

A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

by

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Frank O'Connor, in *The Lonely Art: A Study of the Short Story*, states that the writing of short stories is "a lonely art, and [writers] too are lonely." Were it not for the people mentioned above, I would have to agree with him.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"You can call every prostitute a Theban Sphinx. They babble not simply, but in riddles." (Athenaeus)

"...you yourselves are the riddle." (Freud [concerning women])

"Shall I create a world?" (Oedipa Maas/*The Crying of Lot 49*)

In 1948, Robert Graves stated in *The White Goddess*, that

...woman is not a poet: she is either a Muse or she is nothing. This is not to say that women should refrain from writing poems, only that she should write as a woman, not as if she were an honorary man....she should be the Muse in a complete sense; she should be in turn Arianrhod, Blodeuwedd and the Old Sow of Maenawr Penardd who eats her farrow, and should write in each of these capacities with antique authority. She should be the visible moon: impartial, loving, cruel, wise. (392)¹

The following stories are dedicated to feminine divinity, not to a male god, and if we, as women poets and writers, must work from inside the compensatory mother/goddess myth, one which we have been handed as amends for damages done, so much the better, for nothing undermines patriarchal culture more effectively than the terrifying, yet beautiful, figure of the Pre-Oedipal Mother.

Although in the past, women have been turned into artistic objects, stereotyped by the phallic pen, paintbrush and chisel, today we are no longer silent. The object speaks, albeit in revisionary riddles.

In *The White Goddess* Graves also wrote that "the main theme of poetry is, properly, the relations of man and woman" (392). Specifically, Graves meant that the proper "main theme" for poetry is the relations between man and the White Goddess, his Muse, his "other woman." Graves then offers the following consideration, which, in spite of his bias against women poets, anticipates postmodern feminism:

This is an Apollonian civilization. It is true that in English-speaking countries the social position of women has improved enormously in the last fifty years and is likely to improve still more now that so large a part of the national wealth is in the control of women...but the age of religious revelation seems to be over, and social security is so intricately bound up with marriage and the family...that the White Goddess in her orgiastic character seems to have no chance of staging a come-back, until women themselves grow weary of decadent patriarchalism, and turn Bassarids again. (396)

In the ancient Dionysian rituals, Bassarids, or maenads, were "a pack of delirious women who chewed ivy as an intoxicant" (Graves 92). They tore to pieces Orpheus' body, whose head, then, continued to sing and prophesy. One of the more hopeful forms of a possible female aesthetic parallels the actions of the Bassarids. It involves the silencing of this incessant mouthpiece by tearing limb from limb its phallogentric language. We may sound like babbling sphinxes to men, for it is their myth we seek to revise, and it is they who have packed our mouths with leaves. Intoxicated with our own cause, we fervently fling our "white father's" words into a rising wind that can never

blow backwards, intent on scattering their remains and, so, create ourselves before we are created.

My stories exist, however, not because of any specific spiritual revelations, nor solely to achieve any philosophical justification; they are based, to a certain degree, on innocence, yes, but not upon the purity so hallowed by those who press us with biological imperatives. I have tried to write them inspired by the shimmering white spirit of Graves' Muse. I believe that in the semi-mythological paradise of childhood, a time in which the line between fact and fiction is, at best, sketchy, Graves' Goddess is still known and still a vital part of the female imagination. Later, as child brides, and then, as we move on into maturity, we risk losing her if we do not consciously fight to keep her alive by telling stories of our past.

This is not to say that my stories are purely autobiographical. They are not. Autobiographical fragments of the past have been greatly embellished, and many white lies have been told. The many feelings from the past that remain true are my own way of appraising what little I have learned about a "visible moon."

Scheherazade told stories in order to stay alive. These stories are told in order to keep the Goddess alive, inside. They are the stories of women who have lived as objects of exchange, as artistic objects, yes, and who

sought to be created by men, only to find, time and time again, that they have surrendered their once-fluid psyches to rigidity, to passivity, to silence and captivity.

Caught in the sun's cycle, new moons become full moons at least twelve times a year. But no longer must we reflect a sun's light, a sun's concept of our sexuality. Our cyclical transformations, although repetitive, are all vastly different. We resolve to take this paradox as far as our illimitable feminine imaginations will allow, to turn it into a synthesis of the sensitive and the brutal, the delicate and the cruel, the rational and the illogical. By doing so, we can give birth to a new hope--one that basks in its own self-illumination.

Note

¹Graves, Robert. *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*. London: Faber & Faber, 1948.

CHAPTER II

"MINKS"

MINKS

Miss Purnell cracks her second red pencil of the afternoon over Gary Ward's head and the pieces fly. One hits Debbie Johnson in the face, and I'm watching her reaction when Gary Ward explodes.

"Don't you *dare* hit me. Don't you *DARE!*" his shaking farm-boy voice booms through our shocked silence and his ears turn more red than his hair, and his freckles run together. Kappy and I exchange looks and roll our eyes. No one sasses Purnell. Ever. Not even the sixth and seventh graders.

Always after school, Kappy and I checked the sky as we walked home.

"There she goes!"

There goes Purnell, size of a mite, turned that taxi she always takes into a crow and is flying toward the five-mile turn. Gonna swoop down to that rickety, dark farm house in a spooky grove of pine trees across from Sivesind's pig house.

Purnell's a witch. We're almost sure of this. Kappy's a straight-A student, and she says for positive it's true. She says Purnell flies home, peels off that grungy brown rag of a suit she's always wearing--got a tight neck that buttons up to her pointed chin and two weird, bird-like

things embroidered on its pockets, hex signs probably--Kappy says that Purnell peels off that suit and changes into a black, slinky gown that trails behind her like limp octopus arms, all ripply. Then she lights a candelabra that holds tons of candles, sets it on top of her shiny, big old grand piano and sits down, back stiff as a poker. Purnell glares through all that melting wax, and tries to think of ways to punish us, cursing the world for ending up as our music teacher.

Purnell can't help herself. She has to gasp when she lifts the cover off those most beautiful ivory-key children of hers. She strokes them with her long fingers and smiles. In the candlelight, her gold-edged front tooth flashes like lightning. Then she gathers up her gown, lifting up those octopus arms to the tops of her thighs, where they come alive, waving all around her. She parts her blue-veined legs to straddle the pedals, pauses one holy moment, shifts her seat forward, hands raised above the ivories, octopus arms too...going down...down...and CRASH! The thunderous chords roll, bouncing echoes all over that dark house. Purnell bends over her children, her arms a blur and whips them again and again.

Gary Ward found out the first day his father retired from farming and moved to town that Purnell's music class wasn't going to be a camp fire sing-along. He saw how quiet

we were as we filed down the hall to music. Clyde Johanningmeir never fakes farts in Purnell's class and I don't dare pass Tommy Anderson a note telling him which night I'm going to the movies. We always silently take our seats on folding chairs in front of Purnell's puke-green piano and wait nervously for her entrance. Even Kappy turns a little pale, and she knows that the lines of the staff are E,G,B,D,F, and the spaces F,A,C,E. She knows that if it's four-four time, there's four whole notes to a measure, or eight half-notes, or a whole lot of quarter notes and eighth notes. Can't carry a tune, though, Kappy can't and Purnell gets irritated at anything off-key. So every day we've got to worry about who she's going to call on to sing her drills alone without the piano. I even worry, and I can sing...but not with Purnell standing over my head, beating her red pencil on her book, or running to the piano to pound on F sharp. Those exercises aren't real songs. We hardly ever sing real songs, except at the very end of class, or when the Principal looks in. Then we pass out *The Americana* songbooks and do "Old Black Joe" in soprano, alto, and bass. I hear us...we're singing. We shout, moan, scream, and grunt, but all in harmony, and she's playing the piano, hands flying, her wicked black curls bouncing like springs.

They aren't ordinary, ugly black curls. Kappy says they're witch's ringlets. Witch's ringlets that give her

radar-power to pick out any wrong note we hit so that she can stop the song, find the culprit and bang on a piano key until even it sounds flat from being struck repeatedly by her long skinny index finger. But these big black springs of curls, always eight, no more, across her forehead are wound so perfectly and stay coiled so stiffly that we're sure spiders would be safe living inside their centers. Not ever is there a hair out of place, not even in the back where she's got rows of these curls all gathered up in one big ugly cluster, softer maybe, but still ornery looking, like a hive, a black hive for wasps. We used to think maybe Purnell wore a wig, but Kappy's noticed that some of Purnell's ringlets have turned a little grey since way back in first grade when we first started parading down the hall to her music class. But then, it could be spider webs we see in those curls, and Kappy's mother always says that Purnell could use a little dusting.

"DON'T YOU DARE HIT ME AGAIN! DON'T YOU DARE!" Gary Ward screams. The air whirls and Purnell, moving like the eye in a hurricane, grabs Gary Ward by the arm, and hauls him across the front row of empty folding chairs. Over their clanking, I hear Purnell growl, "You little minks, you..."

"Minks," she growls, or something sounding like that from deep in her throat, but her jaws are tightly clenched

and she's talking through her gold-edged tooth. I think that "minks" is a pretty strange name to call Gary Ward. But there are more words, too, and they make no sense at all, like she's really talking to someone else, instead. Now, I can't understand anything she says because she's bent over Gary Ward, yanking him around, and he's screaming, swinging his free arm with all his might at that furious brown suit.

Kappy and I aren't surprised at Purnell's sudden outburst of temper. She'd been acting strange for months, sort of like she wasn't quite with us in music class, but far away, sort of sleepwalking through an extra-nice dream.

First she quit beating the blackboard as much as usual with her long wooden pointer and the giant chalk diagram of the staff that she'd drawn there grew more and more smudged as we brushed by it after music, accidentally letting a finger trail through it, or an elbow brush against it. Lonnie Tysland actually got up before class one day and purposefully swiped at it before she entered the room. He held the record for the longest smudge until Purnell finally noticed that her staff was disappearing and needed to be drawn again.

In fact, Purnell had begun to look a bit smudged herself, like someone had been rubbing on her own sharp edges. Even her ringlets weren't coiled as tightly. They

verged on looking almost *fluffy*. We sang, more often, from *The Americana* songbooks, and she'd not hear the alto section get lost in the soprano. Sometimes, then, she even sang with us, lifting her voice above us so that we sang softer just to hear it. It had sounded richer, somehow, not as eerie, and I'd shivered at the feelings she put into those boring old songs. "When Johnny comes marching home again, hurrah, hurrah..." Purnell had never before this sung "hurrah" like a cheer. She always had had to stop the song and beat keys when we had pronounced the "hur" like "her" and not "who."

Then, one day after school, Kappy and I finally figured out what was going on with Purnell. We noticed a long, black kidnapper's car parked in the shade next to the playground. The kind our mothers had warned us about. The kind that always had a man in it offering candy. It had huge fins and as we only pretended to round the corner, it rumbled slowly like a dinosaur up to the entrance of our school just as Purnell was leaving the building. Purnell usually stalked the halls in school like a policeman, so she looked pretty ridiculous taking those little bitty, dainty steps right up to that car and then just standing there, smiling and waiting for the door to open. Crawling out of that car like he was crawling out from under a rock, Purnell's Lizard Man appeared.

Yes, we agreed, he had to be part lizard. He had slicked-back greasy hair that went down his collar and beady eyes that popped out of his head and his weak-looking legs and arms seemed to sprout like spindly, weak stems out of the sides of his tapered body.

Kappy and I watched from behind Helen Flage's lilac bush as he scrambled to open the door for, of all things, a blushing Purnell. He'd mumbled something in her ear, and his mouth even opened and closed like a lizard's, straight across, not smiling up or frowning down. She gave him a throaty laugh. That laugh, mixed with the heavy sweet smell of those lilacs, made me suddenly very queasy. Lizard Man sort of gave Purnell a helpful little shove into the car. He swelled up, slicked back his hair and off they went in a cloud of exhaust. Dang, if Purnell didn't have herself a man!

Kappy and I spent our nights together talking of nothing else. Kappy said Purnell was still a witch. She still changed into that black gown and lit the candelabra. But, there, now, settled into one of Purnell's purple brocade armchairs, wearing green velvet pajamas, with smoke curling out of his nose, was the one single reason things were going so good in music class. Lizard Man's eyes bulge out even farther when he looks at Purnell and he darts his pink tongue at her as she lifts her gown and straddles the

pedals. Purnell's keeping the octopus arms on the floor. Doesn't need them now, not with Lizard Man. She rolls back her head, starting slow, lightly caresses a few keys to tease him and he crushes out his cigar. She bats her eyes at him, and begins to tickle him with a slow, tortured rumba. He curls and uncurls the long, slimy tail he's tucked under his robe. The music makes him crazy. It washes him over to her side, and he can't stand but to sweep her up and crush her against his scaly chest. The piano keeps playing, all by itself now, and he's moving across the floor, Purnell clinging so close she looks like his shadow. Every once in a while Lizard Man bends Purnell back over his skinny arm to look deeply into her eyes, and then, he's tickling her neck and darting his lizard tongue all over her shoulders like she's covered with flies. The spiders in Purnell's hair get awfully nervous. Then he tangos her around, pressing her forward, pressing her back, now forward, now over the grand piano right under that blazing candelabra, and winds his tail around her leg. Kappy and I howl with laughter at the thought of Purnell and Lizard Man, really *weird* on top of that grand piano, and we roll off the bed and hit the floor.

Such a hoot, Purnell and Lizard Man...until Kappy's mother startles us, shows up in the doorway, blocking the light from the hall, hands on her fat hips. She's got her own evil eye and informs us that Kappy's dad is sleeping in

the basement rec-room and if he hears us hit the floor one more time he's going to be coming upstairs to investigate. This Kappy's mother doesn't need. We don't either. His smelly old hands on us as he tucks "his girls" safely in, pulling the covers up to our chins and giving us sloppy wet whiskey kisses we later will have to sneak to the bathroom to wipe off after Kappy's dad and mother have started another late-night fight.

Long after Kappy and I have smothered in pillows our laughter over Purnell and Lizard Man, we bring our own hands to our bodies. We touch secret spots and find magical places. This we do, then fall asleep.

Purnell was soft. Purnell was floating. There were sometimes, now, vases of real flowers on her desk. After Easter, the door to music class opened and in she walked, wearing a pink, ruffled, sleeveless dress. We were sure that Purnell had never worn anything *pink* in her life, but now there she was, head sticking out of those ruffles sort of like it sat on the wrong body. She'd even cinched in her waistline, and if we looked at her from the rear and ignored the coarse black hairs on her arms, she nearly was pretty.

More shocking than the pink dress, though, was the big old diamond ring she wore that sparkled brighter than her tooth. It slipped around on her finger so that she had to keep turning it around all the time, and sometimes she would

even miss a beat to do this and she never even cared, just beamed like every day was her birthday. She started skipping the do-re-mi drills, wanting only to watch that ring dance up and down the keys. We thought it had somehow hypnotized her, and we couldn't watch it very long ourselves without having to stop and shake off the kind of jittery feeling it gave us. Sometimes we would spend the whole hour of music class singing medleys, "...far from the old folks at home," and "Yankee Doodle." One day, Purnell even left the door open. She said she wanted to let a breeze in from the hall, but I thought I saw Lizard Man pass by once. Maybe I was mistaken, though, because I'm sure the Principal would never have let him inside the school.

Purnell was so in love with Lizard Man that she blossomed like a weed into a big old flower so screaming loud we became embarrassed for her. Where she dug up her new dresses, we weren't sure, but all of them were just a little out of date, a little too small and had fussy little pleats here and there, or ruffles where they should have been smooth, or sleeves that puffed up at the shoulders, making her look sort of like a clown. I almost got a little homesick for her brown suit with the embroidered hex signs. At least in it she looked her age.

While Purnell was blossoming, Gary Ward, and the rest of us, forgot about four-four time and how many beats to a

measure. We forgot about E,G,B,D,F, and F,A,C,E, and focused only on Purnell's silly, schoolgirl behavior, noting every sign of her flowering romance. She hadn't even the sense to hide a Lizard-mark on her neck with at least a scarf. One day in class she even giggled. Actually, the giggle sort of just jumped out of her, and she had to stop herself by turning her head and reaching behind her ear for, what had always been, her ever-present red pencil. It wasn't there anymore. In fact, we hadn't seen a red pencil behind her ear for some time. She began to pass out the drill books then, but class was over and we were all saved by the bell.

Of course, Purnell's transformation was too good to last long. And she was gawky where even I would have known to be smooth, melted where I would have been cool. And sure enough, as suddenly as Purnell's voice had changed from its old sharp, crabby staccato into melodious, creamy satin, it changed back again. One day she was absent for a whole day of school, and Purnell had never missed school before. After that we began to notice all the wadded-up handkerchiefs in her pockets. Purnell stopped blooming and began to go to seed. She still wore those ridiculous dresses, but she looked wilted, somehow. During this time Purnell started to teach us this song called "All The Way." It isn't in *The Americana* songbook. I think I've heard it

on the radio, but just the way Purnell was acting, sort of sneaky, making us sing softly, and shutting the door once again, made Kappy and I think maybe it was a surprise sort of song that Purnell didn't want the Principal to hear just then. It goes like this:

When somebody loves you
It's no good unless they love you
Alllll the wayyyyyy...
Through the good and lean years
And through all the in-between years
Come what mayyyyyy...
Who knows where the road will lead us?
Only a fool could say,
But if you let me love you
It's for sure I'm going to love youuuuu
Alllllll theeeeeeeee wayyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!

We sang this song over and over. Purnell couldn't get enough of it. She got so rubbery when she bent over the keys that afterwards she'd have to pretend to look for her pointer stick while she dabbed at her eyes, or started sorting through all her music until she could talk again. Kappy and I didn't mind the song so much. It had a pretty melody and all. If we'd worked on the harmony, Purnell might even have put it in the Spring musical. Lizard Man might be there and change his mind about Purnell. At least I thought our parents would like it a whole lot better than

"Gone are the days..." for the fifth year in a row. Tommy Anderson and his friends made up other words to the "if you let me love you" line, and it did get sort of stuffy in that music room, Purnell with wet armpits, mooning around and smelling like dead flowers.

But it's all over now. The diamond ring is gone. The brown suit is definitely back and Purnell and Gary Ward are wrestling in front of the whole class because he can't sing exercise three in the drill book. When she finally gets hold of his free arm, she squeezes Gary Ward so hard that he turns limp-legged like a wet mop. Looks like Purnell is going to scrub the floor with him, but she changes her mind and pulls him up so hard a button pops off her suit. She's shaking him, again, furiously. She won't be sassed. No one will talk to her like that...does he hear her? Does he? Well, he'd better answer, yes Ma'am, right now.

Her shaking witch's ringlets remind me of the picture Mrs. Deters once showed us of Medusa. Purnell's head looks like it's alive with snakes, but Gary Ward won't turn to stone for her.

There's Gary Ward's fat, pink arm with a dimple on the elbow, pulling free. Purnell's jaw is set so tight. There's his pink arm, reaching out to grab at anything...too short, too fat, too juicy. Purnell moans. Those clenched jaws can't resist. Just can't. The gold tooth flashes.

No! Purnell's not going to...Yes! Yes! Purnell *is going to...*SHE IS GOING TO! Her head goes down, but not before we see her lips draw back into a very, very, red, thin line that circles...Gad! Kappy, teeth like a horse! Purnell's surely stepped on Lizard Man's tail and made him into a pocketbook and now she's going to sink her teeth into Gary Ward. He lets out a yowl and in the next few seconds, instead of jerking around on the floor dying, he gets away from her and zooms, skidding, out the door and down the hall.

"SHE BIT ME! SHE BIT ME!" he's screaming, louder than he ever called cows. Purnell doesn't even try to follow him. She stoops down, picks up the button from the floor, and looks at it a moment. We make a mad scramble back to our seats, as she turns around to face us.

I'm getting pretty tired of Gary Ward's bragging. For days now he's been showing everyone "the bite," and it can hardly be seen at all. He's always talking about how his parents marched into the Principal's office and had Purnell fired. If he thinks I'm going to drop Tommy Anderson and start going with him, he's crazy. I've seen him stuff himself with popcorn and candy bars at the movies. Besides, I miss Purnell. She was such a great witch. Such a perfect witch...the only true one I've ever known, and Gary Ward's gotten her fired.

Wish I'd never seen her shrink. How she stumbled to the piano bench, fumbled the introduction to "Oh beautiful for spacious skies..." and played it with a vengeance, not caring that not a single note would leave our tight squeaking throats. I wish I could forget her white, ghostly face and how she kept pounding out that song way past the last verse, past time the bell rang. We should have handed in our drill books, too, face up, binding to the left, as always, but instead we left them on the floor and walked on them on the way out.

Maybe Kappy's right. Maybe I have gone soft. She raises her eyebrows at me lately when I won't talk "witch." What gives? Don't we get to spend the night at her house tonight? Doesn't her mother have bridge club next week and want to hear ten more times *everything* we can remember about that day? If we play our cards right, we can add a few more details to our story, make it last through supper and stretch it over two helpings of dessert, save a few juicy bits for a bribe at bedtime and maybe even get to sleep downstairs in the rec-room since Kappy's dad is out of town again. Kappy offers, as added enticement, that she's found out where he hides his magazines, too.

I try to think that maybe Purnell's going to come back. Kappy says that we'd better be pretty careful, now, about what we say about her. Oh, she'll have a new form, but be

really mad and meaner than ever. But no matter how Kappy tells it, at night, under the covers, it all sounds kind of flat to me. That black, slinky gown, witch's ringlets, crashing chords, even Lizard Man--they're gone, and there's this empty space inside of me.

But one thing's good. Kappy and I looked up "minks" in Miss Hansen's dictionary today. She likes to see us use that big old dictionary.

"Class," she says as Lyle Steffenson shoots a spit ball at Joyce Hill. "Class, words can play tricks on us. They can have more than one meaning, and more than one spelling."

Minks. We looked it up and found out that Gary Ward is a relative of the weasel family. I should have known.

"But there is another spelling, too," Miss Hansen points out. "M-i-n-x."

Minx: "a saucy, free and forward girl," the dictionary states. I like that definition. I like it a lot and write it again and again in my notebook in all different ways, draw stars beside it, capitalize it, underline it. I can almost taste how saucy I plan to become. Red-hot and spicy, somehow, and my mouth waters.

"Minx," Purnell had growled, and in her anger, through those clenched jaws, I think she sounded almost envious.

CHAPTER III
"BROTHER, MY SIBYL"

BROTHER, MY SIBYL

You call me up from California the same day the mail delivers Father's hand-crafted jewelry box of solid walnut. I know he's spent weeks chain-smoking and drinking coffee while dovetailing its corners and countersinking its brass hinges and the brass lock with ribboned key. Inside there is Reuge music from Switzerland. Silver earrings will dance to "The Anniversary Song" and "*Clair de Lune*," weaving like the blonde highlights that run through the walnut's satin grain. It is a wedding gift from the father I cannot tell...

... the morning I held you for ransom with a secret of yours I breathed and was ready to expose. I made you dress in twin overalls and tee-shirt, and follow me around all day. You pouted at my power, but your hair at noon shone like the aura of Apollo and there were no shadows other than the veils in which we stood, enveloped. I had pulled mine over my head and tied it in a pony tail. Yours kept falling to your feet and you would trip on it, then gather it up, like the suspender over your shoulder, to your eyes, the eyes that matched the blue of the eggs we hunted to steal and, really, you said, stepping out of it all, I lived such a boring life. So we jazzed it up at the phonograph, and smeared cheese on Humpty Dumpty's flip side after your high

wavy contralto had drowned out the frog voices that warbled "oats, peas, beans, and barley grow. . ." We choked the needle on the phonograph with curds and hid the record in my drawer. What sense was there in "open the ring and ring them in, while me and baby da, da, da. . ." Tired of trying to figure out the garbled words, we climbed the ladder up to the attic. In the flashlight's beam, we were no longer twins, but undressed opposites. You liked my body better.

"Wish we could trade," you said, and we climbed back down, you as me, me as you.

Nights we lived in a tent of sheets. "Sis," a hiccoughed after-sob, and then your laughter shook the bed, "you should have seen the feathers fly!" You'd vandalized Judge Sheridan's mansion adjacent to the pines in our back yard. I'd eaten spaghetti for supper and, under the table, kicked big brother for asking about your empty chair when he knew very well you'd been on bread and water all afternoon in jail. The thunder clouds of Zeus boiled. Mother's cheekbones shone. You weren't on the six o'clock news. I lay awake until I heard car doors slam.

"The sheriff goes to our church is all," I said to your silence as we listened to low voices across the hall. Pulling out the cookies I had saved for you, I arranged them in a line between us.

"The tomatoes. Did they work?"

Silence.

". . .so I put them on the grindstone behind the chicken coop," I coaxed after crumbs, and whispered of the doctored baby starlings I'd buried secretly at Grandma's, wanting to know exactly how Sheridan's tomatoes hit the fan and flew.

But I must first be your sister and your brother, your mother and your father, your wife and your husband. I pet the information out of you until you've claimed the down pillow and we sleep.

Surrounded by brothers, I kept my bedroom door shut and held court only when the kingdom got out of hand, enacted ritual as the urge hit.

"Hey!" I screeched at your rude intrusion. The breeze from the hall scattered paper dresses to the floor. You ignored the fact that you were stepping on Cyd Charisse's chinese pajamas.

"Sister, you can have it all. My print set, my desk, my paper..." You bent into my face. "I'm dying!" you whispered, waiting for the impact of your words to register.

"What?" I squawked, having heard you quite clearly.

"I ate a poison mushroom this afternoon," you crowed. You did look odd, excited and green, but I blamed your color on the pack of cigarettes Father'd made you smoke the night before. He'd kept you at the table after supper and, so,

cut short your career as cub scout bat-boy. A cigarette butt you'd lit before the ball game had mimed perfectly Coach Felton's exhaled blasts of smoke. Our delight took you further. His drawl, his impatient finger flicking the ashes... until as if by magic, you'd evoked his shade across your sun. There was no curtain call. Your audience had fled.

"All your stuff?" I asked. "Your radio, your...hey, Norm! Come back here. What did it taste like?"

But you were gone.

"Crap," I said to myself, and finished cutting out Cyd's whole wardrobe, clearing a mental space in my room for your desk. If you lived, somehow I'd win you back.

You stole bells from deserted country schoolhouses, scrawled dirty words on theater brick, and went off to join the Navy, but not before you arrived breathless at the church, dressed in the white I was forbidden to wear. You'd donned the Lone Ranger's mask to give away your pregnant, teenage sister to a cradle robber who had boldly defied our Father's threats.

"Black Lamb of God," you quipped before walking me down the aisle.

Afterwards, when your eye blew out all the fat candles in that Catholic church, you told me it would never last. I

grabbed a vestibule umbrella and popped it open, inspired by the superstition.

"All is lost," I so lightly said that day, before the sky broke, before I knew I'd married my own imagination.

You paid my way to ocean Florida once, three days across the South by bus so I could walk the pine-needle carpet of your Christmas cottage on the Navy beach. The place smelled like Grandma's, coffee and line-dried dish towels. You were preoccupied, gave me a white china horse, let me dance with a wolf on the roof and later saved me from the sting of a man-o'-war.

You teased me about a Florida crab, a black crustacean that had jumped aboard my silk at a land-locked bus stop on the way.

"Get ya pregnant?"

"Just get the stuff, damn it, and shut up," I leaned into you in the car outside the drug store like a parasite intent on annihilating our separateness, nits in my brain, now covering the whole state of Florida, hatching everywhere into questers for that one niche in the world where the radiance is felt.

"You ought to give up on men, sis," said my favorite flight simulator, knowing I preferred centripetal force over vertigo. You liked me soft, without the circles that made me wild.

Oh, no one but I had ever slept in your roommate's bed, and Lover had gone home to Maine for a holiday with the folks. When the tide washed us back each night to where we couldn't clear the stretch between the water and our words, I ran the horse over your tanned chest again and again. With questions that lay softly in the pines, I whispered to your silence. Had I lost you, Walsung brother?

You never really told me until you blew into Dallas, out of the Navy in your '42 pickup. You clowned over wine and we fed each other lines, but the men in the zodiac were yours. My new boyfriend, too. A witch for wounds, I made you say it then, brought up Florida, searched in your admissions for subtleties we'd shared. Clairvoyant, I heard your prayers and hung as albatross my secret delight at not having to share your spirit body with any other of my sex.

Forty, I thought myself stoic in the little Iowa farm house in the woods, wintering between a last husband and the next. Snow was drifted to the window tops and to the roof for all I cared and your call, its distant ring, could hardly break the spell of blowing desert snow so cold and fine and white like sand.

Your voice was ten again, and in my room at night.

"There's broken glass in my bed, can I sleep in yours?"

Your nightmare struck twelve midnight. My voice was cracking ice above a howling wind that carved this statue

sharper, sharper, for I, Lot's wife, had turned around to look too many times.

"You notified his family?" I asked. You'd pulled your lover from a closed garage.

"...sleep in yours?" The telephone lines went dead.

In better years, there was a place once. Bored, both of us home for the summer, you borrowed Father's car and toured with me down the gravel backroads to a church in the country filled with bales of hay. We sat where stained glass had once made rainbows, where once we'd smoked hashish and had later gone to the county fair. I, with arms hugging my knees, waited for us to blend in the darkness, to mirror ourselves, to find the tree with stars for fruit. You told me how you'd tried to love a black girl once, thinking race might make the difference.

"Might have married her," you said, "but for her plastic flowers. Christ, they were everywhere."

You'd made her choose them over you.

I picked an apple off that tree. It pulsed, cracked open. Shot across the heavens. "I was first, Norm," I said. "You settled into imprints Mother hadn't time to shed." I'd formed her cradle curves, and at her breast, knew she sensed your coming.

"It wasn't Mother," is all you said. Earth, air, fire and water is what it was. The flower and the sword, heat lightning and Northern lights.

"Will you ever tell her?" asked the poison purple you chose to let bloom.

You call me up from California the same day the mail delivers Father's jewelry box. But I am not to worry. I know of deeper spores. Yes, you will be chaste as a fish, will stop smoking, "stop drinking, too," you say as you drag on a cigarette.

I pull tomorrow's wedding suit from the closet and lay it on the bed.

"It is me they should find a cure for," I say as I wind the key to the works in the jewelry box.

O! How we danced on the night we were wed...Mother's thin voice is singing far away as she does the dishes. It is her song that Father has sent to the sweet belladonna your mushroom grew beside. How many times I had gone to her carved wooden box and set free the notes while I tied her scarves in my hair and tripped down the stairs to run in the night before their echo slowed.

"Another *Big Day*?" you chuckle, sliding your hands down the glass walls of your newfound cage.

"Always," I reply, and wonder what part of me will refuse to stabilize this time. And you are more alive now

than you have ever been, floating in a bottle in a vast green ocean.

My wedding suit looks like Mother's so long ago on New Year's Day, but it is blue, the color of shadows on snow.

"Let's keep this between us," you say in a tee-shirt and overalls.

"Oh yes," whispers your fair-haired sister with dilated pupils and an artificial pallor.

You laugh, then, and promise something borrowed. It will arrive tomorrow as I dress. You'll send back my dream hotel overlooking the ocean, fresh orange juice delivered in the morning by a waiter who loves you, and I, on mysterious errands in the elevator dressed sedately in dark crepe day-dresses that part at the waist. You in the swim, in the lobby walking the decapitated bird. I will put us on, a garter, a tourniquet to stop the bleeding, and adjust my smile accordingly, only to find myself clouded, a red stream, clotting. My sabotaged heart then explodes.

As if sensing your sudden detachment, the box clicks. There is a pause as the music changes.

"Say something," I demand, feeling abandoned, riding off to you on my white china horse.

You set your voice to a familiar warble. Freud, this time, sitting in church, separated from the others. "If a boy knows certain footprints in the sand are his sister's, he will not follow them."

"Frogs and sand..." My chorus line.

"I want to die," you lie, teetering on the edge of movie star dramatics in give-away desperation.

But, not yet, dear brother in the Hollywood Hills, not yet. I need you to lead me safely through hell. I find you and again try to wrap my words around us.

"You and I will become pleasure-loving terrorists," I say hopefully as I raise the lid of the jewelry box to recast for us our unfinished living. You are the tide, and the song of the moon begins to play.

CHAPTER IV
"LITTLE LOVE NEST ON THE TRACKS"

LITTLE LOVE NEST ON THE TRACKS

Early morning, when dust catches sunshine and floats like silver slivers, she puts on sunglasses and coffee. Strange, this taste of newsprint in brown water, but the milk has soured overnight. Empty pockets in cardboard six-packs cool to the labored hum of the refrigerator as she stands at its open door, remembering.

She'd overlooked the red sock that turned all his underwear pink. It was bleach, bread, and milk at the grocery then, and with money left over, she went to the drugstore to kill the pain. A perfectly healthy tooth, the dentist had said. Perfectly healthy but with a root that was dying slowly, screaming. Root canal or three months' rent. She would chew on the left side of her mouth instead, stop gritting her teeth while she slept, and try to nurse the defunct nerve with remedies she knew postponed.

Are you a golden girl? The perfumed magazine wanted to know. *Golden is a state of mind. You can simply never look too golden...so potent, it's dangerous.* The aproned old man in the drugstore set her daughter on his counter and treated her to an ice cream cone, beaming at her as he caught the drips. *You don't have to be blonde, or tan. You just have to be bold about your beauty.* Little tablets chink

together, counted out, one by one. *The golden girl knows how to be 24K...eyes rimmed in copper metallic, black mascara, then lash tips topped in gold mascara...* The child shares a frozen bite with Mommy, and the nerve radiates pain through her jaw. Could she remember a time...facial trauma? external force? the dentist had wondered. The ice cream lands on an oiled hardwood floor as she jams the magazine back on the rack, dull throbs hammering in her head. Pushing at her with sticky hands, the child protests. The old man behind the counter offers pennies. Come back. Come back again. The milk sits patiently in the car, sweating in the sun.

Golden Girl, you're a treasure. Remember that one, after a shift from three until midnight. She'd turn him on, then, with that overall glow, round the circling needles, rake her hands to thread the loops, make her piece rate to pay for gold mascara. Loop the loops at the knitting mill, give them their sweaters, collect her pay. Then. Then she'd bare lots of skin, and still stay innocent in white...now an accidental pink.

Tiny white curds. The milk has soured overnight. It's a chicken-pox-coffee morning. He'll be far from pleased. Watery rings float empty beer cans, and he will drink his coffee black in the little love nest on the tracks. And she

likes the way her chipped toenail polish matches the red-sock-pink panties. It's hot, too hot to wear even these where there are no trees to shade the sand.

Windows rattle, the plaster cracks another inch. A kaleidoscope of color slides lazily by. It's the only circus train she's ever seen. Last circus train ever, from up the river. *Things happen to golden girls.* Out the back door she bounds to get a better look, dish towel wrapped around her breasts. Not ten feet away, now, are turquoise, faded, faded, and orange, yellow, green, blue, red, silver, gold, rococo Gypsy-painted cars. Tattooed arms propped on pillows half out of windows, roustabouts sleep in the early rolling morning. One sends an appreciative whistle of approval from a caged boxcar, far down the tracks before she waves. And, now, she's found the gilded coach she knew would pass. Blue silk stockings furl like ribbons through its partially drawn drapes while that sequined flyer sleeps in velvet coolness.

House lights dim to a drum roll crescendo. A lone spotlight finds its mark in lofty rigging. She glides, she soars and knows the arms of men. Wrists lock, strong hands grip, she finds him in the split seconds of empty air. In straw bedding, on sawdust floors, they synchronize their moves. He finds her in the rocking berths of traveling on. In

curtained coaches he seeks the one so gifted in heart. She will catch him with legs that hold. Her body his net, as he plunges and falls. All she is is in his eyes, and then two bodies fly as one.

A spangled bird, an artist of love, she'll wake to watch the shimmering river slipping by, the river hawks diving.

Smiling, she'll turn towards softness to search the tumbled warmth and know he's gone to deal another morning's betting hand. She'll nibble at the porter's tray breakfast through the long afternoon, waiting for her gambler's return. He'll knock softly before they reach their eastern destination, before the stakes are driven and the tents go up again.

No rain-washed posters left behind. The vanishing menagerie becomes a speck. But the calliope plays on for one whose act has not been cut. Her child calls from a slant-roofed bedroom, impatiently rattling bars on a crib. With rosined feet, she balances along the tightrope tile through the bathroom where diapers soak. Up the stairs, without a pole. Calves wide, center of gravity lowering, with effortless ease she pulls the child to her hip. Performing on a golden thread, she crosses a threshold, burning her knuckles against a hot mug. It's a chicken-pox coffee, pink underwear morning. There will be no net to break her fall.

The strong man awakens, his wreath of laurels askew over dark cloudy brows. His muscles flex under purple sheets. She pirouettes, the wire whipping, is gone before the sway can throw her. Tripping, diving, catching guy ropes down the stairs to safety. Golden Girl, fearless one, drink the bleach or stick with dancing bears.

CHAPTER V
"PINK CRUISE"

PINK CRUISE

There's a sinkhole in a hay field not far from here where, years ago, someone abandoned a lipstick-pink Hudson Hornet convertible, left it there to rust, but took its tires in case it developed a mind of its own. I found it one day on the way to Satre Store, going for flour after an afternoon thunderstorm had rocked my valley. In the rain that fell straight down, I'd stepped naked into the yard to bathe out back in drops that sparkled and stung, and fell like glass from a shattered rainbow. It's shorter to Satre than to town. Larson'd said he'd come down from the ridge that night for chicken. I had legs, thighs, and breasts, but no flour to roll them in.

In my valley, the river is full of mud and the catfish barely outnumber the moon-eyes. Trout glide by, but not if I'm knee-deep, luring with treble hooks and corn. There are wild dogs in these hills, and the one-lane dirt road from my place up to Satre twists through river woods. Up on the ridge, the road to Larson's house grows straight and wide and runs on to town. Through curtainless windows he sees the sun earlier than I, and his late afternoon shadows cast him more lean. In them, he stands oblique, like the angles where his wall meets the floor. Larson doesn't believe in Christmas, but saves his presents. Been saving them since

he was twenty-one. Unopened boxes with flattened bows and rotten ribbons, all stacked under a horse blanket on a bed in his spare room. Says he likes having something to look forward to.

I needed flour, and on the road to Satre, just around a bend, I swerved suddenly to avoid a huge, dead elm that lay across the road, downed by the storm. The brakes locked and the car skidded sideways into a ditch of Queen Anne's Lace. At a steep slant, stuck in river-bottom mud, I hugged the steering wheel and eyed the fallen landmark with its bleached trunk dressed in wild vine. Fickle sweat bees deserted the clusters of tiny white acrid flowers that poked now through the car window. They chose instead Safell's rose-tattooed décolleté and hovered there over the mirage of nectar. Things are different now.

It would be hours before Larson finished chores. I felt like taking a nap in the sun, lying down on the car seat to let the blood rush to my head, but, instead, I found myself imagining his pickup coming down the ridge later, rounding the bend and veering into the ditch on the other side of the elm. By then it would be dark, the wild dogs brazen. I scaled the ditch, pulled myself up onto the felled tree and tested its length, balancing between a closed road and one that was open, footing that felt like the limbo between now

and never. I stepped carefully on smoothness between green, then started walking towards Satre, down the road and out of the chartreuse woods. With the store in sight, I took a shortcut across a field, hoping that Larson was looking forward to my cooking too. His wood was in my stove.

Sometimes after a storm, the air is charged so light and the outline of things so vivid, I remember Safell and the times we had in Dallas. He's right behind me if I sink back into blue, and when I turn, I catch sight of him for an instant before he becomes the vanishing smiles of a handhold on my heart. First met him in V.I.'s Club 22, when he lost his paycheck to my husband's pool cue. Three years later, one night in a neighborhood pub on Knox Street, there he was again, approaching the table I sat at alone. Ponytail, cigarettes rolled in the sleeve of his t-shirt, heavy leather belt, jeans he'd slept in, he belonged down the street where he'd parked his bike in front of the White Lantern. He bought me a drink and we toasted my recent divorce. Turned out we had something in common. He had just gotten out of the joint, and I was making Sunday jaunts to one, in love with an outlaw whose desperation was irresistible. Driving hot to Paris, Texas, I'd used garters and black lace stockings to smuggle smoke into the County under paper plates of my best fried chicken. For a few extra minutes of casual disregard, I'd bared a leg and

bribed the trustee with soft, red kisses pressed against labels of the pints I nestled among towels in the ladies' room. Getting the man all he wanted, but me, and living the blues because I liked the edge. The voltage flowed, and with my eyes I'd dive into steel-grey pools on the other side of glass and screen, only able to surface on the road home, coming up for air with a semi in my rear-view mirror. Doing time in heels.

It was Lipstick-pink in the sinkhole near Satre. With the store in sight, I'd cut across a field of alfalfa. Near a sinkhole where the tops of trees stood level with my knees, Lipstick's color caught my eye, flashing through nettles and wild raspberry bushes at the edge of the drop. Rust on the convertible was still car-wash wet from the storm, but what remained of its pink enamel shone. Lipstick had weathered well the seasons of wind and lightning, and had done it top down, shameless, put out to pasture, block-salt hard by. I knew that rusted chrome, her steel body, those streamlines, that grill. I knew that Lipstick's seats had been itchy wool velvet before mice stole from them to make nests, and that the wooden dash once gave music a resonance deep as its grain, and that her doors had not always been frozen shut...a woman gone to seed, all faded, soft and forlorn who had forgotten she was ever fine. I knew that car. Had been in the back seat of every Hudson Hornet Papa ever had, and

there had been a string of them. Gramp's dealership once covered four counties square. Hudson Hornets and Terraplanes, and Willis Knight. With five kids, Papa drove them second-hand, Hudsons, all forever the color of forest-green. I'd later once seen a silver Terraplane and one that was coffee-brown. But this beauty in the weeds--it was the only pink there ever was.

Safell moved fast to make up for lost time. He needed a place and stuck around. Criminal only in ways he loved. Zipped up the back of my Paris black and made me an offer I couldn't refuse. Said he knew someone who could spring my Clyde and get him over the Mexican border--I could stop the Sunday visits. I must stop the Sunday visits, stop taking the chances. Safell had a brook inside that cut through stone, made the outlaw's eight-year sentence of waiting unbearable. He flicked his lighter and lace stockings melted on the hanger in my shower leaving hardly an ash. Victim of his sweeter, nearer extortion, I went down in flames.

Lovable stray, Safell. Signaled his pack, and one by one, eventually brought them through my kitchen door for supper because the scraps were good and the hand, generous. He'd pull off his dirty work clothes in my kitchen, lifting covers off pans and sniffing. Hungry.

"Man!" I'd yell. "Don't let the steam outta them pans 'less you're fixin this meal yourself," I'd protest, fake southern accent, on tip-toe, in his face, laying our table with his favorite spread. He'd lightly throw me over his shoulder, nibble a leg for starters and cover the hall to the bedroom in two strides. Smoke invariably would roll out of the oven.

"Screw the biscuits."

They burnt like fragrant incense at an altar.

"Never stop," I begged, and sometimes he never did.

And then we dined with snarls in our hair.

Safell pulled a skinny kid into my kitchen one night. They stood squinting in the hundred-watt bulb I'd stolen from the laundromat.

"Christ! Mama. Turn down the juice," said Safell, slugging from a bottle of Wild Turkey. "This here's Ricky. Been showin' him how to dig a ditch," arm hugging Ricky's neck, leaning into him. Safell loved digging ditches. Called it Reality.

"Capital R," Ricky volunteered with a swagger, when Safell dug him in the ribs. It was crawling under houses that Safell hated, claustrophobic and bitten too many times.

"Guaranteed to make them spiders head for hell," Safell laughed, putting out his cigarette in the sink. "Spider Lady won't look twice." Safell pulled up the kid's shirt

sleeves revealing ugly red sores that spread out in angry stains beneath his transparent skin. Embarrassed, Ricky tried to duck out from under Safell's hold.

"Ricky's gonna be my helper, ain't ya, Bro?" Safell thundered, grabbing the kid as he turned away. The kid blushed. "Get himself a hot meal, too, ain't ya?"

"Gonna heal you, kid," Safell said to Ricky the next night after supper. They'd worked and eaten shirtless in the summer heat and Safell had put up with Ricky's arms long enough.

"Get out the cookin' oil, Mama," he said with a rare grin. Prison dentists had done a lousy job on Safell's front tooth. He winked at the kid but his eyes weren't laughing as he got up to shut off the kitchen light.

"I can't take you two straight," I said, reaching for both some whiskey and the oil. I frisked Safell for his lighter and set out a candle as he began his familiar sermon on brotherhood and the honor of a man's word.

In Safell's magic candlelight, we joined hands around the table. I watched Ricky's bewilderment as Safell softly pulled me next to him, safe under one arm while he reached over to pour oil into Ricky's long blonde curls. Watched it dripping down his forehead and into his eyes while Safell kept on anointing his brother, one of his own, teasing, serious. Gentle in my house.

The oil took Ricky days to wash out. He almost became too clean in the process. I said it was the food. Safell said it was the hours Ricky spent lathering in the shower. The scabs disappeared and he started to put some meat on his bones. Safell'd won himself fealty, a workin' sidekick to trail his Harley and do crawl space. We set up a cot in the front room.

These hills are in my blood. Gramp called me a rounder when I came back this time. Said I was too much like my Uncle Bud, with his five wives, semi-smoking the Alaska Highway and avoiding certain truck-stops.

"Just a rounder, Sis," Gramp repeated the word again and again. Like me, he can't say anything just once.

"One of these days you're going to have to make it stick," he said, but there was a pride in his voice, and he shook his head and gave a rusty, hiccuping laugh. My artist, where is he now? Still drawing women's portraits on those cafe napkins and pirating maidenhood? My poet, the electrician. What became of him? His wires always got crossed but the strippers would dance until the fuses blew.

"Ain't no spring chicken now, Sis," was all Gramp ever really said that made me pause.

Ma's quiet. She no longer sounds like doves. She's watched Gramp mash potatoes through his fork and heard his foot

tapping the chair through breakfast, lunch, and dinner for seventeen years. She's—let him have the living room and silently screams for him to die on nights when she remembers Papa named three bombers after her and came home from Italy when the war was over. Took her on a honeymoon to Yellowstone. There's Mama, poking her head out of a tent, bandanna holding back long brown frizzy hair, dreamy-eyed, smelling like lily of the valley in eyelet. Ma made a photo album of the honeymoon, and Pa wrote across it "Lest We Forget." Ma knows. She knows her daughter ain't a rounder, just bad luck is all. Knows a woman's nothing without a good man.

Larson and I shoot green tomatoes off tin cans as the sun sets. Shots echo the valley and the dogs lay low. I'm too reckless to hit anything. I'm lonesome, and his profile makes me crazy. I want to drink wild parsnip juice, chew rose hips and fog the windows. Just once I want his pickup to roll into the yard with one lazy wide swing around the pines, narrowly missing the pump, radio blaring.

I hand Larson my twenty-two.

"Oil my gun while I set the table." I want magic. I try to sparkle and the kitchen sends wafts of encouragement. Larson eats in silence, rolls up his shirt sleeves and picks up a chicken wing, pulls it apart. I am unable to keep my eyes off the curve of his wrists. Beautiful, beautiful

strong Irish wrists. We're saying grace tonight--thank god for the Irish. I like the way Larson sucks meat off tiny bones, the way white cotton falls against dark arms. I like the way he swore when I showed him the elm, saying the words like he's never said them before. I wonder if he loves women this way. Gently, at first, like he's never rocked the slats out from under a mattress. I set the wishbone on the stove to dry.

A gas lamp still hangs from the living room ceiling though long ago the valley was strung with high lines. It sings the wings of pixie moths and its blue light catches my mood as Larson reassembles my gun, his conversation small. The dead elm is his now, he says. He'll cut it up. Haul it back to his place in pieces. Come winter, he says, he'll use it as starter for a hot, fast fire. There will be enough wood to share. He'll mix it with some apple.

"...the right size for your fire-box."

Long silence. Crickets' song drifts in through the windows. Then Larson mentions the wedding dance coming to Satre next week. Both families are from the ridge, but it will draw the whole county. The back of Satre Store will open onto a huge sawdusted dance floor. Men, women, children, dogs will polka and waltz. Larson meets my eyes and clicks the safety on the gun.

"Posters up at the store for weeks," I add, feeling like one of Larson's Christmas presents, forever waiting, wanting Larson's breath in my hair, wanting to take some silk from the closet.

And then he's standing.

"Got deer in your garden, rustlin' corn..." He's out the door to fire shots at the stars.

For my thirtieth birthday, Safell decided on a get-together at the lake.

"You and I are bringin' three turkeys, Mama," he announced and, as an afterthought, added, "put yours in the oven."

To the lake we went, in parade. Family of his I'd never met. Bikers with women who eyed me closely as they passed and turned their heads proudly into the wind, hugging the men they straddled.

"Who's the chick behind Safell?" They wanted to know but weren't friendly. I was new. They kept their distance.

Early next morning, with Safell's heat zipped around me in the sleeping bag, I awoke to huge crows that had swooped down on the turkey carcasses, tearing at them and snapping bones in their beaks. Dreams. Black dreams. Sleek peyote flyers. Safell's forty-five would have sent them vomiting into the mist. It dug against my ribs until the chill evaporated.

"That you, Sis?" Gramp calls out, knowing full well it is but letting me know that I've been too long without visiting. I answer by taking his hand and sliding faded grey ledgers onto his lap. In them is every Hudson he ever sold or traded, recorded in his wavy, printed hand. Name, address, model, date and price, page after page, year after year, until he sold the garage and Grandma closed the cafe next door.

Gramp ignores the ledgers, has been betrayed, is recovering from a stroke at the old folks' home, dressed in his Sunday best. He's still wearing his pride, too, and refuses to get comfortable. The ragged burgundy sweater he would never take off long enough to get laundered now lies folded on a bureau.

"Your Ma don't want me back," his voice breaks. "Fraid I'll fall again."

He is weak, now, and has finally caught up to his ninety-one years. This time it'd been more than the short spells of sinking to the floor, swearing that he'd caught his foot on the braided rug.

He points to the curtain partition, churns his finger in circles around his ear and looks at me sharply. His roommate speaks gibberish. The room is airless. There are plastic drapes at the window.

Not my Gramp. Not here.

"You don't belong here," I say and squeeze his hands. Their gnarled, purple veins are cold. Gramp gives me a blank look.

"You don't belong here!" I shout as the idea forms. Larson. His pickup. It would take them only an afternoon to move Gramp's maple bed, dresser, Grandma's pictures and some clothes out to West Ridge.

Gramp is dozing. I kiss him on the forehead and pat the ledgers on his lap.

"Look me up a lipstick-pink Hornet convertible, Gramp."

"Sis," was the reply, head resting back in a vinyl chair that wasn't his.

Safell was drinking heavily, was moody for weeks and there was no cure for what I knew ailed him. We were drowning. Nights, I waited for the sound of his bike, warming his supper quickly on the stove. Ricky was usually first through the door with a sympathetic shrug, and then Safell, blindly after. Later on, no Ricky.

Mostly there were memories of his years before prison, though Safell rarely mentioned them sober. Finally, one night I pulled him from the bar after reluctantly agreeing to leave the car and ride home behind him on his bike. Not because he was drunk did he miss our turn, choosing instead to whiteline down the middle of the expressway, threading a

curving, iridescent ribbon through the eye of a steel needle, coming within inches of every blaring car and semi. I swallowed the wind, my screams, my irrational fear of speed and held on. Like two insane seconds in Safell's crazy vacuum of madness, we ticked towards an inevitable goodbye, the only way that Safell could say it. The only way I would ever hear. Miles into the suburbs, he turned the bike around in silence. My body had turned to stone.

Later, cutting the corner too sharply, he let the Harley bite the curb of my driveway and skid out from under us, sending the message home.

"You bastard!" I cried, too late, burnt by more than the bike's hot tail pipe.

Safell had finally found the wife and child he had lost in prison.

Holding a grocery bag with Gramp's pajamas, shaving kit and change of clothes, I sign him out of the home for the day. I leave his return time blank. The nurse at the desk notices and Gramp informs her that he's off to West Ridge with his granddaughter and may never be back unless he gets a little respect. We stop for a quart of Old Style Lager on the way out of town. I flirt with him and by lunchtime he's years younger, has gone back to other days and the sparks are flying.

"Fried potatoes, best, Sis, when there's only a few in the bottom of your spider," Gramp compliments my cooking, tapping his foot over lunch and beaming at me. I know it isn't me he's speaking to, but Grandma.

Gramp doesn't need the ledgers to remember Lipstick, either.

"One of them Beisker boys, Earnie, I believe, bought that car in the forties. Wild one, that Earnie. Worked the railroad... Course, all them Beisker boys was wild." Gramp's hands aren't shaking now. He reminisces about the kegs of beer he'd supplied for railroad picnics, his beer tent at the fair, how Grandma's cafe served the coldest draft in town.

I pour the last of the Old Style into his glass. The porch sun warms him. He's tipsy and I steady him by putting my head on his shoulder. I remember how carefully, mornings, he'd fold his pajamas and tuck them under his pillow when he made his bed. I want to see him do it again, want him to live with me, upstairs under the slanted roof.

"I'll bring your bed out, Gramp. Your dresser, too. A few clothes, in case you wanna stay," I offer. We'd be free. I would stay away from men, and Gramp could stay away from the home.

Gramp looks through me, his clouded eyes not blinking. His voice is stronger, cutting in. The home ain't so bad as he first thought. Gladys Eadie, remember her, don't I,

lived down the road at the old place? She's got a daughter working at the home in the kitchen. Making him bread pudding, special, when he wants. I should pick him up Wednesdays, once a week for Old Style and fried potatoes...

"The stairs, Sis. I can't climb the stairs," his voice is a wisp now, trailing off into an excuse he didn't need to voice.

I stare at patches of nettles that border the road. In the Spring, their leaves are tender and I brew their tea. They sting like fury, now, but the county no longer sprays the ditches for weeds and the butterflies have returned.

Late afternoon, we head back to town as flies settle on the screens in the last of the sun. Gramp just needed a choice, that's all.

Ricky traded his van for a car. Dropped by after Safell left. Brought trout and beer and hung around too long after dinner. We exchanged all we had of Safell, eyes open, curtains drawn, screen door catching in the wind. I swore I heard his footsteps in the kitchen and Ricky held me down, kept me from myself.

There were others who came by... Chief, sleek, dark, muskrat Indian, sliding through water, making only ripples. Deadly. Thought me too fragile. Ha! Let me hug his ribs with my knees and made me drink raw eggs in the morning, just to stay a part of the earth...there were others too,

old friends and new. I was fluid, diffusible, kept count of them to keep from evaporating.

Heard Safell was in Oak Cliff, laid off. I packed and headed North.

My valley alone. I am a wild onion whose flesh keeps men crying, a wicked nun born of ground-up river rock. Mine are the layers they dare not peel. My bed is near the secret springs that pop from limestone ridges. But I can yield the first sugar. Undisturbed, I will sweeten in cracking winter frosts, provide peasant food for them if they break the frozen ground.

Heard the dogs when I first moved in. Heard them tear an old ewe to ribbons. I saw them chase it down the dry run back of the house and pursue it up the bluff across the road. I listened as they tore its last heaving breath to blood and steam.

I listen, now, to Lipstick. Her whispers are the hands I use to lightly trace and retrace my lost periphery.

Beisker's been all night at a river bar. Time to leave, he stole a woman. Had her close beside him, in his grasp as he took her on a reckless tour. Days and nights they wound around, until they bumped across the hay field and bottomed out on a Sunday morning. Must have said she'd take it off no more, not a thread unless he threw away those

car keys, put an apron around her, gave her a child. He must plow the field they sat in.

"Evening in Paris" fogging his brain, Beisker played for keeps. Slammed Lipstick into neutral and tromped her to the floor-boards for one last deafening rev before throwing the keys to pheasant and quail. Let "Evening" curl her fickle toes to the morning moon.

Read the letter from Ricky, one time, slowly.

"Safell hung himself in Dallas."

But everything is as it always was. My gossamer ghost trips across the hay field, tearing his words into wind-swept confetti. I slide into Lipstick, extend an arm and turn a wrist. Sparks ignite.

Lipstick and I sling ourselves into dizzy spins, smearing donuts in the dew, screaming through clover. We are a giant, pink sequin, whirling, flashing, catching the sunrise.

We ricochet. We skip along the surface of the river like a pebble over a pond. We skim the trees that border the Wild Turkey, wild dog, wild Beisker woods. Wilder and higher Lipstick and I will fly, filling the sky with cocoons of exhaust.

Strands of hair catch in my mouth. The wind empties my eyes and throat. I drive.

Horns honk and bouncing tin cans leave a dusty trail as the wedding party passes by on the way to Satre Store.

Larson, monk with a chain-saw, dead elm sawdust in his eyebrows, is down in my valley delivering a load. Up on his ridge, I spread the horse blanket on his spare room floor and pull off the first faded ribbon.

CHAPTER VI

"LA PETITE MORT DE RENART: UN FABLIAU"

LA PETITE MORT DE RENART: UN FABLIAU

...and the fox, carrying the little hen in his mouth, listened to her last request. Before she became his dinner, it would be such a comfort if, with his magnificent voice, he'd sing for her a song. Flattered, the fox opened his mouth wide to sing, only to see the hen fly to the treetops above him.

Hungry, hungry month of May, when lean hearts hunt strange smiles and gnaw on scraps of thighs glimpsed from wind-tossed skirts, a little hayseed blows into Chicago, waits by her luggage in calico dismay.

Monsieur Renart spies her lost but hopeful, floating look.

Can he be the 'Mister' she's arranged to meet?

Ah, but yes. A Summergirl to mind the children, be the playmate, spend the time.

"What have we money for, if not to live with a certain ease?" Vassar argued in March, symphony bound. Short intermission, musical recess.

Renart relents in April.

"Keep your Summergirl out of my way."

But *mon dieu!* Renart is stunned at the train station. His mouth waters. He detours suburbia for a better look at what he's caught. A fluffy, blonde *geline* of more than one rooster's dream. Fresh squeezed from teat, warm going down, country come to city, Summergirl. She drives his pulse down backroads straight to the woods.

Suburbia. *Voilà!* Vassar reviews her calendar at dinner. Renart pulls artichoke leaves between his teeth, dripping lemon butter for the heart of a thistle with thoughts that make his *chablis* blush.

Ah, Vassar, chic, blonde-streaked pageboy, a classic climber from sweater to sheath, strips only the leaves. Carves out the choke. Discards the heart. Cards Renard's green with complete *sang-froid*.

Oh là là! City of Fun for a Saturday afternoon Frenchman, two little girls, and a Summergirl. Much to see. Much to do in a Summer of sun. She is steaming meadows after hot summer rain. Rough at the ballet. Soft at the zoo. Water cress and honeysuckle, a salad deluxe. *Crudité*, fresh and raw.

"Nightcap, anyone?" sings bathrobed Renart, top of the stairs. Perfumed and panting. A fox who knocks at the hen house door.

Summer and letters. In bedroom legs. Pours out her heart to a rural route: *Joey, love, got your Chevy running? End of August, be at the depot, one day earlier than Mama knows. Keeping it special. Don't forget. The river motel and my welcome home. XXXXX.*

"Goodnight, *Cherié*, XXXXX." So sad, poor Renart, cooling whispers over scotch-soaked cubes. Vassar offers her back, and little more.

Michigan Avenue. The Saturday Four. Renart's down-town suite. His skyline view. Oh! Wild weed's impressed, *sans doute*, with his suite, his view, his gift of lace.

"Try the little nothing on?" Crafty Renart. Sliding closer on the divan.

Quail hides in the brush. Is sure it will fit.

Burn down the town. Burn circles 'round the loop. Vassar naps in suburban *bliss*, not two little girls in a *suite d'affaire*.

Vassar drones by phone to her La Salle Street VP.

"Darling, I *must*," says the angel of mercy on wings of steel. A dying uncle in L.A.

"By all means, *mon petit chou*," smiles wily Renart, *avec la ruse*, entrepreneur of profit and gain, tallying the

odds for a loan on chance. Through the woods and home in a flash.

Two little girls tucked safely in bed.

Light the candles *dans le chateau*. Vassar taxis in distant smog. Gourmet dinner *chez Renart*. *Saint Julien*, himself, hospitality galore, brandy swilling in his head.

"*L'affection, Cherié*, so great, my sweet..." Renart at the fireplace, tracing frosted initials, with crystal designs. Can't help that he's young again. So young. So alive!

He must get the Red Clover to stray from her field.

Does Summer not think him an unhappy man, who works so hard and for so little?

Does she not adore her French *chanteur*?

Or want to talk *le discours* of love?

Would she not want a Frenchman's bed?

"No," sighs the fickle *fille*, leaving the room and climbing the stairs.

Renart toasts *l'innocence de l'amour*.

"No," is her answer to everything.

"For Christ's sake, *Cherié*! Open the door..." whispers the fox through a quivering keyhole. He flies down the stairs to pour one more, to light a smoke, to unruffle the bird.

Silence.

Mama's hung out wash today. She's canned tomatoes. Fried catfish for supper. Eyes like Summer when she was young. Married her man at seventeen.

Hélas! Mama's never seen the ballet, a country club, or a skyline view. Never worn lace camisoles nor kissed a Frenchman, so very French...

Silence. Sliver of light from a door cracked open.

Renart is gone. Has given up! ...and she thought Frenchmen were relentless.

"You must leave me alone!" Summer shouts down the stairs.

Silence.

"First train in the morning." Does he hear her? First train in the morning, and she will be on it.

Down the hall, dans la toilette.

Renart climbs the stairs by twos.

"First train!" echoes off bathroom tile. Pouts in the mirror.

Renart, there, too. In tragic eyes. His ice cubes have melted, why won't her heart?

"Chérié, just once? Have some pity for your poor Monsieur."

Dévastateur, Dévastatrice. In a kiss, she makes up her mind.

Pitié, Monsieur Renart! Pitié au nom de Dieu! The wood violet can live in sin under one leaf. Cornsilk wet with morning dew. His falcon's dive. Her river hawk's soaring.

The blue fox sings, *a pleine gorge.*

Wrinkled, lustless sheets torn back. Powdered plastic, rolled on quickly.

Shaking hands fumble their fortunes. The French *chanteur* has sung too many verses. His coquette is late for her chorus line. *L'hésitation, oh! hélas!*
l'hésitation...Chérie...

Renart suffers *une attaque d'orgasme, sans Chérie.*
French *crème de la crème*, too soon, *tout a coup.*

"*Chute!*" he cries, and pulls out his hair. *Il fait de la mauvais besogne.*

"*Zut, Chérie, zut...zut...zut!*"

Summer is over, embarrassed and soft, light as a feather, so high on her perch. She'll show a little *savoir-faire.*

She'll be the breeze that cools his heat. A waving
ditch of laughing daisies. The dove coos. Shade on the
porch swing rocks him close. Whispers gently, dries his
brow.

Le depart, too.

"Monsieur, au revoir."

First train in the morning. Impeccably ravished.
Thrilled to the bone. *Poulette sans coq, seductress.*

Adieu!

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CHAPTER VII

"JIMMY CRACK CORN AND I DON'T CARE"

JIMMY CRACK CORN AND I DON'T CARE

She already knew about him, before he ever discovered she lived just across the corn field in the run-down, weathered house. Farm wife gossip on a party line. A kid...he was a kid who tormented the old widow down the road. A kid who hunted and trapped in the nearby woods and sinkholes for anything with a price on its hide, for anything that ran for its life through the sight on his gun, or that died kicking, caught in his steel teeth. A kid who'd had easy pickings with old Mrs. Hale...and she had softly replaced the telephone receiver, feeling quite as guilty as he, for having eavesdropped.

She already knew about him, so that when she came back from town one day to find a dead crow floating in her toilet, the only thing that startled her was the suggestive starkness of wet, black feathers against sheet-white enamel. She remembered a painting she'd seen in a gallery once--angry black smears of oil with a current of the deepest blue beneath, streaked across virgin canvas. She understood it then, that untitled rendering. Soft echoes of a reckless merriment splashed up as she flung the crow into the corn field, shivering in the July heat. By morning the dog had feathered the yard with it.

The long-awaited leave of absence had finally arrived, and she had escaped to the natural cruelty of the seasons, to rusty water from the old pump and to wildflowers, leaving the city's stifling concrete, glass, and disillusionment behind. With the lease of the old farmhouse came one permanent amenity, a stubborn, gray-nosed dog who refused to leave his porch, his place, his home--and now hers--provided she filled the cracked crockery bowl with love, and a few bones. Here, surrounded by a waving, deep sea of corn fields, broken only by sunken islands of trees whose roots tapped secret underground springs, she rocked gently through the miles of green, sailing to the woods beyond, sensing a turning-point within. Let it surface. Let it grow. Let it unfold in the rich, black, pudding earth under stars and rain. Let it pull her through the tangled hedge of old-fashioned roses bordering the porch and lift her to the sky. Give her some forever in three short months, before she would clip the pinks from that bunch of thorns and drive back to the city, watching them wither on the way.

At night she worked. Searching. Sketching dresses made from memories. With soft fabrics held to her body, she whirled and danced to test the fluid folds, to watch the lamplight turn their sheerness into the airy floating shadows of memories she longed to capture. Stored, every bit and scrap, every secret, every intrigue. Mold them into

dresses real, something worn against the skin. Childhood memories of...

...the jersey dress, splashed with flowers and perfume, blowing into Lena's body, parting to her thigh as a long leg in spectator pumps swished forward to crunch the sandy, pebbled sidewalk. Ankle poised, swish, another crunch. Lena's hips swaying to bump the child's hand, her hand, that held fast, safely entrusted for that afternoon as they made their way to Ladies' Aid.

Ladies-ade, she'd heard Lena say...not lemonade, but ladiesade. It was nectar they would sip from long stemmed goblets, leaving lipstick kisses on their sparkling rims. Lazy, waxy, forbidden-by-mother red, rolled thickly on with Lena's help. Red for lips that knew their secret rites of tinkling laughter. A child's naughtiest pout thrown at the mirror, followed by a mysterious, knowing smile, practiced to hide childish innocence, and then Lena, crunching the world, her guide, her key to mysteries born into gender, about to be revealed...a magic potion to surge through her veins...never to get fat...never to have moles...

The presidentress of Ladies' Aid, stout in wrinkled linen and exuding a disheveled mustiness, thrust a paper cup at her, and pointed to where she should join the other "kiddies." Lena, elegant Cinderella, humored sister's

whims, but nearly lost her charm before they got safely back to the porch swing.

That crunching, that saunter in slow, hot, purposeful grace she translated. The floral print dress was of that day, and Lena's walk moved from memory to sketch, from fabric to form, in the lamplight shadows of a long line of endless summer creations.

She returned one day after another trip to town, several weeks after the crow incident. The dog crawled sheepishly out from under the porch and began to yap nervously. The kid had returned, this time, bringing company with him. She opened the door to her summer hideaway and found it strewn with garbage from the morning's breakfast. Stepping over broken potted plants, she ran her finger down deep claw marks in the woodwork at doors and windows and guessed from the slashed screen in the washroom that a frantic animal had finally found a way out after a morning of diversion. Coon? Woodchuck? What had he set free to shred her peace? The kid had gone too far. Barnyard flies dive-bombed as she vainly tried to mend the rusted screen with thread too fine, catching her fingers on the sharp, jagged fringe. Laughter, loose and light, welled up from the ever-amused corn field. Damn him, anyway. Why her? Why not the widow down the road who had no one else to

replace the husband she'd killed with nagging? Why not bother Mrs. Hale anymore?

Days later, still simmering over this last episode, she watched the kid's mother carefully re-wipe every egg of the dozen she'd come to buy, offered this first time for free, compliments to the new neighbor, a prospective customer who had only just seen the careful hand-lettered sign near the driveway. The kid's mother invited her into a freshly painted kitchen that smelled like coffee laced with cleaner. Throw rugs rivaled the tablecloth for spotlessness and slid dangerously on an over-waxed floor so that she thought briefly that the kid might break his neck before he had a chance to bother her again. His mother talked continuously, question marks flipping off her rapidly blinking eyelashes. She felt like swatting them, swatting them like the flies in her own kitchen, let in by the kid's most recent prank.

"...of course, there are a few young people your age around yet..." *Your age? YOUR AGE??* The woman wanted information about where she worked, the third degree about how long she planned on staying and even asked her outright what had brought her to the farmhouse. Why was she single? Had she never married... *And what are you doing over there, alone? ALONE. ALONE at YOUR AGE...*

She rowed upstream around the rocks in that current of questions, revealing nothing that might be passed along the party line.

As she was leaving, the smug woman, accustomed to hearing praise for her immaculate flower beds, the oh, so real, plaster deer she'd painted in ceramics, the cute little windmill weather vane her husband had made, followed silently now, down the sidewalk, waiting for compliments that never came.

She was choking on them, instead, for the woman had moved her to rage as great as what she now imagined the kid's might be. Instead of betraying him, she now had a nearly uncontrollable desire to break something, maybe an egg or two, in order to ruffle the woman's feathers.

She saw him, then, leaving the barn as she turned towards her car. With a shock she realized he was far older than she had before imagined. Only one step away from the lanky body and wide-shouldered stride of a loose-limbed man. He stopped when he saw her and stood with amused, steady eyes, watching his previous violations sharpen and converge in her mind. His eyes--those eyes had pierced the flimsy lamplight curtains of her fantasies. They were eyes at night, watching. She saw their silent, and, until now, unsuspected presence at the edge of the field. How dare he hide behind those childish tricks...*Oh! so now you think you've seen something. Think you know me. Trespasser. Hey, kid, you need to learn something, anything more than peeping in windows and forcing doors, and tidy kitchens that shine like army brass and are twice as cold.*

She waved what she hoped was a casual push in the air at him. *See if I care...* and turned to the woman.

"Your son?" she asked, finding what it was she needed to lower the woman a rung.

"Well, yes," the voice said apologetically, clearly, if still doubtfully, excusing the one snag in the fabric of her precise, sterile world, a flaw in the weave.

She paid for the eggs after all, because the woman still clutched them absently, as if there was a charge for ruining her show, and then drove slowly down the dusty gravel road back to the dog.

Tell me, Madame, does he sling his boots upon your polished end tables, stretch out his legs and rest that blonde, snarled hair on your doily-backed chairs? Skin rabbits in your sink, his bloody knife flashing in the corner of your eye? Does he leave brambles and stickers in your rugs and toss his hat wherever he likes? In your house? Has he seen you naked, seen you dance? Do you listen to him in the morning, when his voice is rough and sleepy and sweet? In your house?

If I had a son like that, I'd hold him close. I'd inhale that wildness all my days, nourish that gift with everything in me, wait for his footsteps as an old, old woman.

"Don't worry, Mama. I'll take care of us."

...if I had a son like that.

And so she swerved the ruts in the road, the car fishtailing, thoughts of him flickering inside, understanding a son like that.

Crickets replaced sirens in the late-summer nights she sank down into cool breezes that furled the bedroom curtains. The flowered wallpaper, faded and stained, provided the colors for her dreams. The dog, curled upon the rug beside her bed, twitched his legs as he ran through the night, chasing his own dreams. Her long, delicate strand of summer nights, pearls found in that sea of green, were the only jewelry she wanted to wear.

Moonlight blinked as a sudden shattering force struck the side of the wooden farmhouse with a resounding crack. Stiff-legged and still half asleep, the dog scrambled onto her bed, shaking it with his barking. The kid was back, this time making his presence known in the night. She caught her breath, silenced the dog, and waited.

Wallpaper flowers danced crazily before her eyes as another crack hit the house and echoed out to the woods. The barrage continued, and she pulled the dog towards her, cradling his head in her lap. What was the kid hurling with all his might against her two-by-fours and lath? What unspoken intent was this that sounded through the walls and bounced off floor and ceiling? There was no way to shut it

out. The dog whined and crowded closer. An old, long-forgotten panic spread through her.

The fort in the pines was off-limits to girls, but Joe was offering candy. Let him think it was melted chocolate she wanted in the fort filled with the secrets of boys. Joe, with a strange sneering smile, suddenly unzipped, and his anatomy sprang up like a jack-in-the-box.

She jumped back, startled.

"Wanna do it?" leered the crooked smile, face melting curiously, faster than the chocolate.

"You know..." and with great pleasure, he used a fat, fleshy sounding word she'd heard her brothers whisper, but not at the dinner table.

Raise your eyebrows. Think while you gawk.

"Wanna do it?" The uncoiled, bobbing Jack pointed straight at her.

What was he getting at, looking so spooky...she'd seen her brothers before. He was no different, but somehow much closer. She stalled for time, knowing indignation could hide her ignorance, experienced sister.

"I heard you. I heard you," she said, faking it, pretending to consider alternatives, not knowing what he wanted.

He grabbed for her hair as she threw back her braids. The spell was broken and the pine trees closed in. She

stuck out her tongue in her nastiest way and ran, gave Sheridan's horse a whole box of sugar cubes, sweetly requested a second helping of mashed potatoes at supper, and threw dirty looks to puzzled brothers over dessert, the fallen angel.

In the farmhouse, darkness turned to grey ash and silence. She dashed the third cup of cold coffee into the sink and looked out across the yard. The impact of the dried field corn that the kid had thrown had scattered kernels like shot. Birds found them first that early morning, the morning of the day she awakened to a new voice inside. It spoke of what she was after, no longer a thought without its form. How long the words had been there, she wasn't sure, but when she whispered them shyly to herself, she heard a woman's voice say with deliberation, "I want to have a child."

She spent the day unable to work and later, to the dog's delight, stepped off the porch, over the barbed wire fence and began walking down a row in the corn field. Ribbed cornstalks were edged in brown. Their long, swordlike leaves brushed roughly against her face and caught like fine sandpaper in her hair as she traced the kid's path through the rows of corn to the sinkhole. Looking down from its edge into tops of sunken trees, she measured his island, was amazed at its span. So much greater than the mere clump

of trees she'd sighted from the upstairs window of the farmhouse. The dog ran circles around her like a pup, leaping through brush, his mud-caked nose poking into gopher holes, snorting, and then he was off and running once more.

By the time they headed back the sun had sunk below the yellow tasseled edge of sky. She had walked across his horizon, had sat in his trees and now, felt his cool, yet interested, still-hidden gaze as she chose the gravel, bordered by trees, a shorter route back in the dusk.

She and the dog, then, each day, retraced their walk to the sinkhole, sometimes wandering beyond it. The late August air was invigorating. It smelled of green turning to brown, of sumac and freshly cut hay. The old house would sigh at their return late afternoons, already feeling hollow, and homesick for the friendly guest it knew would be leaving soon. Even the dog stayed close at her heels, nosing her hands for extra love.

But she wasn't thinking of goodbyes just then...not yet. Not during the sleepless nights when she tossed back the sheets and turned restlessly.

There was a chance. The time was right. She pulled in hopes like nets cast in her sea, watching, listening, casting again, over the wind and even further out...waiting, sleepless.

A rough and tumbled child, unclaimed but by her.
Selfish, she was. Had learned how to be. There would be so many worlds that they could find, the two of them, together, side by side.

"Ma and me," he'd proudly say.

Oh, maybe someday...someday they'd find someone to share their fun, but that could take a very long time.

The dog's low growl rumbled at the first loud crack that hit the side of the house. She shivered, and reached over to stroke his back. His ears were raised, but this time, instead of barking, he drew his legs up under his body and listened while the ears of corn were shelled against the house.

"Nets are much kinder, my friend, than traps," she said, "for, once you are caught, I will surely set you free."

She lit a candle from sparks in the cautious, calculating eyes that watched quietly from the edge of the field and placed it on the hallway windowsill. He'd know...he'd know instinctively the direction of this wind and catch the scent of the game she played.

"Let me take more than I give," she whispered, but her only answer was a creaking board.

"I'll steal," she said. "Yours is the wildness that I want."

The candle sputtered and went out. Seconds later, in the moonlight, at the threshold of her bedroom door, a dark form hesitated before moving smoothly towards its bait. She already knew about him, before he discovered she lived just across the corn field in the run-down, weathered farmhouse.

CHAPTER VIII

"LAST DANCE AT THE WHITE GODDESS BURLESQUE"

LAST DANCE AT THE WHITE GODDESS BURLESQUE

...but I must leave behind my little island, my talisman, the magic in a name, and learn to dance alone.

Arianne and I sit in my kitchen. She visits when my husband is out of town.

"Your domestic suicide is depressing, dear," she says. "Look at you."

I've tried. There was no face in the mirror this morning.

Arianne breathes and turns her cup of pennyroyal tea to steam. She once swallowed a mayfly and named a nameless son.

"Look at you," she says, somehow able to discern my image from the stove, the toaster, the onion skins on the floor. Disapproval flashes in her eyes.

"What in the hell did you do to your hair?"

I know we will go to the burlesque tonight. She will insist, for my vital signs are weak. Two of a trinity, courtesans of old, we must dance to renew a momentary lucidness, to speak again the vocabulary of lightness, intertwining mind and body uncontained. We are the planet Venus when it is the morning star, with ears to hear the drum and feet to follow it. *Flirting with you/You come and I'll take you to our road...*

"Where is your puppeteer this trip?" she asks.

Where is he? He's harvesting blue gramma grass seed at a missile range. Fort Bliss, he says we're rich if he pulls off the coup. I can see him belt-deep in a field that is littered with dead missiles, petrified phallic carcasses, mixing work and play, bagging seed while the Feds race down the canyon walls to arrest his ass and his combines, yes, and his concubines, for trespassing. His trial will expose government waste. A noble cause, no doubt, the headlines will read.

Arianne wants no explanations concerning my husband. She moves her words towards our one intent and stretches her leanness in its white silk.

"Let's get out of this prism," she yawns and unravels the scarf from her hair, floats it up her body. She pauses in a faiva of outstretched arms, her bare feet no longer connecting with my kitchen floor.

"We danced the tonga once, remember?" Arianne throws open my closet and flings clothes on the bed.

"Remember?"

Men are coming through the leaves as we sing to keep them coming. *You come and I'll take you to our road/Road of fisherman and place of the prize.* Sirens, we are, waiting in a garden and there is fruit where we are, for the men are

thirsty. Memories of our rhythmical calling flood my limbs, a primal reflex. La ka la ka laka...

Arianne asks, "Where's your red?" Haunted melodies jingle on her arms and ears.

To Newman Springs, long ago or maybe just perpetual dream, she wandered without permission from the house, across corn fields to where their flatness descended into woods and stream. In front of the wind's eye fragile flowers first stripped her of all modesty, crowned her Willow Goddess, goddess of the stream that gurgled from the rocks above her. She danced, then, for them, spirally, a wild figure-eight dance through the trees. Somewhere in the woods, treading silently, swiftly, her prince approached. The frenzied dancing continued and when her nymph's clothing blew into cool water, the trees, the birds, the rocks, all, but one lone fisherman who rubbed his eyes in disbelief, applauded. She lay on the long flat rocks, then, exhausted, absorbing their warmth. Without knowing why, she pressed her bones against their hardness, writhing, trying to draw their heat inside her body.

R. J. Kirby lost his footing on the bank. He threw down his pint and his fishing pole, and, like an unwilling bridegroom, scrambled back to his gas station. He saw her again, one Sunday morning, in the back seat of the car when Father stopped to buy gas before church.

"Peanuts for the Missy?" he invited, thrusting his palm through the open window of the car, offering salted peanuts in order to get a better look at his vision. R. J. kept the nymph his secret until, later, she became the fading vision of a water serpent at A.A.

"Wear this," orders Arianne, holding up my chili red gauze. I slip on the dress of a full moon, am filtered back into the sky, and we're off to the burlesque.

"Marriage is a muse's death," lectures Arianne on the way while I ride in silence feeling like an empty vessel. The old magic makes me giddy. I feel its pull and wonder if I have the strength to keep myself from flying apart.

O! She is a princess made from flowers and lives in the country with Beardmore, her prince, dining on gingerbread men that his little wife bakes. She rides the tractor on his lap, plowing soil, making beds for seeds. With his hand on hers, she turns the handle that grinds the corn for the chickens and throws scraps to the old sow and her litter. At the end of the day, beside him, swinging her legs to snapping gum, the queen of baby chicks rides back to town with Brother in the back seat, fast asleep. Beardmore's calloused hand steals off the steering wheel to stroke her leg. He winks. She smiles bravely. The hand that gently

milked the goats is now where none has been and Brother sleeps until they reach the town-line road.

"Got a nickel for very good girls," says Beardmore, fumbling with his free hand in pockets suspiciously deep. Brother's halfway up the sidewalk to the house.

"And a dime," the hand on her leg moves higher, moves under the elastic of her panties before Brother's even at the kitchen door and still she sits in the front seat of the car, frozen. The little dashboard clock is stuck at eight-fifteen.

"Mama will want to know if you had a good time," says her prince, while Mother walks down the sidewalk. Mother should hurry. She should run.

"Thank 'Uncle' Beardmore," Mother says, finally reaching the car, too late.

The clock's minute hand stays stuck through hours, minutes, seconds of a possible betrayal. Instead, she chose to keep the secret kingdom and accepted the nickel-dime persuasion.

At the burlesque, Arianne and I open what was shut by shutting what was open. Madame Cerri runs a very tight show.

"My dears!" There is gratitude and grace in her acknowledgement of old employees. Her ample, voluptuous

body, spilling out of black satin, floats before us. A slaked smile cracks her chalked, white face.

Arianne slips her bra through the sleeve of her dress and surveys the matriarchal den. "We're home, mother," says the blonde-haired sphinx.

"Come, come, chick-a-dees. Meet Joe, my new manager..." Cerri weaves through lame fisher kings to the back of the bar where a muscular, tanned boy casts a hawk-like shadow in the black light. We follow, amazed that the place is actually crowded, amazed that Cerri has let Sweet Daddy go.

"Cerri, at least, knows enough to cage a bird who can manage to exorcise this mob, nightly," Arianne pointedly remarks, nodding towards Joe.

Joe pours them doubles for good measure, then massages Cerri's shoulders, and drops a kiss in her ear.

After school, she chose the dreaded, but lovely Pig Alley, Central Park for her town of three-thousand. Chose it over the sidewalk that ran past Bartoff's beer can fence, and still the neighborhood bully knew her mind. He'd wait in ambush down the lane, would catch her and keep her until she sang the song he wanted sung, or saw the part of him he wanted seen and touched. When Pig Alley's creek flooded in Spring, he pushed her up to Bartoff's fence and into the spider's web.

"You ain't gettin' by 'til you knock on her door," he said, hoping to catch a glimpse of old lady Bartoff.

"Tea?" the hag inquired, bowing, holding the door open, inviting her inside, one added glance shrinking into a speck the bully who waited outside behind a tree. In the shadows, smoking by the stove, an old man lurked, mumbling drunken incoherences.

"Learn to dance for your master," the old hag crackled hoarsely, casting white, red, and blue-black polished stones in patterns on the table, picking them up and throwing them down again.

"He will be yours," she prophesied, and gave her all the trees in Pig Alley, all the secret altars there, for three of her whistles into the wind.

"Dance."

The wheel of music turns on our ancient charms. Arianne is pursuer, the movements are pursued. The movements are pursuer, Arianne is pursued. She dances not the dance of nine who nightly tread and drag. No imitation motion, here.

Oh rites, invest again in me the transformation. I must lose the self I cannot define. Conceal and reveal, step once more into Cerri's heaven where white-gowned chameleons stay ephemeral. Stay Beardmore, stay R. J. and

Bartoff, king of beer can fences. That grail you're hanging onto is ours.

But the cure won't come.

Sweet Daddy's been demoted to a table in the corner. I sink into a chair beside him. He's older, more frail-looking now than when he stood behind the bar. He's taken off the bow tie, the cuff links, and the lazy smile.

"Yeah...the bitch. After fifteen years. Just like that, she says I'm through."

"Oh, hell, Sweet Daddy." I sympathize.

"Look at him. Damn corn king. Better get his ass back to Iowa...Idaho...wherever, if he knows what's good for 'im." Sweet Daddy stirs his wormwood cocktails one by one, watches Arianne invert, unfix, transfigure into one gorgeous apparition after another, making rain tonight.

She is a moonflower, thrives at night. He climbs her vines, groping, searching. Uncertain, he feels his way to the fragrance he tears open. The horizontal deed is done. Plumb, again, he walks her home toward Father's light.

An owl in Hattie's pine trees moans. Dream Hattie and Clara, sisters chaste. Your diaries will be auctioned...

May 1st, '66.

Clara washed the curtains upstairs.

Ironed shirts for Dottie Smith.

Peas are up. Beans are in..

Pop them in your mouths, dear ladies. Protection from the magic in your trees, from the sliver in the sky who in her panic twirled the clouds above your head. Pop them in your dark, sweet mouths. Don't loose them on your pillows, sisters, tonight.

Arianne takes the Leucadian Leap. The swan has found herself a writer with economy of words, who lives the difference between thought and ink, who knows from where his magic comes. So divine, his ascetic brace, so charming his ennui, wearing a collar to get in the door. She'll let him capture her vermillion, every quirk of catharsis noted, until, her prisoner, his words alone are free at last.

The dead, dull thuds of 'last call' land, delivered by mute messengers. Corn king dives, swooping low. Last call. Cerri kisses those who fade out, fade up the tangled streets where all too soon green marrow ossifies. It is fate for now. Ta, ta, sweet trees. The spinning mandala slows and dims, streams into threads of moonlight as Joe whispers Cerri's shibboleth.

Sweet Daddy wants yellow over easy, fried on the side, but orders it up hard-boiled. Picks at runny conversation and butters his coffee, drinks the jam, sugars a napkin while he pulls himself together. Going to get in touch again with a female box number in California. Pulls out a

wrinkled re-pro of the photo he's sent to entice her--Sweet Daddy, in a striped T, a younger Dad, sans glasses, eyes panned in true, wearing a hat and a look that kills via zip code. He'll fly out to Frisco if she takes the bait.

I won't walk him back to his room. Help him open the door or with his shoes. Seduce his toupee off and through his delirium become the only game that turns him on, the hallucinations that get him off. Me, Daddy. Him, Cerri.

"Missy, say it. Zay it for me, Mizz...Pleeeez, for Beaver. 'I wanna eat your puzzee.' Zay it..." His voice a low, guttural whine fire engines can't put out, his toupee clutched to his groin with both hands.

But there are no refills in this cafe *blanc*.

He's got to live it again. Disembodiment and dancing for a god. Cerri-Grace and Sweet Daddy. Doin' the Tango Wango, "wango/bango," back in the days of Sweet Daddy's best dreams.

"And corn king, then still in diapers, exploiting his Nursey."

Now, Cerri's dismissed Sweet Daddy. Dismissed the old affair as "merely theater."

"Fuck," sighs Sweet Daddy and leaves no tip.

When day and night meet, mist surrounds the car wash. *Bricoleur* of my knick-knacked soul, guardian of my monologue, he waves his lance at the blue gramma dust of

dreams. Water, blessed water, wash him of a border town bedroom. More silver coins slipped into the slot. Seen and unseen swirl through the drain and on to the Gulf. *Mama Sirena*, no doubt, will bathe in his foam next summer and taste again his salt when her lips touch the sand.

I walk his morning street-light rainbow like the ghost of her perfume which still clings to his clothes. He steadies the mist, peers through it as his familiar icon appears.

"Christ," he rumbles, replacing my stolen myth with his profanity. "Look at you," his thunder laughs, focusing only on my remaining scraps of meaning.

"I've tried. I could not find my face in..."

"Out walking the valleys?"

I is my Other...

I shall always want...

His desire of my desire...yea, though I walk through the streets of my mind...

Pale priests mysteriously twist. They turn, bobbing and bowing. Uncover wine for blood, saltines for flesh and no one slept with the son of god. Men's seawater life has swilled my shores. Their words, too, I have tried to believe. Knick, knack, tick, tack, toe. He loves my feet. His face is wet with spray. He feels like my son, my lover, my host. I look at his hands, watch only his hands as he

drives me home, filling out his shape of me. I glimpse
stigmata as he lights a smoke.

CHAPTER IX
"CHAMOIS AFTERNOON"

CHAMOIS AFTERNOON

She had promised him, once, when they were first married and talked of such things, that, if he died before she did, she'd take his ashes to the mountains. The promise had been on her mind for five months, and his urn had remained at the funeral home until the day before her departure. She went by the post office box first that morning, and picked up the mail. Then, feeling guilty because she knew she'd used the errand as one more form of procrastination, she decided to wait to sort out the ever-dwindling flow of business envelopes addressed to him from the household bills addressed to her, to separate the junk mail from the personal letters. She threw the whole stack into the car.

She'd been wondering if the funeral home would charge her extra for his lengthy stay there. By phone, weeks ago, the director had assured her that it was not unusual for people to wait as long as six months before taking their family members home. Feeling somewhat relieved by her apparent normality, she hadn't wanted, then, to bring up the monetary aspect of what seemed almost like the extension of an arrangement made for his vacation at a posh hotel where it was considered bourgeois to inquire about rates. She knew he'd want his privacy, and that he'd not socialize with the rest of the guests in the dining room, but would ring up

room-service each morning, requesting croissants and coffee, and the sports page.

But the funeral director mentioned no additional charges when, at last, she stood before his desk. Instead, he politely requested that she sign a card that looked much like a check-out notice. He, then, offered her a chair, which she declined, and disappeared down a long, dark hall. In the few minutes his absence allowed, and because she loved the smell of burning candles, she glanced hastily into a softly lit room adjacent to the reception area. She stepped into it, then, only for a moment, for it seemed to welcome visitors.

When the director returned, he seemed oddly out of breath and, in his arms, he carried a shockingly plain, brown, cardboard box, taller than it was wide. When she finally realized that the box was what she had come to pick up, she decided immediately that she would pay no extra fees, even if she was billed for them later, for the director had not even taken the urn out of its shipping container. It had not sat on a velvet-covered stand surrounded by flowers and candles like the one she'd just seen in the softly lit room. She felt both she and her husband had been slighted somehow, even though she could still vaguely recall bits and pieces of his memorial service at a church he had never attended.

The funeral director accompanied her to her car, still carrying the box. While she searched madly in her purse for her car keys, he walked to the rear of the car and waited, blinking his eyes in the bright morning sunlight.

"Put him in the front seat, please," she said, stepping around him in order to unlock the passenger side of the car. The sleepy funeral director woke up. He immediately sensed his breach of professional conduct and with polite, but rather meticulous over-indulgence, complied with her wishes by carefully cradling the box on his knee with one arm while he reached into the car with the other arm to gather up the envelopes and flyers that she had forgotten were still on the front seat.

"There he is," he said with a flourish, taking the opportunity to correct vocally his mistake, not realizing that, while he spoke, he was also handing her back a fistful of her mail. The unintended pun she let slide, and reached quickly for the mail, covering the return address of a familiar brown letter on the top of the pile with her thumb. Months ago she had learned, to her amazement, that *The Garden of Delights, Inc.*, which was addressed to her husband and not to her, did not offer bargains on rare and exotic herbs. Nor did the company sell flower seeds. Instead, it advertised monthly, and with minutely detailed illustrations, some of the most bizarre erotica that she had ever seen.

The funeral director was closing the car door, much like he might have closed a casket, she supposed, and she wondered if he had noticed the return address on the brown envelope and if he, too, since he ran such a grave business, compensated for it by leafing through the pages of *The Garden of Delights, Inc.* in the evening after trying days spent comforting grieving widows.

The box, then, sat next to the mail. She wiped the sweat from her forehead and fastened her seat belt. Seconds later, she found herself reaching over and securing the seat belt on the passenger's side also. On the side of the box, she noticed red arrows that pointed to its top. A big sticker, there, read "This Side Up." Curious, she thought, that particular bit of instruction, but then realized it was intended for the urn, and not the man inside it, for she was sure that the bones of his hands and the bones of his feet had all been sifted together so that she would never again be able to trace his body with her fingers or feel the strength of his limbs.

She suddenly realized how selfishly thoughtless she had been. While she'd fretted about where to put the urn, she had, for months, kept him more confined than ever he'd been before.

"God, Babe, I'm sorry...I..." The apology trailed off and was never finished. All she'd done, especially lately, was make mental apologies to him for one thing or another.

Surely, he was sick of hearing them. She tried to change the subject, but before she'd thought of anything else to talk about, she sensed that the box seemed to be sending out vibrations. It seemed, somehow, that he was responding to her. Indeed, he was, she decided. He was trying to make the whole ordeal easier for her. He was sitting beside her and, miraculously, he'd forgiven her for keeping him waiting. With this realization, she backed out of the parking space.

"I could have, at least, washed the car, and put on something sexy," she said to herself, ashamed at her lack of ceremony. She should have tied ribbons on the aerial of the car and brought with her his favorite music, bought wine and picked flowers from her garden. She, then, fully forgave the funeral director for his blunder. She truly hadn't felt like she would actually be picking *HIM* up, the man who could still, when he felt like it, work his same chemical magic on every gland in her body. Now, conscious of the stubble on her legs, she tugged at the hem of her skirt and put on lipstick. Wanting to further improve the effect, she dug through her purse in search of her sunglasses until she remembered that she'd misplaced them somewhere a day or two ago.

As the reservation date for the cabin in the pines had neared, though, she'd found herself practicing her approach to him, making a special point of taking the street that ran

by the funeral home on the way back from the post office, but she'd never been able to actually stop there to visit him. This day, however, she'd managed to stand before the door of the funeral home, and then, to actually walk inside it, and now, to proudly leave with him.

Forgetting that there was other traffic on the street, pulling out of the drive, she narrowly missed crashing into an oncoming delivery truck filled with starched, white shirts, the kind he'd always hated. Its driver, a boy not too much older than her own son, slammed on the brakes and laid on the horn.

"God," she said absently, "I'd better calm down..."

What in the world would the police have written in their accident report?

"You were the sole passenger in your vehicle?" the policeman would have asked.

She was not really sure she'd have known how to answer his question, nor would she have known what to report to her insurance company. Would her insurance have covered both of them? she wondered.

At the stoplight, in her rear view mirror, she saw the boy who drove the laundry truck lift his hand from the wheel and, with his finger, shoot her the only effective comment he thought women drivers deserved. The box shifted slightly on the seat beside her. She felt like he might be telling her, as usual, to keep her mind on her driving, and to be

sure to signal, because he wanted her to move into the other lane, where, ordinarily, at the first opportunity, he would have leaped out of the car and put his fist into the kid's face, an action that had made her cringe on other similar occasions. Sensing the frustration of his new helplessness, however, she compromised with him, deciding that it was only right that she should make a statement for both of them, now.

At the second stoplight, when the kid pulled up beside her in the truck, she made sure she caught his eye by laying on her own horn before draping arms out of the car window, holding them open in mock-surrender. Then, in a more forthright manner, she bent her elbows and returned the kid's remark, brazenly, with both hands.

"God bless, Babe," were the first words she thought she heard him say out loud, and she thought she also felt his hand move up her leg, a stroke from him that most times demonstrated his satisfaction or approval.

Once home, she turned off the car, and sat in the driveway, unable to decide which room in the house he might prefer. She needed badly to hear his voice again, for the situation represented in a nutshell the exact problem she'd wrestled with for five months. She needed his help, but he chose to wait silently, offering no suggestions at all. Maybe he was testing her. He'd always tried to teach her to always weigh things carefully, not to let her impulsive

nature rule. She'd often grown impatient with him, only to find out later that his very careful considerations usually paid off. A flood of guilt raced through her mind. Since he'd been gone, she had impulsively said and done many things that he would have thought were much too rash.

"But I try to think like you do," she said sincerely. "I'm a bit rusty at it, is all."

When it came to picking him up at the funeral home, though, but for the fact that her deliberation had perhaps kept him stranded there longer than he'd wanted to stay, he'd have been proud of her careful thinking. She'd done nothing but weigh and consider options. She had had much to untangle before she could spin, an overwhelming process--the untangling--that, most of the time, had left her and, she now realized, left him, too, completely in limbo.

"Frankly, Babe," she admitted, "I didn't know how to live with an urn."

She looked across the seat at the box. It was still sending out warm, comforting, vibrations.

Not wanting to spoil his mood, she thought it might be better if she told him first, while they sat in the driveway, that she'd completely re-arranged the house in his absence.

"I *had* to change things," she explained to him, "just as you did. Nothing is the way it was...nothing."

She had traded bedrooms with her son, taking the smaller one, she told the boy, so that he would have more room when his friends came over. She'd tried to paint the little room's soiled, old wall paper, but when it had uncooperatively sagged in big bubbles, she'd ripped it off the walls, muslin backing and all, exposing the bare wood and nails of the original frame of the house. The bedroom now had the look of a rustic cabin, something he would have appreciated. But, early on, while moving her furniture into the room, she'd discarded the idea of putting the urn next to her vanity. It was her room only, now, one he'd never been in. She needed that in order to sleep.

She'd also considered putting the urn in the living room, where he'd spent so much of his time while at home. She'd pared it down, somewhat, by getting rid of most of the clutter. She'd packed away in boxes many of the faded, dusty, reminders of their years together. She'd even, finally, canceled the newspaper subscription when stacks of them had accumulated, all still bound by their heavy rubber bands. So much had happened in her own world that she hadn't been able to handle the globe.

He might like the living room's new starkness, yes, once he got used to it, though with one reservation. She should have gotten rid of the dining table, the one that his mother had given them years ago, the one he'd said looked "too yuppie." In the past, he'd convinced her to hide its

glass top and chrome legs under huge, colorful throws from Mexico, and to place its chairs in various innocuous spots all through the house. Now, with its freshly polished chrome legs, it stood out in one corner of the room. Its glass top, clear and smooth, boasted only a huge vase of flowers, and it was circled by the four grateful chairs.

When she'd imagined guests over for dinner, they always dined in candlelight at this table. They'd be laughing with her, and complimenting her on the delicious food, totally unaware of his disapproval, unaware that he sat silently on...on what...what could she ever set him on in the living room? A pedestal? No. They'd kicked those out from under each other years ago. And she wasn't into shrines, or hanging his picture above the urn like some "before and after" vignette.

In the kitchen she'd made new curtains, red printed ones that she was certain he'd like, and she still kept the table by the windows where they'd spent mornings drinking coffee together. She might put him here, in the kitchen, she'd thought while she threaded rods through new curtain rings. In fact, she'd almost decided to do so until she remembered how he'd lectured her time and time again about the gummy film that accumulated under the stove vent and on the collection of blue speckled enamelware that sat on shelves too high for her to reach easily.

"Just because you aren't tall enough to see the grime, doesn't mean it's not there," he'd scolded, reaching up and wiping his hand across the sticky top of the refrigerator.

"What did you *think* my father meant when he told you I was shanty Irish?" she'd joked. But he had never laughed at her only defense. She was not a good housekeeper, had never cared to be, really, and this trait, in the end, became one of many points of contention. No, the urn did not belong here either. He was sure to find himself inevitably covered with the same greasy dust, if he stayed long in the kitchen.

She'd also gathered up every book in the house and changed the formality of the front room into the coziness of a study where she could read in peace. Here she'd made fleeting attempts to escape into other people's thoughts, and, still, she found herself listening through silence for the touchdowns and home runs that used to blare from the television in the living room. Unless she turned it on again, he'd have found it much too quiet in her study, for he'd read only in fits and bursts, never starting a book at its beginning, and always changing television channels on the remote control as he flipped through pages. With the television on again, she was certain to voice, once more, one of her perpetual complaints.

"We never sit around the kitchen table and eat supper like a family anymore."

Eventually, they would have ended up fighting again. She envisioned nights spent apart, she, reading in the study, and the urn, sitting in front of the television. At three in the morning, when the networks had turned to snow, she'd wake up, and have to turn it off herself. Then she'd have to try to wake him up, so his neck wouldn't be stiff in the morning, and help him off to...god...surely he wouldn't want to fall back into that old routine again.

"See," she'd said to herself, then, when she couldn't think of a single place to put the urn, "death solves nothing."

And so it went. Weeks passed by, then months. When no logical solutions had presented themselves to her, the urn had remained at the funeral home.

Today, there was still the problem of where in the house he wanted to be. She wished that somehow he would just be, and not have to have a physical location. She also felt like she might insult him some way or violate him somehow, in being presumptuous enough to lift him up and carry him inside. He'd always thought of himself as a maverick, as a very independent man. But there was no other alternative. They couldn't sit in the driveway forever. She pulled the keys out of the ignition of the car and put them in her purse, hoping he had noticed that she'd broken in the past five months at least one of her lackadaisical

habits. She opened the car door at last, lips compressed with determination.

The box was heavier than it had looked when the funeral director carried it to the car and she got as far as the living room before tiring, and then, without thinking, set it on the glass table. Realizing what she had done, she quickly excused herself and went into the bathroom. She stayed there a long time, catching her breath. She was hiding from him, she realized, as if he were very displeased with her, or perhaps with the new arrangement of the house. The familiar feeling was oddly comforting and she ran the faucet in the sink in order to sound busy while she examined her face in the mirror. A pair of eyes looked earnestly back at her. Their blue was touched with just a tinge of fear. She dried her hands and went back to the box, picked it up and moved it to the kitchen table. She poured herself some coffee, and added a hefty dose of brandy to it. She sat down in front of the box. They needed to talk.

Styrofoam pellets covered the table. Plastic bubble wrap unrolled from around the urn. It was larger, yes, and uglier than she had anticipated. It had the same frosty cold, steel-grey color as the huge, imposing shapes she'd seen in the hospital's emergency room. Its odd, dome-like, oval shape reminded her of a Russian doll she'd seen once, a doll that one untwisted at its middle and opened to reveal

yet another doll. This doll, too, untwisted, and, inside it, there was another doll, opening into another and another, each gradually smaller until one came to the last tiny doll and found nothing inside. Maybe the urn was like this. In what doll was she going to find him? Or was she going to find him at all? Once more, she imagined his close containment, and ached that she had waited so long to set him free. But he was with her, now, and he needed fresh air. She must help him breathe.

"Please breathe, please breathe, please..." she whispered, this time, knowing there must be something she could do about his situation.

But it was futile to work at turning the stubborn screws she'd found at the urn's base. They wouldn't budge. Afraid that she'd strip them, she called the funeral director, who offered gallantly to drive over to her house right away.

He arrived, and while walking through the study to the kitchen, she heard him sniff slightly at the wild floral slipcover on the daybed in the study. He also sniffed at the shelves of books that lined the walls of the room.

"Have you read all these?" he inquired, pointing at the shelves with a small leather case that he held in his hand.

"I collect books, classics mostly," she replied, and added, "I teach English at the University."

He took a moment to revise his appraisal of her, eyes blinking rapidly now, but he seemed satisfied with the explanation.

"Where is *he*?" he asked, making sure he stressed the last word of his question.

She showed him to the kitchen.

"You know it's against the law to scatter ashes...except in designated places, of course," he cautioned her gently, taking a small tool from the black leather case. "Oh, not that people don't do it, you understand," he added, "but you must be very discreet...very discreet, indeed..."

He lifted a plate off the base of the urn and carefully set it on the table. Then, as if by some programmed reflex, he absentmindedly poked at the ashes on top.

"DON'T!" she screeched sharply, and grabbed his arm.

The startled funeral director jumped back a bit, and nearly lost his hold on the urn. Her heart raced. Her knees gave out. She grabbed the edge of the table and sank into a chair. The incredible thought of her having to sweep him off the floor felt murderously savage. She swallowed a gulp of her coffee wildly. She'd have had to burn down the house instead.

The funeral director turned down the shot of brandy that she'd offered him and quickly re-sealed the urn.

"But it will open easily now," he said, and showed her that the tip of the tool he'd used was, in fact, a standard hardware variety. He then backed out of the kitchen. Very discreetly she showed him to the door. Very, very discreetly he said goodbye.

He waited patiently in the car while she considered buckskin, but, in the end, she chose chamois--ten pieces of the softest, yellow-blond deer skin that she could find. She bought fringe, and feathers and long cords for ties. Beads, she had. They'd decided that she must get him out of the urn and into something more his style. To do this, she would make him the finest chamois shirt he had ever worn.

Steady and sure with scissors and needles, the hands that had held his bleeding head were no longer aching and stiff with sympathetic pains, but relaxed and fluid as they molded the smoothness of the leather into the form he'd requested.

He wanted a shirt, yes, but it must be of a type that the five of them--her son, his two daughters, she and the dog--could wrap around their bodies. He wanted white feathers paired with dark, striped ones. He wanted only the turquoise beads, as many as she had, and ran his fingers lovingly through the thick fringe that hung long and fine. He specified that the raw edges of the chamois be left untrimmed, so that they might fall into natural scallops.

He critiqued her work, drank coffee and smoked cigarettes, every once in a while offering suggestions, voicing wishes, as the morning approached noon. It was vital, they felt, for him to be properly dressed in the skins by the time her son returned from school.

When the sewing was completed, she opened the urn again, this time by herself, out on the patio, and for the first time, gingerly, she touched his white bones. They looked and felt like tiny, hard white cinders tinged with orange. He smiled.

"Big bones, Doll," was all he said.

But he was right. They were big bones and they would easily fill the chamois satchels.

Very cautiously and carefully she filled her hand with him. He trembled. She lifted her cupped palm to her face and inhaled. He smelled primordial, like volcanoes, like molten rocks, like something erupting to the surface of her consciousness and exploding into warmth. Months of inactivity had rested him.

"God, you feel like paradise, Babe," he sighed, then laughingly whispered in her ear, "but I'll melt in your mouth, not in your hand."

"Could I," she wondered, then thought again. "No..."

"Ask me," he said, smiling, daring her to voice her desire.

"Could I, do you suppose..."

"Taste me?" he finished.

Yes, taste him. She wanted to know what he tasted like now. She looked out across the backyard. It suddenly seemed more green, more lush than it ever had been before. Even the old pomegranate tree, which she'd succeeded in saving, boasted new branches. They held one sole, red, leathery fruit which ripened in the sun.

Something about the atmosphere, the privacy of the yard, the whole scene reminded her of the class she'd been teaching on Milton. Better women have succumbed to worse crimes, she rationalized when she could recall no one ever telling her that they had tasted their dead husband's bones. Was there some taboo present which forbade their act, one of which she was unaware? But the urge was irresistible.

"After all, Doll," he added encouragement softly in her ear, "they're *my* bones. I should be the one to say. Go ahead. Try a pinch."

The sun was directly overhead when she lifted him to her tongue and tasted salt. Her lips held him. Slowly he entered her mouth...

Soon the sun would move behind the outermost branches of the elm. Painfully aware of his nakedness, and of the fact that her son would soon be home, she worked swiftly, now, yet carefully, helping him into the shirt, filling the satchels one by one. The shirt fit perfectly. It hung

loosely from his shoulders but he tested its suppleness, anyway, by extending his arms far out in front of his body, and crossing them to make sure the shirt wasn't cut too narrowly across his shoulder blades--something she'd seen him do, always, when trying on a new shirt.

He went to the hall, then, to check his reflection in the mirror while she slipped the empty urn back into the cardboard box and slid it under the patio table. She'd deal with it later. Satisfied with her handiwork, he joined her again in the back yard where he soaked up the last of what sun had not moved behind the leaves of the trees.

There was music, or maybe it was bird song. They sat in silence and listened, sorting out the calls. The white, fine, dust-like powder of him had settled on her arms. It had drifted into her hair, and onto her face as if he'd covered her with kisses. His residue enveloped her and she draped her legs over his.

She offered him a beer and apologized for not having any wine on hand.

"I don't buy it anymore because you're..." She stopped.

"Dead?" he filled in, lighting a cigarette.

"Did it hurt?" she asked timidly, her voice nearly a whisper.

"Did what hurt?" he replied, puzzled, as if he had no memory of what had happened. There was no flashing of those

eyes so dark. Missing in his voice was the tone that usually warned her she was again scaling with precarious footing the precipice of the abyss that had yawned wider and wider between them as the years passed.

"When you were putting on the skins, did it hurt?" she said, crawling onto safer ground anyway, for the afternoon was almost over. But she was filled with questions, just as he had always been, especially during their first years. She'd found his persistence exasperating, but he'd kept on, relentlessly probing. He'd wanted to name everything about her, categorize and classify every inch of her, what she'd been and done and was. She felt like it was her turn now to ask questions but she could not break the spell of an afternoon spent so magically. She knew, also, that he'd have no answers for what she'd ask him, or if he had, that he'd keep them to himself, as always.

All she managed was, "Your daughters are flying to El Paso. They will meet us at the cabin."

He looked so peaceful. The feathers on his shirt stirred softly in the breeze.

"Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow."

Cotton wisps in the sky had crystallized into mythical white animal forms that pranced through peaks of clouds on the horizon. She didn't want to think about the mountains, or the next day. She knew the five of them would wrap his

cords around their waists, tying him to them, hugging him close to their bodies as they climbed. That they'd carry all the dried roses and any wild flowers or special stones that they found on the way up the trail. She knew that, somewhere on the west side of the crest that they climbed, they'd sight a clump of oaks, old and tall, whose leaves were turning salmon-red and beckoning through the pines in shafts of brilliant color. They'd leave the trail, then, and scale the slope. They'd lay him there, at the base where those oaks spread out and strew him with flowers. They'd join hands around him. Later, they'd break their circle, opening it toward the setting sun.

Hesitantly at first, they'd throw his first bones to the wind. They'd hear the shower hit the oak leaves, tat-tat-tat, and he would rain down into the land of ever-summer. She'd taste him again, and know they did, too, as they brushed his drifted powder from the lashes of their shiny, wet eyes. The dust-covered dog would leap around them, dancing, barking joyfully as they flung their arms to the sky, tossing him higher and higher into the blue.

She looked across the table at him. He was so beautiful clad in chamois. She felt that she could live this way with him, forever. He felt so easy, so free. She could take a part of him whenever, wherever she went and, yet, at the same time, he could stay home and unwind. When he was happy, she could have him in every room,

simultaneously, and when he was angry, she could consolidate him somewhere where she knew she'd not tread on the ragged edges of his moods. She could let him sleep late in the morning while she had coffee with him at the table in the kitchen. She could leave him watching television late into the night, but take him to bed with her, too. She could rub her body up against his big bones...

The patio door slammed.

"Hiiiiiii, I'm hoooooome," her son sang, coming out to the patio and throwing his bag of books into a lounge chair.

"What'cha got here?" he asked, walking over to the chamois satchels that were centered on the weathered spool-top table. Each feathered, fringed and beaded tip of them radiated out like points on a compass from a center of tangled buckskin cords. He stroked the smoothness of the leather and started to lift one of the satchels.

"It's Pop," she said quietly, and waited for his response.

"Wow, Mom..." was his reply after a very long time.

"See, Jess," she said quickly, wrapping cords around her waist, pulling a satchel close to her breasts and binding it tightly to her body. She walked around the table. She covered the length of the yard and walked back to him with her longest strides. She jumped up. She

stooped down and touched the ground. She held out her arms and spun around, and the satchel never shifted.

"The urn was impossible, too heavy to carry," she said breathlessly.

"Yeah!" he said, absorbing her enthusiasm, also tying cords around his waist, securing his satchel so that it hung like two small saddle bags from his hip. He galloped across the yard.

"See!" she exclaimed as he spiraled into the air with a one handed dunk into an imaginary hoop. "We can move in these. We can really move!"