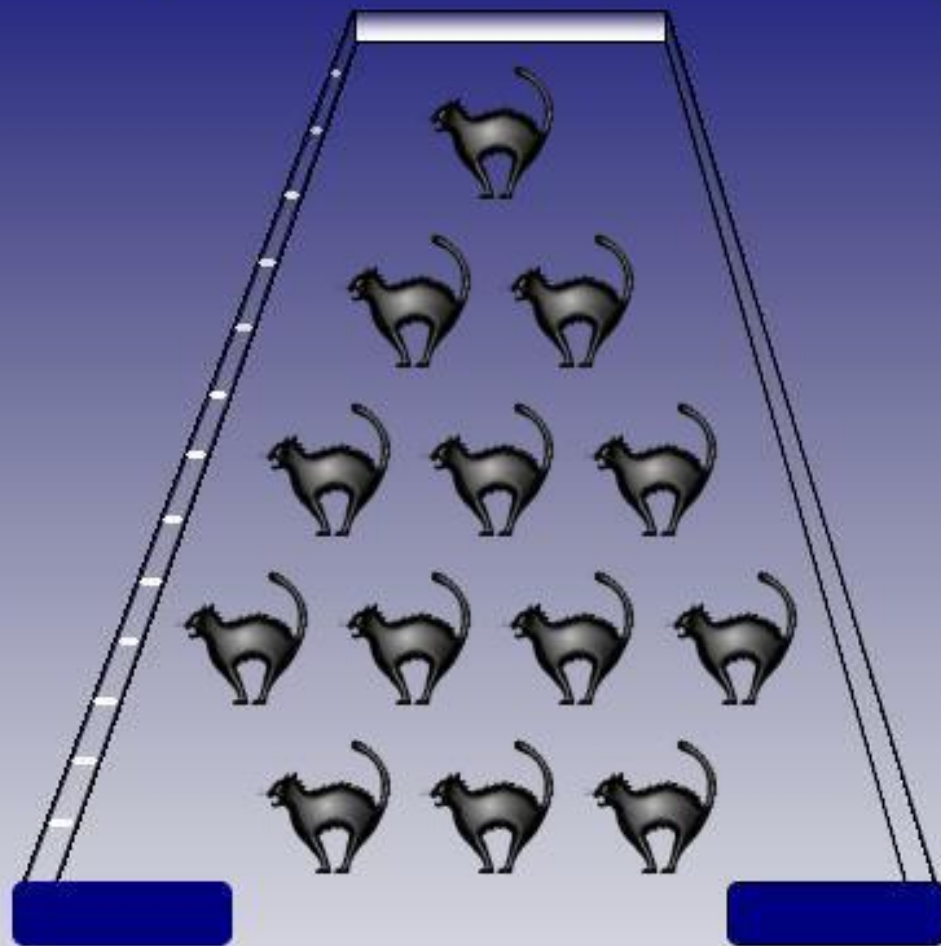


If Seeing is Believing ... then why am I not breathing?



13 BLACK CATS UNDER A LADDER

by

P. S. EHRlich

author of the *Skeeter Kitefly* books

13 BLACK CATS UNDER A LADDER

a novel

by

P. S. EHRLICH



<http://www.skeeterkitefly.com>

2007

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Ups and Downs of Skeeter Kitefly
Skeeter Kitefly's Sugardaddy Confessor

Portions of this book have appeared, in somewhat different form, in *Ten Thousand Monkeys*, *Unlikely Stories*, *The Sidewalk's End*, *Pulse Literary Magazine*, *Thieves Jargon*, *Internet Fiction*, *The Cerebral Catalyst*, and *The Lithic Review*.

Cover design and artwork by the author

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For information contact the author at psehrlich@gmail.com.

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DISCLAIMERS

13 Black Cats Under a Ladder is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

For the record: the author has never lived in Iowa City, Lawrence KS, Terre Haute IN, Columbia MO, Madison WI, Milwaukee or Chicago.

Everything about the following is imaginary:

- (in Lawrence KS) Alpine Drive, Brown Elementary, and St. Teresa of Avila School;
- (in Columbia MO) Stonehill High School and the New Mizzou Opera House;
- (in Madison WI) the Liederkrantz Institute;
- (in Milwaukee) Kurtzway Kollektibles, Washburn Street, the Strichleiter Lofts, and Nonnamou's;
- Walse Falls MN (Judith's hometown);
- the suburbs of Knotts and Zerfall;
- the city and state of Demortuis, Nilnisi;
- the town of Hubscher and Schraube Reservoir;
- and the environs of the Old McRale Place.

However, La Belle Cemetery in Oconomowoc WI is real, as are the legends associated with its statuary—or at least they owe their existence to somebody else.

Finally, the author apologizes to the late Harold ("Herk") Harvey and his fellow creators of *Carnival of Souls*, for adding Rozay Franzia's father to their cast and his two words of dialogue to their soundtrack.

*for my mother and father and brother
on their various rungs of the ladder*

I found him to be a dry man, rather short in stature, with a square wooden face, whose expression seemed to have been imperfectly chipped out with a dull-edged chisel... He had glittering eyes—small, keen, and black—and thin wide mottled lips. He had had them, to the best of my belief, from forty to fifty years.

—Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*

On the brick wall just beyond, the letter H had been stenciled, presumably for some purpose. H? H.

—Conrad Aiken, “Silent Snow, Secret Snow”

For a moment or two the forest and all the other dimly appreciated places echoed with the parody of laughter.

—William Golding, *Lord of the Flies*

In the dark, your fantasies get so out of hand.

—*Carnival of Souls*

1

The Mute Commute

Loneliness is not so bad once you consider the alternatives. Such as the loudmouthed claque at the back of this bus. All your classic noisemakers: a laughshriek rips out of one's throat like an unlubricated chainsaw.

Between me and the claque are cellphoners ("I'm on the bus... I'm on the *bus*") and headphoners, including a singer-along ("That's when I saw her, OOH! I saw her"). Intervening seats are crammed with dozers and dropoffs, some with heads hanging at painful-looking angles. A few hold open newspapers or magazines before their faces, but no pages get turned.

I am up front on one of the sideways settees prioritized for Elderly & Disabled Riders. I'm middle-aged and more or less able-bodied, but few of the E & D take this bus. Unless you count the morbidly obese, who seem to prefer facing forward.

Up here I am resting my eyes. Or trying to, despite the caterwaulers in back. Some acoustic warpage causes their clamor to scrape the length of the bus, straight into my ears.

("Cause baby I'm the MOST!" from the singer-along. And another *bra-a-a-ang* of yakkety hilarity.)

Where we are is anyone's guess. In a commuter express on the Interstate on a Wednesday morning in early February. Other than that, darkness. My watch says 7:15. Time enough for a second attempt at shuteye. But before I can try it—

—eyesnag.

By a sleeping lady across the aisle, one row away.

Young and unmorbid.

Muffled up in a navy overcoat and headscarf. Only her face on display, but that alone is worth today's fare. Even at this untimely hour, underneath fluorescence. A fair complexion with a moving expression: *nod. Nod. Nod.* Lips slightly parted. Brows slightly bent. A literal Land-of-Nodder, ticking off items in a checklisted dream. "Yes, we can take care of this; yes, we can handle that too." Self-assurance. Affirmation. Even a trace of sang-froid, in keeping with the climate and those bluish dabs upon her closed lids.

First time I've noticed her. Annoyance at not having done so before. She might've been aboard every day this week, every week this year—could my eye be slipping? It could and does along with the rest of me and everyone else as the bus suddenly BRAKES—

—Nodding Lady jolted half out of her seat, lids popping open with a single

—*OH*—

that cuts through the blather to penetrate my brain. *Zing*: just like that. Clean as a well-honed chisel.

The bus proceeds at a crawl now, toward coplights flashing through the murk to our left. Half the passengers dash over to that side, wipe-smear the windows, crane and gawk: avid for wreckage. Ghoulish bastards.

The Nodder stays put, her head unturned. Eyes going *blink—blink*—as they swivel slowly leftward. Widening, darkening, sockets hollowing with a sharp fraught

—*NO*—

Yeedge! Calm down, Lady; it's not like you caused the crash. Chalk it up to other people's lucklessness. Be glad that we're edging on past.

But her eyes remain stricken. They wander back, catch mine, are hastily averted. Her gloveless hands get a tighter grip on the purse on her lap. I take a lower gander at a visible calf: she's wearing a skirt on a morning like this, for crying out loud. Not that I don't appreciate it (that calf's got a decided curve) but think of your health, Lady.

Check out the rings on her clenched bare fingers. Probably had to pawn her gloves to bail some wastrel husband out of jail. Next it'll be that ring with the rock. No wonder she

looks a bit stir-crazy. Let those bluish eyelids close... there they go. Again with the nod-nod. Sweet dreams.

Though not for long. Wreck left behind, we resume speed; no risk of running late. Wednesday's not the best day to be late on. Or born on: children full of woe. Remember the Addams Family's daughter. And the Girl Next Door when I was a kid.

Venture another glance at the Nodding Lady.

"She has a lovely face," as the fellow said about the dame from Shalott (after she froze to death).

Clump of lights through the window beyond her. That'll be Stiffs Stadium, our cue to move into the exit lane. The Nodder's eyes pop back open, again blink twice. She raises a handkerchief to her lips, covering a yawn? an *ahem*? or to *take something out of her mouth*, wrap it in the hanky and drop it in her purse??

We head for our first stop on Figure Eight Way. The Lady pulls on a pair of mittens (let that be a lesson to me) and gathers the purse, a tote bag sporting the PBS emblem, a blue umbrella that matches her coat. She rises, strides past me, murmurs thanks to the driver and departs. I twist around, wipe-smear my own window and watch her vanish into the gloom. Feeling like a ghoulish bastard.

*

My name is H. Huffman, and I am an asthmatic artist. Some artists starve; I have trouble drawing breath on occasion.

Amid this busload of gasbags, the Nodding Lady was a whiff of fresh air. Which she took away with her, leaving me and the load to stifle down 14th Street to The Trail, then over to 8th and Jackdaw Square. End of the line.

I re-tie my scarf, reset my hat and get off. Inside one trenchcoat pocket (specially reinforced by bemused drycleaners) I take hold of an octagonal handle attached to a ¼" No. 6 straight gouge.

So no, I'm not just happy to see you.

Security is all the rage these days. Jackdaw Square's not the best place to be so soon after dawn. The streets around it are narrow and crooked, the buildings both pallid and dingy. Here are broken cobblestones, brackish puddles, malodorous doorways. Cast-iron

benches housing the homeless. A blind alley full of unemptied dumpsters.

And there are crows. Trafalgar Square has pigeons; Jackdaw Square has crows. Even in February, even at this hour. Exclaiming above. Patrolling below. Vying with the destitute for dumpster contents.

Hanging over us all is the local equivalent of fog. I call it “nox.” It was here long before security became all the rage.

At least we now have lockable gates on the loading dock, to prevent bums from bedding down on it overnight. They still sneak into the store on winter mornings to have a thaw and sample our varnish or paint thinner or gum arabic.

Check us out at Selfsame Artist Materials!

Alias: dayjob. For more than a dozen mortal years.

Enter with my key card. “GOOD morning Mr. H!!” cries the Warbler in the staff lounge. I head for my office space, a clearing I’ve gradually chopped out of the backstock jungle. High counter instead of a desk; tall stool instead of a chair. Hang up hat, coat, scarf. Unlock cabinet, collect hotpot, take it into the lounge, fill it at a sink heaped with other people’s crockery. Return hotpot to office space. Plug it in. Log onto PC, check e-mail, check phone for voicemail. Mix heated water with instant Folgers; add artificial sweetener. Stir, sip, swallow.

Face the workday.

Starting with this week’s inventory printouts, annotated by Vashti in aggressive red ballpoint. Our computer system was upgraded last fall, meaning it now works half as well; Vashti’s always recounting stock by hand and noting the grosser offages. Such as the entire airbrush department getting vaporized.

Bra-a-a-ang: this time the dock bell. Morning’s first delivery. Cold damp nox accompanies it into the stockroom. (Ghost of the lost airbrushes?) Schlitzzy appears, presenting a stack of cartons from Waning Gibbous. I nod; he offloads his handtruck at the receiving table. Portfolios, photo albums, frames. High time those new frames arrived—that one special-order clown’s been phoning daily about his ever-loving silver leaf.

“Where’s the rolling ladder?” asks Squat Kid. I shrug. The adolescents who unpack and barcode the merchandise, assist customers on the floor and ring them up at the register—

they come and they go. Seldom worth learning their names anymore. So: Squat Kid, Thin Chick, Weird Hair Girl and so forth.

Schlitzzy trundles in another batch of boxes. Migraine Novelties—I shake my head no. Definitely a Gag order. Cart it off to him. (If Johnny Cash had a beerbellied nephew with a hipster goatee, that nephew would be a dead ringer for Gagarin Campbell, Selfsame Manager. “Big Gag” we call him. As in “What’s the?”)

Migraine Novelties. Must be more of those Munch Screaming Pillows. Which are constantly being set off in the gift department: people don’t just squeeze the sample pillow, but all within reach. As though they expect to hear a variety of screams.

Back to mind comes the Nodding Lady. That waking face, those hollow-socketing eyes. What might we make of them?

I take a Bruynzeel charcoal pencil and sketch such an eye on my calendar blotter. Squarely within Wednesday the 6th. Smudge in shadows roundabout; upend the lashes to make it a lady’s gaze. Or half-gaze—add the other eye to Thursday the 7th.

Can the eyes stand by themselves? What about brows? A nose as well? And once you add a nose you might as well throw in a kisser: those slightly-parted lips, a touch of teeth. So a jaw also, with a chin. The whole like a living death mask—

“*Custwan syoo*,” announces Vashti.

“What?” I say.

“*Yerdme!*” she replies.

There is nothing mushmouthed about Vashti Rodilard. She simply brusks everything she utters, abbreviating what she doesn’t minimize. And since she takes a drill-sergeant pleasure in handling customer complaints, I must have been asked for by name. Which can’t mean anything pleasant.

Buckle on my own living deadpan. Keep it monotone and monochrome—we’re not selling used cars here.

Quality artist materials instead. Pencils and erasers, pastels and tortillions, pens and nibs and bottled ink. Red sable, white sable, ox hair and hog bristle brushes. Canvas primed and unprimed. Paper by the sheet, the pad, the roll. On the wall to your left: matboard, foamboard, stretcher strips. On the endcap to your right: etching trays, burins, scrapers,

scribes. Off in that corner: drafting tables, folding easels, gooseneck clamp-lamps. Before us: entire fixtures devoted to acrylics, watercolors, tempera, gouache. Straight ahead: the Aisle of Oils.

And standing smack in our way is a case of mental mumps wanting me to call him “Stu.” Saphead would be more accurate—green, wet and puerile. Nox personified.

“Which paint do *you* think I should get?”

He asked the same question over the phone on Monday. Now he’s here in sappy person to hear the selfsame litany.

Winsor & Newton, consistent in body and color. Schmincke Mussini, more expensive, with added resins for better adhesion. Rembrandt and Amsterdam, the one standard, the other economy. Not forgetting good old Grumbacher—

“Yeah,” says Saphead, “but what brand do *you* think I should use?”

Customers may be always right, but that doesn’t mean they can’t meet with sudden unexpected fates. How ironic it would be if “Stu” tripped and fell into a bin of palette knives. He isn’t even an actual customer—we both know his real reason for being here. Wait for it, the threepenny catechism:

You show at Geraldine Crouching’s gallery, don’t you?

Is she looking at any new work right now?

Do you think you could show her my slides?

Don’t let the deadpan slip. Remain impassive and reply:

No comment.

No comment.

No, period.

Leaving “Stu” adrift in the Aisle of Oils.

Pay your own damned dues, Saphead. Learn for yourself that the name rhymes with “whooshing,” not “slouching.” Better ask for guidance from the crows in the square: I’m nobody’s go-between.

*

The workday wears on to its close. Eat a lunch bagel spread with creamcheese like library paste. Sort out the latest special-order requests. Accept or redirect Schlitzzy’s stacks

and batches. Where does all this stuff go? To what uses is it applied? No idea. Yet I still appreciate new art supplies, their sight and feel and smell. Plus the employee discount.

Finally 2:30 and out. I work three-quarter time, having cut my hours back to six a day when Geraldine started selling my pieces. At one point I thought I'd keep climbing this ladder till I didn't work any dayjob hours at all. But the way things have been going...

To throw off a possibly lurking "Stu," I exit Selfsame via the loading dock. Again grasping the handle of the gouge in my coat pocket. I may be shortish and slightish and middle-agedish, but I have the hands and forearms earned by years of wielding a mallet. Not a croquet mallet, either.

I follow The Trail from 8th to 12th through Chinatown (mostly Vietnamese). The Trail was originally blazed by a Sioux tribe to their riverside burial ground, which they sold to unsuperstitious white men who built a city atop it. 150 years later, this stretch of The Trail is home to noodle soup joints and karaoke bars.

Turn north on 12th toward the streets of downtown. Tiberius, Botts, Garfield, Augustus, Julius, Lincoln, Indianfield, Worming, Harrison, McKinley, Taylor, Cruncher, Danton. Recallable via the easy mnemonic *Too Bad God Almighty Just Lost Interest When He Made The City Demortuis*.

Demortuis, Nilnisi. Alias Slaughtertown. The Gristly City. Chillin' down in the GC. Through which muffled-up people hustle obliquely, blown off balance by the gritty dusty wind. Nox engulfs all, making it an effort to take another step, draw another breath. Small wonder that miasma equals my asthma.

Temporary asylum in Mina's Deli on Lincoln Avenue. Here I buy a prepackaged salad to go. Once upon a time it would've been a hot pastrami or corned beef sandwich, but these days red meat disagrees with my digestion. (As opposed to, say, library paste.)

Another symptom of being "medieval." Gray stubble; thinning hair; wearing long johns all through the winter. Plus dismissing a wild notion to hike on up to Figure Eight Way, see if the Nodding Lady might be waiting there.

No: I'm too old to be a stalker. An effective one, at least. Too frequently stopped and asked for directions. "You look like you know where you're going," they tell me. Even when I first set foot in Demortuis, a stranger in town, people would inquire where places

were I'd never heard of. Panhandlers wanting donations. Streetwalkers wanting suggestions.

Stick to Lincoln Avenue. Catch the next northbound home. Same #104 express I take in the morning; gabbleheads greet it every week with a loud archaic "*Ten-four, good buddy!!*" Afternoons its route is reversed, aiming for FISH BEND / VIA KNOTTS.

One bonus from catching the bus at 3:12 P.M. (as opposed to, say, the one at 4:42) is the absence of noisemakers. There's a smaller, more docile crowd at the stop, but its hobnob consists of endless inanities. "Running late today." "Weather sure is wet." Save your breath, people. I've got none of my own to waste. Climb aboard, take a seat, loosen scarf, tip back hat. Find kleenex and blow nose, cautiously—some grit's gotten into my postnasal drip.

We reach Figure Eight Way. Enclosing Stiffs Stadium, home of the Lucky Stiffs baseball team and the football Cutthroats. Could the Nodding Lady work in one of their front offices? Might account for her hollow sockets.

She isn't here, of course. Too damned early.

During the commute I reconsider "Living Death Mask." Wishing I could attempt a fresh sketch, but I've never mastered that knack in a moving vehicle. Got to admire women on the A.M. bus who can apply fullscale makeup, not batting an eye even when we bump and jounce. Seems like a hell of a risk; those little mascara applicators look lethal.

Can't picture the Nodder pulling such a stunt—not on public transport. Though she wouldn't need much, unlike the war horses who slap it on by the jarful. Just those bluish eyelid dabs, and... whatever else young married women use when they're already lovely. Lipstick, I suppose.

On lips slightly parted.

With a touch of teeth.

Be careful not to let her face make a *vampirish* impression. A bit pale, yes, but what Caucasian isn't in early February. No: she's not hiding behind "living death," but suddenly *aware* of it. As though some monstrous trauma might be concealed in the periphery, bent on devouring her headbobs.

(Don't look at *me*, Lady. I merely observe.)

Out the window. The Ipsissima River, running parallel to the Interstate for a few miles. Big Greedy-Gut. Belcher-forth of the nox that swamps us all. Mass consumer of levees, embankments and shores.

There's more than one way to feed off others.

Ultimately comes down to what you can make of them...

Thunka thunkity thunk. Indicating we've hit that span of pockmarked asphalt just before the Zerfall exit. I pull the cord, causing the #104 to eject me and drive away toward more northerly suburbs—Knotts, Rollinghitch, Fisherman's Bend. While I'm left with two moochers working each corner of the offramp, displaying hand-lettered appeals to drive-bys.

(Everybody thinks they're an artist.)

Walk the last mile along Mesher Road to Green Creek Lane. "Grin Crick" if you prefer: nothing particularly green about it this afternoon. The air feels drier, though. Clouds are breaking up above; it won't be overcast tonight. Colder, though. Chance of black ice tomorrow. But less threat of snow.

Wet or dry, Zerfall seems to unnerve some people. A skeleton was found in the woods by Green Creek Lane the year I came to town. They had to cordon off the creek and reroute traffic for a couple of days. No other bones turned up, nor was any identification made of the ones that had. And since then more woods have been felled to make room for more houses, built by more unsuperstitious white men.

Still plenty of cottonwoods and other poplars to be seen, with willows here and there. All barebranched at the moment, of course. You can make whistles out of willows, but the wood will split if you look at it cockeyed. Poplar's difficult to cut smoothly; it tends to "grip" tools. But no one should be *unnerved* by any of this—except in late spring maybe, when cottonwood fluff gets all the hell over everything.

George and Myrtle Wilson live at 247 Green Creek Lane. I live above their garage at 247½. We dwell not in a valley of ashes but several ash trees, which coexist peaceably with the willows and poplars. (Good for cabinetwork, too: high bending strength.)

Mr. Wilson is a master plumber nearing retirement, so we don't have the drainage problems suffered by others in lowlying Zerfall. Even so, Mrs. Wilson is out scrutinizing the bog that once was and might again be her garden.

“Oh, Mr. Huffman—I’m so glad I caught you—”

Doing what? I wonder. But she just wants to let me know that she and Mr. Wilson will be leaving tomorrow for a long weekend at “the place.” Meaning the Old McRale Place, her late parents’s former ranch, now a little timeshare on the prairie. Often used as a hunting lodge in fall and winter, then an artist’s retreat in spring and summer; either way it requires frequent hoeing-out.

Here in Zerfall I’ve rented 247½ for the past twelve years. We’re still on formal footing, the Wilsons and I: “Mr. and Mr. and Mrs.” rather than Aitch and George and Myrt. They’re agreeable enough as landlords go, neither meddlesome nor inquisitive. They like me because I pay the rent on time and don’t throw late-night parties.

Mr. Wilson built this three-truck garage with help from a contractor friend. Upstairs was the next-to-last resting place of Mrs. Wilson’s widowed mother. At the top of the stairs, engraved on the banister, is a shaky *MONA MCRALE*—done by her own hand at some possessive moment before eternity beckoned.

Now it’s my studio/apartment. I crank the thermostat high, fill a glass of water and pop my asthma controller. Got to take it on an empty stomach an hour before eating, or it won’t do its job. I was prescribed this med a few years ago after half a damn lifetime on prednisone. At my age, that poses too many side effects—hypertension, cataracts, loss of bone density. Not to mention steroid dependence: I had to be *weaned* off the stuff. With this new med I just need to time its doses right. Seldom have bad attacks these days, or resort to using my rescue inhaler.

Drug taken, I doff boots and shirt and britches and longjohns. Climb into a sweatsuit and thick wool socks. All of this is done in the big closet to the right of the landing. Beyond it’s a dining area with eating table, sideboard, three chairs. Then the kitchenette with fridge, stove, sink, small washer-dryer stack. To the left of the landing is a futon with end tables, flush against the balustrade overlooking the staircase. Three windows facing west: between the first two is a “media center” (for want of a better term) with TV, PC, VCR, CD and DVD players, printer, scanner, boombox, and self-answering telephone. Plus a stockpile of movies and music in many formats.

Atop the “media center” I keep *A Perfect Fit* and *Plue Velvet*: both decidedly in-the-round. Past the middle window, on the wall above my drafting table and taborets, hang *Frieze-Frame* and *Gatherin’ Stormin’*.

The drafting table is opposite the kitchenette. A square pillar nearby marks where a wall used to separate this side from old Mrs. McRale’s bed-and-bath. What was once her bedroom now has my workbench and toolracks, with *Artificialities* by the third window as a reminder of what I’m doing here. Materials are kept in the ex-bedroom closet.

The bathroom’s still a bathroom: no tub (Mona wasn’t limber enough to warrant one) but a large shower stall, with grabholds I find increasingly useful.

And throughout the entire studio/apartment is solitude.

It suits me. I can hear myself think.

Bothers the hell out of some people. Not just solitude *per se*, but my preferring it.

When I got my first Betamax, the shrink I was seeing in Chicago asked if it was “a means of distancing myself from Real Life.” No, I said, it was a means of watching motion pictures without commercials in the privacy of my own home. Aha! went the shrink, if I *must* watch movies instead of engaging in Real Life, why not do it surrounded by Real Live people in a theater? Because then I couldn’t hear myself think, I replied.

This shrink looked like Bob Newhart’s stunt double. That plus his being named Dr. Harvey led me to label him—not quite to his face—as the Friendly Ghost. He would begin our sessions by asking what I’d last seen and what had I thought of it, then proceed to analyze the film of the week more than the psyche in my head.

(Everybody thinks they’re a critic.)

Pause by the “media center” to select some entertainment. Last night I watched *Key Largo* again. Not just a Bogart flick, with tour-de-force performances by Edward G. Robinson and Lionel Barrymore; it also clued me in as to why cartoon wolves would go bug-eyed and howl when they saw Lauren Bacall. I didn’t used to understand her legendary appeal, hardly sensed it in *To Have and Have Not* or *How to Marry a Millionaire*. But then I saw *Key Largo*: “Oh, so THAT’S what they’ve been talking about.”

(And what exactly was THAT? The different way she wore her hair? Greater reliance on glances and stances than snappy wisecracks?)

(You got me. Ask the Friendly Ghost, if you can find him.)

Music tonight. Cool jazz. Miles Davis's *Nefertiti*. Title track, "Fall," "Hand Jive," "Madness," "Riot," "Pinocchio." Pretty much sums up the whole life cycle. Though unlike Geppetto, I favor carving little wooden girls.

Such as the current work-in-progress clamped on my bench. *The Glorious Fourth*: two nude caryatids holding an American flag aloft between them. Patriotism is also all the rage these days.

But yes, a degree of hackwork. I've been mining the Ginger & Candy lode for over a year now. Almost played out. So why not scrap it, maybe try a Baby Bacall instead? Have her invite a pack of wolfish Bogeys to put their lips together and blow.

No. I don't get that animated.

I'd like to think my reflection resembles Humphrey Bogart, but know it looks more like Buster Keaton. In his talkie phase, when the bottle started taking its toll. Then again, check out Bogart's face in *Dark Passage* when it's bandaged up after plastic surgery. Nothing visible except the unhappy eyes, nosetip, locked-down mouth: very Keatonesque. And reinforced by bits of pantomime.

Both men had the onscreen attitude that the world is full of traps and snares, so better be on your guard. Wary and ingenious. Bag of tricks kept handy. This is an outlook shared by many shortish men. I think Bogart was 5'8½", Keaton 5'6"; I myself am 5'7¼". (When asked, I round it to 5'8" for simplicity's sake.) We were all three cleancut-looking in our several youths, too, before growing "blunter-hewn" in middle age.

Well, this isn't getting any salad eaten. Better dig in before it wilts.

And no hard stuff tonight—just one beer. Dos Equis: two Xs. Double-cross.

Deliberate betrayal or duplicated sanctity? If you widen an H's crossbar, what do you get but a double-cross joined at the hip?

Which brings this morning's Nodding Lady to suggestive mind.

Really ought to take a whack at that fresh sketch.

Go over to the drafting table. (Bring the beer along.) I used to keep a file of arresting images, clipped from magazines and newspapers... here we go. Susan Sarandon has a folder to herself, dating back to *The Great Waldo Pepper*. Built as she is, braless as she goes, the

focus always shifts up to those remarkable shadowhaunted google-eyes.

Carol Kane too, she of the silent-cinema blinkers with a forlorn overlay. And let's not forget the next generation—your Winona Ryders, your Brittany Murphys. Them I can get off the Internet...

Okay (an hour later). Smudgy sockets and rampant lashes have been recreated in charcoal on 60-lb. Strathmore paper. Brows, nose, cheeks, mouth, jaw, chin. Here's looking at you, kid. Now go back to the eating table and put some damn salad in your stomach.

Yeedge. Who's responsible for the flimflam that broccoli is good for your health? Supposed to help prevent cancer, but seems more like an alternate malignancy. Like choosing to drown instead of going to the gallows.

Could be that's what's behind our Lady's woeful countenance. That stricken bewilderment you find on Pre-Raphaelite faces. The roiling hair, the turbid stare, that dame (again) from Shalott.

To get the full effect, you can't have just the face—should be a complete figure. Surrounded not by Real Live people but roughed-in slumping shapes, that might be passengers asleep on a bus. Condemned prisoners en route to a crematory. Languid zombies about to be raised from the dead. And there among them, awakened by no prince's kiss but a froggish tremor, is our mortified Lady: half sick of shadows but unable to crack the mirror and escape from this mute commute—

—back and forth I go, between the sketch on the drafting table and the salad on the eating table. Wash down a forkful of broccoli with a swig of Dos Equis and the two coagulate in my craw—

—can't swallow—

—don't believe this—

—and now I can't inhale—

—should I yell for help? with WHAT?—

—need a Screaming Pillow—

—to break this chokehold—

—*don't spew over the sketch!!*—

...if Seeing is Believing, then why am I not breathing?...

Cough it all up, bile-green purée and curdled library paste, into the toilet bowl. Like a goddamned bulimic. An abortive overdoser with a gaping deadpan rictus—

—never mind.

That's the last of it.

I should just keep my big trap shut.

2

Armature Standing

I gave my heart to figurative art in the eighth grade. Largely thanks to Miss Pankiewicz, a free spirit just out of college, who encouraged us to call her “Nadja” and spent a lot of class time perched on the edge of her desk, engendering fantasies.

Starting then and for a long stretch I would twist wire into skeletal frames or armatures, then clothe them with flesh of clay. This never made me feel “godlike”—just muddily mortal. Till there came a day when I looked at my attempts at molded sculpture and saw them all as *lumps*. And smashed them, one by inert one.

So I turned to wood (as it were) and specialized in carving reliefs. Which sometimes provide their name.

To me, if not to viewers.

After college I spent a decade in Milwaukee and Chicago, honing my technique. Trying to persuade galleries to take my pieces on consignment. Seeking the pettier commissions, the punier grants and fellowships. Each month I pored over *American Artist's* Bulletin Board, hunting for the little stars denoting competitions open on a national basis. Till there came a month when I found a star by:

FIGFEST: Cairney Academy Annual Figurative Festival, 7/14-16;
open to living artists w/orig. work. Media: all figurative art. Juried
by 3 slides. Over \$5000 in cash prizes and purchase awards, medals.
Fee \$40, entry due 3/15.

Always difficult to tell whether a juried competition is legit or a scam. But the Cairney Academy was and remains an accredited institution (if barely, then and now). It's at 10th and Julius, the age-old heart of the Demortuis streetwalking district, as celebrated in vulgar ragtime:

*On Julius Street in Demortuis town
I met me an evenin' lady;
She even'd me out of a couple o' bucks...*

It goes on in that vein awhile, ending:

But you know I think she was shady.

Which may explain why Cairney's Figurative Festival hands out medals shaped like figleaves. I won the bronze figleaf that year for my panel *All We Ever Look For*. And that signed me up with Catapult Woman.

Geraldine Crouching came to FigFest trusting to "serendipity," in search of a Wholly Unexpected Find. Those were among the very words she used (and she used very many) to describe *All We Ever Look For*, tap-tap-tapping it with her tinted pince-nez.

"I like this! There's skin for the men—*J'accuse* for the women—whimsy for the gays—*Twilight Zone* for the critics! This says POTENTIAL to me, it says savvy, it says bent!"

So far as I was concerned, anything *All We Ever Look For* had to say was more than straightforward. A female nude, scrupulously detailed, recumbent on a couch; a queue of male mannequins, each bearing a lighted candle, filing into the bedchamber; with the head of the line climbing over the nude's footboard.

Geraldine went on to draw suitable comparisons between my work and that of Chagall and Chirico, Magritte and Delvaux. She asked to see any slides I'd brought of other pieces, then let fly her slingshot: "Do you have professional representation?"

Not even amateur, I told her.

"Well, H. Huffman," said Geraldine, "prepare to start going places."

I did. Strolling up Julius Street to Portal Park. Riding to the top of the Cenotaph and there buying a rubber mourning dove that went *cooAHH coo, coo, coo* when squeezed. Savoring the status of professionally-represented bronze leafwinner.

People began asking me for directions. My first Demortuis panhandler approached me that same summer evening: a big cheerful bearded man, like an off-season Santa Claus. (My first Demortuis streetwalker approached me later that night: a thin restive black-eyed woman, like an out-of-sorts Avon Lady.)

I returned to Chicago long enough to retrieve my worldly possessions and load them in the aged Subaru I'd had since college. Which got me back to Demortuis before giving up its ghost and burning down my bridge.

But never fear: Geraldine launched my representation right away. She was just starting out as a dealer, having discovered she enjoyed selling other people's art more than creating her own. (Whose dominant theme appeared to be ballistics on a David-and-Goliath scale. Not Catapult Woman for nothing.)

She suggested Selfsame as a feasible dayjob; introduced me to the Wilsons, who'd bought a couple of Crouching projectiles; got me settled above their garage in Zerfall. Her "space" back then was a mere hole in the Jackdaw wall, but Geraldine provided service—even when the art market collapsed a few months later, at the tail end of overpriced yuppiedom. We were Davidian small fry chillin' in the GC, not SoHo or the East Village; their Goliathlike bottom might have dropped out, but *we* had nowhere to climb but up.

More than a dozen mortal years ago...

Today I stand in front of the new Crouching Gallery on Shoveler Street. "New" I still call it, though Geraldine's been in these larger quarters for so long that half her artists never knew the old wall-hole.

Peering through the front window, I see Geraldine's wispy-pale assistant Ralph. Even after a decade's acquaintance I have never heard Ralph say anything aloud. He murmurs a lot in Geraldine's ear, like Leonardo in the old Clyde Crashcup cartoons.

I do not go inside. Bram Taggart's one-man show is currently on exhibit: broken light bulbs turned into effigies. Feel no need to look at these a second time.

Geraldine wants Something New for the group show in May.

My work is no longer Wholly Unexpected.

Nor, of late, has it been Especially Sellable.

And *The Glorious Fourth* isn't apt to reverse either condition. Even if it were remotely close to being finished.

So here I am, Last of the Red-Hot Chiselers, heading back down to The Trail and Chinatown. Heading back down, period. No one says you can't continue creating art. Or that you have to sell any of it, so long as you keep your dayjob. At least the "Stus" of the world would quit trying to make you their stepping stone.

Right.

The airborne riversilt seems thicker than usual today...

Eyesnag: this time by a quartet of Vietnamesettes. Teens by the look of them, dressed for April despite the February wind. Allowing midriffs and rumps to run free in lowride jeans; garish-colored pantybands on proud display.

The shortest and hottest one has the hiccups. Each time she goes off, the other three giggle in choral response. "*Stop laughing you guys!!*" she yelps at them, flapping aggravated hands.

Lurch of my heart.

Ridiculous. You would think, after so many years—
—never mind.

The quartet turns into the Paktong Palace, a cutrate emporium. To find something so rinkydink it'll frighten the spasms out of Shorty Hottie? I linger outside, as though waiting for the light to turn green. "As though?" What else? If I were a younger or more decadent man, I could claim to be from the Blah deBlah Modeling Agency. Care to put the rest of your fine young selves on Glorious Fourfold display?

Damn. Get a hold of your sorry self—and not literally, here on the street corner. The light does turn green; move the hell along.

Fortunately there's never been need for deceit of this magnitude. My standard op is to post an ad on the Cairney Academy website. Go there to interview respondents; try a quick preliminary sketch. If a prospect shows promise, invite her to Zerfall for a studio session. All on the up and up. And it's not like crowds of women have streamed through as a result: only one or two, every year or so. Nina and Stormin', Josephine and Miranda, K.T. and Amy-Kay, LaQuita and Pluanne, Sage and Rachael, Ginger & Candy.

My Diverting Dozen.

Or Diverted, if you prefer. Though they were all paid for their posing. And only half of them, in fact, came from the Cairney ads.

I obtained my first model via Antonio of the FigFest, who introduced me to Nina Silbergeld. Rather like Garbo in *Ninotchka*, without the laugh. Every move she made was measured, unhurried; she even chewed gum in slow motion. Nina not only used words of one syllable, but only one at a time. “Hi.” “Kay.” “Here?” She could hold a pose almost indefinitely.

Antonio drove her to Green Creek Lane and stayed for the first session. He and I traded occasional remarks while Nina gradually undressed in the bathroom. “She’s just a wee bit *pococurante*,” Antonio confided. “Nina darling! Did you fall in or what?”

“Sec,” replied Nina.

She emerged ten minutes later wrapped in a towel that was lowered, indolently, to reveal implants the size of unexploded zeppelins.

“Ah, she’s something, is she not?” smiled Antonio.

Chomp went Nina’s jaws on Nina’s gum. *Chomp*. And, after a moment, *chomp*.

I did what I could with her, trying to disregard the outgrowths where her breasts should have been. Whatever stance I had her assume, they protruded like frozen sandpiles. In one sketch I tried approximating how her original bustline must have appeared, but Nina disputed this use of artistic license.

“Hey,” she said. And would pose no more for me.

So I advertised for a replacement. Scant interest shown by anyone at Cairney—except Stormin’ Molly Brown, who danced at the Salome Oasis down the street but liked to check out Academy exhibits. She was largely self-educated, well-read, with a taste for mythology and improvised pronunciation.

“Can you sculpt me as an droMEEda?” she asked.

“An—?”

“You know: the chick in the chains on the rock with the sea monster that perSeuss kills after he cuts off the Gorgon’s head with the hair like live snakes.”

“Oh,” I said. “Sure, why not?”

“Great!” said Stormin’. “I’ve got my own chains here, and I can bring the snakes next time!”

If Nina was another Garbo, Stormin’ was descended from Bettie Page, the beaming gleaming queen of Fifties girlie mags. Stormin’ cultivated this resemblance with brunette hair in bangs, alarmingly high heels on her shoes, a proficient interest in bondage and so forth. Fully dressed she looked like an on-air meteorologist—what used to be called a “weather girl”—smiling brilliantly as she forecast the arrival of big warm fronts. Such had been her girlhood ambition, before she detoured into exotic boogaloo “for a little while” that had lasted through the *Fame*, *Flashdance*, and *Footloose* eras. Now over thirty, Stormin’ wanted redirection—and me to provide it.

(Sure, why not?)

She showed up at Zerfall toting a suitcase packed tight with props and accessories. Began to undress before she got upstairs, shrugging off my offer of privacy—“I’m not changing *into* anything, you know”—along with her bra. Shimmy-pirouetting at she slung it across the balustrade. “Only way I can take my clothes off anymore. You should see me at the doctor’s office.”

(*Her* bosom, by the way, was naturally unsinkable.)

Always very chipper, very prolific, endlessly inventive. Things clicked between us. The charcoal loved her, the wood seemed eager to embody her, and many relief panels resulted over the next couple of years—more than I’d produced over the entire previous decade. Better ones, too, and more marketable. Each time Geraldine unloaded one, I upped Stormin’s modeling rate, and she would give me even more of her all.

True, she wasn’t the *quietest* woman on the face of the earth. Nor the absolute tidiest, when it came to littering my studio with left-open jars and bottles, unrinsed cups and plates, and enough crumbs scattered over floor and futon to lead a dozen Hansels and Gretels out of the forest.

“You want a maid, look in the Yellow Pages,” said Stormin’. “Now in this one I don’t think it’s clear I’m wearing *black* nylons. Maybe you could do more of an intaGLEEoh pattern?”

We were working together when Desert Storm broke out, the first Gulf War. Stormin' added khaki and camouflage to her Salome Oasis dance costume and started raking in the dough. I did likewise by depicting her in a variety of bellicose settings. The best of these, *Gatherin' Stormin'*, snagged the eye of an heir to a formaldehyde fortune.

Edgar Clint collects anything remotely erotic, from underground comix (hence his byname, "Double-Bag Eddie") on up. A dealer's dream: Eddie gets suspicious if the asking price seems too low. Geraldine was ecstatic at corralling such a customer.

Gatherin' Stormin' was my first four-figure sale. In its honor I carved myself the improved copy that hangs above my drafting table—and a second one for Bettie Page Jr., as a parting gift. Her attention had turned to computer BBS imagery; in a very short time she staked out her own corner of the Internet and was able to retire from dancing. Today Stormin' Molly Brown is a virtual madam, offering a vast array of digital cheesecake and online intercourse. I still receive Christmas cards from her.

As Geraldine began to inflate my prices, with Double-Bag Eddie having first refusal on anything I could sculpt, a flock of applicants responded to my next Cairney ad. Rather to everyone's surprise I chose Josephine Hynde. (Never call her "Josie" or mention pussycats in her presence.) She had an air of complacency that seemed at odds with her slightly pearshaped and puddingfaced appearance. Yet at second glance Josephine left no doubt about her own particular flair.

It was all in her regard. Eyes forever half closed; a mouth that smiled without adjusting its lips. A demeanor both knowing and slightly derisive. Wise enough to the ways of men to dismiss us (the men) and them (our ways) as silly, foolish, futile. She possessed a gift for silence and stillness, watching and waiting, that translated into immense appeal.

"All we ever look for" is not always what you'd expect.

Stacked beauties can fall short; scrawny plainjanes can outshine.

And there've been changes over the past twelve years. Less silicone but more tattoos. More piercings but fewer pubes. *Too* shaven 'n' shorn, in my opinion—like yanking the gold stars off Christmas trees.

Overall quality has declined of late. My last two models, from the autumn before last, worked as a team: Ginger & Candy. Never did know their surnames—they asked to be

paid in cash. Both were streetsmart (Julius Avenuewise?) yet insensible. Accommodating, yet mechanical to the point of sterility. Where Stormin's eyes had danced with zestful relish, Ginger & Candy's shared an Arrid Extra Dry.

But if you're thirsty enough, you'll drink evaporated milk.

Till you're a middle-aged coot picturing young passers-by in and out of their garish-colored underwear.

Admirable habit? Of course not. Breakable? Unlikely, so long as the sap keeps rising. (To a different kind of saphead.) When asked I say I'm thirty-nine, an age good enough for Jack Benny and Winston Smith—and me for almost six years now. But does thirty-nine mean acting three times as adolescent?

Never delude yourself. Or let yourself be hauled around by your sapheaded *schweinhund*. As my Grandfather Rhine told me when I was barely in my teens: "Boy, you best think of that as your *tool*, and treat it same as you would any other. Keep it clean, keep it dry, and don't be monkeyshining with it. Else it'll end up the boss of you."

(An accurate forecast. Thanks, Gramps.)

I have been accused—by Io MacEvelyn, who shows at the Crouching Gallery and contributes irregular reviews to the local press—of "objectifying" women. And every time she charges this, Ben Szilnecky the pencilnecked painter hastens to relay it to me, unasked, in his bizarre Budapest-by-way-of-Tennessee-Williams accent:

"Ay-utch! Hoff yuh herdt the lay-uttest? Lemme tell yuh somesink—"

(Try to avoid him.)

You can say that objectification *depersonalizes*, robbing women of their individual character and identity. Contrariwise, I can say that objectification *personalizes* by taking an imaginary objective and giving concrete form—

—or, at least, the *illusion* of reality.

Thanks to *trompe l'oeil*. "Trick of the eye." Result of careful effort on the artist's part to create something out of nothing, depth where none exists.

Io MacEvelyn interprets this as deceit. As she illustrated in her essay "Shameful Subject," which just happened to be published in the Sunday paper the week my first solo show opened. I didn't commit the spiel to memory, but its gist was that women ought only

to be sculpted, painted, photographed, what-have-you'd—by other women. If done by men, it causes subjugation and degradation.

Now, I can understand that being judged solely on the extent of your chest must be a pain; like being written off as less than 5'8". What doesn't wash, though, is the stipulated remedy: purging your brain of unreal fantasies and settling for the mundane. Not just settling but reveling: "Broccoli is so nutritious it must be delicious, sweeter than chocolate, more intoxicating than wine."

Right. Let's brain-purge for a moment and look at the mundane female body. Fundamentally designed for bearing and rearing children; hence the enlarged glands, monthly moodswings, troublesome waterworks. The same set of secretions and excretions that make men ambulatory shitsacks, plus a few extra.

And yet women are able to surpass this, and achieve the transcendent.

Not all of them. Nor all the time. But always evinced in the way they *look*—to you and at you. Stormin's avid gusto; Josephine's mocking cheek. Sometimes barefaced, but more often embellished with cosmetics: as in artwork. (Even Io MacEvelyn has been known to run up a salon tab before a gallery opening.)

And how do men react? Obsessives fixate. Whimsicals impersonate. The rest ambulate their lives away on the superficial level.

When they could be climbing a ladder.

Distancing themselves from the surface. Rising above it, delving below it. Moving beyond reality.

In the panel *Impossible to Say* I had Josephine lounging on a dais, plucking petals off a rose. To her left, men are transforming into swine; to her right, swine are transforming into men. At her feet, a pile of fallen petals and thorny stems is kindling into a blaze. Josephine ignores it all, giving the viewer her closemouthed smirk.

"Weird," she said when I showed her the completed piece. "What's it supposed to mean?"

I pointed to the title.

Follow the ladder. Be surrealized.

Ladder is another double-sided word, in its British sense: a run in a stocking. Also known as a raveling—which is to say, an unraveling. And when you ravel/unravel an object, you either clarify it or complicate it. Put it right or have it fall apart on you.

Like it's been doing in recent months, with that ebb of quality. That tinge of "knockoff" clinging to all my work of late. *The Glorious Fourth*. Other Ginger & Candy pieces—*Counter Feint*, *Glass Houses*, *No I.D.* Ditto the pieces of Rachael Guterra before that: a mild-mannered model with a bossa nova body, the face of a lamb and the soul of a sheep. Set against her Brazilian background, this should have led to *Blame It on Rio* crossed with *Blade Runner*: post-apocalyptic samba. But our sessions came off as ersatz, bogus, torpid: sham laddering.

Before Rachael there was Sage Maltese, as in Falcon. Recommended by Stormin' Molly Brown, who called her "a ringer for Julie Newmar." Splendid, I thought: *Batman*, *My Living Doll*, *Li'l Abner's* Stupefyin' Jones. Then Sage turned out to be more of a ringer for Mary Astor as Brigid O'Shaughnessy: cloying throbs, lopsided hairstyle, and roughly twice as old as she claimed.

Be—generous, Mr. Spade!

"Julie Newmar??"

"Oh, I always get those two mixed up," said Stormin'.

And before Sage Maltese came Pluanne Torty...

Almost makes you wonder whether there's any validity to juju, gris-gris, and hoodoos generally.

Geraldine wants Something New. By May. Or Else.

And I've been dawdling over this rehash for ninety minutes now. So I get to await the 4:42 bus, encircled by hullabalooers. "*Running late today!*" "*Weather sure is wet!*" And a good-buddy cheer when the #104 heaves into view: FISH BEND / VIA KNOTTS.

I grab my usual spot on the sideways settee.

Up 14th Street we chug, till we reach Figure Eight Way.

Where enters the Nodding Lady.

Who again places herself across the aisle from me, one row down. A prime seat left surprisingly vacant, as though reserved for fair complexions and decided calf-curves. She

extracts a paperback from her totebag, opens it at a tasseled marker, settles back to read. A book written by...? Rita Mae Brown?? “And Sneaky Pie”—the cat who co-authors mystery stories. This one titled *Pawing Through the Past*.

(Yeedge.)

Watch the Lady’s face grow intent. Flicker of apprehension. *Blink—blink*—and then her slightly-parted lips climb their own tiny ladders, up and down. She smiles.

By damn.

You could look at a thing like that for a hell of a long time.

There you have it: we’re not out of options. *The Mute Commute* hasn’t wholly slipped my mind. And this is another Wednesday, the 13th of February—“Valentine’s Eve,” as the Warbler kept announcing at Selfsame.

So let’s see. The complete figure, not just the face. Perhaps a separate figure. In the round? Haven’t attempted one of those in years, not since *Blue Velvet*. Put the passengers/prisoners/zombies on a panel. Or panels: can’t “surround” with only one. Make it three, box the Lady in? No—too confining, obscuring. A couple jointed at right angles, on a base. One behind the Lady, the other at her side. Yes. Good. And do-able by May. The two panels, at least; those I can carve off the top of my head.

The in-the-round is another matter.

Leaving the Lady fully clothed would eliminate part of the challenge. But there’s still the attitude, the bearing, the contours to consider. Not to mention the *face*. And the three dimensions you’ve signed up for: A-B-C, 1-2-3.

Okay then. Onto the bottom rung.

Got to get to work.

*

Eleven weeks from “Valentine’s Eve” to May Day. I start loitering around town in the afternoons, braving the *bra-a-a-ang* gang to gaze at the Lady on the 4:42. Mornings I continue to survey her nod-naps, the hanky-wrap and purse-drop of the item taken out of her mouth.

Come spring, her navy overcoat is replaced by five different sweaters in shades of blue and violet. (Mulberry on Mondays, turquoise on Tuesdays, etc.) The headscarf comes

off to reveal wiry-looking hair, not quite shoulder-length, with a bit of a wave to it. Hair the color of sugar maple wood. Like creamy toast. Or toasted cream, if you prefer.

She cuts an elegant figure, sitting very straight even when her head nods off. Why does she commute by bus? Has her dream of breaking through the glass ceiling amounted to no more than *Get out in that office and rattle those pads and pens?*

Faintly pained expression as she naps. As though her sleep is troubled by a peapod underneath her furthest mattress. A restless princess, then. Picture a maidservant crowning that wiry sugar maple with a tiara. See the young empress with the clouded brow in old photographs of newlywed Alexandra, who shed so many tears before agreeing to marry Nicholas. The both of them ending up shot to death and dumped down a mineshaft.

Presentiments. Forebodings. Nervous exaltation. Masked by a Victorian reserve so stiff they say she looked like she'd swallowed a yardstick. She who proclaimed rapturous love for her husband (despite the misgivings) and children (especially the bleeder boy). She who gave wholehearted faith to Rasputin, lock stock and ikon—while yanking her inflexibilities ever closer and tighter, like so many whalebone corsets.

A straitlaced ecstatic. No wonder she appeared ill at ease.

Or should I say *appears*, meaning the Nodder across the aisle.

Whom I'm tired of mentally addressing as "the Nodder."

Her name. Unlikely that it's Alexandra. What else? Alex: overandrogynous.

Alexis: bleeder-boy Tsarevich. Alicia: pretty but clueless. Alison: too snooty-sounding.

Alice: too rabbit-holy.

But also looking-glassish.

"Lady Alice."

Not bad.

Her face is diamond-shaped. Angular, without being abrupt or pointed. Certainly not gaunt or haggard, except for those hollows around the eyes. Chin and cheekbones dovetail very smoothly, curvilinearly. Everything nicely rounded off.

Of course, that pained expression might be due to my twice-daily goggling at her. I make no sketches on the bus, jot no charcoal notes, but keep helping myself to her image. Committing it to memory, detail by detail. Dainty nose-bridge and nostril-wings. Silvery

chain around the throat. Sweaters buttoned neatly up, skirts smoothed primly down. Knees juxtaposed over those sleek decided calves and ankles.

Here sits Lady Alice: kindly maintain your distance.

And shift your ghoulish bastard eye to a window or the bus ads above her head, whenever she might catch you acting triply adolescent.

I feel like I should be standing guard while she naps on public transit. Protecting her from harm, or sleeping past her stop. Which she never does: her eyes jolt open the moment we leave the Interstate.

While I try to jolt open up my ears. Not the ones on the sides of my skull, but those within it. If you open them wide enough, you can tap into all sorts of unspoken things.

If I tapped into Alice's, what might I catch? Probably thoughts I couldn't handle—*OH* and *NO* and *That strange short middle-aged creep is staring at me, how I wish he'd leave me alone.*

Then again, she never moves to a different seat further away.

If only I could get her to sit formally, properly. Imagine approaching her: "Madame, would you be so kind as to hold various poses while I draw pictures of you?" Then it would become a question of which hand she'd slap me across the face with.

I've had that happen before, my face slapped by women. The first time by a girl aged eight. (I was seven-and-a-half.) If Alice did it, next thing you know she'd be escorted onto the bus by her husband—some big "bluff" type, insultingly tall and heavy-chested. "You been eyeballing my woman, fellah?" Followed by playground-style administration of nosebleed and Indian burn, with Alice looking on and nodding approvingly—

Just keep your big trap shut.

*

In April I turn forty-five (thirty-nine plus six) and treat myself to a bottle from the liquor store's top shelf. From my half-sister Cassandra I receive a tract demanding to know "WHERE WILL YOU SPEND ETERNITY??" Not, I hope, like our mother, whose urn accompanies Cassie everywhere she goes. As I discovered the last time we dined together, Cass placing the urn on the table between us.

"Say hi to Mom," I was told.

“Ma’am, you can’t bring your own food in here,” announced the waitress.

What’s wrong with being laid to rest in a wooden box? Wood provides relief—or so I hope, as I start carving a block into *The Mute Commute’s* Waking Lady.

First I reconstruct Alice’s memorized likeness on sketchpaper. Borrowing a few features from the Misses Sarandon and Kane, Ryder and Murphy.

Then comes selection of material. After dismissing my stock in the ex-bedroom closet, I head for the LeThean Lumber Yard on Downy Owl Road. They’ve never failed me yet—or charged a dime less than the market will bear. But at LeThean you get what you pay for. In this case a couple of choice well-seasoned blocks: one of cherry, the other of walnut. Both free from knots, checks, and overt blemishes.

For a full hour I examine these two, looking for a Lady within them. Finally I decide on the walnut, tucking the cherry away in case I botch the walnut with my rustiness at in-the-round sculpting. To prevent that, I mold a clay maquette over a wire armature. Here too I’m out of practice, and the thing takes longer than it’s strictly worth. But with any luck this prototype will serve as both 3-D reference and talisman.

Nor am I kidding. Ill winds blow, evil eyes squint, and a hoodoo is as a hoodoo does. So plant that maquette on the workbench and hope it helps dejinx.

Art, as they say, isn’t easy. But it was Schwitters the Dadaist who answered “What isn’t?” when asked “What is art?”

Time to take this artwork out of the isn’t.

Screw the walnut block onto my swivel stand. Transfer the outlined design to its front, back, and sides. Use a handsaw to cut away the chunkier waste. Then rough in the profiles with my mallet and a 1" No. 3 straight gouge.

Establish positions; from them come proportions. These—*tap tap*—will be the knees. Those—*tap tap*—will be the shoes. We can now locate the Lady’s backside precisely, and arrange it upon the bus seat. Confirming that *here* will be her shoulders, *there* her elbows, and her clenched hands in her skirted lap (gentle *tap*) yonder.

The Lady begins to emerge.

Trompe l’oeil can give the impression of depth, but flattens into nothingness when you introduce genuine palpable convexities and concavities. Literal laddering now, using the

V-tool and ¼" firmer. Refine those lines. Engage those curves. Let instinct take over—though not to the point of scrapping the coat and skirt and exposing a nude Nodder to lewd ogles. Stand guard; protect her from the likes of you.

And don't draw attention away from the *face*. Lose the headscarf, show off the hair. Allow it to frame and focus.

Tap tap goes the mallet.

Each day we begin by touching the maquette mascot's lump of a pate. Each day sees the Lady in the Block a little more liberated. Transcending confinement. As we reproduce Alice's dovetailed diamond with fishtail undercutting. Her wiry hairwave with a No. 11 veiner. The delicate hollows around her haunted sockets with a Stubai detail knife.

And in the process I capture her expression perfectly: better than in my sketches, better even than in my mind. By damn.

Scrutinize her from every angle. Tilt and turn the swivel stand. Oh, by damn.

The image of the Waker. Shaped by my hand in conjunction with my eye.

I want to make it bigger. I want to make it lifesize—

Instead I quickcarve two walnut panels of the other passengers/prisoners/zombies, to be visible behind and beside. And if they look at all hallucinatory, so much the better.

Leave me at the top of the ladder. With a tooled finish rather than smooth, except for the Lady's face and legs: this is not a crone. Seal everything with a coat of oil and a layer of wax. Then put the piece together, Lady and panels and base; adding my initials to a corner of the latter.

The Mute Commute. It is done. I have done it.

Whew...

Too unwieldy to transport by bus. So Mr. Wilson lends me his least favorite truck (the one with automatic transmission) on May Day, and I drive my semi-diorama downtown. At the Crouching Gallery it excites considerable comment, not all of which is audible. I hear later—from Ben Szilnecky, needless to say—that Io MacEvelyn peered closely at it and said nothing afterward. Which is the highest compliment she's ever paid me.

Geraldine lavishes more words than she's used about any piece of mine since I can remember. But follows them up with:

“I wonder if you could have another one or two of these ready before the 24th?”

“A panel?” I ask, singularly.

“Well... same model?”

“Sure,” I say. “Why not?”

So I’m not off the hook yet. Although when Geraldine gives Double-Bag Eddie his first-refusal peek at *The Mute Commute*, Eddie snaps it right up. And goes so far as to change his mind about *No I.D.*, the Ginger & Candy panel, buying that too.

Even after Geraldine deducts her share of the proceeds (hogs her half, some might say) I will make as much from this one day’s sales as I’ve taken home from Selfsame since Valentine’s Eve.

Art may not be easy; but go figure.

3

The Hand of Rotwang

I was given what's generally referred to as a "secular humanist" upbringing. Which has spurred my half-sister Cassandra (who was given the same) to send me inspirational literature ranging from Dianetics to the Kabbala.

Our mother—before she ended up in the urn in Cassie's handbag—worshiped bright lights and action sequences, and so became a movie critic. Long before the days of DVDs she was renting feature films and screening them at home on a Bell & Howell projector that often broke down midreel. My father would then be called in to repair it, which he enjoyed more than the films it projected. (He taught physics and worshiped the scientific method, which I thought meant taking things apart in order to put them back together.)

Each home screening was a memorable big deal. *The Girl Next Door* and I were allowed to watch providing we kept quiet; which we always did, having found other ways to communicate.

What's this one about?

There's supposed to be a robot in it.

I thought you said it was a silent movie.

Yeah. So? Robots don't HAVE to talk.

Silent movies are from the olden days. Robots are from the future.

(This with the lofty-learnèd air she felt entitled to, being eight months older than me.)

The film du jour was a scratchy print of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, with a ridiculous nickelodeon score. Despite these flaws it left an unforgettable impression—especially that of

Rotwang, the mad inventor with rampant gray hair, black metallic hand, and smoldering eyes under beetling brows.

I bet that's what God looks like.

Oh don't be stupid.

(The Girl Next Door, though a believer in rationalism, attended parochial school and so disparaged my remark from two standpoints.)

My perception of religion was that you were supposed to enlist in God & Son's army despite its often bootless track record, since it was bound to march to glory someday. But here was Rotwang putting on an almighty light show, converting his robot into a beautiful girl's lookalike: one who could wink and strut and do a belly dance. This, I felt, was graspable divinity.

"You kids probably shouldn't be seeing this," my mother snickered.

YOU shouldn't, anyway, added the Girl Next Door. Who already frowned on my use of the word "underhear" to describe what we were doing.

Anyway: as a kid I *was* convinced the meek would inherit the earth, having had my face crammed into it (plus the sidewalk and curbstone) by the neighborhood bully, Jerome Gullip. Could a tentative "prayer" to Rotwang get something done—and soon—regarding Jerome?

Evidently yes, thanks to a stolen Vespa scooter and a weighty UPS truck. Soon and gratifyingly gruesome.

So I adopted Rotwang as my crypto-deity, carving his genesis of the False Maria into the panel *Artificialities* that dominates one side of my studio. Thus Old Beetlebrow watches over me, whether he will or nill. And takes a black metallic hand in shaking up my fortunes, introducing the unbargained-for: *let's see how the little chiseler copes with THIS—*

*

It is a Thursday, the 9th of May. Six mornings in a row I've come to work without a notion what to do for Geraldine's Another One.

Could always finish *The Glorious Fourth*. But then Geraldine might speculate that *The Mute Commute* was a fluke, not a restoration of my standing as a marketable sculptor. In spite of Eddie's recent double-bagging.

One, two, pick up a clue...

At Selfsame I am sifting through special-order requests when a clear cool voice comes gliding into the stockroom: “Mr. Campbell?... Mr. Campbell?...”

Gag is off today, so I send Squat Kid out to see who wants what. And he returns with **ALICE**—

—or her doppelganger.

For the life of me, I can’t recall what she was wearing on the bus this morning. If it’s Thursday, it must have been lilac—but this lady’s dressed in powder blue. (Why “powder” blue? Talcum is white, gunpowder’s black, sugar is sweet and so are—)

—a powder blue sweater over an ivory blouse; a powder blue skirt over don’t be looking at her legs YOU MORON—

“Mr. Campbell?”

“He’s not here,” says Squat Kid. Leaving her with me, and the cat out of the double-bag. That must be it: she’s come to get me fired for goggling at her on the bus. There in her oversized briefcase she’ll have a restraining order to prevent the sale of *The Mute Commute*, plus a lien on any proceeds therefrom—

“Mister...?” she murmurs.

“Huffman,” I manage. Making a nominal attempt to step down from my stool: a gentleman stands when a lady enters the room. Stands tall when she’s as fine and fair as this one. Unless the gentleman’s feet might fail him now—

“Can I help you?” I say, lifting a stack of papers from a nearby chair. Nearly whisking her powder blue backside as I try to brush off the seat: its, not hers. She decides to keep standing.

“I’m looking for a buyer. My card—”

JUDITH FORMI, SALES REPRESENTATIVE

Formi-Dable

Writing Instruments • Art Supplies • Office Supplies

520 Figure Eight Way
Demortuis, Nilnisi

Judith?? Can't be. Even if the Nodder's name isn't really Alice, it ought NOT to be "Judith," which brings to mind the pigtailed harridan from *Leave It to Beaver*.

Formi-Dable's a local firm, whose products Gag banished from Selfsame a few years back. Our contribution to the unfortunate streak they've been riding for quite awhile now. A much-publicized new plant failed to materialize; then a chance to become a conglomerate's subsidiary fell through. Bad decisions, bad timing, bad luck—and diminishing quality, which Gag gave as our reason for discontinuing F-D. Though that actually stemmed from a kickback-quarrel with their sales rep, Murray Burgher—

—whose toupee I see poking round the corner. Aha: using pretty young lady-bait to regain favor. And if Gag's away, target me instead. Clever move, Murray. Except that of all the fine fair dames on all the buses in all the world, you had to pick *this* one to twang into my bull's eye.

He beams like a stage parent as "Judith" launches into her sale routine. Sounding a trifle unsure of herself, like a magician's assistant obliged to perform the act alone.

"Excuse me," I tell her. Deepening her uncertainty, till she finds I'm staring down Murray Burgher. Who gives us a salute and withdraws—probably to go knock over a competitor's display. (As Vashti has brusked, *Mannay nuph buttered ohs*. Or, demilitarized: "That man ain't nothing but a turd with toes.")

His absence must be a relief for "Judith," who gives me a smile. Yes, by damn! That twin-tiny-ladder-climb! The middle of each lip rises/lowers while the sides stay slightly parted—even her smile is diamond-shaped. And check out her hand as she presents F-D's latest catalog—there's the ring with the rock. It *must* be her.

Showing no sign that she recognizes me.

(Of course, she's never seen me indoors or without a hat before.)

Her eyes are a classic midnight blue. Like the smile, they are horizontal rhombi set in the vertical rhombus of her face. Seen straight on, the nose is a downward-pointing arrow. Twanging toward her ivory neckline? (Stop that—stand guard—pay attention to what she's saying.)

—"can produce very broad strokes on any smooth surface—"

And what's this? A perfume I haven't encountered since the Eighties. What was it called? "White Linen." Vicki used to douse herself with it. Bighaired and smallhearted, the Friendly Ghost's receptionist, pervading the waiting room. On Judith it's a light airy scent.

"—and this is our latest product, the Oasis brush marker. Fast-drying ink when you put it on paper, but the tip stays moist even if you leave the cap off—"

Baloney Oasis, Stormin' would say. Still: Judith sounds like a harp as she goes on about the seventy-two odor-free colors, including a full range of grays and earth shades—

The sample marker in her hand suddenly snaps apart.

For an instant she looks perplexed. Then comes a trace of hollow-socketing, and there goes any doubt that here indeed stands Alice. *Sits* Alice, as I touch her sweated elbow and direct her into the nearby chair. With her free hand she smooths her skirt down over her knees—no, not over: it is springtime, hems are higher, knees stay primly but pleasantly visible. I hold a wastebasket for her to dispose of the broken Oasis, and a box of tissues for her to wipe her hands. Which are unstained but clammy-looking. She swabs them with a rattle of bangle bracelets crowding both wrists.

"Thank you," she says. "See? It didn't leak. They really are good markers." Hectic little laugh. "Um—please don't tell Mr. Burgher."

Not only will I not snitch, but I place an order for a small Oasis selection. Cautioning her this doesn't mean the complete Formi-Dable catalog will be reintroduced at Selfsame.

"I believe I can change your mind about that, Mr. Huffman," Judith responds. Extending one hand for me to take and clasp: it is cool and unclammy. Fast-drying, perhaps.

"You," I inform her. "Not Murray."

"All righty then," she says, packing up her briefcase. Another smile bestowed and she departs, I intently watching her go—and turn, and glance back at me, before she disappears.

Oh, by damn. I'm in for it now.

"Judith Formi." Could she be the daughter of the firm? With that opalescent skintone? Maybe the Formis hail from northern Italy: Venice, Turin, Milan. But her finger also wore a gold band; must be a daughter-in-law. Unless she's retaining her maiden name for professional purposes. Either way, I still bet her husband's a wastrel.

How do I explain the Formi-Dable order to Gag? Say it wasn't given to Burgher but a pretty lady rep—and so whet Gag's appetite? Achieving Murray's aim in spite of myself?

More pressingly: do I take the 4:42 this afternoon? Give her a chance to connect Selfsame Huffman with the Goggling Busman? Then that double-bagged cat will leap out for sure—followed by the lien, the restraining order, the slap across my chops.

No. I'll funk it. For the time being. Catch the 3:12, get home early, try to make something out of that backward glance. Need to put it into a ladderable context. Maybe the Waking Lady bids the Bus of Fools farewell? To become a Breaking Lady—of samples, the ice, our hearts? So we haul the False Maria back to Rotwang's lab, wanting to exchange her for the backward-glancing Bona Fide—whom Old Beetlebrow, of course, wants to keep for himself.

Robot women. However precisely you calculate their capacities and applicabilities, they add up in the end to mighty cold comfort. With hearts two sizes too small, like bighaired Vicki in Chicago.

I don't fetish around with wooden simulacra. No problem letting my finished pieces go, be sold to others. Just keep a few exceptions to prove the rule: *Artificialities* of course, and *Gatherin' Stormin'* as a threshold marker, and *Plue Velvet* because Pluanne beseeched me not to part with it, and *Frieze-Frame* and *A Perfect Fit*...

...because I can lapse into sentimentality like any other sap.

*

Next morning I prepare to face the music. The meow, as it were, of that debugged cat. Taking along my Waning Gibbous zipper portfolio, big enough to carry an inch-thick bubblewrapped 18x24 panel. Plus my security gouge in a discreet cover pouch. No telling to what extent I might have to defend myself, before this day is through.

Hike up Green Creek Lane to Mesher Road and the Park 'n' Ride. Wait for the #104 for at least the three thousandth time. Here it comes. Get in line. Take a breath. Mount the steps. Turn and look—

—and she's *not there*.

It is to laugh.

All the tension, suspense, absurdly pounding pulse—and then that cross-aisle seat is occupied by a corpulent dropoff. I scan the other rows, down to the yakkety claque: nada. No Nodder. She might have cottoned onto the truth with that backward glance, and opted to avoid me in future.

Is that a pang I feel?

Is it of—RELIEF?

Friday. A sparse commute. Meager day at Selfsame too; few calls or deliveries. Catch up on paperwork. Mull over consequences. Am I being spared an aftermath, or denied closure? “Denied?” Who was blathering yesterday about letting finished pieces go?

Got to maintain the edge. First rule of thumb for a sculptor: always keep your tools razor-sharp. (Second rule: never test them with your thumb.)

So this afternoon I loiter around town for a couple of hours, chillin’ in the GC. Watching traffic pass on The Trail. Lugging my portfolio all the way down Augustus Street, then all the way up Julius.

But you know I think she was shady.

In the sense of a shady rest, that is. Forget about your cares, it is time to relax—on the 4:42. Which is punctual for once. Up 14th Street we chug. And pause. And chug. And pause. Taking on more passengers at each stop. They leave the sideways settee to me and my Waning Gibbous.

Till we reach Figure Eight Way.

Where my ghoulish neck cranes as we halt. As the door whuffs open. As in she comes. As her eyes catch mine. Face breaking ice, hearts, on through to the other side—
—into a diamondy smile.

I shift my portfolio off the settee, down behind my legs, and she settles her graceful self alongside me. Easy as that.

“It *is* you, isn’t it?” she asks.

I incline my head noncommittally.

An empty casserole rests upon her lap. Sharing space with the tote and purse and a light greeny-blue sweater over one arm. She used to wear violet on Fridays; this is “teal,” a color I’ve always found suspect because there was no teal Crayola when I was a kid. Above

a teal skirt is a blouse of white ruffles: not too shabby for Casual Friday. Above the ruffles she is translucent: a pearly-peach complexion, bright and clear.

“I was running a little late this morning. Had to finish my casserole for the office potluck. Did you look for me?”

Did she ask me that? Or was it *Do you make art too?*, with a nod at my Waning Gibbous?

Here goes nothing. Reach down. Unzip the portfolio. Extract an 8x10 glossy and present it to the lady. Whose head stops in mid-nod.

Inhalation. Long, deep, and swelling. (Ruffles have ridges.) Then:

“Ohhhh...” she breathes. “You did this?... Is it—me?”

“I hope you don’t mind.”

“But how...?”

“I studied you from afar. As they say.”

Blink—blink. “Well... I don’t know what to think.”

“About the sculpture?”

“No, it’s beautiful. Where is it? Do you have it?”

“It’s at the Crouching Gallery, Jackdaw Square. In the process of being sold.”

Her midnight blues fly up, flash over: very much the Young Empress. “Well, I would’ve appreciated a chance to buy it!”

Now—maintain your edge. Worse comes to worst, throw yourself on the security gouge and die dramatically at her teal-shod feet. No, in her teal-covered lap: with a smile on your face. (Or, with your luck, an empty casserole.)

“My dealer’s price was rather high.”

“How—?”

“Four figures.”

And there we have it: full-blown hollowing round her sockets.

“No fooling? Well I guess I couldn’t’ve, then...”

“But,” I say hastily, “I’d like to do others. With your permission. I wanted to ask you before. But was afraid you’d say no. And then—evaporate on me, or something.”

“Um... more like this?”

“All sorts. Relief panels, in-the-rounds, I carve many kinds of wood—here are some slides and a viewer if you’d care to” (SHUT UP SHUT UP ALREADY) “see cherry and walnut and basswood and mahogany and” (I’M GETTING OUT THE GOUGE I SWEAR) “that’s apple pear oak to a lesser extent and this” (WHAT ARE YOU DOING PUT THAT AWAY) “was an experiment in ebony—”

“Ohhhh...” she goes again. Then, reading the caption: “*Lubaba in a Gym Suit.*”

Actually that one isn’t risqué: my hand is wiser than my brain or tongue. “Lubaba” was my designation for Pluanne’s body wearing LaQuita’s head—at Pluanne’s insistence. Only in *Plue Velvet* does she wear her own.

“Oops,” says Judith.

“What?”

““H. Huffman.””

“Yes?”

“I forgot to ask your first name yesterday. What does the ‘H.’ stand for?”

“The eighth letter of the alphabet.”

Routine answer to the old, old question. Judith’s expression goes from *oops* to *oh really?* with a ladylike moue.

Then a clatter of glass lid on her lap casserole. *Thunka thunkity thunk* and we are on the Zerfall offramp.

“My stop,” I say.

“Ohhhh!” goes Judith, this time distressedly. “Um—would you like some ice cream?” I almost expect her to produce a full cone from her tote but she adds, “There’s a place I go. In Knotts.”

I stay on the bus. Soon we are back on the Interstate, heading north toward ice cream. “Perhaps you’ll allow me to treat you?”

“Well, I guess you can afford it,” says Judith, handing over my slides and viewer after a last peek at *Lubaba*. “These sculptures of yours, they’re at a gallery downtown?”

“Some.”

“I’d love to see them for real. I mean, the real ones. Do you sell a lot?”

“My dealer sells them—sometimes. Two this year, so far. Enough to keep me working at Selfsame.”

“Oh. But you said four figures—”

“My dealer keeps 50% of that. Gives me my half a few weeks afterward.”

“Oh,” she says. Holding the glossy of *The Mute Commute*: “May I keep this?”

“Be my guest.”

She puts it carefully into her shoulderbag. “If I—oh, we’re here.”

We stand together and realize simultaneously that Judith, in her teal heels, is at least three inches taller than me. Unnoticed at the store, due to my ungentlemanly seatkeeping.

“Oh,” she goes once more. Quietly. One of *those*, I begin to assume—but then she makes an apologetic face, as though embarrassed at being “so tall.” With her sweater off, I can see for the first time how long-waisted she is; her height wasn’t so obvious before, since she doesn’t have Tall Chick thighbones. In fact (I will later discover) her legs are disproportionately short for a five-foot-niner. It’s her torso that’s elongated, and her arms, so that sleeves seldom meet her wrists and she compensates with bracelets.

“Can I take your—” I say, indicating the casserole.

“Thanks, I’ve got it. Don’t forget your—” nodding at my portfolio. Which I was on the verge of leaving behind.

I follow her off the bus and into the Knotts Park ‘n’ Ride, as if we did this every Friday. Her teal skirt zips up the back, describing an upside-down question mark. Or the outer edge of a very well-balanced pendulum.

“Oh gee!” she says, stopping short. “This isn’t going to make it hard for you, is it? To get home, I mean? Is your car in Zerfall?... You walk to Green Creek Lane? Oh good, that’s not far, I can drive you there. I don’t mind short drives on regular streets. I just can’t stand freeways, especially at rush hour. That’s why I like taking the bus... Oh look, my car’s telling you hello.”

Smiling at the H on an aqua Honda Civic. In whose trunk we load most of her baggage and my portfolio. I take the shotgun seat; she gets behind the wheel with lissome ease. Key in ignition, radio comes on: a “smooth jazz” station. Bit too homogenized for my taste, but acceptable; Judith turns it down but not off.

“I always indulge myself on Fridays,” she says, “and *only* on Fridays. Then I work out extra hard on Saturdays, to make up for it.”

This going for ice cream—is she being professionally friendly? It’s a deplorable practice when the vendor pays, much abused by bribing Burghers and bought-off Gags. Good thing I offered to treat.

I ask about her job. She responds readily. New to field work, doesn’t think she’ll like it much, prefers being an inside sales rep providing customer service over the phone, but needs to bolster her résumé. “Between you and me, they’re sort of treading water.” If Formi-Dable goes under, Judith will be left with less-than-watertight references, yet she doesn’t feel ready to abandon ship. Which is why she’s willing to work with scurvy Murray and get some field experience, hoping F-D will stay afloat long enough for Judith to earn her sea legs and some commissions.

(Deft at keeping her metaphors unmixed, at least.)

“Sales isn’t really my line, anyway.”

“But the family business...?”

“In-law,” says Judith. Coolly.

Aha. Presume she’d rather be a seafarer. Can picture her piloting a sailboat. Be a challenge to carve, though, all that spume and windflap. Or maybe not: she drives the Honda rather slowly, permitting other cars to pull ahead of us. Especially on Mesher Road, which in Zerfall is given over to decaying stripmall. Up here in Knotts it clings to homespun simplicity, complete with a Malt Shoppe straight out of *Pleasantville*. Near it Judith parallel parks with an extremity of care; I’m asked to get out and check our space between bumpers, fore and aft.

The Malt Shoppe is not crowded, despite the Friday afternoon. People come in, buy ice cream in assorted modes, take it outside to eat or drink. Judith chooses a peach smoothie—no surprise there—and I order a butterscotch shake, mumbling “Hold the butter.” We take a corner booth and she addresses herself to the smoothie straw, hollowing her cheeks. Then draws another long deep swell of a breath.

“Good?”

“Very. How’s your shake?”

Cold and glutinous. “Makes a nice change. You live in Knotts?”

“Oh yes.” (Smoothie straw. Pat of lips with napkin.) “I don’t eat out much, though. Feels so awkward, being in a restaurant by myself.” (Straw again. Long silent slurp.) “I mean *this* is okay, ice cream on Fridays. It’s just...” (Straw.)

“Not lived here long?”

(Pat of lips.) “I moved up here in January. From Trey Hills.”

“Chic.”

(Half a smile: the upper lip alone.) “Yes. But it was time for me to stand on my own two feet again.” (Straw.)

My turn to nod. Has she *divorced* Mr. Bluff? Probably not: still wearing his rings. Walked out on the bastard, then? Maybe it’s a trial separation—detaching herself, step by step. From F-D employment as well. Looking for something new.

I take out my Bruynzeel pencil, flip over a Malt Shoppe promo card, and begin to sketch her.

(Splutter straw aside.) “Oh no, my *HAIR!* and I’ve been eating ice cream!—”

“This isn’t a camera.”

“—thank goodness! No, not here—”

“Please. Just as you are.”

She adjusts wiry strands of sugar maple, eyes darting left and right. No one gives us any heed. And gradually the Young Empress resurfaces before me.

I’ve memorized enough of her bone structure that I can concentrate on close-up aspects. Small pink heartshaped earrings. Tints adroitly painted round her midnight blues, applied to their twitching lashes. A tiny mark, too minute to qualify as a freckle, upon the tip of her nose. That touch of teeth, showing no peach residue: very white, very straight.

“Excuse my asking,” I say, “but do you sometimes wear a retainer on the bus?”

“Um—”

“Sorry.”

“No, it’s just—I didn’t know if I could talk, while you’re... um, no: it’s what they call a ‘night guard,’ I kind of clench my teeth when I sleep, even just a nap, and my dentist says without a night guard I’d grind them down to nothing...”

A sketch in every sense of the word. Yet it apprehends her essence with minimal squiggles and smudges. As with Stormin', as with the best of them, the Dutch charcoal takes to her like lotion on a sunbather. Rendering her elegance, her refinement, in crumbly porous carbon on the back of a cardboard booth promo.

I pivot it for her to see.

And again we get that ocular indentation. Like twisting a spigot: do X, and her sockets hollow; do Y, and they replenish.

She takes the card from me, stares down at it, clears her throat.

"I guess you're not kidding."

"About—?"

"When you say you make art. And you did it so fast. I would give anything if... if I could see *this*... when I look in a mirror."

"Like I said, I would very much like to sculpt you. Properly."

Her expression reverts to *oh really?* Tossing that hair she was so worried about a second ago. "I suppose you expect me to pose all bare for you."

"Never—"

"—what??—"

"—any way that would make you uncomfortable."

"Oh."

"You'll only sit well if you feel at ease."

"Oh. I guess that makes sense..."

"And at the standard modeling rate, of course," I add. (Having learned long ago not to use words like "pay" or "money," till the prospect herself utters them.)

Judith has gone as pink as her earrings. "I think I have a good face," she blurts. "When I was in college they asked me to do a little modeling—of clothes, on a runway—but I wasn't very photogenic. I mean they all said I *looked* fine, 'like a cover girl'—you just couldn't tell from the pictures. They made me look as if I were sort of, well, *glazed*—but I'm not really like that. Except in pictures. Am I making any sense?"

"Of course. But I don't use cameras."

"What about all those slides and things?"

“The gallery provides those.”

Her eyes look into mine. Then back down at the promo-sketch. “Aitch?”

“Yes?”

“You forgot to sign this.”

I print *COVER LADY (AFTER EATING ICE CREAM)* on the card, plus my *H. Huffman* hieroglyph.

“Thank you,” she murmurs. “I’ll have to find just the right frame for it. Oh! How can I keep it from—?”

“Needs fixative. Any in your sample case?”

“It’s at work. It’s not really mine, I just borrow it for field calls. So how—?”

The sketch gets slid painstakingly between the pages of a *Swimming World* magazine in Judith’s tote bag, and we head on out. Where I’m lost in wonder at the sight of her lilting athletic gait. Yes, a swimmer: that would account for the sturdy shapely legs, the limber stride, the upright carriage and high firm curvature. Maybe there’s a bathing suit under that business outfit; glistening spandex concealed by teal. If we were to go to the riverside, lose the shoes and skirt and ruffly blouse, set her gazing out o’er the Ipsissima as if to find a boat beneath a willow left afloat—

—we could outfrenchlieutenant John Fowles *and* Alfred Lord Tennyson.

As she starts the car I ask what her line really is, if not sales.

“*Je voudrais enseigner le français.*”

“I would like’... something French?”

“To teach it. I’m a total Francophile.”

She got her bachelor’s degree in education and wants to go back to school, earn her master’s, teach French on a secondary level, maybe coach the girls’s swim team on the side. Just as soon as she can afford the tuition. Hence her field sales and hope for commissions—if Formi-Dable doesn’t go belly-up too soon.

“Um... how much *is* the standard modeling rate?” she wants to know.

“Fifty an hour.”

“*Dollars?* For real?”

“With contracts, releases, receipts.”

“Gosh! Well then. If I *did* model for you—”

“—comfortably—”

“—‘comfortably’—would other people be there? Could I, um, bring my roommate?”

“Sure. Why not?”

(Roommate! Didn’t she say she didn’t mind being on her own?)

The smooth jazz station starts playing Sarah McLachlan’s “Possession,” and “Oh I love this song!” cries Judith. Turning it up, humming along with the soaring chorus: *I’ll take your breath away...*

Either she hasn’t heard this was inspired by an obsessed stalker, or she’s yanking my chain a little.

I would grant her that privilege.

But keep an eye peeled for traps and snares.

We turn onto Green Creek Lane. All the branches on all the trees are in bloom and I find it an agreeable vista. But Judith, as I direct her into the Wilsons’s gravel drive, appears to be getting unnerved. “Oh,” she says in a tight voice around a dry swallow, “is this where you live?”

For crying out loud, it’s an ordinary three-truck garage—not some terrorist’s lair or portal to Hell. No model-bodies are buried beneath the ash trees (that I’m aware of).

“Yes. That’s my studio up there. It’s artier inside.”

Pop goes the trunk latch. I take that as my cue to get out, retrieve my portfolio, express enjoyment of the ice cream and our opportunity to chat.

“It was fun,” says Judith. “And, um, about the—I’m not promising anything—need to think it over—but *will* let you know.”

From the Waning Gibbous I pluck a Crouching Gallery flyer. Scribble my number on a corner, hand it in through the car window. Do I ask for hers in return? Not yet. Beware of prematurity. She nods at the flyer, smiles out at me, gives a little wave and drives off. Sitting very straight and oh so by damn lovely.

*

That night I scour the bathroom, anticipating what the future might hold. Containing the urge to hone and strop every chisel in the toolrack. Even if a session does take place,

what are the odds it could pan out as well as the first one with Stormin', or Josephine, or—

Miranda Parales. Who merengue'd her way through Selfsame one remarkable summer, almost a decade ago. Still living at home, freshly graduated from high school, now attending a Barbizon be-a-model-or-just-look-like-one factory. Confident that wealth, fame, and sophistication would all soon be hers. Which might have been more credible had she not looked like a cartoon *gatita*, all frisk and pounce and scamper.

When I trained Miranda on handling merchandise her attention never wandered, since it was wholly devoted to the half-dozen soap operas she videotaped by day, caught up on at night, and could prattle about by the hour. If I did manage to get her thinking about art supplies, she would declaim "*We're all out of foamboard!!*" or "*I can't find any more gesso!!*" as though it meant the family hacienda was threatened with foreclosure.

Big Gag stopped by to scope out Miranda from bottom to top (his idea of supervision) and warn her to "Watch out for this one—he'll try to *sculpt* ya."

That was all she needed to hear. Ohmygaw! Was it true? Did I really make statues of people? How soon would I want her to pose for me? Why hadn't we got started yet? Wasn't I *ever* going to ask her? (Pout, stomp, flounce.)

As with any *gatita*, the impulse was to dangle the yarn just out of tantalized reach. For a week I scratched my chin and went "Hmmm..." while Miranda steamed and fumed and hissed. What! Did I find something wrong with her face or her bod, that I didn't think them *worthy* of sculpting? Or was it that she acted too giddy, too skittish, when I *knew* she would try her very VERY best to do exactly what I wanted. (Batting moist brown eyes the color of just-oiled butternut.)

On Saturday I borrowed a truck from Mr. Wilson, drove down to Selfsame, and told Miranda her hour had come. She jumped and clapped and grabbed her backpack, not bothering to time out. No one saw her leave, or scramble into the pickup, or take off with me. Only when we hit the Interstate did she think to ask where I was taking her.

"To my studio."

"Where's that?"

"In Zerfall."

"Where's *that*?"

Cellphones were not yet prevalent and Miranda didn't have one. Her expression turned anxious, then dismayed, then woeful. By the time I parked (unseen) in the Wilson garage, she seemed petrified—except for her Princess Jasmine T-shirt, which was all aflutter.

No resistance to my taking her hand. Or tugging her out of the truck. Or in and up the stairs, Miranda moving like a sleepwalker and making not a sound. All alone with me in my home, her whereabouts unknown.

I don't think I'm more carnivorous than the next man.

But it did have a powerful effect on my imagination.

Put her in an open doorway, standing aghast at what she sees (the viewer). Or down upon her knees, bending aghast over some shattered object that had been her heart's delight. Or huddling naked in the shower stall under a stark cold drizzle, transfixed by the ghastly feeling she's being *watched*—

—as we maintain the edge—

—but contain the urge.

My lips an inch from her ear as I said, "Drink?"

"Wha-a-a-at?"

"Looks like you could use a drink. Pour you some wine?"

She leaped back against the nearest wall, clutching it with outspread arms and tragic gasp. To this day I don't know whether Miranda was genuinely frightened or engaged in bosom-heaving melodrama. Now he's trying to *drug* me so he can *take* me and *have* me! O, how can I avoid such a fate? O, how might I effect my escape?

"Oh no thanks not really thirsty wow forgot to let my mom know where I am mind if I use your *phone*—" Frantic dialing. "*¡Yoly! ¿Dónde está Mamacita? ... AIEEEE!! what are you DOING??*"

This last wailed into my face as she caught me quickdrawing hers.

I showed her the sketchpad, on which I had exaggerated her prettiness till it outshone even Jasmine's cartoon allure.

Over the phone: "*Randa? Randa!*"

"Call you later," she told Yoly.

Hanging up to fling herself around in glamour-style stances. Which she couldn't or wouldn't hold long enough for me to do anything with, even when I pushed her into a chair and told her to just sit still. Fresh pouts and flounces: why had I practically KIDNAPPED her if I found her so hopeless, so unbearable? Why wasn't I taking pictures of her, like these—

—producing from her backpack assorted Barbizonery. Most of which had already been thrust under my nose over the past week. But here was one I hadn't seen before: a spectacular rear view of Miranda in mosquito-net negligée and rubber-band thong, soulfully regarding her frontal charms in a full-length mirror.

“Ohmygaw...”

“My sister took that in our bedroom,” said Miranda, pouring herself some wine.

“Nice, hunh? You can't see the flash in the mirror or anything.”

This bodacious image I replicated on a kiln-dried butternut panel: *El Espejo de Miranda*. It popped the eyes of most everyone who saw it. I received commissions for a dozen duplicates, making it my most lucrative piece then and still. The financial side got very complicated and bilingual, with Geraldine and Miranda's Mamacita haggling over compensation for Yoly as the source's photographer, and a bonus for Miranda who turned it into a ticket to L.A. Last I heard, she was appearing in a Spanish-language soap opera on Univision. Good for her.

So that escapade turned out well for the both of us. My imagination has run riot on similar occasions, not always as fortunately. Once even involving a shower stall—

—never mind.

Dream instead of Miranda tonight. Despite my having gotten jaded on her sweet young *tetas y nalgas*, by carving them over and over again. Like gorging nonstop on caramel flan.

(Not a thing you should do just before going to bed.)

Lights out. Hit the hay. Count shavings to get to sleep. One, two, pare with a view. Three, four, shear it some more...

(Kiln-dried to kill the bugs. Never told her that. Butternut's often infested, full of wormholes. Left by butterfly larvae? Heaving and fluttering?...)

Just as I drift off, Rotwang jostles my memory.

With a newspaper squib from a couple years ago: FORMI-DABLE HEIR KILLED.

Took note of it then as a minor happenstance. Another example of F-D's bad luck.

Can't recall how the guy died, except that it was in an accident of some kind.

4

Back and Forth

Answer the phone is my wake-up call next morning. At 7:15 on a Saturday—but I’m off the futon before the phone’s fourth ring.

“Did I wake you?”

“No, no...”

“This is Judy, by the way. Judith, I mean. Judith Formi—”

“Yes, yes...”

“You’re sure I didn’t wake you?”

“No, no...”

“Well I’ve decided I want to do this. If you still want me to.”

“Certainly, certainly... Er, would today—?”

“Um, sure. How soon—?”

“Anytime.”

“Maybe about ten? Is that too early?”

“Not at all.”

“Okay then. Do you need me to, um, wear anything in particular?”

“Whatever you like.”

“Oh. All righty. I’ll be there around ten. Bye now.”

She hangs up the phone, gets out of bed, pulls a sheer lace nightie over her head—
—*damn it*. She’s going to take one look at your old-goatishness and run like a...
whatever goats prey upon. Children’s nannies in Tin Can Alley.

Now then. Less than three hours to get ready. I'm not in the habit of shaving on Saturday or splashing on Skin Bracer, but time enough to do both. And air out the place. And camouflage the futon with magazines, so it appears more like a large low coffee table.

By 9:30 I am down in the yard, searching for something floral to help put her at ease. Not from Mrs. Wilson's resurrected garden, but expendably wild—such as these small plum-colored items I find under a shrub, free for the picking.

Scrunch of tires on gravel. A car door opens and closes. I stay oblivious, Winston Smith among the bluebells.

"Are those supposed to be for me?"

"Oh hello. For your posing." I rise as a younger man might, without an effort, and hand her the purplettes.

She is all by herself. Wearing a headscarf (though it's not windy) and sunglasses (though there's no glare). She buries her nose in the plumsprigs, then holds the bunch against her bosom. "Grape hyacinths—how'd you guess? I didn't throw this on till the last minute."

Meaning her modestly V-necked top, which is grapish-colored. Throw it on, pull it off, go without—wrench my mind away.

"Didn't bring your roommate?"

"What?" she asks, glancing furtively around. "Oh! Sorry, I fibbed about that. I do have a cat, though... Would it be all right if we go on up?"

"After you," I insist. She climbs my stairs; I follow. Never seen her in slacks before. They are black and becoming and could be called snugs.

Judith halts to peer over the balustrade. What does she see? No flayed skin suit on a hanger; no mummified Mrs. McRale in a chair. Just a studio/apartment. Two more steps, three, and she is inside it.

"You live here? On your own?"

"Me and my artwork. Make yourself comfortable."

She twitters, removes the scarf and sunglasses, stuffs them in her purse—and halts again, taken aback by what's atop my "media center." Oh shit! oh *shit!* doomed before we start! Hadn't even occurred to me to hide the damn things. Now she'll turn and dodge and

run downstairs like a—

“You did these?” She steps away from me... and closer to them. “What’re they called?”

“Er, this one’s *A Perfect Fit*, and that’s *Plue Velvet*. I didn’t make the little cowlmask it’s wearing. Contribution from the model.”

“She’s so cute,” says Judith. “Or maybe cute’s not the right word, but... These are yours too? She’s pretty,” to *Gatherin’ Stormin’*; “She’s scary,” to *Frieze-Frame*; and “Goodness!” at *Artificialities*. Or at all the racked knives and gouges below it. She spies the bathroom—raises brows at me for clearance—and excuses herself behind its door.

At least I got it minty-fresh for her. And she’ll have to come back sooner or later; there’s no window to elope through. I feed an instrumental into the CD player (Ahmad Jamal ought to be “smooth” enough) and adjust the blinds for improved lighting. Judith returns, one hand gripping her purse, the other her hyacinths. Marching up to announce: “In case you haven’t noticed I’m a bit nervous about, about...”

“About...?”

“Posing. For you. I mean, deliberately. I might be too jumpy to do well. Maybe you’ll wish you’d stuck to, um, ‘studying me from afar’—”

“Have a seat,” I tell her, presenting the model’s stool. “Can I take your bag?”

“Oh no I’ve got it. That is I’d like to hold onto it. If it won’t be in the way.”

“We’ll see. Glass of water? Seltzer? Juice?”

“Oh I’d love some orange juice if it’s no trouble and you have any.”

When I return with the juice I find her bag on the floor beside the stool, and both hands clutching the purplettes. I set the glass on a taboret at her elbow, with a paper towel for patting lips with. She thanks me but doesn’t touch the juice or even look at it.

“Do you feel ready to start?”

Rigidly vertical: “Oh sure. I hope so. Do I look okay?”

“Better than okay.”

“What... do I do?”

“Sit there and try not to move too much. Just like yesterday at the Malt Shoppe, but for longer. More detail.”

“Um, longer? I have a little trouble sitting still too long at a time.”

Ants in your pants? I don’t ask aloud. “You’re an active person?”

“Well I try to be. But I need to keep stretching pretty often. Will that be a—?”

“Are we talking every couple of minutes, or—?”

“Oh no, more like ten or fifteen.”

“Not a problem.” (Unexpected bonus: we get to watch her stretch.) “How do you manage on the bus?”

She looks disconcerted, then amused. “There’s lots of different stretches, you know. Some you can do without lunging all over.”

Lady-lunges. That figures. I take up the sketchboard, a sheet of Strathmore Rose Gray already clipped to it, and assume my position opposite Judith. Who offers a conventional smily expression. I see what she means about looking “glazed” in photos. The blame can’t all be laid on the camera lens.

Start outlining her overall ABC: attitude, bearing, contours. Using Conté crayons today, better than charcoal at approximating fleshtones and woodgrains. For a moment I wish I had skill with liquid media, could paint her on canvas in a full spectrum of hues. But my expertise is limited to shades of earth and ash. Sanguine, bistre, and white for highlights.

“Can we talk? While I pose?”

“Till I get to the mouth. I’ll tell you when.”

Her fingers emerge and remerge among the plumsprigs. “Oh. Well now. My name is Judith Formi, you know that already, but I was born a Dahl—”

“A—?”

“D.A.H.L. Like the *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* writer.”

Or the Dahls of Walse Falls, Minnesota, upstate from the Twin Cities and west of Duluth. Half the family’s German Catholics and half Scandinavian Lutherans, with sniping between the two at holiday get-togethers but no blood spilled. Dad manages sporting goods for Sears, Mom sells dream houses for Century 21, Judith is the youngest child and only girl, meaning she always got a bedroom of her own while her six brothers had to double up, a fact of life taken in stride by everyone except second-youngest Rudy who’s had it in for Judith since her birth which will be twenty-six years ago next month so you’d think Rudy

would've gotten over it by now but he hasn't changed a lick no matter what their mother might think—

“The mouth.”

“Oh,” she says, and closes it.

“Just for a minute,” I add. Actually I am nowhere near the mouth, but I could almost hear her heart pounding. Try as she might to drown it out.

I move around with the sketchboard, studying her from various perspectives while she catches her breath. And never takes her eyes off me. Their sockets begin to manifest themselves, yet I protract our first session till the sanguine basics are laid down. Best to test the lady's stamina right at the start. But a shame to make her succumb to the fidgets too soon; so I call our first break.

“*Whew!*” goes Judith. “I never thought sitting still could be so strenuous.” She stands and bends forward, arms extended toward the floor—yeedge! is she blacking out on me? No, she's rolling back up, vertebra by vertebra. Still holding the purplettes as she lifts her arms above her head. S-t-r-e-t-c-h-ing to the left, then to the right, then back to center with another long! deep! swelling inhalation, and concluding with an “Ahhhh...”

Thunka thunkity thunk pounds my heart.

“That one's called the full-body reach-up,” says Judith. Who seems to have shed a few jitters. She quaffs her glass of OJ, pats her lips and smiles: glistening rather than glazed.

How many times can I hope to have her sit for me? stand for me? stretch, curl, kneel, lie? She clearly wants (but does not ask) to see what I've done so far, but no time now; back to her pose. And, yes! she resumes it exactly—same headset, mouthset, flowerclasp.

I replace Ahmad Jamal in the CD player with Stan Getz and suggest Judith try concentrating on something “peaceable.”

“The cool-blue-ocean sort of thing?”

“Sure, why not?”

Bistre now, a darker overlay to strengthen and solidify our design. Reinforce dimensions: *stroke stroke stroke blend stroke stroke stroke blend*. Or rather: *skritch skritch skritch thpppp*. Either way it's a matter of bearing down with a steady hand, not too heavily, as we study her values. Explore her composition. Feel a sense of—what? Her Aliceness?

“Elegance” sounds too affected. “Refinement” is done to petroleum. Maybe “grace” is the word. Or “cool,” as in that blue ocean she’s concentrating on.

Crystal clear ocean.

Clear? Stan Getz counters with “Serenade in Blue.” Cool jazz, like a dip in a pool on a hot summer day. Immersed or ashore, we can *learn from the sea*. Straight-out, no surrealism; just *be true to the tide*.

(In a manner of speaking.)

I’ll never pass muster with the Thought Police. But I can, on occasion, tune in and tap into. If I bear down with a steady brain. Open up those inner ears. Underhear what goes unspoken. Even as the bistre flies across the paper, bringing subtle nuances along with full-body totality, so too can we catch:

Aye Calypso! so long and so well!

(Oh for crying out loud.)

John Denver and White Linen and “No fooling?” An old-fashioned girl, all righty.

I begin filling in her face—smaller strokes, slighter blends—and she focuses her midnight gaze upon me. Does this feel like I’m capturing more than her looks in more than a likeness?

“It Never Entered My Mind,” comments Mr. Getz’s cool sax.

Skritch skritch skritch thpppp.

Now she does begin to fidget and I leave off work almost at once. A few more strokes to the brow, till a furrow appears on her own; then I lay down my Conté.

CLANK goes something as Judith hops to her feet.

“What was that?”

“Nothing, that’s nothing,” she murmurs. Scooping a small object off the floor and hurrying into the bathroom.

Now what? Some sort of *day* guard?

Good guess as it turns out, Judith returning with reddened face and outstretched arm to aim a vial of pepper spray at me—

No, just to show it, before putting the vial in her purse. “Sorry. I didn’t know what to expect. In fact I still don’t, not really. Could I take a little peek—?”

“Not yet,” I tell her, turning the sketchboard away. “One more session and it ought to be done.”

“Is it going okay? Or shouldn’t I ask, is that bad luck? I concentrated the best I could. I was wondering something... is this supposed to be your, um, muse?”

She is staring unerringly at *A Perfect Fit*. My first sculpture in wood after abandoning clay. Part Marcello’s *Pythia* from the Paris Opera; part Bernini’s *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*; part Mel Ramos pop-art pin-up. A nearly nude girl frozen in midwrithe, couched on a Delphic tripod in the form of an open hand. Would you call it oracular? Or simply obscene, the girl barely in her teens (as was I at the time) with hair in a ponytail and “Friday” on her panties?

“That is the spirit of the first girl you ever kiss.”

Audible quiver from Judith. “What was she like?”

“She committed suicide seven years later. I don’t think as a direct result.”

Appalled stare from Judith. “You’re kidding!”

“They said she left a note so long it was more like a suicide novel.”

“Oh, that is so sad.” Reaching out to lay a cool hand on my arm. “I’m so sorry...”

“It’s because of her that I became a sculptor.” (More or less.)

Nod nod nod goes Judith, looking pensive. She lets go of my arm, returns to her stool. “Come on, finish me.”

I have her regroup the plumsprigs (minus the pepper spray) and move a foot or so to the left, following the sun. Now for the close work, the fine detail. Facial features. The mouth whose teeth she clenches in her sleep; the midnight blues in their remarkable sockets. White Conté now, for picking out highlights. Reflectivity. An image created by my hand in alignment with my eye, transcending its arrangement of laid-on tones and shades.

Good as the real thing? Irrelevant.

She is real; it is real. As it breathes, so does she.

I beckon Judith to the sketchboard. She comes by my side to see the finished work.

And the look she gives it, plus the one she gives me directly afterward, are two of the dozen or so things I intend taking with me to my coffin.

I give the sketch a sparse coating of matte fixative and think this is all I'm going to get today. But Judith has other ideas.

"I suppose you've seen a lot of backs—on your models—as an artist, I mean. Would you mind taking a look at mine?"

Wheeling around, she draws up the purple top as far as her latissimi dorsi. Exposing a long-waisted line of spine: now it's a cleft, now a row of little knobs as she darts a glance over her shoulder. Anxious, as if afraid I might produce a cat-o'-nine-tails. The top hikes up further, revealing a band of snow-white lycra with an innocent laundry tag near its clasp. Unlike the lowriding Vietnamesettes, there's no air of flirt or tease about this; Judith seems in deadly earnest.

"Er, it's a very nice back. Never seen a finer."

Judith stands there motionless. "You wouldn't be fooling me?"

"Well—what I can see of it, at least."

"Could you... could you make me look as good from the back as you did with my face?"

"If you'll allow me."

"Now? Will you do it now?"

"If you'll—" (I mime unsnapping and destrapping.)

"Oh," says Judith. "Um. I'm sorry, but I have to ask this. Promise you won't—grab me, or anything?"

"Honor bright," I say. "I'll just step into the other room. Call out when you're ready. Er, would you like the blinds lowered?"

"Won't you need the light to draw me by? Better than using lamps?"

"Probably."

"It's all right then," she twitters.

In the bathroom I stare at the mirror, yank at an earlobe: ow! Apparently awake. Make good use of the toilet, then; put yourself right.

"I'm ready... I think."

She faces away from me, astraddle a reversed chair. Her front is firmly covered with both arms folded over doffed V-neck and hidden cuppage. But her back—

Forty-eight hours ago she was selling me snappable brush markers, while I tried not to gape too openly up or down her powder blue ensemble. Two days later, here's Lady Alice: one-quarter naked in my studio/apartment. Must be a dream. A flashback reverie.

"I can't believe I'm doing this," she sighs.

If you'd rather back out, I nearly reply. "If you'd rather not—"

"Yes I would!... It's just that no one I know would believe it either. But I'm going through with it."

Not much in the way of tanlines; she must do her swimming indoors. The lycra's left faint pink stripes across her susceptible flesh. Photographers call such tracemarks unsightly. I find them humanizing—in a *good* way, if the flesh is good; and hers is Better Than Okay. A back laid bare from nape to waist: demurely muscular, tautly exquisite. With Judith waiting for me to validate it artistically.

"Have you started yet?"

"Look at me, please—"

"No I'm not turning around!—"

"Over your shoulder, like before."

She complies, ready to misinterpret whatever I might have in mind.

"More in profile. As if you're keeping half an eye on me."

The *oh really?* moue. Damn, yes! with her head at precisely the right angle, nose and chin and lashes finely displayed—

"Keep doing that!"

"What?"

"That! Hold it as long as you can!"

She does but it is useless; I haven't prepared the sketchboard or brought out fresh Contés. And so off-balance is this dream that I can only stumble and blunder and spill.

"Aitch...? I'm getting a bit—"

Tremulous with effort. I apologize, have her take a prolonged breather, or what passes for one in our mutual dizzy spell. *Merrily merrily merrily merrily...*

"Um—could we have some more music, please? I've got something to tell you."

Oddly put, in a voice sounding far from comfortable.

“Something hard to say?”

“Sort of, yes...”

Music to tell me something sort of hard to say by. That would be Miles Davis: *Kind of Blue*. Pop it into the player. Pick up the sketchboard. And as we ease into the first notes of “So What,” I start to draw and Judith starts to talk.

Youngest of seven, the only girl, the Little Princess of Walse Falls, not spoiled but admittedly indulged all through childhood. Born with a good face and just kept blossoming. Grew tall quickly but never gawky, never awkward; loved shooting hoops with her boisterous big brothers. Volleyball, racquetball, any sport that involved leaping and jumping. Meanwhile everyone said here was a future fashion model: look at that face, those eyes, those legs, that form. Don’t slump, dear. Stop slouching.

At thirteen she was diagnosed with scoliosis: curvature of the spine. Ordered to wear a back brace that would correct the crookedness... in three or four years.

Skritch skritch skritch thpppp.

That night in bed she turned her good face to the cold wall and cursed God, beseeching death to take her swiftly.

It wasn’t that she was vain or conceited; just an eighth-grade girl who had a horror of deformity. Her brother Rudy’d tricked her once into looking at pictures of circus freaks, and the memory still gives her teeth-grinding nightmares. Now at thirteen she was one of them, gooble-gabble! *one of them!* and thought she would crack up—HAD cracked up: become a gruesome misshapen basket case. Her mother said, “If only you hadn’t roughoused so much...” Her father lost all patience with her constant fantods. And Rudy cut unspeakable capers behind and about her back.

Then Sister Genevieve at Holy Visitation School stepped in as guardian angel. Gave her Judy Blume’s book *Deenie*, which might’ve been written expressly to rescue her. See here: even with a crooked spine—*temporarily* crooked—you could be a regular teenager. Still be considered pretty, attractive, desirable; dance and party and even make out (to a proper degree) instead of being a warped sideshow wallflower.

“I wrote Judy Blume a four-page fan letter, but never mailed it ‘cause I was afraid she might *publicize* it somehow, she and I having the same first name and all—and then *everyone*

would know about my back.”

Instead she started collecting scoliotic celebrities: Daryl Hannah, Isabella Rossellini, Sarah Michelle Gellar, Olympic gold medalist Janet Evans. Swimming became her passion, with Janet Evans as role model and Sister Genevieve as coach.

“We called her ‘Sister Geronimo’—she could do a triple somersault in a tuck position from a handstand.”

Swimming’s done unbraced, allowing Judith a chance (Sister G. didn’t quite say aloud) to have a bod and show it off. But her father didn’t count swimming as a “real” sport, however many ribbons and trophies she might bring home from meets. Her mother was dead set against it, saying she would rack up her spine and wind up in a wheelchair. And Rudy held his nose and blew repugnant bubbles.

That hectic little laugh. Then:

“When my husband—boyfriend he was at the time—first came up to Walse Falls to meet my family, he kicked Rudy’s rear end. I mean, *hard*. Because he’d heard about how Rudy hassled me when we were kids. So, *POW!* Right on the rear. Didn’t make the best impression on my folks... but that’s when I fell for him, once and for all. ‘My hero.’”

Her wastrel.

By now we’ve gone through multiple breathers, from *Kind of Blue* to *Miles Smiles* with *Nefertiti* standing by. So absorbed has Judith been in what she’s relating that she takes no notice of my using a stepladder to study her from above. Her unhooked Maidenform straps have gradually crept into view, like timid woodland creatures wanting to hear Snow White sing:

*Someday my spine won’t twist
‘Cept when I want it kissed—*

“Till then I was always Judi with an ‘i’ and a circle over it. But after I got married I insisted on Judith. *He* always called me ‘Joo’ or ‘Joo-girl.’ His idea of a joke.”

“Rudy’s?”

“No! Marco’s.”

Her hero, Marco Formi. Mr. Bluff. Asskicker R.I.P.

“Finished,” I tell her.

“What??” she goes with a leap and a jump, almost losing hold of her Maidenform.

“What are you doing on that ladder??”

“Finishing you,” I say, stepping down.

“Oh! Turn it around, turn it around!” she demands, meaning the sketchboard. Then after a quick backward glance: “Now *you* turn around, *you* turn around!” I do; she throws back on her top, then hastens beside me for a longer, closer look.

I saw nothing imperfect in the length of Judith’s spine. Her scapulae might in fact be a trifle irregular, but asymmetry has its share of allure. Of beauty tempered by remembrance of pain. She has yet to tell me about Chad the Cad, her first serious boyfriend at Holy Visitation, who got off on the back brace and dumped her when she was at last able to discard it; but that’s here too, prefigured.

I *have* grabbed Judith, despite my honor-bright pledge. The angle of her head recalls its turn to the wall. The oh-really? cast of her half-seen eye introduces the Young Empress of the #104: her misgivings, disquietude, latent majesty. And elegance. And refinement, which isn’t limited to oil and sugar. Refined and resilient: the rounded shoulders, the provocative spinal groove, the finesse of flank and loin. She is neither lean nor spare but willowy, deft with supple grace.

It’s a very nice back. And recognizable as the original.

Judith touches her sanguine dorsals with the extreme tip of one finger.

Then turns to me and wraps her long strong arms around my neck.

*

I don’t know how long we stand here enfolded. It feels like quite a while. Her rehammocked bosom fits very neatly into the gap left by my own sunken chest. And in her haste to dress she’s neglected to tug down her shirttail, leaving a lumbar curve uncovered for my hand to find. And touch. And admire. No amount of sanding could make a surface as smooth as this. It is soft, it is warm, it is firm, it is cool. And it occurs to me that she isn’t recoiling as I press her flesh—

—till an AAAGH rips through the studio.

I savor the aftereffect of Judith's convulsive parting squeeze, and do not follow her to the window.

"What *was* that??"

"A jaybird," I say.

"Gosh! I nearly—"

She reaches back, smooths down her top, hiding her peachy postern from further view. Or touchy-feel.

I call her over to the drafting table, where I've laid out a model's release and contract. First check a week from today. She reads these through, asks to borrow a pen (this from the F-D sales rep) and signs them *Judith Formi*.

"Formi..." she murmurs. "I just remembered. Tomorrow's Mother's Day."

"Ah," I say. "I suppose you won't be available for another sitting, then?"

"Tomorrow? I'm afraid not. I mean I'd love to, but I have to go to Trey Hills. It's hard for Sophia, my mother-in-law. My husband was—he didn't have any brothers or sisters."

Evidently I'm expected to know about Marco and his damned accident. I nod as though I understand.

"I'm not in mourning!" she adds abruptly. "They all think I am. My in-laws. My friends at work... I don't suppose you're Catholic, Aitch? I'm not much of one either, anymore. But still—"

She pokes a finger inside her V-neck, snags a silvery chain, and fishes up a crucifix pendant from between her breasts. (Lucky old Redeemer!) Chain, pendant, and a small silver disk are twiddled wryly à la Oliver Hardy.

"And he called you 'Joo?'"

"Oh, he thought that was hilarious."

"What about the other syllable?"

"Dith?"

"Dee."

"As in *Deenie*?" Sudden piercing harp-giggle: "Dee and Aitch, pure cane sugar!" Then a reversion to the Young Empress: "Just don't EVER call me 'Dee Formi.' Okay?"

"I promise."

We stand there a moment. "Well..." she says. "What happens now?"

"I'll start turning these sketches into a relief panel. We'll try some other poses when you can sit for me again."

"Can I please have the sketches when you're done? I'd like to hang them on a wall and stand next to them and point and tell everyone, *'That's me.'*"

"Would you like to go see your sculpture at my gallery? It's open till five."

"What, now? I was thinking, um, maybe we could... have a bite to eat?"

"That too," I say. "Downtown."

Since Judith doesn't like driving on the Interstate, I offer to take the wheel. She puts back on her shades and scarf as we leave the garage and climb into the Honda. "Don't laugh, but—could we please keep my modeling quiet? It's just—I'd rather the Formis not get wind of it, before I'm ready to leave F-D."

My lips, I tell her, are sealed. But for once in my life I want to keep talking. About the traffic heading south. Her Honda. My old Subaru. Mr. Wilson's least favorite truck. The disk sharing the chain with her crucifix: what does that signify?

She reels it up again, looks at it. "It's a holy medal. St. Judith the Anchorite. I was born on her feast day, June 29th. Sister Genevieve gave me this when I graduated from Visitation. Silver, you see." Judith was the school's perennial silver-medalist, always coming in second at swim meets. "*Big ones, statewide ones*—there's no shame in winning the silver! But try telling that to my dad."

To cheer her up I jabber about my Bronze Figleaf and the Cairney Academy FigFest, before stomping on the brake just before the familiar exit to Figure Eight Way. Must be baseball fans clogging the Interstate, en route to or from a Lucky Stiffs game.

On our right, to the west, we can glimpse the Cenotaph in Portal Park. Bringing to mind the Demortuis city anthem, "Empty Tomb Blues" by Boaz "Ruthless" Luther:

*They tell me that we'll meet again, somewhere up there in the sky
They tell me that we'll meet again, somewhere up there in the sky
All I know is that I didn't get a chance to say goodbye...*

Oh hell—I hope those lyrics aren’t running through Judith’s head too. I tell her my rubber mourning dove anecdote, but she stares out at the Cenotaph.

“I had a really good time there once,” she says.

We both fall silent for the rest of the trip.

There can be other good times. Let this day stay one of them.

Downtown. Jackdaw Square. Shoveler Street. Park and get out of the car.

Judith keeps starting to take my arm, then stopping herself—reaching for my elbow only to jerk her hand away. Nor does she remove her scarf or shades when we enter the gallery. Alice Incognita. Geraldine’s not here, but silent Ralph bids us wordless welcome as I usher Judith over to where *The Mute Commute* is showcased. Above its four-figure price tag and red SOLD sticker.

“Ohhhh,” she goes. “Ohhhh...”

Reaching all the way then. Taking my arm. Holding it tight with two cool hands.

*

Late that night back home, I have a few drinks to relish the events of the day. And savor the aftertaste of blackened spice.

I took my “suddenly ravenous” lady to Catfish Wharf on Strandline and we dined overlooking the river. Which sent breezes to ruffle Judith’s de-scarfed hair as I made her laugh with my Tiff Terrific story.

Tiffany Schloss was a knockout and knew it, having been blessed with deep cleavage and diva hauteur. She wanted to commission me to sculpt her in the grand manner, very much to her rigorous specifications. “You understand these will be nooods,” I was informed.

“You mean she wanted to pay *you* to—?” asked Judith.

“Yes, but then she’d own the finished pieces.”

“Really? How much did she offer?”

Well, that was just it. Tiffany’s offer was laughably small, approximately one-third of Geraldine’s counteroffer. “But these will be *nooods!*” Tiff kept reminding me. Why wasn’t I factoring in that singular privilege? I kept referring her back to Catapult Woman. Tiff was terrifically indignant, finally declaring that when her law student boyfriend passed the bar, our asses were going to be sued off.

(What I didn't tell Judith was why I asked Geraldine to be non-negotiable: Tiffany's confiding she was zaftig for two. And wanting her body commemorated before it blew up on her. I know pregnancy is supposed to make women "glow" and so forth, but I've seen only one definitely pregnant woman naked in my life and she did anything *but* glow—)

(—never mind.)

Harp-laughter from the trimbellied lady sitting with me at Catfish Wharf. A young widow, not in mourning, with no roommate except a cat. Which she tore herself away for: "I'd better get home. My kitty's waiting to be fed." And tomorrow was Mother's Day, and she was expected at Trey Hills.

So I drove us back to Zerfall, where Judith took the wheel to depart for Knotts. But not before telling me, "I had the most wonderful day."

Of her LIFE, perhaps?

Simmer down.

Yes, she enjoyed herself. But no more than if she'd been out with, say, a visiting uncle. One she decided didn't need to be pepper-sprayed. So have a last nightcap, then hit the solo sack—

The phone rings.

"Sorry I'm calling so late. But I couldn't get to sleep. Am I bothering you?"

"I don't think you could."

"Would you mind if maybe we talked a little?"

"Er, I'm not very articulate."

"You were fine this afternoon."

"Well, I could see who I was talking to."

"You're an artist," she says. "*Imagine* you can see me..."

5

Take My Breath Away

So I do. That night and for the next seven weeks. Fifty days in all.

*

My impulse is to call the new piece *Can You Read My Spine?*, but that doesn't jibe with the glint in the subject's half-seen eye. Which advises the viewer to *Watch Your Back*.

On Sunday I sort through my 18x24s. Walnut again? Mahogany? Red oak? What about that cherry block I didn't use for *The Mute Commute?*—no, this one's going to be a panel. Of pearwood: pinkish-brown tint, even-textured grain. Holds sharp detail and polishes to a high luster. "Incarnadine," in fact.

Right you are. Clamp the pear blank to the workbench. Transfer your design onto its face. Listen to Judith on the phone (sounding stressed) in the evening, home from visiting her in-laws. Listen to Judith on the bus (sounding keen) this morning and again (keener) in the afternoon: asking, coaxing, pleading to let her come watch me carve.

"You won't even know I'm there, I promise."

I express doubt about that. More likely I'll be looking at her instead of the panel, and chop my flesh instead of the wood.

"Oh, you," she pshaws. "Well then, I'll be right there to help patch you up."

I allow myself to be talked round. It is Monday the 13th of May, and the dream goes on. With us consuming two salads from Mina's before patting our lips, washing our hands, and heading for the workbench.

Actually what I *want* to do is have her pose again for me. Numerous times. But Geraldine's waiting for Another One, the 24th is less than two weeks off, and Saturday's sketch is perfectly applicable. So resist temptation, get this piece carved, and use it to induce more modeling. Lots more. Of more than just her spine.

Thus: Judith standing fully dressed in a pretty spring outfit, all agog at the end of the bench. And not distractingly, but as though she's always belonged there.

I take up the mallet and start to tap. Explaining how I outline the design with a V-trench to defend against splitting and chipping. Some would do this with a knife but I prefer the parting tool, which gives you greater control and just as clean an incision, so long as you keep its bevel-edges razor-sharp—

“—nnnnnnn—” goes Judith.

One hand not quite over her mouth. The other splayed where her navel would be if she weren't so fully dressed.

Damn that Mina's broccoli! But wait, her sockets are at it again, eyes widely riveted to the pearwood—I look down and see only the channel I'm cutting. Uniform as you could ask for. No blood oozing out of it or me.

“Dee...?”

She blanches. Flinches. Backs away. “I can't—I'm sorry—I'd better—I have to—”
Turn and flee and run downstairs. As I always suspected she might.
Should've had her pose more first, after all.

*

I reach her at home on the third try. Judith sounding almost in tears, afraid I'll never want her to come back. Which I dismiss as absurd; but she continues to sniffle.

“It was as if... nnnn... as if I were... nnnn...”

Not everyone is cut out to watch things getting severed. Friends of Anne Boleyn or Marie Antoinette, for example.

This probably isn't the best time to describe how I'll set-in my stop-cuts with a firmer chisel, then waste—no, better say lower—the background by as much as half an inch, leaving the outlined design in proud relief.

At a loss for other words, I pick up a pencil and tap it against the phone.

“*What’s that?* ARE YOU WORKING ON IT??”

“No, no—”

“I, um, I, um—I’ll see you tomorrow. On the bus. Bye now!”

Click.

Good one, Huffman. Freak her out twice in less than two hours.

Return to the workbench. Delude yourself that her scent’s still there. Perhaps it comes from the drawing on the blank: a young lady clad in invisible White Linen. Seen from behind, as far down as her sacroiliac—no, say “dimples of Venus”—with her face in lofty profile.

Nice. Not to say heady. Out of respect to Anne and Marie.

All the more crude to intrude on her with a chisel. Begging your pardon, madame. It’s (*tap tap*) to protect you (*tap tap*) from splintering overruns (*tap tap*). Using a ½" No. 3 gouge to start the grounding, followed by a ¼" to level it. Make way there—give the lady room to breathe—steady as she goes. Small overlapping slices. No hurry, as the evening turns into night. Into which I work later than my habit.

(Not like I have more inviting alternatives.)

Enough. Put everything away, sweep the bench, pour a short snort and go to bed.

Tuesday on the P.M. bus I listen to Judith fret about field calls, Murray Burgher, and her apparent inability to endure woodcraft.

“When’ll you be finished?” she asks.

“Maybe a week.”

“No, I mean tonight.”

“Hard to say.”

“I know I said I wouldn’t distract you, and I won’t, but...”

“But...?”

“You could call me when you’re done for the night. Even if it’s late, I won’t mind.”

“Might be later than you think. Better you should sleep. I can fill you in tomorrow.”

She makes her moue; I pat her hand. (Even her knuckles are cool.)

I leave her at the Zerfall stop, hike home, eat another damn salad, play Thelonious Monk. Hone and strop the tools used yesterday. But leave the mallet on the rack: from here

on it's all handiwork. Right hand propels, left hand guides. Like... thus. And... so.

Tonight the artist does the modeling. Brings anatomy out of blankness. Separates not only chips from wood but the dextrous from the inept. Mistakes aren't as remediable at this stage, bad judgment is less forgivable; go far enough wrong and you can scrap the entire piece.

Again I work past my accustomed sacktime. Aiming to take a rest break every quarter-hour or so, give the gouge a top-up stroke with a slipstone. But too often thirty or forty minutes pass between breaks and strokes, with me not realizing it till the wood threatens to tear.

Third rule of thumb for a sculptor: quit when you get tired. Blunt tools in a slack grip endanger you *and* what you're sculpting. But I press on a few steps further, then a few beyond that. Here's where we separate the dabhanded from the fumblefists...

Next morning Judith regards me anxiously.

"If you'd like to take a catnap, I'll make sure you're awake before I leave the bus."

"What about *your* nap?"

"Oh, I always wake up right on time." Tiny smile: "I'd've thought you'd know that."

Which, of course, I do. So for the first time we sleep together. That is to say, simultaneously. That is, if I weren't acutely conscious of her discreet night guard placement, moderating respirations, unseen but palpable *nods*. *Nods*. *Nods*...

I plough through Selfsame on autopilot, and on the afternoon bus tell Judith I'll be calling in sick tomorrow—so I can detail *Watch Your Back*. With any luck, she'll see it ready for finishing by Friday.

"Just be sure you get some rest. I—I hope it works out. I miss posing for you."

(If that's not incentive, I should like to know what is.)

Thursday I use my spotlight to illuminate cuts and scrapes being made by smaller and smaller instruments. Culminating with a scalpel and dental pick, which can bring out niceties in damn near anything. Here they tend towards Titian, the first artist to recognize sensual appeal in a young woman's back. "*La contraria parte*," he called it, "*volta di schena*."

Not that I'm dismissing a young woman's front. (Titian never did.)

But see here: in *Watch Your Back* we find a different kind of seduction. Nothing forbidden is exposed by the lady with the slightly-uneven shoulder blades. Just her subtly voluptuous dorsum, from endearing nape to Venusian dimples (whose excavation occupies me for quite an hour).

Yes, yes.

Less laddering in this piece than most of mine. Perhaps a trace in her half-seen eye. That touch of moue worked into her profiled lips.

Oh really?

For all we know, madame.

I go to bed without a nightcap and saw logs for twelve hours by the kitchenette clock.

*

“How do you feel about sandpaper?”

“What?” says Judith.

It is Friday, she is wearing her casual teal, has brought a fresh casserole for the weekly office potluck. Plus an additional portion in Tupperware as a surprise for my lunch. Which I’m sure must be delicious, though in fact I scarcely taste it.

At the Malt Shoppe after work I present Judith with her first week’s check (\$325 for 6½ hours) which she stuffs in her purse with a whispered “*Not here!*” To cover my gaffe I ask her opinion of abrasive materials and she says “What?” So I explain how some sculptors leave their work unsanded so every toolmark might stand out, but I finish my figures till they take on the smooth gloss of toned flesh. Does she think she’d be upset by watching me polish *Watch Your Back*?

“Um, no,” she murmurs. “That sounds... interesting.” Adding “GOSH!” in the Honda when she unfolds my check. “I really do need to pose more for you.”

Off to Green Creek Lane and the unveiling of the panel and Judith’s latest *Ohhhh* which I counter with *Ah-ah-ah*, staying her hand when it reaches with fingers I’m not saying aren’t immaculate but did just leave a Malt Shoppe. I wash my own in the kitchenette sink as Judith emerges from the bathroom asking about takeout, twittering “I feel like Chinese—”

—lurch—

—never mind—

—but before we order sweet ‘n’ sour whathaveyou, let’s do a little sanding of milady’s spine which I will leave off at once if the sight or sound bothers Judith in the slightest. She agrees and reclaims her place at the end of the bench, agog all over again except for a momentary Empressy “No thank you!” when I offer her a dust mask so I won’t wear one either, it’s not like I’m using a power sander on Western red cedar or an exotic beri-beri tree *rich itch itch itch*—

—glance up from this initial friction but “I’m fine” says Judith with a tingly smile so I fill her in about the whole sanding process *rich itch itch itch* medium to fine (which she is) to very fine (which she could be) to extra if not super fine (which can close the woodgrain if you’re not dabhanded) *rich itch itch itch* seldom have problems sanding to 320 grit or even 400 (which can give an illusion of depth that’s near to perfection) depending on lightness of touch sureness of direction *rich itch itch itch* knowing how long and how far you can burnish every curve until one very extra super fine day you might achieve something absolute as my tongue goes into BLATHERSKITE OVERDRIVE—

—what is it about this woman’s effect on me?—

—try to grab a gasp but can’t open wide enough try again yawn and gape wedge a fist in my solar plexus *rich itch itch* “Aitch?” she is saying to the bathroom I am flailing sandpaper slips through my fingers like I’ve forgotten what to do with my lungs suspended at the end of a rope down from a gibbet up from an anvil somewhere deep underwater...

...like the stuff being spritzed into my mouth...

—with a slightly bitter taste, *gyack!*

No, don’t gyack. Keep your tongue down. Breathe it in slowly, deep as you can. Hold for a count of ten. Then exhale through your nose.

Yeedge.

Here I am, a grown-ass man, sucking on a rescue inhaler like a goddamned pacifier. Grown-ass men ought to have whiskey bottles between their lips. Chugging Wild Turkey instead of albuterol.

My head, I find, is cradled on her arm. And not just her arm. Way to go, Huffman! All you had to do was wheeze yourself feeble. And freak out Judith for the third time this week. The poor girl’s sockets are so hollow it’s a wonder her eyeballs remain intact.

“Ummm,” she sighs. “Every time I come here, I end up with my arms around you.”

“Drop by anytime,” I croak. Bogart to Bacall.

With her non-cradling hand she smooths my hair, then gives my face the least possible slap. “You *scared* me. Half to death.”

“Sorry. Thanks, though.”

“I found the puffer in your medicine cabinet, I shook it up good first, that’s right isn’t it?” Highstrung harp-giggle. “Shook me up too. Oh gosh. You should’ve worn that dust mask. We’ll have to build up your wind. I tell you what—tomorrow if you’re feeling better, I’ll take you to my gym. There’s no better exercise for people with asthma than swimming.”

“I haven’t swum for years—”

“I’m a certified water safety instructor and have trained loads of people, so you’ll be in very good hands.” (This said as she removes her arm etc. from behind my neck.)

“Where’s that Black Wok menu? You’re getting soup. Oh, and Aitch? If I go wash up again, can I *please* touch the sculpture?”

*

The dream accelerates.

Judith is not the first woman who’s jumped at the chance to go caretakey on me. But she’s the first to immerse me in chlorine.

At the Knotts Athletic Club she is more relaxed, more in her element than I’ve ever seen her. Probably doesn’t hurt that she’s the best-looking person here. Everyone greets the Young Empress, though none by name. She in turn acknowledges them with gracious *Hi*’s: her loyal courtiers, attendants, towel managers.

The men’s locker room is standard-issue industrial jock. Takes me back to happily forgotten phys ed classes taught by crewcut jutjaws with names like “Coach Beltz” or “Coach Sparger.” Their concept of treating asthma was to make me run laps nonstop.

My brand-new swimtrunks have already started to droop before I reach poolside. Then Judith appears, wearing a navy maillot that fits as close as what she doubtless calls her birthday suit. I see that decided curvature isn’t limited to her calves and spine (pre-brace) but extends from head to foot. Especially when you factor in the rhythmic flexes and clenches by her highset these and upswept those and outthrust t’others—

That'll do, pig.

I notice she's waited till now to tuck her hair into an unflattering rubber cap.

(Also that I've got my gut sucked in like any middle-aged idiot.)

"Okay," she is saying, "let's see what you can do."

This gym is her studio, the pool her workbench, and I'm the block she intends to mold. In we go. Damn, this stuff is wet. I demonstrate my timeworn dogpaddle and end up spluttering.

"Now watch me." I do, as do other men, as she travels to and fro: "This is the back crawl... this is the breaststroke... the sidestroke, with scissors kick... the butterfly stroke, with dolphin kick..."

I lead a round of splashy applause.

"Oh, you. Now *you* try. Let's start with the front crawl and flutter kick."

I rerun my dogpaddle. Spluttering when Judith lays personal trainer hands on me, fore and aft.

"No, silly, *this* way—"

(One HELL of an improvement over Coaches Beltz and Sparger.)

Blink and we're dressed and driving to Sycamore Terrace. "Garden apartments" they're called, minivillas plopped in a Knotts pasture by some developmental Trojan horse. Landscaped with so many cunning little sidepaths, hedgerows, and fenceposts that no Minotaur could find its way to the laundry room unaided.

Judith, glowing with endorphins, wants to feed me an authentic home-cooked meal. "My Grandma Audrey's *frikadeller*; that's Danish meatballs. Bet you thought they had to be Swedish."

Or Italian. As in Formis. Even unuttered, their name hangs in the air. Judith parks the Honda below a cunning little canopy and leads the way to apartment D9—hurrying a few steps ahead, casting oh-so-casual glances to left and right, as though her in-laws might be lurking in the underbrush.

Out of which a dark object bursts upon us.

Judith scoops it effortlessly into her arms. "This is my baaaaaaaby," she croons, "this is my *sweetheart*. You're not allergic to cats?"

“Not really, no,” I say. Meaning this can’t really be a cat. More like an enormous shaggy panther cub.

“This is Uncle Aitch,” Judith informs the creature. “Tell him who *you* are, baby. Go on... go on, now... (he can do this, really...)”

I stand there trying to keep my face vacant. Till the beast opens its maw and gives me a silent but lethal hiss.

“*Noir!*” says Judith. She unlocks D9, sets the animal down, gives it a tap on the tail with a rolled-up magazine. “That’s his name, the bad boy. He’s not used to strangers,” she adds as the beast stalks off inside.

Noir the cat. They ought to name a film genre after it.

As anticipated, her place is very neat and tidy. Or would be if it weren’t for all the hair on the furniture—and hanging in the air, along with absent Italians. Black hair, not sugar maple.

“I’m sorry, it’s shedding season,” Judith murmurs. “Actually it’s *always* shedding season with this rascal.” She flicks personal parlormaid hands over a blue sofa, a violet armchair.

“What kind of...”

“Oh, he’s a Persian. He’s a little sheik, always demanding to be noticed—and here he is now,” as the creature bounds back in to take over the armchair. Judith lavishes more caresses on it, which does nothing to promote my appetite. Nor does her saying, “I’ll just leave you two to get acquainted,” as she sails into the kitchen to dish up *frikadeller*. “Don’t be afraid to pet him.”

“I won’t.” (Truest words I’ve spoken all day.)

I sit on the sofa. The animal hunkers on the chair. We glower at each other.

And I recognize those sour yellow eyes.

Back from damnation. Reincarnated as a Persian cat—can’t say I’m astonished. Intent on usurping the affections of another woman I want? Not *this* time, you bastard. Go find some other mouse to toy with.

When’s the adored not an adorer?

When he’s AJAHR.

I call the cat by that name. Its eyes widen, then narrow, as it hops down and slinks out of sight.

“Are you admiring my art collection?” calls Judith from the kitchen.

I look around for what this might be. Shelves of itsy-bitsy bric-a-brac: mermaids, porpoises, surfer girls. On the decorative fireplace’s ornamental mantelpiece: silver trophies, medals, cups. Plus my flipside Malt Shoppe sketch in “just the right frame.” Actually it’s not half-bad—Waning Gibbous, I see. Ever-loving silver leaf.

Blink again and it’s ever-floating cotton fluff. Floating all the hell over.

I am in the truck with the window rolled down and fluff is drifting, falling, blowing in to hitch a ride. Shedding season has spread to the cottonwoods on Green Creek Lane. Scattering my thoughts like these goosefeathers pursuing me along Mesher Road. And up the onramp. And into freeway traffic—

Tap tap rattle.

Another jumpcut: now Judith is sitting beside me, in her teal skirt and ruffled blouse and fresh White Linen. Rings and bracelets providing percussion as she pats the casserole on her lap.

Fluff settles. Gaps fill in. It’s another Friday morning and I am giving Judith a lift to work. She’s brought me a larger portion of potluck in bigger Tupperware. “You’ve got to eat better,” I’ve been told more than once during the past seven days.

With the underheard undertone: *I need you to keep making me feel beautiful.*

I am her magic mirror, assuring her she’s the fairest after all. And yet I am *not* giving Judith a lift—since she’s cottoned onto what’s bubblewrapped inside my portfolio and stowed behind the seat.

Watch Your Back. Sanded, oiled, and waxed. With the background patterned for greater contrast to the polished figure.

“You’re taking it to the gallery today, aren’t you?”

“Er, yes. Deadline time.”

Deep forlorn sigh. “I wish *I* could buy it.”

“You’re supposed to be saving your money.”

“I know that! I said, ‘I wish...’ It’s just that—I *hate* the idea of somebody taking it away from us! We might never see it again.”

“I’m giving you the sketch,” I remind her. “And there’ll be photos. Ralph takes good ones.”

Harp-snort. “‘We’ll always have photos.’ ‘Here’s looking at me, kid.’” (*Tap tap rattle.*) “It’s going to be like this every time, isn’t it? With every sculpture you do of me. How can you bear to let them go?”

“I don’t sell every piece I carve. This one might not sell.”

“Of course it will! Anybody’d be proud to buy it!... and isn’t that the point? Didn’t you tell me—”

“The point is to *create* it, as best you can. After that, you can try to sell it—or give it as a gift—or keep it for yourself. You’ve seen the ones I’ve kept.”

“Wish this could’ve been one of them.”

“There’ll be other sculptures... There *will* be, won’t there?”

Hands-on lady that she is, she takes a cool dry palm off her casserole and slides it around my elbow. Almost causing me to swerve the truck when she asks, “Are you going to WhooHoo?”

Close your eyes and open them and the sun has moved to the opposite side of the freeway. It’s gotten much hotter, a lot more humid, I’m sweating bullets and have been for some time. Judith’s still in the next seat but her skirt and blouse are gone, as is the casserole. In their place are minty shorts and a polo shirt screaming SUMMER KICKOFF!

Dig-dig-dig-dig go Judith’s fingernails in my elbow-crook as I twist the wheel—with no other result, since the truck’s idling in gridlock. Swervus interruptus.

Bring yourself up to date.

This is... what? Saturday. The 1st of June. Closing night of the Demortuis Whoopjamboreehoo. Originally called “Decoration Week” (to outclass cities that spent a mere day garlanding graves) it has morphed into the local equivalent of Mardi Gras or the Feast of Fools. Each year’s rowdier and bawdier than the last, with more letters to the editor seething about how WhooHoo spits on our glorious dead.

One thing never changes: it's always the muggiest week of the year. And the most congested trafficwise. I finally maneuver us into an unfilled parking spot on Indianfield Street, appropriately near the old Union Cemetery.

Judith is in no hurry to get out of the pickup.

Can't say I blame her. Last Sunday, Memorial Day, she had to pay a duty call on Wastrel's headstone and light candles for his whatnot. Which left her sounding ragged and torn on the phone to me that night.

"Do you ever have bad dreams?" she wanted to know.

"Sometimes. Not lately."

"Mine are awful. And now, besides wearing the night guard, I have to sleep with a night *light* on like a little kid. Good thing it doesn't bother Noir."

(That usurping bastard.)

One nightmare was of the Formis discovering "her" at the Crouching group show. Illogical, since her in-laws don't frequent Jackdaw galleries—Enzo's taste in art runs to fish on plaques, and Sophia's only interested in antique furniture. Her wedding present to Judith was an Italian rosewood wardrobe, seven feet high and five feet wide. "We barely got it through the door when I moved to Sycamore Terrace."

"Where...?"

"In my bedroom. It takes up almost as much space as the bed."

Didn't know she had a bed, or a room to put it in. I was guessing the sofa folded out. "I'd like to see it sometime—the wardrobe, I mean."

Oh really? went the phone. *Brush brush brush-off.*

The sound of Noir being groomed, Noir being coddled, Noir shedding hair like black cottonfluff over bed and mistress and fanciful wardrobe...

Enough. That was Sunday; this is Saturday. Here we're parked and there sits Judith. I tell her we can forget Summer Kickoff and just return home, but she shakes her head. And exits the truck.

A gentleman should walk between a lady and the curb, but Judith places me between her and Union Cemetery. Or the shaggy peeling river birches behind its wrought-iron fence. She won't take my arm in public, but keeps close enough to bodily *nudge*. *Nudge*. *Nudge...*

Wink wink responds my saphead.

Thus we enter Portal Park. Judith with her jitters, I with an obelisk.

And WhooHoo with a horde of beasts. Lethal but not silent.

Surging, swarming, trampling the blossoms, abusing the statuary—we see one grisette spew her lunch over the marble shoes of Ulysses S. Grant. Barricades are up and helicopters whirl and a SWAT team's here on armored horseback, none of which daunts the bedlamites: it's closing night of Whoopjamboreehoo! squander all reserves! on chugging, on frothing, on screeching and howling, on demented demanding that chunks be blown and tits be shown! And here's Judith Formi in a thin polo shirt—

“Can we get out of here?” she shivers.

The way back is blocked by leering dim-eyed bloodshot faces. The way forward's full of outraged protesters brandishing “MATTHEW 8:22” signs. Both throngs are closing in, so I have no choice but to haul Judith ladderwise.

200-odd feet of limestone loom above us: the Demortuis Cenotaph. Its elevator doors have been jammed open, and the alarm blare competes with basslines and police sirens and squalling mob and umpteenth reprise of “Empty Tomb Blues”:

Now my love lies deeply buried, somewhere I will never know

Now my love lies deeply buried, somewhere I will never know

Across the sea, beyond the clouds, or beneath the bitter snow...

A green-lit sign: STAIRS. Steep ones, leading not up but down to an enclosed garage. Abrupt silence follows us into a cavernous space that's deserted except for fossil cars—Ramblers, Pintos, Corvairs. Much cooler here than topside.

If my bearings are right and we take this tunnel, it should lead us out to Lincoln Avenue and that's only a block from Indianfield. But no sooner do I decide this than Judith's shivering escalates into another case of the *nnnnnnns*. I draw her over by a shadowed wall, put a tentative arm around her.

“There was no need for that,” she says.

I start to remove my arm. She shifts with it and leans against me.

“That girl throwing up on the statue—*nnnn*... no need for that.”

“Maybe she had after-hours morning sickness.”

More shivers. “You know the only harsh thing my mother-in-law’s ever said to me? That we were wrong not to start a family right away. Have as many kids as we could... *nnnn*... and part of me would’ve loved to do that, one baby at least... but then he broke my heart and I’m GLAD we didn’t.”

She met Marco Formi when she was attending college in St. Paul and he was going to grad school in Minneapolis. For three years he pursued her through the Twin Cities: classy dates, swanky gifts, generous to a fault. He was 6’4" (by damn I *knew* it) and the life of every fratbash, yet gentle when he wanted to be. And capable of romance—proposing to her at a Vikings football game, via the Metrodome scoreboard.

But Judith held off marrying him till after graduation, not sure she wanted his surname on her permanent diploma. The Dahls disliked Marco at first sight, an impression he didn’t improve by kicking Rudy’s ass. Yet the Formis welcomed Judith wholeheartedly, saying she was exactly the sort of girl they’d always prayed would be Marco’s wife. Living near them in chic Trey Hills. With her big bluff heavy-chested hero.

Mr. Dahl, after walking the bride down the aisle, gave the groom a look that curdled the frosting on the wedding cake. And Marco, from the moment he mashed the first slice into Joo-girl’s face, proceeded to confirm everybody’s worst suspicions. Generosity turned to extravagance, gentleness to audacity, romance to boorishness.

“We were still practically newlyweds, married less than six months, but I was wondering if we—if *I* could make it to our first anniversary... *nnnn*... and then he took me here. To WhooHoo. And it was such a happy day. We went on all the rides, even the Ferris wheel and merry-go-round, and he won me a stuffed husky and said he’d give me another one every year till we had a whole sled team... and he was like he’d been when he was at his best. Oh, I had a really good time that day.”

Lapse into silence.

I start to navigate her toward the Lincoln Avenue tunnel.

But Judith holds back—physically, if not vocally.

“That was the last one, too. The last good time. I kept giving him second chances, but he never turned over a new leaf like he promised, like he *swore* he would... The things

he did to my poor stuffed Mushy-dog, just because I loved it... But I stuck out that marriage for two whole years before telling him I was leaving him. And then he broke my heart. And then he got killed. And I was thrown clear.”

That newspaper squib. “It was a... car?”

“Oh—yes,” says Judith. As if she thought everyone knew that. “He was driving. I just got some scrapes and bruises. They were worried about my spine, of course. Couldn’t believe it when they couldn’t find anything wrong with it—anything *new*, that is. The doctor said it was a miracle. *Nnnnnnn...*”

What do I do if she starts sobbing? Idiot!—put *both* arms around her. One’s there, add the other. She’s wearing sneakers, we are more of a height than usual, her forehead rests against mine. And then she does begin to cry, quite silently. Tears brimming, spilling, trickling down her diamond cheeks.

What do you say? Nothing is best. Hold her close, then; wholly enfolded.

I’m so sorry.

It’ll be all right.

Will it?

Sure, why not?

You hug good.

It’s all in the hands.

Yes, they’re very nice...

6

Depth Charge

To Judith's indignant joy, *Watch Your Back* is not snapped up at the Crouching group show. Nor is much else: WhooHoo did nothing to boost sales in Jackdaw Square, except at liquor stores.

Luckily, Double-Bag Eddie has paid Geraldine for *No I.D.* and *The Mute Commute*. Geraldine's obligated to give me my half within thirty (30) days, meaning I can expect it at the (23rd) hour of the (29th) day. Ask her for a swifter turnaround and she'll catapult you at length about her underfed overhead.

At any rate, money's on its way. And just in time: Judith's been clocking a good many modeling hours. Our current project's working title is *Trophy*, as in swimming, which I think ought to depict strokes in motion—say a relay-racer streaking past, baton in hand. But swimming relays (Judith informs me) don't use batons, and a *Trophy* (Judith argues) should be just what it says it is—representation of victory, triumph, achievement. Which *does* include coming in second, whatever Judith's dad might think.

So: no consensus.

Till two evenings after WhooHoo, when Judith enters my bathroom wearing her sales-rep get-up (mauve on summer Mondays) and emerges clad in glistening spandex.

"Wow."

"Oh, you've seen me in this before."

"I went *Wow* then too."

The edge is clearly hers and she maintains it while our ideas mingle. Okay then: a swimmer stretched at full length, reaching to seize a silver medallion just outside her grasp. Aspiration, determination, tenacity, mettle, pluck. Plus every ripple of skin and sinew, delineated punctiliously.

The session that follows is intense. We try Judith lying on her back, her side, her front; uncooperative gravity keeps tugging her firm poised flesh askew. WhooHoo's weather hasn't moderated, it's another heavy night outside and in, Judith perspires and I sweat like a goat. Then an idea: have her stand and hold onto a strap I loop round a ceiling hook. She still doesn't look like she's swimming, but the image is certainly commendable.

"I feel like I'm on the bus," she murmurs.

"Stop a lot of traffic like that," I say.

The Young Empress furrows her brow at me. What happened to the nervous girl hiding a vial of pepper spray? She's absorbed the pepper and it's risen to the surface:

"Aitch, we need a full-length mirror in here. I know a place we can get one wholesale. Prop it up against that pillar, and then I might be able to see what I'm doing."

It's Judith who suggests getting a leg up on the stepladder so she can dramatize swimkicks. Specifying that each kick match an appropriate stroke:

"If you want my leg *here*, I can't have my arms doing *this*—every swimmer in town would look at it and laugh!"

Stepping down from the ladder to lay personal authority hands on my pad and pencil. This is the way a scissors kick goes: gallop-a-trot! This is the way a frog kick goes: hobble-de-hoy! If her left leg's *here*, her right one's *there*, and her arms must be down or up or over like... thus. And... so.

Stick-figure diagrams drawn by a svelte-figured bathing beauty. And not just any babe in a maillot, but LADY ALICE—flushed and heated and thwarting gravity fore and aft. Oh, by damn! Pose any way you please! Stretch, curl, kneel, lie—just hold steady while I take you in and get you down, set you up and send you over, hook and ladder, nook and cranny, thus and so—

"*Ohhhh...*" she goes. Glistening from hairline to toenail at the end of the session. "Just you wait till we're back in the gym, Mr. H. Huffman! I won't let you out of the pool

till I work your glutes off!” Said with a smile and double-snap of leghole elastic across her own sleek buttocks. Followed by the *snick* of the bathroom door, the swoosh of the shower, and a voice raised in quavery song.

Aye Calypso! so long and so well!

Leave out the door and the song and you could live with this for a hell of a long time.

I get two weeks of it. We dine on takeout, we revisit her gym, I’m put through strict paces till I develop a respectable if unstimulating breaststroke. Fridays we go to the Malt Shoppe and I (discreetly) hand over sizable well-earned checks. Sizable enough that Judith tells Formi-Dable she wants a break from field sales.

“I’m paying my own way through grad school, every darn step of it. Not my parents. Not Enzo and Sophia. I’m doing it all on my own two feet.”

With the help of my hook and ladder. Though it’s Judith who decides the new piece shouldn’t be titled *Trophy*, but *Prized*.

We buy her full-length mirror and lug it up to my studio, but she spends less time looking in it at herself than at me while I draw her. Models don’t often do that; their attention wanders, they shift it inward or elsewhere. Judith’s stays centered, and again I feel that sense of grace in her presence: defusing carnality and suffusing it with “cool.”

Not that she can’t throw me for an occasional loop.

“Have you ever read this book?” she asks one morning on the bus. “I couldn’t make head nor tail of it when I was in college, but now I think I’m getting it more.”

Doesn’t sound like a Sneaky Pie mystery story. I glance at the cover. “*Ulysses*?”

“I skip over the disgusting parts. But look here, where Mr. Bloom’s feeding Pussens and she goes ‘Mrkgnao!’ at him. That’s exactly what a cat would say.”

I’ll take her word for it. Full of wonders, this one is.

She learns that June 16th is Bloomsday and announces we should go out to celebrate it. Not pubcrawling—too much like Whoopjamboreehoo—but there’s a little French restaurant in Fisherman’s Bend she’d like to try, and after all *Ulysses* was published in Paris.

“You do know the 16th’s a Sunday?” I ask. I never see her on Sundays, she spends them lighting wastrel candles with the Formis, then calling me at bedtime for phone solace. And to hear her groom her cat.

"I sent my own dad a card—I can send Enzo one too," says Judith. Coolly.

The 16th's not just a Sunday and Bloomsday, but Father's Day as well.

And on it she wants to be with *me*.

Yeedge...

So what did you expect?

Yes, ever since that night under the Cenotaph she opens her arms for a parting hug when you walk her down to the Honda. Yes, Bogart found Bacall—or if you prefer, Buster Keaton found his lemon-meringue blonde Eleanor—when he was in his forties and she was in her twenties.

I could cope with a relationship if Judith could.

It wouldn't be December-May—more like August-April. I'm not a kid this time around, as in Kansas. Nor a callow youth, as in Milwaukee. Nor subject to a shrink, as in Chicago. And this one's unlike the three I knew there: she's taller, stronger, more tempered.

But Father's Day? Maybe she'll present me with a necktie. Well, I've got news for her—I already *own* a necktie. Which I'm wearing Sunday evening when Judith arrives to pick me up. And which she unknots and reties, without invitation.

What next? *Be sure to wear your galoshes, Poppa.*

"You'd be really handsome if you smiled a bit more," she remarks. For all the world as though she were the first female to spring that line on me.

"You're beautiful whether you smile or not," I retort. And then she *does*, of course.

North we drive, past Knotts and Rollinghitch to Fisherman's Bend and La Maison du Pêcheur. We're seated outdoors under a striped umbrella; I still get the sun in my eyes. Judith orders our food in impeccable French from a bewildered-looking waiter. Correctly or not, we're served lobster bisque and poached salmon with a bottle of homemade ("Ipsissima Valley") Beaujolais. Most of which gets poured into my glass; Judith allows herself only a few designated-driver sips.

"So," she says after swallowing one, "have *you* ever been married?"

"No."

"Lived with anybody?"

"Not really, no."

“Ever been in love?”

I empty my glass, pour some more. “Of course.”

Twitter. “Did you, um, sculpt... them?”

“Yes I did.”

Silence, while she chews salmon. Then: “Are those the ones you’ve kept?”

“A couple.” This wine’s not bad, considering it got squeezed in the valley of the shadow of Big Greedy-Gut. We buy a jug and take it back with us to Sycamore Terrace. Judith has a full glass there; I have several. Sinking deeper into her sofa all the while. No sign of her cat tonight, which suits me dandy. Probably it prefers Pinot Noir.

“You understand, don’t you?”

I turn my head. Find her midnight blues upon me. “Hunh?”

“You’ve gone through it too. With that first girl you kissed, the one who...”

“Hadn’t seen her for years, when she...”

“But somebody? Someone you loved?”

The spicy wine’s making my eyes water. Next thing you know I’ll start spilling beans. Better haul ass to her lavatory—and squat for this whiz; bad manners to aim it all over a lady’s powder room. Hey, maybe that’s why the “powder blue”...

Stand and flush. Zip and turn. Reel back and be collected, directed down. Are these her hands on my face?

Oh Aitch—you’re so—

That same unfinished sentence.

Thirty-two years I’ve wondered what I was so.

Blink and the room changes. Lights are off. Dawn is on. Still sitting on the sofa but my shoes and tie have vanished, my shirt’s unbuttoned, and Judith is curled around me. Head resting against mine. Tush pressed against my hip. Legs arched across my lap. Sunday dress replaced by a long purple tee with *WILDCATS* across the front in gold, slowly swelling and subsiding.

What the HELL??

Secular humanist I may have been raised, but my first thoughts are scriptural—about the beautiful widow who got the Assyrian drunk in order to behead him with his own sword.

Can't recall the Assyrian's name, other than *it started with an H*—

Quick doubletake. The head resting against hers is still attached to my shoulders. The *schweinhund's* saphead is likewise intact. Not a crime scene, then.

Still: here's a how-de-do. Somebody's been working their wiles overnight, and I don't think it was me or mine.

Her chest continues to swell and subside.

Never sleeps like this on the #104. There she's rigidly upright, jaws clamped shut. Now she's lax, slack—openmouthed, in fact. Her nice-girl slaver dribbling down my neck to pool inside my collarbone.

Wait a minute...

No night guard. No night light. Yet sound asleep, more or less in my arms.

Well, I'll be damned.

A romantic notion: awaken her with a kiss. Though not with this wine-dark breath. Pack of gum in my shirt pocket—dig out a stick, chomp hurriedly. Okay. No need to scale brambles around an enchanted castle; just brush away the latest drooldrop, take her chin and lift it slightly upward—

—JOLTING her awake. Lids popping open, eyes hollow-socketing—is she about to scream? Not quite. “OH MY FACE” she goes, leaping off the sofa into the bathroom and whumping the door shut after her.

“My” face, meaning hers. From which she didn't remove makeup last night. Meaning she woke up slightly smeary.

I was willing to overlook it.

Instead I'm left with morning wood, *and* a full bladder. So much for romantic notions. Creak to my feet, hobble on over, tap on the door.

“Just a minute!”

“Dee? I really have to go.”

“Oh don't, oh please stay!”

“I mean, *go*—in there—”

“Oh! Um... just a minute—”

Out she darts past me, muffled in a towel. I half-expect to find her face in an Eleanor Rigby jar by the door. Better that than the stubbly gray pallor staring back at me from too many reflective surfaces. Gah...

I manage to relieve myself without disaster. Twist the knob, open up—and find her standing immediately opposite. Face scrubbed cosmetic-free. Looking scared and brave, younger and older. Less finished, yet more timeless. Blanker, yet indelible.

“Do you still want to kiss me?” she asks.

Sometimes my mind is nimble. “More than ever,” I reply.

Thus: clinch.

So: dreaming.

Beneath the cotton T-shirt and surface pepper she is tense, taut, on edge. But her lips are like the Beaujolais, fresh and bright and berrylicious. (If a dream, what a dream.) I move my hands over her back, staying on top of the cotton, and she does not shrink away but comes closer. Wraps her arms around my neck as on that first Saturday a month ago. And I am Winston Smith among the bluebells, in the Golden Country, with the sunlight pouring in and her body turning softer, warmer, melting in my hands and against my mouth, taking my breath away all over again—except she isn’t, she’s giving me hers, she’s filling my lungs. Building up my wind. Resuscitating my life. I can feel the bristles on my chin turning back to black. And the same words keep throbbing through my mind:

Well, I’ll be damned—well, I’ll be damned—well, I’ll be damned—

Oh shut up and kiss me.

Yes dear.

I don’t know whether she took any liberties last night, or whether at 5'9" she weighs 120 or 130 or maybe more for all her willowiness, and if so whether I’ll be able to sweep her off her feet long enough to find which of these doors leads into her bedroom—

—when I get caught by her strong right hand in a downright intimate place. As in my ear she goes: “Hon—honey—do you have a thingee?”

What do you think you’ve got your hand on, Lady?

No no, you know—FOR it.

Oh. Er. No.

“Oh, Aitch,” she sighs aloud. With exasperated reproach, as though I’d been promising to pack one day and night. *Damn!* Poppa forgot his galoshes. I’m almost ready to propose marriage, if that’s what it’ll take; but then she’d expect me to produce a ring and I haven’t got one of those either—

A distant alarm clock goes off.

“Well,” she says, “I better get dressed.”

Disappearing behind what must be her bedroom door. Fat lot of good that discovery does me now.

I try to put myself right in her powder blue shrine to hygiene. Cursing my rotten luck, and wondering why we keep wasting so much time alone in each other’s crappers.

“Honey? I need to put my face back on.”

Oog. Guess she’s decided that’s what the H stands for. How very affectionate.

“Putting her face on” reminds me of another Judy, the one in *Vertigo* who’s willing to let Jimmy Stewart muss her a little. Which he doesn’t do because he realizes Judy’s in fact the False Madeleine—

—but who the hell cares? False or true or blonde or brunette or used as a tool in a murder plot, it’s *Kim Novak* for crying out loud: go ahead and muss her a little! Though not so much that she falls off a bell tower.

“Here we are,” says Judith. Crispy-clean in fresh makeup and Monday mauve.

Before we depart for the Park ‘n’ Ride, she lets Noir back into the apartment. The outraged creature won’t allow Judith to pet it; pretends it doesn’t know her. But as we head on out, the cat bounds up to glare balefully after us through the window.

*

At Selfsame I am shaking my head at Schlitzzy’s attempt to dump a cartload of Gag orders on me, when the phone rings.

“...Aitch? I’ve been PINK-SLIPPED!”

Which ought to sound sexier than it does. Gone is the clear cool gliding voice; now it’s caught between a keck and a snuffle.

Two weeks notice. No forewarning. No answer when she called Trey Hills. Is it because she didn’t go there for Father’s Day? (Keck.) Or because they’ve found out about

us and think she's betraying Marco's memory? (Snuffle.) Or has F-D finally struck an iceberg and started to sink?

"What am I going to *do*? I'm not ready to leave yet!"

I try to reassure her. I've got contacts with many vendors; even in the current recession, one's bound to need an experienced sales rep. We'll finish *Prized* and carve other sculptures, Geraldine will sell them, I'll advance Judith the proceeds against her future modeling. We'll get by.

"Oh I love you," she says.

She wants to be loved. I do what I can. Call around town, but nobody's hiring. I know *we're* not—Thin Chick wasn't replaced when she left last month.

Then my luck changes. I'm not a high-dollar customer, but the LeThean Lumber Yard has never failed me yet; Sleepy LeThean appreciates those who value good wood. Forty years ago he was one of the original Cutthroats, playing for dime-store wages in the old AFL. A lot of aging fans seek Sleepy's autograph and stories about tackling the likes of Jack Kemp. He always obliges—after they buy some lumber. On them he unloads ordinary stock; me he steers toward a choicer selection. (For which he charges precisely what the market will bear.)

Judith and her sockets board the 4:42 like they've had lifelong insomnia. She can't lay her head on my shoulder without curling herself around me, but does the best she can on a public bus. I tell her a customer service position might be open at LeThean after July 1st.

"But I don't know anything about lumber."

"I can help you there. They sell other things too, paint and varnish and so forth."

"But Downy Owl Road's nowhere near town. We won't be riding the bus together anymore."

I was expecting a little relief here, if not active gratitude—picking up in Zerfall where we left off in Knotts. (To which end I stopped by a drugstore and loaded up on thingees.) Yet when we reach my place, Judith says: "Aren't you going to change?"

"How?"

"You're still wearing yesterday's..."

I am, though I didn't feel grungily malodorous till now.

Wash and shave and change into something more comfortable. Find Judith hanging up the phone after ordering from Black Wok.

“Honey?”

“Right here, dear.”

Still with her back to me: “I don’t think I can do this anymore.”

“Do WHAT?”

“*Tonight*, I mean tonight. I wanted—eek! What have you got *on*?”

“It’s called loungewear,” I try to say with dignity.

A smile comes and goes across her stricken face. She steps forward, starts to hug me, then pushes firmly away. “No. It wouldn’t be right. Too much has happened today.”

“Well... stay for the food, at least.”

“Oh. Yes. I was going to.”

In silence we brew a pot of tea, prep the eating table, open the delivered Black Wok boxes. Feeling like it’s last winter on the #104: me covertly observing, she off in abstraction. Even a few *nod-nods* as she eats her prawns and potstickers. Eventually meeting my eye—

“Oh don’t look at me like that! It’s not you, Aitch, it’s just—I mean—I *want* you to love me! I want to love you *back*! But...”

She wipes a sweet-and-sour dab from her chin. Then, slowly:

“You know something? I won’t have to be ‘Judith Formi’ anymore. Hey! What’s a week from Friday? The 28th? Oh my gosh—that’ll be my last day there—and then Saturday, the very next day, is my birthday!”

Bloop. Her sockets replenish and her eyes start to shine.

“I could go back to being a Dahl again! And when people ask, I could tell them I’m single! Oh gee! Oh Aitch! I was dreading my birthday, but now they’re going to stop!”

“What is?”

“My dreams! The bad ones! I’ll be free—and THAT’S why it didn’t feel right tonight! It’s too soon! Oh, I’m SO glad we haven’t done anything yet!” She grabs my hand, sending a forkful of chow mein clattering. “And *I* figured it out, didn’t I? I stood on my own two feet!” Half doing so, to lean over the table and kiss me full on the—cheek. Then, with sudden concern: “Oh honey! Can you *wait* another couple of weeks?”

Dare I claim a man can die from terminal blueballs?

“Er, some might say I’ve waited too long.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well... we’re not quite the same age.”

Harp-snort. “That doesn’t make any difference! It’d be like saying we can’t be together because I’m ‘too tall.’ Does *that* bother you?”

“No—”

“Do you wish I were *older*?”

“Well, no—”

“Well then! All that matters is how we feel about each other. Do you love me?”

“Sure,” I say. (Why not?)

“I wouldn’t want you the least little bit different than you are,” she says. In which rapturous mood she opens her fortune cookie.

Every journey starts with a single step.

“YES!” goes Judith, glistening and twinkling. “Now open yours, open yours!”

Only he that has traveled the road knows where the holes are deep.

No doubt. Here I am ready for a tactile liaison, and she puts me on a twelve-day kibosh. Thirteen, if you count last night.

*

My blueballs and I start to carve *Prized*. For which I choose a panel of Honduras mahogany whose fiddleback figure suggests under-the-sea. To me, at least; Judith’s dubious.

“Don’t you have any green wood?”

I explain that isn’t so much green as wet, and liable to split or crack as it dries.

“Just like skin,” Judith shudders. “Well darn—you’d think *wet* wood would be perfect.”

She vows to be at benchside for the entire carving. Insists I wear a respirator mask and dons one herself. Until my V-tool bites into the blank; then she’s off to the kitchenette for an unmasked drink of water. After which she thinks her cellphone’s ringing in her

totebag, over by the futon. Finally she remains at the other end of the studio, exercising in front of the full-length mirror. Having put on a leotard the exact same color as my balls.

Which can only be pushed so far.

Lay down mallet and chisel. Go over and confront her.

“Oh—is the music too loud?” she asks in mid-lunge. Meaning her smooth jazz station on my boombox.

“What are you trying to DO to me?” I demand through the mask.

“*What??*” she goes, clutching her sweet bosom. Honestly unaware, for a moment. Then everything from bosom to brow turns vivid pink. Though only briefly; she’s posed too often over the past six weeks to be that bashful anymore. Pink reverts to pearly-peach, and her dark eyes grow mischievous. “Aw, poor baby.”

—*yer jes tew easy t’tease*—

“You,” I tell Judith, “are going to make me gouge myself yet!”

“It won’t be for very much longer. Till then I’m just trying to meet you halfway.”

“Come down in time,” agrees the boombox, “and I’ll meet you halfway-ay-ay...”

Harp-giggle from Judith, humming along as she resumes her lunges.

That night (alone on the futon) I have my first Calypso dream. We’re on the bus and it’s in the river, drifting merrily downstream. Except for a sailor cap, Judith is thoroughly nude. “No,” she says, “I’m in my birthday suit.” Yet perfectly safe, I having been fool enough to climb a bamboo limbo-ladder that lacks any downward rungs. “What are you doing up there?” asks Calypso Judith. “Trying not to break my neck,” I reply. “Hi-dee-ay-hee!” chime in John Denver and Jacques Cousteau.

Then we all chant Belafonte-style:

Judith the Anchorite, she be a saint

Suffer night terrors at the hands of haints

(Moonlight fall and me want to go home)

Scream so loud she bringing monks on the run

Find her fighting Devil off one-on-one

(Nightjars sing and me want to go home)

Six straight nights I have this dream. Each time knowing it's the same ladder I'm trapped on, but never able to come down in time before I awake.

*

Her next insistence is that *I* get a cellphone, so she can be in touch with me twenty-four hours a day. Or how about a Personal Digital Assistant with e-mail capability, Internet access and a tiny keyboard—*plus* a wireless phone?

Before I know it, I'm \$500 deeper in debt and the owner of a so-called BlackBerry. Judith supervises every detail of its selection, nattering on about "dropped calls" and "roaming charges" and "SMS messages." I give in because there's nothing like letting a woman spend your money on something for *you* that benefits *her*, to get her feeling fervid. And right away Judith tells me to take the gadget to bed that night, so we can "test the network."

"Next best thing to being there?"

"Oh, you."

Oh, me. Alone again on the futon, in the darkness. With a clear cool whisper gliding through my headset.

A presence to be sensed, to be felt as though beside me, there aboard the Calypso bus as our dream goes gently down the stream, she feeding me bits of seedcake out of her BlackBerrylicious mouth. Singing me to sleep with wafting music, soulfully cerebral, like windblown feathers or flowers afloat in grottos, in hollows, in a hushed voice advising me to *never mind, never mind, never mind...*

*

Birthday cards are arranged upon her trophy mantel. From her parents, from her brothers (Rudy excluded) and their wives, from her German Catholic grandparents and Scandinavian Lutheran grandparents and Sister Genevieve alias Geronimo—even from the truant Mr. and Mrs. Enzo Formi. *To our daughter*, that one says.

What do you give a girl when she turns twenty-six? In this case you can't go amiss with a bracelet. So I call on Nicolette Ningal, the spacy silversmith and reigning belle of Jackdaw Square: a meld of Sparkle Plenty and the Moon Maid (for those who remember *Dick Tracy* in the Sixties). Many a time I've tried persuading Nikki to pose for me, but she

distrusts wood as a medium. “If it splinters, I might too.”

I describe Judith to Nikki and she picks out a slender streamlined bangle, more oblong than round. Inside it I have *D & H* engraved.

“Depths & Heights?”

“Something like that.”

“Safe bind—safe find,” says Nikki with a sibylline grin. Enigmatic woman, but eminently sculptable.

Friday the 28th. Last potluck at F-D. For someone who’s just lost her job, Judith acts like she’s on cloud nine. Or a root beer high from the Black Cow Grandé she downs at the Malt Shoppe. Full of ice cream and her plans for tomorrow; unfazed by cloud nine’s combining with its eight neighbors to cast a pall overhead.

Saturday the 29th. The pall’s still there, now with rumbles and growls. Spoiling for a summer storm yet keeping it pent up, held back, repressed. Though not in my armpits.

Judith at least looks blithe and unstained in a new white party dress and sugar maple makeover. She hands me the Honda key; tonight I’m the designated driver. We’re returning to La Maison du Pêcheur, and Judith intends to have a couple of birthday drinks—both of them stronger than Black Cows.

En route to Fisherman’s Bend we rehash the future. She impressed Sleepy LeThean at her interview, but the lumber yard job won’t be available till August. Which allows her a month for vacation—and I just happen to spend three weeks every July at the Old McRale Place, Mrs. Wilson’s little timeshare on the prairie.

“I could drive you there,” Judith says. “Then I should go up to Walse Falls and mend a few fences. (See, I’m already talking like I’m in the lumber business.) Then I’ll come back to—where is it?—and pick you up. Unless maybe... you’d like to come with me to Walse Falls? It’s really scenic—”

“—yah sure, you betcha.”

“Hey now! I’ll make you eat lutefisk for saying that!”

“Believe I’ll order the trout instead.”

As we’re seated at La Maison she murmurs that if I have a present to give her, I mustn’t do it here. “Then they’d know it’s my birthday and bring out a cupcake and make

me blow out its candle in front of everybody. I would just *die*.”

Her couple of drinks translate into six frozen daiquiris, half of them peach and half banana. Her food she barely touches. The result is kittenish, at first; then increasingly antsy. That hectic little laugh. With a fidgety flourish she removes her wedding and engagement rings and throws them into her purse.

“Today I am no longer a Formi. As of right this very minute, I’m Judi Dahl again. Oh thank you—” to the waiter, serving daiquiri number five.

“I’ll still call you Dee,” I say.

“You better! Dee-e-e-ar. And never ‘Joo,’ no not ever.” Gulp of rummy banana purée. “I always declare inpeden—inpeh?—*independence*, on my birthday. Took off my back brace on my sweet seventeenth... and then that booger Chad *dumped* me.”

“He must’ve been an imbecile.”

“Well I showed him. Three other guys asked me out right away.”

“Good for them. Your fillet’s getting cold—”

“And then on my twenty-fourth, I did it again. Bigtime. Gave up giving him second chances.”

“Who? Marco?”

Another gulp. No pat of lips with napkin. Finger crooked at the waiter. “Just one more, please?... Yes—Marco. If I so much as *glanced* at another man, he’d yell like I was cheating on him. And I NEVER did. But the things he said... finally I couldn’t take it anymore. We were going out, I didn’t want to but it was my birthday and what he says goes, see, so there in the car I blurt that I’m leaving him. And he says... he tells me... if I do, if I leave him, I’m going to end up as a, a, a—”

“Dee—”

“—*crippled old hunchback*.”

Her face goes to pieces. She ups and turns, fumbling blindly for her purse—I hand it to her—get a garbled thanks—before she runs off to the Ladies.

Other diners eye me. So does the waiter, from whom I accept daiquiri number six. Which I’m too designated to drink, badly though it’s needed.

Judith returns, walking very straight and tall. I stand, half-embrace her, hold her chair; she sits.

“I’m so sorry.”

“No, no.”

“I shouldn’t have said anything—”

“No, no—”

“—to *him*. Not before I blew out the candles. Never tell your birthday wish.”

“Well...”

“He was driving. When he said that to me. And then we crashed. But I was thrown clear.”

I take her ringless hand. Seems like the right thing to do. She presses mine, rubbing her thumb over my palm-calluses, and says something I can’t quite hear.

“What?”

“Then he came back. A year later. A year ago. On my twenty-fifth. It was a really bad day and I went to bed early and lay there grinding my teeth. And I saw him. He came back and showed himself to me.”

Shrill giggle: brittle harpstrings.

“How—?”

“I wasn’t dreaming!—not at the time. But I’ve been dreaming about it ever since. Him. It. And now tonight...”

Down goes the sixth daiquiri. Better get her out of here. But then in the parking lot, Judith wants to get behind the wheel.

“I can drive. Give me the key. It’s my car!”

Lightning flashes, she gasps and jumps; I bundle her into the shotgun seat. Now to Sycamore Terrace as fast as possible. Let her just sulk quietly all the way...

“I’m not some dumb jockette, you know! I was an education major! *Je peux parler Français!* AND it’s my birthday!!” She grabs hold of my right arm, digs into it with her nails, starts sliding that hand up—

—and it is two years ago and I am Marco and I have broken this lady’s heart at its most vulnerable point, so that she unbuckles her seatbelt to guarantee mortal-sin oblivion

before reaching over and yanking the wheel, and I feel the car leave my control to veer and smash and throw Judith free, seeing this with my last sight before the final impact—

—and it is now and traffic's light, coming and going, so I chance a direct look into her angry diamonds and go "DEE—"

She looks perplexed. As though another Oasis marker has snapped apart.

"It's just me here, dear."

"I know that," she says. Sliding that hand back down to my elbow and squeezing it.

Hot and muggy and I am all ice. Get her safely home, then borrow the car and escape to Zerfall—

She looks away. "I'll do anything you like if you'll stay with me tonight. All night. With me. And not on the sofa."

Icebreaker.

We make it to Sycamore Terrace. I park the Honda below its cunning little canopy.

"So will you? Please?"

I look at her. "Till you tell me to leave."

She looks at me. "I love you so very much."

"...you better have this, then."

Gift box from NICOLETTE NINGAL / HANDCRAFTED JEWELRY / BETWEEN THE MOON AND JACKDAW SQUARE. Judith perks up, opens it, goes "Ohhhh..." and extends her left wrist. I add my oblong *D & H* to the bangles already there. "Yes," she says. "Oh, yes."

I get out, go over, help her out and up and along. And to Rotwang I offer a bargain:

Look here. I am ready to love this lady. I want to make her happy. I want to share her pleasure. No more hurt should come to her, no more pain be felt. Spare us grief and I swear I will sculpt you the Absolute Woman.

"I knew it was you the whole time," Judith murmurs.

"Well, don't let that bother you."

We enter D9 as the first drops of rain start to fall. Inside, so much black hair is floating around I think the cat must have blown itself up. A hope that's dashed when Noir's head pops out from beneath the sofa, making us both gasp and jump.

Judith bends precariously down to coo at the head, which looks terrified. With the same look in its rancid yellow eyes I like to think was in Johnny Ajahr's when they finished him off. Another rumble of thunder: the ears flatten, the maw opens, and the head retreats.

"My kitty doesn't love me anymore!" wails Judith. "But *you* do, don't you? Let's see how much—"

My only concern about being stripped in her living room is that the beast might leave its lair to deposit mementos in my shoes.

"Smile for me, honey."

I strain instead, my *schweinhund* now a purebred foxhound.

"And you've got a—?"

"Right here, yes ma'am." Roll it on and we're ready to rock.

Her boudoir: my first entrance. Narrow bed beside the window. Air redolent of girly potions, fabric softener, Lemon Pledge. Dominating the room is the antique rosewood armoire, whose immaculate finish and *trompe l'oeil* frieze I would admire at any other time. But Judith has shut the door behind us and started wrestling her dress over her head.

The armoire can wait.

"Need some help?"

"Yah sure, you betcha," from within the dress.

I get it off her and stand there holding it while Judith, tipsily twirling, removes layer upon layer of undergarments. Many a slip 'twixt the skirt and hip. An old-fashioned girl dancing a connubial ballet, piling my arms with white linen and nylon and lace.

Am I beautiful?

Too mild a word.

What am I, then?

You are transcendent.

Smile for me, so you'll be too.

I do.

And despite my foxhound's relentless lookit those! lookit them! lookit that!, I feel surprisingly at ease. As though this has always been our nightly ritual. She is neither a statue nor a robot but a living woman, graceful young intoxicated femininity. And what's

sauce for the goose—

Can I be on top? My spine, you know.

Anything you like. Just have mercy.

Outside the rain falls harder.

Double-snap of leghole elastic—

And then a CRACKLEPOP shakes the room, flickering the lamp. Judith leaps and gets her toes caught, trips over her panties and falls onto the bed, rolling onto her back, arms and legs spread wide—

She can be on top later.

Drop her duds and mount my charge—

“Oh,” she goes.

“My,” she adds.

THUD

THUD

THUD on the door—

“NO!!” she yells in my ear, “HE’S HERE!!”

—thrusting me away from her, altogether out and off and up to stagger back against the door, my hand instinctively turning its knob—

“—DOOOOOOON’T!!—”

—as in flies a dark blur landing between her splayed legs lunging up her front like a sex-starved ghoulish intent on incubussing as it drives her clear up the wall knocking an Our Lady off its shrine empurpling her face as she expels every ounce of breath from powerful swimmer’s lungs in a godawful SCREAM completely drowned out by the

B-W-A-A-A-M-M-M

of a transformer exploding nearby to kill all the lights—

Blackness.

In which I stumble and blunder and spill, trying to find her, to hold onto the sound of her gibbering *HolyMaryMotherofGodprayforussinnersnowandatthehourofourdeath*, but a roaring noise is rising in my ears and—

—curtains, their cord, wrench it off-balance but see no more than I could before—

“Dee? Judi? Judith?”

“GET OUT OF HERE!”

Not near the bed. Within the armoire. Hiding inside it? Search for a latch—

“GO AWAY! I HATE YOU!”

Sounding further away. And then, as if from some abysmal distance:

“LEAVE ME *ALOOOONE*—”

So I do. Though I can’t be sure she’s talking to me.

7

Rozay Is Read

Awake next morning feeling like I'm covered with mold.

Last night her bedroom door locked itself after me. Lucky thing I got stripped in the living room. Power was out there too, switches unresponsive, no air conditioning; but a bit more light to see by. Enough to find most of my clothes.

The roar in my ears continued to rise. Blotting out all else: I went to the kitchen, filled a glass at the tap, drank—but couldn't hear the water running, or myself swallowing, or the empty glass being set on the drainboard.

Only the roar.

I marched over to the bedroom door and knocked three times. Softly or noisily, no way to tell; hard on my knuckles at any rate. The door remained locked.

You don't have to go home, but you can't stay here.

Yet leaving her was out of the question. So onto the sofa after all—though not without trying to peer under it first. Into a gap apparently unoccupied. I sat down, stretched out, prepared to wait till she reappeared. Though the unmoving air was increasingly oppressive. Beyond mugginess. Felt and smelt and tasted more like nox.

You can't stay here.

Up and over to RAP RAP RAP—

—and be engulfed by the R-R-R-R-O-O-O-O-A-A-A-A-R-R-R-R...

Leave nothing behind.

My necktie, still knotted, snaking around her bric-a-brac. Causing disarray as I extricated it from the bite-size flippers and gadgets and ariels.

I at least had to write her a note. At a small tidy desk in one corner of the living room: plenty of stationery but not a pen, not a pencil, not a marker to be seen. She must've turned the lot in to Formi-Dable on her last day. No matter—in my pocket was my trusty Bruynzeel. I used it to charcoal a few words on a sheet of paper that refused to be slid under the bedroom door. Tried again with a second sheet: it crumpled too.

A moment later I found myself outside, in the downpour, her front door locked behind me. Too late to hunt for her purse and Honda key, or even the blue umbrella that matched her coat. What now? Huddle all night on D9's cunning little threshold?

You can't stay here.

The thunderstorm had passed, though rain was still falling. After awhile I started walking home through it. Seven miles or more on Mesher Road; took me three sodden hours. During which I saw no late-night bus, no taxicab, no car of any sort that might possibly have offered a lift.

But the R-O-A-R in my head did begin to subside.

By the time my blistering feet reached Zerfall, I could hear halfway clearly again. Power was restored too, or perhaps Green Creek Lane hadn't been affected. The roar died away as I dragged myself upstairs, sloughed off my waterlogged duds, left them wherever they plopped on the landing. Toweling jadedly as I broke out the bourbon. One shot, two shots, three; tumbling into the sack and down to the bottom of the deep blue sea...

Awake this morning covered with mold, sore in every joint and limb. Not alleviated by a long hot shower or coffee or soup. I keep to the futon as much as possible, attempting to watch videos. *To Have and Have Not?* Pull the other one. *In a Lonely Place?* Consider the alternatives. *Treasure of the Sierra Madre?* Gone with the stinking wind.

Should I phone Knotts? No, by damn! She's got my number; let her do the dialing.

SKRANG goes the screen door. That will be Mrs. Wilson, delivering the Sunday paper's Arts & Entertainment section as she does every week. Groan down and fetch it. For some reason she folded the thing inside-out, so its back page is the first I see: book reviews with mocking titles. *The Demon of Longing*. *This Blinding Absence of Light*. *Disappearing*

Ingenue, for crying out loud. And Io MacEvelyn's unwelcome byline, under the header "A Novel-Length Suicide Note"—

Whoa.

Double eyesnag.

Baseless Mime, by M.I.M. Franzia.

Somebody better be kidding me here.

Ecstatic review. The new Plath, the new Woolf, the new Anne Sexton—even the new Anne Frank. If-only-she-had-lived-longer-what-marvels-might-she-have-given-us. Buried in Io's goop is a brief mention that the late author's mother resisted all efforts to publish this suicide journal till her own recent demise, a quarter-century after her daughter jumped off a bridge into the Kaw River at the age of twenty-one.

Oh my God.

I truly do not want to be reading this right now...

*

When I was five years old, my father went from being an assistant professor at the University of Iowa to an associate professor at the University of Kansas. My impression at the time was that previously he just helped professors, but now would be allowed to hang around with them.

We moved into a beige house (that my half-sister swore was gray) at 830 Alpine Drive (a street my half-sister derided as flatter than sea level) in Lawrence, Kansas (a college town my half-sister announced she hated long before we got there).

It was a tradition in our family that Cassandra had claimed me as her own baby when I was brought home from the hospital. Our mother was happy to encourage this misconception, and I have vague Iowa memories of Cassie treating me as a cross between a large doll and a small dog. By the time we got to Kansas, my novelty had worn off and Cass was treating me as a cross to bear, mightily resenting her role of live-in nanny. But she'd just entered her teens and harbored countless resentments, adding to them all the time. So I quickly learned to play Linus to her Lucy, or Pip to her Mrs. Joe.

Periodically she and our mother had epic battles that mystified my father and me. Sometimes my name would be hauled into the fray—"How could you *do* such a thing when

your little brother was just down the *hall??*” “You *always* take that squirt’s side, you never believe *anything* I tell you!!” An hour later they’d go out shopping arm-in-arm.

“Don’t try to figure it out, son,” my father told me more than once.

Cass claimed him as hers as well. Her own father (“a folksinging fellow traveler”) having vanished from the scene long before I was born, she always addressed mine as Daddy—usually in aggrieved tones, and sometimes stretched out to five syllables.

Despite her derision, Alpine Drive was more slanted than flat. Its back yards sloped down toward a thicket of locust and hickory trees (known locally as “the woods”) so that all the back doors were several feet aboveground, and each house had a set of backstairs.

“Make sure he doesn’t go down those backstairs by himself, Cassie,” said my mother.

“Listen, Dwarf! Don’t even *think* of going down those backstairs by yourself, ‘cause if you fall down them you’ll have to spend the rest of your life in an IRON LUNG!”

First chance I got, I went down those backstairs by myself. Ridiculously easy if you held onto the banister. But aside from the slope and the woods, I thought our new back yard was unremarkable.

Then I saw a little girl next door struggling to pull a tricycle up *her* backstairs.

“Hello,” she said.

“Hello,” I said.

“My name is Rozay. I’m subject to fits.”

Which I took to mean she had her clothes specially made. Such as the miniature Laura Petrie outfit she was wearing: sleeveless top and Capri pants. I told her my name, and she made a face.

“I don’t like that. Just the first letter. I’m going to call you ‘Aitch.’ Can you help me with this?” There was no fence between our yards, just a low scrubby hedge not difficult to squeeze through. “You hold that end,” I was instructed, and together we lugged the tricycle up to her back door.

“Are you going to take it inside?” I asked.

“No,” said Rozay.

Climbing onto the trike, she rode it dramatically down the stairs and somersaulted over its handlebars at the bottom. Not by intent, it seemed.

“Owww,” she went, sniffing away tears. “Owww...”

I stared aghast, sure that a mob would form to blame me, a boy, for a girl’s getting hurt in my presence—unless I acted fast. Recklessly ignoring the banister, I hurried down to her. “Are you okay?”

Rozay was examining a bad scrape on one elbow. “Doesn’t look like it’ll bleed much,” she said. Fixing me with dewy but narrowed eyes for a second, she held out her other hand. I took it and helped her up.

“Was that a fit?” I asked.

“No! That was a *sperriment*.”

Which reminded me I had a pack of Beech-Nut gum in my pocket, and that it might be a nice absolving gesture to offer her a stick.

“Thanks,” she said. “I’ll chew it later. Come in while I get a Band-Aid.”

As we entered her kitchen, a lady with a lot of high-piled hair came up from the basement with a basket of laundry. “Mary Iris? What was all that racket?”

“Nothing much,” Rozay told her, and “In here,” to me. Using my shoulder as support, she climbed onto the toilet lid to rummage in a medicine cabinet, handing me down a bottle of iodine, a box of cottonballs, a tin of bandages. “This is Aitch. He’s new next door,” she told the lady with high-piled hair.

“Er, hello,” I mumbled.

“What did you do? Let me see!”

“I’ve *got* it, Mother,” said Rozay, applying iodine to her own elbow; we both winced.

“Was it that boy?” demanded her mom.

Great, I thought—*now* would come the accusations. But Rozay turned from the Band-Aid tin to say, “She doesn’t mean you.”

“Oh of course not, sweetie,” said her mom, patting my head.

“And I just slipped off my trike is all,” said Rozay. “Can Aitch and I have a snack in my room?” To me: “My mother’s a nextlent cook.”

“What’s ‘nextlent?’” I asked, following her down a hallway.

“You mean like church?”

“You said your mom was a nextlent—”

“Oh. That means very good. How old are you?”

“Five. And a half. Almost.”

“Well, *I’m* about to turn six,” she said. With a lofty-learnèd air I would come to know well.

“You said your name was Rozay,” I retorted.

“It is.”

“Then why’d she call you ‘Mary Iris?’”

“That’s what my mother calls me. My dad named me ‘Rozay.’ And *this* is how you spell it,” she added, displaying the cover of a Big Chief tablet on which **ROZAY** was carefully printed. “*Not* with an S and an E.”

Even then, when she was six and I was five-and-a-half (almost), I knew her to be unusually pretty. Fine dark Mediterranean features. Black hair drawn back in a ponytail. Black eyes forever narrowing, focusing, concentrating on you or whatever else they looked at. Obviously a little girl, with a child-sized child’s face; but its expression was one I associated with grownups.

I’d never seen a kid’s bedroom so severely organized as Rozay’s. Everything in it looked double-extra starched. Her mother brought in a tray with an actual teapot and two cups on it, plus a plate of pretzellike crackers I was told were *taralli*. As she placed the tray on a small round table, she gave us an odd glance; then another, longer one as she left the room. Rozay noticed this too, and started giving me odd glances of her own as she poured our tea. “Come stand here a second,” she said, going to a mirror on the wall. I went over and stood beside her, and we regarded ourselves.

We looked alike.

Not identically, but still—same height, same color hair (mine shorter, of course) and similar expressions: the same kind of solemn intensity. And while I would refute ever having been “pretty,” in those days I *was* unusually cleancut.

“Hmmm,” said Rozay.

At which moment we heard Cassandra’s piercing voice as she hollered my name. I had gone missing, was in for it now. Excusing myself, I hurried out through the kitchen with Rozay at my heels.

“Here I am,” I called over the hedge.

“And you should call him AITCH,” added Rozay.

Cassie stared at us. “Oh good grief, now there’s *two* of them!”

*

The Franzias were the first couple I’d heard of who lived in two separate houses. During the week Rozay stayed with her mother at 832 Alpine Drive. On Friday afternoon Mr. Franzia would pick her up, and she’d spend the night and Saturday at his place north of town—unless Mr. Franzia was “under the weather,” which he seemed to be fairly often. (Heir to no winemaking fortune, he contributed to the profits of distilleries.)

Very early in our acquaintance, Rozay informed me that her father had acted in a couple of recent films. One was a “business movie” about the Reuter factory where he worked, testing pipe organs for churches. The other, she said, was a “ghost movie.” To me that meant sappy Casper and his feeble cartoons. Not till twenty years later, watching late night TV, did I realize she meant *Carnival of Souls*. Near the end of its opening credits, in very small type: RICHARD FRANZIA. And there he was—narrow-visaged, like his daughter—ogling Candace Hilligoss in a scene at the organ factory. His two words of dialogue were straight out of the Chico Marx phrasebook: “Okay, boss.”

That was the first and only time I saw Mr. Franzia. Our paths never crossed during my years in Kansas, except once—under circumstances that might not have been the worst imaginable, but came pretty damned close.

Back to the beginning. Mrs. Franzia had a word with my mother, who told me not to be surprised or upset if Rozay ever appeared to get “ill,” but to run find the nearest adult. And very soon I witnessed my first fit: Rozay knocking a flowerbox off her porch railing as she fell over and flailed about. I duly ran and fetched her mom, who was impressed by such level-headed behavior from someone about to enter kindergarten. Judging me to be a reliable Nice Boy, she sanctioned my being Rozay’s playmate and (unspoken) caretaker. But since I often suffered from asthma—the attacks were especially bad in those years—Rozay was able to contend that she was *my* caretaker, as befitted her eight-month seniority. When I had to stay flat on my back indoors, she would come over and read to me. Explaining anything she felt I didn’t understand, even when I said I did.

For a lofty-learnèd girl subject to fits, Rozay was welcome company and seldom annoying. I felt comfortable with her, at ease—fulfilled, even. As if we'd moved here so she could be part of my life: the half-sister I was intended to have all along.

Mrs. Franzia and my mother were soon close friends. Rozay's mom was the only woman I ever knew who smoked more than my mine did; at kaffeeeklatsches they seemed to compete as to who could fill an ashtray the fastest. They tried hard not to act too cutesy about Rozay and me, but Cassie frequently wanted to know how hot 'n' heavy we were getting, had we set the wedding date and so on. "Now's your chance!" she told me when we went over one Sunday to behold Rozay in what looked like an extra-petite bridal gown.

This (Rozay explained) was a First Communion dress, and wearing it earned her a second middle name. "Monica" got added to "Mary Iris," and she started printing **M.I.M.F.** on her tablet covers. Knowing that my father had been dubbed Chester Alan Arthur Huffman, I felt equally entitled to a second helping; but Rozay said no.

"You're Aitch. Just Aitch. I keep telling you."

The Franzias were Catholic, which I thought involved worshipping fish. Catholicism did entail our attending separate schools: I went to Brown Elementary, never knowing whether it had been named after John the abolitionist or Charlie of *Peanuts* fame—or simply because its bricks and paint were discouraging shades of that color.

Rozay was enrolled at St. Teresa of Avila, which she always called Sane-Trees-of-a-Villa. She disliked most of the other girls there, saying they either "made fun" or were too timidly religious. As for her teachers, she wouldn't confirm or deny a rumor spread by Snaggle Feist (a dentally-challenged classmate of mine at Brown, who was forever getting hit in the mouth by baseballs or tripping facefirst onto concrete). Snag said if you weren't a Catholic and ventured too close to St. Teresa of Avila, nuns would come out and beat you up.

"Why do you *listen* to people like that?" was all Rozay would say.

She debunked a lot of my notions about what young girls, especially pretty ones, thought and felt and did. No interest in playing house or with dolls, though she once cut open a Chatty Cathy to analyze its voicebox. No obsession with clothes or shoes or hairdos, though she was almost always immaculate: every starchy stitch and strand in place. No fear of bugs, worms, or rodents; she took the lead whenever we explored the Woods at the foot of

our backyards. Nor was she a conventional tomboy—we studied trees without climbing them, and never played catch or ran around yelling. Instead we built immense edifices out of Lincoln Logs, Tinkertoys, and Legos. (Rozay was the visionary, I handled engineering.) We dug through World Book encyclopedias in pursuit of Rozay’s ongoing sperriments, each of which got documented in its particular Big Chief tablet.

We were out minding our business one day, inspecting a dead pigeon at the edge of the Woods, when Jerome Gullip came along to throw rocks at it. Jerome was a BIG boy, maybe ten years old, and at least that many feet tall and tons heavy. His franchise as neighborhood bully included not only Alpine Drive but all the blocks surrounding Brown and Sane Trees, whose mingled students would walk to and from school in defensive clumps. According to Jerome, an odd bump in the street contained a kid he’d pitched into a cement mixer for trying to squeal on him. No one doubted Jerome was capable of this, or that he wouldn’t miss an opportunity to “crack our skulls open” (his standard threat).

I hated every one of his numerous guts. He’d go out of his way to administer a punch or kick or Indian burn. Nor was Rozay immune from hassle: Jerome would shove her in passing, and if she hit the ground as a result, that was her fault. I am proud to remember springing to her defense on a couple of occasions. Both times my nose got bloodied, after which I limited interference to helping Rozay stand up.

Once Jerome used a clothesline to tie Rozay and me to a remote telephone pole, leaving us there while he went off to gather firewood (he said). I knew it was my duty to be a hero and rescue us both, but I only succeeded in proving that rope can abrade human skin. And worrying that Rozay might have a fit. But she was stoic throughout the ordeal, speculating aloud as to how long we might survive if Jerome didn’t return to burn us at the stake. (Cassie and her boyfriend drove by and freed us before that question got answered.)

Nothing Jerome ever did or said seemed to ruffle Rozay. He would call her a dago, guinea, goombah, wop; her rejoinder was always “I’m Greco-Roman.” Jerome had a bunch of slurs for me too, some of which required clarifying.

“Dad, am I a Jew?” I asked after one encounter.

My father glanced up from the physics papers he was grading. “If people ask, son, just say you’re Unitarian.”

“What’re Unitarians?” I asked Rozay.

“They live on a planet between Saturn and Uranus,” she said. Not lofty-learnèdly, since it was early summer and we were the same age. Come August she would jump ahead and resume the role of elder; then the following spring I would catch up and be her peer again.

When Rozay was eight and starting third grade (and I was seven-and-a-half and starting second), our mothers began working at the University—mine on her master’s degree, and Mrs. Franzia part-time in the Dean’s office. Everyone’s schedules were coordinated so Rozay and I could go to one or the other of our houses any day after school, and find either a mom or Cassie or Rozay’s grandmother YiaYia (who had high-piled hair too, tinted blue).

One October afternoon Rozay and I were walking up my driveway, she in her Sane Trees jumper that I’d thought was green plaid till she called it “black watch.” Rozay was explaining exactly how and why she’d been chosen to recite “*Tengo un gatito nuevo, su nombre es Pepe*,” on educational TV, when she fell silent in mid-Spanish.

I turned and found her staring hard at nothing—then collapsing to her knees on the pitiless gravel—then flopping onto her back. Head striking the pavement, inadequately cushioned by her ponytail. Hands grabbing hold of her skirt and petticoat, yanking them both to her chin. And there she lay with Lollipops exposed to God and the neighborhood: shaking, quaking, doing unstarched things before us all.

I tried to yell for help, but no sound came out.

So I took a rock and heaved it through my painted-shut kitchen window. The first time in my life I threw anything that hard, that far, or that accurately.

“WHAT THE HELL JUST HAPPENED??” shrieked Cassandra from her room upstairs.

“Rozay’s sick bad!” I managed to croak.

Cassie, I knew, would lose no time in calling a doctor, fetching a first-aid kit, and arriving to take command of the situation. Meanwhile I reached to pull down Rozay’s skirt—and froze. No! If I so much as touched one pleat, Cassie would catch me in what she’d think was the red-handed act. But if I left Rozay as she was, others who heard the window smash might run up and see her. Suppose it was Jerome!! What should I do??

Pull it down.

Hunh?

No one'll see. Pull it down, NOW.

I wrenched the hem out of her clutching fingers, smoothed the skirt over her poor wounded knees, flung my jacket on top for good measure, and was kneeling at a protective distance when Cassandra burst onto the scene.

Told you so.

“Don’t worry, kiddo, she’ll be okay,” said Cass. “The doctor’s on his way, and her mom—hey, maybe you better lie down too. You’re white as a sheet.”

That evening my mother rebriefed me on Rozay’s condition, while my father delivered a brief lecture on alternatives to windowbreaking as a means of summoning assistance.

Rozay herself, slowed but not stymied by convalescent knees, spirited me away a few days later to a secluded spot in the Woods, deep among the locusts and hickories.

“All right,” she said, tablet in hand, “tell me what happened. And don’t say ‘don’t think about it,’ like everybody else does. I need to know!”

What had her face looked like? Did it change expression? How about after she fell down? Were her eyeballs rolled back, all white? Had she frothed at the mouth?

My answers were less than articulate, and I kept skirting certain occurrences till Rozay threw down her pencil. “You’re keeping something from me! They always do, all of them, but *you* can’t. Now what is it?” Suddenly: “Did you *see* anything?”

“Oh, er, uh, well...”

“Aitch! Did you SEE anyth—”

“Yes! Yes, I did!”

Rozay closed her eyes and sat silent for so long I became apprehensive. Then, briskly: “Well, you better go ahead and show me yours. Just so we’re even.”

“What, here?”

“Right now.”

And there in our sylvan hideaway I dropped trou in front of the Girl Next Door. Who surveyed me for what felt like an hour, and began a fresh page of notes.

“What’re you writing?” I demanded as I repantsed myself.

“None of your beeswax!” she replied. Tearing out the page, folding it over, and sticking it down the front of her blouse. Which she then had to tuck inside her waistband, so the page would stay put.

We left the Woods and started back upslope. “Did you...?” I began, and faltered.

“Did I what?”

“Did you... *say* anything to me, when you were... uh, having your... fit?”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about,” sniffed Rozay.

But then, inside my head: *Can you hear me?*

I stopped in my tracks and stared at her. “That is KEEN!” I said (ever hep to the jive).

“Do it again!”

If you’re not making believe, tell me what I’m saying.

“Tell you what you’re saying,” I paraphrased.

And Rozay smiled. A thing she did far too seldom for such a pretty girl. Her baby teeth and their permanent replacements were both very small, very white. And could fill her face with delight, when she let them.

So what did I say when I was having the fit?

“Don’t you remember?”

It doesn’t work that way. More like a dream.

I told her what she’d told me, and what I’d done, and what happened after.

She started rubbing her forehead, but smiled again. *I’m glad it was you. I mean, I’m glad you can hear me.*

“What does it feel like?”

As if I’m climbing a ladder. I stay “(sigh) where I am, but my mind goes up or down.”

“Can you show me how?”

“I don’t know. We’ll have to try.”

Living as we did in an age of domestic witches and genies, talking horses and favorite Martians and dead mothers reincarnated as vintage cars, we were excited but not astonished by this. If we *had* been granted a superpower, we figured it was no more than our due: I with

my asthma and she with her fits.

But till we began this new sperriment I didn't realize how many different fits Rozay was subject to. Impatient fits, peremptory fits, dictatorial fits. I'd try to offer a suggestion and "We haven't got time for that!"—there were tests to conduct, trials to perform, tablets to fill with data. Could I hear her if my eyes were shut? If I faced away from her? At a distance? How far? Hold this tape measure while she checks. What if I were in a different room, on a different floor, in my house while she was in hers? Could I only receive words, or also see any pictures she might send me? And most critical of all: could I transmit thoughts to Rozay? Use these cards she copied out of a library book—star, circle, square, wavy lines. Bear my mind down on the symbol I see and say its name to her. No; try again. Harder! "Oh, you're not even concentrating!"

I already *had* a Cassandra in my life, for crying out loud. I didn't need another one making me learn how to scuba dive without a snorkel.

Finally the day came when I pitched a fit of my own. Conjuring up a vivid image of Rozay asprawl in my driveway, and hurling it between her narrow black eyes. Which snapped wide open as she stepped forward to slap me across the chops with her dainty little hard-as-nails hand.

I'll never speak to you again.

Whirl on her heel and begone.

What I did then still makes me cringe to remember. At least I restricted my groveling to telepathy, bombarding next door through the night with apologetic penitence. I said she was the prettiest girl I'd ever known personally and the smartest and most wonderful, and I could only hope when we grew up she might accept me as a genuine boyfriend but knew there wasn't much chance of that since I was so much younger, so far behind her, and she'd have her pick of all the older guys.

In short, I made an abject wuss of myself. If only in my own mind.

But she reappeared the following day.

"You can be so silly sometimes," she said primly. "Here, let me see—" Taking my head in her two hands (soft and gentle now) and leaning in to assess the bruise she'd wrought upon my cheek.

Which she gave a tiny peck.

That'll make it all better.

And may I be damned if it didn't.

*

The home screenings began a few months later: part of my mother's film studies that ultimately led to her career as a movie critic. She got the most she could out of each rental, playing every feature several times, though our projector often balked at rewinding.

None of the films she screened were quite suitable for children, yet Rozay and I got to see nearly all of them. One of the first was Hitchcock's *Spellbound*, where Gregory Peck startled us by telling Ingrid Bergman, "We'll look at some sane trees, normal grass, and clouds without complexes." We also looked at *Wild Strawberries*, *Black Narcissus*, Cocteau's *Orphée*—and *The Innocents*, from which we derived our everlasting catchphrase "IT WAS ONLY THE WIND, MY DEAR." Plus new characters to cast ourselves as, especially when Cassandra escorted us places. No longer did we play Jane and Michael to her almighty Mary Poppins; now she was the hung-up Governess to our Flora and Miles. And the focus of our scrutiny as we conducted a new sperriment in what Rozay called "esping." (I preferred the term "underhear," but that got vetoed as verging on indelicate.)

We'd established that neither of us could impinge uninvited on the other's thoughts—or at least that I couldn't on Rozay's. (She *said* she couldn't on mine.) But what about outsiders? Cassie was a handy target, and we kept tabs on some of her stealthier activities—cigarettes, alcoholic beverages, college boys. Taking refuge when necessary in our *Innocents* roles, staring at Cass with self-possessive otherworldly fleers on our faces.

As Miles told the Governess: we weren't mind readers, but we did *sense* things. Accurately enough to keep Cassie in hot water for weeks at a time. Prompting her to denounce us as weird little snitches, spying finks, and "Wednesday and Pugsley."

We were tempted to try a similar approach with Jerome Gullip, but feared his mental vacuum might trap our esping-selves inside his brain. Instead, after watching *Metropolis*, I offered my tentative prayer that Rotwang "do something" about Jerome—who stole a Vespa scooter the very next day and drove it, plus most of himself, under the wheels of a UPS truck.

At Brown we all had to donate to buy a wreath for Jerome's funeral.

Most gratifying dime I ever spent.

But my mother's you-kids-probably-shouldn't-be-seeing-this conscience kept smiting her, till Rozay and I got banished midway through Peter Brook's *Lord of the Flies*. To see how it turned out, we "borrowed" Cassie's copy of the book and read it together, saddened but not surprised that Simon (with his fits) and Piggy (with his asthma) got brutally killed before The End.

"I guess some of us just have rotten luck is all," I said.

"All nothing," said Rozay. "There ought to be more to The End than a lot of sobs and darkness."

An alternative came to light with tickets to *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever*, a road show knee-deep not only in psychic phenomena but reincarnation (a feat apparently not unique to *My Mother the Car*). And when Rozay was given an electric organ for her tenth birthday, she set out to master *On a Clear Day's* entire score. No mundane "Heart and Soul" for Rozay Franzia.

*

My half-sister left town the night of her high school graduation. Shedding cap and gown and pinning honest-to-God flowers in her hair, Cassie announced she was taking off with some friends for San Francisco. Our mother blew her stack, and a battle royal began. Mrs. Franzia hustled Rozay and me away to the Castle Tea Room where we were all supposed to adjourn. Some of my aunts came too, bringing Gramps Rhine (who said we could all use a stiff belt) but neither of my parents appeared and certainly not Cassandra. When I got home, Dad was sitting alone reading Rutherford's *Radioactive Substances*.

"Try to be quiet when you go upstairs," he told me. "Your mother's... resting."

Cass did go to California, where she experienced most of what the later Sixties had to offer. I can't say I especially missed her, but in her absence things did start to go out of whack between my mother and father, and between them and me. Even between myself and Rozay, now that we were ungovernessed. That stupid Hammond organ demanded more and more of her attention—that is, when she wasn't spending more and more time at her father's house in the country—that is, a place I was never invited to visit and a part of her life I knew

nothing about—

That August she turned eleven and jumped at the chance to accompany her dad on a trip to Genoa. Her Greco-Romanness was manifesting itself: she'd started sprouting breasts and hips, plus an *arrivederci* derrière that all the neighborhood ladies merrily predicted would get pinched left and right. A prospect Rozay dismissed airily when I went over to wish her *buono viaggio*. She promised me lots of postcards and opportunities to test intercontinental esping.

How can I try when I won't know where you are?

Well, I know where YOU are; so there you go.

Hugging me goodbye, which was not a habit of ours. With me uneasily (not yet acutely) conscious of her sproutings, and how warm she felt, and how nice she smelled.

I received no postcards. Nor any messages after an initial *Testing 1-2-3, we are at the airport*. Nor did she return on time, which freaked out her mother and YiaYia. Not till three days into the new school year did Rozay come back, all *ciao* and deep olivaceous tan and so many layers of Audrey Hepburn sophistication I would've been sick to my stomach, had I not sensed something else.

Are you okay?

Of course.

C'mon, something's the matter.

You wouldn't understand.

Sure I would. Now what is it?

"Only the wind, my dear."

Flesh and blood and the sandman, whistling down the wind.

I might not have understood, but I could sure as hell be jealous of any supplanters. No doubts by now that she could have her pick—though if I knew Rozay, she'd probably go for some fitful mystic like Simon in *Lord of the Flies*.

Nor was I far wrong. She chose Robert F. Kennedy.

With a sudden constant "Bobby why" and "Bobby wherefore" and "Bobby inasmuch-as-which." What really stuck in my craw was her taking for granted that I was foursquare behind her on this. But her candidate always struck me (and my craw) as a cold-eyed, frosty-

blooded bastard; the type of sandman who'd put you out by funneling grit beneath your eyelids.

He had the gall to open his campaign on the KU campus, right there in River City. You'd've thought the Beatles were parading down Jayhawk Boulevard after winning the Final Four. I found myself trapped on the Field House bleachers by 20,000 demented groupies, with Rozay squealing at my side. It took all my strength to avoid having an asthma attack until the rally was safely over. Rozay had to help me home—solicitous with half her mind, supportive with one of her arms, and full of Bobby-babble every step of the way.

Then he had to go get *shot*, for crying out loud.

When I heard the news I didn't think about him or Ethel or their dozens of children or the future of America, but only how Rozay would react. She'd had no fits for years—none, at least, that I was aware of—thanks perhaps to better medication, or oncoming pubescence, or our telepathic outlet. Now fearing the worst, I sent a variety of solicitous messages next door before going over to check on her in person.

To have Rozay, with eyes dry as sand, tell me aloud that esping was childish, and she would not be doing it any longer.

*

After that there was a gap that only widened. For awhile she got involved with ecology and the environment, enlisting me as her assistant. But despite our efforts and everyone else's on Alpine Drive, the water department chopped down the Woods at the foot of our backyards to lay new sewer pipes. Drainage didn't improve, but Rozay got more morose and unsociable.

Our relationship dwindled to formal occasions, such as her frequent organ recitals. Mr. Franzia was always supposed to come to these and never quite made it—not even to the debut of Rozay's original nocturne, inspired by Alexander Key's *The Forgotten Door*. Her performance excited some coverage in the local press (as did her appearance, “in carnation-colored miniskirt and Marlo Thomas flip”).

Each time I saw her she was a little less recognizable.

The gap between us turned to a gorge when Rozay began her final year at Sane Trees. As an eighth-grader she was entitled to wear a black watch blazer with Bernini's *Ecstasy* as

badge; but one day in October she put on a sleeveless peasant top and Jamaica shorts and went to participate in a campus Moratorium against the war. Trailing me (so much younger, so far behind) in her wake.

Mrs. Franzia had asked me privately to “look after Mary Iris.” I was glad to accept the commission, though uncertain whether I could protect her from drug-crazed collegiate hippies. Or how welcome such protection might be.

A year and a half had passed since the RFK rally, but my companion (if I could still call her that) bore scant resemblance to the little girl she’d been then. She remained a source of lofty-learnèd scholarship, plying me with observations about Nixon and Vietnam and Guerrilla Theater and the Chicago Eight’s trial and whether Paul McCartney was dead.

For my part, I limited observations to the left armhole of Rozay’s loose peasant blouse, through which much of a pink bra cup was visible. Plus much of its olive-tan contents, depending on how Rozay responded to the Moratorium speakers. Less squealing this time than righteous indignation, but a lot more jiggle and jounce.

Thus did I look after Mary Iris. Chiding myself for drinking a whole Mountain Dew and bringing on what felt like an overfull bladder—

Get a good look? popped into my head.

Yes thank you, I replied politely.

You could almost hear a door slam.

Another one opened that night in my solitary bed as I reviewed the events of the day, and physiology advanced to its logical conclusion. Not for the last time, either.

Rozay definitely seemed to avoid me after that. Unwilling to encourage anybody’s wank-fantasies, least of all mine.

Compared to her the girls at Brown Elementary were a measly lot, slow to bloom. Luckily Snaggle Feist’s older brother had a collection of *Playboys* available for rented perusal. (Snag himself won fame, of a sort, by pointing at one centerfold and announcing, “That’s her airbrush.”)

Awkward autumn gave way to unpleasant winter and then an ugly spring: the Days of Rage in River City. There were strikes and sieges and emergency curfews, sniping and firebombing; arsonists burned the KU student union. Without abating at home, the rage

spread nationwide—Kent State, Jackson State, hardhats rioting against war protesters.

It upset my mother dreadfully. She'd lost all track of Cassandra, and her friendship with Mrs. Franzia had lapsed after a quarrel over how NOT to raise a teenage girl. (My own thirteenth birthday, incidentally, got lost in all the *sturm und drang*.) Finally Mom told me to pack a suitcase—we were going to Gramps Rhine's in Terre Haute.

That is, she and I were. "Your father's staying here."

I figured we were being evacuated while Dad bravely held the fort, and we'd return after the dust settled. My father seemed to believe this too, telling me to take care of Mom and counting out extra allowance for traveling expenses. We shook hands at parting, which should've made me feel like a responsible man of affairs.

If circumstances hadn't deteriorated to damn near worst imaginable.

It happened the Friday before Memorial Day. I went down the 830 Alpine backstairs, glancing at where the Woods used to be, then across at 832's empty yard. *Hello*, she'd said; *Hello*, I'd said; almost as many words as we'd exchanged since the Moratorium. *My name is Rozay. I'm going to call you—*

"Aitch."

Sounding subterranean. Halfway, anyway: the rear ends of Alpine Drive basements were at groundlevel. I went through the hedge and into their laundry room and there she was, sorting the wash, looking impossibly grown up in paisley jeans and leopardskin top. Her mother—"Irene," she called her—was at the Dean's office; her father—"Dick," she called him—was under the weather, as he'd been on many another Friday. We had the place to ourselves. The basement radio played "Let It Be" over and over, along with "Come Saturday Morning," "Instant Karma (We All Shine On)," "Love Grows (Where My Rosemary Goes)," and "Up the Ladder to the Roof."

I found her smoking, though not tobacco.

"Can I have a puff?"

"Toke," she corrected me. "No you can't. Your asthma." She finished loading the washing machine, turned it on, turned back to me. "We ought to have a drink. A *buono viaggio* toast." From behind bleach and detergent she produced a full fifth of Smirnoff.

"Where'd you get that?"

“Dick’s house. They’re ‘hidden’ all over. Do you want a drink or not?”

“Sure,” I said, wondering whether it would singe my mouth. “Even though Indiana’s not much of a voyage. And we’ll probably be back in a couple of weeks.”

Her dark eyes narrowed. “You really don’t know what’s going on, do you?”

“Oh, and I suppose you’re going to tell me.”

Rozay tapped out her doobie, poured vodka into plastic glasses. “You’ll understand these things when you get a little older—”

I broke in to remind her I’d caught up again last month, we were both in our teens now so why didn’t she drop it? Which she nearly did with my glass, clapping a dismayed hand over her mouth.

Oh my God I forgot.

You’re damn right you did.

“Well,” she said, clearing mind and throat, “let’s drink to that, then.”

The stuff tasted like insipid medicine, a great disappointment—till I finished my second glassful and found most of my skeleton had gone AWOL. Rozay was perched nearby atop the busy washing machine, gazing at me with indefinite infinitude.

You look older.

You look beautiful. But then you always did... that...

Look—if I do anything—“(sigh) it’s only because we’ll probably never see each other again.”

Why? Are YOU moving away?

“Oh, Aitch,” she sighed again, taking my head in her two hands. *You’re so—*

A sentence never finished, as her lips landed on mine.

Withdrawing after awhile to purse meditatively. I almost expected her to produce a speckle-covered theme book and start jotting notes.

Instead, she unbuttoned my shirt. Then her leopardskin. Reaching back to unclasp her pink bra—my peekaboo catalyst?—which slipped down and off and onto the basement floor. As I might have reacted myself, had I not been anesthetized by Smirnoff.

But it all got etched eternally onto my retinas: her bare breasts, the peace sign and yin-yang and crucifix dangling from a chain just above them, how roseate were her areolae

and how “nip it in the bud” now meant the opposite of what I’d always thought—

She smiled at me. Holding out her arms. *Well, come here—*

Whereupon I did. Without moving any other muscle. Miserably.

What’s the matter?

What do you THINK?

“Oh!” she went. “Well... that’s” *okay: less pressure that way. We can take our time. Irene won’t be home till late. We’ll put your pants through the next wash.*

(Meaning I should take them off? Would she do the same to hers? Could I do the same to hers?)

The washing machine shuddered to a halt, but Rozay made no move to shift its load to the dryer. Instead she took my hands, lifted them up, pressed herself into them. And with that contact came a surge—

—not of static electricity, but more dynamic—

—as my hands touched her bosom and became Hands. Knowing precisely where to go and what to do. How they should bear down, when they should ease up.

My lips rejoined hers and all four were capitalized. She introduced her tongue, I promoted mine, there was twining, there was sealing as we kissed. And caressed. And ached, and strained, and throbbed—and not just with our bodies. In that instant it was disclosed that esping could extend far beyond message-exchange. We vibed together at the edge of singlemindedness: one psyche, one eros, mutual self-possession. Our thoughts merged and thundered toward bright hot enlightenment—

—a prolonged screech on the driveway outside—

—a jarring thump that shook the house—

—a hoarse voice raised in narrow darkness—

Dick!!

Hunh??

It’s my dad, my father’s here, he’s coming inside oh God oh God—

Frantic efforts to pull ourselves not together but apart *oh hurry* stumble and blunder and spin the bottle *oh help me* spill your Smirnoff on the ground footsteps overhead *I can’t I can’t* draw a breath to say “we meet at last, Mr. Franzia” as Rozay imploded with an

—*AITCH*—

writhing on her back anointed with potato juice sightless eyes heaving breasts bucking hips
staring down at black *Friday* glaring up from pink panties no Lollipops these but just as
unstarched as the doorknob turned

—*AITCH*—

Hightail through the basement window, whirl through the hedge and begone.

It was not the proudest moment of my life. Then or since.

I put my brain on lockdown, battened every hatch, plugged my inner ears till I wasn't
in Kansas anymore. All the way to Terre Haute I don't think I inhaled once. Many days and
many miles had to pass before I could believe there wouldn't be any fallout, consequences,
repercussions from my ignominious egress.

But of course there would: karma is as karma does. And it was and it did, and it
came to my attention seven years later. Thanks to the resurfaced Cassandra, then in her
gypsy hogback phase, passing through the Midwest like a nostalgic tornado. Cass phoned
me at college in Wisconsin, saying she was sorry to report that the little weirdo chick I used
to hang out with had come home from Julliard a month or so ago, and jumped off a bridge
into the Kaw River.

"I hear she left a suicide note as long as a novel."

"Well," I said, "I guess some of us just have rotten luck is all."

Not to worry, kiddo; remember this is part of our evolution on the Wheel of Samsara,
passing from one level to the next till we attain Nirvana and can break the cycle. Speaking
of which, she had to go get her Harley serviced. She and Krishna loved me; so long Dwarf.

I hung up and looked around at the sculptures I was trying to create, molding flesh of
clay over wire bones. Feeling muddily mortal about it.

Seeing them all as *lumps*.

And smashing them, one by inert one.

*

Now it's a quarter-century later and I am entering a Borders Books and heading for
New Releases (Non-Fiction) around which customers are clustered, more than you'd expect

this early on a Monday morning. Will they point and whisper “That’s him!” to each other?

They do not. They disperse toward other parts of the store, to the café for espresso and biscotti, without a word or a look at me.

Look for the word.

MIMF.

Author’s holograph on a mustard-yellow cover.

Baseless Mime, by M.I.M. Franzia. Saltear Press. Blurb on the flap: *Why did a beautiful, brilliant music student with a future full of promise choose to die by her own hand at only 21? She gives us the answer in this moving, poignant self-profile that will break your heart and provoke your thoughts.*

Yeedge.

At least there aren’t any photos.

Except for the one on the back of the dust jacket: an edgy young woman with hair cropped gamine-short, giving the camera her best Flora fleer.

Peek at the preface. Girl from Kansas gets whirled away to New York, wows them all at Juilliard, wins acclaim for her *H.D. Sonata for Organ in G Minor* (inspired by the poetry of Hilda Doolittle) before succumbing to the affliction of genius. Returning to her hometown in the boondocks to write this novel-length suicide note, then throwing herself off a bridge and into a river.

Followed by an epigraph from Doolittle’s “Eurydice”:

*If I should tell you,
you would turn from your own fit paths
toward hell,
turn again and glance back
and I would sink into a place
even more terrible than this.*

I purchase the book and hustle it out to the truck. Plenty of room in the parking lot at this hour; no need to leave anytime soon. So open the log of her final sperriment and face up to whatever lies inside.

About this note. I've been told before you take your own life you're supposed to write a note explaining yourself. Testify your testament and say goodbye. Catholic doctrine would have you damning your soul whatever the explanation. Hell awaits, so abandon all hope or go repent your pants off. Aquinas claimed it's better for a woman to be violated than kill herself to avoid violation, "since without consent of the mind there is no stain on the body, as the Blessed Lucy declared."

Trust her to be lofty-learnèd to the end. I flip through the pages and find terms like "eschatological" and "supererogatory." Then three little words jump out to snag my eye:

—till next Lent—

"You mean like church?" I mumble.

Back to the beginning. I steel myself to pore over the text paragraph by paragraph, line by line; but time and again my eyes skim ellipses.

- ☐ *Is he talking about the Lucy who gets gang-staked by four pious men in Dracula? The Skewered Lucy whose head is chopped off and mouth stuffed with garlic?...*
- ☐ *Crossroads burials—suicides, adulterers, the unbaptized—are ready-made Nosferatus, staked to the out-and-out damned spot...*
- ☐ *And lying like Ophelia, her rites maimed and remembrance rueful, having lost her father to what's behind the curtain...*
- ☐ *Call it doubtful, her descent from weeping willow through glassy water to muddy death, so they lay her among the unsanctified...*
- ☐ *Then Hamlet and Laertes leap in after her, onto her, trampling out the vintage of her virgin cants—sweets to the strewments, hey nonny diddle diddle...*
- ☐ *Call us gifted and leave us speechless, groundless, baseless mimes. Hand movements only. And body contortions. I'm used to those—all stops out...*
- ☐ *A mime knows timing but no sense of time. It's as if mimicry provides camouflage, protection from predators by posture and gesture...*

- ☐ *The grayhawks beat dusky wings about you like Tippi in her tollbooth, drowning out the world, dissolving your belonging and trapping you inside...*
- ☐ *Anti-Oz, without an Auntie Em. It's neither a question nor answer. That said, the "get you, my pretty" of the gulchettes is just as painful...*
- ☐ *How it hurts to sleepwalk a tightrope in rose-colored slippers. Adrift in solitary confinement with echoes for intercourse, drainage from dreams...*
- ☐ *Till the little voice inside your head tells you to fly into the night, the blackness against which you will have more fervour, more thoughts that no god can take...*
- ☐ *Amplius lava me ab iniquitate mea et a peccato meo munda me: wash me from my iniquity and cleanse me of my sin (whether I sink or swim, or burn to purge...)*
- ☐ *I don't think I remember how to float. "Thank you for having me" sounds the wrong note. Cruel worlds need no farewell. Harmony is but a knell...*

Then at the bottom of the last page:

Addio, addio, senza rancor. I'd give anything to get out of Anti-Oz altogether. Thrown in a basket, tapping my heels. Closing my eyes as colors cease to exist—sepia is all. Home is like no place. And damnation isn't for everybody, despite what they said at Sane Trees. It's not like you're guaranteed admission. They don't let just anyone in. Chances are you'll flunk the entrance exam.

Finally, going Sartre one smarter:

Hell is overparticular.

I turn back to "About this note" and start over, straight through the unskimmed book. Then once again from beginning to end, this time peering between the lines. But reaching the same conclusion, no matter which way I read it.

There is no mention of me at all.

8

Shaken, Not Stirred

Tap tap goes the mallet.

Chock chock goes the gouge.

Hands are steady but the rest of me feels like a snowglobe in the Fist of Kismet. Like I felt those first weeks in Terre Haute, waiting for comeuppance's other shoe to drop.

*

My Grandfather Rhine was, in his own words, an honest-to-God Indiana boilermaker. (Also partial to drinking the same, and rooting for Purdue's.) Grandma Rhine I never knew; she'd succumbed long ago to cancer, as was the custom in her family. All five of her daughters feared getting it, though not to the point of quitting cigarettes.

"The Rhine Maidens," they called themselves. Each was given a solid respectable *hausfrau* name—Mabel, Clara, Louise, Lillian, Thelma—but with Gramps being an incorrigible girlwatcher and moviegoer, he might have had the Misses Normand, Bow, Brooks, Roth, and Todd in subconscious mind.

My aunts produced a dozen grandchildren—also all girls—with Cassandra making it a baker's dozen. By the time I came along, forty years had passed since Gramps first wanted a boy in the family, and I proved too puny and wheezy for any kind of sporting activities. Or almost any: we did spend a lot of time on the veranda watching the ladies of Terre Haute stroll by. That is, when we weren't admiring latter-day actresses onscreen.

My mother would accompany us to the movies only to end up in another theater watching a different film alone. Her behavior baffled Gramps, but that was nothing new; she'd brought him great pride when she won a full scholarship to Oberlin at the age of seventeen, followed by greater consternation when she hitched up with Cassie's folksinging fellow-traveler dad.

There was never any turning Lillian Rhine aside from whatever she put her mind to. All her friends and even her sisters called her "Rhino"—not because her nose was especially large or sharp, but for the hard-charging attitude she'd displayed since birth. During our time in Terre Haute she kept galloping in and out of town, chasing after bright lights and trying to line up action sequences. Meanwhile my grandfather kept scratching his head.

"Boy, there's only one time you won't be able to understand women. And that's your whole life long."

(Another accurate forecast. Thanks again, Gramps.)

I was less interested in understanding women than feasting my eyes while pressing their flesh. Of course I didn't get beyond fantasy with the engendering Nadja Pankiewicz, but in her art class I did gain a handhold on sculpting in clay. My early productions tended to resemble boobs, so I'd add eyes above the nipple and a fishtail behind to make them look more like bluegills.

Another veranda activity I shared with Gramps was whittling. Hardly needing instruction when given my first pine block and pocketknife, I quickly carved a smooth bulbous oval that *might* have been a fish. In fact I found woodwork so instinctive, so effortless, that I put no great value on it—unlike modeling in clay, which took a lot more exertion.

At Christmas Gramps presented me with a set of fixed-blade knives I still use today. "He may be puny," he told my mother, "but he's got The Hands."

*

After a year in Indiana we rejoined my father, though not (to my concealed relief) back in Lawrence. Instead we moved to Columbia the gem of Missouri, whose university offered Dad a full professorship. He remarked I'd grown so much he didn't recognize me; and from then on my father often seemed mildly puzzled as to who I was.

I wasn't entirely sure myself after enrolling at brand-new Stonehill High School, a complex of interconnected single-story buildings whose banners proclaimed it the

*HOME OF THE FIGHTING QUIXOTES—
THERE ARE NO IMPOSSIBLE DREAMS!*

Not once in four years did they assign me consecutive classes in nearby rooms. I ran myself winded getting from one to the next, up and down those interconnected corridors and around Coach Sparger's goddamned cindertrack. The result (besides wheezing) was discombobulation.

My mother, however, was ecstatic to be in a college town again. She immersed herself in the MU campus swim, sprinting home from one faculty fest to bubble: "Do you know a girl named Crystal Smithson? Well, she sure likes you!"

Intriguing news (which I'd've preferred hearing from somebody else). This girl who sure liked me: did she hail from the Black Lagoon? Or could she possibly be a breather?

Crystal Smithson turned out to be the Tall Chick at my workstation in art class. Fairly nice-looking, but painfully shy. In childhood she'd suffered from a Cindy Brady lisp that made uttering her own name a torment. By age fourteen she was burdened with braces she tried never to reveal, and a height of nearly six feet she could do nothing to hide. Plus a blush that matched the vivid tomato shade of her long red hair. When she saw me the day after our parents met, Crystal's entire head turned the color of catsup.

As I said: intriguing.

"Wanna have lunch?" I asked her.

"With me?" blinked Crystal.

"No, with *me*," I replied. The suave new kid in town.

She tagged along diffidently to the cafeteria. Whether Crystal really sure liked me at that time I never found out. She would admit only to blurting my name when quizzed by her folks about boys in high school. Falling silent for the rest of the meal; scarcely opening her mouth even to eat. So I took a stab at tuning into any emanated vibes, and got:

—stupid—clumsy—homely—hopeless—stupid—clumsy—homely—hopeless—

Chant that mantra. I liked the use of *homely*. Unlike *ugly*, it implied some degree of self-worth—even a touch of vanity. Say about her vivid red hair. Which I asked if I could use for my first art project. Which alarmed Crystal until I explained “as inspiration.”

“It’s natural, you know, my own real color,” she muttered.

“Glad you don’t have to send away for it,” I said.

Her mutters turned to titters, and my reputation as a laconic wit took root.

*

The other students at our workstation exemplified two of the three syllables in Stonehill High. Link Letterman (related to neither celebrity) would blaze up anything remotely flammable, and Nancy “Green Springs” Ghillie was the only person I ever heard of who could mellow out on ditchweed.

The four of us joined the school Art Club on the insistence of Crystal’s best friend Elizabeth Erpe, a poisonous shrew with an adequate singing voice who discovered the Music Club was rife with controlled substances. Music and Art were born allies (they took part in dramatics, we painted their sets) and jointly formed a stoner auxiliary called Our Gang. I could only smoke in the secondhand sense and Crystal was afraid to inhale, however much peer pressure Elizabeth applied; so Nancy baked us her soon-to-be-famous Green Springs hash brownies (ditchweed-free).

They made discombobulation a lot more palatable.

But didn’t enhance my esp-ability, which faded into static.

Certainly I had no success subliminalizing Crystal. *Give yourself to Aitch! He will reward you with orgasms!* Nothing doing. She was pleasant enough company, deferential as to where we might go and what we might do there—except for “bed” and “boff.” Willing to hug and kiss and sometimes be fondled, especially when green-sprung. But not to jettison her virginity or help me overcome mine.

It didn’t help that I was 5’1” when we met, achieving only 6¼ additional inches (eventually above, relentlessly below) by way of growth-spurt. Crystal’s father, a professor of astronomy who could have expressed himself celestially, called us “Mutt and Jeff.” Even Our Gang, whose remarks tended to sound hilarious or profoundly insightful, would say: “Wow... you two, it’s like... she is like... so much *taller* than you, man...”

We were neither the other's ideal sweetheart. She mooned after basketball players; my eye kept getting snagged by shorter, darker, narrower-eyed girls. I occasionally worried that Crystal might find someone else and I'd end up with toxic Elizabeth. But no one better fell for either of us, so we kept going together. Farther afield as we got our driver's licenses and could hang out around the MU campus. Many an evening was spent at art-house cinemas, watching Fellini and Bogart movies for the first time.

One place Crystal and I never went was to school dances; we got enough Mutt-and-Jeff commentary as it was. But when she yearned for a venue in which she might wear a junior-prom evening gown, I bought us tickets to opening night of Britten's *Turn of the Screw* at the New Mizzou Opera. There we got a loge to ourselves, which made canoodling a distinct possibility once the lights dimmed. And when they did—

—I felt a sharp pang. As if of displacement.

"What's the matter?" Crystal whispered.

"Nothing," I said.

The production was typical New Mizzou: outré for outré's sake. The children were costumed like the Jetsons, while Quint and Miss Jessel wore shrouds of foil and tossed a black volleyball back and forth. Enough eeriness seeped through that I grew concerned whether Crystal would be put off, to the point of not putting out.

At which moment I found her giving me her hand.

And not for me to hold.

My first thought was: *This is a rented tux!*

While onstage Miss Jessel sang: *I shall come closer, closer /and more often.*

But when the lights went up Crystal seemed to emerge from a state of mesmerization, and everything immediately below the navel was again off limits.

By our senior year all gloss was gone from Fighting Quixoteland, leaving nothing *but* impossible dreams. Yet Crystal Smithson strode confidently through the maze of interconnected corridors, shedding her braces and sometimes her bra; she even inhaled now and then. I take credit for none of this, other than being a passable stand-in boyfriend.

For her eighteenth birthday I got a block of cherrywood and carved her a bust—as I told her more than once, to make her titter. As before, sculpting in wood was such a natural

snap I didn't rate it too highly. Did I capture Crystal's essential image, blending shy with bold and preserving it in *Prunus serotina*? Maybe so, but without breaking a sweat.

And cherry bust or no, she *still* wouldn't sleep with me.

We corresponded for awhile after graduation. Crystal went to UCLA, got a degree or two in seismology, and last I heard was teaching college students about rocking their world. Good for her. I wouldn't mind seeing her bust again—the wooden one, that is. Not so much her own, after twenty-seven years of wear and tear.

*

Once upon a time there was a bashful beer baron who gave his fortune to fine arts, always anonymously. After Gerhard Liederkrantz's beneficent death, they plastered his name over an institute in Madison, Wisconsin. I opted to go there for college because of its laidback attitude toward figurative art, which elsewhere enjoyed much the same respect as Rodney Dangerfield.

Laidback was the theme of the mid-Seventies, and casual were its variations. One quick casualty at Liederkrantz was my chastity, thanks to sandy-haired Bonnie Pattering and her luminous lime-colored eyes. Plus a sun-kissed gymnast's body that she put to bountiful use. If her unspoken ambition was to boink everyone at that institute, who were we to say her nay? Least of all me, to whom Bonnie (a native of Knob Noster) took an early shine as a fellow Missourian. *SHOW ME* read her snug gold crop-top the day we first conversed.

"What does the 'H.' stand for?" she wanted to know.

"The eighth letter of the alphabet," I told her.

"What's it stand for *besides* that?"

"Hydrogen, enthalpy, and Planck's constant."

"You are so weird!" said Bonnie, not without delight. Nothing she did ever lacked that element—bliss, felicity, euphoria, what have you. Let's see how many euphoric cookies we can pop in a single sandy-haired hayroll!

I hit sandy hay on three separate occasions with Bonnie Pattering. Jubilantly at first, given her exuberant glee; the second time she kept pausing to call me names starting with H and watch for my reaction. Our third time she pulled this stunt during the deed itself, panting a series of H-names into my ear while doing her pelvic best to hotbox the answer out of me.

But Bonnie's best was far too good for this purpose—I was way beyond verbalizing, unless *Uhhhhhhh* counts as a verb.

She decided to label me Herkimer (after her favorite pet rock) and move along, bringing joy to other Liederkranzers. One uptight lithography major denounced Bonnie as “promiscuous,” which was like accusing a Good Humor truck of fostering juvenile delinquency. She just laughed and sang a ditty about there being safety in numbers, the more the merrier and so forth. (This was still possible in the Seventies, that fleeting interlude between the claps of old and high-fives on the horizon.)

After we moved out of the dorm I saw Bonnie less often, though she'd always greet me with a Herkimer-smooch when we ran into each other. Her affability never flagged, and at commencement she was given a not-a-joke award for outstanding achievement in interdisciplinary art. We stood and cheered her thirty-times-three; she looked blissful yet accustomed to receiving plaudits.

I lost all track of Bonnie Pattering after college, and have no idea whether she settled down or came to grief or continues popping cookies to this day. But if there's a luminous field in Casual Elysium, she deserves a lime-colored place there.

*

When I saw my attempts to sculpt in clay were lumpish, I disposed of them and turned to wood. In search of relief. As in *A Perfect Fit*. Locust and hickory weren't readily available, so I used basswood from a linden tree to carve the spirit of First Lost Love, fixed in midwrithe on an underpinning open hand.

Making it a Hand. And me a sculptor, more or less.

My parents by this time had filed for no-fault divorce and gone their individual ways. After graduation I could have resumed puzzling my father in Columbia MO, or joined my mother in the Bronx where she'd begun freelancing movie critiques. But I landed a job in Milwaukee and a space of my own at a converted foundry called the Strichleiter Lofts. And there—

—never mind what happened there.

Skip ahead a few years to Chicago, where I saw the Friendly Ghost.

Dr. Harvey's psychiatric office employed a string of receptionists who all seemed to be auditioning for women's-prison roles. I mentioned this to the F.G., who spent the rest of that session discussing the performances of Eleanor Parker in *Caged* and Glynis Johns in *The Weak and the Wicked*.

Then Vicki made her debut behind the reception desk. Vicki Volester: rhyming with "bolster," not "molest her." Precariously balanced between the beautiful and grotesque, like so much else in the Eighties.

She was another short dark narrow-eyed lady, the one who doused herself with White Linen before putting on outfits made of pure polyester. Plus fashionable shoulder pads that would have been outsized on one of Da Bearssss. But Vicki maintained a sort of balance (precariously) by having her hair biggified, permed up and poufed out till it doubled the scope of her smallish slightish noggin.

The same tottery alignment extended down to the soles of her feet. Everything about Vicki was a trifle off-kilter or just about to skew. Her disposition, for instance: squinting at us through tiny slits in bristling mascara, her mouth screwed tight as a pickle jar. But if she dialed a wrong number or mispronounced your name or knocked over her pencil cup, those eyes and that mouth would twitch open and hang agape. A hand might wander across her face to fiddle with an earring, while her lower half shifted from restless cheek to cheek in a chair that could've used a drop of oil.

"PLEASE quit squeaking!" cried an anguished patient one dog day afternoon. I thought Vicki's jaw was going to dislocate off her head and run for its life.

Squirmy McWriggle. I started arriving long before my scheduled appointments—not to stare at her, not to ogle, just gaze idly at Vicki's slender hands and rounded cheeks in perpetual motion. Fussing with her neckline. Tugging at her skirt. Shrilling in her chair. Giving me furtive little glances: was I still looking? What did I have in mind? How did it make her feel? I noticed she never went to lunch or on break while I was around, or lodged a complaint against me with the Young Receptionists Self-Defense League.

Then one day I felt a sudden tapping, as if a swarm of bats was flapping roundabout my inner ears. Except this swarm wasn't all bats—there were butterflies among them, as many or more, adding their flicks to the batflaps.

They were the first things I'd underheard in well over a decade.

So I quickcarved a panel showing the Friendly Ghost playing canasta with Freud, to mark one year of our making no progress together. As expected, he asked Vicki to hang it in the waiting room. As anticipated, it got her all agog. And when she worked up enough nerve to broach the subject of sculpture—

—before she knew it I was escorting her to a well-timed retrospective at the MCA of John de Andrea's life castings.

"They're all nayyyyked!!" exclaimed Vicki. (Agitation brought out the chiCAHgo in her.) "They look just like real peeepeople! That are nayyyyked!"

"It's one approach," I said, contrasting De Andrea's attractive starko figures with Duane Hanson's clothed dowdies and George Segal's spookier apparitions.

"Guys too??" Vicki gasped, catching sight of lifesize men among the lifelike women. Goggling at their polyvinyl wangs as though she'd only been exposed to Ken-doll crotches till now. "Do you make statues like these?" she whispered.

"No, I don't cast in molds. I carve my pieces out of wood."

"Pieces? Who do you carve them... like?"

"Whoever snags my eye."

Vicki's sidled over to find mine upon her, and not just gazing idly. Oh Gahd! No no no we mustn't, I was a payyytient, she worked for my doctor, she shouldn't even be here with me, it was wrong. And besides—she knew she wasn't in the same league as these women, even if she could be talked into undressing which she couldn't so forget it 'cause she would DIE OF SHAME at being seen like that by complete strangers or even worse people she knew, did I think she was pretty?

"I think you're gorgeous."

"But do you think I'm *pretty*?"

Dark dazzle fueled by embarrassed fascination. Attracted but affronted, afraid yet attuned. I nobly offered to seek a different shrink, but Vicki wouldn't hear of it. She genuinely believed her Friendly Ghost was the Carl Jung of Wabash Avenue, and refused to let me compromise my mental health just so we might have a relationship. Amorous or artistic.

When I hinted at willingness to compensate Vicki for the latter, she scrambled up onto her high horse. Practically propositioning her at a museum! Take her home at once, please, and leave her at the curb! I tried to make amends at my next appointment, presenting her with a quickcarved butterfly. Which Vicki picklejarringly said she could not accept, since (flashy wave of cubic zirconia) she had just gotten engaged.

What surprised me was the depth of protective indignation I felt. For her: poor Vicki, seduced by some cheap bastard. This rival soon had a name (Scott, alias “Pooh Bear”) and a face (from the photo kept on her desk, inscribed to “Bun-Bunz”). How dare he make bastardly reference to what ought to be *my* girl’s caboose!

Thus we entered a holding pattern that lasted for months. During which I mentally sketched Vicki every week in the waiting room, while she fiddled and shrilled and put her off-kilter chin in the air each time she caught me doing it.

Till the day I found her crying in the coffee shop, and she admitted having broken up with (i.e. been humpty-dumpstered by) her alleged fiancé. “This is what I get for letting my friends set me up on bad blind dates,” she sniffled.

I urged her to go out on an open-eyed limb with me, anywhere she liked. Even if that meant wistful-drippy movies like *Peggy Sue Got Married* or *Some Kind of Wonderful*—or *Dirty Dancing*, drippiest of them all. Followed by Vicki’s favorite nightcap (a pitcher of rainbow margaritas) after which I might be invited to take her arm or hold her hand or kiss her goodnight.

Then back would swarm the flaps and flicks.

More months went by. She had other humptyminded suitors, but it was MY wooden butterfly that replaced Pooh Bastard’s photo on her desk. Joined there by further carvings as I was granted further liberties—each one hesitantly, since Vicki was never absolutely certain I wouldn’t go nutcrackers and try to debauch her. She begged me not to breathe a word about us to Dr. Harvey, but I said it was therapeutically crucial for me to allude, at least, to everything we did and everything I dreamt.

“Oh GAHD!!” went Vicki.

(I did tell the F.G. I’d started watching films surrounded by Real Live people, including this one Real Live girl on an irregular basis. “Really?” he said. “What’d you see

last, and what did you think of it?”)

One night it was *Moonstruck*, which swept Vicki off her susceptible feet and back to my garret for the first time. Where I reached second base on a stand-up double, discovering something I'd already cottoned onto—her shoulders weren't the only things she padded. Needlessly: she *had* a stand-up double, more than enough to whet my appetite and water my mouth. But no no no we mustn't, she shouldn't even be here on my lap getting her nifty little A-cups nuzzled, it was wrong, so wrong, oh Gahd, oh Aitch, ohhhh *STOP!!*

Which I did, having more at stake than mere mouthwatering. Vicki dried off and reupholstered herself, and we went out to gulp down too much tequila.

But I'd piqued her to the point of agreeing to pose for me. Clad in a buttoned overcoat to begin with. (It was winter and my garret could have used more insulation.)

Only incrementally would she unbend and divest. Taking off her clothes one garment at a time, with maybe a week before the next item's removal. And the more Vicki bared, the less able was she to keep still: it was Squirmy McWriggle all over again. Becoming such a tantalizing jitterbug toward the end that I could capture no more than brief impressions of her dark dazzle.

She had delectable skin. The color of eucalyptus or honey oak.

One warm evening in May she finished getting down to it.

And did not die of shame, but stood there trembling. Moistening her lips. Handling her altogether self as if she were trying to bathe without soap or water or a washcloth.

“Vicki?” I rasped. “You okay?”

“M-m-my name is Victoria Lorraine Volester,” she quavered, “an' I'm twenty-six an' a Pisces an' I went to Malcolm X College an' my favorite movie's *Moonstruck* an' my favorite actor's Nicolas Cage an' my favorite artist looks just like him an' my favorite f-f-fantasy is men with wood in their hands...”

Break my heart wide open.

Stir it as no woman had since traumatic Milwaukee.

I'd intended to mark the moment by playing a Puccini cassette, but in my distraction I got hold of the Pointer Sisters who thundered forth about BEING SO EXCITED THEY JUST CAN'T HIDE IT, THEY'RE ABOUT TO LOSE CONTROL AND THEY THINK THEY LIKE IT!! Which sent

Victoria Lorraine completely over the brink, me close behind her, and we spent the rest of that evening making butterflies. Lots and lots of butterflies. With a few bats thrown in to keep things lively.

She was worth the long wait.

This, I decided, must be significant otherhood.

Sated in each other's arms; tapped into each other's unspokens.

I wouldn't've done This if you weren't so dreeeeamy and I didn't love you so awwwwful.

Perhaps all women are capable of doing this (as well as This) if they put their minds to it.

That was so good, that was so right, I needed it so bad, it's been six months since I had any loving—six whole months! How 'bout you?

The truth had been effective before, so I turned to it again. (Big mistake.)

Eight whole years.

WHAT??

Hysterics. Not the laughing kind, either.

"Eight whole years" had to mean I'd infected her with every STD imaginable, plus a host of phobias and derangements. This last seemed likely by the way she was carrying on. Trying to order me out of my own garret; then fighting for the sheet off my bed to wrap herself in; then crashing around in the concealing dark, even though it meant she couldn't find any of her clothes.

"What've you done with my paaaanties, you psycho perv??" she was shrieking as the police arrived. To find Vicki Volester skewed completely off-kilter, shielding bosom and belly with loose shoulder pads.

"What's the problem here, ma'am?"

"I told him I loved him! He hasn't had sex for eight! whole! years! and now he's gone and done it with meeeeeee!!!"

I didn't think Chicago cops could look that nonplused.

*

All shook up by the Fist of Kismet. (Not a stirring feeling.)

No charges filed, other than my being humpty-dumpstered significant-otherwise. No reason left for me to keep seeing the Friendly Ghost. Nor were any pieces ever carved from those brief impressions in perpetual motion.

What they said in *Moonstruck* about having bad luck with relationships: how you love the wrong people, make a mess of everything, ruin yourself and *die*. My luck's been bad more often than not. For every Bonnie or Crystal I've taken favored leave of, there's been a Vicki or Rozay—or a Judith. Sometimes the bad luck stems from circumstances beyond my control; more often from my inability to understand women. Still callously callow in the face of indefinite infinitude, despite all the wavelengths I've tried tuning into.

Don't try to figure it out, my father told me. Your whole life long, Gramps warned. Transcendence is unfathomable.

Only by shaping wood with chisel and gouge do I even seem to come close.

Outside, skyrockets are splattering the night like motion sickness on an astral plane. It's the 4th of July and Zerfall is celebrating independence by blowing things up.

I stay indoors with my scalpel and dental pick, bringing out niceties in Honduras mahogany. As the swimmer stretches to grab that medallion just beyond her reach, I add traces of all the ladies I've remembered.

Diffidence, derangement, delight. Bountiful mettle and butterfly pluck. Hot fidgets and cool grace.

There we go. There they are. This is it.

Prized, with a twist.

I snap off the spotlight, step away from the workbench, and pour myself a drink.

9

Second Wind

I walk out of Selfsame into a Chirico landscape. Brooding, ominous, enigmatic, dismal. Jackdaw Square is almost deserted—even by crows. A few featureless people imitate distant sundials. Sign over the drugstore says it's 91° in the shade. And that shade contains streaks of black bile.

(As does my gut. Damned creamcheese.)

Friday the 5th of July. The morning bus was nearly empty; likewise the Selfsame staff lounge. But I went in to work, this being my last Friday here for a long while.

Stop by the gallery. Even Ralph is absent; the only one here is Just-Hatched Chick. (Feathery yellow hair, fast-blinking eyes, tendency to cheep.) The Crouching group show hasn't been taken down yet—

—but *Watch Your Back* is gone from its spot on the wall. No sign of title card, price tag, or SOLD sticker. I look around for *The Mute Commute*: it too has vanished.

Wait. This might signify nothing more than Double-Bag Eddie's having dropped in.

"Edgar Clint been here?" I ask.

"Nobody," cheeps Just-Hatched Chick.

Screw it. Let them hang my pieces, draw and quarter them, prop them in the alley for crows to peck at. I'll seal off *Prized* with a coat of oil and layer of wax, glue the medallion into its niche and keep the thing for myself.

Dead low tide outside. No fluttering Maytime breezes today. The river exhales summer nox from the South Bottoms, where Slaughtertown's stockyards and packing plants used to thrive.

Too Bad God Almighty Just Lost Interest.

Wish I could do the same. Last night I had the unboarding dream again. Hacking my way through wilderness to a wall overlaid with rough pine planks. Prying these loose, feeling the boards splinter, hearing the *skreek* of each rusty nail. Opening a window onto inky night. Straining to peer through it, see what might be afoot, when BANG and FLASH—
—to reveal an enormous panther dragging her body away, fangs sunk into her throat.
(Thank you, Ambrose Bierce.)

I got out of bed and called her. Today too, from Selfsame. The phone at Sycamore Terrace rang and rang with no switchover to the answering machine, though power must've been restored long since. Meanwhile there's a constant busy signal on her cell.

I knew she wouldn't be on the #104 this morning, but looked for her even so. Will just as likely crane my neck when the P.M. bus reaches Figure Eight Way. What I *ought* to do is drive to Knotts and size things up. Find out where she's gone and try to follow.

If I were the one who was hiding, wouldn't she seek me?

So why this reluctance?

See myself approaching D9. Finding my path blocked by prowlcars and ambulances, crowding round a lacerated body in a pool of blood—*none of which would be there if I didn't MAKE them happen*—by going up there and rocking the rope.

Not even a rope: a thread, by which we're hanging over thin ice.

Say I drop by Downy Owl Road. Suppose Sleepy LeThean denies having hired her, being impressed by her—any memory of her at all. "What are you talking about, Aitch? You'd best stay out of the sun. Let me show you some cocobolo from Costa Rica..."

Chase a delusion and what happens? You could topple it over the edge, the False Madeleine along with the Real Judy—send them plummeting off together to leave you bereft *and* bereaved.

Better trust your gut instinct, despite the black bile. Step aside, turn away, go home. Even if that does make this the first weekend in two months that you'll be by yourself.

It's hard...

In my pocket. In my hand.

Thumb rubbing it, like hers over my palm-calluses.

I take it out and look at it: a wreath of stars. Surrounding four pool lanes topped by wavelets, above which is the upper half of a stopwatch.

Prized's silver medallion.

She bought it for me at a trophy shop. Proud and glad to be making a material contribution to the artwork, apart from the modeling.

So there you are—tangible proof this hasn't been just a dream.

Or, at least, that it's been a *substantial* one.

*

Four more days I go in to work. On one of them I encounter Nicolette Ningal in Jackdaw Square, and have a sudden wild hope she might consent to play my rebound girl. But Nikki just tugs an earlobe and says, "I've heard that one before."

Pity. I could use a Moon Maid right now.

Friday the 12th. Bags are packed. I've bubblewrapped *Gatherin' Stormin'* and *Plue Velvet*, *Frieze-Frame* and *A Perfect Fit*. *Artificialities* I'm leaving behind, but the unfinished *Prized* is coming along, plus a dozen blank panels and that spare block of cherry.

The Old McRale Place awaits.

Three weeks and a day (to make up for the 5th) I'll be spending there. I'm trusted to leave the Place as I find it, and to bring back Mr. Wilson's least favorite truck in no worse shape than it set out in. Even so, Mrs. Wilson hands over her ring of keys with somber gravity, heaving a sigh as though she'll never lay eyes on it or me again.

I wait till the A.M. rush hour's over, then slip the surly bounds of 'burbs and hit the cloverleaf. Fifteen minutes on the expressway and the nox is gone, the gristle's been rendered, and Demortuis has eaten our dust.

Set your compass west by northwest: precisely 338 miles from garage to Place. Factor in lunchtime and we're looking at six hours on the road. And not a very eyesnaggable road: got to guard against woolgathering, wits-wandering, and bringing in stray sheaves.

*On either side the river lie
 Long fields of barley and of rye
 That clothe the wold and meet the sky;
 And thro' the field the road runs by, and by, and by...*

Up and down the people go. Thro' fields that gro' and gro' and gro'. Corn. Oats. Wheat. All your embryonic breakfast cereals. Too early to think about stopping to graze. Find some digestible music to focus on. Easily done as we approach Keening, a college town like Lawrence and Columbia, and pick up their classic jazz station. Playing Sarah Vaughan's "Solitude" as we tune in—theme of the day, the week, the month to come.

The past as well. Favorite album of Wendell Jones, my first roommate at Liederkrantz. *The Lonely Hours*, it was called. What else was on it? "I'll Never Be the Same." "You're Driving Me Crazy." And let's not forget "These Foolish Things Remind Me of You." The record would stick there and repeat *oh how the ghost of you clings* till you wanted to call in an exorcist.

Jonesy was tall and stooped and gawkish and stammery. He turned his half of our dorm room into a shrine to Lucinda Faye, a toothsome blonde back home in Oklahoma, spreading photos and mementos over two walls and part of the ceiling. Cheerleader, choir singer, tennis player, sweater stretcher—lucky old Jonesy, I thought. At first.

Then doubts crept in. Lucinda Faye looked a lot like young Kim Novak in *Picnic*: a downhome debutante stacked with ennui. But Jonesy was less of a shirtless William Holden than a bowtied Jimmy Stewart. So had he gone *Vertigo* over her? Or had she cast a *Bell Book and Candle* over him? Was he given these souvenirs to remember his sweetheart by, or had he "acquired" them somehow from a girl unaware of his existence?

Every week Jonesy would paint another portrait of Lucinda Faye, from bewitching memory or bothersome imagination. None failed to merit a full-frontal rating; but some bordered on the peculiar.

"He is so WEIRD!" said Bonnie Pattering, as close to undelighted as her nature would permit. "What *is* it with him and her?"

I wasn't eager to ask.

Especially not at 3 A.M. one November night when I woke to find a soused Jonesy gawking at his shrine by the light of a Coleman lantern.

“Damn it, Wendell...”

Whispering: “D’you think she’s irresistible?”

“Sure, why not? Now turn that thing off.”

“Ought’ve been more romantic. Like gallant knight ‘n’ lady fair. Shivery.” (I think he meant *chivalry*.) “But she won’t let me take MY EYES OFF HER!!”

“Hey, take it easy, man—”

“*Will you assholes put a lid on it??*” from the fat guy next door.

Jonesy hoisted a fresh canvas onto his easel. Picked up palette and brushes and set to work by lanternlight. Producing by sunrise an R-rated *Night Gallery* portrayal of Lucinda Faye, beckoning the viewer with a blurred smile that was, in fact, shivery.

Soon afterward he went home for Thanksgiving and never returned. His belongings got boxed up and shipped posthaste to Oklahoma, including the done-to-death *Lonely Hours* and everything in the shrine. We later heard that before reaching Muskogee, he’d plowed his Valiant into a juniper tree and impaled himself on the steering column.

No clue whether that was Jonesy’s way of falling on his own sword.

(But Bonnie made me “cleanse” my dorm room by burning parsley in a seashell.)

Foolishness. Bewitchery. *Bell Book and Candle*, candle book and bell; forward and backward to send Jonesy to hell...

Sarah Vaughan’s faded out of range. High time for lunch. Stop at the soup joint in Beat All Hollow, have a bowl of their famous mushroom chowder—and crack my skull against the doorframe as I climb back in the truck.

YEEDGE!!

Jerome Gullip must be laughing his damned ass off.

Still, it might dispel a few crop-full cobwebs. Don’t want to get drowsy at the wheel. What doesn’t knock us unconscious makes us awaker, and so forth.

Onramp. Interstate. Chrome and concrete. Hurtle before, hurtle behind, hurtle to left and right. Are we all turtles? Bet our damned asses. You there, are you going to change lanes or not? Try using a turn signal. You in the Land Cruiser: do us all a favor and pull

your UV out of your S. You off on the shoulder: a crumpled sedan with shattered windows. Next to it's a hunched-over sobbing woman—

—*calm down, lady, it's not like you caused the crash—*

Bang-flash as I pass by.

Glance at the rearview mirror. Can't see a thing but traffic in transit. No one slowing down to take a ghoulish-bastard gander.

Maybe there *was* no wreck.

Maybe I'll start seeing it everywhere I go, like Val Kilmer and that old roadside Indian in *The Doors*.

Trompe l'oeils. If not deceit, at least duplicity. Double-crossing. As in that H with the widened crossbar: Dos Equis, joined at the hip. O what a tangled web we weave when first we see what we believe. Takes two to tangle... except that it's men who tangle; women weave. Transcending duplicity to reach—what? Triplicity? Three sheets to the wind? Three's porridge hot, cold, in the pot...

(Listen to yourself, for crying out loud.)

What happened to your head, Roadside Indian? "I ran into the Doors."

People are strange. Mirages are stranger. Better screen all incoming imagery.

Screens are meant to have fine women undressing behind them. Or before them. Should've had a screen at Green Creek Lane. The Diverting Dozen (plus one) either disrobed in the bathroom, like sluggish Nina Silbergeld, or stripped on the spot like Stormin' Molly Brown. Either way a screen would've added something extra to the scene.

Concealment. Division. Protection. Arousal...

Wooden screen, of course. Three folding panels. Or rather three frames, each containing panels carved separately. Say a couple of 18x24s per frame, six-inch rails top center and bottom, three-inch vertical stiles; the extended screen would measure 72x66. Six panels carved on both sides—no, then I'd be stuck carving *basso-relievo*, and femininity calls for *alto*. When it does I want to respond with SCULPTURE, not incisions.

So let's put a pair of panels back to back. Four per frame; twelve in all. Though they'd make each panel thick as a door.

A screen of three doors...

Maybe that crack on the skull let in some enlightenment. I just happen to have a dozen blanks packed in the truck bed. Not that I could hope to carve them all in three weeks. But glad they're on hand, given the increasingly treeless landscape out there. Big sky horizon everywhere you look; scrub and brush *ad infinitum*. An Andrew Wyeth panorama: vast, detached, austere...

*O bury me not on the lone prairieee
Where the buzzards sail and the crow flies freeee
O bury me not—but my voice failed therrre
And they paid no heed to my dying prayyyyer
In a shallow grave only six by threeee
They buried me there on the lone prairieee—*

—whoa! nearly missed my exit—

WELCOME TO HUBSKER

Pop. 2,197

"Home Is Where The Heart Lands"

This was Town to Mrs. Wilson when she was growing up as Myrtle McRale. County seat and site of Big Red's Diner, Old Blue's Bar & Grill, Uncle Yeller's Service Station. I pause at the latter to empty my bladder, fill up the pickup's, scrape three hundred miles of insect roadkill off the windshield.

Hot out here. Dry heat, though; better than damp. Hubsker looks a bit more moribund than it did a year ago. The motel across from Yeller's has gone out of business. "APPY L ND" clings to its signboard. All that remains of Happy Landings? Or There Is a Happy Land Far, Far Away?

If so, we'd better resume getting there. Turn onto State Route 65 (one digit away from musical fame) and head south, along with half of Hubsker's Pop. 2,197. Taking off

early on a Friday afternoon: most every vehicle equipped with a gun rack and towing a boat. Let's go shoot us some fish in a barrel! Wing us a walleye! Pick off a perch!

Schraube Reservoir's coming up on our right. Can't see much of it, thanks to all the cars and trucks and RVs pulling into the exit lane. Speeding up as if to reach it soonest, grasping for that silver glimmer. Could there be a lady in the lake? Has she got a lovely face? Is she stretched at full length with every ripple of skin and sinew delineated punctiliously?...

Prized could be one of the panels in the Screen of Three Doors.

First-done of the twelve. Meaning 8% of the work is already accomplished.

Way to go, Huffman.

Past the reservoir I have Route 65 to myself. It appears to narrow as the open spaces on either side keep widening. Will that crumpled car and sobbing woman pop up again? No, both shoulders stay bare. We remain on our own, unless you count the Black Angus cattle grazing by remote windmills. Ruminating about their bovine fate.

Not so long ago they'd've been shipped by rail to Slaughtertown and converted to raw victuals. But no longer in Demortuis: the stockyards there have been emptied, the packing plants shut down, the boom lowered on the Gristly City. Leaving nothing but nox.

The more miles I put between it and me, the easier I'll breathe.

Twenty-one miles south of Hubsker we turn onto a gravelly road and start doubling back east. 333 shows on the odometer: four more miles to the gate. And no spindly split-rail gate either, but fifteen feet of galvanized steel. Two signs upon it:

PRIVATE PROPERTY

and

TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED

Halt the truck. Get out. Find the right key on Mrs. Wilson's ring. Unlock the gate, swing it inward. Climb back in (watch your head) and drive on through. Halt again, out again, swing the gate again. Lock it tight. Once more into the truck, to drive the final mile.

Trees reappear. Cottonwoods and other poplars, like on Green Creek Lane. Hackberries, chokecherries, and a single willow with fronds swaying in the breeze.

*Four grey walls and four grey towers
Overlook a space of flowers—*

Actually just a front yard that never seems to need mowing. Nor are there any towers, unless you count a tall windmill off to one side. But the house does have four walls and they are battleship-colored.

Behold the Old McRale Place.

Frame house with stucco exterior. Solidly built, to withstand big bad wolfwinds. Gables and dormers over a deep front porch. Anachronistic keypad by the homestead doorknob; I tap in the security code provided by Mrs. Wilson.

Open the doors. Prop up the windows. Get some O₂ in here. Living room to the right, dining room to the left, front stairs between them leading up to a padlocked impasse: Mr. and Mrs. Wilson's private quarters. They keep this Place in pretty good shape, considering its distance from Zerfall. Most of the furniture is cumbersome, not lending itself to easy theft. Horsehair davenport in front of the fieldstone fireplace. Taxidermied heads upon the walls: deer, elk, antelope. Heavy oak dining table, heavier buffet. Huge vintage stove and refrigerator in the kitchen, with an antique handpump by the sink. Walk-in pantry, then a mudporch with backstairs down to the cellar.

I lug in my cartons and coolers of provisions. Not intended to last me the entire stay; I'll have to make a commissary run to Town by-and-by. But for the time being there's no need to beg or borrow from the neighbors. (Some of whom live so far away that driving to Hubsker would be quicker.)

Next I bring in my portable workbench and clamp-vise, toolbox and portfolio and bundled panels. These are set up in the dining room, which gets north light. *Gatherin' Stormin'*, *Frieze-Frame*, *A Perfect Fit* and *Plue Velvet* go on the living room mantel. I didn't pack the VCR or DVD player, and the Wilsons don't have a satellite dish out here. But I've got the boombox with plenty of CDs and cassettes, plus a deck of cards for brushing up on my Canfield.

Last to be unloaded is the duffel bag of clothes and toiletries. These are distributed in the bathroom, opposite the kitchen, and the bedroom behind it. Chiffonier, chifforobe, chest of many drawers. Oversized bedstead suitable for a homestead: the sort that generations are conceived in, delivered in, depart for the hereafter in. New mattress, though. I've brought my own sheets and blanket and pillow, along with my own booze.

(One thing leads to the others.)

Cargo discharged, I park the pickup in what was once a stable. Nearby are other disused ranch structures—a corncrib, a chicken coop. The outhouse is long gone. As is the barn: it burned down years ago and Cy McRale, they say, was never the same afterward. After he died and his widow Mona got too infirm, the Wilsons sold most of the acreage and converted what was left to this little timeshare on the prairie. Hunting lodge in fall and winter; artist's retreat in spring and summer.

All mine for the moment.

I took my asthma controller when I arrived, well over an hour ago. More than ready now for supptime. Plain simple chuckwagon grub—no broccoli. Dare to eat red meat. Heap a can of beef stew over instant rice, wash it down with a pot of coffee. (Decaf, I will admit; followed by dried apricots. Some middle-aged concerns should not be ignored.)

Come sunset, the wind rises and temperatures drop. I go for a stroll around the grounds, feeling balmy and pastoral. Good clean country air: you can get it deep into your lungs. Nothing to disturb the peace and quiet but crickets and tree frogs, and a faraway coyote addressing the dusk.

For the first time in two weeks, I feel able to unwind. Without unraveling.

Back at the house I pour a nightcap, turn off the lamps, take my glass and a massive bentwood rocker onto the front porch. First-night ritual: sit here sipping Wild Turkey, and stare up at the sky. Where the stars are out in force tonight.

Constellations blaze across the wild black yonder. Not another light for five, ten, fifteen miles; nothing to dilute the shining. The bright side of isolation. And surrounded by this I can renew my old motto, my personal credo:

Loneliness is not so bad once you consider the alternatives.

10

Trespassers Will

UP—

—from a deep and heedless sleep—

—I’m jolted awake by a nervescape.

Bed’s flanked by two fans, thrumming in the dark: no jolt there. What then? The so-called BlackBerry’s muted for the night. Could it have gone haywire? Or maybe it was just digestive gripes, say from too many dried apricots—

—SKREEEK—

Whoa.

That wasn’t intestinal.

Loose shutter, probably. Or the house itself, shifting its weight. Old wood can make a lot of noise: rafters complain, floorboards lament—

—SKRRREEEEEEK—

Can’t be the windmill, the Wilsons disabled it after they installed the standby generator, of course some gust or gale might’ve loosened the blades and caused them to—

—SKRRRRREEEEEEEEK—

If I’m not out there prying off planks somebody else must be but who? the panther? a coyote, no longer faraway? an antelope seeking its head from the living room wall?—

—SKRRRRRRREEEEEEEEK—CLUNK

goes the screen on the bedroom window that I propped open like an idiot deactivating the security system while my ¼" No. 6 straight gouge is buried in the toolbox at the other end of the house leaving me here in a room black as pitch if not silent as a tomb while something *climbs onto the foot of this bed—*

—out of which I leap—

—knocking over fans—

—lunging for the lamp—

—fumbling for the switch—

—snapping it on to be confronted by a cat—

A CAT??

Not a panther. Just a cat. That stares up at me with ears flattened, back arched, and dilated copper eyes demanding *HAVE YOU LOST YOUR MIND?—*

—for an instant. Then the back relaxes, the ears arise, the eyes half-close, and the creature curls up on my contour sheet.

I take a moment to use my rescue inhaler.

One thing's for certain: this can't be Noir. Much too small and shorthaired. Ears like a bat. Eyes like newly-minted pennies.

I edge over to the wall, not letting the thing out of my sight, till I turn to check the window. A corner of the screen's been snagged out of its frame. The corner is actually *bent*, and this isn't mosquito netting but stout steel wire. The little beast must be stronger than it looks. Which doesn't bode well for my chances of evicting it.

Slowly I reach out a hand—

—under which the creature thrusts its head, to go for my throat??—

—no. To press and rub and invite being scratched behind its bat-ears.

(Yeedge...)

With my other hand I pick the animal up. Heavier than it looks, too. No resistance is offered; just an unheard but palpable *r-r-r-r-r*. Okay. Careful now. Out we go. Past the bathroom, through the living room, to the front door where I take my hand off its head while I undo the bolt—

—as the cat jumps down to disappear in the darkness.

Damn it! Flip on lights, start hunting, start stubbing bare toes on immovable objects. *Son of a bitch!!* Say your pussy-prayers ‘cause I am going to see just how far this sore foot can kick your miserable bastardized ass—

—here it is in the kitchen. Sitting sedately in front of the refrigerator. Swiveling its head toward me, then back to gaze at the fridge.

I yank the animal off the floor, haul it through the dining room, toss it onto the front porch, shut the door quick and shoot the bolt home. And by the time I’ve doused the lights and washed my hands and returned to the bedroom, the cat has come back in through the window and laid itself across my pillow.

YEEDGE!!!

Close the window. Make it fast. *Then* yank, haul, toss, slam, lock. And turn on the central a/c, though normally I won’t sleep in air-conditioned rooms; they tend to give me congestion. Tonight, though, we’re under siege.

Retrieve my gouge. Re-key the alarm code. Change sheets and pillowcase. Pour another snort. And leave on one of the fans—already the room feels stuffy. Like I’m trying to sleep in a sarcophagus. With a nightshaded graverobber somewhere out there, determined to pry off the lid.

*

Next morning I have a splendid case of postnasal drip. But in the hour between swallowing my meds and sitting down to breakfast, I’m able to unkink the window screen and fit it into its frame. Maybe rig a temporary barricade on the other side? I head out the back door and nearly break my neck on the mudporch, tripping over the nestled-down cat. Which hops up, dodges past and darts inside.

I follow more slowly. Find the thing waiting in front of the refrigerator. Foresee dealing with intrusions day and night for the next three weeks.

“You,” I inform the creature, “are not getting fed here.”

The head swivels. *Oh no?* it looks.

“Not by ME, cat!”

Feed me and I’ll let you sleep.

Wishful thinking. I fill two bowls with Shredded Wheat. Pour non-dairy creamer over both. Set one on the kitchen table, the other on faded blue linoleum.

“There. Go crazy.”

You first, looks the cat. Scowling at its bowl with wrinkled snout.

“You’ll eat what I eat if you want to eat here.”

It sniffs at the cereal. Samples a lap of creamer. Starts to eat with muted crunches.

I chew my Shredded Wheat more noisily, but just as grudgingly. This isn’t a savory chuckwagon platter of ham ‘n’ eggs. Higher in fiber, though, and that’s become a morning necessity. Speaking of which—

Find a carton of old newspapers under the sink. Tear one into coarse confetti, pile it in the carton’s lid, set that on the floor.

“Understand what this is for?”

Copper pennies turn my way. *Outlook good*, says the Magic 8-Ball.

“Hang around if you like, then. But get the hell out of my head.”

Make me.

I get the hell out of the kitchen, pausing only to mix a cup of instant coffee. Time to quit these shenanigans and buckle down to work. Twelve panels for our Screen of Three Doors. *Prized* to be the first; eleven more to design. Pick up the Bruynzeel, flip open the Strathmore, resume where we left off. What comes after mettle and pluck?

Well...

Er...

Fidgets and grace would lead us to...

A good solid dining room table, at any rate. Quarter-sawn white oak by the look of it. Tight grain, rich patina, medullary ray-fleck pattern—

—over which I spill the rest of my coffee as the cat vaults into the room. Scrambling up the buffet to perch in front of the empty china hutch, and strike what appears to be a pose.

Draw me.

You’ve got to be kidding.

As if I haven’t wasted enough time on this animal. Now including slop-moppage.

Still: I've heard cats have a knack for selecting effective backdrops. In this case, a white oak buffet. With north light gleaming off its fur or hide or whatever the term is.

I take up pad and pencil and start to sketch. "Trespassers Will" I could call it. In childhood I identified with Piglet's grandfather since he, like I, suffered from Shortness of Breath. The cat sits motionless till just before I complete the drawing, then proceeds to the Choplick, the Pawscrub, the Legspread with Prolonged Tonguewash—

"Blecch!" I go. "This isn't a photo shoot for kitty porn."

Talking to a lady.

"No, talking to myself."

Says you.

Half a day on the prairie and already I'm babbling to voices in my head. Not to mention squandering charcoal on this damnfool subject—

Bombs away!

Off the buffet it hurtles, landing in the living room with another CLUNK. I run after it and find the animal serenely hunkered below a shelf of picturebooks. One of which proves to be *All About Cats*. And falls open to an illustration identifying the creature on the floor, right down (or up) to its bat-ears.

THE BOMBAY, reads the caption.

Playful expression and affectionate behavior. (Cough.) Glossy coat with patent leather sheen. Less vocal than other breeds. Can get into trouble if left alone too long. (That one I do believe.) Action-seeking game-player, trick-doer, undercover-joiner—

"Oh HELL no," I tell the cat.

Signs point to yes.

Drop the book, back away, take a breather before this turns any weirder. Go outdoors and halfway to the stable before realizing the cat's been left inside the house, free to commit whatever territory-marking mayhem takes its fancy. Back I rush—

—to find Trespassers Will precisely where I left it.

You again?

Yank-haul-toss-slam-lock. Then into the truck solo and hit the road pronto, before the little beast seeks further gameplaying trickdoing action.

Where'd it come from? No collar round its neck (meaning fleas and ticks throughout the house). Belong to a neighbor? Abandoned by a motorist? Or introduced by some foolish earlier tenant of the Wilsons? That would account for its conversance with the Place.

Though not for its conversation.

I reach Route 65 before it occurs to me I have no idea where I'm headed. Not that there's a glut of choices. Turn south and drive all day through wasteland. North it is, then; make for Schraube Reservoir. Even though it'll be inundated with Saturday morning boaters and campers and anglers. Joggers and sunbathers and water skiers... maybe soccer players.

As in *Balls Away!*

Back when Miranda Parales left Demortuis, I was jaded but riding high. A dozen copies of her shapely *Espejo* had been sold; my first solo show was about to open; and a crowd of Cairney students applied to be my next model. One stood out, thanks to three things set in a tawny face framed by tawny hair. Two were eyes of an arresting blue-gray. The third was a picturesquely broken nose.

"Hi I'm Kirsten Tollhouse everybody calls me K.T. 'cept my grandma she calls me 'Periwinkle Blinkers' tee hee 'scuse the grass stains I just came from a soccer match and thought I'd have time to change but didn't sorry."

No one ever tried harder than K.T. on a track or field, or was more accident-prone on either. She once toted up for me all the various bones she'd chipped and muscles she'd pulled. "Hey that sounds kind of sexy you know when I say it like that tee hee doesn't it?" Too much of a klutzbutt (her term) to land an athletic scholarship, she aspired to be a video editor for ESPN. This was a field in which she could avoid hurting herself, since editors no longer had to cut film with razor blades.

K.T.'s body, despite its many injuries, was almost blemish-free; and like a good second-generation Bonnie or Stormin' she shucked jersey, shorts, and skivvies to show it tawnily off. But in my presence she would not remove her kneesocks. I guessed this was so she could assure her grandma that Periwinkle Blinkers never posed completely unclothed.

Balls Away! was a panel I carved of her wearing those kneesocks with cleated shoes as she punted merry hell out of a sack of soccer balls. It caused a hullabaloo at the Crouching Gallery, possibly because it appeared soon after Io MacEvelyn's "Shameful

Subject” essay. But Geraldine took no notice of the turmoil, since Double-Bag Eddie broke all records purchasing *Balls Away!*—speedwise, dollarwise, and demandwise for a complete “Cleats ‘n’ Teats” series. Which we duly produced, though I often had to use looped straps to keep K.T. from falling out of position and onto her klutzbutt.

The resulting sculptures always represented her as adroit and coordinated. As well as a yowzah poppet: “Hey if anyone came in right now and saw me sort of tied up tee hee with my leg in the air and hardly a stitch on I bet you’d have a bunch of explaining to do hunh?”

Damn. This type of reminiscence isn’t apt to ease my restlessness. Got half a mind to drive into Hubsker and find me a rancher’s daughter, one who doesn’t dip Skoal or object to being city-slickered.

No—I’m too middle-aged to try that anymore. Here’s the reservoir turnoff: take it.

And find the lake even more crowded than I expected. Barely enough leeway in the parking lot to squeeze myself out of the pickup and into the Schraube mob.

Not as muggy as at WhooHoo, but a lot more blistering as the sun beats down on a sugar sand beach peppered with noisemakers. Make that breathwasters: the Black Hole of Calcutta could spend a week exhaling what’s being dissipated here.

“Sure is hot.” “You call that bait?” “I’m at the lake... I’m at the *lake*...” ““Oh my my! oh my my! can you boogie? can you slide?”” “They ain’t biting today.” “There any lotion left?” “Couple o’ big ole crappies.” “No, we parked near the dam.” “Get back in the pontoon!” “She just up an’ vamoosed on me.” “Can you hear me *now*?” “Don’t forget to bring a towel!” “Mommy I wanna go hoe-wummmm—”

You and me both, kid.

Turn aside and trees beckon. Green and dark with the promise of cool.

A moment later I’m climbing away from the maddening throng, into a stand of ponderosas. Their material might be more suitable for spice racks than sculpture, but I can appreciate them as trees. The scent of vanilla’s in the air: byproduct of hot sun on pine bark. Taking me back to the Steak ‘n’ Shake in Columbia MO, where Our Gang went when beset by the munchies. (No more than five days out of any week.) Crystal would never order a shake, afraid it’d make her face break out; she invariably wanted “just a taste” of mine, cheeks hollowing as she addressed herself to the straw...

No. That was another set of lips in a different Malt Shoppe.

Now I'm feeling restless again. Thirsty, too. But don't want to reenter the mob quite yet—

—hello.

Three young women, gliding toward me up the slope. Bare-armed, bare-legged, in butterfly swimsuits. Two swing a wicker basket between them. The third tears at something held in one hand, letting bits of it float out of the other. Petals from a rose? Fragments of a note? Breadcrumbs from a loaf? They hover in the hot still air like slo-mo snowflakes.

Can this be my Vietnamesette quartet, minus Shorty Hottie?

Choral giggles. As if in response to an absent hiccup.

They gaze straight ahead, not at me; as each one passes I go *Ahhhh*. Three girls from Ipanema, via the Paktong Palace. Watch the rhythmic wench-clench of their garish spandex as they ascend into the shadow of the trees...

To go where? And do what? Have themselves a picnic—at Hanging Rock?

The Three Asian Graces. To get the full effect in a relief you'd lose the swimsuits, of course; *La Primavera* without drapery. Slim dark narrow-eyed curvy-assed pouty-papped plum blossoms... DAMN! Where's my Bruynzeel? Left behind at the McRale Place. Get back down to that wedged-in truck. Don't lose track of the image! Say it three times fast: *pouty-papped plum blossoms, pouty-papped plum blossoms, pouty-papped plum blossoms...*

Racing south on Route 65 I realize my postnasal drip's gone dry, thanks to the Three Asian Fates. No—Graces, young and lovely. Fates are old and grim. Says who? Every artist from Greco-Roman times till now. The first spins life's thread, the second metes it out, the third cuts it off. Meaning they're weavers: transcending duplicity to reach triplicity. Takes two to tangle, three to weave; one (the shortest and hottest) to go truant.

Chalk it up to fate.

Or to *Three Fatefulettes*. Panel number two for *The Absolute Woman*. As my Screen of Three Doors seems to have retitled itself. Ponder that as I park the truck, cross the yard, draw near the mudporch—and have Trespassers Will materialize round and round my ankles. Transmitting an inaudible *r-r-r-r-r* up my shins. Reminding me again of K.T., who'd wheedle with butterfingered massages when she wanted an advance on her modeling fees:

“Ooh you’re so tense oops did that pinch tee hee relax your shoulders now isn’t that better I only need a *little* extra this week oh c’mon pretty please you know I’m good for it.”

And she always was. Though miscast as a masseuse.

Odd what you’ll endure, to be touchy-feely’d by a yowzah poppet.

Bombs away from the glossy anklepresser planted between me and the door I’m trying to unlock. Not *Balls away*, though: this morning’s Prolonged Tonguewash left no doubt regarding this cat’s gender. Trespasser for sure, but if never a tom I suppose she can’t be a Will. So call her Willamene, after the slinky witch in the old *Hercules* cartoons.

Her? She?

Whatever.

*

I make it explicitly clear that joining me undercover will result in Willamene’s getting skinned alive nine times over. She elects to sleep on an armchair by the chifforobe. This chair is upholstered with the stuff that bullfighter-paintings are made of, and when the cat curls up on it and closes her eyes, she effectively vanishes.

Besides bed, I’m left alone while sitting at the kitchen or dining room tables, or upon the throne in the john. But take a seat anywhere else and zoom-pow! there’s a cat on my lap. I’ve heard the best way to dislodge lap-hoggers is to stand and let them topple off. I try this with Willamene and she simply rotates ninety degrees, suspended there like a bat-eared codpiece. Which is so freakish I never attempt it again.

Days go by with no progress made on *The Three Fatefulettes*. Sketch after sketch is begun, goes wrong, gets a large X slashed through it. At times like this I wish I brought my clipping file, or had broader Internet access than provided by the BlackBerry’s 3" screen.

An imagination can be a terrible thing to fall back upon.

Late one night in the bentwood rocker, looking not at constellations but the middle distance, I wonder how to lure even a single Fatefulette out of her lair.

Ask again later, gleam two copper cents from the dark blob on my lap.

“Why don’t you prove all the old wives wrong and bring me some GOOD luck?”

Thinking of rabbits.

The hell I am. This is getting to be like one of those lunatic-ventriloquist movies—*Dead of Night* or *The Great Gabbo*. Or two separate episodes of *The Twilight Zone*, three if you count the one with “Talky Tina”—

Dummy is as dummy does.

“Excuse me?”

Doctor Dolittle you ain’t.

Grunt and squeak and squawk with an animal. I finish my bourbon, heave myself off the rocker and move indoors, Willamene shinnying up for a shoulder ride. And as we cross the threshold I blink—

—and it’s daylight. I’m seated at the dining room table. Strathmore’s open in front of me, Bruynzeel’s in hand. Full mug of coffee nearby, steaming hot. Music on the boombox: Bessie Smith imploring a judge to send her to the ‘lectric chair.

Ohhh-kayy...

I don’t budge so much as a hair, but Willamene plummets off my shoulder and onto the table. Where she grabs hold of a kneaded eraser before absconding with it out of sight.

I reach out. Grasp the mug. Taste the coffee. Good and piping.

That’s what I need; haven’t woke up properly is all.

Mug drained, I turn to take it to the kitchen—and there’s Willamene on the floor. Depositing the eraser at my feet. Copper eyes rolled upward, radiating what appears to be *mortification*. Then the creature extends a furry leg and nibbles nonchalantly at its paw-pad.

For crying out loud...

If I didn’t know better, I’d swear this cat’s doing what amounts to a nightclub act. Impersonating petty-klepto Amy-Kay.

Not to be confused with K.T., who’d graduated after two years of teehee modeling. She was succeeded by Amy-Kay O’Kallick, who resembled a young Michelle Pfeiffer with avian overtones: long-legged and long-necked like a heron or egret, wearing feather boas instead of scarves. Amy-Kay’s life plan had been to be a 4-H Princess in rural Tasselville, then Homecoming Queen, Miss Tassel County, Miss Nilnisi, Miss America, and Ultimate Supercelebrity. She achieved the first two steps but came in third runner-up at the county fair. Now she was a Cairney dramatics major, seeking stardom by alternate means.

Amy-Kay would've been ideal casting as a blind girl. Her wide pale eyes were always focused inwardly, making her look preoccupied even when upset. Such as when I capped our contract-signing with an offer to buy her lunch.

"Ew!" she recoiled (appearing lost in thought).

"Sorry—"

"Oh I'll spend time with you if you like. So long as we don't have lunch."

We went instead to see *To Die For*, during which she accepted eight kernels of my popcorn. Chewing each one into oblivion before starting on the next.

"Sure you don't want more?"

"Oh no thanks. I eat like a bird."

And did not want to compromise future stardom with present indiscretion. Posing nude wasn't a problem, but I was forbidden to spread any of her privates across my panels. The feather boas came in useful here, lending Amy-Kay a coquettish air that blended nicely with bemusement. Undercutting the feathers consumed a lot of time, though, and weeks would go by between our modeling sessions. I'd be startled by intervening changes—dyed hair, piercings, tattoos. The first tongue stud was the biggest bombshell, but it didn't impede her performing a new talent entry for me: reciting T. S. Eliot's "Rhapsody on a Windy Night." (While clipping her toenails.)

A few days later, sallow with chagrin, Amy-Kay confessed she'd pilfered the clippers from my medicine cabinet. Hell, I told her, consider them a bonus. But no, no, she didn't deserve them; she was bad, she was bad.

I went through the motions of forgiving her. She pressed my hands and kissed my lips and walked off with one of my slipstones hidden in her bra.

Even then I wasn't overly worried. Models, like artists, are entitled to eccentricities. It wasn't till Amy-Kay went from eating-like-a-bird to bingeing-and-then-purge that I suggested she might want to see somebody.

"As if," answered Amy-Kay (in a pensive manner). "Totally faux."

Fortunately she flunked out of Cairney and went home to Tasselville before giving up her gag reflex. Our contract having lapsed, I felt free to carve a "County Fair of Souls" series with fully-dressed O'Kallicks coming across stark-naked O'Kallicks in carnival

settings. *Search Me. Pick a Pocket. Nothing Up My Sleeve.* Every one of which came off the top of my head. Above, below, behind: all of yours will be mine, will be mine...

Yes.

Now that you mention it.

Amy-Kay would make a very good Fatefulette.

*

Next morning somebody gets up on the wrong side of the chair. One moment she's a sourpuss, refusing her share of Shredded Wheat; then we get a moodswing to hectic brio.

"Feline PMS?" I ask.

Snort. Unheard but very apparent.

"I'm going into Town tomorrow for supplies. Could get you some Meow Mix if you like. Proper litter too."

The cat marches past me to thump the mudporch door. I let her out and Willamene makes a big show of sharpening her claws on a hackberry tree. At any rate she's not tearing up the McRale furniture or my sculpting materials.

Now for a day of *progress*. (And about time—I was beginning to think I'd have nothing to show for my first week here.) Six years since I last carved a "County Fair," but there's no difficulty reproducing the starker O'Kallicks on paper as spinners or cutters or meter maids. Making them excellers. Surpassers. Outshiners, even.

Take a scrawny plainjane like Sage Maltese: she could make you believe in her make-beliefs. That she lived in the Film Noir Forties and not her own fortysomethings. That there was more to her than met the skeptical eye or moved the cynical ear.

"Any truth at all in that yarn?" Bogart might inquire.

"Some... not very much," Brigid O'Shaughnessy might admit.

Yet Sage Maltese could transform her flimsy yarns into convincing silk stockings. A knack I could never convey in the reliefs I did of her: surrealized covers of vintage pulps like *Spicy Detective*. Bleak passion. Lurid suspense. Distressful dames in scraps of chiffon being menaced by hardboiled thugs. *Be—generous, Mr. Spade!*

My second Fatefulette. Gone astray like Amy-Kay in the exceedingly gray area between fantasy and reality. (Could K.T. complete the triumvirate? Or would she turn it

into banana-peel burlesque?)

Straight through the day I sketch, forgetting to break for lunch. Not till dusk falls does my stomach make its needs felt.

Slap together what's left in the fridge to create a Dagwood sandwich, country-style: even the lettuce is greasy. Snarf this down... and notice the cat doesn't zoom-pow through the cracked-open door to confiscate a portion. All the more for me, then.

Debate whether to have my couple of shots in a cooling bath, or out on the front porch as usual. Porch it is; save the bath for tomorrow. Traditional Saturday night activity round these parts. So pour a Friday night tumbler of Wild Turkey and head for the living room—

—where I find Willamene, poised against the davenport. Twitching from bat-ears to tail-tip. Prelude to a furball expulsion? I put down my drink, take a step forward—

The head swivels, drawing a bead on me. The body continues to twitch.

“Eat something you shouldn't have?”

(Silence.)

“Where've you been all day?”

(Silence.)

“Oh, cat got your tongue?”

(Twitch. Twitch. Twitch.)

This could start to unnerve a person. All the glass eyes in the heads on the walls seem to be observing us. I take another step forward—

—and the creature at my feet springs to life. Clambering up the fireplace and onto the mantel, from which I removed my four pieces the night she moved in. But put them back when I saw her leaving my possessions unmolested—

—until now. Twitching no more. Sauntering with tail in the air. Giving *Frieze-Frame* a brazen sniff—

“GET THE HELL AWAY FROM THAT!!”

I lunge at the mantel only to trip and fall, though not so low I don't see *A Perfect Fit* totter as the cat brushes past—

—and slides off the mantel’s other end. The cat, not my *Fit*. Dangling by one paw for an elongated second; then landing on the floor and dashing away.

I get to my feet. Go check for damage. Collect the four pieces and carry them into the bedroom; pack them away for safekeeping. By damn! Never should’ve allowed that stupid reckless varmint in the house! Got to deep-six the animal before this night is through, or next thing you know it might be me who’ll get bumped off—rubbed out—blown apart.

Last to go into the bag is *Plue Velvet*.

Or would be, if my eye weren’t snagged by the cowlmask it wears to conceal its features.

Probably the finest in-the-round I’ve ever carved. And the only one I’ve had to swear on my mother’s grave will never be revealed to a living soul.

*

“*Moneys Lucky twansyoo*,” Vashti brusked.

I’d heard a lot of terse snippets over the years about her niece LaQuita, but was surprised she wanted to see me. Much less pose for me. Both thanks to the Mawulisa Exhibit, a major presentation of West African art at the Boaz “Ruthless” Luther Center. I’d gone to this myself, to admire the bas-reliefs from Benin, and was inspired to try my hand at something comparable: not just in ebony but exotica like wenge, iroko, zebrawood.

LaQuita Gibson was inspired to be immortalized. Thus she called on me at Green Creek Lane: a tall striking girl of twenty or so, very angular and very dark.

“That’s because we Gibsons are *pure*, see? Not like those Tortys—they got every color of the rainbow in their family tree, even Korean!”

GASP and (giggle) from LaQuita’s cherubic fifteen-year-old cousin/chaperone.

“Torty?” I said. “Like raspberry torte?”

“This girl’s too *brown* to be Raspberry Tart, or Strawberry Shortcake either!”

“KEEE-ta! (giggle)”

My first impression of Pluanne Torty was a chocolate Easter bunny with the ears bitten off—or folded back into thick braids. She was shorter, lighter, and cuddly-plumper than LaQuita, with flawless teeth that her lips never closed over, and saucerlike eyes behind glasses the size of lima beans. LaQuita usually called her Plue—in two syllables, “like

gooey chop suey”—as she GASPed and (giggled), or went “KEEE-ta!” and (giggled), at most everything her older cousin said.

“You ever meet that mother of Plue, best watch out. She’s half Creole and half Haitian, and all mean as a snake!”

“KEEE-ta! (giggle)—you’re talking about my mama!”

“—as a *snake!* AND she’s a voodoo queen!”

“GASP (giggle)—she is not! My mama’s a deaconess in the Baptist church!”

“Just don’t let her near any chicken bones, I say. ‘Mambo Annie,’ they call her.”

According to LaQuita, Pluanne’s mother made a devil-doll of their great-grandfather Rodilard so she could reanimate his corpse and put it to work mowing the lawn.

“That’s not *true!* (giggle)—don’t believe her!” pleaded Pluanne.

I told them the pieces I carved weren’t likely to work as juju amulets, and invited LaQuita to assume any pose that made her feel comfortable. She assumed one that left her wearing only a thong, looking very dark but not nearly so angular.

“Sorry I got to keep my drawers on—Ahhnt Vashti’d kill me dead otherwise. Don’t know what she’d do to *you*.”

(“She did keep her drawers on,” I reported first thing next day at Selfsame.)

(“*Dwano parvit,*” brusked Vashti, shaking her drill-sergeant head.)

Sketching LaQuita took me back to life class at Liederkrantz and the unabashed Cheshire Mack, whose skintone I hadn’t encountered to such a living extent before. Since I’d just switched my sights from clay to wood, the effect was that much more mindblowing: Cheshire seemed like a dryad indeed, a walnut sapling made womanflesh. I damn near went broke hiring her for extra sessions.

Two dryadless decades had passed since then. The Cairney Academy has a sizable African-American attendance, but only a smattering’s ever responded to my model ads and none of them suitable. Now here was LaQuita Gibson in a wildchild thong, gabbling incessantly to her cellphone, to Pluanne, to me:

“So does being an artist make you a ‘mo, or do you like girls? Ever been with a black chick? True what they say, you know—do it once and” [double snaps] “never go back! ‘Cause the sistahs *got* back, even li’l Plue there—”

“GASP (giggle)—”

“—course she wouldn’t take so much as her *shoes* off in front of a man, which is a shame ‘cause under that big ol’ sweater ‘n’ skirt she’s got the most bodacious li’l booty—”

“KEEE-ta! (giggle)—”

“Go on, then! Show the man your li’l tootsies!”

Pluanne demonstrated instead that she could blush as deeply and sweetly as any Caucasian. Cheeks, ears, brow, throat—all took on a raspberry glow.

Though only on her own behalf. No sign of embarrassment at her cousin’s extreme dishabille. So accustomed was Plue to LaQuita’s baring body and soul that she quickly got distracted by a glimpse of my derelict Commodore PC.

“This is even older than the ones we have at school!”

LaQuita interrupted her cellphone conversation to say I should have Plue look at it. “She’s real good at fixing video games and stuff.”

I handed Pluanne a screwdriver, told her she had free rein to work miracles, and had scarcely returned to my sketch before she brought the Commodore back to life.

“Loose cable inside, that’s all. But you really ought to buy a new desktop.”

“Wouldn’t know what to look for.”

“Oh I could help you with that! I know exactly the one I’d get if I had the money!”

“Girl, let the man concentrate on designing my statue!” scolded LaQuita. “He can buy you a computer any old time!”

Dubious cough from me. But that very same week I found myself returning from Circuit City with a hyper Pluanne and a Pentium Pro, plus a flatbed scanner and bubblejet printer. All of which she had out of their cartons in the time it took me to hang up my hat. All of which she started doing her homework on whenever I sketched LaQuita. “Just five more minutes!” became Plue’s battle cry at the close of each modeling session.

Which probably accelerated Keee-ta’s disenchantment with posing for me. She liked the first relief I did of her (*Woman in Drawers with Cellphone*) but thought the rest a bore.

One Saturday in November Pluanne showed up by herself, via the bus. Saying LaQuita couldn’t make it but *she* had a couple of reports to finish for school, so would it be all right...? And would I mind if she popped round every Saturday morning for just an hour

or two, to borrow my computer and printer and scanner?

“Oh *pleeeeee*, Mr. H...”

Who could resist big brown saucer eyes behind lima-bean lenses? Not me, anyway. I told Plue she was welcome to pop round any Saturday she liked.

A week later I picked up the phone to hear her fighting back tears. Mama wouldn't let her come alone, was angry she'd done so without asking permission, and now both her parents wanted to “pay me a visit” tomorrow after church. Would it be all right...? And could I possibly be persuaded to put on a necktie?

The Tortys arrived early the next afternoon. Vashti's cousin Franklin towered over me, his forearms so vast Pluanne could've fit inside one of his shirtsleeves. But I'd taken her advice and tuned my radio to the Cutthroats pre-game program; this along with my dropping Sleepy LeThean's name satisfied Mr. Terty I was a trustworthy fellow.

“Mambo Annie” wasn't falling for that. She looked every inch a Baptist deaconess and more than capable of being mean as a snake.

“You own this place, Mr. Huffman?... Your landlady lives next door? I should like a word with her, if I may.”

“Mama...” murmured Plue.

“Yes?” (Like a shotgun being cocked.) “You'd best come with us, Pluanne. Be so kind as to take us over, Mr. Huffman. Franklin, you can wait in the car.”

Mrs. Wilson must have thought my necktie and I had joined the Jehovah's Witnesses. At any rate she vouched for my good name, and Mrs. Terty gave probationary consent to Plue's popping round on Saturday mornings to computerize her homework.

“Perhaps in return you could prepare Mr. Huffman a lunch, Pluanne.”

“Oh I'd be glad to! I don't think he takes near as good care of himself as he ought.”

“Don't make personal observations about folks, dear.”

“Yes, Mama.”

For my part I'd been straining not to personally observe Pluanne from the moment she unbuttoned her overcoat. Underneath she had on the type of wool dress any Nice Girl might wear to church in November, covering everything from collarbone to knee. But doing a lot more than big ol' sweaters and skirts to transform cuddly-plumpness into righteous

uplift. Accentuated by a waft of sandalwood that I've always been susceptible to—

Oh-so-bo-da-cious yowled my foxhound as Plue waved goodbye.

Let's see how the little chiseler copes with THIS, added Rotwang.

It started out fine. Plue was even allowed to come without a duenna, so long as she checked in with Mrs. Wilson upon arrival and departure. Her grades, already good, soared to straight A's; and her parents agreed our arrangement could continue till such time as they could afford a PC as good as mine or better.

At Green Creek Lane she swiftly took on proprietary airs. Every Saturday Pluanne would strap on an apron and cook me a week's worth of dinners, telling me when each should be thawed, how long it should be reheated and at what temperature. "I want to see every bit of this eaten, too."

"Yes ma'am," I'd say, and invite her to stay for lunch. Listening to her chatter about her friends Janet and Shawnda and the snooty-conceited D'Enyce whom they all despised. It was agreeable to have her as a regular guest, a surrogate little-sistah or daughter-equivalent. Almost the same age another equivalent would have been...

...never mind.

All the more reason not to turn Pluanne into a Shameful Subject. Difficult as that could be to resist. (She coyly called herself chubby; I said nonsense, she was Just Right.) You'd've thought boys of all races would be after her, but she never mentioned any. When I alluded to this, Plue blushed raspberry and said I never talked about any of my lady friends.

"No, not since you made such a fuss about them—"

"I did not!"

She'd squawked at my tossing Christmas cards on the sideboard, taking it upon herself to tape them to the fridge door. Tightening her smile when she saw who enclosed snapshots. K.T. and Stormin' Molly Brown each earned a loud sniff, and Miranda Paraless (from whom I received a publicity photo in décolleté minidress, floridly inscribed *XOXOXO besos y abrazos*) a zinging critique:

"Well I don't think she's pretty at all. Got on enough makeup for a whole beauty parlor, and look at that big ol' rump."

Swinging her equally proportionate li'l booty as she minced away.

I held my tongue. As it were.

In February Pluanne turned sixteen and drove up to Zerfall, over the moon, in an elderly Skylark her dad had reanimated. I offered her a little mahogany “16” I’d quickwhittled as a knickknack, in case she wasn’t permitted to wear it as a pendant.

“Well of course I am! We’re not Amish, you know.” Proving it by giving me a big ol’ hug, while I thought hard about frosty showers.

That night my entire futon was suffused somehow with sandalwood. Bed’s not the best place to think about cold showers, or hot ones either for that matter. And when I finally did drop off, it was into a phantasm that embraced me till you’d’ve sworn I was not alone on that sack of straw.

Hearing her breathe.

Feeling her heartbeat.

Tasting the natural Kahlúa on those never-closing lips, the living Hershey’s Kisses on that swelling righteous uplift—

DAMN...

The intensity. The vehemence. As if I were sixteen myself and not thirty-nine. As I truly was at the time, for the next couple of months. Then snoopy Plue deduced my birthday and baked me a torte, dishing this up with a raspberry face to match.

Sorry I can’t jump out of it.

“What?”

“Sorry I can’t fit forty candles on it.”

She’d asked me to be the subject of her Social Studies term project, profiling a small businessman. Not, she hastened to burble, that I was small!—or short! Just that she wanted to learn all about the mercantile side of being an artist. So I escorted Plue to the Crouching Gallery, introduced her to Geraldine, and enabled Ben Szilnecky to dine out for weeks on “Ay-utch’s leetle shadder.”

For the project she wanted to document my sculpting a panel from blank to finish.

“Can’t do anything too risqué,” I cautioned. “Not if it’s going to be shown in class.”

“Hey now! You’re not talking to a *child*, you know. I’m old enough to drive and get a job and be married.”

Do all Nice Girls know their state's age of consent? At any rate I carved a discreet LaQuita in iroko, knocking it off in less than a week.

"Like magic," said Pluane. Heaving an awesome sigh, her uplift now contained in a crisp cotton blouse that quivered with every springtime pulse—

Suppose I pose for you.

"How's that?"

"Let's say I was your model. Would you want me to sit on that stool there, same as Keee-ta?"

Oh, er, uh, well—

Glowing like a parfait, she kicked off her shoes and wiggled her li'l tootsies at me.

"See? I *can* do it in front of a man." Sashaying into my bathroom with a frissony smile.

Old enough to be JAILBAIT.

Was *that* her game? Set off how? By some bigoted traffic cop pulling her over, the N-word flung at her undeserving head, till Plue vowed to avenge herself—on *me*? Sure, why not? Who else had played the sap for her these past six months? If she should drop her drawers and scream for help, not one person on the planet would believe me guiltless. And by law I *wouldn't* be—having known how old she was from the get-go, whittling her that "16" on the fine chain around her fine neck...

...above the slightly outgrown gymsuit she stepped out wearing.

Braids unbound and glasses left off, she sat in front of me. Do-re-mi, 1-2-3, A-B-C: attitude, bearing, contours. Especially contours. Above, below, behind...

"Will I do?"

"...fine..."

But then a sudden GASP. "Don't draw my face!!"

"Why not? You're so—"

"No, you can't, you mustn't! Use Keee-ta's! I just wanna find out what it feels like! This gotta be between you and me, just us two, no one else can know oh *pleeeeeease*—"

Entwining her left little finger with mine to enforce my compliance. Even then she made me sketch LaQuita's head from memory first, before she would contribute the body. And its palpitations, which were all I could underhear when I tried tuning in:

Lubdub lubdub. Lubdub lubdub. LUBDUB LUBDUB...

Her eyes met mine, gaze for gaze. Was she looking with shallow saucers? More like swirling maelstroms. Myopic maybe, but entrancing. Drawing me toward them, inside them, down into their whirling-dervish vortex-depths...

LUBDUB. LUBDUB. LUB... DUB...

“Oh, she’s beautiful! What’ll we call her?” Meaning my graft of curvaceous limbs and torso onto an angular head.

“Lubduba?” I tried to say, but it came out “Lubaba”—a name that would grace several experiments with ebony. Each born of a clandestine gymsuited session by day, and multiple undercover phantasms by night. Posing her Just Right self for me, this way and that way. Finding out what it feels like, this that and t’other way, until—

—a distinct rejoinder.

I lay I MAKE you mine!

As t’other took over and transported me to places I’d never seen but knew at a glance: her own chaste bed surrounded by stuffed animals, then the kingsize mattress belonging to her parents, then her Social Studies teacher’s desk with Janet and Shawnda and D’Enyce all looking on astounded, then the altar of the Baptist church while a choir boomed *We are—climbing—Jacob’s—ladder—soldiers—of the—*

NO!

Wrenching myself out of her arms, out of that dream, and off of the futon.

Heedless of the hour I staggered to the workbench. Laid hands on a well-seasoned block of black walnut. Took up a saw and cut away what wasn’t needed. Took up my mallet and roughed in the profiles of an in-the-round. Decidedly round. With no sketches and no maquette; no grafting and no concealment.

Started in haste, it was finished with care. Blending the nude, the maid, and the cat from Manet’s *Olympia* into a single odalisque that sprang to life in the carving. With a face intended to be recognizable.

(Trespassers will be violated.)

She popped round one last Saturday before taking off with her folks on summer vacation. Having insinuated with many coy glints that something special was in the works,

just you wait and see! Now here she was, looking oh-so-overinnocent as she caught a lower lip between flawless teeth and gave it the tiniest devastating bite.

“Back in a sec,” she said.

Snick went the bathroom door.

Prime rule of thumb: maintain your edge.

I got a grip on the dropcloth that hid my recourse if Sweet Sixteen turned curdly-sour.

Out she came, clad in a violet kimono, raspberrying from the roots of her hair to the Easter-bunny epidermis peeping between silken lapels—

—that she yanked apart and flung off with a (giggly) “*Surprise!*”—

—as I ripped away the dropcloth and went “*Surprise yourself!*”—

—realizing a moment too late that Pluane had on a cocoa-colored two-piece swimsuit, cute as could be—

—as her eyes and mouth kept widening, widening at the sight of her carven image on my swivel stand: every meticulous detail exposed except for the underfro her hand was either covering or playing with (depending on the viewer’s mindset) and all of it in living color, thanks to black walnut’s ultrasmooth grain and ultrawarm tone—

—while Plue’s own blush blanched to sickly café au lait before resurging to the fore with a *lubdub lubdub LUBDUB LUBDUB LUBDUB LUBDUB*—

“HAWWWW...” she went. Convulsively. Half-doubled over as though she were about to be sick—about to pass out—about to *drop dead* as I ran forward and caught her in my arms—she hopping astride my thigh, wrapping herself around, mashing herself against, distending her eyes an inch from mine as if the closer and tighter you clutch a live grenade the less its chance of going—

“*HAWWWW-awwww-awwww... awww... awww... awww...*”

Bumped off. Rubbed out. Blown apart.

The only dying Plue did that day was from spontaneous combustion. In front of me; on front of me. Blubbering on one shoulder while pummeling the other with a small feeble fist. Imploring me not to show her odalisque to another living soul, never to part with it ever *EVER*—was my mama alive? No? Then *swear* I won’t, swear on her *grave!!*

Sobs and darkness at the end.

I swore as she asked, holding and stroking and trying to soothe her. And beseech her pardon. Dissuade her from screaming. Convince her that a little frottage in the woods didn't nullify her virtue.

(And failing to mention that my mother *had* no grave, her urn traveling wherever Cassandra toted it.)

A week later in the mail I received a handmade cowlmask of turquoise velour. It fit the odalisque's head precisely. Enclosed was a note saying "So you can keep your promise," followed by a ♥ and a P.

I did keep it. Promise and piece. The latter titled *Plue Velvet*.

"Isn't that darling colored girl going to come anymore?" Mrs. Wilson mourned.

"*Strewify*," brusks Vashti when I ask after Pluanne. She's doing fine. In college now; too busy for boyfriends.

Plue Velvet ended up where it belonged, side by side with *A Perfect Fit* on top of my "media center." None of my few visitors have ever asked to see it unveiled. Even I've left the cowlmask untouched, other than the occasional dusting, from the day I first slid it on.

Until now.

Here at the Old McRale Place, late on a Friday night.

Pluck it off, then.

And there she is. Barefaced. Those coy glints in her eyes and smile: recognizable, if not entirely comprehensible. Thanks to sphinxiness and juju triplicity.

Fatefulette Number Three.

Tomorrow I'll integrate her (so to speak) with Sage and Amy-Kay. Right now it's time for that shot I poured what seems like hours ago. Find my tumbler in the living room, take it back to the kitchen, add ice from the freezer, give it a chance to chill.

Realize the velour cowlmask's still in my other hand. Toss it onto the drainboard.

Taste the bourbon. Here's mud in my eye. Pour another—no, the bottle's empty. Fetch a fresh one from the walk-in pantry. Wrestle with the goddamn wrapper they put on the goddamn cork, trying not to let it dig under my goddamn thumbnail as I peel it away—

Please yourself.

—what?—

Forgot one, didn't you?

—how's that?—

Can you only count to three?

—pay no attention—

Come on down and see Shorty Hottie sometime.

—just get the wrapper off the cork—

Don't mind me hanging around.

—and the cork out of the bottle—

Even though the suspense could kill you.

—turn my head slowly, s-l-o-w-l-y, and look—

—but nothing's there.

Nothing unexpected, at any rate. Antique handpump beside the sink. Greasy plate from my supper sandwich. Tumbler with a sliver of unmelted ice, awaiting the fresh slug.

AND TWO COPPER EYES STARING AT ME THROUGH A VELOUR COWLMASK.

I lose my grip on the unopened bottle.

It hits the floor at the exact angle to make it detonate.

No live grenade, no Molotov cocktail, no light bulb broken by Bram Taggart ever sounded like this dire Wild Turkey when it shatters. Christening the linoleum with a flood of amber liquor that turns purple against the faded blue.

I look up and find the cowlmask vacant, precisely where I left it on the drainboard.

I look down and find Willamene at my feet, backing away from the pool of booze.

If this is Willamene. A dozen other cats have come out of the woodwork to occupy every surface in the kitchen—table and chairs, stove and refrigerator, cabinets and countertops—all of them watching as the boozepool turns the engulfed breakage into glassy islets. Scintillas against the purpling floor. An overturned canopy of a starry night sky. With horizons spreading outward, opening up and flowing away at my vertiginous feet.

Thirteen black cats, and me descending a ladder. Clinging there encircled by a brood of tiny bagheeras with eyes like crows.

11

Bruise from Nowhere

FLASH.

...hunh?...

Week and a half out of college. On a cot in a space of my own. A “loft” they called it, meaning a cell: 600 square feet beneath a twelve-foot ceiling. Exposed pipes. Exposed ducts. Three walls of exposed Cream City brick. Fourth dominated by a steel-sash casement, cranked open onto darkness.

FLASH, it went.

Something wrong?

And me not fully unpacked yet.

Digital clock plugged in, though. Dimly reading 11:44. Quarter-hour left of Wednesday the 13th, for all you children full of woe.

FLASH.

Up then. Over to look out at what they called a “light court.” Meaning an airshaft under a skydome, with my screenless window near one of the shaftcorners. Around which, not quite out of sight, I saw a flickering rhombus. Attached to it was an agape frame of glass, projecting opposite.

Presenting a midnight vision.

Very young it appeared. Very what in those days we called Oriental. Very if not extremely female.

A VYOF, suspended in midair.

Ivory hourglass with touches of jet. Holding in one hand what I guessed was a trigger plunger, connected to an unseen camera. Photographing herself wearing a magenta beret and nothing else.

Turning to the left (her right) and FLASH.

Twisting to the right (her left) and FLASH.

Stroboscopic from either angle.

Digital clock flipped over to twelve. A final FLASH and the floating frame went black. Ceased to be. Leaving me with my window open, but only the shaft to see.

*

By day I constructed models for Kurtzway Kollektibles, doing my part to maintain Milwaukee as America's Cultural Mecca. Kurtzway, famous for their bongos, was trying to bootleg *Laverne & Shirley's* coattails up to counterfeit groundlevel; so I carved endless imitation Lennys and Squiggys and Big Ragoos. That was the dayjob.

Home space was down on Washburn Street, the industrial south side of town. Where a foundry had been subdivided into cells and renamed the Strichleiter Lofts. Mine was #515, on the top floor. The one around the shaftcorner was #517. Between us was a freight elevator and iron galleries that clanged underfoot.

Thursday the 14th I returned from Kurtzway with a bratwurst on poppyseed and a six-pack of Pabst. Ate the first and drank most of the second (the evening being warm) while further unpacking. And waiting for dusk to fall on the year's almost-longest day. Gradually the airshaft darkened but stayed empty, with the rhombus around the corner a mere hole in the wall.

Had I been dreaming last night?

If so, could I arrange a rerun?

CRASH went the elevator gate. *CLANG-CLANG-clang* on the gallery. *Slam* from #517's door.

And the magic casement reappeared inside the light court.

Mirroring a spiral staircase. To its right was half a brass bedframe, the half-mattress draped with batik. To its left, by the casement hinge, was an ornate-looking highboy; over that hung Tutankhamen's metallic head.

Then off went the overhead and on came the candles: fat ones grouped in twos and threes, lit apparently *en masse*. Illuminating my VYOF in a deep dark gown, sitting in profile with a cello before her. (A cello? A cello.) Bow in one hand, neck in the other, she began to make music. Cadences I would soon associate with Siouxsie & the Banshees and their album *The Scream*—“Jigsaw Feeling,” “Nicotine Stain,” “Suburban Relapse.” Raw and snarling they struck me; eerie agitation mixed with insistent despair.

And as she played, as she gyrated and undulated to the tempo, her profile became elemental. Black slash for closed lashes. Red parenthesis for open lips. Hair like ink-dipped quills. Double scoop of vanilla surging against a sable vase.

While I stood by entranced, lost in her fervor and angst.

*

Friday the 15th I came home to find a frantic man walloping #517's closed door. “CRAAAANK??” he shouted. “CRAAAANK!!”

No response from within, so I left him to it. Went on to my own cell around the corner. What kind of slur was “craaaank” supposed to be? A skank with crabs? Not *my* VYOF. Not the vision I'd gazed at two nights running (me standing, mind racing). What say tonight we make it three-for-three?

(The distant wallops ceased. Good: leave her to me.)

Wherever she might be. Twilight descended as I finished unpacking, groping in the murky gloom. No light came on that night and no music sounded, though I stayed up till well into the wee hours. Staring out my window at vacant space.

Then, come Saturday morning—

Awoke fairly late. Off the cot to stretch and scratch and search for breath. Damn it! Too much CO₂ in this cell. Grab my inhaler? Or rely on the window?

I boosted myself onto the sill and leaned forward as far as I dared, into a light court filled with screenless open casements. Wedging a fist into my solar plexus, willing the oxygen to reach my starved bronchioles, twisting and turning to help it along—

—and there she was. Perched upon her own sill in a black lace shortie nightie.

“Whutchew think YER gawpin' at?”

Oh her legs. Oh her breasts. Oh her beautiful almond-cookie face. Oh her...

—*VOICE*, for crying out loud. Like Tanya Tucker on helium.

A delicate hand removed a thin brown cigarette from a petulant mouth that slowly curled into a smile. Dimples, even. As she inspected me in my tentpitching boxers, which upgraded from pup to pavilion as I drank in more of my neighbor.

“Way-ull,” she chirped. “Aintchew jes the kewtest thang.”

“Hey,” I respired.

“Hey yerself. Kimberly Wu.”

“Who?”

“Wu. Call me Cranky Lynnette.”

“Why?”

Away flew the dimpled smile. “Cuz that’s whut I’m *called*.”

“Then who’s—”

“M’*name*’s Kimberly Wu. I’m *called* Cranky Lynnette. Git it?”

To illustrate the point (and make my pavilion flap) she fondled the casement crank at her side. Everything behind her was reversed: half-brass bed on the left, highboy and Tut on the right, staircase spiraling antipodally.

“Squeaky Fromme’s real name,” she remarked.

“Is...?”

“Lynette—one N. Mine’s got two, so ‘Cranky Lynnette’ wouldn’t have thirteen letters. Y’wanna bawl?”

“Um. Sure. Should I...?”

“Naw, I’ll come over thar.” Flicking her thin brown cigarette, still alight and trailing smoke, down the airshaft. “Gimme a sec.”

“I’m in #515—”

“I know whar y’are, babe.” Twinkle of legs and lace and she was gone. Out of sight: no reflective visions at that time of day.

During her gimme’d sec I slapped on soap and water, toothpaste and mouthwash, then a shirt and jeans. Maybe I’d heard more than was meant. She could be coming over with a *bowl* of something—egg flower oatmeal, perhaps.

Rattle of knob. Escalating peevishly before I could get the door open. No bowl was in her delicate hand, but she'd stuck another thin brown cigarette between her lips. Freshly crimsoned, along with new lash-beading and lid-lining and socket-shading.

She had eyes like sloes. Fruit of the blackthorn, the spiny plum, *Prunus spinosa*; eyes the color of wine in a vault. Set obliquely in a head shaped like an old-fashioned spinning top—very wide brow tapering down to a very small chin above a very slim neck. Below that was the ivory hourglass, clad now in skintight raven singlet and fleshtaut raven shorts. Plus a pair of silver suspenders to emphasize her undeniable form. Up close she was actually diminutive, much shorter than myself—but oh the bosom-rack and oh the buttock-shelf and oh the waspy-waist swerving from the uppers to the latters. Oh the Shalimar dabbed on every vital spot, convex or concave. The only thing remotely flat about Cranky Lynnette was her stare.

Which I got leveled with as she entered my loftcell, as though I'd enticed her over with flimsy blandishments. CHING-A-LING-A-LING she dismissed them, brushing past on sandaled feet that sported the first toe rings I'd seen outside an Arabian Nights movie. Each ring bore a tiny bell, and each bell sent up a minuscule jangle as Lynnette scampered over to my workbench. Hopping atop it and yanking sharp objects out of the tool caddy.

"Kew! Y'could cut up a body real good with these!" she trilled, testing a chisel bevel against her fragile thumb.

"Careful!"

"Aw, I'm tougher'n I look." Whistling forth a smoky plume (that smelled like tobacco cut with bubble gum) she wagged the thumb at me. Then turned her attention to a bracket above the bench, on which was set the first work I'd achieved in wood after abandoning clay. Practically new it was then; almost two years in the making.

"UH—"

"—I'm *bein'* careful," Lynnette quibbled. Grinding out her cigarette on my Cream City bricks before picking up the piece. The nearly nude girl frozen in midwrithe, couched upon the oversized hand.

"I'm a sculptor," I gargled.

"Yew made this?" she asked, gazing at *A Perfect Fit*.

“Yeah.”

(Silence. Then:)

“Will y’make one o’ me?”

“Oh HELL yes!”

“Whoa-kay then,” she went. Replacing *A Perfect Fit* on its bracket (carefully) before ripping open my chest—

—no, just the safari shirt I’d bought at Kohl’s three days earlier. Followed by the rest of our clothing, discarded just as unsubtly. Cranky Lynnette left little in the way of doubt.

Certainly none concerning her own endowments. If you took the other night’s vanilla scoops and stuffed them with the other day’s bratwurst, they could not have been more exotically succulent; more torrid to the touch or nippy to the feel.

Not that I was permitted to touch or feel howsoever I pleased:

“Jes... lay... *still*... ‘kay? Lemme dew yew!”

“But... I want... to do... you too!”

“This ain’t about me, babe,” she said, giving my chin a love bite. (Some kind of bite, anyway.) So I lay... *still*... and let myself be galloped like a circus horse over hurdles and through a hoop of fire, all the way to Banbury Cross by a fine lady with rings *and* bells on her ten petite toes. CHING-A-LING-A-LING!

Did I want to bawl? Primal as John Lennon with the Plastic Ono Band.

Till we lolled together on the concrete floor, Lynnette’s mouth moving unhurriedly over my throat from ear to ear. Planting a row of crimson hickeys that would take years to subside. Surfacing at last to smirk down at me, her flat stare turned to sharp sparkle, and say:

“That wuz fun! Howdy, neighbor.”

I burned to kiss her then, full on those lips that had been pretty much everywhere except against mine. But when I tried, she reared her head away on its very slim neck till her very full yabbos hove into view.

“Gwan, he’p yerself... attaboy... now t’other one... good baby.”

Up she stood then to mosey into my bathroom. Asscheeks oscillating like nobody’s business.

I got to my feet more incrementally. Not to mention infuriatedly. By damn! *By damn!* Ought to grab her and haul her to the workbench, clamp her down and see how much SHE likes jes layin' still! Oh yes! Mercy will be begged for when I dew yew, my beauty, with a *schweinhund* reporting back for active service despite all it'd just been subjected to. (Such was its puissance at age twenty-two.)

Out came Lynnette to glance up at my face, then down at my hound. Heaving an exasperated little sigh, she laid a hand on me—went *wink wonk wunk*—and wiped it on my stomach. “THAR y’go,” she chirped magnanimously, oscillating over to the fridge and finding my medication collection atop it. “Whut’s this stuff?”

“Prednisone,” I mumbled.

“Whut’s that?” (Rummaging inside the fridge, extracting the last can of Pabst.)

“A steroid. Anti-inflammatory. For asthma.”

“Y’mean like not breathin’? Bummer.” Popping open beer-can and pill-vial, she sampled some of their contents in one swallow.

“Hey!”

“Hey yerself. Mebbe it’ll hep me git t’sleep.”

“You’re supposed to take it with food—”

“Okey-doke.” Chomping a frozen waffle and washing it down with beer, she put on my now-buttonless safari shirt; tied it closed (more or less) with one of her suspenders; and yawned so expansively she nearly fell down. “Oh gawd! I’m dyin’ fer sleep. Gotta go catch me some Z’s.”

“It’s after *noon*—”

“I only jes got home ‘n’ wuz havin’ a bedtime smoke when yew poked yer nose in. Woke me all up agin.” Frowning crankily as she gathered sandals, singlet, shorts, the other suspender, her black lace undies and my box of frozen waffles en route to the door.

“Er—you could, uh, crash here—”

“On *that* thing? Them sheets silk? Didn’t think so! But say, y’gotta car? I’ll be needin’ a ride round’bout ‘leven. See y’then.”

Kissing an index finger, she drove its crimson nail into my bare chest and jangled on out. Leaving me free to write a letter to *Penthouse Forum* if I chose, or wonder how far she

might be needin' this round'bout ride. There was a gas crisis that June, truckers were striking, many stations had odd/even rationing...

...but odds were even if Lynnette said "Drive me to Shanghai," I would point my Subaru westward and floor the accelerator.

At the stroke of eleven I went knocking on #517's much-walloped door. It opened and a small mummy case was handed to me. No: a cello case, painted to resemble Nefertiti's coffin. With Pharaoh's daughter following it in a low-bosomed slit-skirted witching-hour gown. With a large silver ankh hanging from a jet chain into her vanilla cleavage.

"So?" she asked.

"Fuhhhh," I replied.

"Whoa-kay then."

She tucked one of her thin brown cigarettes behind my ear. A *kretek* she called it, Indonesian cloves; bound to be better for asthma than "that nasty pezdaprone. It like t'give me hot flashes!"

I was directed to drive not to Shanghai but Brady Street on the East Side. A few years earlier this had been Milwaukee's counterculture habitat; now it was wilted and threadbare. Funky little taverns and coffeehouses and the boarded-up Astor Theater and a waterbed emporium that must have seen more buoyant times. Beside it was a stairwell leading down, and a sign that read (when you got up close)

Nonnamou's

• "SUMMERFESTERING" •

SAT DAST CAST • CRANKY L

We descended into a cellar full of fog and din. The fog was a mingling of nicotine, patchouli oil and surly perspiration, emanated by hoodish-types at bistro tables. Lynnette threaded me through these to a bar at the far side, where she kneeled on a stool to trade Continental salutes with the lady bartender.

"Tattoo Rula," I was told (barely audible over the heavy metal dirge in an adjoining room). To Rula: "M'new neighbor." To me: "Y'gotta name?"

“H. Huffman,” I coughed.

To Rula: “Whut he said.”

The barkeep inclined her gray mohawk. Looking like a Maori wisewoman who’d seen it all and had it engraved upon her person.

I was going to order a Guinness and whatever Lynnette wanted, when I found her jut-strutting into the next room past an enormous bouncer. “Theo,” Lynnette mouthed at me, and “Neighbor,” she mouthed at Theo, who gave me an ominous watch-your-step once-over.

In the next room were another couple dozen hoodish-types, additional smoke and oil and rancor, plus a sacksuited gargoyle and his backing band:

*What goes on in your dreeeeams
Is nothing like it seeeems
You think they’re falling leeeeeaves
They’re not what you perceeeeeeive
What’s innocence at niiiight
‘S corrupted by the liiiiight
No soul can answer whyyyy
Your heartbeat tells a liiie...*

A punk club, I thought. More Germanic than I’d imagined. Some were swaying to the gargoyle’s elegy and some were genuflecting, while a few danced the Metropolis Bop: part trudge, part taunt, part android folly.

The gargoyle’s requiem ended with a droning crescendo, and there was expressionist applause.

“Varney Otranto and Dastard Castle,” croaked the club’s spectral MC. Whom I’d later know to be Non Nonnamou himself: raccoon eyes, flaky complexion, omniscient grin. “And now, my friends, your own—your very very own—Cranky Lynnette.”

A blue spot came up. As did anticipatory ruckus. Both enshrouding my Girl Around the Corner, seated with Nefertiti’s cello between her fishnet knees. Raking the room with her horizontalfying glare.

Then she closed her lashes. Opened her lips. Took the bow in one hand, the neck in the other, and wrang resonance from catgut. A melancholy vibrato that rose and dove, soared and stooped, as her open lips formed red parentheses.

Out of which came twangfree song:

*Once upon a time I cried myself awake
While I wondered how much longer my tears would take
I heard the sound of fingers running through my hair
Which was strange because I knew I lay alone—
But I guess you had to be there
Yes you had to be there.*

*Harboring an enemy who shares the pain
Of windflowers fragmented by the pelting rain
Anemones with tarnished petals planted deep
In my heart to give interminable sleep—
And you said:
No enemy
No enemy
Just seeking shelter from nevermore.*

*Cry for sanctuary though there's no escape
From the shadows flooding through us like liquid crêpe
An inundated couple can't come up for air
Which is sad because I used to come alone—
But I guess you had to be there
Yes you had to be there.*

*However much you covet the life you choose
Keep breathing on your own and you are bound to lose
Give shelter so interminable you will be
Like the fragmentary tears that set you free—*

*And you said:
We were the dead
We were the dead
We're not gonna take it anymore.*

Finishing to a guttural “*Eh eh... eh eh... eh eh...*” from the audience, in the best EC horror comics tradition.

The blue spot yielded to basement lighting. Lynnette disappeared momentarily into the hoodish-mob, returning on the sacksleeved arm of Varney Otranto—to leave me behind with her mummy case.

“Be a babe ‘n’ tote this home fer me, ‘kay? See yew.”

“Whoooozat?” droned the departing gargoyle.

“M’neighbor,” Lynnette told him. So offhandedly I wanted to shout *I HAD SEX ON THE FLOOR WITH THAT WOMAN TWELVE HOURS AGO!*

“How she plays,” said Tattoo Rula at the bar. “Not the cello only.”

“So what do I do?” I asked.

“You play back, Hoffmonn. Must be her game, her rules. Otherwise it is solo.”

I solo’d out of there and drove back to Washburn Street. With the scent of Shalimar drifting up from Nefertiti’s coffin in the shotgun seat. And a whiff of cloves from the Indonesian *kretek* still tucked behind my ear.

*

Sunday morning I was at the workbench, taking out my feelings on a hapless block of wood, when: *CRASH. CLANG-CLANG-clang. Slam.*

After a moment a paper airplane sailed through the window to land on my cot. Unfolding it, I was confronted by three pictographs:

car agen 8p?

“WHAT THE HELL DOES THIS MEAN??” I yelled out my window into #517’s. Which was rapidly filled by a Wrathful Lynnette wearing only my open safari shirt, plus a

sleepmask propped above a face lathered with cold cream. Demanding to know whether I could manage *just once* this weekend to let her slumber undisturbed, was she asking for the moon and stars here??

“Gawd SAKES, Huffman!”

“Sorry,” I mumbled. Averting my gaze from her cranky sloes till she clapped her untied wrapper shut.

“Yew ‘n’ yer gawpin’! Yer jes lucky yer so kewt!”

I didn’t feel lucky at that moment. I felt in thrall.

To La Belle Chinoise Sans Merci.

*

Rattle RATTLE RATTLE went my knob at quarter past eight.

Lynnette in a punkette sunsuit; elaborate camera case dangling off one shoulder; tripod and satchel of apparatus at her feet. “Well are we dewin’ this or whut?”

“What?”

“Goin’ out! C’mon, I ain’t got all night.”

“Where?” I asked, picking up the tripod and satchel and hurrying after her.

“Oconomowoc,” she went as we boarded the freight elevator.

“’Scuse me?”

“That Varney Whutsit told me ‘bout a boneyard thar whar this chick-ghost comes outta a crypt-statue ‘n’ walks into Fowler Lake. Gotta git me a pitcher o’ *that*. Oh SHIT—” at the setting sun, smack in our faces as we left Strichleiter and climbed into my Subaru. Consulting a map, I was relieved to find Oconomowoc about halfway to Madison, not Manchuria.

“Which cemetery?”

“La Belle.”

That figured. “What if it’s closed when we get there?”

“Oh, dontchew worry ‘bout that.” She lit a *kretek* and blew a cloud in my direction.

“Jes take a good look at that crypt-statue. I might be wantin’ yew t’make one zackly like it, o’ *me*.”

“Er, nude?...”

Brief bark of cloven laughter. “If y’wanna be buck-nekkid when y’make statues, that’s yer bizness.”

“I will if you will,” I replied, placing my right hand on her left thigh. Off which it was promptly swatted.

“Quit pawin’ me, Huffman! I don’t dew encores.”

Nor did La Belle’s chick-ghost put in an appearance that evening. Lynnette and I made other cemetery runs that summer, farther afield as the gas crisis eased. Though never so far as the Cimetière du Père-Lachaise in Paris, where everybody from Modigliani to Molière to Jim Morrison was interred. According to Lynnette, there was no finer resting place on the face of the earth—not least because it welcomed stray cats.

“They even got these li’l boxes fer ‘em t’sleep in when it rains. That’s whut *I* call quality.” She herself fed strays on Washburn Street, but refused to confine any to her fifth-floor loftcell. “Lockin’ up kittycats is krewl! ‘Sides, I never let *nobody* in thar ‘ceptin’ me.”

“What about neighbors?”

“SPECIALLY not neighbors!”

I found meager consolation in her not bringing anyone home. I, at least, got to escort her from there and occasionally back, sometimes favored with a parting crotch-tweak (“Sweet dreams t’grow on, babe”) outside the freight elevator.

Of course I wanted more than tweaks. Yearned for more; *ached* for more.

But I wasn’t even her exclusive chauffeur. Weekdays Lynnette got driven to her photolab dayjob by Erin/Aaron, a fellow employee and the least convincing transvestite ever to strap on a garter belt (his Nixonian jowls had five o’clock shadow at all hours). Twice a month Tattoo Rula drove her to a necromantic hairdresser in Oshkosh to get their ‘dos done and fortunes told. And on Saturday nights, more often than not, I transported only the cello home from Nonnamou’s.

Lynnette didn’t object to my ogling her floating frame in casement-reflections, so long as I spoke no word and broke no spell. She did a great deal of “ay-roebuck dancin’,” a brand-new activity which to me looked like Sixties go-go, except she didn’t wear boots (or

much of anything else).

In exchange for this, Lynnette felt entitled to small neighborly favors. These she requested not by phone (she didn't have one—"The gummint kin pay fer their own wiretappin'") but via paper airplanes. They usually landed on my bed while I was in it, poking me in the nose or ear. One night I got jabbed awake to unfold a plane and find her demanding an

amlett?

I did know a hawk from a handsaw, but this one puzzled the will.

"An *ahhhm*-lett," explained Lynnette, having a wee-hour smoke on her sill.

"You want me to *make* you one?" I croaked out my window.

"Naw, jes gimme the eggs. I'm starvin' here."

I tossed her a full carton. She caught it by the lid, but the bottom dropped open and sent a dozen white ovoids down the airshaft. Nearly followed by Lynnette, as she began a giggle-jag that turned into highpitched hiccups.

"Try holding your breath," I suggested.

Flap flap flap went her aggravated hands.

Later that same Sunday she came over to #515 for a session of I Will If You Will. She posing buck-nekkid for my sketchpad; I doing likewise for her camera. Simultaneously but not interactively, as Lynnette let me know with a whack across the chops.

"*Owwwwtch...*"

"Y'want a knee in the nuts next? Cuz I kin supply it! This is *art*, Huffman, not a chance fer yew t'feel me up. So be a good guy 'n' go stand over thar in the light."

While she laid aside her camera and straddled the cello in a lover's clinch.

I don't know whether Pip ever had coarse common fantasies of Estella unlacing her stays, removing her chemise, and playing a musical instrument in his presence. Making Pip's foolish clumsy laboring-hound rear up on its hind legs and bay at the moon.

"Yer such an addylessent," Lynnette grumbled. "Why caintchew git *used* to it?"

"How can I get *used* to it when you never GIVE me any??"

“Hey, I give yew good ‘n’ plenty! Go ahead ‘n’ dew yerself, if y’gotta.”

“Like hell I will! With you here taking pictures?”

“Aw, poor baby. Yer jes tew easy t’tease.”

Beckoning me to her side—for a *wink-wonk-wunk*-THAR-y’go reenactment. Scraps for a stray; heartfelt as a hiccup.

I’ll show her (I vowed). Sending to Louisiana for a seasoned blank of sinker cypress, and on it carving my very first stand-alone panel. In *cavo-rilievo* or hollow relief, such as the ancient Egyptians used for decorating their tombs.

A recessed niche. A naked profile. A cello held but not hid behind, so that the fortunate viewer beholds her all. Willful beauty captured but not captive: “krewl” in its ageless Cleopatraness, its indifference to the effect wreaked upon poor sorry mortal us.

Title: *Frieze-Frame*.

It delighted her. Brought out the seldom-seen almond-cookie dimples. Brought over the seldom-felt hourglass to lean against me. And (when I tried to kiss her) brought her fingers inside my shirt to give me the purplest nurple ever perpetrated.

Before I could regain full consciousness, Lynnette had grabbed my hand and dragged me out of my cell. “C’mon c’mon!”—down the clanging gallery, around the corner past the elevator, and into her sacrosanct loft.

Hassenpfeffer Incorporated! We’re gonna do it!

Or so I thought. But pausing only to prop *Frieze-Frame* (carefully) atop the highboy below King Tut, she tugged me up the spiral staircase to an unlatched trapdoor, and through it, and onto the Strichleiter roof.

Where, like the song said, we could be closer to heaven.

It was a Friday, the last night of August, and uncounted stars were shining above as we ran across the pebbly aggregate. Past skydomes and vent pipes and a rust-choked cooling tower, Lynnette pulling me toward the edge—to the brink—swinging her legs over it and making me do the same, till I sat there on the parapet beside her silhouette. With the lights of Milwaukee before us to the north. Firefly traffic moving along the Hoan Bridge; a gleam on the horizon that was the Gas Building’s crowning neon flame.

(When it’s red, warm weather’s ahead—when it’s gold, watch out for cold.)

(From here the light looked green.)

I told her then that I loved her. Even if it were my misfortune and none of her own.

She held my hand, thumb-rubbing its palm-calluses. And sottoing, to me or herself or us both: *“In Flanders fields the poppies grow /between the crosses, row on row...”*

Was that all? No other response, even to be underheard? But my inner ears had been clogged by too many hash brownies; they could detect nothing more than a staticky r-o-a-r that proved to be a summery breeze off the lake.

Only the wind.

My dear.

Just seeking shelter from nevermore...

Almost as if to give me a second chance with her. Or, perhaps, so that she might take a second crack at me.

*

Saturday the 1st of September. Start of the Labor Day weekend—or “Stillborn Day” as it was called at Nonnamou’s. On this accursed evening we were seated at the bar, me sketching the clientele like Toulouse-Lautrec at a dimmer-lit Moulin Rouge, when Lynnette let out a squeak.

“Who he?”

She was looking over my head, so I turned toward the door. And saw an incongruity that even then, at the ass-end of the Seventies, pushed contemporary fashion beyond exaggeration.

He was too the hell tall and too the hell wide and too the hell tan. Travolta coif and Burt Reynolds moustache. Three-piece suit the color of bad salad dressing, with lapels wider than pterodactyl wings. Possibly a shirt beneath the jacket, but if so just to offset the gold medallions and pelt of Gucci chest hair.

“Aaaay,” went the incongruity. “What is this place, a morgue?”

Johnny Ajahr.

(May his sour yellow eyes kebab on the shish of the damned.)

Immediately he targeted Cranky Lynnette: “You look like you could use some smacking down, doll.” To Tattoo Rula: “Tequila. No salt. No lime. And same for the

lady.” To Lynnette: “You bite the worm, right?” To Rula, with a twenty from a gold money clip: “What we don’t drink, you keep.” To me, or at any rate in my direction: “Move, pal.”

And bang off our barstool we were heavily jolted—charcoal, sketchbook, and me. Vivid reminder of the bad old Gullip days. As I ceased to exist insofar as Lynnette was concerned; she hanging sappily on Too The Hell’s every cough and grunt.

Then a *third* guy horned in. Dastard Castle’s jitterish guitarist Gilbert Blyght sidled over to tug at TTH’s sleeve. “Hey Johnny? Johnny, you selling tonight?”

Downing his shot: “Could be, pal.” Clamping a meathook on Lynnette’s slender wrist: “Not this, though.” Tipping tequila into her slackened mouth: “Drink up, doll.” (Gurgle and choke from Lynnette, who preferred Pernod.) To Gilbert: “Not here. Outside.” To Lynnette: “Let’s blow this worm farm.”

“Kay,” she sighed. Blissful-idiotic.

And away they all went, two of them propelled by the third’s meathooks. Leaving behind the smell of bad salad dressing, as though his suit produced its own spoor.

“What the hell just happened?” I wheezed at Tattoo Rula.

She mopped the bar and shook her doleful mohawk. “I think a different game now, Hoffmann.”

And it was. The One Night Short Of A Two-Week Affair. With Johnny Ajahr playing the role of Bentley Drummle (“such a mean brute, such a stupid brute”) in our newly-formed triangle. Except that my Estella, instead of regarding her Drummle with utter contempt, fell for him like a ton of Cream City bricks.

My paper airplane errands abruptly ended, as did my chauffeuring duties. Ajahr took her everywhere in a piss-tinted Corvette, the sort of bastardmobile you’d expect to be driven by a “promoter” plying his trade. Painting the town Persian Brown: spreading its reek till it permeated Washburn Street and the Strichleiter Lofts and the airshaft on which I couldn’t close my steel-sash casement.

Much as I wanted to.

Him she brought home.

Him she let into her brass bed, her silk sheets, her lace panties. Night after night. Time after time. Nothing could drown out the noises they made, not my radio or stereo or

industrial-size exhaust fan. I heard it all: every grate of boxspring and rasp of mattress. Every thrust, every gush, every too the hell savage bray and gloat. Every malignant abomination her fragile delicacy was subjected to—

—while I lay alone with my inhaler and fought to draw breath. Moving my cot as far from the window as possible. Hearing them was obscene enough; the only thing worse would've been catching a reflected glimpse with my own seared eyes.

Excruciating.

Unendurable.

For the first time in years I called upon Rotwang, asking for vengeance to be visited upon the Foe. Another UPS truck—a rival dealer with a grudge—a thousand freaked-out junkies dying for a fix. I even tried to hire Theo the bouncer to do a freelance dry-gulch, but he pretended not to know what I was talking about for the amount of money I could afford to pay.

So: nothing. Lynnette: screwed. Sense of the word: extreme.

I don't doubt that Ajahr's ultimate scheme was to break her in, break her down, and trick her out all over Wisconsin. But little did he (or I) reckon with the depths of Kimberly Wu—her stamina, tenacity, and willingness to bear anything Ajahr could dish up.

Just as long as she could bear his children. Nor was that expressed in jest.

Late at night on Thursday the 13th: a furious bellow and a screeching twang.

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN, YOU FLUSHED YOUR FUCKING PILLS?"

"DOWN THE TOILET A WEEK AGO! I WANNA HAVE YER BABY!"

"YOU FUCKING CRAZY BITCH! NOBODY FUCKS THAT WAY WITH JOHNNY AJAHR!"

"I DEW! 'N' DONTCHEW CALL ME A BITCH WHEN I'M OVEWLATIN'!"

"YOU'RE A CRAZY BITCH IS WHAT YOU ARE! I'M GETTING THE FUCK OUTTA HERE!"

"NO YEW AIN'T, YEW BASSURD! YER NOT LEAVIN' THIS ROOM!"

"YOU GONNA STOP ME, BITCH? *ARRGH!!*—LEGGO, GODDAMMIT!!"

"I LOVE YEW, JOHNNY! I WANNA HAVE YER BAYYYY-BEEEEZ—"

"SHUT UP!! SHUT THE FUCK UP!! AND GET YOUR FUCKING CRAZY HANDS OFF ME—"

Blows: struck. Door: slammed. Gallery: clang-clang-clang. Elevator gate: crashed. Silence: brief.

She burst into sobs then, and wept half the night.

It was a terrible thing to have to listen to.

*

After leaving work on Friday the 14th I was in no hurry to go home. So I treated myself to fried clams at Howard Johnson's, then a boring showing of *The Amityville Horror* followed by a preview of the slightly better *When a Stranger Calls*. I wouldn't have minded finding Carol Kane back at the lofts, waif-faced and google-eyed and in need of personal assistance.

Near midnight when I returned to Washburn Street. Dark out and darker inside my cell, except for a glow in the window.

Guardedly I approached it; cautiously I scanned the magic casement. The echoed contents. *Frieze-Frame*, still propped under Tut's metallic nose. (A spot from which I would one day reclaim it for my own.) Bed shifted since last I'd seen it, into full view alongside the spiral staircase. Mass of candles grouped and lit around the brass frame, making it flash like Brynhild's ring of fire. And on the batik coverlet with folded arms lay—

“YEEDGE!”

An exclamation that must have shattered enchantment, since she jackknifed bolt upright. Spewing projectilely.

Blink and I was at #517. Door unlocked—her on the floor—Lynnette trailing puke as I hoisted her into the bathroom that doubled as darkroom—who the hell knew what she might've swallowed and was now disgorging over the bowl, me guiding the barf geyser till her stomach was empty and the rest of her sagged into stupor, flaccid on the tiles.

“*Wu?*” I said. “*Wu!*”

Most of what I did next was inspired by pulp fiction and, I've since learned, the opposite of what you're supposed to do; but fatality was before me and my imagination ran riot. Ripping off a lace nightie that resisted like chainmail. Slingshotting Lynnette into the shower stall and blasting her with cold water. Brewing a pot of pungent tarlike tea and ladling it down her throat. Standing her up and plodding her through the debris of last night's fight. Repeating this cycle again and again for miles upon miles—each time startled to spot myself here and there upon a wall covered floor to ceiling with photographs.

Doppelgangers that chimed in as I chanted “*Why-no-phone why-no-phone why-no-phone?*” —not daring to leave her unattended even for the few minutes it would’ve taken to run back to my place and summon an ambulance. Twice I did start to go; both times she slumped over with a heart-rattling shudder. I tried wrapping her in a dress, a towel, my old safari shirt—anything so I wouldn’t have to carry her naked and insensible along the galleries. But if her nightie felt like chainmail, all other fabric was plate armor that refused to stay on.

So she remained in the raw. And not her usual vision-of-savory-opulence raw—more like a bedraggled dumpling. With a shiner under one sloe. Lurid new bruises on face, arms, flanks. Wet head rolling like a boulder on my shoulder; bare boobs quaking in a perpetual avalanche. Again and again I yanked her bungling legs away from the guttering candles. Miles upon miles she mewled like a sack of kittycats sinking underwater. Hour after hour I kept up the pace, needing all my strength not to topple like a hewn tree—or give her poor bruised ass an oscillating wallop as wake-up call and payback clout for these past few hours, these past two weeks, these past three months—all her grouching and kvetching and querulous complaining and *whut the hail did I think I wuz DEWIN’??*

Staring at me, ashiver with baffled dismay.

“S’okay. S’okay,” I told her, rubbing her briskly as the candles flickered. Now to get her into some clothes and off to St. Luke’s ER—

But then she turned up her tremulous mouth. Pressed it against mine, as she had never done before. Less swabbed-out than in my fondest fancies, but I wasn’t about to avert my lips. It was she who broke the kiss, to breathe in my ear:

“Please don’ go away... please don’ leave me... please stay hyar.”

So I did.

Though I couldn’t be sure she was talking to me.

*

Carol Kane turned out to be a garrulous lover. Lecturing nonstop in her quaint little bleat about national malaise; interrupting one orgasm in midclimax to take a call from the White House. And there on the phone was Jimmy Carter’s unmistakable twang, asking:

HAVE YOU CHECKED THE CHILDREN?

—waking me the hell up. In black silk sheets. On a brass bedframe. And all by

myself: no caller, no Carol... no Cranky Lynnette. Not in the loft. Not in the bath—

—*the airshaft!* She'd gone out the window, off the sill, into the void—

...but no smashed-egg body seemed to be at the shaftbottom. Nor any sign of one having been there (at least not recently).

Relieved exhalation. Then a sharp pang of displacement. At the sight of my own casement open opposite, reflecting half the workbench and half the tool caddy and half the drafting stool. None of my cot, though, now on the far side of the room—

—*the roof!* Leaping into jockeys, hurtling up the spiral staircase, its treads and the roof's pebbles disagreeable under my bare feet but no time to lose, got to gallop round the parapet straining eyes and lungs—

—at the dawn of a perfectly ordinary Saturday morning in mid-September.

No broken almond cookie on the sidewalk. No chalk outline or police barricade or coroner's entourage. Nothing out of place except one rooftop tenderfoot in his undershorts. Who crept down through the trapdoor and tidied up #517 like an obedient houseboy—snuffing candles, changing sheets, mopping upchuck, plunging commode.

Wiping the place clean of fingerprints as I went.

Advantage had been taken: plain and simple. And a woman under the influence: I was in for it now. Would have to face the music, take my medicine, kowtow to bromides. So I holed up by my telephone the rest of that day and night, and all the next day and into the next night as well. Entire weekend spent awaiting fallout, consequences, repercussions.

Moving my cot back over to the window. Checking every few hours for signs of life. Again and again there was nothing to see but a deserted rhombus in the wall.

Sunday night I could wait no longer, had to hit the sack. Where I dreamt of chiseling my nose to splice my fate—and awoke to find that task begun by an airplane up my nostril.

In the re-electrified shaft was a re-illuminated frame, untenanted but bright enough to read by. Assuming I could unfold this origami jet and absorb the two words

lawn dry?

Pounding on her door. Which was opened by a Perfectly Ordinary Lynnette in

bombazine pajamas. Sleepmask on brow; cold cream on face; toothbrush in mouth.

“Ah dinmee yadda dewt rye nah,” she said, before leaping back out of my arms.

“Ay! wuhyew hinker dewee? Gih ommee, Hummuh!”

“I was worried about you!!”

She took my hand, turned it palm upward, spat a mouthful of paste into it. “F’yer that worried, take this—” (heavy bag of hamper contents) “—‘n’ be sure the deli cuts git done on cold!”

Back in her mouth went the brush; back in my face closed the door; back in the jamb shot its bolt. Leaving me with a sudden hunger for sliced ham and turkey.

Thus we took up where she’d left me off.

I resumed my neighborly duties. Lynnette’s bruises and contusions retreated from view. As occasionally did the rest of her, in pursuit of Too The Hell and his sour yellow eyes. Rumor had it that he ran like a rabbit every time she drew near.

When’s the adored not an adorer?

When he’s AJAHR.

Who went so far as to get himself arrested, indicted, and sentenced to prison after a big October drug bust. Perhaps the bastard felt safer behind bars. If so, more fool he.

No word about Friday the 14th was ever exchanged between Lynnette and me. Until Halloween: a solemn night at Nonnamou’s, not least because this year it fell upon a Wednesday. (Children full of woe, the Addams Family’s daughter and so forth.)

I left Kurtzway that afternoon feeling ready for anything noir-ish—except what awaited me at the Strichleiter Lofts. Where my cot was heaped with airmail, each plane a variation on *C ME*. I strolled around the corner, carrying an empty trick-or-treat sack; and got dragged into the tang of fresh vomit.

Oh yeedge not again! Though Lynnette looked the opposite of nauseated, jumping and jiving and demanding I look at what I took to be a kid’s chemistry set. Diminutive test tube in a plastic holder with an angled mirror at the bottom, in which a reddish-brown ring appeared.

I suggested she might want to clean her tube.

“*NO*-ew!! That means it’s official—I’m PREGNANT—‘n’ now I’ll git him fer sure!”

Dancing with glee, then freezing to the floor: “Cain’t jump—mustn’t jump!” (To her belly:) “Sorry sorry sorry.” (To me, through a new burst of tears:) “I’m so *happeeeeeeee!!*”

*

As Bogart told Bacall: those are harsh words to throw at a man, especially when he’s walking out of your bedroom. Except in my case I, like Lynnette, was frozen to the floor.

“...how far?...”

“Oh—eight, nine weeks.”

Calculating feverishly backward. Then a giant silent *WHEW*: even eight weeks would guarantee acquittal. But Lynnette began to chirp about why the first day of her last period was significant, and why she’d chalked up missing her next period a month later (a month ago) to stress, since the tube she’d filled then hadn’t produced a reddish-brown ring but she must’ve taken *that* test too early ‘cause she missed her *next* period too and took the same test again and this time SCORED, look! look!! at the Ring in the Tube in the Mirror that confirmed she had the joy-joy-joy-joy down in her heart, and on Halloween to boot.

Excusing herself to boot in the toilet.

(Morning sickness for Cranky Lynnette meant more like mid-afternoon.)

Never once did she entertain the slightest doubt as to whose seed had taken root in her flowerbox. For me, however, the next month and a half were too the hell dubious. The rest of the world might get preoccupied with the hostage-taking in Iran, but I had acuter worries.

As her neighbor I was compelled to help deal with fatigue and dizziness and food cravings and tender breasts and increased urination with possible leakage when laughing or sneezing. Not to mention kicking her *kretek* habit for the Baby’s sake. I, of course, was assigned to hold her cloves and not let Lynnette have one no matter how she begged or pleaded. I, of course, was the handiest target for every resulting mood swing:

“YEW DON’T THINK I’LL MAKE A GOOD MOTHER, DEW YEW?? YEW THINK I’M GONNA BE A SHITTY ONE, DONTCHEW?? BEIN’ MEAN T’ME JES CUZ I WANNA HAVE A LI’L BITTY PUFF T’GIT ME THROUGH THE NIGHT, *IZZAT ASKIN’ FER THE MOON ‘N’ STARS HERE??*—”

Then there were her pilgrimages to Daddums in the slammer. Others drove her there but I, of course, couldn’t escape hearing every detail of how Johnny wouldn’t come see her

in the visiting room, again, but Lynnette just knew how thrilled and proud he must be about his imminent fatherhood and how it was going to make all the difference between them the moment Johnny made parole, which was bound to be as soon as possible.

By mid-December I'd worked at Kurtzway for a full six months and was entitled to a few days off. And away. Out of town, without alerting Lynnette beforehand. Unless you counted cranking my casement window fully shut for the first time.

I drove down to Columbia MO, calling on my mystified father and taking part in a reunion of Stonehill High's Our Gang. Nancy Ghillie baked us a pan of her Green Springs brownies, so the time swam by as of old. Back to Milwaukee on Sunday the 23rd: crummy driving in crappy weather, but I had to cover Christmas week for more senior Kurtzwayites.

Up the elevator, along the gallery, into #515. Dropped my luggage, snapped on lamps, fired up the steam radiator. Unbuttoned my trenchcoat, unwound my scarf, and—
—*rattle RATTLE RATTLE* went the doorknob.

"Whar the hail have yew been??" demanded Lynnette.

Her head looked more like a spinning top than ever beneath its magenta beret. Body lost in a shapeless sweatsuit behind a tightly-clutched teddy bear.

I started to reply, but then she extended her arms sideways and let them hang in cruciform suspension, the bear dangling by one paw.

"Well go ahead," she sighed.

"And do what?"

"Hug me if y'gotta." As though submitting to an indignity. But her hands came unnailed and squeezed my ribs so hard they nearly cracked. Pushing away a second later—"Don't hurt the baby!"—but seizing me by the elbows till I promised to stay put while she went and fetched her cello. And changed into her witching-hour gown (let out a tad) and moussed her hair into porcupine quills and applied fresh makeup and fresh Shalimar and freshly-polished silver ankh above/inside her amplifying cleavage.

"So?" she asked upon her return.

"Fuhhhh," I replied. Susceptible as always.

"Whoa-kay then."

She said I must be famished, and called in an order—the first time I'd seen her use a

phone—for shrimp and prawns and snow peas and bok choy. She said I must be exhausted, and played me Saint-Saëns—the first time I’d heard her go classical—melodious snatches of *Carnival* and *Danse*, intended to soothe. When the food arrived she made no remarks about my chopstick technique—the first time she’d been so forbearing.

Truth to tell, after my crappy drive from Missouri all I really wanted was a few beers and a hot bath. As the hour grew later I *had* to get some shuteye, *had* to go to work tomorrow; too many others would be sure to blow the day off, it being Christmas Eve. I swigged my beer but skipped the bath, making do with sink and soapy washcloth while Saint-Saëns yielded to Offenbach and threatened to become party time in hell.

Finally I marched over in my longjohns. Bussed Lynnette on her very wide brow, snapped off all the lamps but one, climbed under the covers and requested that my guest close the door on her way out.

“Door *is* closed,” she said softly.

Loosening the cello bow. Laying Nefertiti in its casket. Standing in the lamplight to unzip her low-bosomed slit-skirted gown, unstrap her black lace bra and step out of black lace briefs. Leaving her in only ankh and chain as she turned off the last lamp, climbed onto the cot beside me, and pulled the covers over our heads.

“Howdy, neighbor,” she whispered.

*

I thanked God. Literally. On my knees, even.

When I wasn’t crooning *Wu, you is my woman now*.

Where once I’d burned for her kisses and caresses, I now found myself positively buffeted with both. Before she’d leave for the photolab; before she’d go see Poppaea the midwife; before she’d take the stage at Nonnamou’s. And no running off afterward with cursory hoodish-types; now she always tried to keep a sloe on me in the audience. (I quickly learned not to wander off to the bar or the can, lest Lynnette outjitter even Gilbert Blyght.)

And suddenly I understood what Rubens, Rodin, and Renoir had appreciated about female abundance. Here was my own *Venus at a Mirror*, my own *Danaide*, my own *Bather Drying Her Leg*—increasingly zaftig, extravagant, plenitudinous, and lavished upon me as

often as I could rise to the occasion. Thanking God for youthful puissance as we danced the Second Trimester Two-Step; as I was treated to the sounds and furor I'd had to overhear and suffer through before. Now they were mine, every heave, every whoop, every—

OH BABY OH BABY OH BABY *OHHHH*-WUHHH...

Constant cuddling was required every night. With both arms, too; if I drifted off using only one, a fingernail would poke me till I added the other. Nor was I allowed to fall asleep any way but on my right side, since Lynnette could only rest comfortably on her left and preferred missionary cuddling to spoonwise.

"Y'know it like t'gimme the willies when y'wheeze on the back o' my neck. Whar I come from, that ain't how y'chursh a woman."

"Sorry," I said, shifting to cherish her properly. "You'd rather I wheeze in your ear?"

"S'like hearin' the ocean roar," she said, nestling closer.

I played seashell awhile. "So, where *do* you come from?"

"Nowhar," she replied, and we lay in silence for a moment. Then: "I wuz kidnapped outta my cradle by a band o' gypsies tourin' the Chitlin' Circuit in an RV caravan. They made me practice whut they called 'zee beeg-ass feedle' when I wuz so bitsy I needed a stepladder t'reach the pegs."

Thus commenced her series of bedtime talltales. Spinning me a new thread every night between our bouts of *ohhhh*-wuhhh.

She claimed she first became aware of herself in an orphanage outside Houston, Texas—the last place on earth for a VYOF, according to Lynnette. Not one pleasant memory till the age of ten, when she saw the Merry Pranksters swashbuckle past in their psychedelic school bus. Causing her to start coveting California: not surfin' safaris but occult trippiness. And after eking out three more years in foster care, little Kimberly Wu staged her debut runaway—ending up in Los Angeles with a fake ID, along with many other little Kimberlys alleging to be you-know-what-I-mean seventeen.

Some of the threads she spun then had her joining the Manson Family. #517's wall montages did include shots of Squeaky Fromme and other X'd-out girls holding vigil during

the Tate-LaBianca trial. I couldn't identify my Lynnette in any, or verify whether she'd taken those pictures or merely clipped them. But she boasted of many arrests at that time, for loitering and contempt of court and endangering public safety. "'N' all we wuz dewin' wuz kneelin' on the sidewalk."

In other threads, she did or didn't get her GED; did or didn't learn camerawork at L.A. Trade-Tech. More certain was her presence in the Hollywood punk scene—pogoing at the Whiskey and the Masque, sharing spike-haired sex 'n' drugs with the Weirdos and Zeros and Germs. And escaping from the Hillside Stranglers: these two guys, see, who tried to drag her into their car one night, which wasn't unusual for Hollywood Boulevard except that the Strangler was dominating the news. So after Lynnette fought off the two guys and freaked out bigtime, she fled as far from California as you could possibly go—which had to be Milwaukee.

Sundays, Mondays, Happy Days; Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Happy Days...

And they were. Those winter days and nights spent cherishing her. Buried together under a mound of blankets, possessing and being possessed, till there ceased to be a point where dreams left off and reality set in.

It was the happiest time of my life.

Meaning it could not last, and didn't.

*

By March the freezing blasts off the lake had diminished to icy gusts, which native Wisconsinites interpreted as a sign of spring. With it came signs that Lynnette and I were no longer alone in bed.

She was swelling up like Violet Beauregard at the chocolate factory. As if a beach ball had inflated behind her bellybutton, converting that lower dimple into an extra nipple. ("Ain't two titties gonna be *enough*?") Add that to the backaches and bleeding gums and hemorrhoids and indigestion and constipation and bloated ankles and charley horses and varicose veins—none of which could be called a blessing for her, or a turn-on for me.

One night I awoke to find Lynnette conversing with her beach ball.

"Kick once for yayess..."

"...what the hell?"

“Poppaea sez she kin hear me now ‘n’ I should be talkin’ tew her.”

“To Poppaea?”

“No-ew—Baby! Tryin’ t’figger out whut her name is... Hey babe? Babe! Hey!—”

(Nail-poke.)

“Ow! You talking to me?”

“Whut girl names go good with Ajahr?”

“Dora,” I said. Cementheadedly.

“*Dorita*—that’s it!” (To the beach ball:) “Lovely Dorita, meet yer maid; nuthin’ll come between us...” (To me:) “Dew y’ mind? This is private talk.”

It was the last blast of windchill needed to cool off my libido. I told Lynnette I was afraid further boinkage might “harm the Baby,” and promptly got exempted from that particular chore. As by then it had become.

Her almonds and ivories turned ashen and pallid; baggy smudges encircled her sloes. She refused to believe that trees and flowers were in bloom—I’d be sent to check sidewalks for black frost before Lynnette would venture out, clinging to my arm as though Washburn Street were a skating rink and every step was treacherous.

“Don’t lemme slip! Don’t lemme fall! I’ll bust wide open, I’ll *explode*—”

In April she commandeered my dust mask, saying the air was choked with toxins and microbes and she couldn’t go unprotected. Yet insisting on being driven to Nonnamou’s for her Saturday gigs, even if it meant singing through the respirator. And being so afraid of the basement stairs that Theo had to carry her down them. And then up onto the stage, swathed in an uncanny muu-muu, evoking a Chinese fertility goddess with very bad joss.

“And now my friends,” Non would croak as the blue spot enshrouded my Venus of Willendorf. Cello wedged between unparalleled thighs, pressed against a phenomenal belly. (“*Dorita loves the vahbrations.*”) Raking the room with an aberrant glare above the mask.

Then she’d close her lashes. Tilt her head. Take the bow in one hand and neck in the other. And, once again, wring melancholy resonance from twangfree catgut.

There came a bruise from nowhere

That seeps beneath the skin

*And sleeps alone within
Like a perm 'nent tattoo
Of a worm I've bitten through—
All you have left from pleasing yourself.*

*The bruise from nowhere lies
Beneath my lover's feeling
But like a bay-aby's cries
It sheds its grace on me—
Though the blood is all you see.*

*Please yourself was how I lived
No one's left for counting
Drinks I took from fountains
Now empty of shadows
That've vanished up ladders—
Blow the roof off of pleasing yourself.*

*The bruise from nowhere lies
Beneath my lover's feeling
It makes a baby survive—
The blood is the life
The blood is the life...*

“Cranky Lynnette, my friends,” Non Nonnamou would grin. Flakily omniscient.

*

May brought false labor and Poppaea's ordering moderate bedrest. Lynnette was permitted to do mild isometrics, waddle to and from the bathroom, even practice the cello if she didn't gyrate or undulate.

Erin/Aaron wanted to throw her a baby shower but Lynnette kept putting it off, saying the commotion would disturb Dorita. Any plans for the future, immediate or distant, were restricted to the letters she scrawled daily to Ajahr. (Which I, of course, had to post for

her.) None received a reply or was returned to sender; possibly they got used as “wipes.” But Lynnette kept on scrawling, confiding, romanticizing—as though she expected Johnny Dearest to pop out along with the newborn, and provide for all their needs like a yellow-eyed genie from a piss-tinted lamp.

Presuming that failed to happen... what *about* the newborn?

Could I picture myself helping to rock it, burp it, clean up after it? Would the child display any traces of its—her—paternity? Would she be beautiful like her mother, yet purged of all peevishness? A well-behaved little girl, yet nobody’s pushover; able from an early age to see through the sons of bitches of the world? Might she grow up to be a good student, a fine artist, a born connoisseur of music and sculpture and film? And might she love me—as a surrogate uncle, say—a passable stand-in parental unit, preferable to any other sperm donor in her mother’s life?

No. She—it—was bound to be a sullen lumpish brat. A backtalker, refusing to do its chores, pilfering from groceries, sneering at my artwork. Too the hell precocious when it came to smoking and drinking and screwing and landing in detention and having to be picked up from juvenile hall—and Lynnette would think the moon and stars shone out of the kid’s backside. Never hear a word said against her Baby; never allow the slightest discipline.

Sorry, Dorita. You better look to the yellow-eyed genie for your father figure.

Except that, very soon, doing so was out of the question.

Squib in the *Sentinel* on Friday the 23rd: Johnny Ajahr had been killed in prison. Unclear whether he was targeted as “one o’ them Eye-ranians,” or reaped comeuppance for some drug-related ripoff.

I didn’t take the morning paper, but Tattoo Rula did. Her disembodied voice called me at Kurtzway to coordinate how we would keep Lynnette in the dark about this until the baby came. A conspiracy in which I, of course, was expected to take the lead.

“Not to forget, Hoffmonn, you are rounding the corner from her.”

Chisels and gouges danced through my head as I sought to leave work asap. But it was Christmas Eve all over again—too many others had vamoosed already, turning the Memorial Day weekend into a four-day toot.

When I finally escaped, it was into the hottest afternoon and bitchmost traffic of the

year. Got home no sooner than if I'd left at my usual time. Not waiting for the elevator, I ran upstairs and arrived at #517 short on wind, drenched with sweat, and stitched in both sides.

"Hey," I respired.

"Hey yerself," said Lynnette.

"Any... body... been... by?..."

"Like who?"

"Just... anybody..."

"I don't let jes anybody in hyar."

She was plumped on the brass bed against high-piled cushions. Legs stuck out at right angles with the teddy bear between them, holding a ball of yarn in its paws. Above her bloated bosom-rack, a few inches below her face, she wielded a pair of needles as busily as I'd seen her manipulate chopsticks.

"Didn't know you could knit," I panted.

Snort-sniff from Lynnette at my ignorance.

At least the radiator was off and the casement cranked open. As recently as Monday she'd been feeling "drafts" and "chills." I poured us a couple of ice waters; she left hers untouched.

"No letter today?" I asked. Usually it was handed to me as soon as I entered.

"Been tidyin'," said Lynnette. On the floor around the bed was every piece of equipment in her photographic arsenal, dusted and polished and neatly arranged.

"Didn't tire yourself out, I hope."

"*Tidyin'*, I said—not *tirin'*."

"Sorry. So... what's this thing you're knitting?"

"Sash."

"Kind of lengthy, isn't it?" Serpentineing over her bloat to writhe around the batik.

"That's whut makes it a sash."

"Oh. Er. Uh. Well..."

It was like being trapped inside a Poe story. Any minute now I expected a tell-tale heart or walled-up cat to make its presence loudly known. Leaving me no choice but to spill

the beans, confess the truth, divulge the secret I'd barely started keeping from her. Then I suddenly feared she could READ IT IN MY FACE—yeedge! don't let her look you in the eye! Pretend to examine these lenses and whatnot at your feet.

“Put that down! I jes tidied it!”

There spoke a mother-to-be. *Knit knit knit* went her needles; *writhe writhe writhe* went the sash; *twitch twitch twitch* went my guilty-feeling face.

“Yew,” said Lynnette, “are makin’ me nervous.”

“Sorry—sorry—it’s been a hard week.”

“Whut’s good fer Monday won’t do fer Friday,” she remarked. Adding that if getting on her nerves was the best I could do, I might as well get out of there. I objected; she insisted; so I got up to go.

She called me back, saying that when she finished the sash she might practice her cello, if I'd be so good as to bring it to the bed. No she wouldn't overdo it. Yes she'd holler if anything obstetrical happened. Gawd sakes! Quit fussing, Huffman.

I fetched the cello, then bent and pecked her cheek. “Love you, Wu.”

“So yew keep sayin’. Night now.”

And with that I left her.

The Strickleiter Lofts were quiet that evening. I supped alone in mine, pausing in mid-chew or -gulp to hark at the silence. Waiting for the setting sun to give way to twilight, as it had that first Friday night almost a year ago.

Dusk at last.

Up lit the airshaft.

Candlepower at work, lending a vision to an agape frame of glass. Shimmering likeness of a VYOF in a deep dark muu-muu, making music. Playing all the tunes from Joy Division's *Unknown Pleasures*, an album that some were calling “post-punk” and others “Gothic.” It sounded like one long song to me, one dark heartbeat subject to arrhythmia: tachying up and bradying down.

I remained by my window for quite a long time. Knowing I should chide her about staying up late and playing with angst. But our old arrangement still applied: observe all you

like, so long as you speak no word and break no spell. Just look on and listen. Let the music tranquilize you into a doze...

Bugbite on my chin.

(Some kind of bite, anyway.)

I opened my eyes and glanced down at a paper airplane on my chest. Unfolding it to find, in bold black Magic Marker, the single monosyllable

by

While at the same time in the airshaft there was a FLASH.

I glanced up and out, and what I saw there turned the world to vacuum. Null and void. Blue shadows through which I groped for something to inhale. And by the time I could breathe again, it was too late.

Three suspensions were reflected in the casement.

The first was Cranky Lynnette, wearing nothing but the sash. One end must have been tied to her ceiling trapdoor; the other end was knotted round her neck.

A second cord descended between her dangling legs to something that wasn't the teddy bear, though much the same size and just as immobile.

And the third cord hung from the trigger plunger caught in Lynnette's hand, leading over to the camera with which she'd recorded her—their—departure.

12

The Coughing

Unlock the gate. Swing it inward. Drive the truck through. Stop.
Swing the gate outward. Lock it tight. Fifteen feet of galvanized steel.
Return to the truck. Drive the final mile past hackberries and chokecherries, the single willow and disabled windmill. Park behind the house.

Unload cargo. Stack it on the mudporch. Peek into the kitchen.
Not so bad...

Could've been a genuine gore-orgy instead of just looking like one.

But the linoleum's a mess, the spilled-bourbon reek hasn't ebbed, and sticky brown pawprints are all the hell over. So bring in the new broom, the new mop, the new sponges and jug of cleanser, and start swabbing. *Whiskey here, whiskey there, whiskey almost everywhere. Whiskey is the life of man, always was since th'world began. Whiskey-O, Johnny-O, rise her up from down below...*

(Or not.)

(Never mind.)

Collect the broken glass. Make a second sweep and a third, keeping eyes peeled for odd fragments. Amounting to a couple shovelfuls of shattered bottle, plus a bucket of suds that can be emptied down the drain.

Now fetch the new detergent and take it to the cellar, along with a week's worth of dirty socks and shorts and sheets. Wedging the cellar door firmly open. Even if it were to shut accidentally, I don't imagine I'd be trapped down here; but no sense taking chances.

The McRale cellar is cool and dry. Free from mice and mildew. Pays to have a master plumber as your landlord. Pays him even more to put coin-operated Maytags in this time-share. Good thing I didn't spend all my quarters on breakfast at Big Red's Diner. Biscuits and gravy with a side of homefries: guaranteed bellyache. But better than facing that kitchen floor on an empty stomach.

Load the washing machine. Adjust its settings. Splurgle and slosh—the washer lives, after who knows how long a dry spell.

Back upstairs to move the other provisions from mudporch to pantry. Watch your step carrying these new bottles of Heaven Hill. (We're done with Wild Turkey for awhile.) Less care's needed lugging in the Meow Mix and proper litter. Open both bags; fill Willamene's dish and box.

"There you go, cat."

No answer.

(The best of all possible.)

Clean the rest of the house while I'm feeling hygienic? Considering I'll just have to do it again when I pack up to leave in two weeks—

WHANG WHANG WHANG WHANG WHANG

Yeedge! Sounds like something's busted loose in the cellar. Hurry downstairs, expecting to find the Maytag dancing across the cement. But it's still snugged against the wall where it belongs. Shifting cycles from rinse to spin, while the submersible pump replenishes the holding tank with fresh gallons of well water. All systems seem to be go.

Warily I lift the washer's lid.

Harrumph goes the drum as it slows to a halt.

Nothing looks amiss, inside or out. Lid clangs shut; drum resumes its whirligig. No unusual pounding or thumping. Just a splurgly *P-P-P-P-P*, like a frightened Shemp.

(Wise guy, eh?)

The washer finishes its job without further clamor. I transfer wet socks and so forth to the other Maytag. Insert more quarters; push to start. *Bumble, bumble, bum-bur-umble.*

Stand there and listen awhile longer.

Head upstairs, pause on the mudporch, listen some more.

Enough. Go park the pickup in the stable. Return to the kitchen and uncap a beer. Raise it almost to your lips before noticing half the food's gone from the dish on the floor.

"All right, where are you then?"

(Silence.)

"Show yourself so I won't be stepping on you."

(More silence.)

Celebrate! Cat's away—Bird should play. Put Charlie Parker on the boombox, deal a deck of cards across the kitchen table and brush up on your Canfield till it's time to take that Saturday night bath. With a clean washcloth, and clean towels afterward, and clean sheets to spend the night on and under.

Fresh start Sunday morning. Progress now, instead of nonsense. Eat a digestible shredded breakfast, to jumpstart regularity. Drink the first of many mugs of java, to jumpstart creativity.

Get that second panel down on paper: *The Three Fatefulettes*. As portrayed by Plue, Sage, and Amy-Kay—not necessarily in that order. Figure on the left is spinning forth; figure in the middle is measuring out; figure on the right is cutting off. "Together they weave destiny's tapestry." Like that whoozamacallit, the Triple Goddess—Maiden, Mother, Crone.

Sage Maltese as the latter, of course. And Pluanne just as obviously playing the Maiden... except that Amy-Kay's visible ribs and starveling breasts are more suitable for that role. Cuddly-ripeness would qualify Plue for the central figure. Yes: she and Amy-Kay swinging the tabernacle basket between them, while Sage the Crone scatters torn petals (or splinters, or crumbs) of Fortune.

Next step: design an arrangement. Rough doodle to begin with. Then a whole sketchpad of revisions and enhancements, reducing the Bruynzeel to a charcoal nub. I don't generally attempt trios—too many tensions and balances. Not that a duo's immune from

complicated dynamics. Or even a hard-to-get solo, one-on-one—

(Nightjars sing and me want to go home)

Skipping lunch again, unintentionally. Compensating with another chuckwagon supper, fresher and less greasy than Friday's. Followed by a legstretch around the grounds; then a couple of drinks in the rocker on the porch. Where, for once, I get no zoom-pow! cat on my lap.

I can live with that.

Look at that constellated sky. Hark at those crickets chirping near at hand, the coyotes yipping further off. Breathe in the bucolic evening air. Sip unspilled Heaven Hill till sack time.

Rinse the glass in the kitchen. Skin out of your shirt on the way to the bedroom. Pitch it onto the armchair by the chifforobe—

—and be convinced for an instant that Willamene's curled up there, lying in wait.

But the shirt sags vacantly over the overstuffed seat.

Even so: strip off blanket and topsheet, give the contour a couple of swipes sideways and longways. Use the new broom to probe beneath the bedstead.

Game-playing. Trick-doing.

Seeing things, hearing things—be smelling them next.

All clear...

Okay. Fans on. Lights out. Drop off. Return to that scene in the ponderosa grove, with the butterfly triumvirate gliding toward me through treeshadows. Clustered they are and twisted around, like tendrils of long dark hair caught in a—

—nervescape.

Back awake. Heart pounding in the darkness.

Lie quietly. Breathe evenly. Slow yourself down... to a dampened yet crackly sound. Not coming from me, but underlying the fan-thrum like a case of pneumonia:

HUH-HUH-HUH-HUH-HUH

Elmer Fudd as poltergeist.

Climb out of bed. Track the *huhs* down the hall. Into the bathroom, behind the throne—aha. Might have guessed. Same thing happened to the toilet in my last Chicago garret. As its ballcock wore out (happens to the best of us) a “water hammer” developed in the pipes. Which would account not only for the current racket but the earlier whangfest.

Phone Mr. Wilson in the morning to confirm this diagnosis. In the meantime (after a prudent whiz and flush) adjust the valve below the toilet to shut off the flow. Along with the *huh-huh-huh-huh-huhs*.

Result: silence. Blessed blissful silence...

And no relapse at eight a.m. when I turn the water back on.

Get out the BlackBerry anyway. Pick up a fairly strong signal. Call the Wilsons in Zerfall and leave a message on their machine. Remain on guard for half an hour or so.

But the silence stays unbroken.

Refocus then on the dining room table, the portable workbench, this sheet of Strathmore Rose Gray. Yesterday’s sketches laid out on either side; *Plue Velvet* positioned straight ahead (minus its velour cowlmask, which vanished from the kitchen drainboard). Today we devise the final composition, using Conté crayons in sanguine, bistre and white. Begin with two thin verticals flanking a substantial curve, and go from there.

On the left: a figure bemused by doom and maidenhood. Amy-Kay with heron neck, egret legs, and feathery hair like Just-Hatched Chick.

On the right: a figure trying to deny the mundane. Sage Maltese with lopsided coif, saccharine throbs, and lurid scraps of passion.

In the middle: a harvest deity, a Nubian Ceres with cornrows in her hair. Torso a series of fertile crescents; milk and honey by the double jeroboam. And an unforeseen impulse for Pluanne’s eyes to bulge and her tongue to protrude, protrude, *protrude*—

—X through that—

—tear it up fast, halves to quarters to eighths—

—to confetti for the catbox.

Cold-sweat creepers for me.

Steady now. Settle down. Don’t let your wits go wandering, or next thing you know they’ll run riot.

Fresh sheet of Strathmore. This time start by copying the central figure's head from *Blue Velvet*. Sweet cherubic face, the color of Snickers or Mallomars or Nestlé's Quik. But with saucer eyes glinting sphinxily. Yes. Good. Extend that up to the cornrows, out to the earlobes, down to the throat—which has nothing around it. A throat neither thick nor fat, but—undaunting. Ditto the rest of her body: abundant in places, but nowhere attenuated. Leave that state to Sage and Amy-Kay.

Yet we mustn't let them dwindle to mere handmaiden and footcrone. If Pluanne's to be an African Demeter, play up the other two as opposite phases of Persephone. Abducted Virgin on the left, pale and rueful; Netherworld Queen on the right, chill and stark.

And no visible tongues.

By evening all three figures are done, and I've regained sufficient appetite to devour a Hungry-Man pot roast with apple crumb dessert. Followed by a long hot shower and lengthier cooldown, rocking and sipping on the front porch.

At which point it occurs to me I haven't had a reply from Green Creek Lane. Check the BlackBerry: no messages. Signal appears strong enough. Tap in the Wilson number and try again.

Ring. Ring. Ring. Ring. *We're sorry we can't take your call...*

Strange. It's Monday night; they ought to be home at this hour. Doesn't really matter, though, since the plumbing's sorted itself out.

Or has it? If the toilet ballcock's not at fault, what was making that noise? Pipes disturbed by the seldom-active Maytag? Complaints from the well pump or the holding tank? Neither sounded off during the shower I took just now.

So why am I heading down to the cellar?

Tank's pressure gauge reads 50 psi. That's adequate; don't futz with it. Dad was the physicist, Gramps the boilermaker; call me if you want wood chopped or planks planed or—

—skrrreeeeek—

—race to the top of the stairs and stop the goddamned door from closing in the very snick of time.

Yeedge...

Don't imagine I couldn't have been imprisoned underground. Without even a shot to solace myself, having left my tumbler up in the kitchen, along with the BlackBerry.

Get the hell out of this pit. Lock the door from the outside, thank you very kindly. Enter the house; lock the mudporch door also. Pocket the BlackBerry, pour a good-sized slug, plop in an ice cube. Glance down at mottled linoleum as I start to depart—

—and there in the corner are a dish and a bowl, both picked clean as any bone.

"Here cat," I gargle.

"Come here, Willamene," I try to call more audibly.

"*Key key keeee-eeey*," I chitter like a gooney-bird.

(Silence.)

Oh man. Oh MAN.

Beast from water, beast from air—and me with no pig's head on a stick to offer either.

Make do with what's on hand. Dole out extra helpings of Meow Mix and non-dairy creamer. Switch off the overhead, back away from the kitchen, retrieve *Plue Velvet* from the dining room and stash it safely in bubblewrap.

Then—casual as all get-out—have a little look-see roam-around. Walking on tiptoe to exercise calf-muscles. Trading in the new broom for a fireplace poker: you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours.

"*Key key keeee-eeey...*"

Come-out-come-out-whenever-you-are-and-have-a-slice-of-pie. Pumpernickel pie. Devil's-food cake. Blackened Cajun *keeee-eche...*

Nothing doing.

I put away the poker, which was hurting my hand. Finish my drink; brush and floss. Close the curtains, hit the hay, count a few shavings in hopes of sleep. One, two, pare with a view. Three, four, shear it some more...

*

Tuesday morning I choose a butternut panel for *The Three Fatefulettes*. Kiln-dried. Sure to have a satiny luster. Straight coarse grain for fine smooth curves. But will split in a wink if tools aren't razor-sharp, so hone and strop every implement in the box.

Then transfer yesterday's design onto the face of the blank. No rush. No haste. Steady as she goes. Same for the second she, and for the third. Maiden. Mother. Crone.

After lunch and a nap, I outline them with a V-trench and set that in with a chisel. *Tap tap. Tap tap.* Grounding the surrounding surface with a No. 3 gouge. *Chock chock. Chock chock.* Bringing out the ladies in proud relief.

Good to be wielding a mallet again. Time to quit, though, when you get tired: Sculptor's Rule of Thumb No. 3. Unclamp the work-in-progress, slide it into the Waning Gibbous, brush off the portable workbench. Yawn and stretch and adjourn to the kitchen. Can of soup—easy to heat. Bag of apricots—easy to eat. Venture a squint toward the dishes on the floor... and find them full. As they were left last night.

Adjourn to the bedroom before it's altogether dark out. Crawl between the sheets. Relax and float downstream. Go with the flow, ride with the tide, swirl in the whirlpool with a *lub-a-dub-dub...*

UGH.

Wha'?

UGH-UGH.

Got to be kidding...

UGH!—UGH!—UGH!—

Fortunato in the catacombs. Seeping through the boxspring, the mattress, the pillow to worm its way into my ear, my skull, my brain: a wracking phlegmatic *UGGGH-ugggkh! UGGGH-ugggkh! UGGGH-ugggkh!—*

—leap and stride and stoop and twist the toilet valve, flaying flesh off your thumb—
—as the noise goes on. And on. And on.

No way am I setting foot in that damned cellar tonight.

I've slept through the sound of coughing before. Many a time in childhood, thanks to my mother's habitual three packs a day. Averaging a couple coughs per coffin nail. I once calculated that to be 800-odd a week or 40,000-plus a year. Nonstop to the end.

She won minor celebrity as a film critic thanks to [a] *Terms of Endearment* and [b] a radical mastectomy, with her review of [a] turning into a critique of [b]. Identifying first with Shirley Maclaine as the übermother of a star-crossed daughter, then with Debra Winger

as a professor's wife cut down by malignancy, and lastly with their enduring strength of will as they withstood frustration, misfortune, and so forth.

This became the title essay of my mother's first book—*Amazonian Women*—which landed her on the talkshow circuit. Including *A.M. Chicago*, hosted by not-yet-nationwide Oprah Winfrey, who (or whose staff) clued Mom in about the U of C's experimental treatment of metastasis. My half-sister signed her up for a course of this, leasing a house in Hyde Park for the duration and compelling me to come share it with them.

"*You CANNOT go on living this way!*" declared Cassandra, meaning my post-Strichleiter existence. Which in truth was not all beer and skittles—more like vodka and Pop Tarts. "*You have GOT to see somebody!*" Cassie added, herself selecting Dr. Harvey for that purpose. And scheduling my first appointment with him. And depositing me bodily on his doorstep.

(The Friendly Ghost jumped at the chance to discuss *Amazonian Women* with its author's son. How, for instance, had I reacted to my mother's mastectomy?)

(I told him I'd been bottle-fed and could deal with it.)

A few months later Cass carted our uncured mother back to the Bronx, further down the road to the urn in her handbag. I moved into the first of my Chicago garrets, traded in vodka and Pop Tarts for bourbon and granola, and continued to see the F.G.—

—though in the end all I got out of that was Vicki Volester.

My eucalyptus-skinned Significant Other. Trying so hard to look like Susanna Hoffs of the Bangles. Last seen running like an Egyptian up the El station stairs, refusing to listen to reason or give me any of her own, other than the eternal female "*You know why!*" Along with accusations of stalking her, harassing her, taking surreptitious photos of her—I who hadn't touched a camera since Milwaukee.

Silly disproportionate bitch.

Up the El stairs before me she ran. In a burnt-orange bubble skirt that, like her heart, was two sizes too small. From its askew hem a loose thread trailed; I gave it a tug and Vicki, with a shrill cry, whirled around to take an openhanded swing at my face. Missing by a mile and toppling off-kilter to be caught in my arms, pressed to my chest, and for one fractional moment I could sense her relenting—

—but no no no flail flail flail scratch scratch scratch. Squirm free, wriggle away, *ay-oh-whey-oh* out of my life. Leaving me holding the loose thread, which unraveled for a yard or more before it snapped.

Except that in my dreams (for thirteen years) it neither snaps nor stops unraveling, but spools into a tangled skein all over the El platform. The skirt-thread's connected to a blouse-thread, which is attached to shoulder-pad-threads, which are fastened to camisole-threads, and so on down to the last intimate scrap of polyester. *Gahd oh Gahd oh Gahd oh GAHD!* shrieks Vicki, frantically trying to cover herself with fibers that scatter like urban tumbleweeds. But all she accomplishes is to snag her poufy-perm in the unravelment, swiftly exposing a smallish slightish noggin to every commuter in Chicago plus a trainload of paparazzi as defoliation spreads from bighair down to littlehair, yanking that curly pubic star right off her private Christmas tree—

Wake my heart wide open.

To face the dawn with morning wood in my hands.

Having gotten next to no sleep, thanks to the sound of one lung coughing.

*

Flash-forward to dusk.

I'm in the truck driving back from Town with six new stitches in my "Mount of Luna." Whose numbness is wearing off fast.

Should've known better than to seek help from the plumbers in Hubsker's paltry Yellow Pages. Number One put me on hold and abandoned me there. Number Two said he could check the coughing pipes "sometime next week." Number Three had just answered my call when the wireless signal flickered or faded or whatever causes calls to drop—and deny me reconnection. Even when I went outdoors and pointed the BlackBerry at the sky.

Probably just as well. Bring in an outside plumber for anything short of a flood, and Mr. Wilson would consider it first-degree infidelity. And needlessly: when the sun rose all was again quiet on the McRale front.

So I tried to forget the night's noises and give my attention to *The Three Fatefulettes*. Right hand propelling, left hand guiding as I shaped and modeled. Digging deeper, delving further, maybe not the wisest course to take when sleep-deprived but that's how you separate

the dextrous from inept, the dabhanded from fumblefists—

—as my grip slipped on the No. 11 veiner, and my right hand propelled it into the heel of my left.

Initial reaction: *DON'T BLEED ON THE PANEL!!*

As opposed to everywhere else. I wrapped the gash in a T-shirt that went from dry off-white to dripping crimson as it daubed the kitchen and mudporch and stable and steering wheel and lock on the gate when I swung the thing wide and stomped on the gas and ploughed through a wind filled with flecks like a desert simoom, trying to hold the oozing mitt above my head without sticking it out the window to attract thirsty birds of prey before I could barrel up to the county hospital, fist held like a weltering Olympic torch for a triage nurse to ignore while paramedics rolled in gurney after gurney of burnt-to-a-crisp chawbacons that shunted me off to a corner where I tried to dwell on something other than the clots in my undershirt...

On inner visions.

Of lovely women.

Such as Nicolette Ningal poring over this very hand, identifying its heel as the Mount of Luna, hallmark of creativity and imagination—but still declining to pose for me. Or introduce my Luna to her Venus. “No pain, no palm,” she sighed, squeezing my hand as she pushed it away.

Spacy lady. And the young charmer who finally treated my wound might have been her love child by a merman. Chestnut ringlets, moss-green eyes, water-lily complexion, and an eminently sculptable seersucker blouse.

“Mr. Hummums,” she announced, “you’re a lucky fellow.” Had I waited any longer, the risk of infection would have been too great and she’d’ve had to send me home unsutured. But Nikki Jr. reckoned I was just within the safety margin, so—*jab! jab! jab!*—she stuck me with three different needles. First to numb, second to stitch, third to tetanus-boost.

Fairly deep laceration but no tendon damage. Keep this dressing clean and dry. Watch for swelling, red streaks, pus. Here’s a prescription for antibiotics. Come back in seven days for suture removal. Now go out and have a nice evening you hear?

Easier heard than done.

No food inside me since breakfast. No fun opening a pack of drugstore Cheez Doodles with one good hand and blunt front teeth. No urge to revisit Big Red's Diner; no hope of leaving Old Blue's Bar & Grill sober enough to drive. So I settled for burgers (easy to hold) at a fast food joint. Meaning I now have to wait two hours to take my asthma controller, and hazard its interaction with antibiotics and pain pills *and* Heaven Hill.

Onto the road. Into the dusk. Half past eight in the P.M.

Numbness wearing off fast.

Traffic's thick en route to Schraube Reservoir. Past that, I'm by myself. Maybe I should make a U-turn, spend the night at a Hubsker motel—one without APPY L ND on its signboard. Accompanied by Nikki Jr. as my private-duty caregiver. See her riding shotgun in sheer seersucker like a downhome debutante. Maybe a latter-day Lucinda Faye, out to evade a Jonesy of her own generation. *Yes, he scares me, Mr. Hummums—says I remind him of a lost love—wants to buy me clothes and make me over and change the color of my hair! Can't I hide with you tonight?—*

—BUMP—

Hit the brake.

Engine idles unconcernedly.

Gaping nightfall on either side.

No traffic behind, but pull over to the shoulder anyway. Get a flashlight out of the glove compartment. And... pause.

Could be a possum. Or a pothole. Or a pulped tumbleweed. (Of Vicki Volester's unraveled underwear?) Or...

Stay seated. Drive onward. Turn east on the gravelly road—and be confronted by a single big-ass headlight, glaring at me over the horizon.

Full moon.

No wonder this day's been so catawampus.

Keep going. To and through the wide-open gate. Leave it like that. I closed it every night for the past twelve days, and what's been the result? Marauders; mayhem; malice aforethought. All the comforts of home away from home.

Pull into the stable. Park the pickup. Unbuckle the seatbelt... which refuses to come apart. *Now* what the hell? Am I supposed to *fight* my way out of it? Make like Bogart breaking free from crook-manacles—Bogart forgetting the flashlight and bag of stuff from the drugstore—Bogart having to dive back after them and risk being recaptured—

All that damnfool moon's fault.

It's behind me now. Casting my shade across the yard. Along with the ghosts of hackberry branches, pointing and gesturing at the mudporch door I left wide open. Wider even than the front gate: gaping like the nightfall. Might as well have unrolled a red carpet for whatever...

...is making...

...those noises...

...inside.

Oh shit. But don't funk. Follow the Ray-o-Vac's narrow beam. One, two, we're past the porch. Three, four, we're in the kitchen. Five, six, we're *stepping on things that crunch like tiny bones* but are in fact capsized catfood, as we switch on the overhead *and see a bloody smear across the wall* that YOU left there your own helter-skeltering self.

Yeedge.

No, don't yeedge. Rescue inhaler's on the other side of the house. Beyond those noises like audible Rorschach blots. Take a deep breath of ordinary air, and exhale it s-l-o-w-l-y...

Right. Next. Forward into the dining room, or turn left into the hall? Edge round the corner and stumble upon—what? A pair of lurking girls who'll ask me to come play with them, forever and ever and ever?...

No corners. Step forward. S-l-o-w-l-y...

White oak table. White oak buffet. Workbench, clamp-vise, toolbox.

And whispering hisses concealed in the shadows, muffled and indistinct.

Sudden thought: could they be coming from *upstairs*? In the Wilsons's private quarters, there behind the shuttered dormers? Picture the McRales themselves, laid out side by side like tomb effigies—Cy who was never the same after the barn burned down; Mona inscribing a banister before eternity beckoned—the two of them causing pipes to hammer

and chains to rattle and me to go BUMP in the night—

Unless it *is* the cat, after all. Making these noises.

Except this can't really be a cat. Not a mere spreader of fleas and ticks, content with kibble and soy substitute; you and I know better than that. Fancy thinking the Beast was something you could haul and toss! Much less deep-six, bump off, rub out, blow apart—

“HUHHHHHHH-UGGGKH-UGGGKH-UGGGKH”

I go, unable to restrain a tremendous convulsive tsunamic cough sneeze snuffle keck gurgle choke hiccup hurl that shakes not simply me but the entire Place, from rooftop to basement. And then...

Silence.

Dead silence.

Goat-sweating silence.

Through which I g-r-a-d-u-a-l-l-y return to the kitchen. Where a bottle waits upon the drainboard. Down the hatch without a glass: swallowing one, two, three different pills. Mixing meds in an 86 proof solution.

I've had four minutes of sleep in the past forty hours.

I've got six stitches embedded in the heel of my hand.

I just let a cacophony fly out of my trachea.

So let me saw logs. Conk me out swiftly.

But my eyes refuse to close. The upper lids dangle like marionettes; like a pair of lurkers at the end of their ropes. With an interminable night ahead.

See, I'm in the bedroom. See, I'm in the armchair. See, I'm going to read myself to sleep. Not *All About Cats* but a book I brought with me—a Raymond Chandler paperback or Sweetman's biography of Gauguin, or *Baseless Mime*—

—what the hell is THAT doing here?? I didn't pack it, I swear I didn't pack it—

Stop. Get a hold of your sorry self.

Go ahead and reread the thing: it might have a sedative effect. Open the book, skip the intro, hit the text...

(And may I be damned if my eyelids don't go slack.)

About this note. I've been told before you take your own life you're supposed to... Testify your testament and say... Catholic doctrine would have you believe... Hell awaits, so abandon all—

—whoa there. Wait just a second. Eyelids back up:

φ *About this note... I've been told... Testify your... Catholic doctrine... Hell awaits—*

About...

I've...

Testify...

Catholic...

Hell—

A...

I...

T...

C...

H—

Skip ahead skip ahead skip ahead skip ahead skip ahead skip ahead skip—

φ *Aquinas... Is... The... Crossroads... However—*

φ *Appearances... Into... Twice... Crazy... Hope—*

φ *Anti-Oz... It's... That... Curses... Here—*

φ *After... Illicit... Tenderly... Calling... Humiliated—*

φ *Appropriately... I... "Thank"... Cruel... Harmony—*

φ *Addio... I'd... Thrown... Closing... Home—*

Constantly repeated, right up to the final

φ *And... It's... They... Chances... Hell—*

Oh my God.

OH MY GOD.

OH MY GAW-UDD—

13

After Ever Happily

Wake coughing. Bile-green paste. Out of mouth, over chin, onto throat. Pools inside collarbones. Rivulets across my sunken chest.

Making three, four, five monograms.

A-I-T-C-H.

Should have kept my big trap shut...

Book on the floor. Facedown, yet fleering up at me: an edgy young woman with hair cropped gamine-short.

Wonder where they got this dust jacket photo. Maybe her high school graduation picture, though it lacks the taint of mid-Seventies makeup. No blue eyeshadow, no frosted lipstick. Nor any need for either. Could do little or nothing to herself and still look beautiful. But then she always did... that...

Do little.

As in Hilda. As in "H.D."

As in *aitch*.

*If I should tell you,
you would turn from your own fit paths
toward hell,
turn again and glance back
and I would sink into a place
even more terrible than this.*

I sink into the bathtub. Left hand wrapped inside a plastic bag. Wash without incident (the plumbing doesn't kibitz) and shave gray stubble from scrubbed-clean jaws. Change the Mount of Luna's dressing; apply a fresh bandage; start taking meds in their proper order. Heat and eat a can of chicken noodle soup. And stash that damn bourbon at the far end of the pantry's top shelf.

Back to the bedroom, to the plush chair. And this time read what was only skimmed before: the preface to *Baseless Mime*. Contributed by an editor at Saltear Press who never met Ms. Franzia, but doesn't let that stymie a belated post-mortem.

Girl from Kansas. Afflicted by genius. Comes to Juilliard, engrosses self in studies and exercises, avoids personal contact till she feels trapped inside "Anti-Oz." Significantly dedicates her crowning composition to Hilda Doolittle the Imagist poet, famous for taking (and sharing) lovers on both sides of the divide, from Bryher to Ezra Pound. Diagnosis: conflicted desires and confused identity—Sappho vs. Priapus—as we could hear for ourselves, if Saltear's budget permitted enclosure of a CD. Rest assured that the *H.D. Sonata for Organ in G Minor* is as much an homage to Grecian classicism (hint hint) as the Doolittle verses scribbled in every margin of the music manuscript. Passages about how music sets up ladders that set us apart—making us invisible and letting us escape—singing a rhythm we never dreamt to sing—about smiling, and waiting... and being circumspect.

O never, never, never write that I /missed life or loving.

But it's very much to be feared that Ms. Franzia did just that. Hence the inevitable breakdown. If only she had lived longer, been more willing to accept her true inner nature—ah, what marvels might she have given us.

(Cough.)

Assuming the editor's accurate, shouldn't the acrostic spell out A-I-T-C-H-D-E-E?

Pure cane sugar...

Turn the book around and be fixed anew by that Flora fleer. Those two black eyes narrowed but dewy—

Look closer. Definite moisture.

Apply a thumb to the glossy dust jacket, anticipating a heart attack if actual tears are being shed—

—but my thumb comes away dry. As any bone.

As the dish and bowl I remove from the kitchen linoleum, rinse thoroughly and burnish with a cloth. As the linoleum itself, still mottled but clean after I sweep away last night's jumbled crunchies. As the rest of this Thursday, spent lying between fans and trying not to perspire. As the grilled cheese sandwiches I get up and flip for my supper—so dry, in fact, I have to wash them down with two-thirds of a sixpack.

Resulting that night in a rarebit dream.

Lucky me, surrounded by every kind of dryad and forest-nymph and Entmaiden imaginable. They sense I'm a sculptor, recoil from me despite their rootedness, their smoothbarked limbs and trunks contorting fantastically but not out of touchy-feely reach. I try to reassure them I mean no harm, would never fell a living tree, am only there to admire the material they're made of. Which isn't a smart thing to say to *any* female, as the whole thicket informs me excoriatingly till I lose my balance and fall out of bed—

—waking to find MIMF's eyes gibing into mine.

As if to say *On a clear day we can play forever, and ever, and ever...*

No fair.

I was not your goddamned nemesis.

Nor anyone else's. Crystal gained confidence, Stormin' redirection, Miranda made it to L.A. and K.T. to ESPN.

As for some of the others...

It still wasn't my fault.

The instant I told Vicki the *eight whole years* truth, she disavowed her words of love like so many fraudulent checks. When I answered Amy-Kay's binge-and purge cry-for-help, she dismissed me as "totally faux." And I sure as hell didn't force any attentions on Pluanne Torty—in fact if either of us got tampered with, it was *me*. Jinxed. Blighted. Hoodooed. Why else would Stormin' have described the unstatuesque Sage Maltese as "a ringer for Julie Newmar"? Followed by the ersatz replicant Rachael Guterra, the hooker-hearted Ginger & Candy, and finally—

Finally same as firstly.

Unlucky in love; deluded by life.

Friday is devoted to mumbles of this sort. While trying to eat something that won't cause further grief. Debagging my four pieces (again) and arranging them on the cat-free mantel (again). Reminding me I have a work-in-progress whose niceties are waiting to be brought out with thinner and thinner blades. So get back to the bench.

Left hand has to brace rather than guide, which slows in-progress to near-tedium. Not helped by the stitches, which feel like itchy fishline. No swelling or red streaks or pus to report, but a lingering sense of injury—flesh rent by metal—what a sappy thing to do. Like pulling that “material” gaffe in last night's dream and outraging all the tree-women. *If you prick us, do we not bleed?* Not when you're kiln-dried you don't. That's why I favor seasoned wood over green. No need to anesthetize before chipping away at these six sockets, widening and darkening their beat-all hollows. Hauntingly delicate sockets whose half-dozen eyes start to glare, start to blaze with the scalding anathema Actaeon must've got from Artemis—or Wendell Jones from Lucinda Faye, the day he sought to have it out (meaning in) with her. But the Blessed Lucy didn't intend to be violated by four pious gang-stakers and certainly wouldn't countenance one lone vapid creep: so it was Jonesy who got impaled, and it was Johnny Ajahr who got the shiv, and now the Triple Goddess is going to make it three-for-three by having it out (meaning in) with *YOU YOU YOU*—

—not me! not me! not if I take this spoon gouge and excavate you medusas, reducing your panel to a pitted shell, then seize mallet and chisel and advance on the mantel-hand upholding the nearly-nude whose frozen midwrithe turns to heaving bucking convulsions as I aim blow after blow at the new Anne Boleyn the new Antoinette till I chop off her bloodcurdling lump of a head—

—with a JOLT—

—at finding mine—

—upon my pillow.

Still attached to the rest of me. In bed; in the dark.

No chisel. No mallet. But a drenching reek of garlic.

What the fuck have I done??

Lights. Watch reads 1:00 A.M.

Sounds. Fan thrum, owl hoot, pulse thud.

Dining room. Table tidy; no trace of turmoil.

Unzip my portfolio... and here's *The Three Fatefulettes*, intact and unmarred, all ready for finishing.

Falter into the living room... and there sits an undecapitated *Perfect Fit*, tranquilly gathering dustspecks on the mantel.

I ought to feel relief.

Pantry. Top shelf. Heaven Hill.

Steady your nerves. Tighten your grip. Been slipping for almost a week now. On bottles; on veiners; on phantasms. Imagination's running riot. One of these days you'll have an urge you won't be able to contain, and then there'll be hell to pay. Remember what might've happened to Miranda Paraless and her fluttering jasmines—

—when she moved like a catatonic sleepwalker.

Somnambulism. Must've been. Makes sense, even. Sleep caught up with me and I carried on semiconsciously. If not in rose-colored slippers.

And look at the garbage can: topping its contents is a frozen pizza box. Check the fridge: no leftover slices. Piggy'd out and snarfed it down in a single fugal sitting.

(What do you want on *your* Tombstone?)

Got to quit eating hot cheese—the dreams it induces are too freaking vivid.

Io MacEvelyn would attribute them to “unsublimated fear and loathing of women.” So too might the dryads and forest-nymphs. Harsh judgment, considering it comes from undigested bits of cheese.

Am I such a mean brute, such a stupid brute? Did I cherrybust Crystal or psychoperv Vicki? Did I drug Miranda so I could *take* her and *have* her, or tie up K.T. for erotic subjugation and degradation? When I awoke on Sleeping Beauty's sofa, did I assault or abuse her Ajahr-style, Marco-wise, Gullip-like?

And if I didn't, was it because I'm a forbearing gentleman? Or because I know my attempts at brutality tend to degenerate into baggy pants pie-in-the-puss slapstick? Suitable for a shitsack: belch, fart, wheeze. There's sublimation for you.

Be a good guy, Huffman. Go stand in the light.

No. Snap off the light and go back to bed. Dreading another gibe from the *Baseless Mime* I left propped against the bedside lamp. But she regards me just as she used to do—narrow-visaged, lofty-learnèd. Indefinite infinitude.

I wish she'd given the photographer more of a smile.

Slide her dust jacket off the book and tuck it under my pillow. In hopes of warding off, through the remainder of this silent night, the stuff that dreams are made of.

*

Then, come Saturday morning—

I see now that I've been cooping myself up too much inside.

Ought to treat this like a *vacation*. Get out more in the open air, take longer walks after every meal—a couple miles at least. So with breakfast eaten, let's assemble our gear for a by-damn full-blown constitutional! Knapsack, sketchbook, charcoal, chewing gum. Bandanna, water bottle, sunglasses, longbrimmed cap...

...and BlackBerry. Blinking a red light to bring me up short.

Forgot to mute this thing last night or plug it into its cradle. Just left it sitting on the chest of many drawers, where it evidently received a message of some sort.

"I've got mail."

From—*blooferyoo@wonderhere.net*

Subject—*Re:*

Blankness. Re: what? Zero, infinity, spam? Click the enter key and read—

Running a little late. Be there soon.

And that's all she/he/they wrote. No closing line, no signature, no indication whether I'm being alerted about somebody's arrival or admonished as to my own misbehavior.

"*Be there soon.*" Will they? Should I? Is there here? If one of us is running late, what would be on time?

Crypticisms. Who needs 'em.

Bolt the door behind you. Activate the alarm. Stride up the driveway on the double; see if we can cover the mile to the gate in twenty minutes flat.

“*Running a little late.*” The Wilsons, unable to reach me by phone? I wasn’t aware they have an e-mail account—or would choose *blooferyoo* as a user name. Seems more appropriate for B. B. King or Taj Mahal. Or the Bloofer Lady in *Dracula*, who turned out to be the Unblessed Lucy and ended up gang-staked.

Coincidences. Who needs ‘em either.

How to respond to the e-mail? “No rush” or “Please explain” or “What the hell??” And that’s assuming the BlackBerry will even allow a response. I shake it, point it every which way, even hold it upside-down—but can’t budge the words *Data connection refused* off its tiny screen. For crying out loud! Stow it in a pocket and head for the gate. \$500 this idiot gizmo cost me, \$500 I could’ve spent on a spree at Selfsame or LeThean Lumber. Or Julius Avenue for that matter. But no, I had to be cajoled into “keeping in touch,” “hearing her now,” “listening closely—”

—as I climb the slight incline of the gravel drive...

...and notice how NOISELESS everything is today.

Sky’s gone a odd color. Flaring and luminous. Not lime-green like Bonnie Pattering’s eyes, but sulfur-lemon like Ajahr’s or Noir the cat’s. And in this weird unwholesome light I watch the gate swing toward me, gyrating like a well-oiled pendulum. Yes I left it unlocked, but—fifteen feet of galvanized steel—must weigh a hundred pounds, and that’s without a rider—yet I could swear that sitting astride it is a

W-H-A-M

of wind hitting me, hot baked gust of prairie sirocco blasting sand behind shades beneath lids Bobby Kennedy’s funneled revenge no good blinking can’t get the flecks out can’t see where I’m going or what I’m inhaling through gritted teeth as the wind blows harder *louder* THICKER R-O-A-R temperature plummeting cap whipping off turning around playing blindman’s buff shuffle along don’t slip or fall ‘cause if you bust wide open nobody’ll find you before the crows—

—OOF.

Pry one eye open just enough to confirm what we’ve collided with. A railing—right side of the front porch—seize it with both hands—feel your way around it—flounder up the

steps—fumble with the alarm—fumble with the key—fumble with the door—

And then we're inside. Where you can never be cooped up too much.

Boulders are boring into both of my eyeballs like chiggers or maggots that *will not wash out* no matter how I wipe and swab and scrub and sluice—till I grab the lower lids, yank them over the uppers, using the upper lashes as brushes. Making a second sweep and a third, keeping my pitted orbs peeled till voilà—

—the grit is gone. I can see again. However blearily.

And none too soon, since the howl of the wind is suddenly punctuated by THUMPS on the roof.

Sidle into the kitchen. To its painted-shut window. Take a waterlogged squint and discover...

...it's snowing outside.

Well I'll be damned. Try the dining room windows. Snowing outside them, too. End of July and there's a blizzard going on.

Hail, of course. A bombardment of frost pellets, big as hardboiled eggs. Under which the old windmill appears to be coming unstuck, this time for sure. Watch as its blades start to turn—as its blades start to *break off*—as the tower itself starts to sway and tilt and splinter away in extremely slow motion...

—to collapse with a crash that's more felt than heard over the THUMPS of hail and R-O-A-R of wind and thunderstorm subjecting the house to a lights-out shingle-ripping window-shattering onslaught such as terrified the cast of *Key Largo*, even Edward G. Robinson—

—but not Bogart. He stayed cool as ice. Like Buster Keaton in *Steamboat Bill Jr.*: buildings might collapse on him, yet he rolled with their punches and danced with the squall.

I do my rolling and dancing and cool-as-ice-staying in the pantry. Waiting there for the generator to kick the power back on. Any minute now, any second. As I feel through the shelves for a bottle (not of water) while we wait. Remembering how solidly this Place is constructed, how ready and able to withstand big bad wolfwinds.

I just hope the wolf's aware of that...

Storm passes. Power stays off.

But the R-O-A-R remains in my ears. In my head. Blotting out all else.

Steal out of my pantry sanctuary into the kitchen I'm sick and tired of cleaning. Its painted-shut window is now a jagged open frame, and the linoleum's blanketed (again) with glassy smithereens. Step cautiously through these to tape the pizza box over the unscreened frame. Temporary barricade, and extra gloomifier. Find the flashlight on the drainboard. Go check for other damage.

Less murky in the dining and living rooms. Puddling on their windowsills, though the panes seem intact. Likewise the ceilings, though no telling what state the upstairs might be in. Bath and bedroom both look normal but the mudporch deserves its name, and the back yard's a morass of slush and fractured hackberry branches.

Improvise a pair of boots—Hefty bags rubber-banded over sneakers. Plow through the mire to the side of the house, where windmill debris stretches from broken base to clobbered blades. As if to remind me I once attended Stonehill High School:

*WE ARE THE FIGHTING QUIXOTES—
THERE ARE NO IMPOSSIBLE DREAMS!*

Such as the one where beneath all this wreckage lies a functional generator.

Try to locate it, single-damn-handedly; still favoring my bandaged left. Hours trudge by while I hoist flotsam and shift jetsam, pausing at intervals to sag against the house and close my swollen eyes.

Too old to be playing Robinson Crusoe. Especially without a Girl Friday.

Finally I unearth the thing, anchored on a concrete pedestal like the central a/c, in a steel enclosure that clearly wasn't designed to have a windmill dropped upon it. Sniff for fumes: the generator is (or was) connected to an underground propane tank, big enough to power the Place for five days. Give that the remotest excuse for exploding, and...

My nostrils sense only rain, clay, ozone.

On the front panel a FAULT indicator glows like a fat red carbuncle. The laminated troubleshooting guide hints this may mean Internal Failure—Do Not Attempt To Repair Yourself. Call Our 1-800 Number For Service.

You betcha. Even if I didn't have a R-O-A-R in my head and could hear properly, try calling a toll-free service number this late on a Saturday afternoon.

Okay then. What next? Fiddle with circuit breakers? Not if that involves venturing into the crappy-abysmal cellar. Why not slog across the yard to the stable, get in the truck and drive up to Town—then keep on driving till we reach Green Creek Lane?

Because there's a piss-me-off *pond* where the driveway ought to be. And what I truly don't need right now is to get the truck stuck in a bog. While I'm effectively deaf. Bone-tired. Aching-eyed. Wearing leaky makeshift galoshes.

So—back indoors.

Where (assuming there's no fuel leak) we can count on what?

A propane water heater—for whatever's left in the holding tank. Which the well pump can't replenish without electricity. In fact I bet *all* the fixtures need voltage to ignite. Including this old gas stove, converted to propane. Test it: see if we blow sky-high. We don't: the range doesn't respond. And we can't jumpstart a burner with a match—

—because there isn't one to be found in the kitchen, or by the fireplace, or anywhere in this godforsaken Bring Your Own Supplies house. Not a match, not a lighter, not a candle, not an oil lamp, nothing able to burn or shine—

—except for my own personal Ray-o-Vac. Which lacks extra batteries. And can't use the boombox's, since that has C's and the flash needs D's. So the two oldies already in it will soon be our only source for interior lighting.

But just for tonight. One short midsummer night. Give the ground a chance to dry and your head a chance to heal. Go to bed with the sunset, rise with the dawn; darkness won't make a difference that way. Tomorrow morning we'll be out of here and back in what passes for the 21st Century.

(Skull-splitting yawn.)

Pop meds now; dine in an hour; drinks at twilight; bed to recuperate. Fine plan.

Bathroom. Sore temptation to fill the tub. But a vivid image of precious tankwater draining away. Compromise by running just enough for a sitz—which can later be ladled into the bucket and saved as a flush-aid by the throne.

(Thank God the septic system's gravity-based.)

Ahhhh. Water's still hot. Scrunch down on your spine, let it close over your ears, wash out the blockage inside them. Resurface able to hear again? Nope: same rote, same R-O-A-R. In dimmer surroundings. Groan up, towel off, snap on the flash, bail the bath into the bucket.

Sup on a can of room-temperature minestrone. Sip tepid bourbon on the soggy bentwood rocker. Try sleeping out here, under the trundling clouds? No, too damp. Too apt to attract insects. On the living room davenport? Drag it over by the lattices, maybe catch a western breeze? No, too inflexible. Too much like a marble slab.

The old bedstead, then. Curtains pulled wide. Window propped wider.

If any beast pries past the screen tonight, I won't be able to hear it. Or see it, in a room black as pitch. Still a tinge of gloaming from outside when I switch off the Ray-o-Vac, but it doesn't last long. And when it's gone I enter a sensory deprivation tank.

Altered States time.

Blind deaf and dumb.

Unmoving air. Increasingly oppressive. Beyond mugginess. Nothing but nox...

Blink and the room changes. Power's restored! Lamps shining, fans whirling, clocks ticking, music playing; a glorious hullabaloo to my reactivated ears—

—except it isn't. They aren't. All a dreamed-up sham. Reality stays put in darkness, deafness, blindness...

Until the lights *do* come on. The fans *do* start spinning. And I *can* hear every note of "It Never Entered My Mind" as I fly out of bed, savoring Stan Getz's cool blue serenade—

—contrived by my goddamned subconscious. While the rest of me remains stuck in this noxious sauna, on this stagnant mattress...

Doze to. Doze fro. So forth. So back.

Till 5 A.M. Sunday morning, when the unvarnished dawn appears. Though it takes me another hour to force apart my lids. Glued together they are, by a quarryful of crust.

Hobble into the bathroom. Gah: leering dim-eyed bloodshot eggplants. Run the tap for a lukewarm rinse. The flow immediately slows to a lukewarm trickle.

Run to the kitchen; same thing happens there. DAMN IT—the tank must've been emptier than I guessed.

Eyesnag (gah) by the antique hand pump beside the kitchen sink.

Forearms, don't fail me now.

Risp-rasp. Risp-rasp. Felt rather than heard, with the handle offering no resistance.

DAMN IT—you're a cast-iron lever-action suction pump and you're going to start sucking, hear me?? Swing that handle like it's an adze dressing timber: *RISP! RASP! RISP! RASP!*

Look over Jordan, what do I see, someday massa gonna set me free—

—with a gout from the spout and a rush from the gush.

Whew. At least I won't have to leave here dehydrated.

Now to clear out of this hellhole. Still a muddle outside, but the pond over the driveway has subsided and gravel is visible again. So let's fetch the pickup, then gather belongings and pitch expendables and sing hey! for the road home to Zerfall!

Enter the stable, key ready in hand—and stand there staring at the truck's open door. Copycatting how the house greeted us, the last time I parked here... and had to wrestle out Houdini-style... straggling the balky seatbelt after me... in such a way that it prevented the driver's door from latching.

Which happened two, three—four nights ago.

The interior light was on at the time.

It isn't now.

Turn the key in the ignition. No response: nada, bupkus, zilch. I can't hear whether the engine's grinding, but that's a tad unlikely since the interior light was on for *eighty-plus hours*. Bleeding the battery down to merciless dregs like a sonofabitch vampire mosquito.

Swat my brow with a bandaged palm.

Swat it again, harder, when I wonder who to call for help—and realize I haven't checked the BlackBerry for messages since before the storm struck. Then that I left the gizmo stowed in a knapsack pocket. Then that it's been on, without a recharge, for... let's see... counting Friday's fugal fit...

You asshole.

Constipated, hemorrhoidal, carbuncular-with-a-glowing-red-FAULT ASSHOLE!!

Back in the house, before shutting off the BlackBerry to save what's left of its charge, I see there's been no new e-mail or voicemail or followup to *Be there soon*. As though the

world has given me up for dead.

So no choice left but to *walk* out of here. One mile to the gate; four more to Route 65. Kid stuff—I hiked seven miles a month ago, at night and through rain. Did it in three hours AND got my hearing back en route.

Repack the knapsack. Extra food this time. Additional bottles of well water. Spare clothing. Might be awhile before I can flag down a passerby, hitch a ride or have them phone for assistance. If worse comes to worst, we'll march all the way up to Schraube Reservoir.

Ready? Set? Away we go. Sorry to leave my four mantel pieces behind, together with the unfinished *Prized* and *Three Fatefulettes*; but they're safer stashed in the house than lugged around by me. I'll retrieve them soon enough. It's not like an enemy army's coming to torch the Old McRale Place.

...I hope.

You don't suppose terrorists would be so misguided as to nuke *Hubsker*? Or that the summer storm was in fact shockwave and fallout from some weapon of mass destruction?

Quit being melodramatic. Keep an eggplant peeled for signs of a neighbor. Even if the signs say TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED or BEWARE OF SAVAGE DOGS—

—what's that?

In the underbrush. Between me and the gate.

More than one of them. Coyotes? Hyenas? Wolverines?

None of the above.

They're *cats*.

Coming out of the woodwork like they did the night the Wild Turkey detonated. At least a dozen of them; each a Bombay Bagheera with open maw and hungry fangs and silent but lethal hiss—

Delusion. Derangement. Action-seeking game-playing trick-doing. My answer to that is still HELL no—

But then the rote in my head changes. Downshifts from a R-O-A-R to a shuddering *r-r-r-r-r*. And with that shift comes a voice, a chorus, a purring refrain that speaks to me relentlessly. It says stumble, it says blunder, it says spillage, it says *AITCH*—

Turn. Flee. Hightail back to the house.

Bury myself within its gray walls and blue shadows. Fish out my rescue inhaler; spray and hold and count to ten.

And now they stand before me. The two of them, side by side. Perusing me with solemn eyes.

The first one esps: *Those born to be drowned need never fear hanging.*

The second one sottos: *Contrariwise too, forever and ever.*

And each extends a hand, as if we three might dance together. Ring-around-a-rozay, crank-a-doodle-doo. Huff on a puffer and blow our heads off...

...if Seeing is Believing, then why am I not breathing?...

...HUHHHHHHH. Oxygen returns to my bronchia.

I look again; the girls are gone.

But through every window a cat can be glimpsed on the periphery.

Except in the kitchen. Thanks to the Tombstone box. Shielded from observation I sweep again, mop again, empty fridge and freezer. Any thawed contents that can't be stomached go into a Hefty bag and pitched down the cellar steps. Leaving me canned goods, jarred goods, some bread and fruit and liquor. No need to dine yet on Meow Mix.

Enter the dining room. Sit boldly at the table, my back to the windows. Whose light casts silhouettes as I clamp *The Three Fatefulettes* to the portable workbench. Silhouettes that stalk and saunter and brazenly sniff—

Put on the dust mask. Pick up the sandpaper. Begin the finishing process. Feeling if not hearing the familiar sound of it: *rich itch itch itch*. Creating illusion of depth while ignoring the flickers just out of my sight, to left and to right—

Focus. On what's before you. On what you're doing to it. Medium grade to fine, to very fine, to extra if not super fine. Suitable for Maiden Mother and Crone alike. Key elements of *The Absolute Woman*, our Screen of Three Doors and Twelve Reliefs.

Be a shame to leave it only one-sixth completed.

Some legacy. "Leave nothing behind."

Rich itch itch itch...

Bessie Smith was right: I hate to see the evening sun go down. Which it does without cooling the house or stirring the air.

Switch on the Blackberry. Only one bar of power and signal. Re-key the Wilsons's number and clear my throat: *Hello I've gone deaf hope it's you running late but'll be here soon the windmill fell down the lights are all out and I'm surrounded by monstrosities—*

Yeedge. That was inarticulate, even for me.

Who else can I call? No rural 911 service to speak of. Utility company, county hospital, sheriff's office? All bound to have phone menus blotted out by the *r-r-r-r-r*. Options for the hearing-impaired? Might be listed in Hubsker's paltry Yellow Pages...

...which I seem to have mislaid. And can't locate in the growing dusk, even using the Ray-o-Vac.

Pour more Heaven Hill. Drinking inside tonight; not *al fresco*.

Sunday P.M. Selfsame's closed. As are the Crouching Gallery and LeThean Lumber. All I've got for my half-sister is her PO Box.

There are two other entries in the BlackBerry "address book." One a home phone, the other a mobile. Haven't dialed either since the 5th of July, when the first rang and rang and the second got a constant busy signal.

What the hell. Try them both.

Are you there? Can you hear me?

Plus a few words charcoaled on a sheet of paper that refused to be slid under an unopenable door.

Click off.

Finish drink.

Carry bottle, flashlight, and ¼" No. 6 straight gouge into the bedroom. Take up sentinel duty in the armchair by the chifforobe. Creatures of the night, be warned—I can carve a lot more than butternut if you make a rash move...

Next thing you know I'm sawing logs like an unlubricated Black & Decker. The last snore strangled as 100 watts are aimed at me—by an interrogator? Morgue attendant? No; that frigging big-ass moon. No longer full, but shining eerily on. As if to harvest my heart.

(I ain't had no lovin' since absolutely positively June or July...)

Blink and I'm on the bus and "*Ten-four, good buddy!!*" the caterwaulers are yelling. Look quick across the aisle but the seat I see is vacant. Still bearing her imprint, though; where it's gone I must follow. Past the *bra-a-a-ang*ing claue through a door in the back—school bus? no, train coach—through a series of crowded cars I push before getting shoved out on the tracks like a bum-rushed hobo. Except that these tracks grow vertically over a stone wall, like a trellis of barbed-wire brambles that puncture my hands till I grab hold of a willow frond from an overhanging tree, its spun-gold leaves turning crimson where I grip them. "*If this is the ladder by which we mount, I too will seek my fortune,*" says a voice not my own but whose advice I accept, climbing upward in pursuit of the imprint till I'm prying rough planks off a window with one bloody hand while the other clutches the frond that snaps and sends me through the wall into a looming chamber, vacant except for a cobweb-coated spinning wheel atop a plinth like the statueless pedestal in Chicago's Haymarket Square. Maybe this is where Rapunzel sang or Briar Rose got her beauty sleep or the Lady of Shalott half-sickened on shadows, but whoever it was she's long since gone: "*The cat got her, and now will scratch out your eyes!*"—spoken by that venom-tongued panther just before it leaps, but as I dive out the chamber window onto the barbed-wire brambles I realize *SHE HASN'T DEPARTED, SHE IS HIDING IN THE PLINTH—*

—foul fetid rotten groping void—

—it's a dream—

—I will wake up, I am awake, I still can't see or hear or find the flashlight where'd the moon go where's the stars why this blackout crashing against objects that dissolve into vapor scourged by specters cudged by wraiths decimated by a slam to the gut knocking the wind out of me but my hand closes on something cold and hard that doesn't dematerialize as I hit the ground here's a thicket crawl inside it burrow deep find a lair from *The Wind in the Willows* that was read to me once while I lay on my back and struggled to breathe as though buried alive but "Listen" she'd say "to the sound of my voice" like a hand I could hold not so cold or so hard as the thing I grip now which is flat and metallic but I wrap myself round it: a stray grain of sand is the core of a pearl...

*

Blink.

And bonk. My head. On the underside of the dining room table. Beneath which I come to myself when there's light enough to see by.

Left fist clenched like grim death. Raise it, relax it, and behold a wreath of stars. Enfolding four lanes topped by wavelets below the upper half of a stopwatch.

This is what I've been clinging to for untold hours? With my left hand too; yet there's no pain. Remove the bandage... and find the wound healed.

More than just a dream, then.

Home Is Where the Heart Lands.

Pump water from the well. It comes up almost icy, which is more than fine by me. Drink deep; rinse salt and copper off face and torso; scratch two days of gray stubble but leave it unshaved. Spread peanut butter over bread gone stale but not moldy, and wash it down with more undistilled H₂O.

All the while knowing what I need to do next.

Abandon my would-be masterpiece. Fetch that spare block of cherry I didn't use for *The Mute Commute*. Choice wood, well-seasoned, free from knots and checks. Clamp it onto the swivel stand, luckily brought from Zerfall. "Safe bind, safe find," as the spacy silversmith said. No preliminary sketches, no guidelines or maquettes, no amulets or talismans other than the medallion I neglected to glue into its *Prized* niche.

Here I am, the Last of the Red-Hot Chiselers.

Time to take a work of art out of the isn't.

Use the 3" No. 5 fishtail gouge to lop off corners, then the 1" No. 3 to rough in profiles. Horizontal rhombi set in a vertical rhombus, angular without being abrupt or pointed. Brow, cheeks, mouth, chin: a dovetailing face.

Third time may be the charm, but thirteenth time's the fate. Surrealize the circle of life and achieve the oblong, the elliptical. What Cassie said about passing from one level to the next till you can break the cycle and escape; crack the mirror and transcend confinement. Find and free the Lady within the block—who will only emerge at her own discretion.

True for them all. Some were eager to spring out: Stormin', Miranda, K.T. Others did it only once: *A Perfect Fit*, *Frieze-Frame*, *Plue Velvet*. A few like Vicki Volester remain hidden in the plinth, thwarting attempts to entice or extract them.

Sculpt throughout the day. Turn the laid-aside block into another in-the-round, a second cherry bust. No breaks for food or drink or rest or anything but honing, stropping, topping off the tools with slipstones. Razor-sharpness: prime rule of thumb. Which is cramping. Along with the other thumb and all eight fingers. Give them a quick rub and proceed. Pay the price. Be racked with thirst in a room like a furnace, perspiration slathering from every pore while monstrosities claw at every window. Don't look back. Don't let up. Not even to search for the flashlight as the sun begins to set. Go by touch; move by feel. You know these features. Could identify them among ten thousand. Recreate them anew. Dainty nose-bridge and nostril-wings. Lips slightly parted, brows slightly bent. Self-assurance, affirmation, even a trace of sang-froid.

Material is not enough. An object, pure and simple. *Trompe l'oeil* gives it the illusion of elegance and refinement. But no personality. No grace.

I've sung "Solitude" ever since I can remember. Played the sap my entire life.

Send her over. Recall her. Relieve her. Retrieve her, sleeping or waking, prized beyond possession, from all I have lost. Because there ought to be more to The End than sobs and darkness. Come back to me. Come back...

I need your love to roll away the stone sealing off my heart

I need your love to roll away the stone sealing off my heart

And open up the empty tomb that's been tearing me apart.

Finally I can carve no more. Can no longer see the piece, but know it to be a telling likeness. A bequest. An offering. An Absolute Woman.

All I ever looked for, in the engulfing *r-r-r-r-r-O-O-O-O-A-A-A-A-R-R-R-R—*

"Oh," I go.

"My," I add.

TAP

TAP

TAP

—on the front door. That I do hear.

Through the living room lattices I can see... something on the threshold.

Unlock. Unbolt. Open.

A three-quarter moon, more oblong than round, rises out of the east and over the house.

To reveal a pair of perplexed-looking midnight blues. Widening, lightening, going *blink—blink*—like an Awakened Beauty.

When Orpheus met Eurydice, wasn't she a sight to see?

Avert your eyes fast.

But “Aitch?” says a voice, clear and gliding, that makes the windrush dwindle to ordinary night-noises. “Honey? Are you growing a beard?”

“Power’s been out,” I rasp. “What... what day is it?”

“Why, the 29th.” (Harp-twitter.) “I said I’d come pick you up.”

At the 23rd hour of the 29th day. Come down in time to meet me halfway-ay-ay.

A lilt to her stance. A sheen to her form. Bringing with her a whiff of fresh air: the scent of white linen. Ever-loving argent glimmers on her wrists, her ears, her neck.

I meet her gaze.

Nod. Nod. Yes. Yes. Her fine fair hands, her long strong arms reaching out.

For three-quarters of an instant my heart is torn between rational explanations (is there an aqua Honda parked in the drive?) and heat-mirage despair (you’re an artist—IMAGINE you can see her). But then my undersenses kick in.

Still want to kiss me?

More than ever.

Thus: clinch. So: dreaming.

(If a dream, what a dream.)

Where have you been?

I kind of got sidetracked. And you weren't the easiest person to find.

I studied you from afar. As they say.

Kiss. Caress. Vibe together at the edge of singlemindedness: one psyche, one eros, mutual self-possession.

Can I be on top?

Just have mercy.

She quivers and bows, takes me in hand, slips me inside her. Easy as that. She is soft, she is warm, she is firm, she is cool. Tautly exquisite. Supple finesse. Giving me her depths, her heights, her diamond of a smile.

Where do you want to go?

Up. The ladder. To the roof.

I'll take you.

And the last thing I see is the pendant hanging from the chain around her throat—neither a cross nor an ankh, but an H.

P. S. (Paul Stephen) Ehrlich was born, raised, and educated in Kansas City, Missouri. After enduring thirty-one summers and winters there, he exchanged Middle Western climate for Puget Sound's in 1988. Employed by the University of Washington (not necessarily as an instructor) he lives with himself outside Seattle.

As the author of *The Ups and Downs of Skeeter Kitefly* (a disturbingly hilarious novel about a compactified young woman) and *Skeeter Kitefly's Sugardaddy Confessor* (a disturbingly hilarious sequel with further compactification), he has since 2002 administered the Skeeter Kitefly Website and its Split Infinitive Productions at **www.skeeterkitefly.com**.

