom made such good money, why did Martha need a Weatherby to pay the hospital bill?

“Thanks for coming,” said Martha. “You’ve always given me more than I deserved.”

“Before I go, promise me you will never say that again. Nobody deserves any less than anybody else. And promise me when you *do* get married, it will be for love? It’s the most we can hope for.”

“Sure, Levi,” said Martha halfheartedly.

### XIII

#### JESUS' SLEEPER

A week later, on a Friday night near the end of July, raspberry season was in full swing. Two weeks had passed since Annie had divulged her secret about Leyland and Cressida had lied about Richard. Annie's truth and Cressida's deception continued to weigh heavily on both of them. Now Annie felt awkward, because she knew that Cressida knew. Cressida felt ashamed because Annie had been honest and she hadn't.

Levi was yarding reefer units which were rapidly being filled. Some trailers were being loaded with barrels of concentrate to be sold to an ice-cream company. Others were being loaded with barrels of freshly-sorted raspberries which – in a week or two – would be hauled right back from the Multi-Freezer and processed into concentrate the minute the season slowed down.

In the meantime, everyone was working twelve hour shifts to keep the Carnival

hopping twenty-four hours a day. Few complained. The Carnival was feast or famine. Layoffs inevitably followed several weeks of decent paychecks. Everyone worked the long hours without too much complaint, knowing the glut would be over soon.

Cressida walked into the lab with a sample of raspberry paper-cake from the press for Annie to test. The lab always monitored the press to ensure that the least possible amount of juice was being trapped in the pressed paper-cake that dropped from the bottom of the press and onto the conveyor belt leading toward the dumpster. Just outside the building, the dumpster held a sickeningly heavy smell of sweet rotting fruit.

“I’ve noticed you staring at the line from the catwalk tonight,” said Annie. “What’s up?” She herself had been watching and wanted to know if Cressida was looking at the same thing.

Cressida explained, “I’ve been watching the love triangle between Luther, Mario and Joleen. Luther keeps running up to the line when Mario’s there with Joleen. He whispers into her ear, which pisses Mario off. Then the little bastard steps off the line – like he’s going to throw a jealous little tantrum – and takes barrel samples instead.”

“Yes, the little bastard is pretty irritated tonight,” said Annie. “He doesn’t like the competition, but he’s sure giving Luther a run for his money, which I think is funny. But women like Joleen are so disgusting. She shouldn’t waste a single minute of her time with losers like that.”

Thinking about how Annie had slept with a loser like Leyland, and how a loser

like Joleen had also slept with Leyland, Cressida tried to be diplomatic. “Oh, Joleen’s not so bad. In fact I’ve always kind of respected her in a strange sort of way, because she’s no coward. She’ll do anything.”

“That’s not necessarily a good thing,” said Annie. “There’s certain stuff everyone should be afraid of. I think the most important thing a person can do is learn to avoid what makes them feel like a shit afterward.”

Cressida knew what Annie meant. She was beginning to see that divulging secrets was not such a good thing after all. Sometimes it was easier to be clueless. Her latest conclusion helped to reinforce her decision to lie about sleeping with Richard.

Annie – still feeling like shit after confessing about Leyland – turned away from Cressida and looked through her microscope, which meant their current conversation was over.

Cressida looked away too and decided to go back to the dumpster where she could stare at the sky for a while and get away from things – things that made a person feel like shit. Climbing into the dumpster, she shoveled steaming seedy raspberry cake away from the edge of the dumpster where the conveyor poured in its flow.

Shoveling was a necessity. The conveyor was too short to dump paper-cake nicely into the middle of the dumpster. Instead it would pile up on the inside edge, and quickly overflow onto the ground unless Cressida moved the dumpster with a fork lift or periodically shoveled the cake to the other side by hand.

At the Carnival everything was a work-around. Nothing was set up perfectly.

If Richard had only fabricated the conveyor with a few more feet at the top end, everything would have been fine. Cressida knew his failure to build a better conveyor was probably Douglas' fault. Douglas was so cheap. Always trying to save a dime. She knew Richard would have built a better conveyor, if Douglas had let him buy what he needed. The same with the press pump. It was too small and everybody knew it. Richard had gotten a real deal from Cressida's dad, but everyone who ran the press dealt with the constant threat of overflow. Thanks a lot dad, Cressida thought.

Feeling more and more cranky as she shoveled, Cressida began to think about how much she hated raspberry season. The raspberry mold made her whole face itch – especially her eyes – and there was always plenty of mold, giving the plant a sour musty smell. Strawberries smelled so much sweeter, more embracing, less fragile than the delicate moldy raspberries. The end of strawberry season had coincided with her decision to end clandestine meetings with Richard.

In the last two weeks, she had felt both hollow and hopeful. She realized that avoiding Richard was as hard, if not harder, than continuing to see him in secret. By getting involved and then cutting things off, she had inadvertently created yet another emptiness in her life. Sometimes she wondered whether Richard thought she was being selfish for the decision, punishing him for not pursuing divorce proceedings sooner. She wanted to tell him that she was suffering too, and go back to the way things were, but she was way too proud to tell him she had changed her mind. She knew it would make her look weak, and she couldn't have that. She needed to be strong.

So they walked past each other in the plant like casual friends, limiting conversations to work issues – like whether more sheets of paper should be thrown in the processing tanks which would allow the press to remove more particulates, which would in turn help the filtering process. But then there was the danger that more paper would absorb – and consequently waste – more juice during the pressing process.

Cressida relished these kinds of conversations, taking each point under careful consideration, trying to weigh the alternatives with meticulous detail, like solving a physics problem, being careful to use common sense and acknowledge all the compromises and potential losses. She hoped to show Richard through her work that she was committed to him, in order to ensure that he wouldn't have any more silly thoughts about her finding someone else before September.

Most times she would get a wink from Richard, which she took as a sign that he knew she was devoted. And once in a while he would say, “you're not going to change your mind on this are you?” And when she was about to answer, he would interject, “about the amount of paper, that is.” And then he would wink again. Cressida would turn away from him and blush, glad for his loving clues buried in the conversation. His meaning would have been obvious to anyone who understood him as well as she did.

And yet there were times when Cressida wished for tears. Crying would have been a delicious indulgence, but tears had eluded her since her self-imposed separation. She felt too much to cry. Crying involved sharp focus on one particular thing, one moment of joy or sorrow, but Cressida's feelings were too broad and



complicated for a single moment of weeping. She felt herself hardening, and considered her inability to cry as a sign of courage during a difficult time. Crying would have been too easy, she told herself. The coward's way out.

Cressida killed the next twenty minutes by moving cake around in the dumpster, checking flow into and out of the five processing tanks, and ensuring that all the pumps and valves were set to address the weakest link in the chain – that worthless press pump that Douglas would not allow Richard to replace, the one her father had sold to the Carnival – after which she went back to the lab to see if Annie wanted to go on a beer run with her at the break, hoping beer could bring comfort where secrets had introduced problems.

Before she could ask Annie, Levi came into the lab, positively glowing. “You’ll never guess what I just saw,” he announced.

Both women turned toward him.

“Do tell,” said Annie.

“When I used Jesus’ tractor the other night, I left a spare can of dip in the cab. A few minutes ago, I ran out of dip, so I remembered about the spare that I had left in his cab, in the seat pocket you know, so I went to get it. When I opened the door and climbed up to the seat, there was Joleen on top of Mario in the sleeper, just pumping away, shirt off, tits flying all over the place.”

“What a nut she is,” screeched Cressida. “She’ll do just about anything!”

“Nut? No. Slut, yes,” said Annie.

“That too,” agreed Cressida, hoping Annie wasn’t thinking badly of herself

about Leyland, and glad once again that she had kept her own secret. If Levi or Annie had known about Richard, she would have reminded them that motivation made all the difference in the world. It was the fine point of distinction between good and evil, between courage and deception. For instance, unlike Joleen, Cressida herself was in love. There was nobility in her actions. In Richard's. Theirs was a sincere matter of the heart. It took courage to stand in isolation and boldly hold onto the secret. Joleen had no secrets, and she certainly wasn't motivated by love. Yes, they were nothing alike, she and Joleen, Cressida reminded herself.

At the same time, she wondered what Annie was thinking. Was she thinking of how Leyland had also been in the sleeper with Joleen, and what Leyland must have thought of Joleen? Was Annie wondering what Leyland must have thought of her as well, when he had her in the back of Dexter's pickup? Annie must have hated the idea of being a virgin at twenty-one, and the ribbed bed of the pickup must have bruised her spine, when that big fat Leyland pushed down on her. What a loser. The nerve of Annie to accuse her of bad judgment with men, when Annie's herself had the worst judgment of all. And if, after that, Annie had decided that she wasn't missing anything when it came to sex, it was only because she hadn't waited for the real thing, for someone more mature. And for this, she felt sorry for Annie. The only saving grace was that Annie had learned from her mistake, whereas Joleen kept making the same mistake over and over. What could she possibly get out of having sex with Mario? He was just a child.

Having tried to put her own actions on a higher plane, Cressida still felt uneasy

about what Levi had seen. Her skin crawled as if covered with stink bugs and earwigs. She thought about all the times she could have been caught, especially by Levi, or maybe she had been caught by Levi and she just didn't know it yet. Or maybe Gustavo had caught them and kept his mouth shut, waiting for the right moment to humiliate both of them, or get the upper hand over Richard. Maybe she didn't want to think about it anymore. She was very glad for having broken things off, and continued to commend herself for her resolve, which made it easier to maintain the lie that nothing was going on. She got up the nerve to ask Levi to continue. "So what did you do?"

"I said, 'excuse me,' grabbed my can of Copenhagen, and shut the cab door," he said. He couldn't stop grinning. The skin of his lower lip stretched white over the bulge of chewing tobacco in his mouth.

Cressida stared at the bulge, thinking it was high time Levi gave up his habit, not understanding how someone could choose to do something so unappealing. "You must have half a can in there. That's so disgusting. When are you going to quit all together?"

"Soon," said Levi, cracking a grin wide enough to expose the dark brown top of his wet dip. "I may want to kiss somebody new, and she may take offense to my chew. I promise, this is the last can." He winked at Cressida, who smiled, thinking nothing of the remark. She knew he would tell her who it was, when he found somebody new, though she had difficulty conjuring the picture of the women who would come after Martha.

She noted that Levi – who had only a week before said his final good-byes to Martha – had a remarkable capacity for recovery, something she had always admired in him, a quality never put to the test in her own life. She reassured herself that she could handle anything, especially in light of the fact that she was doing so much better about her parents’ divorce. She didn’t think too much about her dad when she was at work anymore. Richard has been instrumental in helping her to take her focus off her childhood family and start pursuing something strictly for herself. God bless Richard, she thought to herself.

And then to Cressida’s surprise, Annie added, “One of the women on the line – you know the tall one who hardly ever talks – came in for a band-aid. She told me Joleen was planning on doing that. Apparently, she said, Joleen wanted to make Luther jealous, mess with his fat little dough-boy mind, let him know he had no rights with her, regardless of him sharing drugs with her. She said everyone on the line was waiting for her to do it with Mario. She said they all knew where Joleen and Mario were going during the break.”

“I can’t believe you held out on us,” said Cressida, feeling guilty for accusing Annie of holding out, and knowing damn well that Annie hadn’t brought up the subject because she had stopped discussing anything to do with sexual indiscretions, in the same way Cressida herself had stopped discussing Richard. She wondered if Annie was hoping she’d simply forget about Leyland, the same way she herself was hoping Levi and Annie would forget all about the signs of Richard’s interest earlier in the summer.

“You know how it is,” Annie defended herself. “I didn’t say anything, because I guess I didn’t want to believe it. With Mario? I mean, come on! I didn’t think she’d actually do it. It’s even stranger than Mario, Luther and Joleen doing snow together. I mean, what a crazy combination.”

Levi asked, “how in the hell is any women supposed to make another man jealous by sleeping with Mario? That makes no sense at all. On the other hand, if Mario died tomorrow, he wouldn’t die a virgin. Every man is scared of that, you know.”

“What makes you so sure he was a virgin,” asked Annie

“You can just tell,” said Levi, looking away from Annie, none the wiser and not wanting to give away what he believed to be her secret.

“It’s OK,” said Cressida, seizing the opportunity to cover for Annie. “She told me.”

Annie took off her glasses and began looking through the microscope again, unsure where Cressida was going to take the conversation.

“Huh?” said Levi.

“Told me about being a ... you know, uh, not doing the nasty,” explained Cressida, hating the deceitful nature of the conversation. More lies were being introduced into their lives.

“Oh,” said Levi, suddenly recognizing Annie’s discomfort. Assuming she was embarrassed about being a virgin, he tried to help. “It’s no big deal Annie. Better to be you than to be like Joleen. First Leyland and now Mario. Who would sleep with

either one of them. Losers! I'm proud of you for wanting to save yourself for true love. Everyone deserves the genuine article. At this point, I'd rather be alone than be with someone who didn't love me. I'm prepared to wait the rest of my life for the right woman. What about you Cressida?"

"Me?" said Cressida, popping out a contact and putting it into her mouth.

"Sure, I'm waiting for the right woman too."

"And you think I have nasty habits," said Levi, "but seriously Cressida, is there anyone who tickles your fancy?"

"No," she said flatly.

"Love is a crazy thing," said Levi, smiling at her.

"Sure is," she agreed, putting the dirty contact back in her eye. When the fog cleared, she could see the undeniable sparkle in Levi's eye, but convinced herself it was nothing. His eyes always sparkled, she told herself.

Trying to dull the shine, Cressida moved onto more practical matters. "Look, the reason I came in here was to ask if you guys wanted to drink with me tonight. I was going to load the dumpster cooler?"

"Sure," said Annie. "I'll have a few."

"Not me," said Levi. "I'm driving."

"Driving! Driving where?" asked Cressida. "And, since when did driving stop you from drinking?"

"The events of this summer have forced me to seek out a more responsible side of myself," he said seriously, calling once again on his own handy notion of Buddhist

philosophy, which had become a running theme for the summer. Assuming the most pompous language he could muster, he tried to amuse his female counterparts.

Although he knew, and it was likely they knew, that what he was really saying was more representative of his own emerging philosophy.

He continued, “You see, at the temple, which is isolated and is therefore much like the Carnival, the monks believe that you should not go around responding to every sensual desire that crosses your path, i.e. drinking from a dumpster cooler or fucking Mario. One must learn to forgo these irresistible cravings, learning instead how to live without, which in turn leads to an increasingly unpolluted perception of life, a sound perspective on things that doesn’t drain your resolve, thereby allowing you to approach life’s most important challenges, without the detrimental effects of excess participation in hedonistic pleasures. And mostly, I don’t want to lose my chauffeur’s license. I have to drive to the buyer’s station east of Ferryville and pick up a the load that Douglas bought earlier today. Want to come?” Levi looked at Cressida.

“Why would I want to go anywhere with someone who’s lost his mind? I’m going to the Plaid to get some beer. It’ll be in the dumpster, if either of you want any.” Cressida left the lab.

Then Annie teased, “Levi, sometimes I wonder if – when your hair grew back – it sucked all your brains out. Once in a while, I don’t understand what comes out of you. Don’t you know that too much thinking can be as bad as too much drugs or sex. You spend way too much time alone in that truck of yours trying to figure it all out.”

“Don’t you?” said Levi. “I mean, don’t you sit around thinking about the meaning of life?”

“No,” said Annie, “God’s got it all figured out for me, so I don’t need to. And besides, I don’t have the time.”

“Oh, come on,” Levi insisted, “when you are looking at that millionth mold count, aren’t you thinking about what kind of clay loams they have in China, or what phase of the moon your going to see tonight. Don’t you stare at the sky, and think about life’s infinite possibilities?”

“Is all of this pondering because of what happened with Martha?”

“Sure, but other things too.” Levi faltered, unsure whether to give away what he was really thinking.

Annie recognized the tone. “Come on, big brother, what’s up?”

“Maybe if you did a mold count, or something, I could tell you. Then I would know you weren’t listening, and I could tell you the whole truth, while you weren’t listening, that is.”

Without a word, Annie threw a fresh sample of raspberries into the blender, mixed it, dabbed a small amount onto a slide, and slid it under the microscope. As she stared through the eye piece, Levi began.

“Well, I’ve had some long talks with Thurston about this. And incidentally, thanks for not listening. I feel like I’m making a confession here. So I’ve talked to my head monk, Thurston, and he said I should follow my heart.” Levi paused.

After a few seconds, Annie cautiously turned her head toward him. “And?” she



whispered.

“Oh, and you’re supposed to ask me what’s in my heart.”

“I thought I wasn’t supposed to talk.”

“Never mind that,” Levi said anxiously.

“Spill it!” Annie demanded impatiently.

“So, my heart says I should ask Cressida out.” Levi said, turning flushed.

Annie stared at him. Her mouth fell open. “I don’t know about that,” she said kindly, but with reservation. She still suspected that Cressida’s mind was on Richard.

“I don’t think Cressida is going to want to date her older brother.”

“It’s time to change all that,” Levi insisted. “I’m a man and she’s a woman, and we’re not related. Can’t we go from friends to lovers?”

“Levi, I never knew.” Annie couldn’t help smiling at the notion.

“Neither did I. I’m telling you, this is all new to me too.”

“Are you sure it’s not just a rebound from Martha?”

“No!” Levi said sternly. “I was over her the day she started serving Walter sausages at the I-5 Denny’s. What I think about Cressida has nothing to do with that. I was hoping you would support me here. What do you think she would say, if I asked her out.”

“I don’t know Levi. I’d like to give you the green light, but Cressida’s undies have been in a bunch this summer. I don’t know. I guess, just do what makes you happy, and don’t think too much about it.”

“Thanks a lot,” said Levi. “I’ve got a better idea.”

Determined to prove Annie wrong, Levi left the lab. He went to the press area and waited for Cressida, who returned from her beer run within minutes.

“Changed your mind so quickly?” she asked.

“No. I’m not here for beer. I need a fork driver to fill a load at the Ferryville buying station.”

“So?” said Cressida.

“So, why don’t you let Gustavo know you’re going with me.”

“Oh, no. No way. Gustavo won’t let me leave the press. He hates me. Why can’t you believe that the man is looking for a reason to fire me? Why do you think he’s training Lupe? Not that I have anything against Lupe, but he’d rather have her, or one of his Mexican buddies from the barrel line, doing this job. He hates me!”

“OK,” smiled Levi rubbing his hand on his inch long hair, letting Cressida know the wheels were spinning. “No problem. I’ll talk to Richard then.”

“Huh? But, wait,” Cressida called after Levi, not wanting him to talk to Richard, afraid Richard would think she had sent him.

Levi did not give Cressida time to stop him. He jogged toward the back of the plant – fueled by his conversation with Annie – and found Richard in his usual location staring into the cloudy and fruit-spattered little window on one of the four vacuum effects of the concentrator. Richard was assuring himself that the concentrate *looked* like it was the right thickness, even though Annie’s lab results were the final word on quality.

“I need a fork driver to go to the Ferryville buyer’s station with me, and if it’s

not too much trouble, I want Cressida. She's the best, you know" All smiles, Levi stared intently at Richard.

"Why don't you check with Gustavo?" Richard replied blandly.

"I did," Levi lied. "He said Lupe can watch the press while Cressida is gone. I just wanted to check with you and make sure you didn't care whether Cressida left or not."

"Why should I care?" said Richard. "It doesn't matter who runs the press, as long as the juice keeps coming. "

## XIV

### PROSPECTING

The turbos whined as Levi throttled up the empty interstate. The darkness, the hum of the engines, and the ease of driving at night made him feel wonderfully sleepy. He was glad for his earlier decision to decline a dumpster beer. With the coming of fall, his compulsion for reckless behavior was waning. Thoughts of the future – his goals and his need to assure his father that he would be leaving soon – crept into his mind.

Levi's cab-over-engine tractor was not a smooth ride. He glanced at Cressida, innocently catching a glimpse of her breasts jostling with the multitude of bumps and ripples in the freeway pavement.

As they traveled past the I-5 rest stop, Levi observed the line-up of semis, parked one after the other under the waving fir trees. Truck drivers – needing to sleep – had filled the rest area to capacity. Levi considered that some of them were sleeping

with wives or girl friends.

And then he imagined himself with Cressida at that rest stop. What if they were a long-haul couple, traveling across the countryside by night and crawling into a sleeper by day. He would make love with her, then wrap his arms around her and cradle her until evening. After the sun went down, they would fire up the turbo-diesel and continue on their journey.

Not wanting to travel too far beyond the current state of reality, Levi spoke. “I don’t think you should be so worried about leaving the press. Did you know that Richard said he could care less who runs it, as long as the fruit keeps coming?”

“That’s comforting,” said Cressida, hurt by the sentiment.

“Yup, as long as the fruit keeps coming, that’s all he cares about. I assume you’ve figured that out by now, since you don’t seem to be spending too much time around him anymore.”

“I told you why I don’t leave the press,” said Cressida, defensively. “I don’t want to get fired. How many times do I have to tell you? Gustavo said several weeks ago, he’d fire me if he found me away from my station one more time. He even said he’d fire anyone he caught drinking on the job. Can you believe that? What a hypocrite. Since when did he stop drinking at breaks? In fact, Annie told me for a fact that he’s one of Dexter’s favorite clients. It’s just not so obvious because he snorts by himself, instead of doing it right out in the open with the rest of the club.”

“The beauty of it is, none of this will matter in a few weeks. Right, Cressida? Did you know that I’m going to go to school for sure this fall?”

“Really?”

“Yep! I’ve applied and everything. All I have left to do is register and tell my dad.”

“You haven’t told your dad yet? Oh, boy.”

“The less time he has to be disappointed in me, the better. But don’t think I haven’t warned him a hundred times. He just doesn’t believe me. He keeps thinking I’m going to chicken out, like when I dropped out of high school.”

“He needs to know, Levi. He counts on you for everything.”

“Well, he’s going to have to stop. I can’t live for him. This is for me.”

With that, they were quiet.

The truck’s headlamps cast yellow halos of bouncing light onto the moving asphalt. Once in a while, a piece of paper or cardboard flew across the highway in the increasing wind. Neither said anything about it. The road rumbled under them, Cressida’s breasts bounced, Levi snuck peeks, and each dreamed of September when everything would be different.

Several miles east of Ferryville, in an area of rural Washington very much like Carnival, the rural buyer’s station consisted of an elevated ramshackle shed with missing shingles and broken wall slats. It was nothing to look at but served its purpose as a place where local growers came and sold their fruit.

When Levi and Cressida arrived at the graveled truck yard in front of the shed, all the lights were off, and a gentler breeze than the one on the highway rustled through the holes in the shingles and slats. With the headlights of Levi’s tractor, they

got a passing view of all the pallets on the dock. Levi backed the truck up to the dock in the darkness, coasting gently into the rubber dock bumpers. He pulled the air brakes and jumped from the cab. Hastily, he went to the passenger side and opened the door for Cressida. He reached his arms up toward her.

“No, Levi,” she said, “I’m not jumping into your arms.”

“Come on,” he encouraged. “I’ll catch you. Trust me.”

“No. I’m too big. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Come on,” he insisted. “I’ve got you. Just like old times. Remember out on the farm when you’d ride with me on my tractor, and then you’d jump into my arms, and I’d catch you and give you a piggy-back all the way back from the main barns. Nothing’s changed. Come on. Just be a friend and jump into my arms. I’ve got you. You’re completely safe. Don’t be afraid!”

Cressida could see that Levi was not going to let her get out of the truck by herself. She gently lowered herself into his arms. He swung her away from the truck, wanting to continue holding her, but gently setting her on the gravel parking lot.

“See, that wasn’t so bad,” he said.

Cressida laughed, wanting to hug Levi for always showing her such unconditional affection, for not making her wait until September, and for not putting divorce proceedings between them. No sneaking around, no unpleasant – *but necessary* – separations. With Levi, affection was straightforward and consistent. No scary shit. Cressida made a mental note of these things, and began thinking of Richard again, wondering what his divorce status was, and whether he had made any progress

toward separating himself from the weasel. There had been no rumors at the plant, so she assumed he hadn't, which was distressing.

After searching without success for a light switch or panel box on the darkened docks, Levi cranked down the landing gear on the trailer, disengaged the truck from the trailer, and brought it around, pointing the head lights onto the dock, which allowed Cressida to load the pallets into the trailer. With the tractor disengaged, she could no longer drive the forklift to the front of the trailer. The landing gear alone would not support such weight. Instead, she had to push each pallet forward into the trailer with the one she set down behind it, being careful not to use too much force and topple the tall and wobbly rows of berry flats, stacked twenty high on the pallets.

Levi watched with pride. "You're the best fork driver the Carnival's got," he announced.

"You're just saying that because we're friends."

"No. I'm saying it because it's true. All Weatherbys are good equipment operators."

"But, I'm not a Weatherby."

"Sure you are. Me and Annie think of you as one."

Again, Cressida felt a rush of warmth, knowing she had always been accepted into Levi's family. As the propane engine on her fork lift continued to sputter more and more, she wondered how Richard's family would react to her. She felt a blast of cold air, as Levi turned on the trailer's reefer unit.

Then, the fork lift died. She restarted it. "Damn," she said, jumping to the



dock and checking the gauge on the propane tank. "I'm so stupid. I should have checked this tank before we left."

"Almost out?"

"Out out! I better get it back into the trailer, if I can."

She jumped back up to the seat, and after several attempts at restarting, the engine pattered to life, just barely, and she drove it into the trailer, after which it died again. She chalked it, and they decided to hand load the last three pallets, thankful that the fork lift had not died sooner.

First they stacked the flats onto the dock, dragged the empty pallet into the trailer behind the fork lift, then ran back out to the dock and began carrying five fruit-laden flats of raspberries at a time, breathing hard and competing to see who was faster. Neither was willing to show signs of fatigue.

Flats of raspberries were always heavier than flats of strawberries, because there were no air pockets. The raspberries were mashed densely into every available inch of every flat. Carrying five at a time was very heavy work.

The playful competition that ensued was reminiscent of earlier times when Cressida's life was less troubled.

She puffed, "I'm a better man than you, any day of the week!"

"Doubtful," Levi grunted and picked up seven flats.

"Don't hurt yourself."

"Listen sister, it's going to take a whole lot more than seven flats of berries to hurt me."

“You’re not so tough.”

“Wanna bet,” he huffed, thankful for the coolness of the increasingly stiff breeze.

As they both returned empty handed for the last three flats on the dock, Levi grabbed them, and Cressida jumped on his back.

“Carry this load!” she laughed.

In the trailer, she jumped off his back. He lifted the flats to the top of the stack without too much struggle, after which he spun around, lifted her into his arms and carried her back to the dock.

“I warned you not to hurt yourself,” she laughed.

“You could never hurt me,” he said quickly and set her down. The words *because I love you* almost bubbled forth, but he held them back.

“You sure know how to show a girl a good time!” Cressida turned around and hugged him. “Thanks for making me laugh. I love yuh. You’re such a great guy. No matter where we go in life, promise me we’ll always be friends, no matter who you marry. OK, big brother?”

He reached into his mouth and pulled out what he swore would be his last dip, and flung it into the gravel. He leaned toward her and whispered into her ear, “you’ve got my word,” and he grinned widely. His even teeth were lit up by the truck light, and the unmistakable twinkle in his eye flashed toward her.

Cressida’s strong sentiment toward Levi was nothing new. She had always told him she loved him, especially when he made her laugh. It was the Weatherby

way. With the exception of Old Weatherby, everyone in the family went around saying they loved each other. Moments of happiness were always a good enough reason. But Levi took Cressida's sentiment to heart and felt encouraged by the moment.

"Hey, I was wondering if you would do me a favor," said Levi.

"Name it," said Cressida as they closed the doors on the trailer.

"I was wondering if you would go with me to Elmsburg, when I register for school. Show me the ropes?"

"But freshman don't register the same day as seniors."

"So?" he said.

"So, I'll think about it," she said. "I don't know if I should be seen wandering around campus with a freshman. I'll let you know."

"Just keep it in mind," he encouraged. "We could have fun."

"I can think of better ways to have fun."

"If you can think of something better, let me know."

"I will," she smiled.

Levi felt gleeful, certain that their friendship could grow into something more. He was determined to keep trying, feeling certain that he would be the best thing for Cressida in the long haul. And then, driving out of the dock, he remembered something interesting he had forgotten to tell her.

"Hey, Cressida. Did you hear that Douglas may be thinking of purchasing this buyer's station and maybe building a new processing plant out here?"

“I had no idea!” she said, startled by the implications of such a purchase.

“Yah. Maybe Douglas will transfer Gustavo out here, once it’s done. Then, next summer, you won’t have to worry about him.”

“Wouldn’t that be nice,” said Cressida, thankful for Levi’s thoughtful suggestion. She began to imagine how wonderful things would be the next summer, if Gustavo was gone, and Richard was in charge at the Carnival, and she could openly share her love for him with the rest of the plant. They would pretend it was something new, something that had just started as a consequence of Richard’s finalized divorce proceedings. Then no one would judge her harshly. Men and women met and fell in love all the time. Natural as pie. Yes, how nice that would be she thought, moving away from any thoughts of Levi.

STORMS OF ENVY

When the twosome returned to the plant, Levi backed up to the dock and opened the trailer doors. A fork driver removed the pallets of fresh raspberries and stacked them in one corner of the plant for day shift.

Cressida walked into the back of the trailer and pulled the propane tank off the dead fork lift and carried it through the back of the plant to the edge of the bone yard.

Standing next to the five hundred gallon refueling tank, Cressida screwed on a fill-hose, cranked open the fill-valve and then the tiny pressure-release valve. She turned on the pump and listened to the rushing sound of propane filling the fork lift's portable tank.

As the pump whirred, Cressida watched a rising dust devil twist through the old rusty pieces of equipment. She reflected on the fun she had just had with Levi. He was hopelessly easy to be around. She yearned for the time when things would be

different with Richard, and she secretly hoped he would find a reason to come back by the bone yard.

When propane started spewing furiously out of the release valve, signaling that the tank was full, Cressida flipped off the pump, closed the fill valve as rapidly as she could, and then began to close the tiny release valve with her bare fingers. The propane blasted like a knife from the release valve and condensed on the top of the tank. She tried not to let her moist fingers get stuck to the ice-covered metal.

As condensing gas sucked the warmth from her finger tips and the wind whipped gritty dust into her eyes, she felt like crying. Her contacts stung painfully. All of life's little discomforts had become tormenting reminders of the larger problem – getting involved with Richard. Still hoping for a passing conversation with him, she rubbed her cold fingers against her pants and dawdled irritably.

The night sky was like a painted curtain hanging over the plant. A wind storm continued to whip up loose debris in the bone yard. With much greater force than the breeze that had cooled Levi and Cressida at the buyer's station, changing weather pushed down hard on the Carnival. With crackling tentacles, intermittent lightening awakened heavy storm clouds.

Knowing rain was coming any minute, Cressida stared toward the streaks of jagged light that dashed through the thunder clouds. Meanwhile, a full propane tank leaned against her leg. She imagined the gas explosion that would kill her twice over, if a bolt of lightening happened to pass through the tank. As one the tallest objects in the bone yard, she felt exposed.

The full propane tank weighed more than half as much as she did. When Richard failed to pass by, and when a powerful gust of wind blew more grit into her eyes, Cressida retreated into the plant. She grabbed both ends of the tank and hefted it to her waist and walked toward the dead forklift in the refrigerated trailer.

As she shuffled through the plant, the weight of the tank removed all the bounce from her step. The lights flickered and then the plant went dark. Pumps, fans, and motors stopped. In the silence, she could hear rain pattering softly. Back in Ferryville, she had not anticipated such a dramatic change in weather.

Near the stairs to the catwalk, she heard Lupe, who was still being trained by Gustavo, call out, "*Aye Cabrón!*" Not wanting to be on the catwalk in the dark, she descended the stairs rapidly. With her wet rubber boots, she lost her footing on the steep steps and she fell backward. Cressida heard a smack on the stainless stairs that made the metal ring with vibration

As her eyes adjusted to the darkness inside the plant, Cressida watched Lupe's dark shadow crumple at the bottom of the steps. Even with the lights on, Cressida herself had slipped more than once. She knew just how painful it was to fall backward and hit her tail bone or her back on the edge of those hard steps. She and Gustavo ran toward Lupe.

As Gustavo pulled her away from the base of the stairs and lay her on the cold concrete, he could feel blood oozing from her scalp. She was unconscious. He was visibly shaken. He told Cressida to go get Richard. Ever so briefly she wondered whether Annie was right. Could Lupe and Gustavo really be lovers? How disgusting,

she thought. Lupe deserved something better than a saboteur.

Without a word she ran back toward the concentrator, knowing that – if needed – Richard would be the one to drive Lupe to the hospital. Even though he was a legal alien, Gustavo hated dealing with white people and their institutions. He was not the Good Samaritan. That was Richard's role, and Cressida knew it.

Carefully, she negotiated the concentrator area, not wanting to hit her own head into one of the elevated vacuum effects. She called out for Richard.

"I'm back here, goddammit," he yelled into the quiet.

Breathlessly, Cressida explained, "Lupe hit her head falling down the catwalk stairs. Gustavo wants your help. She knocked herself out."

"Shit," declared Richard, throwing his arms down to his sides.

It was unclear to Cressida whether he was more concerned about Lupe or about what the power outage would do to the concentrator. The minute the pumps went off and the flow stopped, hot stagnant juice began baking onto the inside of every section of pipe, every concentrator plate, and every vacuum effect. In short, the equipment would have to be broken down and cleaned with chlorine. The juice from the aborted concentrator activities would have to be sent back to a holding tank and re-concentrated.

All of this was Richard's problem, and it meant time and money. Richard knew he would hear from Douglas, as if Richard himself had control over the weather. He hated being Douglas' sounding board. Each time he listened to Douglas complain about the cost of doing business, Richard thought about how he should be getting paid



so much *more* for being the key concentrator operator. In a clear state of exasperation, Richard walked hastily toward the base of the catwalk.

Cressida stepped back and watched as Lupe failed to come to life. Gustavo and Richard made the decision to call 911. In the mean time, Richard ran to the lab and got gauze and towels. He made a pillow and held the gauze to the back of Lupe's head and tried to stem the bleeding. Lupe's blood poured onto the towels and then the floor.

Within fifteen minutes the ambulance came, and by then Lupe had thankfully opened her eyes. Everyone was relieved, but the massive gash still needed to be closed. Lupe was incoherent, asking what had happened and where she was, but not asking for her husband. No one called Jesus. They all knew Lupe was better off in the hands of Richard.

Cressida watched as Richard helped the paramedics lift Lupe to the gurney. She watched his every move as he walked out to his car and then followed the ambulance toward the hospital. Cressida knew someone needed to provide information to the doctors. Richard might even wind up driving Lupe home after that.

After the vehicles left the Carnival, Gustavo told the rest of the meandering employees to wait at the break area outside, which nobody wanted to do because lightening was still tearing through the sky. He insisted, saying it was more of a risk to be inside the dark plant, and he didn't want the same thing that happened to Lupe to happen to anyone else.

Slowly, the crew shuffled out to the wooden picnic tables, thankful at least that

they were not sitting on metal.

A few minutes later, Gustavo announced that Luther had called the electric company and that the power would be restored to the plant within twenty minutes. Lightening had hit a nearby transformer and a crew was already working on it.

Instead of sitting with the main group at the picnic tables, Cressida ignored Gustavo's command and walked back through the plant to the dumpster. Annie and Levi were nowhere to be found. Unconcerned by their absence – in fact thankful for it – she climbed into the dumpster and sat next to the cooler that she had filled before going to the buyer's station with Levi. Feeling anxious, she thought *fuck Gustavo*. What did it matter where she sat, or if she had a beer, or a six pack. He himself was probably at the other side of the plant, out by the barrels, having a snort with Luther.

As the wind continued to gust through the narrow channel between the building and the large dumpster, the flimsy portable conveyer belt – connecting the two structures – twisted and squeaked under the strain, the same way it always did when carrying a solid stream of paper-cake into the dumpster.

The wind muffled the popping sound of her opening beer can. If Gustavo came strolling by, he wouldn't hear her sitting there swallowing either. She moved off the rim of the dumpster and sank three feet into a comfortable depression in the mountain of soft warm paper-cake. Gustavo would never know she was there. Within minutes she had guzzled a cool sixteen-ouncer. The trip to the Plaid had been worth it.

Feeling lonely, she drank in silence and watched lightening strike in the

distance. From her warm hiding place, she began to fantasize about being the one who had fallen. She imagined the pain on her skull and the warm blood trickling down the back of her neck. She would lay there in a warm pool, and wait for Richard to come to her rescue. She would pretend to be unconscious. He needed to be as concerned as possible. She was in control of the situation, knowing she would be fine. He would be worried to tears, to the point of shivering. She would keep her eyes closed, feel him wrap his arms around her and pull her to his chest, clutch her tightly, like a precious child, like a beloved spouse, and ask repeatedly, *Cressida, are you OK?* She would not open her eyes, enjoying the outpouring of alarm from her forbidden lover, and yet a scene for all the world to see, like the way Gustavo came to Lupe's aid, if in fact they were really lovers like Annie had said.

She played out the scene between herself and Richard, him declaring that she must not die, citing that he loves her, that she needs immediate medical attention, and he himself will be the one to take her to the hospital. Herself lying on the seat of his car, strapped in next to him, leaning on him. Him steering with one hand and holding her with the other, her smiling, moaning, groaning, pretending to be unconscious, delirious with joy, because he is caring for her. Worried about her and only her. No one else is gaining his affection, diverting him, pulling him away from her.

Cressida's hands tightened around the cold beer can. Transfixed, she herself shivered and stared at the sky. Her thoughts moved to making love with him in the bone yard. She wanted to be with him after dreaming of how the terrible accident would bring them together, allow his forbidden feelings of love and concern to surface

for all the world to see. But there was still the excitement of the secret. She thought of them doing it in the lab, in the bone yard, and on the catwalk. What if everyone else vanished from the planet, and no one, not even his children were standing in their way, preventing them from being with each other, making him feel guilty about his feelings for her. Or what if the whole family was killed in a car accident, run over and smashed to bits by a train or crushed in a twenty car pile-up on the interstate? What if she was standing next to him as he got the news? Suddenly there would be nothing standing between them, and she would be there to help him get over the loss of his sons. She would also be there to celebrate losing the weasel. No one would blame them. It was an accident, someone else's fault, and they would be free forever.

Hearing someone climb up the rungs on the dumpster, Cressida caught herself, knowing it was wrong to think such things. She froze, hoping whoever it was would not look down.

"Here she is," Levi called to Annie. "We've been looking for you. Mind if we join?"

Annie climbed the metal rungs into the dumpster behind Levi.

With all the energy she could find, Cressida forced a smile and said, "sure. Come on in." She pulled out a beer for Annie, acknowledging Levi's stated desire to abstain.

"We went over to the main house," explained Levi, "just to see whether the power was out there too – to make sure Mom and Dad were OK."

"Oh," said Cressida. "You must have left before Gustavo came out and told

everyone that it was the transformer on the nearby power pole. Apparently only the plant and a few of the nearby houses lost power. Everything's fine out at the farm, right?"

"Yup," said Levi. "It takes more than a transformer to knock out a Weatherby!"

\* \* \*

The next night, Richard was not there. Cressida found out from Annie that Douglas was transitioning him to day shift. With alarm, Cressida discovered that Gustavo had become her sole supervisor. Annie said she heard that Douglas wanted Richard available during the day to go to the new site in Ferryville. Douglas had actually gone forward with the purchase of the buyer's station and the adjacent land. He was going to build a new plant and needed Richard's help.

Unnerved by his sudden departure to days, Cressida tried hard to turn her dismay into something positive. She told herself she wasn't scared and that everything was going to be alright. His silence wasn't right, but then the whole thing wasn't right. It was only a shift change.

She wondered if perhaps a total absence might be easier to bear than when he was present but unapproachable. Soon, she reminded herself, soon it would all be over. They had agreed on it, and she believed in him. He had never given her any reason to distrust him, she told herself.

## XVI

### ENHANCED RESOLUTION

For the next two weeks, Levi struggled with what he should get Cressida for her upcoming twenty-first birthday. He asked everyone for advice.

“First of all you should never get presents for friends,” explained Mario. “Then the next year, you’re obligated. And the year after that, and the year after that. And besides, you should never buy gifts for your *women* friends anyway. Then they start thinking you’re more than a friend. They get the wrong idea. My dad says you should never make a women start feeling like you owe her something. It gives them the impression that you are working for them, that you’re money is their money. And why would you want to give someone like Cressida that impression? She’s so tall. She’s practically the same height as you. I don’t like her. She’s a sasquatch, and she rides my ass. Dad says to stay away from giant women. You want somebody small and submissive – easier to control, maybe like Richard’s cute little wife Suzie. Have

you ever seen her? She's tiny. A woman like that! That's what Dad says. He tells me to make sure whoever I date is not after the family money. You don't want them marrying you, and then robbing you blind after the divorce." Mario went on and on about the ills of buying presents, making Levi sorry the little bastard had overheard him asking around.

Next, Levi went to Thurston.

"There ain't nothin' better to light up a women's heart than a well-thought-out gift. Makes 'em wriggle with joy, like one of them earth worms in wet grass. Ever seen that? Now, I ain't sure how far 'long you are with 'er, but you aughta be careful you don't scare her off. The wrong present could really dent your doin's. Cressida don't seem like the flowery kind. Not jewelry, nor clothes. I ain't sure what's left, but then, if you know her like I think you know 'er, you'll figure somethin' out. Remember money's no object. Ain't never met a women with a solid sense of price. They just want you to show 'em that you know 'em. Just make sure she's the one. You don't wanna be buyin' things and given' her the wrong idea. Women get the wrong idea real quick, and then you're obligated, year after year."

After that, he went to Annie.

"If I were Cressida, I'd want you to take me out and show me off. Buy me a red dress, something that has absolutely nothing to do with the Carnival, and maybe some red pumps to match. We could go downtown and hit the night life, just me and him, the man of my dreams, and then we'd go to a fancy dinner at the most expensive restaurant in town. He'd let me know he thinks I'm worth it, and we'd get the feeling

we were a million miles away from this shit hole, and then we'd go to a real romantic movie, and hold hands the whole time, and then he'd take me dancing until my feet hurt, and then at the end of the evening, he'd spring the engagement ring on me, and then we'd be ready to tell the whole world. But that's just me. I'm not sure what Cressida would like. She's never had a boyfriend who actually bought her something. All they ever wanted was sex. She'd think it was something more, and then they'd dump her, and she'd get her feelings all hurt. She could never figure out why it happened like that, and then she'd come crying to me, all brokenhearted. That was mean of me to say. And I'm not really answering your question either? But still, you should have seen some of the losers she's slept with at school. I just wish I could meet a nice guy who would want to buy me something for my birthday. But Cressida? Who knows."

And then he went to his mom.

"Levi, shouldn't you be more worried about how you're going to tell you're father you'll be leaving? I know he's having a hard time admitting it, and I know you've already tried to tell him, but he's not convinced. The time has come. He needs to know you're really committed. Now, I've done what you asked, and I haven't talked to him myself, but time's running out. You need to stop worrying about women and start thinking about you're future. If this agronomy degree is what you really want, I hope you take the right steps. I don't know if getting all involved again is the right thing for you now. And Cressida? I don't know if she knows what she wants. From what I've seen this summer, she's not the same girl. She seems



confused. With her parents divorce and all, I feel sorry for the poor child. Be sure you're not giving her the wrong idea. You've been friends for an awfully long time."

And finally, in a brief encounter before going home from dayshift, Richard offered his unsolicited and totally unexpected advice.

"Isn't Cressida's birthday coming up this month," he asked. "She talked all summer about turning twenty-one and how old that was going to be. Funny, isn't it? She mentioned wanting a telescope several times, so she could look at the stars or something. I don't know if you Weatherbys get her things on her birthdays, but since she's practically one of you, I thought I'd pass the word along. It's probably a lot of money, and it may be more than you want to spend, but she mentioned it more than once, and said she could never afford it. I think she said she wanted an eight-inch Celestron reflector with a clock drive, or something. Yah, that's what she said all right. But she couldn't afford it. Thought I'd mention it in case you and Annie were trying to think of something. *Hasta luego.*"

"Thanks," said Levi, recognizing instantly that Richard given him the answer to his problems.

At the same time, he was annoyed that a man he disliked so much had come up with the winning idea. Levi remembered all the times Cressida looked up at the stars and said she wished she could see Saturn's rings or the Orion Nebula. Levi wondered how it was that he hadn't come up with the idea on his own. Levi also wondered why Richard had bothered to tell him. Maybe he felt guilty for wasting so much of Cressida's time, alienating her from Gustavo, and worse yet, alienating her from her

friends. What kind of a loser does that to someone they're claiming to help? The winning idea in no way changed Levi's assessment of Richard.

It was a mistake for Levi not to have spent more time with Cressida and her problems at the beginning of the summer. Levi wanted to change all that. Obviously at one point, Richard had been listening to Cressida better than Levi himself had, but that didn't alter the fact that he was a sorry son of a bitch, Levi thought. Always pretending to care about other people's problems. There's no question, he's doing it to make himself feel better. You could always tell with people like that. Was he wrong about Richard, Levi asked himself? Hell no! Richard mentioned the telescope for himself, to make himself look better. Still it was a winning idea. Damn.

\* \* \*

At 2:00 AM, on the morning of Cressida's twenty-first birthday, after an unusually short shift, the crew convened at the willows next to the steaming sump pond. As always, everyone on nights was ready for an excuse to party.

"I know I shouldn't be contributing to your delinquency," said Annie, handing her a brown paper bag, "but this year, I couldn't think of what to get you. You didn't talk about wanting something in particular like you usually do. Sorry."

"Sorry?" said Cressida. "No need to be sorry!" She smiled, thankful for the small gesture. She grabbed the fifth of whiskey, held it in the air and yelled out, "look everyone, free swigs, complements of Annie."

After taking a large swallow herself, Cressida passed the bottle away and never saw it again. She continued to drink beer from three full coolers and thought about who was missing. The coworkers laughed and joked and did beer shooters – holding the can over their mouths, punching a hole in the bottom with a can opener, and popping the top, then gulping down the whole twelve ounces in one big hasty swallow. A reefer was passed around and several had a toke. Some were doing hits of speed.

After several beers Cressida walked into the tall grass to relieve herself. Dexter followed her.

“Do you mind,” said Cressida, “I walked out here to take a piss.”

“I know, but I have something for you.”

“I’ve told you before,” said Cressida, “I’m not interested.”

“How do you know if you haven’t tried it?”

“I know, because I know,” said Cressida unconvincingly. She wondered if her waning resolve was showing. At the same time, she was afraid. She didn’t want coke to make her feel anxious or paranoid, but the idea of exploring a new experience, going somewhere she had never gone before, was tempting. “Look, I’ve already been drinking. I don’t want to feel bad. Will it make me feel bad?”

“Listen, a couple lines will make you feel *better*, not worse. I promise.”

Feeling uncharacteristically vulnerable to Dexter’s gentle suggestions and calm demeanor, she asked, “what will it do to me then?”

“You’ll have to see for yourself. It’s a little different for everyone, but I’ve

never heard anybody complain.” He thought for a second then said, “unless of course they did too much, but that’s hard to do. You’d have to snort an awful lot. Put it this way. I don’t have the quality or the quantity to make you feel bad. It can only make you feel good. You can do as much or as little as you want. It’s your birthday. Don’t you want to celebrate? My treat.”

Curious, wanting to know why everyone else was so interested in it, and hoping there was something that would take away the pain, she gave in. “OK, but just one snort.”

“Sure,” Dexter smiled. “He unscrewed the black lid from the little glass vile and dipped a tiny black spoon – no bigger than a toothpick – into the white crystal and got a small scoop. He held it to her. “Hold one nostril shut, and breath in hard with the other.”

Cressida followed his instruction. She waited. They stood out in the tall grass together. “Turn around,” she said. “I can’t wait any longer.” Cressida took a few steps away from Dexter and crouched in the tall grass. When she came back to Dexter’s side, she reported, “I don’t feel anything.”

“Some people need just a little more than others. Here, have another.”

Feeling safe about the lack of effect, Cressida snorted three more tiny little scoops, waited awhile, and then had two more after that. Suddenly, she felt less drunk, more clear headed, less worried about her problems, but a bit anxious to get moving. She thanked Dexter and headed back to the main group standing under the dangling willow fronds. She called out to everyone, “hey, it’s my twenty-one-er, and I

say let's all go to the trestle."

When everyone started to move toward their vehicles, Annie offered to drive, pulling Cressida away from the back of Dexter's pick-up.

"I can't sit in that truck," she insisted, "no matter how drunk I am."

"Sure," said Cressida. "I totally understand." Feeling as though she had never understood things better, she followed Annie to her car.

Dexter's truck left the parking lot first. Annie claimed she was having problems with her manual choke. When she finally got the car started, everyone else had gone.

"Hurry up," Cressida encouraged. "Let's go, let's go. I don't want to be the last one into the tunnel."

"Hold your horses," said Annie. "We'll get there when we get there. Just be patient."

When Annie drove out of the parking lot, she went north instead of turning south toward the road that led to the trestle.

"Excuse me," said Cressida jokingly, "but maybe *you* driving *me* wasn't such a good idea. I know you're bad with directions and all, but I didn't think you were so drunk that you couldn't find the party."

"We've got somewhere else to go," Annie said confidently.

"Where?" Cressida demanded.

"It's a surprise."

Annie wouldn't say anymore, which gave Cressida a chance to think clearly

about the upcoming month of September. It just wasn't that far away, after weeks of waiting, it was right around the corner. She felt gleeful and excited, as if September had come overnight. Life was good again, she thought.

When Annie pulled into Levi's driveway, the house was dark. Thinking with unhampered clarity – a clear crisp cutting snappy kind of clarity, the kind that glides across ice like the thinnest razor's edge, or takes off like a rocket and cuts through the atmosphere, slicing through space and time – Cressida was convinced she had it all figured out.

"It's a surprise party isn't it. Nobody went to the trestle did they? Everybody's in there in the dark aren't they? And you've got a damn cake in there or some silly thing. Right Annie? You shouldn't have."

"Nope," said Annie leading Cressida away from the front door and into the back yard.

Cressida immediately saw the telescope. "Levi," she cried out. "How did you know?"

"I'd like to tell you that I just knew," he smiled, "but that wouldn't be the truth. You're not going to believe this, but your old loser-pal Richard told me. I went around asking everyone what you might want. When Richard mentioned the telescope, I knew he had the right idea. I don't know how he knew, but he knew. The bastard."

Cressida wanted to burst into tears, only capable of seeing the gift as a clear crisp delivery from Richard, straight from the center of his heart, slicing through that

same section of space and time she had just come to understand. Richard obviously used Levi to do his leg work. How clever. But her acute thinking reminded her not to show excess emotion, afraid doing so would give her secret away, her overwhelming happiness with Richard's gift. Showing such joy would surely point to her love for her future spouse. What to say, what to say? She couldn't find the right words. Was her acute thought process fading? Was the coke was wearing off and the drunk returning? Either way, it didn't matter. She knew this was Richard's way of saying they were still on, that things were going to be OK. "It's nice," she said, feeling fidgety.

"Nice?" Levi replied. "Is it the wrong size, the wrong kind? Maybe I should have asked you first. I thought I was getting exactly what you wanted."

"No, no," she said, "it's perfect. How did you know?"

"Like I said," Levi kicked the ground, "Richard told me. Shame on you for telling him all your secrets."

Cressida wanted to do twenty laps around Levi's house, elated by the gift.

"Here, have a look," said Levi. "I took the liberty of reading your owner's manual, and I figured out how to set the clock drive, and I got this book with these star charts, so I could find you something. For now, I've just got it set on the moon. I hope that's OK? You'll have to figure out where things are for yourself, but I'd be glad to help. Here, in this book, you'll be able to get all the names of the craters. The book even talks about the what the dust up there is made of. Moon soil! Cool, huh? I hope you like it." And then jokingly, he said, "I bought it with the money I had saved

for Martha's wedding set."

Cressida looked into the eye piece, paying little attention to what Levi was saying, thinking of how distant hopes had been brought one step closer.



## XVII

### THE MASTER BEDROOM

On a beautiful early fall evening, in late August, Levi explained to Thurston what had transpired over the days since Cressida's birthday. The two men were sitting in a dark corner of the topless bar located within walking distance of the truck stop and the I-5 Denny's. Since the death of his beloved wife, the bar had become one of Thurston's favorite Saturday night hangouts. Levi hated the place. He thought all the women were desperate and lost, and he believed the indulgence to be Thurston's most obvious failing. Levi reminded himself he was only there for Thurston's ear, not for the view, sad as it was.

“So after Cressida acted disappointed about the telescope,” explained Levi, “going so far as to say that she would prefer to leave it at my place – saying there was less artificial light there – I figured I had nothing to lose, so I went to talk to my dad. You know? Get all the suffering over at once.”

“And,” said Thurston, not bothering to look at Levi.

“And so, after Cressida left, I didn’t even go to sleep that morning. If I wanted to catch my dad, I knew I had to be at the breakfast table by 5:30. You know how he’s always out the door by 6:00 AM. So, there he was reading the paper when I strolled in. I thought I could get a decent breakfast and have a heart-to-heart with the old bastard. He acted like he had no time. Busiest man in the world. Has to read the national news. Like something happening in China was more important than me, and like nothing was going to stop him from getting to the barn on time.”

“Just didn’t wanna hear what yuh had to say,” said Thurston.

Even though Thurston’s eyes were following the hangman’s noose and the zippered leather underwear, Levi knew he was listening.

“You’re exactly right,” said Levi, “he didn’t want to hear what I had to say, but this time, I was going to make him listen. I didn’t realize until later that he was trying to make it impossible for me to talk to him. Hoping if I couldn’t talk to him, I wouldn’t leave. Just like when I dropped out of high school. I hadn’t figured out how to say no to him then, always trying to make him happy at my own expense, even though he never admitted that I was the only one who was suffering. He thinks offering me the farm is the biggest compliment a man can give his son, and I understand that, but he may never understand that I don’t want it yet. Someday maybe, but not now. I want to explore the world first.”

“So what did he say when yuh reminded him you were leaving?”

“Nothing!”

“Nothin’?”

“Absolutely nothing! So I called mom to the table to translate. I said, ‘Mom, does Dad understand that I’m going to Elmsburg next week to sign up for classes? Does he know I’m leaving? Does he care?’ And Dad just sat there at the breakfast table, staring down at the paper in his lap and sipping his pulpy hand-squeezed orange juice. Mom spoils him. And she kept saying, ‘I can’t speak for your father. You’re going to have to ask him.’ And then she’d shoot a death stare over at her deaf husband. Why are all dads such total bastards? Although he’s not a bastard to Annie. She’s his precious little doll. He even offered to pay for her tuition, meanwhile he’s asking his own son to remain ignorant – as ignorant, in fact, as those bullshit farmers around here who are always over-spraying, over-tilling, and pouring pesticides and herbicides and topsoil into the drainage system. There’s got to be a better way. If I’m ever going to take over the farm, I want to be informed, make sure I do things right. Then maybe we’d be selling less berries, but we’d be selling the best berries, and we’d make more money on less land, and then we could pull our bottom land out of production and maybe even run a hunt club, or something. You know many farmers in the Multnomah Valley are doing that.”

“Levi, where do you come up with all these ideas?”

“I read – unlike Dad. He just holds that newspaper every morning to make people think he knows how to read.”

“Now, now. That ain’t fair.”

“Well, the guy’s just a bastard, for pretending not to hear his own son. A

selfish bastard. And all I have to say to him is, I'm gone at the end of September. I'll be down south at school with Annie and Cressida, and he'll be sorry for being such a dick."

"He's proud of you Levi. He tells people 'round town what a fine equipment operator you are. How yuh have the touch when it comes to machines. Your dad thinks the world of yuh. He's right proud to have yuh as his eldest son."

"Then why can't he support me."

"He's doin' the best he can. Yuh want him to understand you, and he wants you to understand him, and there's a whole world o' differences standin' between yuh. One of you's got to be big."

"Why does it always have to be me?" Levi lamented.

"Because you're the strongest," said Thurston.

Unable to respond, feeling strangled, Levi turned to watch the dancer, and he allowed his mind to drift away to thoughts of school.

\* \* \*

A few days later, he headed to Elmsburg State College in the backseat of Annie's car. He had asked Cressida a second time to go with him, and she had said sure. But she had also said that it would make more sense if Annie went with them. Then, she and Annie could look for a place together.

They agreed that while he was going through freshman orientation, they would

even look for a place for him, if he explained what he wanted. When he asked what they thought he would want, they gave him the rundown. Dorms were out. He was too old. Then there were co-ops, studios, one bedroom apartments, two bedroom apartments, one bedroom houses, sharing a house, off-campus housing with cafeterias. Of course there was Greek system, but that was way out, not even an option worth mentioning, except for the Acacia Fraternity, which did seem to have a preponderance of Ag<sup>7</sup> students and math nerds. But again, he was way too old.

Ignoring all the humbling references to his late start, he asked them to keep a lookout for one-bedrooms, studios, or a room in a house, within walking distance of campus.

They dropped him off at the main entrance, by the security guard shack, which reminded him of the scale shack at the Carnival, and he walked over to the College of Agriculture. Inside the musty smelling, turn-of-the-century building, he was surprised and charmed by the wooden floors and creaking stairways. He enjoyed the paneled walls with three-foot core samples taken to show the different physical structure of various soil types.

The long cylindrical samples – encased in Plexiglas tubes, and mounted to dark wood paneling – had been taken from all over the country. There was a prairie sample from South Dakota, a tundra sample from Alaska, a rain forest sample from the Olympic Peninsula in Washington, and a Great Basin Plateau from South Eastern Oregon, not too incredibly far away from Winnemucca, he thought. His heart skipped a beat remembering earlier events. But he felt hopeful and strong, getting stronger

every day, trying to be positive, trying to overcome the lack of support from his father and get on with his life without Martha.

Levi had scheduled an appointment with the Dean of Agriculture. Before he walked into the man's office he rubbed his hands on his pants to remove the sweat.

The Dean was a stern but seemingly reasonable man. He was impressed with Levi's SAT scores and community college coursework – all that he had done to get accepted into the university as a freshman – it was still not enough to get him into the College of Agriculture. The dean explained that when he had acquired enough credits transferable into the agronomy program, and if he maintained a minimum GPA – which seemed likely, considering his excellent high school grades before dropping out – he should be in the program by the following year.

Sitting in a wooden chair, looking over a dark wood desk at the dean, Levi worked quietly through his disappointment, realizing that not being in the program for a year was not the end of the world– just a minor dent in his ego. He'd experienced worse setbacks, and reminded himself that this was nothing. A year would fly by. He could wait.

After humbly thanking the dean for his time, Levi went to the Student Union to eat lunch. Excitedly, he marveled at the ornate construction of the old college buildings – the cross beam structure in the SU, the brick face and grand columnar entrance way to the Men's Building, and the beautiful but dilapidated Badger Hall. He thought, perhaps if he had entered school at eighteen, he might have enjoyed living in that grand old dorm building in the center of campus. He enjoyed all the tree-lined

sidewalks, with giant elms full of crossbills and grosbeaks twittering away. He observed that the trees and birds were the same as the ones back home. Acknowledging that fact made him feel less strange about leaving the only place he had ever known.

The sun was shining brilliantly over his new world, and the wind rustled energetically through the elm leaves. Levi was anxious for fall. He was ready for the changing of the seasons. At the end of the summer, he always felt tired of the sun's heat, the darkness of night shift, and the isolation. He was more than ready to join the academic world and the day people. He was sick of living like a bat.

Levi waited until the freshman "W's" were scheduled to walk through Finn Coliseum and pull cards for the classes they wanted. The experience was like a carnival, running to the tables for the most popular classes and with the longest lines, standing at the end of the line, hoping he could get into organic chemistry before all the sections were full, or at least a section that didn't start at 7:30 AM. Changing to days would take time, and thinking about chemical reactions that early in the morning was an unpleasant notion, but still better than driving tractors for the rest of his life.

When he had grabbed all his cards, feeling happy to have gotten everything he wanted, he turned his packet in to the administrative people at one corner of the building and left to meet Annie and Cressida at the intersection next to the guard shack. He sat in the cool grass near the intersection, and waited patiently while watching puffs of wind move gently through the lush greenery all around him.

Annie being the punctual and responsible person she had always been, was

there within five minutes of the promised meeting time. Levi got into the back seat again, and they went to look at an apartment they had found for him. Having lived in town for three school years, they knew exactly where to look for something they thought he might like.

“Believe it or not,” said Annie, “we already rented a place for ourselves. We’ll take you there, before we head to the studio. The only problem we had was who was going to get the master bedroom.”

“So who got it?” asked Levi.

“I did,” said Cressida. “Annie insisted. She seems to think I’ll be entertaining more often than she will. And I figured if my being a slut is going to help me to get the bigger room, then more power to me.”

“I never said that,” Annie countered.

“Sure you did,” said Cressida. “You said, ‘if history’s any judge, then I should get the room that accommodates a twosome.’ How else am I supposed to take that?”

While driving toward their new apartment, Annie turned her head back toward Levi and winked, then said. “What I meant, Cressida, was that maybe this was going to be the year that you would find a decent long term relationship. I was trying to be positive. Can’t I hope nice things for you without you getting all pissy?”

Cressida caught the wink. “Does that wink – the kind of wink that only a complete moron could have missed – mean that both of you think I’m a slut? Are both of you complete jerks?”

“No, no, no,” said Levi. “You’re taking things all wrong. We both hope this is



going to be your year, that a good man is going to walk right into your life and make you completely happy.”

“Look, I don’t need either of you trying to fix me up with losers. I can do that all by myself, thank you very much.”

“But what if I introduced you to a handsome, caring, passionate, smart and funny kind of guy,” explained Levi. “I’m talking about the kind of guy who could change your life, the kind of guy that would make sure you were never lonely again, the kind of guy who would love you to pieces, make you the center of his galaxy, and shower you with gifts?”

“I get the impression you guys have someone in mind already,” Cressida snided. “Tell whoever it is that I’m not interested.” She wanted to tell her well-intentioned friends to back off. Whoever they had in mind, she was sure she wasn’t interested. Annie had set her up before, and the guys had been nice, but too straight-laced, too simple, much like someone she thought Annie herself would be interested in. Cressida wanted a challenge. She wanted to tell them she had already met someone who satisfied the parameters Levi had specified, and she was sick to death of hiding it. When they got to the parking lot, Cressida got out quickly, irritated by the constant lie.

As they stood in the smaller room, the one that would be Annie’s, she said to Levi, “see those elms outside my window. They remind me of home. I can’t wait to open the window this fall and hear people walking through the falling leaves.”

“That’s exactly what I thought when I was on campus, Annie. I like it down

here because it reminds me of the farm.”

“OK guys,” interrupted Cressida, “now let’s look at the room where I will be entertaining.”

The threesome walked into the large echoing room. Looking at the bare walls, the room suddenly seemed lonely, way too big, and with a bad view to boot. Cressida looked out at the parking lot and wished she was the one who was renting a studio instead – a place where Richard could come down for weekends and no one would know, especially if the divorce proceedings took longer than expected. She wished for a place where she wouldn’t have to explain anything to Annie and Levi. After the telescope, she wondered whether Levi still considered Richard a loser. Everybody else could see that he wasn’t.

“Nice,” said Levi, “I can’t wait to come visit. So where’s my place?”

“It’s just down the street,” said Annie. “If you decide to take it, you’ll never be lonely.”

They drove to the tiny apartment, overlooking a large patch of elms and a small drainage creek. “You can look out the window and feel like you never left home,” explained Annie.

“Earth to Annie,” said Levi.

“You know what I mean,” laughed Annie.

“I do,” he admitted, “and thanks for the thought. I love the farm. I love my little house back home. It’s my obligation to dad that makes me feel like I want to leave. Don’t you see. I have to leave. It’s the only way I can prove myself to him,

make him take me seriously. If I come back, and that's a big if, then I am coming back on my own terms, not because he's pressured me into it. I'll never let anyone make me feel like I don't have choices again. Without choices, life isn't worth living."

"Here-here to that," agreed Cressida.

"And I think I am going to choose this place," said Levi. "Thanks Annie. A brother couldn't have a better sister."

Levi signed a lease that would allow him to be near good friends and comforting elms. After the business was done, Levi was not ready to leave Elmsburg. He said, "I don't know if you guys are in a hurry, but I was hoping you could show me around town a little more."

"I've got an even better idea," said Annie. "How 'bout if we take Levi to Bald Mountain and watch the sunset. Wouldn't that be romantic?"

"For who?" asked Cressida.

"For me and Annie," said Levi sarcastically. Recognizing Annie's good intentions, he was beginning to wonder how Cressida could be so blind. One thing was for sure. Either he needed to be a lot more direct about his intentions or give up on the idea altogether. He wondered if she was still under the spell of another man – some loser Levi couldn't compete with.

"Yah, sure," said Cressida halfheartedly, "let's take Levi to the top of Bald Mountain."

Annie and Levi could tell Cressida was preoccupied, but they headed to Bald

Mountain anyway. It was the highest peak around – a place where the stars were exceptionally bright and the lights of the little coastal towns were visible from fifty miles away – a place from which a person could feel like they were on top of the world, overlooking the Multnomah on one side and the ocean on the other – and a favorite place for dates – or, for the more adventurous, overnight affairs.

On the drive up, Cressida grabbed the back seat so she could think. She wanted to confess. She hated the idea of leaving the Carnival at the end of September. She wasn't thinking about her final year as an undergrad, a senior in good standing, and that if she kept up her academic record, she would graduate with honors and be able to apply to any astronomy program in the country. She could write her own ticket.

But she wanted to admit to somebody that she didn't care so much about the stars anymore. They were so far away, so intangible, and so lonely. What she really wanted was to remain home near the man she loved. Even if she wouldn't be able to see him until he was free – maybe later than she had once hoped – she would still be closer to the memories of June and July, the ones she replayed over and over to the minutest detail, with the kind of acuteness that would surely lead to a job as a first-rate astrophysicist.

She remembered everything Richard said and how he said it, when, where and why he said it, what his face looked like, whether there was grease on his chin, or whether he smelled like hydraulic fluid after fixing the lift cylinder on the barrel dumper, or whether he just smelled like b.o. which was probably Suzie's fault for not

doing a good job with the wash. The weasel was shamelessly undomesticated, even with the kids. All she cared about was the latest hairstyle and whether her lipstick matched her fingernails.

Cressida knew Richard would be pleasantly relieved when he could begin to live his life with a woman who cared less about appearances. She remembered the times Richard had told her she was sexy, even with her hairnet, knee-high rubber boots, and fruit stained shirts that *never* smelled like b.o. because Cressida knew how to do laundry.

Sitting quietly in the back seat of Annie's car, she even began to entertain fantasies of not going to school at all, continuing to work at the plant, so she could be around to console him when the divorce proceedings were ongoing, and the hard times had come, and he had to do his own wash. She knew the hard times were coming. She knew Suzie would not make things easy for Richard. The weasel was a born-and-raised local, just like Richard, and she knew everyone in town. She would probably bad-mouth him at the beauty shop and the filling station and the Plaid.

Why not? She had already been bad-mouthing him, which was probably why –Cressida assumed – he went out of his way to help everyone. He probably knew all the cruel things she was saying about him at the little salon near the Plaid. The things she was saying to the community were probably the same things she was saying at home to him – the things he in turn told Cressida – about how he was a bad husband because he worked night shift and never had any time for her, the lazy, sleeping, son of a bitch, and how he had a roving eye, and how he was always helping everyone else

under the sun except her, and how he didn't make enough to give her a decent respectable life. Suzie even made the occasional remark that he was probably unfaithful, which explained why being away from the family so much didn't bother him. Who in their right mind wanted to work night shift, unless they didn't want to see their own family, she would say.

What did she know, Cressida thought. And how dare she accuse her husband unfairly. Cressida knew for a fact, because Richard had told her so – over and over – that he had never been unfaithful to Suzie and was sick of being falsely accused. False accusations were what drove him right out the door. Why couldn't she just trust him and leave him alone, he said to Cressida night after night? In a marriage, trust should be unconditional. That's what he said he believed, and that is why he said he was so upset when Cressida had asked him if he was still sleeping with his wife. He told Cressida she should automatically assume he was doing the right thing, in the same way a good person would assume that there was a god in heaven. She should not question whether he was doing the right thing. He should not have to prove himself all the time. All she needed to do was trust him, not ask too many questions, and mostly be patient. Work on that Cressida, he would say. In the end, things were going to happen the way they were going to happen. That was what he promised her, especially in the bone yard when he had wanted her, before she had decided that it was best for them to remain apart until September.

Cressida sometimes hated herself for demanding the separation. Soon it would be over. Patience, she reminded herself. Patience. Even Mrs. Weatherby was known

to say that all good things came to those who waited. That's what Levi used to tell her all the time.

"Here we are," said Annie, announcing the obvious to Cressida.

At the parking lot below the summit, Levi looked around with obvious joy. In the fading light, they walked without flashlights to the very top of the peak – just over 4,500 feet – very high in relation to the relatively low elevation coast range and the even lower Multnomah Valley behind them. He enjoyed the night sky and thought about how if Cressida brought her telescope to school, they could all come up there together and look at the stars. He watched the twinkling lights starting to pop up all over the fading blue heaven above. As they stood on the summit in a light cool breeze, he wondered what was going on in Cressida's mind.

"Hey Cressida," he asked, wanting to involve her in conversation. "I've got a scenario for you. Follow me on this one. What if aliens came out of the sky right now and offered to take you on their space ship and show you the entire universe? Would you go?"

"I-," began Cressida.

"But wait," said Levi. "There's one more thing. What if it was a one-way trip. You'd have to choose between exploration of the entire universe – which must be an incredible thing – or staying here on earth with your friends. What would you do?"

"I would go," Cressida lied. "I would miss you guys very much, but I would most definitely go." Before June, it could have been the truth, she thought. It wasn't a *total* lie.

“Not me,” said Levi. “Don’t get me wrong. I think it would be a fantastic experience, but there’s way too much for me right here on earth. I could never leave you guys.”

He reached out and brought the two women in for a group hug, and then looked upward toward what he considered one of life’s most remarkable and reassuring constants. The stars. They winked at him and he smiled back, feeling certain that his life was finally changing for the better.



## XVIII

### EXPOSURE

“Tonight, I take you off press,” Gustavo yelled.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Cressida shouted angrily.

The combined noise of the press, the pumps, and the fan motors was deafening.

“Not five minutes ago I set the valves to drain a processing tank. I re-checked everything,” then she paused, weighing her options, and then deciding she had nothing to lose, not caring whether Gustavo fired her on the spot. “Listen, if Douglas were to find out that one of his supervisors was tampering with valve settings – just to fuck a subordinate for no goddam reason whatsoever – that supervisor would be in hot shit with Douglas! In fact, that supervisor would probably never work for Douglas again, let alone become a plant manager. What’d’ yuh think of them *gusanos*, Gustavo?”

Gustavo smiled the broadest smile she had ever seen him smile, broader than

the blinding gold he had flashed at her – when he had come looking for her in the bone yard earlier in the summer – after the first time she and Richard had done it flung over the pulper cylinder.

“*Creseed*,” he said, “You know Lupe. She tell me a story. She say, she see Richard in bone yard with some *muchacha*. They no looking for parts. She say she no believe what she see. No, no, she say, she think Douglas fire Richard, if Douglas find out what Richard do with *subordinada*, like you say.”

“What the fuck are you talking about,” Cressida yelled back at him over the rumbling of the press. “And what does any of this have to do with the fact that I think someone is sabotaging my equipment!”

“You go to line,” Gustavo demanded. “You be gone soon. You stay on line until you leave. What? Two weeks? *Bien! Go. Inmediatamente! Pronto!*”

“You’re so full of shit, Gustavo,” she mumbled, then louder so that he could hear, “it’s a good thing I’m leaving soon, because I don’t know how much more of this kind of bullshit I can stand.”

In reply, Gustavo asked her to send Lupe back to the press. “Lupe’s job now. You no work here no more.”

“Motherfucker,” Cressida mumbled. “Goddam son of a bitch. Cocksucker. Prick. Asshole. *Pendejo!*”

Knowing Levi would be ashamed of her language, she kicked her boots through the pools of water on the concrete floor between the press and cluster of women on the sort lines. Only two out of the four lines were running. One was

predominantly white, populated with the remaining college girls and the lifer women. The other was mostly Mexican, populated with those who only knew key words like mold, juice, worms, and fuck you.

When Cressida ran out of expletives, she thought about how Levi often told her that her language would scare off even the most hardened trucker, and that it was a good thing he saw her for the beautiful woman she really was, underneath all that foul language and berry-stained clothing.

But tonight, Cressida didn't care whether Levi would judge her harshly. Instead, she wondered whether Gustavo knew anything, or whether he had just made up a clever lie, the kind of lie that he hoped would convince her not to tell anyone about what he had been doing to her press all summer long.

Her mind was whirling and drumming with the sounds of equipment. She couldn't think straight. Overpowered by confusion, she remembered the morning of her birthday when everything seemed crystal clear. She began to wonder whether a snort would help her to put it all together, make it through the night.

Cressida was torn. Going to the line without a bigger fight might have inadvertently made Gustavo feel like he'd won. But fighting too much might have caused the kind of scene that would prove he was right about her and Richard. Especially if Gustavo hadn't seen anything. Or if he had made up the story about Lupe seeing them.

So she could probably go to Lupe, if she wanted to, and get the truth. But asking Lupe would prove that Cressida was hiding something. No she couldn't go to

Lupe. And besides, who was Lupe to judge anyone, especially after kissing Gustavo by the dumpster earlier in the summer – according to Annie’s sources anyway.

But Gustavo needed to know that he couldn’t get away with this kind of bullshit. And if he really did know about her affair with Richard, he could blow the lid off things, embarrass the hell out of Richard, make Richard deny everything, and then force Richard to put greater distance between himself and Cressida, which would surely be a worse kind of separation than the one she was already enduring.

Maybe the scandalous exposure of their indiscretion would make Richard wonder why she couldn’t just go to the line like a good *muchacha* and keep her mouth shut. Maybe her lack of patience, lack of ability to swallow her pride might even turn him against her, and she couldn’t stand that. He might think she betrayed their secret to force his hand. She could never let that happen. She owed Richard more. He had done so much for her, changed her life. She needed to be loyal. Once he realized what she had to endure in order to make things right between them, once he realized what she had sacrificed, how she had swallowed her pride for the greater good, he would love her all the more. So that was how it was going to be.

She couldn’t wait for the time when she would be able to tell him what was happening to her. How unfair Gustavo was being, how unfair life in general was, and how she found the courage to rise above it all, for the sake of their love. She realized that no matter what she did, aside from standing quietly on the line, she might make things worse, bring more attention to something that was meant to be a forgotten secret come September. Richard had said it over and over, that people mustn’t know

about what had happened between them. And, later in the fall, they would have to pretend like their relationship was new, later, yes later, when everything would be OK. Patience, she reminded herself.

Hard as it was, she had to be bigger than Gustavo. Gustavo had to know that the minute he said anything about Richard, then she would go straight to Douglas about the sabotage. And she knew that Douglas would believe her over Gustavo, because she knew that Richard would back her up. He would let Douglas know that she was quite simply the most honest person he'd ever met, like any of the Weatherbys – even though she wasn't one. Yes, the reliable Richard – someone who had worked hard for Douglas for fifteen years, and whom Douglas believed in, someone who ran the concentrator much better than Gustavo – would stand behind her.

Not knowing whether things would come to that or not, Cressida had considered walking right out of the plant and never coming back, but again that would make Gustavo think he had been right about her and Richard. Or if he really had caught them in the bone yard, he needed to know that she couldn't be intimidated, that she was stronger than he suspected, that he could not scare her off so easily.

And mostly, she didn't leave because she was afraid of being separated from the one place that still united her with Richard. Even though they were no longer on the same shift, at least they were still coming to the same place everyday. The Carnival had become a part of their love, the place where it all began, and she could not bear to go willingly. Gustavo would have to force her out. Good luck trying, she

thought.

In the end, Cressida decided she had to bite her lip and get through the next couple weeks. It was better for everyone, even though it was the worst for her.

After not crying for two months, Gustavo had brought Cressida closer to tears than she had been since her self-imposed separation from Richard. She stood on the line and stared at the passing black raspberries, trying to choke back her humiliation. Once in awhile she reached out with a fruit-stained latex glove and grabbed a hunk of moldy berries – congealing globs of fruit with white hairy strands of wet mold that looked like gray slime. Sometimes she could hardly see at all, when her eyes clouded over, and then she would kick her own shin with the back of her boot, to feel pain and bring herself to reality. She couldn't let Gustavo reduce her to tears. As she threw the fistfuls of slimy berries into the buckets on either side of her, she worked hard at hating Gustavo. He was not going to be the one to reduce her to tears, humble her, make her feel like shit, like an absolute nothing, like a lifer.

Enraged, she thought about how she would be leaving soon, just like Gustavo said, and she would never come back to work at this shit hole again. Even if Gustavo was sent to the Ferryville plant, and Richard came back here next summer, she would not come back. After Richard's divorce, they would not need the plant to unite them. She was going places, going to graduate with honors, going to be an astrophysicist, or maybe and astronaut. She couldn't wait to get to Elmsburg, away from all this, away with real friends, friends who would eventually understand the decisions she had made.

She calmed herself, knowing she would be seeing Richard soon, on a regular basis by the end of fall term in fact. And after that, she would figure out how to break the news to Annie and Levi, tell them how she and Richard had fallen in love with each other over the summer, but how he had resolved to get a divorce long before they fell in love, and how important it had been to both of them to do the right thing, do as little damage to innocent parties as possible, like his children. Yes, they were going to pursue their love for each other after he was a free man, which he would most certainly be by the end of fall term, if not sooner.

There was no way, she thought, he would want to go through the holiday season without his future wife. She knew she couldn't imagine going through the holidays without him. He would have his own place by then, and they could have their first turkey dinner together, just him and her, with candle light and wine, and surrounded by more love than two people could stand. If only everyone could find as much love as she had found with Richard. Yes, they were lucky, she thought. Not everybody finds what they have.

With these kinds of thoughts, Cressida slowly began feeling better. They could even have the twins over, and the twins would certainly come to love her, because they would be able to see what a kind, sincere, honest person she was. They would love her, because they would be able to see how much she loved their father. She was a decent person – minus the profanity. Anybody who knew her could see that. It was plain enough. She would never lie about a thing like Gustavo sabotaging her press. But she had to let it go, or it would drive her mad.

## XIX

### OCEANS APART

The beach cabin was supposed to have been a last hurrah for all the college-bound coworkers. The get-together had been planned by Annie and Cressida for people who enjoyed each other's company, but with the addition of the three freshman boys – whose names they hardly knew – Annie and Cressida felt like they had lost a measure of control over their own idea.

The final group was a strange combination at best. Levi, Cressida, Annie, Dexter, Mario, Joleen, Leyland, and the three freshman boys who were determined to win some of Joleen's affection before the summer was through. The odd reappearance of Leyland had been Joleen's doing. She had taken it upon herself to add tension to the mix, to make sure Mario didn't think he had exclusive rights. Just because Leyland was gone from the plant didn't mean he was gone from Carnival, or from Joleen's off hours.



It was Saturday afternoon in mid September, and they had jointly rented a large cabin overlooking the Pacific Ocean, for one night. The cabin was rustic but costly and required a minimum number of participant to be affordable. Keeping the price down was one of the things that had put pressure on people to go, but there were other pressures.

Levi had begged Annie and Cressida not to back out. He reminded them that they were the ones who had originally asked *him* to join. They were the ones who had made the arrangements. They absolutely couldn't back out.

How Mario got invited was anyone's guess. Levi himself felt like backing out when he first heard the news. Joleen must have been responsible for that invitation too.

Annie was not looking forward to being around Leyland. She wrongly assumed she would never have to see him again, after Douglas had fired him for loaning the motorcycle to Mario. And then – having grown up in a tiny rural community – she was reminded that mistakes had an annoying way of tagging along for the rest of your life.

Not knowing why Annie wanted to back out, Levi did some strong persuading, afraid that if Annie backed out, Cressida would too. He explained to Annie how he hoped this would be his big chance to tell Cressida his true feelings, before the pressures of school started. He reminded Annie that there was nothing more romantic than a night on the beach, and a good sister would try to help him with his plan.

Once Annie relented, he begged her to convince Cressida to come along. But

Cressida didn't want to be around the trio of Joleen, Mario, and Leyland. She wanted to kill Joleen for asking the two of them to join, for wrecking the trip for everyone else. Once Cressida reluctantly agreed to go, Levi was thrilled. He really didn't care who went, as long as Cressida went.

When they arrived at the beach house, they had to decide who was going to sleep where. There was a loft with a king-sized bed, a crowded bunk room with three sets of bunks, and two small rooms with two twins each. Cressida and Annie quickly grabbed one of the small rooms, leaving the others to fend for themselves. Levi grabbed the loft, stating that he was oldest, and therefore had dibs. Joleen took the other small room, which left the bunk room to the rest of the males who begrudgingly piled their belongings in the tight sleeping quarters.

From the sidelines, Levi watched the evening unfold. Everyone got drunk rapidly. Joleen and Dexter played bar tenders, making pitcher after pitcher of daiquiris.

"I'll have a strawberry daiquiri," said Cressida.

"No can do," said Dexter. "We've got fresh blackberries. Take it or leave it."

"Wouldn't you know it," explained Joleen, "an entire flat of Grade A blackberries just fell into my trunk, before I left work this morning. So, Cressida, you've got three choices. Blackberries, blackberries, or frozen raspberries."

"Yuck," said Cressida, remembering how the raspberry mold had made her eyes itch every day for a month back at the plant. "I'm out on both of those choices. Way too seedy." When she said the word seedy, she thought about how the pulper in

the plant removed all the seeds from the concentrate, then she thought about the old derelict pulper in the bone yard and shivered. “Where’s the beer,” she said with annoyance.

“In the fridge already,” said Dexter, “oh, and I don’t know whether you’ve heard or not, but it’s probably going to snow later.”

“A total blizzard!” Joleen added gleefully.

“No thanks,” said Cressida, reminding herself that the morning of her birthday had been an exception to her rule about drugs. She was over the shock of being sent to the line. With one week of work left and all the determination in the world, she said, “all I need’s a beer. Thanks.”

As darkness came, Levi received his first disappointment. The cloudy sky had turned dark and drizzly. His vision of taking Cressida for pleasant stroll – sitting in the beach grass and watching the sun set while sharing their most intimate feelings for each other – disappeared with the descending fog.

The party remained in-doors. Still, Levi kept waiting for an opportunity to ask Cressida to join him for a walk, hoping that the fog would evaporate, the clouds would lift, and the moon and stars would emerge, but she was playing monopoly with the group and paid no attention to him.

With the exception of Levi, they all sat around a large and unstable wooden table and continued to drink heavily. By his own demand, Mario was made the banker, which annoyed Cressida. She protested the whole time, saying someone else, someone much older and less likely to cheat, should have the responsibility, someone

like herself. She was convinced Mario wasn't even smart enough to count the money correctly. Joleen intervened, saying Cressida needed to give "the little cutie" a chance. Each time Joleen referred to him in that way, Cressida kicked the table's center support with disgust.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" Joleen barked, losing patience with Cressida's table kicking. "Why do you keep doing that?"

"The medication isn't working," Cressida quipped.

As the game wore on, Annie and Cressida whispered back and forth about how they were sure Mario was giving Joleen money under the table. She was having an exceptional night. Though they had no way of proving it, they knew Joleen could not have gotten Boardwalk without help.

Fleetingly, Cressida wondered whether a few snorts would help her see things more clearly, help her to expose Mario's and Joleen's cheating, help her to count and keep track of other people's money as well as her own, all at the same time.

Levi sat on a bar stool, off to the side, bored with the entire evening.

Every fifteen minutes or so, Joleen would say, "come on and join us. There's room for one more!"

Wanting to ask her how she expected him to join in the *middle* of a game, but not wanting to hear some incredibly stupid answer, he said, "I hate monopoly. Any fool can win." He had been watching Mario pull large denominations from the bank and nudge Joleen. He winked at Joleen. "Any fool can win. Right, Joleen?"

She winked back at him, licked her lips and brushed a hand against one of her

breasts, pretending to wipe crumbs from her shirt. Levi knew she was coming on to him, and he was mildly disgusted. He looked her straight in the eyes and said, “no thanks, that game’s not for me.”

“How do you know? You ought to give it a try,” she said. “Otherwise, you don’t know what you’re missing.”

“I think I have a good sense of what I’m giving up.”

“Don’t knock it until you’ve tried it,” she persisted.

“No thanks,” said Levi. With that, he retreated to the master bedroom and opened a window. He smelled the salty air and stared into the darkness, listening to the gulls crying and the waves crashing. Carried by a cool breeze, light sprinkles of rain hit his face. He imagined taking his first agronomy class in the fall. He knew it was just a matter of time before he would be in the College of Agriculture’s agronomy program. Officially! Did those fools downstairs have any idea how much he loved to till the earth? And smell it after it was turned over. And get it under his fingernails and feel the grittiness between his fingertips. Did they know that he had gotten his own subscription to *Agronomy Magazine* after he dropped out of high school, or that there was nothing better than a silty clay loam between his toes? He read a lot. He knew about these things. And he was anxious to learn more.

He turned on the television and found one faint channel. Through the dancing static, he watched the *Gilligan’s Island* episode with the magic beans, where they could all read each other’s minds. He chuckled, wishing he himself had an exclusive little packet of those beans, so he could read everyone’s minds downstairs, especially

Cressida's. By the end of the program, he decided that magic beans were for cowards. What he really needed was to find out what she thought the good old fashioned way. Win or lose, Levi resolved to make his feelings known to Cressida.

When he came back downstairs, the monopoly table had been abandoned.

"Where is everybody?" he asked.

Dexter just smiled, too stoned to care.

"Lessee," said one of the drunken boys sitting near Dexter. "Annie and Cressss wen' down to the beach. Joleen's in 'er bedroom with "the little cutie," and the big dick, I mean Rick, or whatever, an' I think Mario's actually in 'er closet. Passssed out. Leylan'? He's down the beach. Mad at Joleen. Lessee. You're there and I'm here." The other boy laughed and poured more shots.

"Oh, an' we're nex'!" one of them pronounced.

"Huh?" said Levi.

"Nex' 'n line," said the boy, pointing toward Joleen's room. "She promisssssed."

"If anybody cares," said Levi, "I am going to look for Cressida and Annie."

As he walked down the narrow wooden stairway leading to the beach, with its many twists and turns on the precipitous landscape, he thought about how the situation back in the cabin was appalling and amusing at the same time. Appalling because sloppy sex with Joleen was such a drippy disgusting thought, and amusing because Mario was unconscious in the closet, and even more amusing was the image of Leyland stomping down the beach, thinking he had exclusive rights. He should have

known better. And why for the life of him, was Leyland interested in Joleen anyway? Couldn't he do better at school?

Levi reminded himself, however, that he would find nobody better than Cressida at school. Homegrown and priceless, he thought. That's what she was. More important than every single acre of strawberries on his father's land. And maybe even more important than the silty clay loam under his fingernails.

At the bottom of the long stairway, which had taken him down the cliff-side to the sand, he discovered a short board walk which took him to a small three-sided wooden shelter. Inside were Annie and Cressida, sitting on a dry wooden bench.

"Aren't you guys cold?" he said. "You must be freezing."

"Nope," said Cressida, "can't feel a thing. Besides, we're under cover."

"Plus, we've had a little more than you," Annie added. "Takes the edge off."

"Come on," he said, "let's go up to my room. We can watch television. There's a little black-and-white up there."

"Nope," said Cressida, "not going back in there."

"Why?" asked Levi.

"Cheaters," said Cressida.

"Liars and cheaters," said Annie.

"When we caught Mario giving everyone money but us," Cressida explained, "we forfeited and got the hell out." She thought for a minute and then added, "have you ever noticed how nothing bad ever happens to people like Mario?"

"Yah," said Annie, "they lie and they cheat and they never get in trouble. It's

so unfair.”

“Being good, doing the right thing,” said Cressida, “that’s what makes you suffer.”

“It’s a harder road,” Annie agreed. “People like Mario have it easy. No matter what they do wrong, they never get caught.”

“Yah,” said Cressida, “I never cheat and I get in trouble anyway. That fucking-”

“Oh no!” said Annie. “Don’t you even think about starting that Gustavo stuff again.”

“He was overflowing my press on purpose. You realize that don’t you. You’re not the one who has to stand on the line for twelve hours a day. You can still drink beer from the dumpster. I miss those days.”

“I promise I’ll drink for both of us,” said Annie, “and I may even send Mario over to help you sort, if you’re not nice to me. He can make sure you’re not throwing out anybody’s Grade A fruit. He’d be glad to tell *you* what to do.”

“Oh, like hell he would,” said Cressida. “I’ll smash his little face in, if he comes near me.”

“Maybe Joleen wouldn’t think he was such a little cutie, if you smashed his face in.”

“Yah!” said Cressida.

“Right on!” said Annie. “Smash his retarded little face in.”

“Moron!” said Cressida.



“Retarded little bastard,” said Annie.

“I love it that he hates me,” said Cressida. “He’s scared of me because I’m tall *and* good looking.”

“Yah, me too,” agreed Annie, even though she was short and could never ever remember being called good looking. Then she added, “you know, if you were extremely drunk, like seeing-double drunk, and you didn’t look straight at him, and the light was kind of low, and you were maybe twenty feet away, Mario could almost be kind of cute.”

“In sick disgusting kind of way,” said Cressida, sticking her finger down her throat and pretending to gag. She took another drink from the fifth of rum they had brought with them.

“You guys are feeling good, aren’t you?” Levi asked nervously, hoping no one would be sick soon.

“You’re still on that sober kick, aren’t you?” Cressida scoffed. “You’re not driving any fucking reefers to the Multi-Freeze tonight. Don’t be a snotty jerkoff. Have a drink.”

“Don’t be a tee-totaling *pendejo*-for-a-brother,” said Annie.

“A stupid little alcohol-free bastard-loser,” agreed Cressida. “Just sit down and fucking drink with us. Or we’ll smash your face in.”

“Look what we got,” said Annie, proudly holding up the nearly empty bottle.

“You guys drank all that?” Levi asked anxiously.

“No, no, you silly stupid brother-loser,” said Cressida, “we just took one of the

bottles. They'll never miss it. See?" She grabbed the bottle from Annie and held it toward Levi.

"That's it, come on," Levi said, "before you both freeze to death out here."

"I keep telling you, big brother," argued Cressida, "it's not cold."

"Sure, sure," he said. He grabbed both their arms and pulled them up. "We're going inside. We can all hang out in the master bedroom. Just the three of us. No fucking morons, no stupid little bastard, no snotty jerkoffs. Just us."

Back in Levi's bedroom, Annie and Cressida flopped on the extra-large master bed, turned off the lights and stared through the picture window toward the ocean, which was barely visible because of the rain and the darkness.

"Come on and join us," said Cressida, moving to the middle of the bed.

"There's room for three."

Levi jumped at the invitation, even though he recognized the intoxicated offer for what it was. Nothing new. The three of them had often sprawled on Levi's bed at home and watched television – before Martha had moved in and out.

Within minutes, Annie started yawning loudly, remembering Levi's original plan. "Guys," she announced, "I'm going to bed." With that she got up and left.

Levi took note that Cressida did not move away from him, even after Annie had freed up space on the bed. He wanted to take her closeness as a positive sign, but conscientiously reminded himself that nothing a drunk did, or didn't do, was a reliable sign of anything. Still, it hurt to be so close. And yet, he knew damn well that making any move on a drunk would have been the total coward's way. He wanted her to be

completely sober when he told her he was falling in love with her. He also wanted her to remember.

Cressida kept putting her head down and closing her eyes.

“The bed is spinning, Levi.”

“Oh, boy. Just tell me if you’re going to be sick. I’m here if you need me. Want me to get the garbage can from the bathroom. Are you going to be sick?”

“I think I need air,” she said. “I really need air. Help me go outside.” And then she flopped her arm over his back. “Be a pal, and help me go outside.”

Levi helped her down the stairs, but Cressida was not doing well, stumbling, and almost bringing both of them down to the bottom of the stairs in a heap.

“Where are we going?” she demanded. “The doors that way.” She pointed toward the ceiling.

“We’re not going to the beach,” said Levi, knowing she wanted to go down the steep wooden staircase. “We’ll go walking down the road. Nice and flat. Real safe. OK?”

“Whatever you say,” she obliged.

Levi didn’t mind taking care of Cressida. He had done it before, and he acknowledged the times she had done it for him. He was forced to remember the morning when Walter had invaded his home, when he was lying on the floor in his own hallway. Still, those remembrances aside, Levi could not help feeling disappointed. He would have backed out of the weekend retreat, had he known it was going to turn out like this. He wanted to tell Cressida his true feelings, not help her

walk off a raging drunk.

As Cressida staggered down the gravel road leading from the house to the highway, she leaned over and puked without warning. Levi wiped her face off with his jacket's sleeve, and then watched her sway. Afraid she was going to pass out, he grabbed her to make sure she didn't fall.

"Are you going to make it," he said, trying to be lighthearted.

"Don't I always? We're survivors, you and I. Survivors! Bring it on!" she gurgled, then got down on her knees and puked again. Before Levi could stop her, she lied down in the middle of the road.

"You can't lie here," he said, trying to pull her up. She was dead weight.

"Why," she protested.

"Because you'll get run over. Come on. You can lie on my bed, when we get back to the house, and I'll make sure you live until sunrise. Please?"

"You know we're a lot alike," she continued, lying face up in the wet gravel, feeling nothing, and looking toward the mist. "We don't give up easy. We've got all the patience in the world. We've been through worse. We'll get through this. You just wait and see. It's all going to be fine."

"Sure it will, now give me your hand."

Cressida relented, reaching her arm toward him. He pulled her up and hastily escorted her back to the house. By then, it was 4:00 AM. Just in time to be done with the night shift, he thought.

When Levi brought Cressida back upstairs, he found Leyland and Dexter

sprawled out on the master bed watching television.

Cressida flopped on the bed next to Leyland and Levi took off her wet shoes.

“I guess we need to leave now,” said Leyland, getting off the bed. “You guys make such a cute couple. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t.” Leyland winked at Levi.

“Imbecile,” Levi mumbled and shook his head, irritated by the implication that he would take advantage of a zombie.

“Cressida, are you still awake?” He shook her but she didn’t respond. “Passed out! You better enjoy this sleep,” he muttered, “because you’re going to wish you were dead tomorrow when you wake up.”

Levi sat in silence on the bed next to Cressida. Part of him wanted to believe Leyland had meant what he said about them being a cute couple. But considering the source, Leyland was probably thinking the usual, without consideration for the fact that Cressida was unconscious. In either case, Levi knew it had not turned out to be his night.

XX

## HOT PEPPERS

“I wish I were dead,” Cressida moaned on Sunday evening. “I think this is the worst I’ve ever felt in my whole life.”

Levi had returned the suffering Cressida to her mother’s house.

“Cressida, honey,” said her mother, “sometimes a good hangover can last three days. Maybe I should fix you a drink. It works. Just one drink and you’ll feel better.”

“Mom, are you crazy? Leave me alone! And close the door behind you.”

“Let me know if you change your mind,” she said, backing away from Cressida’s bed.

The idea of drinking even one teaspoon of alcohol made Cressida’s stomach boil. With relief, she watched her mom – still in a house coat and slippers – shuffle out of the room. She probably doesn’t even feel the hangovers anymore, Cressida thought. For an instant, she was afraid of turning into her mother, of drinking too

much, and of not knowing where to draw the line, not being able to face reality sober.

She lied in bed with the lights off and the curtains drawn, wanting to sleep away the hours until she felt better. Any movement, even the lifting of a finger, made the world spin. Talking made her feel like she wanted to throw up. Lying perfectly still, in the dark, with her eyes closed was the only peace she could find. But it was a labored peace. Breathing felt like heaving a mountain up and down, and her heart pounded against her chest as if someone was swinging a sledge hammer against a gong. I'm in hell, she thought.

The next evening, still feeling weak and nauseous, she forced herself to go to work. She was afraid Gustavo would lay her off if she called in sick. She was afraid of missing an opportunity to see Richard. And afraid Levi would worry if she didn't show up.

Being there was no fun at all. The whirring, pounding, and clanking sounds of the plant hurt her head from every direction. The propane fumes and the constant movement of the cherry-laden sort line made her sick. Combined with feeling awful, she was deeply disappointed. Richard's car had not been in the parking lot when she arrived – with a purposeful fifteen minutes to spare. By 6:00 PM, when the night shift started, Richard was usually headed home to his family.

Each night, with the changing of the guard, from dayshift to nightshift, she looked forward to seeing his car in its usual spot, near Douglas's double wide trailer next to the plant. A quick view of his car before work was the highlight of each passing day. Seeing something of Richard's made her feel like the dream was still

alive, like she had not imagined the whole thing.

At the 10:00 PM lunch break, she sought refuge in the bone yard, a place she rarely went to anymore. Sitting on a pallet and leaning against a small square tank – a few feet from the derelict pulper where Richard had shown his true feelings – Cressida thought she might find some peace. She closed her eyes, hoping the spinning sensation – helped along by several hours of passing fruit on the conveyor belt – would stop. Tonight her motion sickness was even worse than usual, not only because of the lingering hangover, but because something was horribly wrong with the conveyor belt motor.

That night, the sort line was jerking along with a terrible spastic motion, making all the other women queasy as well. They complained to Gustavo who said they would just have to work through it. It was not his problem. All the repair shops were closed. Someone from day shift would have to fix it tomorrow. He said he would leave a note. The nauseous sorters were not consoled.

As Cressida sat very still in the bone yard and concentrated on hating Gustavo for the conveyor belt motor, for the press sabotage, and for everything else she could think of, a friendly voice disrupted her uneasy solitude.

“Hey,” said Annie, “how yuh doin’?”

“How did you find me?” Cressida groaned, not opening her eyes.

“When I saw you walking back toward the concentrator area, I remembered Richard wasn’t here anymore, and I wondered where you were going. I just wanted to make sure you were OK.”



“I’m fine. Don’t I look like I’m fine?”

“The truth?”

“No. Just tell me I’m fine.”

“You *will* be fine. But I don’t think you should just sit back here by yourself. Sometimes activity helps. Gets your mind off the pain. Why don’t you walk with me to the break area. I’m sure it will make you feel better.”

Reluctantly, Cressida went with Annie to the picnic tables and sat with the rest of the crew. They were all talking about the new plant – the one recently purchased by Douglas – east of Ferryville. A couple of the employees who were currently driving all the way from Tillsdale and Dersham, some thirty miles to Carnival, said they hoped they would be able to transfer to the new plant when it was operational.

Unable to resist sharing her special tidbits of knowledge, Annie said, “I overheard Gustavo and Luther talking. They said Richard’s last day here was Friday, and now he’s fulltime out at the other plant. He’s going to move the family up there soon and everything. Douglas is really serious about expanding his concentrate business. The building isn’t even finished, and they are already fabricating equipment for the inside. That’s what Richard is overseeing – how the equipment is going to be built and laid out. I hear it’s going to be bigger than this operation. And I have it on good authority that Gustavo’s all excited. He thinks he’s going to be the new plant manager here.”

“That would be great,” said Joleen.

“Why?” snapped Cressida. She was annoyed that anyone would be happy

about Gustavo taking charge, and she was secretly devastated by Annie's news.

"Don't you see," Joleen explained, "Douglas'll transfer Gustavo to day shift and get him out of my hair. That prick is always hassling me about how I sort."

"Speak of the devil," whispered Cressida to Annie.

Gustavo came out and sat at the opposite picnic table with Lupe and several of her Mexican friends. They began sharing their food and talking about peppers. Half in Spanish, half in English. Gustavo claimed he had come across the hottest pepper he had ever tasted in his life. To prove it, he touched the pepper to his lips, bit off the tiniest possible sliver of green, and grimaced. Then he passed it around to allow others to see that he was right.

"Ooowhheee!" said Lupe. "*Picante!*"

She turned around to the table with the white people. "Anybody wanna try?" she asked. "Very hot! *Muy picante!*"

For the Mexicans, eating was such a social event. Every night, their meals were potluck. Although the college students never shared their sandwiches or instant soup, the Mexican women always offered everything they brought.

Joleen reached for the pepper, always willing to jump on a dare. "Here, I'll try," she said, feeling brave.

Cressida wondered whether her bravery was helped along by some pre-lunch bathroom snorts.

Lupe passed the pepper, and instructed Joleen not to bite, only to touch it to her tongue, then see if she could stand to bite. Joleen touched her tongue, and

immediately handed the pepper off to one of the younger boys. She began drinking pop furiously. “Oh my god, that’s so hot!” she exclaimed.

The boys, feeling they had nothing left to prove, chose not to punish themselves and passed it on through Annie, and then toward Cressida who had her head down on the table. She was not even pretending to feel good. She waved it away with her hand, trying not to touch it, and said, “forget it!”

Once before, Gustavo had tricked her into taking a large bite of an overly hot pepper. She decided right then and there that that was when she first started hating him.

“What about you Mario,” said Joleen. “Guys, give me that pepper back! Come here Mario, and open wide!”

Proudly, with his little chest out, Mario came over.

“Come on, you little cutie, come on, big bite. Show these guys what you’re made of. No little pepper’s gonna hurt you.”

Getting sucked in, Mario opened his mouth and let Joleen throw in the whole pepper.

“Chew! Cutie, chew!” she said.

Everyone else started chanting, “Chew, Cutie, chew!”

Mario chewed quickly and swallowed, hoping to get the hotness out of his mouth as soon as possible.

Annie nudged Cressida to look up. “This better be good,” Cressida moaned, reluctantly lifting her head.

“He just ate the whole pepper,” Annie whispered. “I don’t know about that.”

“Oh boy?” said Cressida. “That wasn’t smart at all.” She watched as Mario’s face kept turning brighter and brighter, until it was nearly purple.

For the first few seconds, Mario said nothing. Valiantly, he maintained a quivering smile. Putting on a brave face, he tried very hard not to let the suffering show. But the burning was too much. Without asking, he grabbed a nearby canteen from the table and drank furiously, then poured the remaining water on his face and over his head. After the canteen was empty, Mario ran into the plant.

“That just made my day,” snickered Cressida. “That’ll teach him.”

The Mexicans were laughing too, marveling and gasping, and then laughing again. They were animated, repeating Mario’s gestures, acting as if they were him, and then pretending to put a whole hot pepper in their mouths, and then feigning his miserable gestures and then laughing. They kept saying, “*gusanito loco*.”

As sick as Cressida felt, she had to chuckle at the new name. Before they had just called him “little worm.” Now they were calling him a *crazy* little worm.

“Did you hear that, Annie,” she said. “They’ve finally got his number.” Then she laid her head back down on her outstretched arms.

After the hullabaloo over Mario’s mistake died down, Lupe spoke in Spanish with her friends. She kept looking back at Cressida and smiling.

“Cressida,” said Annie, “they’re talking about *you* now.”

“What are they saying?”

“I don’t know,” said Annie, “but I think I heard the word *bebé*. You look like

shit, so I think they think you're pregnant." Then Annie asked Lupe, "tell me, what are they saying about Cressida?"

"Oh," Lupe smiled broadly, "they think she's having Levi's *bebé*, and they happy for her. They think she and Levi make pretty couple. All my friends think you have very nice brother. Nice man."

"She's just hung over," Annie laughed. "Tell your friends she's hung over."

"OK, I tell them," said Lupe, "but only if you promise to tell Levi my news. I left Jesus." She smiled proudly. "I got my own place. Just me and my kids. I finally get brave and do it. Tell Levi, OK?"

"Congratulations, Lupe," said Annie. "I'll pass on the news, when he gets back with the next load of cherries. I'm sure Levi will be very happy for you."

Cherry season was in full swing and Levi was on the road, bringing in cherry totes from several distant growers.

Cressida listened to the conversation, but didn't lift her head. How was it that Lupe could just walk out on Jesus, and at the same time, Richard couldn't even bother to tell his future wife that he was moving to Ferryville? Why would he move the whole family? That made no sense at all. The weasel wouldn't want to be stuck in Ferryville when he asked her for a divorce. The timing seemed completely wrong for a move. No, it was Annie who must be wrong. That was it. Maybe Richard was moving to Ferryville, which would be great, to put some distance between himself and his family. Then he and Cressida could begin a normal life even sooner than expected. No one would no him there, or judge either one of them harshly for falling in love and

pursuing an upstanding life. Yes, so much the better, she convinced herself.

As she lay there with her eyes closed, not caring what anyone thought, knowing that in a few days she would be back at school and may never have to work at the Carnival again, she felt revitalized. Lupe's victory over her marital problems with Jesus fueled Cressida's continued belief that anything was possible. Lupe, who had once seemed so dependent on Jesus, so subservient and so scared, was now free. That served as a positive sign to Cressida that Richard could do the same.

And yet again, Cressida felt jealous of Lupe, not unlike when Lupe had gotten hurt. Except this time, Lupe had solved a problem, and sooner than Richard to boot. Cressida swayed from being happy about Richard leaving Carnival, to feeling very frustrated, hurt and angry that he had not tried to contact her. Yes, Annie was wrong about the family moving thought, just like she had been wrong about Lupe and Gustavo. She could see no signs that Lupe had ever been romantically involved with Gustavo.

"Break's over," announced Gustavo.

As the crew shuffled slowly back into the plant, Annie said, "hey has anyone seen Mario?"

Gustavo said he thought Mario was in the men's room, probably too embarrassed to come out, and not to worry. He'd be out eventually. Any *gusanito loco* who could eat a whole pepper could stay in the bathroom as long as he wanted, laughed Gustavo.

Cressida herself went to the women's room and splashed cold water on her

own face. She couldn't believe she was still feeling so wretched. She looked in the mirror and imagined looking at the face of a pregnant woman. What would Richard do if she was actually pregnant? Would that force him to leave his wife? She thought about how she would love any baby of Richard's, and she felt warmed to the toes. She thought about making love with him for the sole purpose of becoming pregnant, and how passionate and exciting it would be. She smiled into the mirror and said, "Richard I'm pregnant. Aren't you thrilled." She imagined him embracing her and telling her how happy he was, and that the timing was finally right for him to be a real father. She splashed her face again, feeling wonderful and sick at the same time. She felt foolish for having invented such a silly fantasy in the women's room. And besides, she didn't want to be pregnant. The timing would be all wrong. She needed to graduate. But someday.

When Cressida went back to the sort line, she continued to think about Richard's move. Was Annie right about the whole family moving too? Would it be wrong for Cressida to call him and find out what was really going on? But how could she call? What if Suzie answered? What if the kids answered? What if she called him during the day? No, she didn't know the number. But she could call information, and then what if someone else from the new plant answered the phone and became suspicious? But they would probably be different people who wouldn't know her or recognize her voice. But what if it was the wrong time, took him off guard, upset him because it caught him in a position where he couldn't talk, and then he would be unhappy. She didn't want to make him unhappy. Love was supposed to be a good

thing. Why should anything she did make him unhappy? Had it ever?

Cressida was sure he could never make *her* unhappy. Unconditional faith always led to extraordinary fulfillment. There was a huge reward waiting at the end of all this. Faith in Richard would lead to heaven on earth, in the same way that faith in god would lead to heaven in the hereafter. Although in the case of both god and Richard, neither had done anything recently to prove that the faith was deserved. And when it came to the lord, Cressida was quite sure He had never lifted a finger for her. At least he had never done anything obvious like call her on the phone to answer her prayers. Richard, on the other hand, had told her he loved her, told her he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her, and she knew he would someday ask her to marry him. Wasn't that enough proof? Sadly for Cressida, the answer was still no. She needed a sign, anything, just to show her that the faith was deserved. Richard needed to do something. But he hadn't – at least nothing she could put a finger on. He hadn't even phoned. How hard was that?

Thinking about the whole situation made her madder and madder. Feeling sick again and wanting to vomit with every spastic jerk of the cherry-laden conveyor belt, she wondered why people believed in god, when nobody could prove He was even out there. No matter what the priest had said every Sunday at the Carnival community church, there was no concrete physical proof, the kind of proof that led to belief in an expanding universe and naked singularities – the kind of proof that could be explained by an equation.

The priest said doubters would go to hell, because they should have believed,



even though there was absolutely no proof. And the nuns were no consolation whatsoever, because they didn't have a clue about the more tangible things in life like love and marriage. They were always talking about a cozy place in the sky with cumulous clouds and feathered creatures. A warm fuzzy place way out there, a place that may or may not exist. Didn't they realize there was no room for heaven in the known universe? The sky was already full of galaxies, planetoids, and globular clusters. All of them should have taken an astronomy course at the nearby university before getting up to the podium and preaching to Carnival about how things were.

It was all ridiculous, thought Cressida. Even when you love somebody, there should still be ongoing proof that the affection is warranted. Why the hell hadn't Richard called? How hard was that? He knew he could call her anytime in the morning because her mom would be sleeping off a drunk. And besides, Cressida had a phone in her own room. She would be able to tell if her mom picked up the phone for some reason. If her mom heard a man's voice though, she would probably think it was Levi, and then put the phone back down. Cressida had that going for her.

Then Cressida started thinking about how she liked the sound of the words "globular cluster." She liked them so much, in fact, that she decided Glob would be an excellent nickname for Mario, next summer, if in fact she had a reason to come back.

It was then that Cressida heard screaming, the most frightening kind of screaming because it was coming from a man – from Gustavo. All the women on the line turned toward the men's bathroom door and watched Gustavo shrieking on top of

his lungs and running toward the lab.

When the ambulance came and carried the body out, everyone knew Gustavo was in big trouble.

Cressida was dumbstruck. Glob was gone forever! How could this be? She would never get the chance to call him Glob. Images of him saying, “fuck you,” when she called him by his new name had danced before her eyes. What she wouldn’t give for just one little “fuck you.” Nobody wanted Mario to die. They had just wanted him to be taught a lesson. Cressida felt chilled and uncomfortable. Squirmy and ill. Mario was the annoyance everyone enjoyed having around. Someone they teased and had fun with. Cressida looked across the belt to Joleen. She stared straight ahead, toward the men’s bathroom door, eyes unblinking, not sure what to do.

“It wasn’t my fault,” Joleen kept mumbling, continuing to run her latex gloves through all the cherries going up the belt.

All Cressida could think of was how much she didn’t want to go to another funeral. There were too many of them, and there was nothing the priest ever said that made any sense at all. But Carnival was full of hypocrites, and they would all be there, at the Carnival community church, in their Sunday best. People would wonder if Cressida didn’t show up. She had to go. Gustavo was off the hook because he was Mexican.

And then her heart clanged in her chest. Richard would be there. Damn, no he wouldn’t, she remembered. Son of a bitch. Cressida felt limp. Douglas hated the church almost as much as Carnival hated *him*. Cressida remembered how Thurston

always said he prayed for Douglas, because Douglas would never pray for himself.

There would be no funeral for Mario in the church. No Richard either. She wouldn't have been able to talk with him anyway with Suzie there.

\* \* \*

Tuesday night, Luther was in charge. There was nobody left to run the concentrator, so all the incoming fresh fruit was being barreled and sent to the Multi-Freeze. Levi was busy hauling barrels out, and running back empty. Even Thurston – in light of the special circumstances – had agreed to keep the Multi-Freeze open well after midnight.

At the end of the first break, at 8:00 PM, Luther waddled out to the picnic tables and told everyone what they were dying to know. “Mario had an allergic reaction to the pepper, and his throat swelled shut. The autopsy showed he suffocated. Gustavo has been relieved of duty, and Richard will be here tomorrow night to train the new guy. He was hired a couple weeks ago as the equipment foreman at the new place in Ferryville. He'll probably be your night foreman here for the rest of the season, so do what he says.”

Then Luther waddled back to the lab.

\* \* \*

Wednesday evening, as Cressida drove into the plant and saw Richard's car back in its usual spot, she felt sick. Her heart pounded spastically, like the troubled motor on the sort line. The heavy mountain was back on her chest, when she breathed. If she didn't know better, she would have believed she was still suffering from excess drinking. She felt scared, excited and cold.

When she saw Richard walking through the plant with the new guy, she saw stars. She shook her head, afraid that if she allowed the feeling to continue, she would wind up on the floor. The pounding in her chest was an overwhelming nuisance, making her wonder whether it was possible for someone to have a heart attack over love and fear. She decided the only way to make her chest stop hurting was to go to the line and wait. She could not bring herself to approach him, not with the new guy constantly at his side. There was too much to say, and there would have to be a better time.

Twelve hours came and went and there was never a better time. Once in awhile Cressida caught Richard and the new guy walking from the lab to the catwalk, or back toward the concentrator or up to the fresh totes of cherries, stacked three high outside. The old flat dumping station had been removed and a tote dumper had been set up in its place. The fact that cherry season was in full swing signaled the imminent departure of the remaining college students. Most were already gone.

Once that night, very briefly, Richard and the new guy stepped up to the Mexican line. Cressida watched them intently, keeping her hands moving – pretending to sort in the same way everyone else pretended to sort – but not taking her

eyes off him. He never looked at her. Never smiled, never winked. Never showed one single sign that things were going to be OK.

The pain in her chest continued through Thursday night, which went exactly like Wednesday night, though he was only there for a couple hours – instead of the whole night. The new guy learned quickly, and Cressida heard from Annie that Richard was needed back at Ferryville on Friday morning for some critical phase of construction inside the new plant.

Cressida stood on the line and watched the passing cherries, rolling gently backward as they were being carried forward on the tilted conveyor belt. She was astounded that Richard never came on her line, never asked why she wasn't at the press or driving fork lift, never recognized her suffering and moved her off the line for the last couple days. Never even said hi. She swore she would not come back to this place next summer. No matter what happened.

Incapable of understanding how he could have been in the same plant – within feet of her – and not even have looked at her, made Cressida feel sicker than she had been when she was hung over. At least when she was hung over, she could close her eyes and ignore the pain. In emotional torment, she devised a plan. She could no longer wait.

WEEPING WILLOWS

At 5:00 on Friday morning, in the dirt parking lot near Carnival's four-way stop, Cressida backed her car under some weeping willows to prevent seeming overly obvious. Often she had parked near there, out in the middle of the parking lot, to hop in someone else's car and go to the trestle or the I-5 Denny's, but this morning, she wasn't meeting the usual gang. This was her last chance to catch Richard – before she left for school. To ensure she didn't accidentally miss him by seconds, she had gotten there extra early.

Within minutes of turning off the engine, she began to shiver. With her gas gauge on empty, she was afraid to run the engine for heat. She wanted to have enough gas to get home after seeing Richard. Wishing she had brought a coat to work, she shook with cold, knowing full well that nerves were partly responsible for the shaking.

As she waited for him to pass by on his way to Ferryville, she rationalized the

wait. If he decided to leave early, she would not miss him. It was better to wait a little longer, spend a little extra time at the stop, than miss her last opportunity altogether. If he planned on getting to the plant by 7:00 AM, she calculated he would probably leave his home around 6:10 AM. He lived only a couple miles south of the intersection.

What would she say to him? What did he have to say to her? She felt like *una loca*, waiting for him in the waving shadows of the willow branches, but Richard had forced her to it. This was his fault. The way she saw it, he had not upheld his part of the bargain. He shouldn't have made her wait so long without one single word of assurance. No tangible proof of progress.

His promises of two months before seemed like ages ago, before Mario's untimely end, before being sent to the line, before the telescope, before Martha left Levi, and long before Annie confessed she had slept with Leyland. What was Richard thinking? There must be trouble. She hoped he was OK. The end of September was coming. And no word. Not even a note. Although there was no way he could have left a simple thing like a note, which was part of her frustration.

Since the previous weekend, her stomach had continued to cause her problems, constantly burning and bubbling. During the previous shift, she had left the line more than once to go to the bathroom. Now, sitting in the cold car, she could feel a terrible bout of diarrhea coming on. But what could she do? That problem would have to wait too. She couldn't leave. There was too much at stake. Why did diarrhea always come when there was so much at stake?

By 7:00 AM, the sun had risen. It shown brightly, but coldly, over the frost bitten fields. A sparkling white layer covered most of the valley. Cressida vowed never to trust Annie's information again. Why had Annie thought he was supposed to be at work at 7:00 AM. And then a mild panic set in. Maybe she had missed him? Maybe he had gone to work at 4:00 AM. Or maybe, after two night shifts, he wasn't going to work at all on Friday? Switching from nights to days without one full day off was against union regulations. Maybe the new place wasn't going to be a union shop? It was possible. Anything was possible. Maybe he had finally asked Suzie for a divorce and he was too upset to come to work? She might have yelled at him all night long about how he couldn't do this to her, about how she wouldn't let him. Surely, she must have reminded him about who wore the pants in the family. He had joked to Cressida about that more than once, how Suzie was relentlessly telling him what to do.

After two hours of miserable cold and growing colon cramps, she watched Richard's car race through the tiny intersection without stopping. The surrounding countryside was flat enough that he didn't really need to stop to see whether cars were coming. But he must not have seen Cressida's car parked under the hanging willow branches. Didn't he look for her, the same way she always looked for him? Maybe it had been a mistake to park so far under the branches? Maybe he really hadn't seen her?

She started her car and raced after him, flashing her lights. He eventually pulled down a narrow dirt road into another willow grove by a small stream where many of the younger boys from Carnival fished during the summer. White bait



containers and empty beer cans lay strewn around the frosty parking area. Richard hadn't even slowed down until several miles past the intersection.

Cressida pulled in behind him, afraid of running out of gas, and bewildered as to why he had not stopped sooner. He jumped out of his car and hastily opened her passenger door. He sat on the edge of the seat, half way out of the car, letting what little heat had gathered in her car rush out. Cressida's sides hurt with the shivering, and she asked him to shut the door.

"No," he said. "What I have to say won't take long. First of all, what in the hell were you doing following me like that? What if people saw you?"

"Nobody saw us," she said with irritation. "Why didn't you stop?"

"Look Cressida, it's over. Couldn't you figure that out for yourself? Are you really that out of it?"

Cressida was stunned. Was he insulting her? Calling her out of it? Over? What did that mean?

"Huh?" she said, unable to think, wanting to cry, wanting to show him how wretched he had made her, how cold, how low, and how humiliated for standing on the line for two weeks, and yet how loyal she had been, and how cruel he must be for doing this.

He continued. "I've got my own life. I've got a new opportunity in Ferryville. You can't expect me to follow some fucked up fantasy, when I've got real opportunities. Be real, Cressida. If you ever cared about me, you'd be happy for me. I'll be moving there in a month, and you'll never see me again. One day, you'll thank

me.”

“Why?” Cressida said.

“I just told you why. There’s nothing else to say. And I’d appreciate it if you never followed me like that again. I’ve got family to think about.”

With that, Richard got up and left. Cressida reached over to shut the passenger door. She couldn’t understand how he could just leave the door open like that. Was he insane? How mean! How irresponsible! The passenger is supposed to close their own door. Doesn’t he know better? Why? Why did he do that? Why?

“Did I fall in love with a crazy man,” she said aloud – startling herself.

To her own ears, her voice sounded strange, unrecognizable, distant. Like she had suddenly lost herself and had no idea where she was going. She imagined herself tumbling through space, like some dirty unnamed planetoid hurtling through a vacuum. Disoriented and spinning out of control.

Richard honked and waved furiously.

Was he waving good-bye? No. That wasn’t it. He wanted her to back out of the way so he could leave. Delirious, she started her engine and moved out of his way.

Once he was gone, she ran into the bushes, unable to wait any longer. She wondered how many other boys had run into the bushes during the summer to get the same kind of relief. Wiping with frozen grass, she felt sick and insane, like someone had just caved in her skull with a sledge hammer, or like she was a desperate prisoner, reduced to the lowest form of humanity in a frigid cell without toilet paper. For the

first time in her life, she thought being dead would be easier. There was nothing worth this kind of suffering. Her faith was shattered. The betrayal was so immense. Her body trembled violently. Cressida was sure her heart had been replaced by a cheap useless pump – the kind her dad would sell.

She drove out of the willow grove, back to the main road, not able to decide which way to turn. Which direction would take her further away from torment. Turning south, in the opposite direction of Ferryville, Cressida drove aimlessly for an hour. Eventually she drove up to Levi's house.

She turned into his driveway, knowing it was the wrong thing to do, but hoping he could stop her from going insane. Maybe he could pull her back to earth before she lost her mind, before she turned into that unrecognizable brown planetoid, tumbling through the vacuum of space, heading for a crash.

If Richard could do what he did, there was nothing left to lose. She opened the front door and took a deep breath. Everything smelled like Levi. The smell of Martha's perfume had long faded from the walls. Cressida tiptoed passed the paisley galaxies into Levi's room. He was still sleeping. The last several nights had been very busy hauling endless barrels of freshly sorted cherries to the Multi-Freeze.

Without saying a word, Cressida sat down on the edge of Levi's bed.

"Levi," she said. "I need help."

Surprised, Levi rolled over and looked at her, mildly startled by her unexpected entrance, and by her unusual look of terror. "What is it?"

"I'm out of my mind," she said and began to cry. "Help me."

The flood gate opened, and what Cressida had been holding in all summer rushed out in a torrent of unyielding emotion. She cried convulsively, unable to stop herself. Levi pulled her under his covers and held her tightly – understanding that she was suffering greatly, and offering sanctuary without question. He knew she would tell him when she was ready.

She continued to cry for the next two hours, shivering as if she was freezing to death. “I’m cold, Levi. I’m just absolutely chilled to the bone,” was all she could say between swallowing her tears and trying to stop the hiccups. After thoroughly exhausting herself, she fell asleep for a brief period.

When she awoke, Levi was gone. Feeling panicky, she remembered why she was there. Tossing the covers back and jumping rapidly to her feet, she decided it was very wrong to use Levi for comfort. She felt guilty, wretched, like a *gusanita loca*.

She pulled on her shoes and headed for the front door.

From the kitchen, Levi called out, “hey where are you going? You’re in no shape to drive. Come on back here. I’m making coffee, and if you stay, I’ll even make you breakfast. Don’t go.”

“I’m not hungry,” Cressida declared, trying to rebuff him, hoping he would stop caring so much. She felt unworthy. Richard had made her feel that way. After all, if the only man who ever loved her could treat her the way he had, like she was his enemy, then what was left. She felt utterly worthless. She had seen a side of Richard possessed by the devil. How could anyone have been so cruel to someone they had professed to love?

Frightened, she bolted for the front door, afraid Levi would try to stop her. She was afraid of hurting him, knowing she couldn't tell him what was wrong. Not yet. Possessed by a strange sensation of shame and panic, she knew she needed to get out of the house and run for her life, go somewhere, anywhere away from the feelings that were killing her, ripping her insides out, crushing her heart.

Sure enough, still in his boxer shorts, covered with stars and galaxies and Darth Vader helmets, Levi came out after her. She knew she was insane for noticing the shorts, and she wondered if he had thought of her when he had gotten them. She also noticed how ribbed his stomach was. It heaved in and out as he danced barefoot through the gravel toward her car. He must do tons of sit-ups, she thought. That's the only way his stomach could be so tight. "That insane fucker, Richard," Cressida cried angrily, looking away from Levi's stomach, "with his disgusting satanic, fucked up pot belly. I wish I could kill him. How could he do this to me? I thought he loved me?"

"Hey, Cressida," Levi called after her. "Don't go!"

In her rear view mirror, she could see him waving for her to stop. She pressed the peddle down, afraid he might even be crazy enough to get in his car and come after her. Going to his house had been a mistake. She wasn't ready to talk to anyone. How would she ever be ready to talk, to trust, to believe that someone could actually help her?

Without making a conscious decision, she went south again, toward the four-way stop in a daze, knowing only that she had to keep moving. If she stayed in one

place, the pain would kill her. As it was, she already felt like she was being struck by lightning, run over by a steam roller, brains exploding everywhere, crushed by a semi in a head-on, guts flying out the window. She couldn't stand the raging fire in her chest. The pain just wouldn't stop. It was consuming her, tearing her apart.

When Cressida reached the intersection, she was torn by that same panicked indecision, incapable of choosing a direction. One of three forward, or backward? Which way would lead her the farthest from the pain? She beat on the steering wheel and screamed, "why, why, why? That crazy son of a bitch! How could he do this to me? He said he loved me? He never *never* loved me, *ever*, if he could do this to me? Why?"

Through her own screaming, loud as it was, she heard honking. Suddenly her door was opening. Annie got in.

"Annie!" she said with alarm, and hastily wiped her face. Relieved, she noticed Annie was drunk. She could smell the alcohol.

"Holy cow," Annie said, not too drunk to notice that something was very wrong. Cressida's eyes were swollen and red from crying and her face was blotchy. "What happened to you?"

Cressida summoned everything she had and pulled herself together, not wanting to explain to Annie just yet. "I'll tell you later," Cressida promised. As she choked down the immense problem, her hands shook and her scalp tingled. Her hair felt like it was sticking straight out all over her head.

The honking behind them persisted. Cressida was still idling at the

intersection.

“We’re going to the trestle,” said Annie. “It’s the final morning party for the few of us who are left. After the shift was over, I looked for you, but you left without even saying good-bye. I had to ride in Dexter’s truck, and you know how I feel about that. We partied at the sump pond until we ran out of beer. We went for more, and then we went looking for you. We even went passed your house, but you weren’t home. I’m glad we checked the stop, because here you are.” Annie giggled. “Drive me to the trestle! They’ll follow.”

The truck full of drunken college students followed Cressida’s car to the trestle. While they milled around on the shoulder of the road under the trestle and drank, Dexter noticed Cressida.

“Last weekend still getting to you?” he asked. “From the looks of it, you’re not recovered. This ought to help you.”

Before she could say no, Dexter slipped a carefully folded triangular packet into her hand. “Pay me later,” he said, and then he walked up the hill without her.

Cressida stayed behind at his truck, at first watching everyone stumble and bumble up the hill, then staring at the packet in her hand, turning it over and over, trying to make a decision. The shiny red wrapping paper was beautifully folded, like origami or a Christmas present, and perhaps what was inside was just the thing to get her through the worst morning of her life. Having no money for a straw, she tore off a sloppy square corner of the shiny red paper, rolled it into a ragged tube, poured some of the packet into a squiggly line on the hood of Dexter’s truck, and she snorted it into

the back of her nose. It felt cool and refreshing. Sharp and clean, with that medicine taste that trickled down the back of her throat, like floor cleaner or Everclear. The chemically induced post-nasal drip made her swallow repeatedly. She poured another sloppy line, and then a third.

The pain lessened. She began to realize that perhaps Richard was the crazy one, that he had temporarily lost his mind. He was afraid, a coward. And she needed to help him turnaround. But who wanted to be married to a coward – the kind of man Levi repeatedly called a loser. Levi, don't you know that the strong need to help the weak, she thought. Yes, Richard would come around, come back to her. Within a week, he'd be desperate and come crawling back. She could wait. She'd waited this long. He would realize he couldn't live without her, and then he'd say he was sorry for being such a fucked up bastard, such a horrifying excuse for a man, someone that no one in their right mind would want to be married to.

She dabbed what was left in the packet onto her finger and then rubbed it against her upper gums. The sensation was pleasantly numbing. She wished she could rub cocaine on her heart, her mind. Make it all go away. She knew he would come back. It was just a matter of time. She had gotten used to waiting – believing that the impossible could become a reality.

She ran up the hill after the rest of the group, which was pretty much the same group that had gone to the beach, except for Leyland and Mario. Cressida wondered why Annie was even with these people. Couldn't she see that they were no good for anyone? No one from the Carnival was any good, except for the Weatherbys.



After they crossed the trestle and entered the tunnel, the group of guys and Joleen continued on into the ominous darkness, deciding to get all the way out the other side of the tunnel. Trains or not.

The tunnel was so long and curved that daylight disappeared after one hundred feet. They did not know exactly how long it would take to get to the other end, because no one they knew had ever done it. But today was the day.

Annie thought they were crazy, and Cressida was in no mood. They decided to sit on the tracks by the tunnel's entrance and wait until the group of young men and the plant slut came back, wherever it was that they would eventually come back from.

"Annie," said Cressida. "I have to tell you something. Promise you won't tell Levi."

"You didn't tell Levi about Leyland did you?" she asked in response.

"Of course not," said Cressida, defensively.

"Then you're secret's safe with me. What is it?"

Knowing no other way, Cressida blurted out, "I had an affair with Richard earlier this summer." She began crying again. Not even three snorts of coke could erase the pain. Sputtering and swallowing snot, she continued, "he said he loved me. No man has ever said he loved me before. He said he was going to ask for a divorce in September. He promised – made me wait all this time for nothing. He said he wanted to marry me. Spend the rest of his life with me. The whole thing was a *lie*. He was such a fucking liar! He told me this morning it was over. He just said he couldn't do it, and that I should have known. Annie, it's been a nightmare. I believed

him. I don't know why I did, but I did. Maybe because he told me he loved me. And I fell for it. Oh boy, did I fall for it. Have you ever had a guy tell you he loved you?"

"No," said Annie. "I guess that might be enough to make me believe. I'm so sorry." She leaned over and hugged Cressida. "I hate to see you suffer like this. I don't know what to say?"

"You can't say anything. I'm the stupid idiot for believing him. But can you do me just one favor? Can you just tell Levi I love him?" she blubbered. "He was there for me this morning. I don't know why, but I went to his house after Richard told me. Just tell him thanks for always being there. I *do* love him. Maybe if I hadn't screwed things up this summer, I could have been a Weatherby instead of a fucked up crazy person. How could I have believed, after everything I knew about Richard, after all this time of doing nothing, that he would actually do something?"

"Don't beat yourself up. I don't understand it myself," said Annie, wanting desperately to tell Cressida that Levi was in love with her, but knowing it wasn't the time. There would be another time, at school, away from all this.

Cressida sat and explained to her best friend how the whole thing started, how there had been a point where he had made her feel so happy, how he had made her forget all about the problems with her parents, and how she had come to see her father's choice as the right one, if it made him happy, and if her drunken mother had made him miserable.

She never could have imagined feeling like this, never saw it coming because she was absolutely blinded by the idea of being loved. By the time she was done

explaining how she had waited at the four-way stop – how he wouldn't even get into her car, or close the door, and how cold she had been the whole time, and how much it hurt – they heard the group calling up toward them from the road below the trestle.

“We made it,” they yelled up to Annie and Cressida. They had come out the other side and walked side-hill, around the butte, down to the road. “We’re going to Denny’s. Time for a celebration breakfast. No trains. Nobody got killed. Meet us there.”

Wanting to be done with her story, Cressida called after them. “Hold your horses. We’ll be right down.”

Once she stopped talking, Cressida noticed the continuing effects of the cocaine. She also felt the pain. “Wait for us,” she called down again, not wanting to be left behind with Annie and the awful truth.

She walked hastily from tie to tie, wanting to get off the tracks, hating the clear view of the ground below the trestle and all the space in between. Exposed in broad daylight, the ties looked farther apart, and the distance to the ground looked impossibly far. Had they been crazy for drinking and walking across the trestle at night? How had they survived all those times?

Even with the mid-morning sun, the trestle remained in the shadows of the butte and was still covered by frost. Pockets of ice had formed in the deep depressions of the uneven railroad ties.

Annie called, “slow down. It’s too icy for running.”

With those words, Cressida lost her footing on a patch of unseen ice, took a

misstep, and jumped to the outside of the track, trying to catch her balance while still veering toward the edge. She looked as though she had caught herself.

“Jesus,” Annie yelled. “You scared the shit out of me.”

And then in slow motion, Cressida waved her arms, still trying to regain her balance, not fully recovered from the first slip. She stepped forward onto a second piece of ice. Trying to save herself, she fell backward from the track and landed head-first on the road below. There was no saving her.

## XXII

### STRAWBERRY MOON

The minute Levi walked into the Carnival community church, Cressida's mother grabbed his arm and said, "you'll sit up front with me."

"Oh, no, I couldn't," said Levi. "I couldn't take the place of family."

"You're the closest thing to family Cressida ever had – you and Annie. You're sitting with me. *And* your sister. Don't argue or you'll make me cry."

Levi grabbed Annie's arm and pulled her – just as reluctantly as he himself was being pulled – toward the front of the church. "The only saving grace," he whispered to Annie, "is that this damn thing isn't an open casket. Good thing she fell on her head." Then he giggled, feeling like he had lost his mind with grief.

Annie pinched him hard on the back of his leg.

"Sorry," he said. "I'm not having a good time here. Please lord, forgive me."

"Levi, ssshh," said Annie, "just get yourself through this. OK. Don't be a jerk

about it. It's not for you. It's for the family. For the community!"

"You got that right," he whispered as they sat in the front pew, "and it sure as hell isn't for Cressida. She hated being obligated to come to these things. Sure as shit, every six months or so, somebody croaks. You'd think with all the funerals around this place, there wouldn't be anybody left to fill the church."

Annie pinched him again on the side of his thigh.

He wanted to pinch her back, but restrained himself, knowing full well he was out of line. He reminded himself that even if he didn't believe in it, he still had to be respectful of it.

Discretely, Annie scanned around the church to see if everyone had come. Sure enough, there was Richard coming into the church, arm-in-arm with his wife. They sat down near the back.

"Richard's here," she whispered to Levi.

"What the fuck is he doing here," Levi hissed.

Annie shushed him and pinched him again. "People can hear you. You know he has to be here. Otherwise people would wonder."

Cressida's mother grabbed Levi's hand and squeezed it. She sobbed and squeezed hard while the altar boys waved the incense, while the neighbors walked up to receive communion, while the Our Fathers and Hail Marys were being said, and while many got up to say what they knew of Cressida, and what a wonderful child she had been. Always had a smile for everyone. Always happy.

Eventually the church turned toward Richard, expecting him to say something,

as he always had at previous funerals. He was good with the words. And everyone knew he had been her supervisor at the plant for the last three summers. He was obligated to say something. He had to, whether he wanted to or not.

When he did, Levi felt nauseous. Annie had already told him the whole story. He wanted to kill Richard, jump up and scream out to the whole church that Cressida might still be alive if it weren't for him upsetting her, killing her with grief. She might not have slipped, if he hadn't blown her mind, if he hadn't destroyed her. How dare he get up there and talk, obligated or not. Levi never hated Richard more than at that moment.

As Richard talked about what a good equipment operator Cressida was, how she never dropped a load of flats going over the scales, and how she always came to work on time, Levi decided he had had enough. Not caring what anyone thought, he pulled his hand away from the Cressida's mother and stood up.

Richard bumbled on his words.

Levi took the opportunity to give Richard the most hated stare he could summon, and then walked out of the church. He wanted Richard to know that he knew, and that he would not forgive.

Richard looked away and continued to talk in a monotone fashion.

Hoping people would understand, Annie got up and went after Levi. Everyone knew how close the Weatherby children had been to Cressida.

Levi stood out in a nearby strawberry field. He ran dirt through his fingers as Annie approached him.

“Mind if I join?” she asked.

“No,” said Levi. “This is somewhat of a sandy loam. Have you ever noticed? And did you know that I saw them in July in the bone yard?”

Annie gasped, unable to believe he had kept the secret from her all summer, while at the same time quickly remembering her own deceptions.

“It was disgusting. Like dogs fucking in the night. I wanted to tell her I knew,” he said. “I wanted her to stop it. And did you know, the reason I went looking for her – the night I caught them – was because I’d seen Gustavo changing some valve settings on the press lines. Cressida might have been right about Gustavo, but she was all wrong about Richard. I tried to help her see what a coward he was, that he would never do right by her. Guys like Richard who are stuck in a rut are always too chicken to do anything. It’s their chicken nature that gets them stuck in a rut in the first place. Why couldn’t she see that?”

“I guess she had to find out the hard way,” said Annie.

“That’s the only way some people learn,” he said. “Martha always hated dirt under my fingernails. Did you know that? And did you know that I really loved her?”

“Martha?”

“Cressida.”

“Of course,” said Annie.

They hugged, standing in a Weatherby strawberry field, in their Sunday clothes on a crisp morning, with the fresh smell of fall in the air.

“This sucks,” he said, trying to stare at the sky through his tears.



Brown strawberry leaves, burnt by the summer sun, surrounded them. Levi turned to the ground and looked at the shriveled stems, where berries had hung until the pickers had come.

“I wonder if she’s in heaven with Grandpa?” he said, trying fruitlessly to make himself laugh.

Knowing he didn’t believe in such things, and considering the situation, Annie went along. “Maybe she’ll be reincarnated as a strawberry.”

Levi smiled. “That would be good,” he said. “Cressida always loved strawberries. *All Weatherbys love strawberries.*”

\* \* \*

Six months later, on a bitterly cold clear evening in January, Levi drove to Bald Mountain to watch the special lunar eclipse. They said it would be red. At dusk, in the parking lot below the summit, he felt the wind buffet his car. He got out anyway and walked to the top. A few hardy souls were already up there. Most others had chosen to set up their telescopes and photographic equipment in the parking lot below. Levi had left the telescope he bought for Cressida back at the farm. There was no room for it in his studio in Elmsburg.

During the next several hours he watched the moon change. At dusk it was hazy, almost muddy, and unusually large as it rose from the horizon. As the sky blackened and the moon rose diagonally across the sky, it turned a deep blood red,

astounding to the eye. It hung there strangely, as if painted.

Levi's heart quickened as he watched the sight. He imagined an earlier time when superstitious people would have been frightened, afraid the end of the world had come.

Sitting on the frozen ground and shivering, he watched a white sliver appear on the left half. As the moon rose higher and higher in the sky, the whiteness began taking over the moon, and the deep red color retreated toward the right. Within an hour, the eclipse was nearly over, except for a smoky reddish fog in the upper right corner, giving only the slightest hint that something unusual had ever happened.

When it was finally over, Levi stumbled rigidly back toward the parking lot, trying to warm himself. The moon seemed more distant than usual – small and ghostly, showing no traces of the spectacle that had occurred.

Levi drove back to his studio – the one Annie and Cressida had chosen for him – and studied for his upcoming agronomy mid-term, knowing it was just a matter of time before he was accepted into the program. *Officially.*