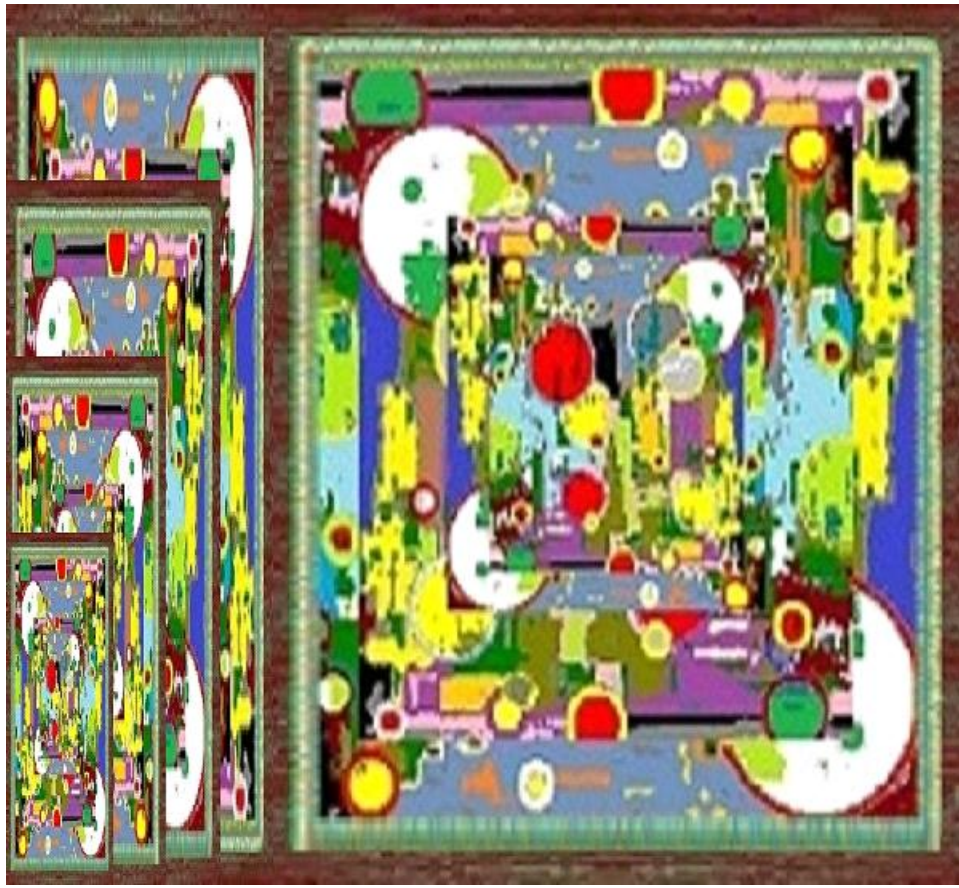


Mountain High Snippets

Introduction

Mountain High Snippets are meant in creative design presentation to reflectively represent the odd fragmentation of our consciousness and life experience at the turn of the 21st century. *Some content explicitly is rated "R," meaning "for mature ingestion".... jH, June 2013*



Author's Note -- Amongst the many classic male authors I most reflectively admire are Proust, Steinbeck, Ferlinghetti, Lawrence Durrell, Gide, cummings, Joyce Cary, D.H. Lawrence, Frost, James Joyce, Camus, and Kurt Vonnegut; a few classic female favorites are Bronte, Nin, Joyce Carol Oates, Browning, Dinesen, Laura Lee Hope, Jong, Dickinson, Alice Walker, Violet Nicholson, Millay, and Sappho.

Chapters

1. "Bay Bedazzle, North Carolina"
2. "Blink City, New Jersey"
3. "Boomerang, Alabama"
4. "Cherish Rise, Vermont"
5. "Esther Landry Grove, Pennsylvania"
6. "Foundry Bogs, Mississippi"
7. "Houdini Falls, New York"
8. "Hullabaloo, Tennessee"
9. "Itty Bit, New York"
10. "Jalopy Junction, Maine"
11. "Juggernaut, West Virginia"
12. "Kaflooy Kate, Maryland"
13. "Isle Dolorosa Lovage, Maryland"
14. "Lolla Pa Looza, Alabama"
15. "Lunatic Lunge Overpass, Kentucky"
16. "Mordica Mine, Ohio"
17. "Scrounge Acre, New Jersey"
18. "Tumbleton Quarry, Virginia"

19. "West Silly Skunk, Georgia"
 20. "Vida Quandry, Georgia"
 21. "Viva Nonpareil, Massachusetts"
 22. "Zilch Montenegro, Connecticut"
 23. "Wobbly Flat, South Carolina"
 24. "Yodelberg Yell Northwest, Ohio"
 25. "Sprach Cave, Zara's Spit, Maine" [*digitized cave paintings*]
- Index Postscript: "Malar Key Pratell, West Virginia"*
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1. "Bay Bedazzle, North Carolina"

"Where did Pauly go?" Nadine opened her eyes slowly and pulled up to a sitting stance on the oversized towel.

"She's swingin on that tire Greg strung up down by the water's edge," Carla assured her.

"By herself?" Aunt Nadine felt her stomach knot a notch.

"Bobby took her down there. So, no. I don't think so."

Dina pulled herself together and upright. Babysitting was not her favorite gig, she reflected again, but she knew little sis Tania needed freetime desperately before she started conversing in unknown tongues with the lawn mower again.

Carey loped alongside Nadine on the dirt track through their expanding meadowland backyard.

"One more killer storm," she commented, shading her eyes and looking southeast, "We'll likely lose those few trees left and have a clear view to

Bobby's digs. And his sunbathing," she added wide-eyed, lifting her eyebrows high.

"Been there, done that. Lost the tee." Dina commented flatly.

"Recommendations?"

"Ya gotta roll with it, doll-baby."

"Uh-huh." Carla couldn't determine what that meant on an action front.

The object of Dina's apparent disaffection came into view over the grassy rise along the sand-ringed lake. Pauline stumbled quickly behind Robert as they stepped into the dirt path and closer toward their hostesses.

"Hey, Pauly," Nadine called out. "Didja have a good time?"

"Yes, ma'am." the towheaded toddler answered loudly.

"What's my name?" Nadine demanded as the girl reached her knee.

"Dina."

"Dina what?"

"Dina dina-dina. Dina-dina-dina,"she answered, with her little head to one side, in a singsong tone.

Nadine glared at her. "Dina Layton. What town is this?"

"D-dazzle," Pauly stumbled.

"Bedazzle. Be. Dazzle."

"Be. Be. Dina-dina,"she stamped her feet.

Nadine laughed.

"Okay. What state is this?"

"Care-lina. Dina-dina."

North or South?"

“Layton.” Pauly spread her legs to a cowgirl stance.

Dina reached down to tickle her underarms and scooped the child onto and against her generously middle-aged stomach. Pauline shifted her weight and slid down toward Dina’s shoes.

Undeterred, Nadine repeated, “North or south?”

“North.... Care-lina.”

“Town?”

“D-dazzle.”

“Be. Dazzle,” Dina smiled and stooped to hug her. “Be. Dazzle.”

“Ugh!” she exclaimed. “You’re all gritty with sand. C’mon, let’s get a bath. Dry clothes on. Your mom and dad will be here real soon.”

“Be. Dazzle,” Pauly offered as her wet clothes fell to the floor and Dina lifted the girl into warm sudsy water.

“Let’s turn off there,” Jodie suggested pointing her hand out the window toward a one-lane paved road swerving from the Parkway toward the base of the thickly-forested mountain.

Val checked the gauges and, finding the tank nearly full of gas, hit the signal switch and turned the wheel of the Honda with a lurch of surprise in that direction.

They’d enjoyed together the thrills and excitements of unknown trails, whether by driving or hiking, since meeting as teens at Saint Joan’s Prep for Girls.

Having reconnected through cyber-sleuthing last year, they’d caught up fairly well on sometimes intense and slightly disorienting, personal post-graduation histories. Jodie’s bounteously-sized family had all moved scattered points North of their shared starting spot. Val’s siblings had more or less stayed put,

as had she, sliding from local community college studies into the town's one university to major in Sports Administration and worked now as a coach and guidance counselor with detailed and woe-full tales of high school interactional employment travails. Jodie had college-hopped to an advanced degree in Molecular Biology and found outstanding R&D employment with a foreign OTC natural manufacturer USA-headquartered in Raleigh.

"Do you keep in touch with Isaac?" Jodie wondered about Val's last husband.

"Have to because of Petie."

"Who's Petie?"

"The English Sheepdog we raised. We have joint custody."

"Okay. Does Isaac live close by?"

"Pretty close. Next city east. We have park lunches together, the three of us, about once a month."

"That's cute. Endearing, these days."

"Yeah, we have fun. It helps to be out in the fresh air with others around."

"Keeps you from haggling." Jodie surmised.

"Pretty much. Keeps the volume down," Val agreed.

"There's a cute little store," Jodie indicated a small peeling clapboard to their left and pulled up to its wood-floored and railed porch. "I'm thirsty. Aren't you?"

In agreement, Val opened her door and stepped inquisitively onto the porch and toward its amply-sized maroon-red cooler.

"Ah," she sighed contentedly, "Barrel-made local root beer!"

Jodie pointed to a window sign. "There's a country deli inside. Bet it's good!"

"I could do that: be hungry," Val responded enthusiastically.

Jodie disappeared into the cluttered interior to push open the screen door and

announce, “They have homemade kraut and bratwurst! It’s a little authentic Heinie place! Come see. Some of the signs are in German script and engraving.”

Val peered around and over Jodie’s compact body. “We lucked out on this one,” she agreed.

A few earlier forays in other places had yielded considerably less delightfully appetizing relaxations.

“Those brats are huge,” Val noted.”Wanna split one?”

Jodie nodded and headed toward the angular apron-fronted woman behind the deli display.

Handing one wrapped half to Val, she asked, “Ready to roll?” and, later, at the intersection, “Eenie-meenie. Right or left?”

Studying the signs, Val chose Route 863East. “Left,”she answered assuredly, not wanting to return to the mountains quite yet.

Right Reverend Preach Patricia The Beloved stretched out over the shinily slick parqueted floor for her weathered and stained sassafras walking stick balanced against a brown metal folding chair near her golf cart’s aluminum steering wheel. Poking the rubber-tipped end securely into a groove, Patty raised her woven and worn bulk from the fawnskin-upholstered bucket-seat to step cautiously toward her congregation’s settlement-dated pulpit to address its mottled and muddled remains.

“Buds,” she began in her familar low tone. “We have just shared an extraordinarily long year of untenably strung-out days in interminable weeks of tedious months. But to whine to an hourglass is a satanic devil dance we must leave behind in faith and exalted calling through thoughtful prayer. Let us bow together with whatever we have left.”

In signal, Pat lowered her chins to her pallidly bared bosom and her cherished followers followed in divine squinch-eyed salute as Mistress Jacobina pulled

her bow carefully over the strings.

“Dear God and Jesus et al (Heavenly Host) -- Please save and deliver us from these self-aggrandizingly murderous and phony ‘Christian’ thieves of jobs, loves, lives, businesses, investments, savings, health, homes, identities, truth, justice, guarantees of security and safety.....Yours truly, Patricia Bea Flanastein and Etcetera, USA, Earth, Milky Way, Your Universe”

Hippity and Hop pulled themselves up Kevin’s flannel shirt by their kitten claws to sit one each on a shoulder.

“Just like they’re posing deliberately,” Chad noted, while taking a photograph as required.

“How do you tell which is which?”

“Hippity has black stripes on white. Hop’s are white on black. See?”

Yeah. I’d have named them Zee and Bra.”

“Okay. Next litter.”

“No, really. Hop has a black freckle or beauty mark under her right eye. Hippity has none.”

“Are they weaned yet?”

“Yeah. Naomi just walked out the door a few days ago and refused to come back inside since.”

“Yup. That’s weaned. Tough love, cat-style.”

“You did something similar with Janet and Robin, didn’t you?”

Chad remembered the New Mexico job on dusty arid flatlands that was meant to last three weeks and stretched into five oxygen-deprived, dry torturous months. “Yeah, it worked out that way. They did okay.”

“Where are they now?”

“Robin’s bumping tables at a dive called Huxdee’s outside Cleveland. Taking sociology classes at night and on weekends. Lives with a whichaway dudette named Grand Teton or something who does fairs around there.”

“Janey?”

“Janet’s here still -- studying art history and techniques over in Black Mountain. She loves it.

“Do you like her artwork?”

“Usually. Some I just don’t get what she’s conveying or playing with.”

“I’d love to see some.”

“She has a show in Asheville next week.”

“Wow. That’s the Big Time.”

“Yeah, it’s a funny little side street place I never heard of.”

“Still, it’s the Mountain City -- heart and soul and leading edge of it.”

“The opening reception’s this Thursday night.”

“You going?”

“Absolutely. You wanna bop alongside?”

“What time?”

“Leavin around four.”

“I’ll be there.”

Chad stood and walked toward the Bay to open the sliding door onto the porch. “Hey, we oughta be out here. It’s gorgeous,” she said into a soft breeze waving through tulip trees to transport the fragrance of nearby flowers.

“Don’t let Hippity and Hop out,” Kevin yelled in warning.

Chad turned to close the door behind her.

“The Last Ride,” Danny said, “will be on a souped-up dayglo bike through a dayglo sky, flying between pea-sized stars colored in tiedyed dreams deployed around a seamlessly opaque asteroid chute between galaxies of the fifty-fourth dimension of seraphim.”

“Then what will we do?” Sue inquired with concern. “Ask for directions?”

“Hell, no. We’ll find a wave in a pleasantly harmonic key to follow. If we get lost, we’ll just chord it into the next dimension.”

“God, I love it when you talk dirty to me.”

“Damn. I lost my train of angels on that one. Shut up, Sue. Where were we going?”

“Higher registers.”

“When we hit the highest, time stops.”

“But we don’t know it because knowledge requires a space of continuum.”

“The stoppage of time is a no-thing, not even a blot, no spot to stop on.”

“Yes, I can see that.”

“Do you see a restaurant coming up? You know how hungry this stuff makes me.”

“It says seven miles off the right. Will pink silk pantaloons be okay to wear?”

“Perfect,” he answered thoughtfully, adding, “but on orange-striped longitudes within lavender altitudes they may tear.”

Sue reconsidered. “Maybe I’d better just do homespun cotton culottes. And ribboned braids for my hair. What about you?”

“Real men don’t wear clothes in the universe. It’s rude.”

“Ohmmmmmmmm. How long will we be there?”

“As long as it takes to get to Time Stopping,” Danny answered impatiently.

“What do you expect your last sentence ever to be?” he inquired with curiosity.

“‘Julienned granaries throb empirical gelatins’ or ‘Tiny zipped steamers chuckle dabbled curdles of edelweiss,’” Susie answered promptly.

“What if you don’t get to finish the sentence?”

“It won’t be understood then.”

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2. "Blink City, New Jersey"

Missy rolled multi-colored pebbles absentmindedly under the country-toughened soles of her bare feet while Petunia, the softly brown-furred pygmy goat baby, jumped and skipped behind her between irregularly shallow shoreside pools of water scattered along the creek’s narrow beach.

Distracted by a pale-colored bulldog wading and splashing by her side, Petunia baa-ed like a lost lamb when Missy rounded out of sight a leafily sharp corner.

“Petunia! I’m right here. C’omeon,” Missy, turning her head and body back, called.

Petunia, shaking her drooping ears in excitement, bounced eagerly toward the sound.

Missy saw in her mind’s eye again the howling young sheep they’d bought at auction and penned up to butcher last month for grilling and winter storage.

Lyle’s family had raised sheep on their flatland farm while he was a child so

he was no stranger to their ways and taste.

Missy's introduction had been a perfectly mint-roasted leg during a Cape May Chef Gerard Café d'Orleans oceanside date years, and personnas, before the exotic enticements of mountainside living occurred to her or she'd heard of Blink City's simmering micropolis. Sighting the clump finally of wild tangerine polka-dotted daylilies, she pulled a rusted trowel out of the unfinished linen pouch swinging by her slender right hip and secured over that shoulder and bent to loosen a ganglingly generous bunch of crusty rhizome roots for bringing to Tess in town that afternoon while they shared during their weekly ritual of renewed conviviality lightly-spiked juices freshly squeezed and puree'ed from fruits Teresa's Florida-situated family sent up frequently, along with decorative seashells, for tropical treats.

Petunia nudged the bag along, with her forehead, sending it tumbling over rocks and sand toward the waters' edge where Missy ran to grab it.

Missy sprayed mineral water from a bottle provided on a nearby covered stand to rub off the soles of her now-burning feet black clots of stuck tar jettisoned from fading ocean liners and hazy yachts speckling translucently opal waves and the oval of a sinking horizon in the distance. The flattened and compacted pale sand around her was littered with the crispy-bright blues and irridescantly luminous purples of sun-dried sea creatures, men'o'war, and brittle curling spikes in beige and browns of assorted and abandoned smoothly rose-lined sea homes.

PuddinPie galloped along the waterline, her blacks and grays stretched to finely-muscled contours and lines amidst sprays her pounding paws raised of salts and sands.

"Puddin! No!" Missy yelled as that sleek head faced east and disappeared into an oncoming wave. Puddin turned to paddle easily toward land, accustomed accommodatngly to Missy's attentive over-protection.

Petunia led the way across the jagged field by the stagnant pond of thickening weeds back to her small barn on the mown rise near the curlingly steep ribbons of worn forest trails to the mountain's double crest.

With an expectorant groan toward darkening heavens, Missy sank calf-deep into the hidden pond marsh and struggled against muddy goo and clay-like muck toward firm fieldground, waving her arms widely in the air to keep her balance.

“Next time,” she muttered to herself and Petunia, “I’ll remember a walking stick.”

Priscilla Deborah Peterson. You’re next,” the denim-suited announcer called from his booth to the center of the jumbled stage.

Deb pulled in her stomach and stood, fumbling for the papers beside her chair. LaDonna reached over to gather and hold them in the air.

Herbie turned suddenly through Kaleidoscope Café’s side street enclave artisan-tiled patio gardenspace, drawn by the muskily oriental fragrance of gardenia incense burning in irregularly shaped and decorated wood and clay pots lining the window sills aside its beaten copper antique doors.

The Café’s legendary mystique, *je ne sais quoi*, included a slender damask-covered banquet table of imported java, a quicktime roaster, patron-operated grinder and artfully unique implements, traditionally ancient to innovatively post-modern, for boiling and/or perking. A wildly eclectic display of cups and mugs, spoons and stirrer sticks arraigned on a smaller wooden table within easy grabbing distance by organic sweeteners from honey to brown sugars under a boldly hand-lettered sign that read, “NO ARTIFICIAL NUTTIN’.” An Arabian-styled and costumed student clerk stood readily at hand to assist customers puzzled by all the possibilities.

Unfurling her treasured rainbow-tiedyed oversized, ivory-handled umbrella, Sarah left it with some trepidation in the crowded outdoor vestibule box and stepped gratefully out of the crescendoing lightning storm.

(... to be contined....)

As she lifted her right foot and leg to rungs of the black leather-upholstered bar chair, Lyla nodded and smiled toward Paulie in her green lame'overshirt, native beads and tinkling crystal hoop earrings.

“Heard the one about the two old drunks...,” she began.

“Probably,” Paulie interrupted with an eye squinch and a twitch of her long freckled nose.

Lyla laughed. “... this old drunk teetered into a cemetery late one autumn night, tripped and fell headfirst into a deep freshly-dug open grave. He clawed on the sides to get out but kept sliding back to the bottom. Finally, he began yelling out, ‘Help! Help!’ As the wee hours of the morning came around, he screamed up again, ‘Help! Help me please, somebody! I’m cold! I’m cold! I’m cold!...’”

“....Just then, another old drunk stumbled by, and looked down into the open grave, and said....” Paulie interjected.

“... ‘Of course you are. You kicked off all your dirt!’” Paulie and Lyla said in unison, and chortled together contentedly.

“How’s the a-hole quotient tonight?” Lyla queried solicitously.

“Pretty low. Thankfully,” Paulie offered, skimming the evening mentally in her mind and sliding the glass tip bowl in Lyla’s direction for confirmation.

“Ooooh, I see a wild mushroom pizza in the leaves,” her roommate divined, peering down at loosely crumpled bills and large coins.

“Do you see a few Black Russians too?” Paulie wondered aloud.

“Yep. Dancing Cossacks coming into view,” Lyla assured her happily.

Paulie hip-hopped toward the door end of the marble counter.

“Let’s do it,” she directed. “Grab the loot and run!”

“Where are you hens hustling off to?” Matt demanded as Lyla pushed bills

into her coat pockets.

“A higher class dive,” Paulie shot back.

Matt feigned spitting tobacco juice onto the floor by his checkout stand.

“Ain’t none in this ‘ere grind,” he advised.

“You keep thinking that, John-boy. Stay home with ma. That’s a good child,” Lyla teased.

“Mama been sweet to me,” Matt pouted dramatically. “Give me all that I want and need.”

Paulie shrugged. “If you say so....” She slid a blousestrap in his direction over her left shoulder down toward her elbow and her right hand onto a prominently protruded rounded hip.

“We can deal,” he announced spontaneously.

“Your dive or mine?” Paulie asked in an enthusiastic burst of curiosity focused on the multi-colored sickle tattoo wrapped onto his right bicep.

“Pizza,” Lyla reminded, hungrily. “Jiving Cossacks.”

Matt laughed aloud. “Git on out to the street where you two belong now. Scoot.” He reached around to pat Lyla’s generous, velvet-ensconsed caboose as it waved cheerily by him.

Jerry had taken a wrong turn off the expressway and now faced a jammed one-way traffic pileup entering a hamlet he’d no interest in visiting. A Kinky Kween donut shop with a near-empty parking lot to his right offered an inviting layover respite. His stomach rumbled agreement. Martha giggled at the sound and rubbed her own anticipatory little tummy in sympathy. “I want hash browns and grape juice,” she demanded, leaning her ponytailed blonde head against the window to read the sign on her side of the minivan.

Jerry neared the ordering window and turned toward the back seat.

“Stephen?” he asked his assistant. “What’s your pleasure or poison this morning?”

“Bacon biscuit,” Steve called forward eagerly. “Mocha coffee.”

“Onion rings,” he added at the spur of the moment. “And a kiddie cheeseburger. I’m near to starving.” he realized.

Jerry let down his windows and repeated all his sun-seared grogginess recalled to the white-capped clerk who called it all back toward piled shiny metal armature of the franchise kitchen.

“Small burger,” Steve yelled out. “Rings. Bacon biscuit. Large mocha caffeine.”

Kevin heard the banjo playing from the corner street light and followed the tune into O’Mallory’s Delicatessen.

Tuesday evening’s casual group had formed, as usual, in the side room by the disordered stacks of local newspapers and regional magazines spread over the floor. He slid onto the maple bench at the old upright by the back door, nodded and bowed to familiar faces gathered to play or listen, and hit a few chords in a compatible key before settling in to add or blend in that instrument's musical ingredients to whatever he picked up on.

Tina hummed along while she leafed through a brightly-colored architectural design catalogue of glossy possibilities for the parcel on the edge of town she’d bought last week “for a song,” she joked to Kevin a little later after they’d ordered and picked up their metal plates of piled-high "homemade" fresh salami and swiss rolls, sauerkraut and sweet potato chips.

“It’s got water and sewer hooked up and I can have a camper pulled in anytime,” she explained between sips from her tall glass of sweetened tea.

As the group dispersed and went their separate ways, Kevin and Tina pushed overgrown and tangled branches of wisteria aside along the walkway from the back porch to make their way through to Sonia’s cottage for their weekly

evening private class.

On the second beat, Kevin held out his left arm. Tina reached up to grasp that open hand and swirl, skirt flaring, rhythmically over the wooden floor into his chest. Toe to toe in complicatedly complementary step, they swayed decoratively in severely focused concentration while the melody played on. As the thumping chorus began, Tina whispered her legendarily fateful line into his ear audibly and leaned back to laugh with him as they separated on cue to complete their spirited march around the room's periphery.

Sonia clapped enthusiastically from her sofa chair. "Perfect!" she pronounced with a grin. "Don't change a thing," she added, referring to the sold-out revival opening scheduled that weekend for the town's heritage stage with its ornate box seat upholstered balconies and recessed brass-railed mini-orchestra "pit," usually completed with outstanding student musician scholars from nearby Patriot's College Minute Militia Academy Preparatory School.

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3. "Boomerang, Alabama"

Gilly stumbled into the "Somewhere Else" bar on Calhoun Street in Grover's Circle just in time. Patsy was struggling to get into her oversized faux lynx jacket to pull its kidskin hood over her wiltingly permed blonde curls, rhinestone-studded hairpins and crinkled crinoline bows. As she stooped to the carpet to retrieve a hefty black leather briefcase stuffed front and back with loose papers and manilla file folders, Gil waved and yelled, "Wait for me!"

Pat met him at the door with a tense grin. "I thought we needed a chat over drinks first. You said," she reminded him in a low hiss. She pinched hard the hand he held out to carry her case to the sidewalk and waiting taxicab. Gil

wincing as he closed on the documents they meant to present backing their argument for contract renewal.

“Ah,” he sighed. “Couldn’t get away.”

“Why don’t you drop that bitch? She’s only in it for the money and the lay.”

“Pay and lay,” Gil agreed, nodding over his red leather motorcycle jacket and the winding purple rattlesnake tattooed around his boney shoulders.

Nudging Pat with a sharp elbow, he offered with a growling chuckle, “But she makes a mean Irish stew.”

Pat guffawed. “I bet she does, lamb chop.”

The partners relaxed together with quietly comfortable comraderie into the car’s overstuffed backseat upholstery for the remaining few minutes of their ride uptown to their clients’ reclusive suite atop the Hotel Ariana Nuevo.

“Where’s the frigging key to this?” Gil grumbled, turning the briefcase upside down to access the recessed compartment secreted at the bottom and finding it resistant to opening.

“It ain’t locked,” Pat advised with a frown.

“Hell it ain’t,” Gil growled, as he pulled in a spiraling frenzy at the metal hatch. “Do you remember the entrance code?”

“Yeah. Frito-Lay. Something like that,” Pat answered wryly. “Asta la bomba. Or bonga,” she added with a smirk. “Maybe.”

“You wouldn’t,” Gil prayed.

Pat crinkled her nose and curled her toes hidden inside thick wool-lined storm boots.

“Cool it, captain.”

(to be continued...)

4. “Cherish Rise, Vermont”

It was difficult to tell Audrey from anyone else. She wore drab clothes and allowed her hair to hang freely in disinterested curls. Her shoes were a practical low-heeled brown or black. She wore no makeup except occasionally some light lipstick for her chapped lips. In wintertime, she wore a dark green woolen coat. In summer, she wore light-colored dresses and slip-on pumps. When she spoke, her voice was low and polite. Her job did not require her to speak to strangers except on very rare occasions. Mostly, she spoke to Mrs. Petersen, her boss, and Janice, her co-worker in the bookstore. The bookstore itself was an old and quiet place, frequented mostly by folks who had lived in Dolsontown for years. It had an ambiance of must and dust. Unlike the newer stores, it didn't serve coffee or donuts to its customers and most of the books carried there were used. Their covers might be leather, their pages yellowed. Some were un-cut. It was a place to hunt for a rare book, perhaps even one signed by the author years ago.

"Hello, Audie," Sadie Petersen called. Her boss was the cheery sort. "You're early, as usual. Would you like a cup of coffee?" She always asked that and Audrey always said, yes. Mrs. Petersen kept a pot for herself and her employees in her office, along with creamer and sugar. Some mornings, she brought donuts in for them and for herself.

"I'd love some," Audie answered, taking off her green wool coat and hanging it over a chair in Sadie's office.

"How are you this morning? Did you have a hot date last night?" Mrs. Petersen enjoyed teasing Audie, secretly hoping that one day Audrey really would have a hot date and come out of her shell, so to speak.

Audie looked embarrassed and coughed behind her fist. "No, of course not," she muttered, reaching for a mug and pouring coffee into it carefully.

"It wouldn't hurt you, you know," Mrs. Petersen encouraged her. "A girl your age should get out more in the world." Sadie held her middle-aged body straight in the chair. She wore bright makeup to accentuate her auburn-colored hair. Her suit was navy silk and her shoes matched it. Her skin was pale.

"I go out with Janice sometimes. That suits me fine," Audie answered defiantly. She resented intrusions into her private life and discouraged them as well as she was able.

"Where do you and she go?" Sadie asked, making small talk until the shop opened in five minutes or so. Mrs. Petersen enjoyed talking. It made her shop popular with customers. She would go over books, talk about authors and literature, discuss the neighbors and what was going on with the stores on her block, the newest movies, or what latest outrage the mayor's office had caused.

"We go to Oagley's for lunch, you know. And sometimes we go to the movies and Winston's Steak House afterwards," Audrey said finally, sipping her coffee and nibbling on a jelly donut she'd just picked up.

Mrs. Petersen reached down with her free left hand. "I have something special for you today," Sadie said mysteriously.

"What? Why today?" Audie asked, curiously.

"Ah," Sadie said. "Did you forget it was your birthday?"

Audrey blushed. "I didn't know you knew. Or would remember," she amended.

Sadie pulled out an unwrapped package from underneath her desk. "Here you go. See what you think."

Audrey pulled the box open and found a pale pink sweater with pearls and a bright pink skirt to match. "It's lovely," she breathed. "Thank you very much." Audie felt dazzled by an outfit so different from what she usually wore or would choose for herself. She wondered if she'd ever really have the nerve to wear it anywhere.

"It would be a nice thing to wear on a date, I thought," Sadie said, pointedly.

"Who would I date?" Audrey asked in despair. "I don't really know any men anywhere."

"You need to join a book club or something, some place where you'll meet

men with interests similar to yours."

Audrey contemplated sitting in a roomful of strangers and abandoned the idea immediately.

Sadie sensed what she thought kept Audrey at home nights. "You could ask Janice to go with you," she suggested, helpfully.

"Well, maybe I will," Audrey answered, doubtfully.

"Time to open up," Mrs. Petersen announced. "Will you unlock the door please." Sadie was stickler for details. Her books were arranged alphabetically within their categories and the shop opened promptly at nine o'clock and closed promptly at 8 p.m. To make up for the ten hour days, Sadie's New and Used Books stayed closed on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays. Audie and Jan enjoyed the three days off in a row. Sometimes they had even gone out of town, rented rooms and splurged on hot tubs in the forest and fancy restaurants in Morriston or Greenway way up in the mountains. The drive itself revived their spirits and the retreat gave them strength for another month or so.

Audrey disappeared out of the office, as Sadie sighed. She worried about Audrey, her quietness, the way she had withdrawn from the world since Kevin had died. It had been over two years. It was time for Audie to reenter the world of adults that date and mate and fight and make up and build and tear down and live and get sick and get healthy and die. Audrey, instead, had built a world for herself made solely of the characters in books. With the exception of Janice, she saw no one and she wasn't personally close to Janice either. Janice, of course, had her own life with two children to raise by herself and Janice did date. Sadie resolved to push Audie further back into the land of the living each day, however she might be able to do that. It's one step at a time, she reminded herself, as they say.

"Audrey," she called out the next morning, "did you try on the outfit I gave you? Does it fit?"

Audie answered affirmatively. "Yes, it fits perfectly. And it looks very nice. I'm saving it for a special occasion," she added. Audrey couldn't really

imagine where she would wear such a bright and outstanding style. It didn't suit her, she thought. It didn't suit her personality or her mood, which was retiring and somewhat drab.

Mrs. Petersen was insistent that Audrey socialize. "I may have a special one for you then," Sadie announced. "I'm having a little get-together at my house, just some friends, for coffee and finger foods and desserts and chitchat and we'll watch a movie. It's to be this Friday evening. What do you say?" she asked determinedly.

"Oh, no," Audrey said quickly. "I can't."

"Of course you can," Sadie said abruptly. "You need to get out and this is a perfect opportunity to meet some other people." She nearly lost her patience with Audie and bit her lip.

"You're inviting someone for me, aren't you?" Audie asked accusingly.

Mrs. Petersen had her mind set now on what was best for her employee. "Well, I might invite several someones that might be right for you," she said, coming out of her office with a wink.

Audrey hid in the stacks all day. Sadie's New and Used Books had rows and rows on two floors. It was possible for Audie to disappear, even from Janice.

never the same

**better than myrrrh,
softer than fur,
the blur of you
meanders through my
mind
by my soul,
the whole we are
and aren't,
the parts we play
to stay and start
keeping our beat
sync'd
in the love game
hearts**

Lila saw Manny in her mind's eye striding over a freshly-bushwhacked field now overgrown with evergreen starts for the infancy of their tree farm. Over generations the land and its waters had nourished a healthy succession of corn, wheat, cattle, hogs and chickens, other domestic fowl and migrating birds. 'And weeds, bugs and other unwelcome varmits,' reality begged her to recollect honestly the cost of tamey lush profusions past. Often its inherent wilderness had crawled, seeped and swept back over careful rows and tidy plots and plantings.

While they laid Manny in an unadorned box to rest as he chose, an irridescently-necked flock of wild turkeys pecked and called by to show respect and bid final farewell to a quiet friend of times sliding stillborn into yet-unmarked centuries of becoming.

Lila's chest ached as a forlorn figure faded into the misted forests of memory. A dissenting cry shook helplessly through her. Moppet curled into furry confusion by her feet to whimper a wetly cool nose against toes turned tensely down into

grass and dirt.

“It’s all right, boy. Papa’ll be here in our dreams,” Lila consoled. “We’re not alone. He still cares for us from other worlds,” she assured a tousled, near-howling tawny head.

Their somnolent sadness sifted onto leaves upturned around the stark fissure of his grave for the recumbent storm rumbling on winds loosed by a cryptic sky of disordered clouds stretched wide and high with the blessings and intimations of ages silent in sentry. She felt his warm arm on her shoulder and the hairs playing against her skin. “I’ll never leave you,” he promised as the snows whispered past their bedroom window and piled outside against the doors.

“We are,” he repeated over and over.

“We are, and have been, and will be again. There is no end, nor begin. No live or dead. It’s all of a piece without parting or part. All the rest is illusion, the mirage of selves,” he murmured as they dissolved back into the breath of God.

“Cut,” Todd yelled from the next hill, stepping away from the camera. “perfect-o.” He raised a fist. “We got it that time!”

Nancy shook her head briskly to dispel the mood of her character and lines. George skipped beside her. “Whew. One more time, and I’d give up,” he confessed. “Me too,” she admitted in grateful relaxation.

Todd rolled a wheelbarrow of chilled bottles of imported beers and wines their way.

“How do you feel?” he prodded.

“Paycheck-less,” Nancy groaned while the men laughed in agreed camaraderie.

5. "Esther Landry Grove, Pennsylvania"

Carol finally found the perfect one for her collection. It was pearl and shells on a long gold chain. Every Saturday, she visited places like flea markets and yard sales searching for a special necklace. Her favorite to date was one of solid amber. Its dark warm shades shone in the light and reflected, she felt, the calmest part of her soul. Another one was graduated cultured pearls, a short string that fit loosely around her neck. Still another was a triple chain of handmade and polished maple beads. She fingered the solid gold now strung from beneath her finely chiseled head.

Carol had aquiline features for a woman. Her nose was somewhat long and straight. Her skin was pale and didn't tan. Her cheeks were naturally ruddy. Her mouth was full and today she wore pale pink lipstick to match the nails on her fingers and toes. Her sandals were of a soft tanned leather. Her shorts and shirt were made of soft silk. On her left ring finger she wore a thick gold braid. She wasn't married but her mother had told her years ago that that would keep men from bothering her too much, as she was such a generally solitary figure. Carol was tall too. She towered over some of the men at the county fair that day.

"How are you doing, darling? You like that necklace, do you?" the proprietor of one stand asked. He was old and wizened from the sun. His arms were thick and covered with dark curling hairs. On his head, he wore a cotten cap. Around his wrist was an old gold watch. His pants were faded navy blue and loose. His shirt was striped and tucked in under a cracked brown leather belt. Dirt hid under his fingernails.

Carol had been fingering a necklace of odd-shaped turquoise beads that held a heavy silver pendant in the center. "It's nice. I can't find the price tag on it though."

"For you it's ten dollars, doll," Peter said. He didn't put prices on any of his goods. He sized up his customers, how they were dressed and they held themselves, and then figured out what the top price was that they might pay

for any particular item. That method had stood him in good stead over the years. He made an adequate living traveling from show to show, putting up his tent with the tables and their black felt cloths, the glass-covered boxes of jewelry, the small open cases of knives.

"I'll give you five. There's one nearly like it for five over a few booths down." Carol had become adept over the years at haggling over prices. She enjoyed the game and never agreed to the original price, no matter how fair it might seem. Most of the dealers bought their goods at severe markdown prices and could afford to take far less than whatever they said.

"Aw, darlin'," Petie said. "That one don't have no pendant though. The pendant alone is worth ten dollars." He had worked on this particular piece of jewelry himself, restringing the beads half way down after adding the curiosity he'd found. Although most of the jewelry Peter sold was made by others, he had a few more expensive pieces that were made by himself. He was an expert craftsman but could not make a living on his own skills alone.

Carol examined it again. The pendant was a six-pointed star with an arrow through it pointing down. "I've never seen this sign before," she commented with curiosity. "What does it mean?"

"Oh, it's just a love sign, like a heart with an arrow through it," Pete explained. He didn't really know what it meant, had purchased the necklace and the pendant, along with many others, at a large discount warehouse on the other side of town. The other pendants were standard offerings of hearts and five-pointed stars and crystals wrapped in swirling silver strands. He had the rest tied on multi-colored leather strings.

Carol was intrigued. She turned the pendant over and over in her hand, while the beads of turquoise caught the light. "Okay, I'll give you seven-fifty," she offered finally.

"Nope. It's ten dollars and that's a bargain," Petie intoned adamantly. He knew what he had in the jewelry and determined to make at least one hundred percent on each piece. Otherwise, his business wasn't worth having and he couldn't afford the price of booth space. If this customer wouldn't pay

what was fair, another would and, if not here, then elsewhere.

She turned the pendant again over in her hand. It let off, it seemed, a vibration of some kind. "Okay," she relented. "Ten dollars and something to hold it in." Peter bent his aching body under the table and rummaged around in a carton there. "How's this?" he said finally, holding out a small cloth-covered box.

"Oh, perfect," Carol exclaimed, not expecting anything but cardboard. She didn't really need the box either but attempted to get her money's worth since she was paying full price. She didn't usually agree to that, but this necklace particularly caught her fancy and interest.

Pete dropped the necklace into the box. "Here you go, miss," he said, handing it to her.

Carol reached into her purse, nestled the box on the bottom of it, and found a ten dollar bill. "Here you go and thanks," she said, stepping back and moving on toward the next booth.

A few days later, Carol ran necklaces through her fingers like someone else might gold coins in a chest. "Do you know what this is?" Carol asked her friend, Judy.

Judy, like Carol, wore jeans and a loose sweat shirt. They both wore sneakers. They sat on the rug with their legs crossed, going through Carol's collection. "No, do you?" Judy replied.

Carol frowned and held it up to the light. "The man who sold it to me said it was a love sign."

Judy shook her head judiciously. She always felt a little uncomfortable in Carol's house. Carol was what she called "a neatnick," and every single thing had its place. Her home always seemed spotless and Judy tended to feel a bit dirty as soon as she walked into the place. Judy herself enjoyed living in a bit of a mess. She thought it was more conducive to creativity than the kind of relentless order espoused by Carol. "I don't think so," she said cautiously.

"Feel it." Carol handed the turquoise necklace with its silver pendant over.

She had cleaned the beads carefully and shined the pendant with silver polish. It gleamed now with a soft evanescence, as if it were old.

Judy rolled the pendant in her hand. "It sort of feels like it moves, doesn't it?" she said. Her shoulders shrugged from the kind of muted strangeness of that experience. She shuddered a bit.

"It must be some weird way it's made," Carol noted with perplexity. Carol held to logic and was not afraid of the pendant at all. She studied it instead.

"We could take it Peale's Jewelry and see what they say," Judy suggested helpfully. She felt there might be a curse on the necklace or some charm a witch had thrown.

"Let's do that." Carol enjoyed any excuse to examine, and perhaps purchase, more necklaces for her jewelry boxes. She had by now three. One was shaped in distressed wood like a miniature dresser. Another was made of fine china with gold-leafed drawer handles. The third was dark metal and contoured like a trunk. All were relatively large and took up quite a bit of space on the special high table she had bought. The table itself was mahogany and about four feet long by three feet tall. It held a precious spot in her bedroom. The bedroom was all dark wooden furniture with white curtains, a white bedspread, and white carpet.

Moments later, they walked down Main Street and turned into the jewelry store. Mrs. Peale was bent over a case, putting a gold watch back where it belonged with its price tag turned down.

"Hello, girls," she said, looking up and closing the case. "Is there something I can do for you today?" Carol, in particular, was a good and familiar customer. The Peales' had fixed jewelry for her and sold her some others. They understood that it was her hobby to collect, restore and keep special pieces.

"Yes," Carol said. "We have a question for you."

"Okay," Mrs. Peale said. "Shoot."

Carol pulled the necklace out of her pocketbook and held it out, dangling

from her right hand. "What is this?" she asked, pointing to the silver pendant.

Mrs. Peale frowned and pulled it toward her. She got out her magnifying glass and examined it in detail. "There's a marking here in the back on the bottom of the arrow," she finally noted. "It says GHJ, which I assume is the maker's mark."

"Do you know what it means -- the six-pointed star with the arrow?" Judy asked.

"My guess," Mrs. Peale said, "from years of experience making jewelry for people is that GHJ was a craftsman who was in love with someone of the Jewish faith and that he made this pendant for her. Or, of course, it could be the other way around and she made it for him," Mrs. Peale amended, conscious suddenly of the changes in her time.

Carol smiled. She liked the story, even if wasn't true. And how, she wondered, would they ever know the truth. "Can you feel it vibrate in your hand?" she asked curiously.

"Yes," Mrs. Peale replied. "It's the angle at which the arrow is set and its style. It moves slightly because the design is purposefully a little unstable."

"Why do you think GHJ did that? You think it's deliberate?" Carol couldn't imagine designing anything that was purposefully unstable. Everything in her life, her work and her home was as stable, as ordered, as she could possibly manage it.

"Maybe it's meant to signify that love is alive, that it moves, that it's dynamic rather than stagnant, static," Mrs. Peale guessed.

"You're a genius," Judy said.

"Well, I'm just guessing. You might try to find a silversmith with the initial GHJ in the phone book," she offered. "See if I'm right."

"Oh, I like your story so much," Judy exclaimed. "I'm not sure I'd want to find out the truth if it was any different than that. It's such a lovely tale."

Carol, of course, was more practical. "Yes, that's what I'll do. Thank you," she said, peering into the cases with interest.

"Can I help you with anything else today?" Mrs. Peale asked.

"No," Carol finally said. "Not today. But thank you very much about the pendant. I'll be back another day."

A little later, Carol and Judy leafed through the J's in the local telephone book, but they found no GHJ.

"Ah well," Judy said finally. "It's a mystery."

"I think," Carol commented, "that, just like the necklace collection, I'll search for GHJ in various ways."

"Do you think it's good luck to keep the necklace, or do you think the pendant wants to be returned to its original owner?" Judy asked with trepidation. "It might be bad luck to keep something that's a sign of deep affection between two complete strangers to you."

"I have no idea," Carol said, somewhat abruptly. She became irritated off and on at the lack of rationality that followed Judy around.

"Maybe the silversmith is dead," Judy said.

"Could be," Carol replied, summarily.

A few years later, she was wearing the turquoise bead necklace with the silver pendant at a flea market close to home, looking as ever for more to add to her collection. A new craftsperson had put up a booth and she admired her skill with silver and brass. "You have quite a knack for turning out unusual pieces," Carol commented to the owner.

"Yes, and you're wearing one of mine too," Lila said. She was short and swarthy with a gypsy look. Her dress was colorful and she wore bright beads around her neck and dangling from her ears. Her hair was pulled back with a red kerchief. Her voice was scratchy and low.

Carol fingered the pendant in some astonishment. It was far finer and more

delicate than the pieces that Lila had spread on the table before her now. "You made this?" she asked.

Lila leaned forward and held the pendant, turning it over and back again. "Yes indeed. I remember it well."

"Who is GHJ?" Carol inquired aggressively.

Lila hesitated. She wasn't sure whether she had a contract with the original owners to keep their secret. Finally she said, "That's the initials of the man who asked me to make it for his wife for their fiftieth anniversary."

Carol grinned at a mystery now nearly solved. "And what happened to him?"

Lila looked down at the work in her hand. "Oh, they were long-time customers of mine." She strung a bead carefully on its thin string. "They both passed away several years ago, within a few months of each other."

"Can you say what the symbolism of it is?"

Lila strung several more glass beads and then looked up. "Well, yes," she said, looking into Carol's eyes. "They were Jews and they loved each other and Judaism."

Carol puzzled again at the necklace. "And why does it move? Is it meant to?"

Lila pursed her lips and closed her eyes for moment. "Yes. It meant something very special to them," she sighed, "but what I can't exactly say." Her heart ached for the clients that were gone. "They were insistent, though, that it be that way."

"A jeweler in town suggested that it might mean dynamic, rather than static, love," Carol persisted. "Do you think that might be true?"

Lila nodded a little sadly. "I think it might be something like that. Do you like it?" she asked.

"It's my favorite piece."

"Well, then," she declared, "it's meant for you. Do you have a special person in your life?" she inquired.

"No, not right now."

Lila reached out and patted Carol on the hand. "Well, maybe it's a sign, a vision of what is to come."

"Maybe so," Carol murmured and moved on to another booth, lost in thought. Maybe the pendant would bring her good luck. She'd been alone for over three decades now. She realized at that moment that her collection of not-rights and one-night stands had exhausted her and resolved to give them up. She fingered the silver pendant again. A dynamic love now would suit her just fine.

"Space Odyssey"

**Separated from God
like Saint John the Baptist's
head from his body,
our selves and lives shown
off on a platter,
while Salome dances
as the musicians strum and
play.**

So the drum beats on,

**and the conductor
still lifts his baton.**

6. "Foundry Bogs, Mississippi"

Phaedra chose for their walking tour the blue convertible and a rusty red copter from the rental lot. A dime has a mere 118 ridges around the edge, she groused obscenely. Patty demanded a boy's tricycle in the design of Aunt Joel's unicycle seat.

Oleander chose to serve humanity over-easy. Twenty-eleven soggy leaves of just-picked garden lettuce crashed into the marble patio flooring tile scattering the watermelons against moonbeams driven to perpendicular angels before Jocelyn could stop any of it with her borreyed umpire whistle, because a shark can detect one part of blood in 100 million parts of water and a sneeze will travel out your mouth at over 100 m.p.h. She realized instantaneously how trivial the moment or any negligence or Andean sense might be or could become.

Hal took Isaac's hand and bent gently each finger back to pull the purple polk-dot rawhide bandana down over his furry ears.

Her Number Fourteen "JO" train was only sixty-seven ten hours late pulling into DoHickoryCiao Station on the wrong date in an erroneous year. A pig's orgasm lasts for 30 minutes. "NOT HERE!" pleaded blinking lamps beside every sixth stool and every thirty-seventh loveseat, upholstered or not, by Second Sacred decree of the Ulster of Pembury Down.

"Where's our marshmallows?" Kerry demanded in a conspiratorial whisper. "Digitized decimals hide surreptiously on every side," LouEllen replied thankfully, kneeling. But a Saudi Arabian woman can get a divorce if her husband doesn't give her coffee.

"DO YOU THINK ANYONE NOTICED?" Milotte screamed, plugging his nose with dandelions and slithering slowly into the whipped cream.

"According to a British law passed in 1845, attempting to commit suicide was a capital offense. Offenders could be hanged for trying," she added, sententiously.

"Real life in the skip-eight century looks like this," Lynn intoned scarily,

handing little Deiter a tufted and cushioned monochrome pepperspray kaleidoscope on a porcelain pentagonal tray.

"We knew that one," Phil and Gerald yelled in unison from the third and fifth balcony.

Lydia blew her nose, lifting her left foot politely first to rehearse the onion'ed hashbrown Monterrey. "Monserat," she pled weepily. "Or Seurat." Kane thundered into the foreboding omission. Lydia wilted. "I wore pink lace pushup bras," she begged and cried over his rosemaries.

"TROTSKYite!" he screamed into the keylatch now by his big right toe.

"Bikini bows," Stuart stuttered in the throes of a cornpopping jam.

"Jamarama," Jodie sang silkily in her mother's nightgown. Harriet fed the rabbit cinnamon sticks of authentic imported Parisian liver pate' from Montreal and bathed him in aged Reisling unearthed last week from a slightly cracked cask in the remains of still-moulding Dresden. Grateful chirps emerged from the pointed tips of his long ears.

"I'm just in it for the orange peels," Van testified solemnly by earhair-swear.

"And the wheatgerms," Brenda interjected testily, ripping one out by the root.

"And okra chips," she added, meanly.

The Play's The Thing

The stage is divided into two-thirds the living room, with usual furniture and table with telephone, and dining room of a suburban house, with the front door at stage left and another door in the back off the livingroom, and one-third stage right a jail with holding cell that turns later into a one-room apartment. Stage left there is also a small area that is the walkway and outside of the house. Lights shine and darken on whichever part of the stage is the one in which a scene is happening.

Cast:

Nell

Helen

Gil

Guest 1

Guest 2

Kid

Lights are on the jail area where a woman is standing barefoot in a thin dress at a metal counter and the dining room where Helen and Gil are giving a small supper party for two guests. The telephone rings. Helen excuses herself with a nod from the dining room table and walks into the living room.

Nell [in a low whisper] : Helen?

Helen: Yeah.

Nell: I need help.

Helen: What's wrong?

Nell: I'm in jail.

Helen: What happened?

Nell: They think I'm someone else.

Helen: I'll be right down.

Nell: Okay.

Helen: Somesby, right?

Nell: Yeah.

The jail scene goes dark as Helen hangs up the telephone and turns toward the front door and dining room. Gil and the guests are laughing at a joke they've just made.

Helen: Gil! Gil!

Gil: Yeah?

Helen: I've gotta go to town.

Gil: Why?

Helen: There's been an accident.

Gil [*sitting very still and lowering his voice*] : Who?

Helen: Walk me to the car.

Gil also excuses himself from their guests, standing up and walking toward Helen and, taking her arm, walks through the front door with her.

Helen: It's Nell.

Gil: What happened?

Helen: She in jail.

Gil [*frowning*] : What?

Helen: She says they think she's someone else.

Gil [*frowning more deeply*] : There's an accident?

Helen: That's an accident.

Gil: [*reaching into a pants pocket for his wallet*] : Right. You might need some money.

Helen: I might need the deed to the house.

Gil looks confused and is frowning again.

Helen: For bond. Will you got get it so everything won't look too strange?

Gil: That won't look strange?

Helen: It's in the top drawer of the desk upstairs. Say I forgot my pocketbook.

Gil: Okay. Cool.

Helen: Run!

Gil turns back through the front door and passes his guests.

Gil: She forgot her damn pocketbook.

He disappears through the stairway door backstage and the guests murmur with their heads leaning toward each other. Gil reappears in the living room with a large envelope in his hand.

Gil [rushing and turning his head toward the guests]: It's gonna be okay. Not fatal. It's a friend of hers.

He goes through the front door and hands the envelope to Helen.

Helen [opening the envelope and checking to make sure the right papers are there] : Whew! Okay.

Gil: Call me when you know.

Helen: Right.

She walks offstage and he turns back toward the living and dining rooms.



Jordan in his pink nylon jacket walked across the room toward her to ask, with the usual undertone of arrogance in his off-key tone of voice, “Would you like to go to the Wednesday night dance here with me?”

Sylvia gulped in long-concealed distaste as if she’d swallowed a potato bug colony and a family of red ants.

“No, thanks,” she answered softly. ”I’ve been looking forward on that night to crawling by myself through 'possum excrement washed down with buzzard vomit. I really appreciate you asking me though.”

The building owner's oldest son feigned to not have heard her preferences but smiled and nodded too closely by her side throughout the next song played.

(... to be continued...)

finis

7. "Houdini Falls, New York"

Violet-flowering Chive, daisies of Chamomile and Feverfew, lavenders of Pennyroyal and Lavender, explosions and extrusions of Nasturtium, blues of Rosemary and Rue, golden Tansy, purple drops of Thyme, Basil indigo, Bee Balm spikes of star-rose, Tuberosa tangerines, bells of Comfrey, Lobelia flames flickering 'round dot-lemons of Saint John's Wort, fragrant hues of Lovage and Lemongrass -- I call on all of you and the Heavens Resounding to save and heal now our sweet Drew,"

Neahdra The White Witch chanted in tune to chimes pealing softly from a folk-painted wind-up box resting on the flannel tartan skirts of her lap while she dropped stems and petals into a large steaming copper kettlepot of teas and honey by the bedside of her little sneezing and sniffing nephew nearly hidden under quickly thrown layers of handmade comforters and quilts and afghans. Drew burrowed his pulsing head under fluffy down pillows, scrunched and curled his muscle-straining aches and ligament pains into a crescent he held at his knees and rocked, moaningly, on its side.

"Hum, Drew!" Aunt Nea directed. "Hum you a lullaby."

"That's my baby, my brave man," she soothed.

Rea piled the bills, pulling them toward her with a silver three -inch heel, and bent deftly, scrunching them, and a ten tucked beneath the sliver of an ankle strap, into her purse. Throwing the small bag over her shoulder, she walked quickly down the few stairs towards a table into the restaurant's darkest corner, smiled without turning to whistles from men and a few women at the bar.

"The guy drinking coffee wants to talk with you," Tom repeated, watery blue eyes sliding in the direction of a patron's back.

Rea sat without looking, flexed her peach-painted toes and delicate arches under the table. "Do you know him?"

"Yeah, he's been here a coupla times. Train engineer or something. AA. Doesn't do booze."

"Married?"

"Uh-huh."

Rea rested and looked appraisingly toward a lithe, tanned figure in short sleeves and denims. Medium build, cropped sandpebble hair. Cole spoke calmly with neighbors at the bar, quietly examining their gestures and expressions. Lifting his coffee cup, he turned and nodded to Rea, gesturing toward the bar.

"He's older," she said to Tom.

"Not so much."

"Okay," Rea sighed and moved the chair back, releasing her aching legs for another short stretch.

"Would you rather sit at a table?" Gray eyes watched as she leaned against the bar.

Rea meant to say no. "We could talk better there."

"I'll bring your drink. "Whada you want?"

"Coffee'll be fine." Rum and coke, she'd thought.

Rea drifted through the stale haze of shouts and music and chatter, away from Tom's table toward the opposite back corner of his restaurant.

"Tom says you're an engineer," she commented, sliding the thick pottery toward her and opening a small packet of cream.

"Mostly Midwest. Kansas City, Chicago, sometimes Albuquerque or Texas."

"What are you doin here?"

"I work outta New York. It's kinda screwy, but between trips I'm here." Cole followed her hand as it raised the cup to her mouth and stopped briefly.

"Like it?" Rea took a sip, barely wrinkling her nose.

"It's my town. You?"

"Hub of the universe. Center of the world. Art and culture forever." She laughed as the cup clattered back into its saucer.

"How long have you been here?"

"A few months."

Cole studied her. "From New England?"

Rea pushed the coffee back. "Vermont."

"Right. Me too." Cole paused, considering. "Have you been to the zoo?"

"Yeah. I go to the Met and the park nearly every weekend."

"The one in Brooklyn."

Rea shook her head, puzzled, turning the handle of a spoon.

"We'll go tomorrow." Cole smiled, sure.

"I guess I could call in sick." Now she frowned into the handle's reflection.

"Let's go for a walk. It's a beautiful night."

Rea shook her head and sat up straight, reaching for the bag draped over her chairback. "Yeah, it really is."

As they wound through bodies and smoke, Cole took her arm.

"Leaving the gray people behind," he said.

... He'd loosened the buttons of a white blowsy shirt. "Dance for me." Colchis leaned back, stretching his arms along the top of a plain Danish couch, distanced blonde curls spreading from a sun-browned chest. His legs extended wide onto the dark purples, blues and gold of a Persian carpet. As Rea moved, his eyes softened, half-closed, tranced. "Take off your blouse." Still swirling, hips fucking a low, syncopated jazz, Rea stroked and floated on the notes, pulled hazily on the sides of a gossamer smock, trailed her skin with sliding, questioning fingers. Cole held his breath, focused on the soft cinnamon aureoles, the hardening pointing nipples. Her breasts hung gently, playing a soft half-step to the shifting, hissing snare of her hips. "Take off your skirt." Rea pushed down on it, stepped away. Drunk on the pale, milky white opening, inviting slits, he felt himself fall.

As she swayed, turning slowly on her heels to the music, Cole unzipped his pants, caught and pulled her with his eyes. *Now. Come here.* Still swimming to the rhythms of an atonal sax, Rea knelt between his legs, knees against the couch, arms on his thighs. Lollipops and an ice cream cone, he'd said, but stronger, warmer. Put your mouth around the candy and pull the hard round center out from its soft coating. Hold onto the cone. Feel its texture with your fingers. Remember how you lick the sides, catching the drips from the bottom to top? Like that. Relax, open your mouth over the ice cream, savor the taste, suck until you've taken it all. Cole buried his hands in damp sienna hair, held her head by the sides and pressed firmly, guiding Rea slowly to his beat. The largest toe of his right foot burrowed into cloves of fur, circled lightly, teased and pressed. Rea, I want all of me inside all of you. Her mouth ached from friction on the stretched sides and roof, as Cole thrust harder, drove faster, pushed deeper. Rea's hands slid under him, forward, found a pelvic grip. Please, she thought, I'm almost gone. And he filled her,

pushing hot jets exploding against the back of her throat, running into the deepest parts of her. Ground in the widening, crashing waves from her hips, a kaleidoscope of colors flashed, shimmered, took shape, dissolved. Cole fell back, exhausted. Rea swallowed, sank for a moment, then leaned into his aroma like a cat, licking him wantonly, gently clean. Resting her head, Rea nestled into the twisting browns and blondes of his hair. I'm shot up with Cole, she thought sleepily, and higher than I've ever been. He's in my veins now, in my blood.

Rea piled the bills, pulling them toward her with a gold three-inch heel, and bent deftly scrunching them, and the twenty tucked beneath the sliver of an ankle strap, into her purse. Throwing the dark bag over her shoulder, she walked quickly down the few stairs towards a table backed into the restaurant's darkest corner, smiled without turning to catcalls from drunken men and a slim, dark-haired woman at the bar.

"Where've you been? Haven't seen you in awhile."

"Working. Museums. Discovered the Guggenheim," Rea explained, lighting a cigarette and leaning back on the metal-flowered chair. Her legs ached as she crossed and recrossed them. Loosening the tension, she traced small circles with her feet into the musty void under the table. "Coils of delight, Miro sculptures. I practically lived there last week."

"Cole back?"

Rea laughed. "Would I be here?"

"I don't know. You said he didn't mind."

"He doesn't. I just wouldn't."

"You don't miss it?"

She shook her head. "It's a hoot, a diversion. Time killer."

"Makes you feel good?" Tom pressed.

Rea consulted her body. "Yeah, why not?"

"No reason." Tom shrugged, avoiding a repetition of her refusals. "It's your dime."

Rea sighed in contentment and sipped through a straw on her rum and coke.

"Right," she said. "It's my dime."

"Are you and I okay?"

"Yes." Jenny turned toward the kitchen again. "Have you been avoiding me on purpose because of all this?"

"I didn't want to talk about it, didn't want it to come up."

She poured herself some more juice and opened another beer for Darla before reentering the livingroom. "I want you to come over to the house this weekend. I'll fix supper for us all, invite some other people. And I'll tell Kevin to leave you alone."

"Oh, I couldn't. Will he?"

"Yes, you can." She handed Darla her beer and sat down again. "And if I tell him to, he will. You're my best friend and that's what I want you to be."

Darla sniffled. "I wish we'd had this talk a few months ago."

"That's all right," Jenny said, comfortingly. "You weren't ready yet."

"No, I wasn't," Darla agreed. "I was too confused by everything that happened and too heartbroken."

"Do you think Steve will show up again?"

"I don't know. Truthfully, he disappeared once before when he was really jealous angry, remember? But he didn't stay gone this long."

"Wait it out," Jenny advised. "You love him. And he loves you."

"I do. I'm not interested in anyone else."

"Meantime," Jenny counselled, "take care of yourself and get well. I think he just might turn up one of these days."

"I hope you're right."

"I'm right," Jennifer assured her. She was older and knew more about men. And she knew Steve. She might even try to contact him herself, straighten out the mess that Kevin had caused between them. A warning light gleamed inside her, then. She knew she had better leave it alone for Darla and Steve to work out together when they were ready. He'd be back, she felt sure, when his wounds had healed.

Skipped

She never stepped on a crack.
Reassured the world is squared,
And all at right angles.
Near-sighted to every smoothed
Crevice and fractuous blur at the
edges.
And the ledges lured her
To the panic of their frenzy,
To the fiery hurtle off the plain.
They would never be the same.
Fracked.

~

Adele bent to roll a small sizzling log back into the stone-lined fireplace with the black metal poker her grandfather had used similarly during the years she

played and grew in his four-storied Victorian home with its cozily comforting echoes from each corner and vestibule of energetic lives and ebullient personnas in settled generations prior to them bustling with purposeful productivity.

The Watsons who'd purchased it at a bargain used those savings to modernize and reconfigure every room with contemporary style and convenience so that Adele barely recognized what had been cooking, studio or wash rooms. The old library had become a marble-floored grand bar with a guest-sized jacuzzi hot tub in the corner where her secretary-desk had been. Adele demurred for years from event invitations she experienced as discomfitingly disorienting, although Kayla Watson effused with genuinely warm welcoming on every occasion, inadvertent and formal, as did her teenage son Davey. The old back porch morphed into a tile-inlaid art deco patio for outdoor private festivities. All the once-sparkling chandeliers had been replaced by clean lines of practical low-watt and eco-friendly recessed lighting.

"The ghosts don't know where to go or sit," Adele's sister Hattie complained. "Uncle Patrick had an awkward fit that you walled up the opening from his study to the living room!"

"Did he bump his head?" Kayla inquired sympathetically.

"Absolutely. You know how his temper gets," she noted to Adele. "It was an ugly moment."

"Does he mutter and stutter in a high voice when he's angry?" Davey broke in excitedly. Adele and Hattie nodded their identically red-haired heads nearly in unison.

"He lets me have it some nights when I'm trying to go to sleep."

"Yes, you're in his room, one of them," Adele explained.

"Do you sleep under the window?" Hattie asked solicitously. Davey nodded in reluctant affirmation.

"He wants to get back on his day-bed."

“I’m in his way,” Davey summarized his apprehension of the distressingly uncivil situation.

Great-grandpa Dedrick leaned over Adele’s left shoulder to whisper about the small burning coal that had rolled out during her Watson reverie onto the woven carpet of the compact home she’d built on five hilly acres they’d retained from the spreading original estate orchard.

“Thanks, Dee,” her body exhaled into the spirits embracing her.

“Hattie, you can bring the steaks. The coals are just about right now.”

Her sister appeared with a foil-wrapped buttered corncob in each hand to throw into the embers scattered in the cooking pit under their antique iron grill.

“Dee’s been here, hasn’t he?” she demanded inquisitively. “I can smell the tobacco in his pipe,” Hattie shared with her sister intuit.

“Mmmm-m. Hawaiian Clove Mangrove Extra-Deluxe,” Adele agreed, inhaling with lusty sensuality. “I’d recognize it anywhere.”

“He was sporting his racing tweeds, wasn’t he? I can feel the threads against my arm. And smell the mothballs too!” Hattie scrunched her small sun-freckled nose into olfactory distaste.

“Grandma Frannie was wearing that wide pheasant-feathered hat with the huge rainbow-colored lace ribbons. Remember that?”

“She musta figured out how to unlock the attic chest,” Hattie noted with surprise. “I hid the key under my sapphire and amethyst family jewelry.”

“She’da known to look there,” Adele reminded her sister of Fran’s genetically legendary extrasensories.

The remaining Pattel sisters unwound their dual sensitivities down gracefully into the thickly-piled leopard faux-fur diagonals before their supper cooking in the fireplace to await patiently their traditional birthday celebratory repast.

finis

8. "Hullabaloo, Tennessee"

Christopher set the vase down on the braided rug by Aunt Jill's upholstered rocking chair. Where Puddles, their new dalmation, quickly skidded and skated on freshly-waxed wood of the cabin's flooring into it.

Oh, beautiful," Roger cooed. "Odd purple rainbow pieces are so art deco. Much better, Puddy. Thanks, buddy."

"Sorry," Chris mumbled, scooping the pieces into a brown paper bag.

"I don't care. It was a boring old family pottery thing. I'll reglue it tomorrow morning into something new and startling."

Chris hummed the tune to "Purple Rain."

"Yeah. With the pieces cascading down like rain."

"With splashes of silver glitter paint for drops."

"And a splotch of it at the base. We'll call it 'Puddles'."

"Way cool." Chris began a jig in front of the puppy before scooping him up against his chest.

"You're brilliant, Puddy. See?"

Hey! Hey! Hey!" Linda shook her head and permed salt-and-pepper hair loose, looking up through overhead slats at green-tinged liquid dribbling

through.

"Ai! Yi-yi." Davey crooned.

"You forgot the friggin plate again! What the bleepin bleep is wrong with you?"

"I miss your sweet voice."

"I'll make a tape."

"All swear words? Promise?"

"Wrapped in old underwear."

"God, I miss that. The shreds."

"The blood."

"Ah. The good old months. Please come back."

"To you?"

"No. The plants miss you. Especially the Boston fern."

"Did you take its plate away too?"

"No, it misses the soft touch you are. I mean, your soft touch.

"I didn't forget the twenty. I was getting around to it when you watered me."

Lydia scratched her jagged nails through bulky secret recesses of her woven handbag and threw it against the enameled breakfront while wads of paper tissues, vials of lipstick and perfume, one small kidskin change purse, several silver dollars and wrinkled notepads exploded in profusion onto the oriental carpet around Katey's sandal-shod feet.

"I can't find my daggum reading glasses," Lydie explained to her bemused neice. "Would you read the inscription out loud to me that's beside that over-sized cornstalk native doll in the case? Please," she added out of

restrained respect for one of her favorites amongst that generation of kinfolk.

Clearly and distinctly, Katey complied:

"In laudatory remembrance of the notably and extraordinarily outstanding women of the State of Franklin who, during the Revolutionary and Civil Wars particularly, while their men left to fight for The Union -- the United States of America, worked alone and in concert to manage homes, businesses, schools, entertainments, communities and to raise children in establishing here a tradition of felicitous strength in faith and good individual and communal purpose."

As Lydia smiled in contented satisfaction, Katey knelt to scoop up the hard purple case with her reading spectacles.

"Our Cherokee neighbors also are respectfully reverent ecologically, socially, spiritually, historically and now toward The Female Aspect. That has been significant for us in beneficent impact and influence over centuries too," retired Professor Lee Marianne Ravensong instructed, fitting the Tennessee oyster-pearl glasses methodically over the ridge of her sun-wizened nose for a clearer view of the doll's multi-colored linen skirt, deerskin smock and boots, and brightly beaded head-dress.

IdaMae woke and broke free from her dream of tumbling down a familiar flowered hill with startled reluctance to disentangle stubborn toes knotted into her mother's loosely-crocheted summer afghan for sloughing barefoot toward the sound of persistent knocking at the back window.

"Sorry, Idy, I locked my keys in the car again." Babs knelt down, golden madras dress flared over her knees and feet, to talk through the opened window.

"Okay, let me remember where I put the chain...."

"I think it's in your walnut jewelry box. The one with the big brass latch."

IdaMae giggled. "Hope I didn't lock it." Idy groaned in Babs direction as she

reached that corner of the room and hefted the small closed box into honeysuckle-scented air.

“Undo the screws on the latch,” Babs advised.

“Come on in and get me a case knife,” IdaMae directed on opening the back screen door. The loose-bottomed drawer full of jumbled server pieces clattered as Babs fingered and peered for a stand-in hardware tool.

“Will this do?” She held up a worn goldtone filigreed butter knife for IdaMae’s inspection and approval.

Idy grabbed it. “It better.” She sank into the davenport’s warm cordoroy and turned the box on its side, hoisting Lowell’s oversized tee up around her waist, stationing the box firmly between her thighs and working the latch loose.

“Here you go,” she called, holding out a looped metal chain rigid with assorted keys, into the open kitchen doorspace.

“Where’s Low?” Babs wondered aloud.

“Dunno. He was gone when I woke up.”

“His chariot’s in the lot.”

“It is?” Idy blurted in surprise.

“A friend musta stopped by. Maybe Percy Johns. Did you know he’s back in town?”

“By himself?” Babs asked carefully.

“No. Meathook’s with him.”

“Still blonde, bubbly, and bad?”

“I reckon. Just got a whiff of the poison pot in passing.”

“What does Low do?”

“Ignores it all. Turns off his mind and padlocks his pants.”

Babs crinkled her nose, closed her eyes and nodded her head slowly. “Thank God. You too, right?”

“Yeah. Wide berth on a large earth.”

Babs sniffed. “Where are they staying? So I know which way not to drive.”

“In the van, I think. Wherever they can park and leave it.”

“The Dad’s dough gone?”

“Probably. I don’t ask. They don’t tell.”

“Okay. I gotta get home and changed for work. Thanks for the key.” Babs left by the front door, turned right onto the railed porch and into her adjacent apartment.

“Watch for the gray van!” Idy warned.

“You bet.” Babs called in return.

“I know this sounds corny.... Do you have any brown sugar?” Linda burst out in stepping alongside a fellow tenant she recognized.

Roger laughed. “Is that a trick question to answer?”

“No. I just got a sudden hankering for a cream-stuffed grilled sweet potato.”

“Yes, we do have brown sugar today. Come on in,” Roger invited, holding the door open generously with an unsleeved golden arm into the great room with its handwoven earthtone Native American wall hangings, colorfully abstract ceramic art pieces, and assorted African drums. Multi-colored dream catchers and medicine wheels swayed by a nearby ceiling fan hung before the large bay window with its distant mountain view.

“Wow,”Liddy exclaimed. ”I love this room.”

“Thanks,” Roger answered on his way into the kitchen. “Slip into something comfortable. Like the ottoman. Do you have time for coffee? We have fresh-brewed espresso. And almond-cherry cream.”

“Mmm-m. I’d love it,” Linda agreed, settling into the soft back of her seating to examine the room. “Where did all the ultra-realism paintings come from?”

“You like them?”

“Very much.”

“Roomie’s family is nearly all artists, including musicians that make their own handcrafted instruments.”

“Beautiful flutes,” Liddy commented.

“They use native woods in innovatively traditional ways. They’re a little famous for it, amongst aficionados. Dollywood carries them,” Roger added proudly. “And a few fine Gatlinburg galleries. And the museum gift shop up in Qualla Boundary. Each one’s numbered and named in Tsalagi.”

Swinging a small paper-wrapped package of brown sugar in his left hand, Roger balanced a brightly opaque demitasse saucer-and-cup with his right.

“Here you go,” he intoned, placing all on the matted glass table beside Linda.

“Can you play the flute?”

“No. Roomie’s the magician. The snake charmer. I just bang the drums, to keep it fam.”

“Cool. I’d love to hear and see it.”

“We’ll be in the Center Plaza during June Jubilee. And by the garden fountain at Craft Carousel.”

“Okay. I love both of those. Catch ya there.”

Linda relaxed into a comfortable stillness with her newly-discovered comrade to sip on thick coffee and study distantly all the gaily-designed magazines strewn around her.

“Is the café’ right?” Roger inquired.

“Perfection,” Liddy assured him. “Well, I need to be getting along. Thank you so much for the R&R.” Linda stood with the parcel of sugar and turned to

face her charmingly impromptu host.

“And the brown sugar.”

“Anytime. Glad for the company.” Roger walked her to the door.

Dave tinkered impatiently with the strings, waiting really for the long summer day to darken and cool in allowance of his purpose since dawn awakening to a fawn-shaded dream of mountain hiking trails so high that strands of dewey-wet clouds whisped through lushly green stands of bush and brush.

Alicia disturbed his intent reverie around suppertime, insisting that he sample her thick squirrel stew with mashed potatoes and squash. And malty home brew suds. Dave cut with his pocket/boot knife into the crusty-brown round of her freshly-baked bread and pulled off a still-steaming guy-sized chunk to dip into gravy. Then returned to his padded floor mat to lean back against the feather-down pillows she'd given for Christmas to chord, strum and pick through their latest tune. Humming, Alicia added a few harmonizing riffs quietly on the piano, stood and gathered together mealtime leftovers to slide alone into the cascading violets of twilight.

Solitude begged Dave to climb into its steep incline.

He walked to the pine slab door, hoisted the 30-30 over his left shoulder, reached for the small green box of bullets to stuff into his pants pocket, secured the snap. Closing the doorlock behind him, Dave headed into a moonlit field of fallen bits of stars pulsing against uneven ground. Stopped to the murmur of his breathing, Dave heard branch-and-twig rustling within the forested grove to his right, stood breathless in place. Not even his eyes moved.

Softly, in a serpentine turn, he lifted the rifle and aimed it toward that telling rent of sleeptime quietude. The small buck froze in the light, fell quickly after the shot hit its mark, perfectly Dave discovered on starry examination. Centered right between its eyes.

Ahead lay all the work of dragging, bleeding, gutting, hanging, butchering and cleaning, cooking or wrapping for storage.

And savoring each exquisitely tender and tasty, gourmet morsel.

Dave had acknowledged himself as a teen to be a usually pacific omnivore streaked with restrained primal urgings that required attentive respect.

Now he knelt again by the deer, thanking God for mysterious blessings in the sacred silence of the kill.

finis

8. "Itty Bit, New York"

Gary leaned over the stove. He stirred the spaghetti thoughtfully. Would Jean show up? He put a bottle of white wine in the refrigerator and set the table with a white cloth and white napkins. He got out his mother's silver and shined it with polish in the sink. He re-stacked the magazines on the coffee table, emptied and washed the ashtray, and dusted the smooth glass surface. He stared at the phone. She was late. Should he call? No, he'd wait for awhile. Anything could have happened. She might be stuck in traffic. She might have had trouble deciding what to wear, as women do. He tied the garbage bag and took it outside, put a new one in. He found a vase in the cabinet and put the flowers from the living room in it, set it in the middle of the dining table. Finally, he sat down on the sofa and turned on the television. He watched it unseeingly. Where was she?

"Finally," he said, opening the door. "I wondered what happened to you."

Jean stepped across the threshold with some trepidation. She didn't really know Gary well and had accepted his invitation by sudden whim, borne of a loneliness that pulled at her heart lately. She needed to make a change in her

life. Something wasn't right, was missing from it. The attentions of a man had eluded her for several years, partly of her own choosing. Coming out of her shell again, so to speak, seemed to be the answer, a step forward toward engaging in the world and the swirl of humanity in it again. She had removed herself, concentrated on her work for too long. She walked with more determination into the room.

"Sorry. Believe it or not, I got lost on the freeway. Took the wrong exit and had a hell of a time getting back to where I was. There's a lot of traffic."

"It's the holidays. Rough time to travel." Jean took off her coat and Gary hung it in the closet carefully. He silently admired her tastefully tailored blue suit and matching high heels balancing long, slim legs. Her figure was nearly perfect, he assessed, especially for a woman of her years.

"Want a drink before we eat?" he inquired with nervous cheer. It had been awhile since he'd entertained anyone formally and he felt ill at ease, forgetting what might be the correct thing to say or order of details.

Jean stood by the door, shaking her long hair loose and running her fingers through it to loosen the strands. "Sure," she agreed, uncomfortably.

"Here," he offered, remembering his manners and gesturing vaguely toward the picture window. "Have a seat on the sofa while I get it."

As Jean settled in to the soft gray cushions, Gary left to pull crystal wine glasses from the cabinet. He opened the refrigerator door noisily and found the chablis, poured it carefully and turned toward Jean.

"Nice house," she commented politely.

"Thank you." Gary nearly caught one large foot on the carpet as he reentered the room. "Want a tour?"

Jean thought some movement might allay the awkwardness between them. "I'd love one," she said.

He handed her a glass as she stood and put a steering hand gently on her back. "This way," he guided toward the spacious hall. "There're three bedrooms and a loft studio. Two baths, including the master off the largest bedroom. Lots of closets. Cathedral ceilings wherever I could manage them. Skylights."

Jean examined each room in detail and with approval. The house was immaculate and cozy despite its size. Bright colors adorned cushions and knickknacks and drapes. Only the thick carpet was plain, and even it had a subtle hint, shades of blue and green. It felt like a home well-lived in and cared for over the years.

"You designed it?" she asked in some astonishment.

In his mind's eye Gary saw the drawing board he'd taken down and his mounds of charts and scriblings. He felt Deidre leaning over his shoulder to gaze at the latest idea, now crystallized around him. He shook his head and put his hands in his pockets casually. "About seven years ago."

"It's large for one person," Jean commented carefully, as she peered into a guest bedroom. The house seemed like a family place. Unlike hers, she thought, so uninviting for children, or even much company. A nausea overcame her briefly, as she took in where she was and with whom. A relative stranger, she reminded herself nervously.

Gary coughed, holding a weathered and veined hand to his mouth. "It used to hold a wife and two kids."

"Oh," Jean said in some surprise. "I didn't know you were married." She'd pictured him as a bachelor. Panic overwhelmed her. She didn't know him. What was she doing here?

Sensing dismay, Gary reached for her hand and led her down the hall further. "For fifteen years," he explained, "give or take a few months and days and hours."

His hand felt firm and warm. "Are you," she hesitated uncomfortably and with a hidden terror, "divorced?"

Gary gazed into her open eyes and smooth upturned face. He examined the beige makeup and blue eye shadow, the hint of red on her lips, her small pink ears and trailing salt-and-pepper hair. She was really beautiful in a mature way, he decided in the end. "It'll be final in about two weeks," he assured her gently.

"Uh-huh," Jean murmured, relaxing from the tension and looking upwards.

"What a wonderful skylight," she continued with some enthusiasm, examining the master bath. "Lots of light and plants. How lovely." She felt a woman's touch throughout and cringed a little. The aura of his soon-to-be ex-wife permeated his home. She felt unwelcome and wanted a name for it. "What was her name?"

"Deidre." Gary said it with a certain emotive flatness. He remembered her passion for decorating, saw her climbing ladders and holding paint brushes, choosing furniture in different stores. He felt her hand on him, restraining some whim as the house developed.

Jean wondered if Deidre was pretty. Did she have slimmer legs? Was she a blonde? "She did most of the decorating?" Jean quizzed.

"We did it together," Gary demurred, closing the door to each room as they walked back down the hall toward the living room. His feet felt leaden and his head ached dimly. Deidre's ghost leaned out from around the corner, accusingly. He shuddered and blinked his eyes. "How's your wine?" he asked Jean, diverting his thoughts to the present.

She arranged herself again on the couch and examined the magazines.

"Wonderful, thanks," she answered, leafing through pages unseeingly. Her eyes focused. Decorator Home. Handyman Repairs. House Anew. Her heart ached briefly for what must have been better days and dreams. "You did a lot of the work yourself?"

Gary settled into the gray lounge chair briefly and sipped his wine. "I did what I could. Hired out the rest."

She straightened the magazines absently. "What parts did you do?"

He felt restless at the questioning and held himself with a will into the chair. "Wiring, plumbing, drywall, paper hanging."

Her spirits lifted. Fabulous, Jean thought to herself. An all-around handyman. Something her house could use, could have used over the years. She'd needed a man but never found the right one, had given up several times. Her affairs had been desultory, lacking in real warmth and care, she reflected, and the sex had never really been that good. She wondered if it was her or them.

"Are you ready for supper?" Gary asked hopefully, needing a change. Conversing with a woman again was difficult. He'd become unaccustomed to feminine presence, some daintiness in it, some need to be helped.

She gazed toward the dining room. "Yes indeed," she responded with enthusiasm. "You've laid the table out so fetchingly." She almost teased him about the propriety of the settings, then thought better of it. Instead she seated herself promptly and put a napkin in her lap. Her mood in the house, she noted, rose and fell along with her comfort level. Deidre must have been a formal hostess.

Gary walked toward the stove and picked up a large slotted spoon. "I hope you like spaghetti."

"Love it," Jean assured him gratefully.

He pulled bread out of the oven and put it on a silver platter. Then he ladled spaghetti and sauce onto two white china plates rimmed in gold. The accoutrements seemed to require explanation. "Deidre left quite a bit behind when she moved."

Jean's eyes swept the table. "Lucky for you," she said, fingering around the rim of her plate.

"It's strange," Gary commented, seating himself heavily. "It's like she's still around."

"A ghost," Jean agreed, feeling the presence again. "Maybe she meant it that way."

"I don't know," Gary picked up his fork, pondering the question in some frustration. "She didn't want to be married anymore. She was adamant about it."

Reaching for her wine, Jean asked curiously, "What did she, does she want?"

Gary swallowed and wiped his mouth slowly with linen. "A place and life of her own, she said. Time by herself."

Jean sipped quickly, to settle her nerves. "That's hard with kids," she commented and added, "This spaghetti is delicious."

Gary pushed a few stray gray hairs back. "Thank you. Jeff and David are in school during the day."

Jean ate quietly for awhile, following each bite with a sip of wine. "What does she do?" she asked finally.

"Who?" Gary was lost in reverie. He saw his sons riding their bicycles, reading in their rooms, watching TV, playing basketball by the garage, yelling and falling over each other and him. He saw his wife calling from the house for them to come in and eat or clean or study or work. A sigh escaped him and he sunk a little into his chair, shoulders sagging. "Oh, Deidre. Of course. She paints," he answered succinctly with a slight grimace.

"How nice." Jean wanted the ghost into the open where she could exorcise it. "What kind of painting does she do?"

"Watercolors." Gary despaired of the topic, one he'd been over and over with Deidre and supported with generosity and general good humor over the years. He wanted to forget her, to erase the memory somehow. "Would you like some more bread?" he asked instead, holding the platter toward Jean. "What are your hobbies?" He needed a companion entirely different, he reflected again. To start over. To cover the old with totally new.

"Yes, it's garlic isn't it?" Jean dunked a piece in sauce. "I like gardening," she answered, "reading, occasionally writing." Jean described her garden, how she prepared and planted and pruned and weeded and harvested the small plot of land by the side of her house. Her haven from whatever beset her at various times, a resting and restorative place of connection to whatever's most basic.

Gary swirled a final fork-full of spaghetti and leaned in toward her. "That's interesting. And what do you write?"

**"Oh, mostly letters to the editor," she demurred self-consciously.
"Sometimes a guest column."**

"I'd love to see them."

"I'll bring some to you sometime." Jean wasn't sure if that was forward. They'd just met and were eating their first meal together. How did she know he'd want to see her again?

As if reading her mind, Gary answered, "I'm really happy you agreed to come over."

"It's a treat," Jean assured him, "to be cooked for and served dinner by a man. And in such style too."

"More bread?" Gary held the tray toward her and she shook her head, no. "So," he continued, "have you been married?"

"No." Jean pushed her plate back a bit. "I've been close a few times but never made it down the aisle."

Gary watched her sipping daintily out of the crystal glass. "Anything special keep you from it?"

Jean looked down at her lap. "Some say fear of commitment." She looked in his eyes. "I think I just liked my life the way it is."

"Tell me about your house," he coaxed her.

"Oh, it's a small cabin," she replied modestly. "Out in the woods really. Lots of rabbits, wildlife around."

He meant to draw her out of a silence that threatened to envelop them. "Have you had it long?"

"About three years," she replied. "I moved there from an apartment in town. It's a real treat," she added.

"You don't miss town?" Gary asked quizzically.

"I miss some things about it." Jean took her napkin and placed it by the plate. "Convenience of stores and restaurants. But I love the peace of the country."

Gary refilled her wine glass. "Have you neighbors close by?"

"Not too close," she explained. "I can't see the houses except in winter when all the leaves are off."

"Tell me about your work."

Jean pushed her hair behind her ears. "My job?"

"Yes."

"Oh, it isn't much," she said softly. "I manage a small gift shop for an out-of-state owner. Well," she added as an afterthought, "it keeps me busy."

"Do you have lot of traffic?"

Jean shook her head again. "It's kind of seasonal. Winter holidays and mid-summer when the tourists come through." A quiet shrouded them as they drank their wine. She reflected on the store, remembered a task she'd forgotten and needed to do in the next few days. Finally, Jean asked, "What about your work?"

"Accounting," Gary smiled, deep creases showing around his mouth and eyes. "Dry stuff."

Jean had an affinity for numbers, kept the books for the shop owner and did it well. "Do you like it?"

He smiled kindly. "I'm used to it."

"How long have you been doing that?"

"For different companies for quite a few decades now."

"Are you close to retirement?" she wondered out loud.

"In a few years."

Jean held her glass loosely and twirled it a bit in her hand. "What will you do then?"

"Oh, I'll have some private accounts to take care of," he said, pouring more wine. "I'll piddle around with the house. I'll play golf."

"You like golf?"

"Yes, I do." Gary reached for the last piece of bread. "I got intrigued with it a couple of years ago."

Jean rubbed a gray-blue eye tiredly. "Are you a sportsman?" she asked politely.

"Yes, I'd say so. Played football and ran track when I was younger. Took up tennis for awhile. What about you?"

Jean examined her quiet life briefly. "I'm more of a stay-home-and-crochet kind of person." She sipped on her wine and wondered how lively Deidre was. "I have played some sports but it isn't with great enthusiasm. Or talent," she amended. She meant to ask if his wife played tennis but was diverted.

"Shall we go back into the living room?" Gary asked quickly, picking up plates and heading toward the sink.

"Sure."

"More wine?"

Jean sat back on the sofa and admired the glass chandelier. "I'd love it," she responded, picking up her glass again and emptying it. Gary opened another bottle he'd saved in the back of the refrigerator.

"May I sit beside you?" Gary asked hesitantly when he came back into the room.

"Yes, of course," Jean agreed.

Standing over the coffee table, he refilled their glasses before settling on the sofa. She slid over and he left some space between them, hung his right arm loosely over the back of the couch. "Well," he said, lifting his glass, "here's to chance encounters."

"Yes," Jean agreed, touching his glass with hers. "I don't usually accept home invitations from such new acquaintances."

"Why did you this time?" Gary asked curiously. Secretly he'd been surprised when she'd accepted his invitation. He hadn't been able to resist the allure of her in the bookstore, as they'd conversed over literature and later shared coffee and bagels.

Jean reflected on their meeting and the state of her mind. She had yearned for companionship, tiring again of her solitary life. "You seemed like such a very nice, comfortable person," she said. "I enjoyed our conversation."

He relaxed with his wine. "Anything else?"

"A little lonely maybe."

Gary was surprised. "You felt that?"

"It was, is something in your eyes."

He sighed. "Can't hide it, I guess."

"What's it like?" Jean asked softly.

"The house used to be full of people. Different sizes and shapes of course. I was used to it."

"And now?"

Gary shifted somewhat on the cushion. "I amble around it, almost bouncing off walls. Remembering this and that. It's hard."

Jean nodded. "Is it all the time?"

"No," he admitted. "Not always. Not now. Not when I'm busy." His fingers played on her shoulder. "I forget about it sometimes."

Jean leaned toward the table a bit. "You have hobbies?"

He sat back further. "Aside from golf, I've been making bird boxes for outside."

"That's nice," she said, encouragingly.

A weary look crossed his pale blue eyes. "It keeps my hands and mind

concentrated."

Jean fiddled with the tassels on a throw pillow. "Do you see your kids?" she asked finally.

Gary paused, while Jean lit a cigarette. "Every other weekend."

"Oh, do you mind if I smoke?"

"I'm not crazy about it," he advised. "But I won't object. Deidre smokes."

Briefly, Jean felt like quitting. "Thank you." She inhaled thoughtfully. "She's quite a bit younger than you are?" Jean guessed.

"Young and restless." Gary said summarily and geared the topic with determination toward Jean instead. "You never wanted children?"

"Not really." She reviewed chances over the years. Marriage proposals she'd declined in the end. An abortion in her twenties. "Not enough. You did?"

"When I got in my forties," Gary's eyes brightened, "all of a sudden I wanted a family."

"Do you think it was a mid-life crisis?" she asked, remembering nearly

marrying a close friend when she'd been in her forties.

Gary closed his eyes, recalling bachelor years. He'd dated and partied generously, climbing company ladders to higher positions with more money and responsibility. He hadn't really questioned the path preordained by his parents before he'd even entered college, except to desist frequently from scolding that he hadn't found a suitable wife. "Perhaps. Or maybe I just gave in to the inevitable eventually."

"I'm sorry it didn't work out." She wanted to comfort him and patted the hand laying on his right leg.

"Too many differences," he answered edgily, moving from the gesture with a bachelor's unease. "Not just age."

Jean stared down, slipped a turquoise and silver ring off and on her index finger. "How long have you been separated?" she asked finally.

"Nearly a year." Gary rubbed her shoulder gently. "You don't get lonely?"

"Yes, I do sometimes."

He realized he wanted to know her better. "What do you do then?"

"Take a walk. Visit a neighbor. Call someone."

Gary imagined walking through a woods hand in hand with her as an evening sun fell. "Does it work?"

Sipping anxiously on her wine, she felt a slight atmospheric tug from the inner warmth of Gary. "Sort of."

"Do you believe in soul mates?" he asked suddenly, turning his face toward her.

"I'm not sure," Jean answered from a solitary space. She relaxed back into the arm behind her, rested her head on it. "I'd like to. But I've never met one." Her despair was nearly palpable. It wafted into the room over Deidre's ghost and hung heavily in the silence.

Gary placed his glass on the table. "Maybe I could be one?" he asked gently.

Jean slipped off her shoes and wiggled a toe thoughtfully in circles over the carpet. "Maybe," she said finally. "I'm unusually comfortable with you."

"I like you too," he assured her. There was a nervous silence. "May I kiss you?" he asked in a low tone.

Jean's heart jumped and then settled. "Yes," she replied. She had wondered when, if he would, and how.

Gary reached over slowly, put his left hand on her shoulder, ran a finger over her lips. "Are you sure?" he wondered.

"Yes," she advised him with a hunger rising from her stomach, a passion barely contained.

His mouth touched hers, then pressed firmly. His chest was against her. Her lips parted as his tongue explored and she responded with heat. Satisfied, he leaned back. "How was that?" he asked, needing verbal confirmation.

Jean felt a little high, like her body was floating. "Good," she said. "Very good."

He leaned forward to pour more wine. "Why don't you snuggle in closer?" Gary suggested, pulling her closer. "We can watch the fire for awhile."

She nestled in, curling her feet on the sofa, enjoying the wine and warmth. Music from the stereo filled her consciousness, along with the soothing bulk of Gary beside her. "This is heavenly," she breathed finally.

"You could stay," he suggested carefully.

Her eyelids felt heavy. "The night, you mean?"

"Yes, the night."

Jean was hypnotized, as if she couldn't move or think on her own. She broke the spell with practicality. Her eyes opened wide again. "I haven't any bedclothes, or clothes for the morning." She put her feet on the carpet and sat up straight.

"It doesn't matter really, does it?" Gary murmured, nuzzling her ear.

Jean sank back from the momentary tension. Maybe it didn't matter after all. She was always so prudent, so cautious. Gary was a good chance to take, she pondered sleepily. "What have you got in this wine?" she wondered aloud.

"Nothing." Gary grinned. "What do you mean?"

She blinked her eyes quickly. "I feel so ... mellow."

"Perfect." He held Jean closer. "Will you stay?"

She put her glass on the table. His fire glowed and the aura of Deidre faded out of the room. Her head swam briefly. "Yes," Jean said with an abrupt determination. "I'll stay."

Gary led her into the master bedroom and took her in his arms. "I'm so glad you're here," he murmured, fondling her breasts, burying his head and nuzzling her neck.

"Me too," she answered with an anticipatory sigh and arched, rubbing against the manliness of him. They disrobed each other quickly. Gary pulled back the covers and they fell into a searching, needful embrace. Later, he wrapped around her and they slept in peaceful bliss.

A whiff of bacon woke her in the morning. What a gem, she thought dreamily, reaching for rumpled clothes. The room was bathed in light and color. Her body felt near muscleless. She sank back briefly into the pillows and curled like a snail against the covers.

"Good morning," he announced with cheer, as she meandered finally toward the kitchen. "How do you like your eggs?" The sight again of a woman with him to begin the day lifted his spirits. Her hair was uncombed and haloed her small face in slight curls. Her makeup had worn off and the glow of her skin charmed him.

She felt a little disoriented. Jean blinked her eyes and focused on the surroundings: Gary at the stove, coffee perking on the counter. A tug pulled her mind toward home, the small kitchen overlooking the woods and the cereal she usually ate every morning by the window. "Over easy," she requested. "With coffee."

He opened the refrigerator door and reached toward the back. "Have a seat. I'll bring them right over."

"You really are a find," Jean said, admiring his lithe body as well as his cooking skills.

"Put me in your gift shop," he joked, bearing a cup to the table.

She reached for her coffee and sipped slowly as he finished preparing breakfast. They ate in a comfortable, reflective silence as sun poured in the windows.

Finally, he cleared his throat. "I have to go to work pretty soon," Gary informed her, clearing the plates.

"That's okay," Jean assured him, pushing back from the table. "I have things to do today too."

An awkward interval fell, as Jean gathered her shoes and purse. Would he ask? When would she see him again?

"I'll call you," he said at the door, buttoning her coat snugly.

"Okay," she breathed in relief. "I'll look forward to it."

They kissed briefly and he guided her out.

"Lovely evening," she said, then turned to walk down the sidewalk.

"It was," he agreed, half-closing the door. "Take care."

Jean reached for her keys.

After a few days of not hearing from him, Jean sucked up her courage and called Gary's telephone number. The answering machine said to leave a message. She did. Silence. A week later, she called again. Again, the answering machine took a message. Jean turned the evening over and over in her mind, word for word, kiss for kiss, body for body. He wasn't going to call or respond. Where was the clue? She took a walk, visited her neighbors, and phoned Penny, a friend in Cincinnati.

"Some men," Penny advised, "never get over their first real love. Maybe Deidre was his soul mate. Or at least he thinks so."

"And he can't get over it?"

"Maybe he still hopes, despite everything, that it's true. Maybe they got back together."

Jean had thought of visiting his home and then discarded that as being an invitation for humiliation of some kind. She frequented the bookstore where they'd met and first had coffee together. He didn't appear there. Her head drooped in despair. "I guess I'll never know."

"I'd say you found a broken heart and helped alleviate it for one night."

Dark circles had etched themselves under Jean's usually bright eyes. Her view of the world and her place in it had dimmed. "That wasn't what I meant to do."

"No," her friend commiserated.

She held a hand on her chest, which felt heavier than normal lately and actually hurt sometimes. A depression had overcome her and she had trouble some days just getting herself to brush her hair and take care of everyday normal things like the garbage or the bookkeeping. "Now I've got a broken heart too."

"You thought he was the one?"

Jean felt tears forming again. "I really thought maybe he was."

"Broken hearts all around perhaps."

She pulled herself together with a sigh. "Some people are just meant to be alone, I guess."

"You've got me," Penny reminded.

Jean smiled palely. "Yes. Thank heaven." It isn't the same, though, she thought to herself. It isn't a warm body in bed with me at night. It isn't breakfast fixed in the morning, or any other meals. It isn't sitting by the fire

in a comfortable, hazy silence enjoying the evening and each other's presence side by side.

"You'll get over it," Penny advised.

Sadness pervaded her. "Yes," she agreed despondently. "Eventually I will."

After they said their goodbyes, Jean hung up the receiver and picked up her crocheting. The phone rang. Stretching for the receiver, her hand trembled again.

A low, rough voice said, "Jean?"

"Yes," she answered, with a trace of hostility, "how are you?"

He flinched from her tone. "Sorry," he explained. "I've been meaning to call. Busy with the divorce, you know."

"Is it final yet?"

"It was final yesterday."

A heaviness lifted from her heart. She frowned at what to say next. "Are you okay?" she asked finally.

"I'm relieved it's over," he assured her.

Me, too, Jean reflected, pausing for words.

"Would you go to dinner with me this evening?" he asked.

Jean adjusted her mind and heart to Gary's reality. "I'd love to," she sighed in satisfaction.

"Maybe bring some extra clothes this time?" he inquired with a teasing chuckle.

"Yes," Jean laughed, "this time I will."

10. "Jalopy Junction, Maine"

"Please welcome with a round of warm applause our renowned guest speaker, recently retired Professor Thomas Glatenburg of Mississippi's Chazzletown Tech Community College Mountain Craft and Fine Arts Department, for this evening's outstanding buffet and biennial meeting of our handwork heritage committee council."

Arthur stepped back against the stage wall with a sweeping motion of a sunburned right arm toward the lecturn.

"Tom, the floor's all yours."

Ginny dimmed the overhead lights, leaving the spot on Glatenburg.

Tom removed his glasses from the jacket's inner pocket, cleared his throat, brought the frequently-rehearsed speech to mind and opened the book he'd brought.

It's a pleasure to be here with all of you again. While most know, as former neighbors, students and colleagues.... Over the past forty-three years, I have visited and lived in Appalachia, a region that represents all that's best and worst of the American, and perhaps human, experience. Its settlers throughout the ages define still our history on the planet. Descendants of original native tribes, themselves immigrants from other countries and territories, find a place and voice amidst more modern ones, from the boundaries man has made of land and brain, the rough frontier of space. Its sometimes daunting crests and isolated glens protect and preserve nuances of distinct identities, from plant to mammal species.

The clash of resolutely independent accents, mores and morals wax to conflict and wane to a fragile peace. Popular mass icons, the MacDonalds and Holiday Inns, wash uneasily against canning jars grandma used, still filled each summer and fall with traditional home garden produce -- peas and beans, beets and corn, and a drumbeat more primitive and innate to the universe, the beginnings and endings of perception and time.

Servants of earth and sky dissonate against the cold bite of technology in everyday life. Our senses are overwhelmed by the juxtaposed images of ancient and futuristic, power corralled by a few on one level and dispersed among the many on another, our choices, individually and collectively, one by one for discerning and shaping realities, and the mechanistic forces uncontrolled in their direction and effect within which grandchildren will flourish and perish.

It all becomes too much and we retreat to the place where poets speak and arts record our turmoil. We object, we accept, we muddle through. Do we know very much, or nothing at all? A journey in Appalachia -- with its human color, diversity of nature, and stark display of contrasts from primordial to post-modern -- may help us find the truth of what we have been, where we stand now, and how we might travel through time still unformed by mind, body and soul.

Although some writing reflects other lifetimes, most of this latest collection marks the end of a personal sojourn in Appalachian backcountry and the end of a dream, a way of life there, not just for me personally but for the culture which has been absorbed more and more by urban areas to the East and the inevitable incursions, evolutions of industry.

If rural life, unplugged, was less than perfect, prosaic, pristine in its daily accoutrements, it held the awe and stillness, peace and truth of natural organic flow and the immanent presence of a Creator-God who whispered through each unmowed blade of grass, each ripple over aboriginal stone. Thank you for this opportunity to share my mountain memories.

Looking up toward the glassed equipment booth, Tom closed the book that held his notes.

After raising the auditorium lights, Ginny stood and walked forward to announce: "The line forms in our garden-side lobby for purchase of individually inscribed copies in hardback and soft cover of Tom's newest bestseller, Highland Haints: An Appalachian

Anthology. Thank you, Tom, for revisiting here and sharing again your time and thoughts with old friends."

She turned for a relaxed handshake that became a hug.

Peggy took the .22 from the corner quietly and walked down the stairs in the dark. She could hear the scratching noise at the door even louder from the livingroom. Stepping carefully down the hallway, she called, "Who is it?"

There was no answer, but the scratching continued. She reached for the door knob, holding the gun loosely in her right hand, and opened the door. There was no one there. A muted meow greeted her instead.

Peg looked down to see a scrawny yellow cat sitting patiently on the welcome mat. Peggy laughed out loud. "And I suppose you want to come in?" she said to it cheerily.

"Well, come on in and have some milk," she said. The cat followed her into the kitchen where she poured a cup for it and placed it on the floor by the table. The cat went to it immediately and licked it up with hungry appreciation.

"And what is your name?" she asked it. The cat, of course, simply meowed and rubbed against her leg as she sat on one of the kitchen chairs. "Shall we call you 'Sammy'?" Peggy asked.

The cat rubbed against her determinedly. "Okay," Peggy replied. "You can have some more milk. And some tuna fish." Peggy opened a can and Sammy ate quickly. He obviously had not eaten for awhile. His coat was scruffy and his body thin. Otherwise, he seemed healthy. His eyes were bright and his nose a soft clean pink.

"We'll take you down to Tamela's tomorrow," Peggy informed her new friend.

Tamela took in stray cats until homes could be found for them. Peggy was allergic to the fur and could never keep one for more than a few days without suffering from a runny nose and running eyes. She wished that situation were different, because she would have loved to keep a cat. She did not really care much for dogs.

"Tamela?" she said over the telephone the next morning.

"I have another stray for you.... No, it's healthy just underfed.... Shall I bring it over this afternoon?... No, I really can't.... Okay, I'll try to keep it for a few more days.... Thanks."

Peggy hung up in some consternation. Tamela's boarding home for felines was full. Peggy felt her nose begin to itch and run, simply at the thought of keeping Sammy for days in the house.

Instead, she shooed the cat outside where she placed another bowl of milk. Sammy yowled at the door, but Peggy returned to her upstairs studio room and ignored him....

"Can you picture it?" Abigail regaled the bar's routine lineup this Thursday night of toney exurban patrons on their ways home in designer suits and well-worn tag lines. "Me, in hot pink scrubs," he continued, reaching under the glass counter for a tall bottle of anisette, "and two-inch silver glitter nails, with stone-studded gold slingbacks to teeter around on, with the pot-bellied schmerfs from Hoboken in grandpa's overalls in charge of the drill."

Gail shook her long curly strawberry red wig, felt with her left hand where the oversized staying pins had come loose, and pushed them back commandingly toward her scalp.

"There ya go, Razyzy." Abby warned his friend to catch the chip-filled glass sliding down.

Abby turned to pour a chunky lime mix into the blender, set it on 'whir-high' with a dramatic pale-armed flourish and two-step before the floor-to-ceiling mirrored wall.

"Assa-insane," Lane agreed. "How'd you get home?"

"Real quietly," Abby drawled in her growliest baritone, after another grinding go-round with the Polynesian cocktail frothing and forming in its thickly squat plastic jar.

Lane tittered in her highest-pitched voice. "I bet," she grinned.

"Ditched the heels and ran like hell to the other side of the road," Abby summarized, confirming her soul-bud's intuition.

"Dust to dust," Janice intoned with quiet glee, loosening her grip on a sticky clump of clay dirt and crabgrass she'd just scraped from the hillside before the tiny casket was lowered into the crevice hand-dug by her jacketed and jeaned brothers. Jason and Jake stood in salute while Medussa The Mole disappeared one final time into the bowels of the table garden she'd haunted and hunted for just-ripe beets and turnips when alive.

"Haha," her spirit ghost whined upwards into the night breeze toward the ears of her unwilling hosts. "There's a smashingly orange carrot here I can reach from these new digs! Thank you schmucks very much."

They had long known from her accent, tail and coat coloring that Medussa was of British Isle heritage and surmised she'd been stowaway on an early sailing ship hidden in its

kitchen, perhaps burrowed at the bottom of a wooden flour barrel.

As the moon set under the crowded canopy of galaxies unidentified into a tawny horizon of sunflowers and corn, Jason and Jake and Janice skipped around the little cairn of their guest's remains, singing and stamping triumphantly from their throaty tween tenors and alto, "Dussy, Dussy! Loosey no more! Our trap's done evened the score! From this tunnel sealed do not snore, or bore, or squeal, again!"

"Amen," Janice added in relieved refrain, sinking cross-legged to their plush carpet of marigold groundcovers.

("Or that's how it seemed to me," Unka Lowell coughed in conclusion to his lounging audience of assorted blue tick coon dogs and dawdling bullfrogs.)

11. "Juggernaut, West Virginia"

The town hall clock tower chimed tinnily eight times. That meant, Sammy reckoned by the timid stars and foreshadowing sky at the top of State Street's hill, "It must be near nine o'clock. Wonder what happened to Natalie?" he pondered aloud to the small pink sunsuit-covered figure by his right side.

"Maybe Gabby showed up after all." Her sister's "main sleaze" had been a no-show earlier while they waited to leave together for the festival before agreeing to meet near the sidewalk benches by a favorite hangout, Rooster's Hardware Café & Grill.

Sammy and Martha drifted toward music sifting out through antique furnishings inside the refurbished Fortune Family Five and Dime Store, found vacant seats at the converted soda counter, ordered root beer floats for savoring to melodic sounds of The Sutton String Folk Family playing on the little corner stage that owners had wedged between round wooden tables and caned-back chairs. Old church pews served as padded benches lining the

photograph-laden walls.

“Oh, look,” Marty pointed toward the side wall at someone with straight shoulder-length pure black hair, long beaded necklaces, a deeply embossed thick red leather armband, and a brown felt bowler-type hat. Gabby leaned back on the sidearm of the bench pew and swung long black-leathered legs up onto the seat. During intermission he took over from Kara on dulcimer. Natalie sat beside Sam to order two reubens on rye with rainbow chips and two jumbo dark Danish draughts.

As soon as they were served, Natalie walked toward the stage to throw some change and small bills in the glass donation jug for “starters.” A few patrons ambled up also. The Suttons thanked each one, spoke with those they recognized, solicited request songs from the usually quiescent crowd.

“St. James Infirmary!”

Owen Sutton shook his head, no, to the rest who let their instruments down loosely.

Marty yelled out, “Honkytonk Haven.”

“Heaven,” Nat corrected her.

Ted Sutton nodded and picked out the opening bars on mandolin as the others blended in on guitar, bass, fiddle and voice filling the room with a dancing beat that soon roused a few to their feet in the cleared space by the front door, inviting others in to join them from the festival’s colorfully full sidewalk and street.

Gabby grabbed Natalie by the waist to direct her outside also in the direction of a band playing gospel rock at the intersection with Fourth Avenue.

The dry, scuffled path narrowed to shreds of a leaf and twig pile where it held open a thin, tree-lined doorway to the thunderous noonday sky. Janie pulled

up over her rose-brown curly hair the expansive hood of Landry's green army parka.

Oh, this'll be fun," she yelled running for the open-fronted, metal-roofed shelter and settling into its handcrafted log couch.

Landry strode up, unbuckling his backpack and sliding it across the wide pine boards.

"Wanna snooze it out?" he asked, pushing back a heavy-slatted door onto a bare room with one screened sliding window into the thick forest of hardwoods and laurel that guarded the trail on both sides.

Janie slid down, tiredly, in the log sofa."Sounds good," she answered as Landry unrolled a dual sleeping bag.

They curled up comfortably facing each other. Landry rubbed the spot on her back he knew was strained from the steeply snaking trek up from their riverfront campsite cabin. Jane's eyes fluttered closed in the peace and affection that flowed freely between them. They had clicked naturally together like hydrogen and oxygen ever since a serendipitous college class years earlier juxtaposed them in seminar discussion on a shared devotion to healthy regional ecology. Intervening career, native land and family events had jiggled the chemical composition they reestablished through spontaneously regular joint wilderness explorations and adventures.

"Hey, a neighbor just told me about Jenny Lynd Park! Kentucky. We gotta check that out. It's got everything we love in one place. I'll be to it next weekend. Love your company there, and then....."

Jane woke up with a start.

"Shit, there's a leak in the roof!" she grumbled pulling the parka back over her head.

The compartments in Julie's mind collided and crumpled on hearing the farm had burnt months ago from tornado-spawned lightning.

“What’s left?” she asked in trepidation.

**“Some stands of trees. And scorched fields.” Kitten enumerated their losses.
“Caked red mud. Mouldy-looking black rubble from the barn.”**

“Anything from the house?”

Kitten nodded. “Chimney.”

“Oh my sweet lord. All mama’s things.....”

Julie stared into the picture of their family room: Aunt Haddie’s piano, the handmade oriental rugs, the Victorian lamps, softly plush chairs, upholstered sofas.....”

“Oh! The old family photos!”

“I have a few.”

“Me too. A few.”

Julie slid down further into the chair and pulled a quilt around her like an infant with a blanket.

Christine walked over to pull the cover off her cousin’s teary-wet face, smoothed her hair back gently.

“I’m sorry, Jules. The whole place has been so abandoned. There was nothing anyone could do, anyway.”

Chris sidled into the chair beside her cousin, held her shoulders and crooned, rocking her back and forth, “My poor baby.” Julia had always been like a little sister to her, although in chronological age they were nearly parallel.

“The farm was my backup plan -- where I’d be if the city totally ground me down and spit me out. Where I’d retire, for longer and longer vacations, in graceful ease....”

“I know, baby. Remember, we talked about grayhairs rocking on the porch together surrounded by country cats. And maybe a few chickens. Butterflies. Baltimore Orioles. A little vegetable garden. Climbing roses. Hollyhocks.”

“We’ll have to rebuild. Little by little. The land’s still here and paid for and ours.”

Julie stood, crossed the room to Kitten’s bookshelf, and crumpled suddenly to the rug from traumatic exhaustion.

Chris knelt beside her. “You didn’t break anything?”

Julia shook her head while Kitten slid an arm under her back to support her into a sitting position.

“Everything went black,” Julie explained.

“Yes, it did,” her cousin agreed.

12. “Kaflovey Kate, Maryland”

Penny cruised the set surreptitiously with her eyes while she swept her heavy brocade skirt around her knees and thighs as Greg appeared from behind the garishly futzy oriental room divider panels and strode across the stage toward her.

Where and what was the clue to her next line?, she anguished in rising internal panic. "Georgia On My Sleeve" was a locally popular play and its newest audience would detect immediately any flub or fumble. Into the last seconds, Penelope noticed the heavy silver buckle fastened around Greg’s supple waist and under his invitingly muscled and bared bronze torso.

“If you’ll loosen your heart to me, Don, it will be an amazing three weeks here in the Castle D’Or chambers, I promise you,” Penny seduced as eagerly awaited by both script and rapt ticket-holders.

She detected the source of her internal discomposure scraping props off-stage over the linoleum floor behind the tied-back purple velveteen curtains and hurling livid invectives into the air on his heavy Slavic tongue. As she reached upward to rise multi-petticoated on daintily opaque open-heeled high slippers for Greg's steadying hand, Frederic hissed audibly. Greg tightened his hold on her wrist as he swallowed an involuntarily chuckle at the subterranean seige that had seethed and frothed between the former lovers since first rehearsal.

"Why is Ellie Mae so fastidious about everything?" Pappy complained to their Uncle Oscar. "It drives me up a wall. To keep her content, I have to be an accountant, historian, statistician, nursemaid and master gardener all at once."

"Don't you remember the story of her and Professor Heidi?" Oscar inquired in thoughtful reminiscence.

Pappy shook his dreadlocked head disconsolately.

"In eighth grade, Ellie was the only Gentile in that excellent all-Jewish city public middle school she raves about sometimes. As always, she made close friends with her classmates, and teachers -- and earned top grades, as she does naturally like others skateboard or ski."

Pappy grimaced in reluctant agreement.

"Somehow," Oscar contined, "she got convinced by a friend that it would be cool and exciting for her to cheat on a particular test by writing crib notes on her hands, as the neighbor did, altho Ellie didn't need to do that historically."

"As she tells it, her puzzled teacher walked quietly down the aisle toward her deskchair, picked up her hands to turn them over. And dismissed her from the room while explaining why in a flat tone to the rest of her class."

"Ellie was so embarassed by it all," Oscar explained, "she never considered

trying anything like that again there or elsewhere. And got *way* fussier about the company she keeps."

Pappy melted, exhausted, into the brown velvet beanbag chair. "Oh, okay," he nodded and sighed. "I get it."

Kevin unbuttoned down its back the evening's floor-length tangerine silk shimmy with deliberately devoted attention to the intricately intimate detail of its delicate velvet-covered buttons and handwoven silver cord loops as Olivia in stilled relaxation gazed disinterestedly through their room's antique window onto State Street's wheeled and foot traffic four stories below the hotel's thickly plush Persian carpeting and ornately wide molding.

- Stepping back from the mottled panes, Via dropped her arms to allow the dress to flow gracefully to the floor around her unshod feet and turned toward Kevin. He reached down to grasp her left hand and guide her toward the queen-sized bed while she lifted her right hand to dislodge a pearl-studded pin from auburn curls and shook them loose to smoothly pale bared shoulders.

Via fell belly-downward onto the flowered cotton comforter and whispered, • "I • 've missed you for so long. • "

- "Weird we ended up in the same off-main show, ain • 't it? • " Kevin agreed.

- "Serendipity, • " Via pronounced with a satisfied smile and a slow wink of one gray eye.

- "You arranged it! • " Kevin exclaimed in surprise, as she rolled to her back with legs spread out onto a low-lying tufted hassock chest.

- "Mmmm-m, • " Kevin inhaled. " • Magnolias in full bloom again. I'd know them anywhere! • "

(To be continued....)

finis

Really and truly,” Kitty shared with newly-fetched friend Oscar, “Peddleton Heights wasn’t always cool. Back in the day of Ed’s black and white sheeew, it was boringly, snoringly, stilted. And agingly wilted. Yeah, we had The Kingston Trio,” she went on. “The Righteous Brothers. And Elvis and.... yum... Fabian. AND Father Knows Best. And mother makes her Pillsbury cakes rise higher than the rest of the block. Of dull blocks... We couldn’t wait to get free in the rocking real world we’d set on fire. Or just burn down. From The Big City, ours or theirs. Mexicans or polar bears, we just wanted to get goin with our fantastically exciting and interesting lives, far gone from the matched plates and bowls of our hometown’s moulding and mildewed souls.”

“I like Peddleton Heights,” Oscar interjected, objectingly.

“It’s cool now, Kitty agreed. “ The world snoozed groggily on around it while P-Heights unfurled rainbowed ribbons in handmade attire of many patterns. I love it now.”

“Was it always like that under the surface of its stumblingly stodgy image?” Oscar wondered aloud.

Disjointedly unmatched scenes and preferential careenings rose up on Kitty’s spinal column to the 3D projection screen of her mind.

“Yes,” she concluded in summary. “There were glimmers unsuspected like the unbidden patches of honeysuckle that become hedgerow or the lone clover that became our field.”

Oscar removed his flannel jacket and wound it for a pillow as he lay back beneath an unyieldingly clear canopy of countryside heaven to await wisps bidden or bound of the morrow to appear again for their measured taking, staking to the whorly stalk twined of their pasts.

finis *****

13. "Isle Dolorosa Lovage, Maryland"

A whiff of bacon woke him in the morning. What a gem, he thought dreamily, reaching for rumpled clothes. The room was bathed in light and color. His body felt near muscleless. He sank back briefly into the pillows and curled like

a snail against the covers.

"Good morning," she announced with cheer, as he meandered finally toward the kitchen. "How do you like your eggs?" The sight again of a man with her to begin the day lifted her spirits. His hair was uncombed and haloed his small face in slight curls. His makeup had worn off and the glow of his skin charmed her.

He felt a little disoriented. Jason blinked his eyes and focused on the surroundings: Gerry at the stove, coffee perking on the counter. A tug pulled his mind toward home, the small kitchen overlooking the woods and the cereal he usually ate every morning by the window. "Over easy," he requested. "With coffee."

She opened the refrigerator door and reached toward the back. "Have a seat. I'll bring them right over."

"You really are a find," Jason said, admiring her lithe body as well as her cooking skills.

"Put me in your gift shop," she joked, bearing a cup to the table.

He reached for his coffee and sipped slowly as she finished preparing breakfast. They ate in a comfortable, reflective silence as sun poured in the windows.

Finally, she cleared her throat. "I have to go to work pretty soon," Gerry informed him, clearing the plates.

"That's okay," Jason assured her, pushing back from the table. "I have things to do today too."

An awkward interval fell, as Jason gathered his shoes and knapsack. Would

she ask? When would he see her again?

"I'll call you," she said at the door, buttoning his coat snugly.

"Okay," he breathed in relief. "I'll look forward to it."

They kissed briefly and she guided him out.

"Lovely evening," he said, then turned to walk down the sidewalk.

"It was," she agreed, half-closing the door. "Take care."

Jason reached for his keys.

"Okay, let's go out." Sammy pulled himself up into a sitting position and immediately held his head. "Oh, ow," he said without meaning to say anything at all.

"Aren't those pills helping?" Michelle asked.

"No. Not at all," Sam pouted. "I want the ones I had."

"The doctor says they're too strong."

"I know what she says," he said irritably. "She doesn't have to deal with this head, though." He heard Michelle rustling around in the kitchen and a pot banging on the stove. "Did you change your mind?"

"Doesn't sound like you feel well enough to go out," she commented dourly.

"Well," he said, still holding his head, "I don't. But I can cook."

"No, just take it easy. I'll fix spaghetti." Michelle had a few dishes that she knew how to fix for herself and for him. She didn't know how to use spices very well and she didn't know how to bake, but she could use the microwave

and she could heat up canned or frozen food on the stove. These were newly-acquired skills since her spouse had been hurt. Resentment of Ulna and Earnest welled up in her again, as she opened a can of sauce and filled a large kettle with water for spaghetti.

Sammy settled back into the couch, took another pain pill, and concentrated on the television. The news was on, reporting on accidents like his. Why him? he thought again. Well, why not him? another voice in his head answered. He would say he had bad luck except that he had Michelle and she was a dream, the woman cooking his supper now in the kitchen. His friends, too, he reflected did the best that they could. "Would you bring me another beer," he called, "please?"

"You aren't supposed to drink alcohol with those pills," Michelle called.

"I know," Sam said groggily.

Later, when Michelle brought their steaming plates of spaghetti into the living room, he was sound asleep.

A few weeks after that, Michelle came home and again found Samuel passed out on the couch.

"Wake up, Sammy," she said and shook him. He didn't move. "Sam, wake up," she demanded. Finally, she called 911.

"Hello, my friend is passed out and I can't wake him up." The rescue squad appeared with sirens blazing some minutes later. They loaded Sammy into their vehicle and screamed to the hospital. He was still comatose. She called her best friend, Ulna, and she came in to sit beside her.

"How is he doing?" Ulna asked.

"I can't tell. They won't tell me anything."

Ulna put a hand on his arm. "He'll be all right, I'm sure."

Michelle shivered. "Right," she nearly whispered.

They sat in silence on uncomfortable straight back chairs, reading magazines and watching people come and go from the crowded waiting room.

Hours later, Dr. Sarkow called Michelle into her office. She looked grim. "I'm sorry to tell you this," she began and Michelle felt tears welling up in her eyes. Her heart suddenly pained her. "We couldn't save him."

"What happened?" Michelle asked, although she suspected the truth.

Dr. Sarkow looked down at her notes. "It was an overdose of alcohol and pain pills."

Michelle put her head in her hands. "Why would he do that?" she groaned.

The doctor patted her hand. "We don't believe it was intentional. Accidents happen, you know."

... Michela, the Christmas mouse, scrunched her furry red stocking-bonnet down over tingling ears and hopscotched onto Rhonda and Roy's gingham-wrapped presents, cardboard decorators boxes and painted china bottles. She stopped to nibble on a crinkled green velvet bow and roll its copper bells around with her toes to make them jingle. Leaping from Rho's dollhouse chimney, Michela stretched mid-air to the lowest tree branch drizzling with peppermint-flavored artificial snow. She curled her hands and feet around a hanging angel's halo and tightened her hold as the harp-playing lacey rendition of divine messaging and comfort swung rhythmically in warm waves arced from the fireplace's fizzling coals and sparking logs.

"Whee!" Michela coraled cheerily to Pauline who studied her from the window's generous sill with steadily serpentine violet feline eyes.

"Felice Noel," tooted the yellow metal Model-A from its track circling the

trunk of the tree.

"Ho ha," huffed the wooden green firetruck beside it as both disappeared under a slate-gray stone-foam tunnel toward the diningnook's panelled wall.

finis *****

14. "Lolla Pa Looza, Alabama"

"A'-men, sister!" Phaedra agreed emphatically.

(... to be continued...)

"My name is Callie Vandra," the tall gentleman wearing a natural woven-straw sombrero announced over the studio's loudspeaker onto the dance floor of energetic townfolk swirling and parading in enthusiastically colorful conviviality. "If you wanna make a special request, step right on in here, and we'll do our best to 'get it on' for you," Cal promised in that throbbing contralto tone that drove Gladys mindless.

"Hey, Glad," he called as she slid toward the door. "Come on in and choose one for the homeys."

She pointed to ever-popular "Pack It In" by their own Dove Hollow Jug Band with Little Otto Mueller on bass.

Cal's whole body nodded in approving agreement.

As the haunting intro hushed the room, Gladys drifted back toward Tonya, Tim and Patricia at their usual back corner table. "Fill up on the rye and ginger, Nettie. Please," she looked up toward her neighbor's satin-gowned daughter.

"Whoa!" Tonya warned as Nettie leaned deeply in her low-cut costume to serve the table of friends.

Nettie grinned as she backed away toward the brass-railed service bar and relaxed into one of its high upholstered chair-stools, leaning forward to chatter with bartender Oscar about a night class in Eastern Philosophy they shared at City College. He refilled a large wooden bowl with freshly-popped corn from the machine and slid that down smoothly to Jimmy Rake and Jason leaning against the bar near the front door.

"Is the gang still here?" Sasha wondered, gliding inside from the eerily light sky of early morning.

"Hey, sister," Gladys yelled from their familiar dim cloister along the back wall. "Waitin' on you." She kicked a chair out, invitingly, toward the center of the room.

"Rum and coke," Sasha ordered in passing the bar and Oscar. "With lime, she added on crossing the near-vacated room. Tim stood and hovered, hesitatingly. "I gotta split," he admitted with practical reluctance. "The Native Lands Seminar starts at ten."

"What's the prof's plan?"

"A purchase and profit give-and-take roundtable," he decided at the moment, "to get them riled up. I've got a great historical First People video to run at the beginning."

Cal turned the volume down on the Mitry Chorale's version of "Don't Get Me

Wrong” to indicate closing time for the few members lingering within The purple-Striped Pink Palisades Private Party Club Concert & Dance Hall.

As Jean settled in to the soft gray cushions, Gary left to pull crystal wine glasses from the cabinet. He opened the refrigerator door noisily and found the chablis, poured it carefully and turned toward Jean.

"Nice house," she commented politely.

"Thank you." Gary nearly caught one large foot on the carpet as he reentered the room. "Want a tour?"

Jean thought some movement might allay the awkwardness between them. "I'd love one," she said.

He handed her a glass as she stood and put a steering hand gently on her back. "This way," he guided toward the spacious hall. "There're three bedrooms and a loft studio. Two baths, including the master off the largest bedroom. Lots of closets. Cathedral ceilings wherever I could manage them. Skylights."

Jean examined each room in detail and with approval. The house was immaculate and cozy despite its size. Bright colors adorned cushions and knickknacks and drapes. Only the thick carpet was plain, and even it had a subtle hint, shades of blue and green. It felt like a home well-lived in and cared for over the years.

"You designed it?" she asked in some astonishment.

In his mind's eye Gary saw the drawing board he'd taken down and his mounds of charts and scribbings. He felt Deidre leaning over his shoulder to gaze at the latest idea, now crystallized around him. He shook his head and

put his hands in his pockets casually. "About seven years ago."

"It's large for one person," Jean commented carefully, as she peered into a guest bedroom. The house seemed like a family place. Unlike hers, she thought, so uninviting for children, or even much company. A nausea overcame her briefly, as she took in where she was and with whom. A relative stranger, she reminded herself nervously.

Gary coughed, holding a weathered and veined hand to his mouth. "It used to hold a wife and two kids."

"Oh," Jean said in some surprise. "I didn't know you were married." She'd pictured him as a bachelor. Panic overwhelmed her. She didn't know him. What was she doing here?

Sensing dismay, Gary reached for her hand and led her down the hall further. "For fifteen years," he explained, "give or take a few months and days and hours."

His hand felt firm and warm. "Are you," she hesitated uncomfortably and with a hidden terror, "divorced?"

Gary gazed into her open eyes and smooth upturned face. He examined the beige makeup and blue eye shadow, the hint of red on her lips, her small pink ears and trailing salt-and-pepper hair. She was really beautiful in a mature way, he decided in the end. "It'll be final in about two weeks," he assured her gently.

"Uh-huh," Jean murmured, relaxing from the tension and looking upwards. "What a wonderful skylight," she continued with some enthusiasm, examining the master bath. "Lots of light and plants. How lovely." She felt a woman's touch throughout and cringed a little. The aura of his soon-to-be ex-wife permeated his home. She felt unwelcome and wanted a name for it. "What was her name?"

"Deidre." Gary said it with a certain emotive flatness. He remembered her passion for decorating, saw her climbing ladders and holding paint brushes, choosing furniture in different stores. He felt her hand on him, restraining

some whim as the house developed. Jean wondered if Deidre was pretty. Did she have slimmer legs? Was she a blonde? "She did most of the decorating?" Jean quizzed.

"We did it together," Gary demurred, closing the door to each room as they walked back down the hall toward the living room. His feet felt leaden and his head ached dimly. Deidre's ghost leaned out from around the corner, accusingly. He shuddered and blinked his eyes. "How's your wine?" he asked Jean, diverting his thoughts to the present.

She arranged herself again on the couch and examined the magazines. "Wonderful, thanks," she answered, leafing through pages unseeingly. Her eyes focused. Decorator Home. Handyman Repairs. House Anew. Her heart ached briefly for what must have been better days and dreams. "You did a lot of the work yourself?"

Gary settled into the gray lounge chair briefly and sipped his wine. "I did what I could. Hired out the rest."

She straightened the magazines absently. "What parts did you do?"

He felt restless at the questioning and held himself with a will into the chair. "Wiring, plumbing, drywall, paper hanging."

Her spirits lifted. Fabulous, Jean thought to herself. An all-around handyman. Something her house could use, could have used over the years. She'd needed a man but never found the right one, had given up several times. Her affairs had been desultory, lacking in real warmth and care, she reflected, and the sex had never really been that good. She wondered if it was her or them.

"Are you ready for supper?" Gary asked hopefully, needing a change. Conversing with a woman again was difficult. He'd become unaccustomed to feminine presence, some daintiness in it, some need to be helped.

She gazed toward the dining room. "Yes indeed," she responded with enthusiasm. "You've laid the table out so fetchingly." She almost teased him about the propriety of the settings, then thought better of it. Instead she seated herself promptly and put a napkin in her lap. Her mood in the house, she

noted, rose and fell along with her comfort level. Deidre must have been a formal hostess.

Gary walked toward the stove and picked up a large slotted spoon. "I hope you like spaghetti."

"Love it," Jean assured him gratefully.

He pulled bread out of the oven and put it on a silver platter. Then he ladled spaghetti and sauce onto two white china plates rimmed in gold. The accoutrements seemed to require explanation. "Deidre left quite a bit behind when she moved."

15. "Lunatic Lunge Overpass, Kentucky"

Jerome noticed the hissing just in time to run for the kitchen and pull the soup pot off the mini-stove burner. He shook his right hand woefully and examined it for burn marks. It looked fine but he ran cold water over it anyway.

"Dammit, Deb. You forgot the soup. And I damn-near burnt up my playing hand."

A figure swathed in towels emerged into the hotel room's living area.

"Let me see. I'll put butter on it.

Jerry growled.

"I don't wanna eat it, god-dammit. I wanna pick with it."

"It draws the flame out."

“Uh-huh.”

Deb let the towels fall to the floor, opened the little refrigerator door and walked toward Jerome while pulling back the paper from a butter stick.

“Get away from me with that.”

“I have another idea. Diversionary.”

Jerry backed up to the sofa, sat down and relaxed.

“Let’s stop at the next turn-off to get some fresh air,” Patsy suggested.

Mara nodded, keeping her eyes on the distant truck ahead.

“Hungry yet? There’s a great park an hour or so on up. Can you wait? It’s worth it,” she promised.

“Yeah.”

Pat began singing, “All I want is a room somewhere.....” stumbling over the words.

“Yes, my fair lady. We’ll be bedded down down well and comfortably ‘ere long.”

“How many days now have we been on the road?”

“On the run?”

“I wish.”

“Aunt Sophie’s looking forward to meeting you after all these years. She’s real excited about the Kenton Coe gig too.”

“Is that the park?” Pat pointed to a sign on their right.

“It’s only been ten minutes, child. Keep your pants on.”

“Da-da.”

“Ra-boom-de-yay. Maybe we have been traveling too long.”

“Let’s give it up.”

“The road?”

“No. Eating. It’s an expensive addiction.”

They rode in a friendly silence through thick forests and cleared fields to Langston Pugh Park where Mara turned smoothly into a large graveled parking lot by a porticoed log-style building.

“There’s a great gallery of local crafts inside and fresh-made foods,” Mara enticed. “The famous gorge is on the other side. There’s patio dining too.”

“And good trails if you need some exercise. I do,” she added.

“There’s the gorge,” Mara swept her right arm toward a clearing close to their tray-laden table. “They’re still looking through the holler at the bottom for the body of that hiker who disappeared last month. She’ll be the 27th since they’ve been keeping records.”

“Don’t worry. I can fly.”

“Uh-huh. Let’s go take a look. It’ll knock your socks off.”

They walked slowly toward the railing.

“Whoa,” Pat exclaimed. “I wanna live by that stream there. Let’s set up.”

Mara grinned. “Knew you’d love it.”

“Groove. Vee. I am retiring right in that spot. Undisclosed spot. They can look for my body forever. They’ll never find it.”

“Ha. Ha.”

Mara leaned back against an aged maple whose leaves were just beginning to turn shades of orange.

"Ready?" she asked, straightening and turning back toward the patio path.

"Yeah," Pat sighed reluctantly. "Let's ride."

The bike careened in the mud toward a ditch too close to a cliffside dropoff.

Kevin determined to ditch the wheels and walk the last half-mile or so to the rental farmhouse.

Dragging their groceries in the spare feedsack, he aimed intently for the gated open courtyard.

"Hey, man, what happened?" Scott yelled from a pondside lounge chair.

"Mud. Rain," Kevin responded succinctly. letting loose of the sack and pulling up a woven chair.

"Fish biting?" he asked without interest or enthusiasm.

"Naw. They're becalmed by all the algae," Scott explained.

"Dog days. Nothing moves. Not even a friggin breeze." Ken observed in wearily worn disgust.

Scraping the chair back on the concrete deck, he added," Gotta get this stuff inside to the a/c before it rots."

"Yeah. Wanna go tubing later?"

"Sure. Why not. Stop by when you're ready. We may be looped, I'm warnin' ya."

Kevin disappeared with a grocery bag in each arm and his right hand firmly around the neck of a large whiskey bottle.

"Don't trip," Scott yelled. "I may join ya."

"Sure and ye'll be welcome." Kevin sidestepped a flash-rain ditch, nearly sliding on drenched grass.

Scott watched him disappear behind thickly-greened trees and stretched deep-tanned legs toward the stagnant pond, reached down for the opened book beside his chair and rested it on his bare thighs. Flipping through pages, he dug his small scratchpad and pen out from a shorts pocket and returned absorbedly to the notes he'd been making for the regularly-awaited club article due next week.

As dusk closed in on the pages, he gathered together the instruments of that avocation hobby and stood to walk thoughtfully toward the trees where Kevin had disappeared hours earlier.

“Toddy time,” he announced loudly, aiming pebbles at the front door from the porch steps.

Leona opened it slightly. “Hey, watch it. Come on in. We been waitin on you.” Scott skipped two stairs to the porch floor, crossed to push open wide the door.

Leona patted the pillowed space beside her on the braided rug. “Have a seat,” she invited.

Scott crossed his legs, waited for Kevin to deliver the evening's repast of bourbon and ginger, covered Leona's small outstretched hand with his to ask, “How ya been, toots?”

“Not bad. Not half-bad.”

“Lookin fine, you be,” Scott assured her.

Leona frowned. “Ain't where I'm at, frat boy.”

Scott winked in Kevin's direction.

“Just funnin, old flame.”

Leona turned her hand over and grabbed his with a friendly will. “You still be a heap o' harm, Big T. Let it be.”

“Absolutely. Chocolate cheesecake awaits your plate and palate. And pleasure.”

Celandra rested contentedly on a seatpad against the wide stern of the boat, stretched her legs for a table, tossed to her mouth the opened wine cooler, and shuttered rapt eyes to a waning sun preparing to dissemble for its radiant nightly drama into neon streaks straining along the garishly graded greens of our planet’s horizon.

Finch high-stepped down Ruth’s hallway in his sequin-outlined green velveteen tuxedo jacket, swishing dust balls and strands along before him with the theatre’s costume broom.

“Hm-Mm-ooooohm-hmM,” he chanted in low register, passing the empty antique-laden drawing room with its floor-to-ceiling lace-curtained windows opening onto Main Street.

“Fin! What are you doin?” Ruth asked sharply.

Finch leaned, seductively, on the long broom handle.”I’m helping out around the house. Need any other services?” he inquired suggestively.

Ruth giggled, deciding to join in the fun, pulling her dress up to her thighs and striking a pose against the wall with one chubby leg drawn up to her knee.

“Yes, yes,” she answered. “Come hither, fine sir.”

“Tis well and ye ask, lass. This instant will I.” Finch side-waltzed toward her, bowing to the opposite wall.

“Oh!”Ruth exclaimed in mock distress. “Sir, must ye? Have ye taken leave of all your senses ere now?”

Finch swung smoothly to one knee to face her and taking her hand intoned lowly, ”M’lady looks pale to fainting. Shall I fetch the salts?”

“Sir! Hurry, do.” Ruth placed the back of his free hand against her forehead.

“Pray run for them.”

Fin rose to imitate a horse galloping toward the dining room and returned with a small cut crystal covered bowl of loose sugar.

“A sweet is the treat you’re hankering, m’lady.” He held out an overflowing silver server spoon toward Ruth’s wide-open persimmon-rouged mouth.

16. “Mordica Mine, Ohio”

hdafe:Gkil Koji

"Covi'ban" maneb| cy*v

ix

Oiu yjh!gat f/er.

brown or natural (unprocessed) or even LindaSal confectioner's Sugars. parious kinds esoteric than Also as a substitute seasalt for malt (or JamesDavid none at all and is PaulJanet A traditional

healer for sore throats and Other discomfitures. special compatible seems roblynn that

do bring TomJanelle different results, so Check on packaging *Toddi'r siocled*

mewn padell, ac ychwanegu menyn, llaeth a siwgr er enwir a'u berwi; phryd y bydd

*yn ffurfio pêl feddal pan gânt
eu profi mewn dŵr oer, yn tynnu o'r
tân; gadael i oeri ychydig a*

churiad drwchus nes; arllwys i mewn i bas

menyn padell, torri'n bach.... aren't through

generations are frequently learned by sight and discretely measured portions and instructions. Part of the fun of cooking is enjoying that freedom and creativity in experimenting with ingredients and processes -- following, of course, some

standard experience in the basics involved. There aren't really many *hard and fast rules for and use the spices that are your favorites and/or are on hand and*

similar to ones called for in any particular recipe, e.g. basil or dill for parsley, ginger and/or cloves for allspice

, seasalt for salt (or none at all, as foods have naturally-occurring salts in them), fresh-ground mixed peppers for *Przepisy kulinarne przez pokolenia zdobyte przez wzrok*

i to raczej dyskretnie

i instrukcji. Część sklepów spożywczych i świeżego powietrza na radość z gotowania jest odkrywanie tej wolności i kreatywności i! procesów - po, oczywiście, pewne standardowe doświadczenia w zakresie podstaw. Nie są przez pokolenia są często poznawane przez wzrok i dyskretnie odmierzone porcje i <I>instrukcje.

Preheat oigheann. Prátaí bhácáil de ghnáth. Bain as oigheann nuair a dhéanamh, gan fuarú le beagán, a ghearradh i leath fhad, agus scoop insides isteach i mbabhla. Cuir cáis uachtair agus spíosraí tirim, stirring

le forc, chun blas

a chur air. Meascán Spoon prátaí mashed i craicinn leath.... Recetas por generaciones aprendidas por vista y haciendo más bien que en discretamente e instrucciones. La parte de comestibles y aire fresco la diversión de cocina disfruta de aquella libertad y creatividad en y procesos - después, por supuesto, un poco de? experiencia estándar en los fundamentos implicados. No hay por generaciones son con frecuencia aprendidos por vista y porciones discretamente medidas e instrucciones . *La parte de la diversión de cocina disfruta* que libertad y creatividad en la experimentación con

ingredientes y procesos - después, por supuesto, algún estándar experimenta en los fundamentos implicados. No hay realmente muchas reglas difíciles y rápidas para y usan las especias que son sus favoritos y/o están a mano y similares a pedidas en cualquier receta particular, p.ej albahaca o r eneldo para el

perejil, gengibre y/o cloves para la pimienta inglesa, sal marina para la sal (o ninguno en absoluto, cuando la comida tiene sales naturalmente que ocurren en ellos), la tierra fresca mezcló pimientos para negro

Toddi'r siocled mewn padell, ac ychwanegu menyn, llaeth a siwgr er enwir a'u berwi; phryd y bydd yn ffurfio pêl feddal pan gânt eu profi mewn dŵr oer, yn tynnu o'r tân; gadael i oeri ychydig a churiad drwchus nes; arllwys i mewn i bas menyn padell, torri'n bach..

.. Recepti preko generacij naučili

pogled in narediti in ne v diskretno in navodila. Del živil in zabavno kuhanje je uživajo to svobodo in ustvarjalnosti v in procesi--po, zrakom seveda, nekatere

standardne

izkušnje v osnove

sodelujejo. Tam niso preko generacij pogosto naučila na pogled in diskretno meri delov in *navodila. Del zabave kuhanje uživajo* da svobode in ustvarjalnosti v eksperimentirati s sestavinami in procesi--sledi, seveda, nekatere standardne izkušnje v osnove vključeni. Ni res veliko trdega in hitro pravila in uporabo začimb, ki so LoveHal priljubljene in/ali so na strani in podobne tistim, ki so imenovane za v kakršne koli posebne recept, npr. bazilika o r Kopra za ?peteršilj, ingver in/ali klinčki za Pimentovec, seasalt za sol (ali none at all kot živila so naravno prisotnih soli v njih), sveže mlete mešane paprike za črni

Meng die res van die bestanddele in 'n medium-grootte bak met 'n draadklitser tot baie glad. Gooi sowat $\frac{1}{4}$ koppie in die middel van die pan en kantel

dun versprei

oor bodem. Draai versigtig met 'n ! kleefvrye spatel. Franse pannekoek sal kook vinnig deur.

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some cases and is a traditional healer for sore throats and experimenting with ingredients other than discomfitures.

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17. "Scrounge Acre, New Jersey"

Pat reached for another slice of plain cheese pizza out of the box from Domino's. It was her favorite and she savored every bite. It was her treat after a long week, a way of rewarding herself for sticking it out through six days of harassment and hassles.

"Want another piece?" she asked Wendy politely.

"No, I've got my steak and cheese here," her roommate answered. "Thanks anyway."

They ate in silence for awhile. Wendy thought about her boyfriend, Quentin, and wondered what he was doing this evening. He usually called on Fridays from Buffalo, where he'd taken a temporary job to tide himself over until work picked up in Lovington again. She missed him dreadfully. At least Pat had moved in to keep her company and share the bills. The house had seemed so empty and dreary for a few weeks before that. Pat was grateful for a good home instead of the grungy apartment she had been renting in town. Rents were ridiculous in Lovington, she reflected. It was basically a tourist town, that was why, she thought. The locals could barely afford to live there, unless of course they owned one of the so-called tourist traps: overpriced restaurants and antique shops and motels. The views from Lovington were spectacular. It was nature that brought visitors to the area despite second-rate accommodations and food and entertainment.

"Have you heard from Quentin?" Wendy inquired, although she thought she knew the answer.

"Well, he sent a postcard from some roller coaster park near where he's been

staying."

"Oh yeah?" Pat didn't really care that much for Quentin. He was way too thin and his manners were less than perfect. He probably didn't even remember her name, although she'd met him twice when he'd come back to visit Wendy on long holiday weekends.

"Want to go to the movies tonight?" Wendy wondered out loud, thinking that any time away from the house would be good for her.

"Sure. What do you want to see?" Pat loved to get out too. She immediately began thinking of what she would wear and how she'd fix her hair. Maybe, she thought as ever, she'd meet somebody special somehow out there. You never knew who you'd run into in town. They could have coffee and ice cream at the All-Night Gypsy after the film. That's where the coolest people hung out. It was expensive but she could afford it once a month. It was like a gamble, taking a money chance that perfect person might be there this time. And, if not, they usually had some interesting conversations with others they knew that frequented the Gypsy.

"What about that new romance thing? The one with what's-his-name?" Wendy too enjoyed the cafe and knew they would stop there after the movie. She looked forward to that nearly as much as the film. The last few movies they'd seen had not been very good, and they had left early, before the end of each one.

"Kerner Davis?"

"Yeah, that's the one."

"It looks good in the ads."

Wendy laughed. "So did the last three."

"We're bound to hit now and then. One out of four. Surely the odds are with us now," Pat grinned. She picked up another slice of pizza and got up. "Okay, I'm going to get dressed. Does it still start at eight o'clock?"

Wendy flipped open the newspaper to the movie section and ran her index finger down the listing column. "Here it is. 'Bold in Blue' starts at eight. Right. What are you wearing? Pants or dress?"

"That purple dress I just bought at Thrifty Nickle."

Wendy frowned, trying to remember the outfit. Pat never bought one, but many at a time. She didn't go shopping that often and loaded up on each visit. The Thrifty Nickle, a consignment shop, was her last outlet, when none of the other stores had what she wanted and could afford. "I don't remember it."

"Yes, you do. It has a full kind of pleated, flowery skirt and blouse and vest and it comes down below my knees."

"Oh yeah. That's pretty. It looks really good on you."

"Thanks. What are you going to wear?" Pat asked perfunctorily. It didn't really matter if they matched. She remembered in high school, when the girls went out together, they had to all wear dresses or all wear pants or all wear shorts and the colors and styles needed not to clash. One of the joys of maturity, she decided, was not having to worry about that any longer.

Wendy contemplated her wardrobe briefly. "I might just wear those loose black silk pants with that pink halter top. And the pink sweater with the lace and pearls."

"That would be beautiful," Pat assured her and left the room.

Wendy finished her sandwich, wondering if the phone would ring before they left. She would really like to talk with Quentin before going out. It was so tempting to spend the night with someone else when she didn't hear from him for a few days. She just wanted company, she told herself, male company, the feel of a male body near her, next to her, sharing heat and the secrets of passion, however tenuous, however borrowed the time. In the end, she knew she wanted to be with Quentin but she was young for such a long separation. His older years made it easier for him, she thought. Or maybe, she added to herself, he wasn't as faithful as he claimed. He probably wasn't, she decided, wondering if she was giving herself an excuse to do the same.

"Better get ready," Pat called out from her bedroom.

"Oh, right," Wendy answered. She'd been lost in thought and hadn't realized how much time had gone by. Five minutes to get dressed and get in the car. It took twenty minutes to get to the Palidine MultiPlex Theaters

from the house. The roads were slick from rain all day. It had piled into the gutters and overflowed onto Main Street around lunchtime. They couldn't make any time in conditions like that. She pulled her change of clothes on quickly and brushed long brown hair back from her face and neck. It shone and curled slightly on the ends. Light pink lipstick and blush completed her styling for the night. "Okay, I'm ready," she called, walking out into the hallway.

"I'm out here in the car," called Pat through the open doorway. "Come on. We'll be late."

Wendy pulled her purse from the kitchen table. "You forgot your purse!" she announced mirthfully. "Think they'll let that purple dress in free?" The shirt had a low neck and Pat's perfectly round and firm breasts rose up from it teasingly.

Pat giggled and pulled the top of the dress up a little bit, smoothing the skirt over her long tanned legs. "Well..."

"Here it is," Wendy threw it on her friend's lap and closed the car door beside her. "Let's ride."

"You look gorgeous," Pat commented, admiring her roommate in the side mirror, which was always askew and never pointed where it was meant to be, toward traffic on the right side behind the car.

"Quentin didn't call," Wendy announced for no particular reason.

Pat kept her eyes on the road and turned onto Patter Lane toward town. "I know."

**"I might talk with someone else this evening at the Gypsy, you know."
Wendy glanced at herself in the mirror and felt satisfied at the reflection.
She brushed her bangs back from her forehead and reminded herself to get
them cut in the next week before they got into her eyes.**

"I know. You're getting restless, aren't you? Oops."

"He's been gone a long time. What was that?"

"We hydro-planed slightly on that curve."

"Be careful."

**"I am. I'm only going thirty-five," Pat assured her. Lights from heavy
traffic surrounded them. "Oh fuck," she said, as the car swerved toward a
vehicle on their left. "This is really dangerous."**

**"Do you want to turn around?" Wendy asked, concerned. "Or me to
drive?"**

**"No. It's just bad, that's all. I'll slow down a little bit more." Pat
concentrated on the road and traffic. Wendy thought about Quentin's short,
thin body and the muscles on his arms. If she found someone else, she**

decided, for a night or two, she'd look for someone totally different. Wendy too thought about who she might meet at the Gypsy. Neither thought about the movie at all.

"Here we are," Pat announced as they pulled into the Palatine's parking lot.

"Can you find a space?" Wendy asked, surveying the area crowded with cars and trucks and SUVs of all colors and descriptions. "It certainly is full."

"These are supposed to be good movies they've got this time."

"Hey, there's one," Wendy said, pointing forward and to her right.

"Okay, got it. That's as close as we'll get anyway."

Nearly the same height and with similar figures, Wendy and Pat caused a small stir as they entered the theater. Heads turned as they chattered to each other. They were used to the commotion and ignored it. A few friends called, "Hey kid," or "How you doin' there, gals," as they passed through. One out of four turned out to be their best bet. They both enjoyed the romantic comedy "Bold in Blue," and congratulated themselves and each other on finally choosing a good film. Leaving the theater, they linked arms and skipped to the car. It was that kind of movie, a feel-good, let-it-go kind of story with an upbeat end.

(to be continued....)

"Want to go to the Uptown Tavern instead?" Wendy asked, hesitantly. Ally surveyed the damage. Piles of cartons and garbage bags. Dustballs. Knicked furniture. The story of her life wrapped up in things. Things to be moved again. Briefly she contemplated again simply offering what was saleable, salvaging pieces for the Salvation Army, and ditching the rest. The allure of starting completely new ever-existed, beyond her horizons. No, she needed what she had and the little reminders in knickknacks and forget-me-nots of former lives.

"Good grief!" Lois exclaimed, knocking mud off her boots onto the doormat. "What a mess."

"Ah, yes. But it's my mess." Ally glanced out the window at snow threatening to engulf her car.

"Get rid of it."

"Nope. It's staying with me." Ally frowned. A light drizzle had been falling since early morning, compromising a good beginning to her trip.

"How many times have you moved this caravan?"

"Don't."

"Seriously."

"Not one too many, apparently."

"You'll smother." Lois swiped dust off a chair with her right palm.

"Smothering pieces."

"What?"

"It's a saying of a friend. Means something like, I'd smother unless you offered me so much for them."

"How much?"

"More than anyone wants to pay." Ally piled her remaining folded clothes into a near-empty carton, closed its top, and fastened the edges with tape.

Lois tripped over a bag on her way around the corner to assess the bedroom condition. "Ouch."

"Sorry. They'll all be gone soon." Ally leaned to secure a loose bag top with twine.

"Anything left to eat?"

"Bread and tuna fish, I think."

"Okay."

Lois slammed the refrigerator door. "It's like a morgue." All the cabinets were empty and the dishes gone. "You packed canned goods?"

"Gave them to Chris." Panting softly, she dragged a large box toward the front door. "The death of Ally," she continued, "in Appalachia."

"Are you sure about this?"

"It's too late not to be. Anyway, I'm not sure about anything. Ever. Until it exists anyway. Then I'm sure it exists." Ally pulled off her shirt and jogging pants and threw them into an open bag.

"Like you soon in California?"

"Right." Lois looked away as Ally pulled off her underwear and snuggled into a blue terry cloth bathrobe.

"I can't picture it."

"Why not?"

"It just isn't your personality." Lois stood munching her sandwich and with one foot propped on a bag.

"Well, it isn't my personality now. It will be soon."

She ran her fingers through short gray hair and fluffed it self-consciously.

"What makes you think you'll fit in okay?"

"Everyone fits in in California, one way or another."

"How do you know?"

Ally headed toward the bathroom. "Devon says it's like the Israel of America. Refugees from the rest of the country."

"That sounds like hyperbole."

"Good word."

"Ever consider just throwing some bags out randomly?"

"Yeah. Actually, I did that once."

"Really?" Lois stood outside the closed door, leaning against the wall.

"Boxes. I got tired of messing with them, moving them, and just gave some without opening to see what was inside to Good Will."

"Wow." Lois contemplated that briefly. "Did you miss anything later?"

"I don't think so. Occasionally I wonder where something went that I'd forgotten about but... it could be anything or anywhere." Ally dropped shampoo, towel, wet washcloth and soap, finally the shower curtain into a bag and tied it shut.

"Like what?"

"I don't know. There was a flowered porcelain bread plate I particularly liked. It's disappeared. I just remembered it a few days ago."

"How long has it been missing?" Lois followed her back into the living room.

"Oh, four or five years, I suppose."

"That's when you last used it?"

"More or less. Do you want this?"

"What is it?"

"I don't know. A figurine."

"You don't want it."

"No."

"Sure," Lois held out her left hand, "I'll take it. You never noticed it was gone before?" she continued.

"Nope."

"Busy life."

"Well, I've been distracted."

"Yeah. By Devon."

"You don't really like him, do you?" Ally disappeared into the bedroom.

"He's okay."

"What is it?"

"I don't know. He plays you, I think. Strings you along, wears you out with questions and ramblings and what-ifs and so on."

"A lot of it is the distance," she explained, carrying a beaten brown leather suitcase back into the room, "and not communicating in person."

"Think so?"

"Yeah. It makes a difference."

"Well, there's always phone sex. What's in the suitcase?"

"Things for the overnight motels. That isn't what I mean."

"That's what he means."

"He's more multi-faceted than that."

"Uh-huh. What weather did you pack for?"

Ally scraped artificial flowers into a bag.

"Why in the world do you keep them?"

"They're pretty. Any season, sort of."

"They're old. Throw them out and buy new ones when you get there."

"No. They remind me of something."

"What?"

**"Oh, shopping when I first got here. The stores on Creighton Drive. Julia."
Ally opened the suitcase. "See?"**

"You like Julia?"

"She's a character. I wouldn't want to forget her."

Lois surveyed the contents. "Neat. Too bad about the shop."

"Well, she's getting on. It was probably too much for her anyway, or nearly

so."

"I don't know why it's so hard for some of these stores to make it."

Ally closed and locked the suitcase. "Too little. Too high overhead. Creighton Drive's gotten trendy while the old folk just kept on doing business in the same old way."

"Abacus?"

She chuckled. "Just about."

"What's this?" Lois held up a piece of lace.

"It's an antique shawl." Ally picked up a crystal vase and put it in a large open carton.

"Where did it come from?"

"Also Julia's." She pulled the box toward the center of the room and sat heavily on her sofa.

"She did have some neat things."

"You wouldn't throw that away?"

"Uh-uh." Lois rested in an armchair, propped her feet up on a bag.

"Well," Ally sighed. "It's almost time."

"Looks like you're ready."

"Ready as I'll ever be." She dialed Christopher's line. "Are you ready?... Oh. Okay. Yeah, I'll be here. Thanks, Chris."

"What? How do you get old boyfriends to do that?" Lois shifted in her chair.

"He says he has an errand to do and then he'll get the truck. I'm nice. And I pay him."

"What a haul."

Ally turned and lay back on the couch. "It'll be an adventure."

"Are you going to call Devon?"

"Yeah. After the truck's packed and we're ready to hit the road."

Lois rubbed her eyes and pushed hair back off her forehead. "I can't believe you're leaving. Does Devon know about Christopher?"

"He knows he's a friend." She lifted her head and ruffed up her hair to help it dry. "It's been real."

"It has. I'll miss you."

Ally turned slightly toward the chair. "Stop it."

"Never say goodbye?"

"It's too sad."

Lois leaned forward. "Well, it's exciting too, isn't it?"

"I guess. Now it's just a bit nerve-wracking and exhausting."

"You'll be okay."

"I know. It's just a lot. A lot to take in and think about."

"Don't think." Lois leaned back.

"Want some wine?"

"Sure. One for the road."

"Long road," Ally noted as she disappeared through the kitchen door.

"For you. Better just have one."

"We can do that."

"Yes, we can."

Ally returned with two large jelly glasses half full. "Here's to new beginnings."

She held out her glass and Lois touched it to hers. "In with the old and out with the new."

"What?"

"Okay," Lois giggled. "In with the new and the old."

Ally laughed heartily. "Is that a reference to the flowers?"

"And the shawl."

"To friends?"

"To friends."

"Let's not say goodbye."

Lois put down her jelly glass on a box and went over to hug Ally briefly.

"Okay," she agreed, returning to her chair. "See you in the hereafter."

"Oh, that's worse." Ally rose to tape the last box closed.

"I mean the hereafter of you in California and me here, visiting each other sometime in the next year."

"Great idea. You can fly out."

"I hate to fly."

Ally and Lois bantered back and forth, sipping their wine as snow flurries passed by the windows, waiting for Christopher's knock on the door.

"I just feel like a drink, after all."

"It was all those liqueurs and fancy mixes in the movie, I bet. They did look good, didn't they?" Pat laughed.

"Well, let's do it. We hardly ever go to a bar or tavern anymore."

"There's a reason for that," Pat reminded her. It had to do with the kind of people that might pick them up. They had agreed they were safer at a coffee house and could do their drinking, such as it was, at home while they were without formal escorts.

"Just this once," Wendy pleaded. She knew all the regulars at the Gypsy and despaired really of meeting anyone new there. She had concluded over the evening that what she needed to perk herself up and get herself through the months until Quentin came home was a one-night stand. Not a lot of them, she assured herself, but just a few here and there to kind of keep her spirits up.

"You're wanting a man, aren't you?" Pat asked suspiciously and with what she knew of her friend now.

"Maybe just a little bit."

"Well," Pat mused, "who isn't? I could stand to meet somebody too. You're right. The Tavern tonight." She turned left on Doval Avenue and stopped at the traffic light. "One more chance to change your mind right here," she reminded Wendy.

"No. I'm really in the mood for the tavern."

"Okay," Pat replied, turning left as the light turned green. "Uptown Tavern here we come."

The girls, as they would be called off and on, parked on the right side and entered through the front door. The usual murmur accompanied them as they seated themselves at the bar and ordered.

"I'll have scotch on the rocks," Pat requested, as a small voice in the back of her head reminded her again that she should not have liquor and drive, especially not on bad roads.

"Gin and tonic here," Wendy ordered.

Maybe, Pat thought, we or I will just go home with someone and I'll pick up the car in the morning. That's it, she thought, leaning heavily toward a hard night on the town. Suddenly she wanted to drink until she was nearly howling at the moon, get it all out of her system, be stupid and funny and play and laugh and forget everything and anything that was the least bit serious.

Wendy felt in a similar mood, as they ordered drink after drink. They talked with the bartenders and with strangers who sat beside them and bought more rounds of drinks. They sat at the table of three men in business suits who ordered more drinks for them all. The waitress brought around complimentary peanuts and popcorn and chips. They nibbled on those to keep their stomachs calm, so they could drink some more. By four in the morning, Wendy and Pat were nearly incapable of walking but they were full of good humor and love for their fellows.

"Hey, gals," one of the more sober businessmen said. "You better let us take you somewhere for the night. You can't drive like that and this place is about to close." Just then the bartenders announced "last call," and they all ordered one more round for the road.

Pat felt just sober enough to know that she didn't want to spend the night with the businessmen who'd been buying their drinks for the past hour or so.

"I think I can drive," she announced through a blur and lifted her right arm high in the air. "Hey, waiter! Bring a pot of coffee here."

Wendy's head fell toward the table and she lifted it with great difficulty, focused her eyes. "You can't drive, Pat. You've had as much as I have."

"Let me have some coffee and we'll see," Pat replied. She saw the roll of fat sagging over the belt of the businessman next to her. No, she thought. I am not going home with that.

"Come on home with me," he urged. "I won't bother you. I've got a guest

bedroom for each of you. You can just sleep it off and leave in the morning. I'll even fix you breakfast," he added enticingly.

It occurred to Pat hazily that he had had every bit as much to drink as she and Wendy had. "Who will drive?" she asked in confusion.

"We'll call a cab and pick the cars up tomorrow," he suggested.

"What do you think, Wendy?" she asked.

Wendy pulled the few coherent cells left in her head together suddenly. "Why don't we just get a cab for the two of us and go home and pick up your car tomorrow?"

Light surrounded Pat's head. She wasn't sure if it was lamps in the tavern or that she knew what they needed to do now.

"Yes. That's what we'll do. Thank you very much," she said, turning to the man beside her, whose name she remembered was Ted.

"Hey," he said, grabbing her arm tightly. "I didn't buy all those drinks for you to shrug me off, gal. I want your company."

She pulled away from him. "Leave me alone," she said sternly and with some fright she tried not to show.

"I ain't gonna bother you. I told you. I just want your company for awhile longer. You're a looker, that's for sure," he added, eyeing her up and down.

Pat stood up shakily. "I'm going to make a telephone call," she announced and turned toward the back wall.

Ted tried to grab her skirt as she passed, but missed and nearly fell forward on his hands and face. Pulling himself back up, he directed his comments to Wendy. "You want to come home with us, darlin', don't you," he wheedled.

The man next to her put his arm around her shoulder. "We wouldn't hurt a lovely thing like you, doll," he offered soothingly. "We just want you to be safe."

"Yeah," said the third man. "Come on home with us and we'll bring you back all sound in the morning." His voice slurred as he spoke, stirring his drink and gulping it through a straw. The last round arrived, along with coffee for Pat.

She returned to the table, sat down, and announced with some relief, "Billy's coming to get us in a few minutes."

"Who the hell is Billy?" the man to her right asked sourly.

"Billy is a neighbor and an old boyfriend of mine," she answered with what was left of her dignity after too many scotches on the rocks.

"Fuck him," the man across from her said. "He's your old boyfriend. We're your new boyfriends, gal."

"No, you aren't," Pat said with finality.

Wendy nodded her head weakly. "I'm for going home with Billy. Is he coming in?"

"No, we're going to meet him by the car in the parking lot."

"We'll walk you out, doll," Ted said threateningly.

"No, we'll be all right," Wendy told him with what she hoped was determination in her tone.

Wendy and Pat stood up as the chairs of the three men scraped back. "We can't let you walk out there alone," the one with gray-blond hair said.

"Yeah. We'll walk you out," said the brown-haired one.

"Gentlemen," the waiter interrupted. "Your check and there's a call for Ted on line two."

"Oh, hell," Ted answered with a groan.

"Who is it?" his brown-haired friend whispered loudly.

"Shirley, I'll bet," he said, looking down at his large out-turned feet.

"Yep. It's your wife, bud," the waiter announced with a grin. "Says she's been looking for you for three hours now."

"See ya," Wendy and Pat said nearly in unison and laughed as they walked toward the tavern door.

"That was a close one, wasn't it?" Pat asked, turning to Wendy as they reached the car.

"Too close for comfort," Wendy agreed. "Who's Billy anyway," she asked with a giggle.

"The guy in the movie, remember?" Pat responded.

"Well, what are we going to do?" Wendy asked in consternation. "We can't afford a cab and we don't want to go back in there anyway."

"We'll close the windows, lock the doors, and sleep it off in the car. There are lights here in the parking lot. We'll be okay."

"Are you sure?"

"Well, it's better than the alternatives, isn't it?"

Wendy slid into the back seat and curled up with her sweater as a pillow.

"Yes, it's better than the alternatives."

Pat pulled a blanket from out of the trunk and laid it on the front seats.

Then she too curled up to sleep.

"We were lucky," Wendy said later, as they pulled into the driveway of her house. "No one even noticed we were there."

"Well, I wouldn't want to do it again, would you?" Pat asked tiredly.

"Nope. That's our adventure for the year, I think."

"Yes. Still 'Looking for Mr. Goodbar'?" she asked Wendy seriously.

"No. I think I'll just wait for Quentin and go to the Gypsy occasionally until he gets back."

"Good idea. I'll stick with that too."

Pat opened the back door with the key on the window sill. "I'm so glad to be home," she sighed, lying down on the couch. She reached for a piece of the last night's pizza and flicked the remote to turn on their television news.

"And there won't be any news that we were killed on the highway or in some strange man's house," Wendy commented.

"Thank heaven," Pat replied, stretching with her free hand for a magazine to read.

Wendy nibbled on the last stale piece of her steak-and-cheese sandwich.

"Thank heaven," she agreed.

18. "Tumbleton Quarry, Virginia"

A whiff of bacon woke her in the morning. What a gem, she thought dreamily, reaching for rumpled clothes. The room was bathed in light and color. Her body felt near muscleless. She sank back briefly into the pillows and curled like a snail against the covers.

"Good morning," he announced with cheer, as she meandered finally toward the kitchen. "How do you like your eggs?" The sight again of a woman with him to begin the day lifted his spirits. Her hair was uncombed and haloed her small face in slight curls. Her makeup had worn off and the glow of her skin charmed him.

She felt a little disoriented. Jean blinked her eyes and focused on the surroundings: Gary at the stove, coffee perking on the counter. A tug pulled her mind toward home, the small kitchen overlooking the woods and the cereal she usually ate every morning by the window. "Over easy," she requested. "With coffee."

He opened the refrigerator door and reached toward the back. "Have a seat. I'll bring them right over."

"You really are a find," Jean said, admiring his lithe body as well as his cooking skills.

"Put me in your gift shop," he joked, bearing a cup to the table.

She reached for her coffee and sipped slowly as he finished preparing breakfast. They ate in a comfortable, reflective silence as sun poured in the windows.

Finally, he cleared his throat. "I have to go to work pretty soon," Gary informed her, clearing the plates.

"That's okay," Jean assured him, pushing back from the table. "I have things to do today too."

An awkward interval fell, as Jean gathered her shoes and purse. Would he ask? When would she see him again?

"I'll call you," he said at the door, buttoning her coat snugly.

"Okay," she breathed in relief. "I'll look forward to it."

They kissed briefly and he guided her out.

"Lovely evening," she said, then turned to walk down the sidewalk.

"It was," he agreed, half-closing the door. "Take care."

Jean reached for her keys.

"Okay, let's go out." Pammy pulled herself up into a sitting position and immediately held her head. "Oh, ow," she said without meaning to say anything at all.

"Aren't those pills helping?" Michael asked.

"No. Not at all," Pam pouted. "I want the ones I had."

"The doctor says they're too strong."

"I know what he says," she said irritably. "He doesn't have to deal with this head, though." She heard Michael rustling around in the kitchen and a pot banging on the stove. "Did you change your mind?"

"Doesn't sound like you feel well enough to go out," he commented dourly.

"Well," she said, still holding her head, "I don't. But I can cook."

"No, just take it easy. I'll fix spaghetti." Michael had a few dishes that he knew how to fix for himself and for her. He didn't know how to use spices very well and he didn't know how to bake, but he could use the microwave and he could heat up canned or frozen food on the stove. These were newly-acquired skills since his wife had been hurt. Resentment of Ulna and Earnest welled up in him again, as he opened a can of sauce and filled a large kettle with water for spaghetti.

Pammy settled back into the couch, took another pain pill, and concentrated on the television. The news was on, reporting on accidents like hers. Why her? she thought again. Well, why not her? another voice in her head answered. She would say she had bad luck except that she had Michael and he was a dream, the man cooking her supper now in the kitchen. Her friends, too, she reflected did the best that they could. "Would you bring me another beer," she called, "please?"

"You aren't supposed to drink alcohol with those pills," Michael called.

"I know," Pam said groggily.

Later, when Michael brought their steaming plates of spaghetti into the living room, she was sound asleep.

A few weeks after that, Michael came home and again found Pamela passed out on the couch.

"Wake up, Pammy," he said and shook her. She didn't move. "Pam, wake up," he demanded. Finally, he called 911.

"Hello, my wife is passed out and I can't wake her up." The rescue squad appeared with sirens blazing some minutes later. They loaded Pammy into their vehicle and screamed to the hospital. She was still comatose. He called her best friend, Ulna, and she came in to sit beside him.

"How is she doing?" Ulna asked.

"I can't tell. They won't tell me anything."

Ulna put a hand on his arm. "She'll be all right, I'm sure."

Michael shivered. "Right," he nearly whispered.

They sat in silence on uncomfortable straight back chairs, reading magazines and watching people come and go from the crowded waiting room.

Hours later, Dr. Sarkow called Michael into his office. He looked grim. "I'm sorry to tell you this," he began and Michael felt tears welling up in his eyes. His heart suddenly pained him. "We couldn't save her."

"What happened?" Michael asked, although he suspected the truth.

Dr. Sarkow looked down at his notes. "It was an overdose of alcohol and pain pills."

Michael put his head in his hands. "Why would she do that?" he groaned.

The doctor patted his hand. "We don't believe it was intentional. Accidents happen, you know."

19. "West Silly Skunk, Georgia"

"Got an extra butcher knife?" Claudia asked.

"You can use mine. I ain't got none extry. Drawer to the right of the stove," Lottie offered. "What's it for?"

"Cut the heat away from my front door. It's so damn heavy and thick, I can't get inside. Or find the doorknob."

"Yeah. It'll come away in big sticky chunks, I'm sure," Lottie agreed, leaning back to spread her legs wide and fan herself with her dress.

"Might be a breeze down by the stream," Claudia suggested, longing for the shade of its weeping willows and cherry trees.

She loved the little natural grove there of forget-me-nots that appeared annually by communal whim. Tiny violets disarrayed on its perimeter. Delicately wild white roses arced achingly over spiked grasses outlining the stream-bed.

Lottie sashayed toward and into the raw-rope hammock, swinging it back and forth toward reluctant waters churning through clumps of storm debris and rotting leaves down a slight incline of the clearing.

Claudia sat gingerly on the jagged summit of a rotten pine stump and from an

interior dare pulled over her head the woven frock top clinging to her in widening sweat spots, crumpling it into an uneven clump to wipe her glisteningly wet skin free.

“The heat makes me crazy,” she explained.

“There’s no one here to mind or care,” Lottie noted, listless in the humidity. Claudia dipped a part of the shirt-ball in tepid stream water to run it over her arms and under swinging breasts.

“Ah, that’s better,” she shared before adding, “I’ve gotta get back home before Dell gets there.”

Claudia dipped the whole shirt in stream waters, wrung out the excess, and pulled it back over her head and shoulders before dragging her bare toes back on the path to Lottie’s family cottage.

“Potsy, would you come here for a minute please?” Roland leaned on the bannister and called up the curving stairs glowing with fresh wax.

A bald-headed and robust figure, vacuum at hand, shirtless in gray denim bib overalls appeared in the upstairs foyer.

”Yessir,”Potsy responded in a deferential tone. He truly liked and admired his boss, enjoyed his work and surrounding circumstance.

Roland limped toward the kitchen. “I can’t reach the juicer in the cabinet and I promised Fran I’d whip up some passion fruits for supper to go with our sweet-and-sours. They’re marinating now,” he added.

Potsy stepped carefully in thickly rubber-soled shoes down to the great room landing.

“I’ll get it,” he assured his patiently affable, diminutive employer as they walked together toward the pantry.

“Which cabinet?” he wondered, peering around in that crowded and dimly-lit room. Neatly stacked cartons of emergency supplies filled every free floor and

air space.

“That one to your left with the flashlight hanging from doorknob,” Roland directed as he pulled the cord on the light fixture overhead.

Potsy lifted down one tall, bulky implement. “This?” he asked in befuddlement.

“No, that’s a regular blender,” Roland informed. “The thing with the blue base beside where that was at.”

Potsy handed it down cautiously, as the jar-top was obviously glass by its weight.

“While you’re up there, would you hand down those heavy multi-colored crystal goblets please? Fran’ll enjoy those,” Roland guessed, looking forward to pleasing by surprise his long-awaited guest.

As twenty-somethings, he and Fran had beach-bummed in the Keys, working toward a break for their devoted artworks within mid-Atlantic and Gulf breezes and tidal waters from a sand-logged trailer they salvaged, spiffed-up and shared with a ragged assortment of free-range cats. Grasping for the brass ring, Fran had married Miami’s main art dealer and wound up as a single mother clerking in Jacksonville, Macon and Athens. Roland had been thrilled to hear her voice again and discover she’d come within easy visiting distance so he could practice his recently rusty “charm“ on her softly affable swerves.

The bell rang at the front door.

“Oh, no,” Roland tittered, “Nothing’s ready yet!”

“Want me to thread these skewers?” Potsy, reaching for the marinade dish, asked from the kitchen counter.

“Yes- yes,” Roland nearly screamed. “And fire up the patio grill!”

He sped nervously into the kitchen.”Where’d you put the juicer? Nevermind, I see it.”

He pulled an earthenware bowl of peeled fruits from the refrigerator impatiently and placed it next to a large bottle of dark Jamaican rum. The bell rang again, longer this time.

“I’m coming. I’m coming,” Roland promised excitedly, skipping and sliding down the varnished hallway.

Fritz bounced down the road toward Christy.

"Here, boy," she called, bending to pat her thighs in welcome.

Beulah raced out of the wood to join him and jumped, front paws forward, to greet him with a friendly lunge.

Jet black smooth and shaggy shades of red they advanced in step, side by side, shaking their heads and yipping in enthusiasm by each side of Chris.

The threateningly gray sky rolled back into mountains on the hazy horizon leaving a brazenly blue glare overhead to promise heat without respite to all the organisms of its dominion, the mongrel domain of the third planet from the Sun in what its grammered guards called The Milky Way. Ladla The Peace Centurian flung a whining stream of rainbow-jelled jujus from Star Nebula Orisis into its largest boiling sea to calm and disperse the storm brewing there.

Fibrous filters from The Mangrove Maelstrom Galaxy dropped of their own sentient accord over atolls teeming with giant scaley lice and caught the percolating insect plague up into The Grand Universal Void for permanent dispersion amidst the waxed ion and waned aeon droplets stored there.

Ignoring the tremulous tumult of the nearby universe, Chris whistled for Fritz and Beulah as he pulled a compact mirror from his back left jeans pocket and smeared liver-flavored orange lipstick onto his eyelids and into his ears to amuse and entice them. Up each nostril he pushed dog biscuit-shaped licorice

sticks and pushed his pants down toward his hips country-style to stagger waist-bent bravely toward the flaringly flaming citrus orb that had grounded along his path.

"Git," he yelped in the wrong direction, turning his fevered head toward the icemelt reigning from the Seconded Stunship sent from the sweltering homegloom barium star in its spatial trail of catsup-colored and flavored filaments of the moons of Planet Phyllis in The Dimension of Dreadfull Dead.

Galactic blood urped, clotted and oozed from the pustule pool of putrescence spewed from the agitated orb visitation mirage. Its alarm excretions in crusty curds of jaggedly jangling gelatinous whiplike strips of froggy groanings soon jammed the way home to Christy and her canines.

He had to make his way home through that to secure it safe from the irradiated proton plops the orb expired obsessively before the massive mess depleted all the neonate nitrogen from the storage cupboard or the dogs would have no fodder.

Earthmoon hummed her a soothing tune and breathed its blue steamers with comforting encouragements and vaguely pastel blandishments for sprinkling on pink-jumping pits that tripped him.

Comet Caligula crooned in nordic notes of disdain as Christy crawled through a zapped strain in the blighted spore of starsun Jules.

The oven door banged closed. Jamie hoped that meant a meal soon in the offing. George appeared in the doorway and skittered a tin pan noisily across the wood floor toward the paper-strewn desk in announcing, "Fix your own damn dinner, bum. Are you ever going to be done writing that trash?"

Jim grasped the pieces of his latest obsession, *The Great James History of the World Through The Eyes of a Mouse*, together with both hands into an unruly stack.

"Yes. No, I just began writing a sequel: *The Grated History of Evolution Since Time Began As Experienced Through the Teeth of an Omniverous Gnat.*"

(... to be continued....)

"Please, mommy! Let me go one more time," Freda begged in girlish anticipation.

Alice pressed the button once again for the lobby floor and the plexiglassed cylinder glided down in its smoothly silent drama of the hotel tower unfolding before the cushioned bench where Freda rested entranced before mutely passing outdoor windows and private room doors and open-railed hallways and other visitors.

The elevator stopped on the plushly carpeted dais where a chair-seated woman wearing a thigh-length silver t-strapped shimmy with matchingly shiny beret and skinny slingback high heels finger-danced out ragtime on an opened white grand piano. A small pale-blue tuxedoed gentleman in the alcove shadows on her left held a saxophone patiently by one side and blended in when a chorus was played. The percussion-surrounded drummer behind him wore a strapless form-fitting black jersey bathing suit with matching felt fedora and glittering rhinestoned sandals on her tapping feet. Their flashing neon sign blared "The Electric Bandittos Eclectica!" for an all-acoustic group that formed and reformed depending on who where wished to perform at any given time or place. When Freda and Alice passed through earlier on their way to breakfast, a heavily made-up and denim-jeaned instrumentalist on french horn sat in. He reappeared during lunch in the company of a grinning evening-gowned teen in garishly sequined waist-length cape and elbow-high gloves with a trombone.

Alice handed her daughter a few dollar bills to place in the glass bowl on the piano, as the still-seated musician smiled and nodded to her tiny benefactress. "Okay," Freda announced, looking up to her mother and with a happy dance step, "I'm thirsty now. Let's go."

Alice reached for her hand as they headed toward and into the cinderella-style lift once more to the top floor with its gleaming rows of tempting refreshment dispensation machines by a bare-floored and wallpapered community room of magazines and newspapers, sofas, tables and chairs with a cozily-cluttered kitchenette area by the wide floor-to-ceiling window onto the hotel's strictly-manicured English gardens flanking its highway-side main entrance passage and deeply-carved Moroccan mahogany front doors.

Alice studied the soda machines.

"What color?" she asked Freda in their customary game.

"Green," Freda called back.

"Dew, 7Up, limeade," Alice announced.

"Dew," Freda answered easily.

"Ready for a sandwich?"

Freda nodded and moved to her mother's side.

"Burger? Dog?" Alice questioned studying the compartmented window of another machine.

"Ham and cheese? Tuna? Roast beef and swiss? Cream cheese and olive?" Freda grimaced until Alice completed the enumeration. "Baloney and American? Liverwurst and muenster? Bacon and cheese biscuit?"

"Beef," Freda finally decided and they walked to the mini-microwave to warm the roll and melt the cheese.

Alice found ice trays in the little fridge, filled a large red plastic cup, opened the can of pop and poured the fizzing green liquid out, dramatically holding the can high in the air to create a fountain.

Freda giggled.

The mini-oven bell rang as she stood on her toes and reached up onto the counter for the door latch and her snack.

"Sarah Luna. Sequoia Madrigal. Tamara Daniel. Samuel Katrine. Kava Selena," Linda offered as interesting possible names for the baby.

"Let's not have one," Manny reconsidered.

(... to be continued...)

"You won't believe the news today in the Silly Skunk Daily Standard!" Penny exclaimed to Patrick, her Irish Setter.

"We have company finally. Zeezee is here as prophesied!" she added animatedly.

Streaming from the barrier islands, she related, Guelotians had come ashore during the previous week with their translucently viscous over-large heads shaped like jagged rocks over transparent bodies that copulated and propagated by sympathetic vibration in agreement without regard to gender of which they'd only one or many compatible, depending on other wavelengths and intensities in their environment. All of their thought communications are telepathic and soundless to human ears, Penny explained to an attentive Patrick, although some earthly species like dolphins can and do tune in to their frequency to listen and respond. Outer Terrestrials call the Guelotian native home Starson Beb of the Ultra Dimension and its inhabitants Beins.

Guelotian transport around their home and elsewhere is through intention and welcome, Penny continued to an enthralled Patrick. Beins are accommodating and conciliatory, agreeable and harmonious in general, she assured him. They aren't found where uninvited or displeasing to them, but they're capable singly and especially in concert with each other of Herculean tasks and triumphs if they and/or their hosts are threatened or attacked. The

methods employed and goals attained in victory aren't necessarily apparent to humans at the time, or occasionally ever, being undetectably invisible and inexplicable to them, and are often ascribed to discernibly familiar but erroneous forces. To interact with earth forms Beins assume randomly male and female physiologies, Penny informed the still-curious Setter, with consequences from tragic to comical since earthly sexual activities and gender expectations are completely alien to Beins (and many other outer terrestrials), of all ages and types for reconnaissance, research and assistance. As with all life forms, Beins are spirit emanations of God in a manner similar to earth forms but different in apparition and abilities.

Starson Beb's terraced gardens of the elusive raspberry tree and fabled conifer mustard are famed throughout Outer Terrestrial territories, Penny went on to summarize from what she'd read of The Standard's background research coverage. Zeezee Bein, assigned as a gardenskeep of the invaluable raspberry and mustard orchards, had never been allowed on any extraordinary adventures. Petulant as Zeezee felt about restrictive responsibilities off and on, nurturance from sprout to flowering profusion of succulence and spice that are every Beins dietary mainstay brought also its measure of comforting joys and satisfactions for the meanwhile. And then it happened! Finally Zeezee was called, needed more urgently where earthforms have been challenged and nearly smothered by a brutal invasion of Dedseds from the black hole Dimension of Knot in the Nebula Twangle.

Patrick lay on his back and stretched contentedly on the fake fur rug, relieved to know the universe had sent assistance to save them from the structural shambles engulfing earth.

20. “Vida Quandry, Georgia”

Chel let herself back in to her apartment and settled into the sofa with yesterday's newspaper. She would, she decided, go through the entertainment section and see if she could figure out anything from it. Also, she remembered

suddenly, there was a magazine devoted to the city that might yield up places that would appeal especially to her tastes. The doorbell rang and Chelsea rubbed her eyes. She had nearly fallen asleep. Instead, she pulled herself over to the door and opened it to a tall woman with long brunette hair and large bangle earrings.

"Hi there, Chelsea. Don't mean to scare you," she noted.

"Oh no. I was just almost asleep on the couch here," Chel protested weakly.

"Sorry. I just wanted to introduce myself. Pam said you stopped by. My name is Katy Batina. Pam and I are friends and have been roommates off and on over the years."

"Hello Katy," Chel said warmly. "Wouldn't you like to come in for a minute?"

"Sure, I'd love to. I haven't seen this apartment in a long time. It's cute, isn't it?" she asked, walking from one room to another and finally settling on one of the orange chairs.

Chelsea sunk in again to the sofa. "You're my first company," she said.

"Would you like some tea or coffee?"

"Tea and crumpets," Katy said in a silly tone so Chel would know she was joking. "No, coffee would be fine."

"Okay. Just let me get some perking."

"Oh, no. Don't bother with that. Just a glass of water, or juice if you have it would be fine," Katy amended, crossing her legs and smoothing her skirt.

Chelsea approved of the way Katy was dressed. She wore a light gray full skirt, a white blouse with a thin red bow, a black velvet jacket and gray suede high heels. The effect was very elegant. "Have you just gotten off work?" Chel asked curiously.

"Mmm-huh," Katy answered without much interest in discussing her employment.

"What do you do?" Chel persisted.

"I'm a clothes' buyer for Graolyn. Have you been there?"

"Oh yes," Chelsea breathed. "It's wonderful. I'm so intimidated though by the styles," and the prices, she added to herself.

"It's a hard job but it's fun sometimes," Katy said in a tone that closed the subject. "What do you do?"

"I'm a bookkeeper for Hought and Company. They're electrical engineers, you know, downtown."

"Uh-huh."

Chel came back from the kitchen with two glasses of apple juice. "Here you go. I'm so glad you stopped by."

"Well, I can't really stay long. I'm tired and I have to get up early in the morning but I wanted to meet Pam's new neighbor. Especially," she added with a slight grin, "because Ned asked you out."

"Did he ask you out ever?" Chel inquired, her head at an angle.

"Yes, of course."

"Did you go?"

"Yes. It was fun. It wasn't a date. We just had dinner together. We still do sometimes." Katy uncrossed her legs and crossed them again at the ankle. They were long and the stockings she wore shone in the evening light. They were grayish black to match her outfit and accentuated the slimness of her limbs.

"That's nice."

"You can go with us sometime then."

"Sure," Chelsea agreed suddenly. "It sounds like fun." There was a silence as they sipped their juice, then Chel asked, "Where do you go when you go out on the town here?"

"You mean what restaurants?"

"Well, yes. And what about book shops and tea rooms, if there are any."

"Sure there are. Did you want me to take you to a few?" Katy asked curiously.

"I'd love for you to do that." She wondered if Katy's taste would be the same as hers. There was no way to know except to accompany her to a few different places and find out.

"Well, give me your telephone number at home and work, and we'll work on getting together and going out on the town then."

"Will Pam...?" Chelsea asked hesitantly and without voicing her full concern.

"No," Katy interrupted her. "Pam isn't much for going out and we don't like the same kind of places at all. Pam is beer halls and chips on the tables and peanut shells on the floor. I'm cordials and tea sandwiches and strawberry torte."

Chel smiled. "Opposites attract," she noted without realizing what the import might be.

"Oh, we aren't..." Katy hesitated and didn't finish the sentence.

"Oh, I didn't mean..." Chelsea said almost simultaneously.

"Well, the truth is," Katy said, leaning back and taking one last sip from her apple juice glass, "once we were but now we are not."

"Oh." Chel couldn't think of anything to say for a minute. "How long have you not?" she asked finally.

"A long time really. It's a good relationship," Katy explained. "We've worked on it. We're friends. Good friends. And we take care of each other." She placed her glass on the table and sat back. "We just don't have that kind of relationship anymore. We haven't for several years."

"Does she have someone else?" Chelsea asked. She really wanted to ask if Katy had someone else, but didn't know how to phrase that to someone she

had barely met.

"Oh yes," Katy assured her, reading her mind. "We both have had other relationships since. My most recent one kind of self-destructed a few months ago."

"Are you okay?" Chelsea asked with genuine concern.

"Yes. I wasn't to begin with but I am now."

"That's good."

"Well," Katy said, standing and walking toward the door, "thank you again for the juice and the company. I need to get on home now."

Chelsea walked over to the door and gave her a sudden impetuous hug. "I'm glad to have made a new friend," she said. "I'll look forward to hearing from you."

Katy kissed her full on the mouth and turned toward the hallway. "I'll be calling you," she said over her shoulder. As she turned down the hall, Mr. Winterspoon appeared at the top of the stairs.

"How are you doing, Red?" Katy asked gaily as she passed the new landlord on the steps.

Jocelyn Penelope Levrinski. You're next," the white-suited announcer called from his booth to the right of the barren stage.

Jocey pulled in her stomach and stood, fumbling for the notebooks beside her chair. Donald reached over to gather and hold them in the air.

Olivia pondered what she'd say next to her fearlessly departed brother, Harvey Lowell.

"You never really liked mama anyway," she noted aloud, smoothing the jagged folds in Hortense Graham's flowery lace skirt. "She jabbered too much for your taste, didn't she?" Vee addressed in a newly acidic accusatory key her ever-reticent youngest sibling as he leaned carelessly against the laminated purple casket and refused to answer.

"How did you get her to swallow the nightshade? Did she scream and suffer loudly in pain, or just double over to cry and whimper?"

Lowell slid silently under the table to lie with a skewed grin stretched around the tanless head he rested on scattered blossoms tumbled onto the scratched wide-plank flooring and its thinly worn and fading carpet.

"Did you enjoy it?" Livy persisted, glancing down with a grimace.

"How did she get to the shed for the axe to cut off your head? I didn't know she was that strong. Did you?"

Lowell shoved his sister hard against the jutting mantle, foisting his index finger into the deep hole in her side under the left breast and circling to widen the wound. "How the hell do I shut you up?" he grumbled under his breath.

For her part, sister Karolla Jill reminisced on the puppies. "Did Jolly and Catsup fight back when you put them into the feed sack? How did it sound when you threw them into the pond? Did it make a big splash or just ripple and sink? Where did you find the cinder block?"

Lowell reached for the fireplace poker to lengthen onto her right shoulder and underarm the uneven knife-cut around Karol's neck.

Hortense sat up and arched against the right side of her barely-cushioned coffin. "Shhh-h," she hissed demandingly, "Mother's resting."

"Come here, Nancie," Scar said. "I want to show you something. Look here!"

Nancie looked up from her book. "What?"

"It's a picture. Come on."

Nancie laid the book on a cushion and got up reluctantly.

"Oh!" she exclaimed in surprise. "That's disgusting!"

"No," Scar said. "It isn't. You're just afraid. It's just a picture."

"It's real human beings."

"They're just posing."

"They don't even know each other."

"How do you know? Anyway they're getting paid."

"Who cares?"

"It's just a job."

"Well, it's not a good one."

"People do different things. It doesn't matter."

"It does."

"You're a priss."

"You're decadent."

"Why does it bother you? Nudes at the gallery don't."

"It's art. Love of the body, the shape of it, the shadows, the person inside it."

Scar shrugged. "It's just a body."

"A tool?"

"Yeah. I guess."

"No one inside?"

"Well, not all the time."

"Using a body for money and leaving your mind and soul somewhere else?"

"Ahhh."

"Do you have a mind and soul?"

"Of course."

"Are you sure?"

"Nanc!"

"Where are you when we make love?"

Scar squirmed and grimaced. "What?"

"Are you there?"

"Of course."

"I don't think you are."

"What are you talking about?"

"I think it's mechanical. Just something you do 'cause your body pushes you to."

"All right."

"It doesn't have anything to do with me. It could be anyone."

"Make some biscuits or something."

"What?"

"You talk too much. Think too much. Do something. Shut the trash up."

"I don't want company that doesn't want to discuss anything."

"You want to discuss everything. I heard you babbled about your aunt's teacups for five hours yesterday."

"Did not."

"Did too."

Nanc laughs and Scar joins her.

"Okay. I babble."

"Well, quit."

"It's just background. You don't even have to listen."

"It drives me nuts."

"It drives me nuts that you don't talk."

"I don't have much to say."

"You could."

"I don't."

"Well, what's inside?"

"Nothing."

"That's what I said. A body without a mind or soul."

"It is not."

"It's not communicating. I don't know what you think."

"Well, listen."

"Listen to what?"

"Listen to the silence."

"That's insane."

"No, it isn't."

"I don't get it."

"I'm there. In the spaces."

"Physics again."

"Existence precedes not essence but words."

"Essence precedes existence?"

"It might."

"Essence exists and a body curls around it?"

"And it exists." Scar grins.

"Shoot."

"Look at this."

"No!"

"Okay, look at me." Scar unzips his pants and slides them down.

"Jeez. Don't you ever think of anything else?"

"Not really."

"What about when you're teaching class?"

"Everything proceeds from that."

"Ooooooh."

"Where are you going?"

"To make biscuits."

"But I wanted to show you...."

"No!"

"Okay. Food's good too."

"You gotta have that to...."

"Yeah, that's where the teaching comes in."

Nanc leaned around the kitchen door holding a pan in the air.

"Well, it's true."

"Look at your pictures," Nanc muttered.

And later as an oven door slammed against the quiet, "I hear you."

21. “Viva Nonpareil, Massachusetts”

"Hey, Darla. How about if I come over for a little visit today?" Jennifer asked, as they stood by the intersection of Main and Fifth Streets.

Jennifer was worried about her friend but didn't want to push her for answers. She hadn't called or visited Jenny for months. That was not normal. The two of them had been close for many years. Something was wrong. It could just be Stephen, who'd left without warning or notice of any kind. He just disappeared. After five years or so in Viva, he just vanished. No one heard from him. No one knew where he'd gone. No one really knew for sure if he was alive. What had caused him to behave like that, Jennifer wondered. And she pondered whether Darla was keeping a secret of the answer.

Darla said she had no idea why Stephen had left, that it was as much a surprise to her as anyone else. Still, they had been nearly inseparable for the years they had lived together. Surely Darla had a clue, whether she consciously knew it or not. Jennifer had suggested psychotherapy, maybe hypnosis. She knew Darla had gone for a few sessions and quit abruptly. She knew that Darla dragged herself around on her job, giving it fifty percent or less of her mind and effort.

Darla looked down now when she walked, refused to meet the eyes of passersby. Jennifer wanted to rouse her somehow from her lethargy, give her new life, or life back to her. She missed the friend that Darla had been, the person she had been. Darla had been bouncy, joyous, full of enthusiasm and love. That person seemed to have died slowly over the past few months, maybe

the past year little by little. Jennifer went over in her mind the last months that Darla had been with Stephen. She remembered how Darla had paled little by little, become quieter and more withdrawn. What had gone on between them?

"Sure," Darla answered without enthusiasm. "What time?"

"Oh, between three and four, say. Is that okay?"

"Yeah. That'll be fine." Darla hugged her and they parted to go their separate ways.

She scraped the dirty cobwebs from ceilings and corners with an old broom. Then she dusted the furniture with a damp cloth. Company required some upkeep. Left to her own devices, Darla didn't really care how filthy her home was. The doctor said she was depressed. He prescribed medicine that made her feel crazy. Her mind raced and her hands shook. She refused to take it anymore.

"Hi, girl. How are you doing?" Jennifer was at the door now, just a screen between her and her friend. Her blonde hair had blown nearly loose from the bow at the back of her neck. Tall and slim, she wore a pale print sundress with spaghetti straps and low-slung leather sandals. A small silver purse hung from her right shoulder. Around her neck was a string of cultured pearls and lightly colored seashells. Scattered freckles dotted her tanned nose and cheeks.

"Come on in. I'm just trying to create a false impression here," Darla answered. She wore bright plaid bermuda shorts with a blue tank top. Her feet were bare except for a gold braided ankle bracelet. Her short brown hair had been permed recently and curled fetchingly to circle a round face. Darla was a little on the chunky side with short legs and a thick waist. Nevertheless, she was attractive and her breasts were ample. They pushed now over and against her shirt.

"Cleaning?" Jennifer asked in mock surprise as she opened the screen door to a slight screech from its hinges.

"Yeah," Darla responded. "Have a seat. I even made us some macaroni and

cheese and hot dogs."

"You really went all out," Jenny teased her. She knew that Darla was an excellent cook, had had many a fancy meal at her house. The standout, Jenny always thought, was sirloin tip steak and Yorkshire pudding served with fresh peas and potatoes from the garden. That afternoon they had had red wine, beaujolais, the four of them laughing and talking and carrying on, watching sports on television and then listening to music and dancing. Those were happy days, Jennifer reflected, the days of their innocence just a few years ago.

Darla went to the kitchen, pulled pretzels from a cabinet and poured them into a white porcelain bowl. "Want some pretzels and beer?" she called. The kitchen was compact. It held a small round glass-topped table with two white wire chairs. There was a narrow buffet filled with decorator plates on top. The closed cabinets beneath held extra pots and pans.

Jennifer examined her nails and reminded herself to redo them later that evening. The bright red paint had chipped, as it had on her toes. "Do you have any wine?" she asked hopefully.

"Nope, sorry." Darla had barely been shopping lately, just for essentials and had no interest in fancy liquors or wines. "Just beer today. But it's good stuff. Guinness Stout." Stephen had left it behind and she had had no taste for it.

"Oh, I don't like that in warm weather." Jenny looked out a window facing the backyard at clear sky beyond. She felt afternoon sun heating the livingroom. "How about iced tea? Do you have that?"

Darla read her mind and switched on the air conditioning. "How about orange juice?" she offered.

"That'll be great," Jennifer agreed. She saw a blue jay flit past the kitchen window to a feeder hung from the branch of an oak tree. Summer was her favorite time of year, despite the sizzling temperatures. She kicked off her sandals and pulled her legs up beside her on the couch. Leaning into the pillows, she stretched her shoulders and rubbed her arms in comfort at the surroundings. "This is a wonderful house," she commented.

Darla reappeared with the bowl and their drinks. She set the pretzels on a table in front of the couch and sat down on the flowered overstuffed chair. "What do you think of the new arrangement?" she asked.

The question threw Jennifer. "You mean your single status?" she inquired cautiously.

"No!" Darla laughed. "I mean where the furniture is now."

Oliver George Tedersen. You're next," the white-suited announcer called from her booth to the left of the cluttered stage.

Ollie pulled in his stomach and stood, fumbling for the papers beside his chair. Donald reached over to gather and hold them in the air.

Stephen leaned over the stove. He stirred the spaghetti thoughtfully. Would Darla show up? He put a bottle of white wine in the refrigerator and set the table with a white cloth and white napkins. He got out his mother's silver and shined it with polish in the sink. He re-stacked the magazines on the coffee table, emptied and washed the ashtray, and dusted the smooth glass surface. He stared at the phone. She was late. Should he call? No, he'd wait for awhile. Anything could have happened. She might be stuck in traffic. She might have had trouble deciding what to wear, as women do. He tied the garbage bag and took it outside, put a new one in. He found a vase in the cabinet and put the flowers from the living room in it, set it in the middle of the dining table. Finally, he sat down on the sofa and turned on the television. He watched it unseeingly. Where was she?

"Finally," he said, opening the door. "I wondered what happened to you."

Darla stepped across the threshold with some trepidation. She didn't really know Stephen well and had accepted his invitation by sudden whim, borne of a loneliness that pulled at her heart lately. She needed to make a change in her life. Something wasn't right, was missing from it. The attentions of a man had

eluded her for several years, partly of her own choosing. Coming out of her shell again, so to speak, seemed to be the answer, a step forward toward engaging in the world and the swirl of humanity in it again. She had removed herself, concentrated on her work for too long. She walked with more determination into the room.

"Sorry. Believe it or not, I got lost on the freeway. Took the wrong exit and had a hell of a time getting back to where I was. There's a lot of traffic."

"It's the holidays. Rough time to travel." Darla took off her coat and Stephen hung it in the closet carefully. He silently admired her tastefully tailored blue suit and matching high heels balancing long, slim legs. Her figure was nearly perfect, he assessed, especially for a woman of her years.

"Want a drink before we eat?" he inquired with nervous cheer. It had been awhile since he'd entertained anyone formally and he felt ill at ease, forgetting what might be the correct thing to say or order of details.

Darla stood by the door, shaking her long hair loose and running her fingers through it to loosen the strands. "Sure," she agreed, uncomfortably.

"Here," he offered, remembering his manners and gesturing vaguely toward the picture window. "Have a seat on the sofa while I get it."

As Darla settled in to the soft gray cushions, Stephen left to pull crystal wine glasses from the cabinet. He opened the refrigerator door noisily and found the chablis, poured it carefully and turned toward Darla.

22. "Zilch Montenegro, Connecticut"

Janie kept her balance against the current, feet planted determinedly, toes

gripping a slippery flat rock, as she cast into the riffles below the falls. Several small-mouth bass and a fall-fish she'd kept for catfish bait swung from a stringer attached to her belt. From a rope tied to a loop in her pants hung a covered plastic cup, half full of nightcrawlers that had poked up from the wet ground into her garden this morning and helgrammites she'd snatched from under river stones as she'd walked toward the white water.

She knew she'd waited too long. That bass had gotten his meal for free. Janie wound her line in, anticipating the empty hook and finding instead a small, evanescent and gilded bluegill barely thrashing as it flashed out of the water against the sun. Janie removed the hook, imagining the size of the fillets, and added the perch to her stringer. Four, and she needed at least six for Cass to bother cleaning and frying them. Janie threaded the head of a larger helgrammite onto her hook and, as the dark, segmented tail whipped and curled in the air, cast out below the rapids.

Harley screamed to Diane, "Right, RIGHT!", as he dug his paddle deep and urgently into the current to the right of the canoe. Furious white water foamed and crashed against ragged grey rocks suddenly straight ahead of them. Diane back-paddled from the stern, steering their canoe toward a pebble beach, laughing as cool water sprayed her sun-burnt shoulders and back. What if they fell out? At least they'd cool off, she thought. Diane paddled toward the shore. She envied the gal standing in the riffles, casting downstream. Next time she'd bring an anchor and her fishing rod, although Harley might be a bit bored with that. Maybe he could bring a book.

Cass splashed through shallow clear water, searching the dark colored stones and ivory shells, stooping to examine an unbroken mussel, turning its iridescent blue-green curve toward the sun. Reaching the riffles, Cass settled into the rocks a few feet from Janie, stretched her legs into white water and splayed her toes against the cool current. A piliated woodpecker tapped against a tree trunk, red head bobbing against the large green leaves of sycamores. Canoes, green and yellow and red, swirled around the rapids.

Mallards and wood ducks hid in tall grasses along the shore while canoers

shouted and splashed downstream. As Janie cast and waited and reeled in her fish and an evening quiet returned to the river, they slid out again onto the green, still pools, winding around rocks and islands, splashing out onto the clear air currents, gliding into cool downstream waters. Pintails who'd watched boats from the trees flew down to the bank and a solitary heron, purple-gray and regal, dipped its slender beak into the shallows.

Trish emptied her pocketbook onto the dining room table. Somewhere in there was her eye shadow case. And inside it was a one hundred dollar bill. She needed it now for groceries. Ah, she said to herself, there it is. But that was her blush case. No. The eye shadow case was gone. She could hardly believe it.

She rummaged again through the strewn contents of her purse. It simply wasn't there. She went to the bathroom and checked on the sink counter. Not there either. Then she checked the bedroom in vain. Finally, she convinced herself she had put the bill someplace else entirely. She went through the contents of her jewelry cases and through the pockets of her sweaters and coats and skirts. After hours of fruitless searching and rising panic, Trish finally accepted that the one hundred dollars was gone.

And what, she asked herself, had she to eat until payday next Friday. She checked the cabinets. No, she was out of powdered and evaporated milk. She had some canned vegetables and some spaghetti sauce and noodles. She checked the refrigerator and found half a can of margarine and some bread and juice. Trish poured herself a glass of that and sat down again at the dining room table. Who could she call for a loan this time?

"Hello, Mom, how are you doing?.... Just fine.... Well, I've had another little catastrophe...." Trish explained the situation. Her mother expressed her regret at not being able to help. She advised her daughter to keep her money in the bank and have more ample savings. 'Ten dollars a paycheck', she admonished again, 'will add up to a rainy day fund', if her daughter would just comply.

"Carol?... How are you?... No, I've had another of my little disasters...."

Trish recounted her latest fiasco to her best friend. Carol said she could loan her twenty dollars until the following Friday. The butterflies began to leave Trish's stomach. That was better than nothing.

"Pete?... What's up with you?... Oh, I've had another small fiasco...." Trish retold the story and her old boyfriend offered to loan her thirty-five dollars until payday. Trish was feeling better. She finished her glass of juice and poured herself another. Checking again through the cabinets, she found crackers and peanut butter for supper.

"Janet?... How are you this afternoon, sis?... Well, I've had a minor setback...." Trish again told the tale of the eye shadow case and her missing one hundred dollars. Janet promised to loan her forty dollars until she could pay it back, whenever that might be. Trish felt a crush lift from her chest. That was enough for groceries and sundries, including gas, until she was paid again.

Crisis averted, she drove first to visit Janet. She retrieved the forty dollars with only a minor scolding from her older sibling. Pete gave her thirty-five dollars with no words of wisdom except that she try to build up a bank account, as her mother had admonished. Carol offered her thirty dollars after all and promised to help again if she needed it. Trish stopped by the grocery on the way home and bought what she needed for the week. Passing Ted's One-Stop, she splurged and bought a fifth of white wine. Arriving at home, she called Wilma.

"Want to come over tonight for wine and cheese and crackers?" Trish asked. "I'd love some company. And you can help me resolve the latest mystery."

Intrigued, Wilma agreed and arrived at the door of Trish's apartment some hour or so later. "So what's to solve?" she asked, settling in her favorite chair. Trish told one more time her story of the eye shadow case and the missing one hundred dollar bill.

"Are you sure that's where you put it?"

"Absolutely."

"Did you check in your wallet?"

"Of course." A momentary trepidation passed over Trish as she wondered if she really had.

"Check again. Go on."

Trish went over to the dining room table to retrieve her wallet and opened it for her friend. "There. It isn't there. See?" Wilma took the wallet and began going through it methodically.

Shortly, she pulled out a folded one hundred dollar bill from behind a credit card lodged securely in its section. "Here it is, kid. Just where you put it," she informed her friend.

Trish stared. "How did it get there?"

"I think you put it there."

"Yes, but when? I know I had it in the eye shadow case."

"Was that this one hundred dollar bill or another one?"

"No. It was this one."

"When did you go to the store last?" Wilma asked, determined to resolve the mystery before she finished her wine and left for home.

"Oh," Trish said with disgust. "I know what happened."

"What?"

"I meant to go to the store last night and put it in my wallet before I left. Then they were calling for freezing rain and I decided to go tonight instead. Now all I need to find is my eye shadow case."

"Your poor head. You really need someone to help keep you straight."

"Thank you for being that person. Do you think I'm getting to that age where I need live-in help?"

"No, it's just the trauma of losing your husband, being on your own, and some other travails you've had, including getting a job after all these years."

"Well, there's nothing like old friends." Wilma gathered her pocketbook and coat and stood up to go. "Emphasis on 'old'," she replied with a grin.

Sadie was getting dressed when gravity changed and her hair caught the blouse mid-shoulder. Tugging on it didn't help. Perhaps a knife would cut through it, she had thought, but it took a chain saw and Graylord's help to get it untangled from curls the weight and color of bronze, now stuck askew parallel to the floor. Breakfast became the usual, if unanticipated, havoc as electrical charges reversed randomly. The bread popped in and out of the toaster and she managed to grab it just as the edges singed. Looking for the to-do list of that morning's tasks, she found its magnetic clip had slipped upward from the frig and firmly attached itself backwards to the top of an overhead cabinet.

Sadie pulled on the step-stool but woodspores had magnetized and it clung to the corner with a force her muscles, glowing meanly through evanescent cells, rejected with the sound of what used to be a doorbell. The doorbell ticked as her muscles rang and Sadie's mind whirred in white sparking clouds. She didn't want to see what the sky looked like now. On the other hand, she had to go to work and headed resolutely toward the ticking bell where surely the door would be.

Sadie's body dissolved through the window glass and reorganized its patterns, as she deduced that, if the doorbell was on a window, she might tune in on the windowlocks to find the door when she returned home later in whatever turned out to be a day this time. Striding with increased adjustment on one ear and part of her large intestine toward a tree she felt from the metallic fauvian aura was her autoplate, Sadie opened the eye on her wrist and directed it upward. Loomed remnants of antique airland ornaments from the

25th century whorled through a green void that earlier had been a chatreuse field of glass shards on toenail tattoos when she'd wakened from slumber in the binding of Thesaurus *P. P*, she thought, and small beige circles covered the autoplate.

Uh-oh, she thought, and a bubble rose in rainbows toward the void. *Pretty*, she reflected uncontrollably, and the tree/autoplate glimmered back. *Uh-oh, uh-oh*. Bubbles. *Pretty*. Glimmer. Sadie's eyes widened from wrists and waist. *Control, control*. Her body froze and the autoplate scooped her up. *Ssssssssshatreuse?* she wondered as shards skipped on the toenail swing. *Work*, her mind oozed, almost in sync with the first bounce toward Wril.

Sadie relaxed and let scents of the new universe take over flight. *Lullaby, lullaby*, they sniffed, *all the old senses have died. You are again new. Open your eyes, open your eyes*.

finis

23. "Wobbly Flat, South Carolina"

Their disagreements settled, centered as ever on the same resentments and recriminations.

Pauline's face was red, contorted like an overripe apple. "You've been seeing her again."

"No," Jay insisted, "I have not been seeing her again."

Pauline shoved him out of the way and then turned to say, "When are you going to get that bimbo out of your life?"

Jay crumpled his cigarette into the ashtray. "She ain't no bimbo. And," he added, "I ain't seen her for months. She's mad."

"She," Pauline emphasized the 'she', "is mad?"

"Forget it," Jay advised. "Like I told you, like I told her, it's over."

"Sell that damned stuff," he said later when he found her with the small mahogany box empty and jewelry strewn around her folded legs. She sat on the floor fondling her favorite pieces.

"I will not," she protested. "They're family heirlooms."

"We need the money," Jay thundered in reply.

"Well, go make it then."

Pauline's large body shook with anger, as he pounded a fist on the bedroom wall. Wiry and angular, he was smaller than his wife but his yelling and banging eventually drowned her out. She put the jewelry away and went to bed in tears that night, waiting for him to come in and explain, to apologize for his most recent burst of temper.

Some two months later, police determined that Jay died around 2:45 p.m. on Tuesday, June 8. The lab found the cause of death to be asphyxiation. Pauline cried nearly from the time she finally gave in and called for help on June 5, to the time officers discovered the body. The couple had their problems -- a few scars showed that -- and to begin with she thought maybe he just left for a few days to cool off. After five days though, she knew that Jay would never stay away that long without calling or coming back. It chilled her. Her shoulders shrugged in despair. Every day she waited by the phone for any news at all. Finally her friend on the force, Danny, appeared at the front door.

"Now, sit down," he said, consolingly. "I have bad news." His bulk seemed to fill the living room. He put his arm around her back and held her as her body shivered with sobs.

"Do you have you any clues" she asked, "as to who could have done this and why?"

He shook his head in the negative. "Did he have any enemies?" Danny asked carefully.

"Not any that serious," Pauline replied.

The case remained open on the books, unsolved.

Pauline rearranged her life to that of a single person. She felt afraid of the outdoors, now, and rarely went out. She vowed never to marry again. She turned down offers of dates. Later, she agreed to have a roommate. She and

Sheila often walked way back in the forest where Jay's body had been found. "Right here," she would say. "Right here, he drew his very last breath."

Sheila would shake her head in commiseration. "It's very sad," she would say.

One day as they were walking that way, Sheila noticed something sparkling from under the ground. She knelt to dig out what appeared to be a gold bracelet. "Hey, look here!" she called to say.

Pauline came over and frowned. "I've been wondering where that was," she said.

"It's yours?" Sheila asked.

"I must have lost it here sometime when I was weeding around the trees where the lilies of the valley are planted," Pauline answered. She rubbed the bracelet clean with the corner of her shirt and put it on. "I'm so glad to find that. Thank you!" she said.

They walked on. It was a relatively short distance to the dismal place where Jay had said his last goodbyes to the human race.

(to be continued....)

Madeleine had a demon. Everyone in the hamlet knew it and one after another they'd tried with varying success to exorcise it. Clel had gotten rid of

it completely once, but the result was so horrendous that the townsfolk ended up praying secretly in their hearts for the devil's return. Its absence was worse than its visitations. Pots boiled over and burned. Pictures fell from the walls. Even the chapel crucifix turned slantways on its moorings. If it fell to the floor, they all agreed, the hamlet would die.

Meantime, Madeleine hummed Elizabethan folktunes as she sewed. Tears melted with paint in the tint of watercolor oceans nobody knew. In the evenings, she danced barefoot on town streets screaming half-sentences, disjointed words at the stars and moon. She cursed the exorcists and the preacher. She swore the demon was a priest. Once they found her fully clothed in their square's fountain, hands raised to the waterfall, laughing as jets hit her eyes and rained down pale cheeks into her open, upturned mouth. Her family was appalled. They called the city primate to help them and to cure her.

The bishop sang Latin chants and wove an ancient cross of the Essenes between her breasts. Into her forehead he wrote the sign of the fish. Madeleine yelped and meowed like a cat, stretched her arms wide toward East and West and fell chest-forward toward the primate, who declared her healed and left. Madeleine laughed and called her demon's name.

Grateful of peace from black magic in their space, the townsfolk left Madeleine to her possession and returned to their work.

Selah Shalom, the priest sang from the aisles of palms that Easter.

Dinah's forebear had been so special to her that she had chosen to be married on the same date as her great-grandmother. The china had been a wedding gift: first, years ago, to her great-grandma and, many years later, to her. Dinah kept the boxes under her bed. Every once in a while, maybe once a year when no one was in the house, she pulled them out carefully and opened them one by one.

There was her great-grandmother's black enameled pitcher with its burst of bright red and yellow flowers on their dark green stems. In another, she found tiny coffee cups laced with forget-me-nots and rimmed heavily in gold. Yet another held six silver-rimmed white plates. In the fourth she found matching bowls. The final box held serving pieces: a large plate, a butter dish, and a gravy boat. She handled them all lovingly, turning them over and over in her hands.

"Dinah! Where are you?" Jeff called from the hallway. He was a large man with reddish skin and light brown hair. He wore it cropped off around his ears and somewhat long in the back. He wore faded jeans and a rumpled blue t-shirt. As he passed by the coatrack, he threw his cap onto a hook there.

"In here with the remnants of my family," she called back sorrowfully. Dinah was small with dark brown hair and skin. Her mouth had fallen at the corners in a near-perpetual expression of dissatisfaction. As usual, she wore sweat pants and a sweat shirt. The set she wore on that day was pink.

"Oh," he said, appearing in the doorway. He surveyed the cloying neatness of the room with its small bottles of perfumes and its lace doilies set here and there under jewelry boxes and vases of artificial flowers. The bedspread was flowered with a white background and the curtains matched. It held five pink silk throw pillows with frilled and fluted edges. "Why do you go through all that old stuff? Why don't you either keep it out where we can use it or sell it and get rid of it?"

"You know the answer to that," Dinah protested just as a scream from Peter announced his presence again in the house. His sister whimpered after him.

"Kids," Jeff said, closing the bedroom door behind him. "Get back and wipe the mud off your shoes. Now!"

Peter and Grace retreated back to the mat by the front door and studiously wiped their boots, scuffing their feet loudly and pushing each other off balance. Little Grace fell finally off her feet and onto the carpet.

"Ow!" she screamed. "Stop it!"

"Peter! Leave your sister alone," his Dad admonished sternly. "Get upstairs now and wash your hands. We're having dinner soon."

Peter and Grace disappeared up the stairs in some semblance of order. Jeff opened the bedroom door again. He found his wife folding the top back of the last carton and pushing it back under their bed.

"One day," she said, "I'll have a fine corner china closet with a glass front and I'll show these pieces off and you and I will use them. We'll have guests that use them too."

Jeff ignored her. "Is dinner nearly ready?" he asked. "I'm starving."

"Get yourself a bowl of macaroni and cheese while you're waiting. Yes, I have something ready to fix in a minute," Dinah said, straightening up and brushing her pants in the front from lint on the rug. "I'll be in there in a second."

Jeff went into the kitchen and Dinah brushed her hair thoughtfully. She was so tired of a life of paper plates and her Mom's old everyday china. It was brown and chipped and looked unappetizing. Dinah put the brush down and dragged herself toward the stove. "We're having hamburger helper with broccoli and rice," she announced, taking the top of the skillet to show Jeff.

"Mmmmm," he said, approvingly, as he leaned over the skillet. "Smells wonderful. Need any assistance?"

"Nope," she said, reaching for her mother's old plates from the cabinet.

"Sure you do," he said helpfully. "I'll set the table for you."

"You will?" she inquired in surprise.

"Yes. I have an idea too." Jeff took the plastic mats out from the drawer where they covered a linen tablecloth with napkins to match. He took flatware out from the dish drain and set all of it out on their large kitchen table. He moved a vase of artificial flowers to make way for the saucer that held butter and took a loaf of bread down from the top of the refrigerator. He found ketchup in the refrigerator and set it beside the butter and the cardboard salt and pepper shakers.

"What is it?"

"Our anniversary is next week. How about if we ask Mom to take the kids and have an elegant dinner in the dining room just the two of us. I'll fix it for

you."

Dinah laughed in delight. "And what will you fix, Mr. Instant Gourmet?" That was a reference to Jeff's lack of culinary skills. He did know how to put dishes in the microwave but, other than that, he spent little time in the kitchen.

"I'm going to surprise you," he said with a wink. Jeff knew that he'd broil steaks and bake potatoes and cook vegetables and heat rolls from the bakery downtown. He'd put out the real silverware and buy real flowers for the center of the table.

"You certainly will," she answered giggling.

"And what do you think I'll serve this fine meal on?" he asked teasingly.

"Ah, you want to use great-grandma's china, do you?" she asked.

"Why not?"

"Why not, indeed," Dinah answered with glee. "That will be a very happy anniversary -- for the china and great-grandma and me."

This time, Quentin gave her artificial roses for the anniversary of their first date. He held them out to her like they were something very wonderful. She put them in a vase without commenting, except to say thank you, and placed them in the center of the dining room table.

"So, you fixed us something special for tonight, did you?"

Katey considered the steaks she had marinating. She thought about what was in her refrigerator now. "I thought it would be fun to just chow down on hamburgers and french fries."

"Uh-huh."

"Did you want to go anywhere tonight?"

"No. We could just stay here and watch TV."

"Okay."

Quentin didn't quite know what to say. He knew something was wrong but he didn't know what. Obviously the evening was not going well so far. He got up and went into the kitchen after her, putting his arms around her waist as she stood over the stove.

"Mmmm," he said, "you feel so good." He nibbled at her ear.

"Quentin, I can't cook if you're bothering me in here." She shrugged him off and moved slightly to the left.

Quentin backed off and frowned. "Anything I can do to help in here?"

"You can get us both a beer." She had hoped he'd bring wine, maybe champagne.

"Here you go." He set it on the counter beside the stove.

"Thanks. Just go in the living room and relax. I'll be out with this in no time," Katey said. She purposefully overcooked the hamburgers, knowing he liked his nearly rare. She took the french fries out of the oven and put their supper on paper plates. Her mood was worsening by the minute and she tried to find the plastic forks and knives and spoons, but failed.

"Quentin," she said, as they sat down and began to eat, "I don't think you and I are really suited to each other. I mean, I think we're wrong for each other."

Quentin put down his hamburger and nearly choked on a piece. He swallowed and played with a french fry. "Why?"

"It's just a matter of taste."

"You mean you like your hamburgers well-done and I like mine rare?"

"No."

"Well, what then?"

"I just can't explain it. We're too different."

His shoulders sagged. "This isn't exactly the anniversary I had planned."

"Well, it might have been better if you'd taken me out somewhere, I suppose."

Quentin licked his upper lip and bit it.

"Can't you just unbend a little sometimes, do something on a spree?"

He pushed the paper plate back with force and some of the french fries fell onto the table. "If it's that important to you, let's go out now."

"No," Katey said. "It isn't just that."

"What else?"

Katey looked toward the center of the table. "It just isn't real. It isn't a real love affair. It isn't what I'm looking for."

Quentin felt like he might throw up. Instead, he stood up. "I'm going to leave now." He put his napkin on the table. "You're constant bickering and picking is making me sick."

She sniffed. "Well, go then."

"I will. I am."

Katey felt relieved when she heard the door slam shut. She threw the roses in the trash.

Over the next few months, she dated feverishly. Her attitude, when Quentin called, was cool. Finally, she agreed to see him again. They were sitting at an outdoor cafe, sipping on iced tea and watching passersby.

"So, what finally changed your mind?" he asked, leaning back in the wire chair and lighting a cigarette.

"Sort of a 'the grass is always greener' kind of thing," Katey tried to explain. She fiddled with the straw in her tea.

"The perfect mate wasn't out there after all?"

"No."

"Will you please tell me what really happened between us?"

"I did."

"You didn't tell it all."

Katey tried to remember what had bothered her so much that she'd thrown Quentin out on their anniversary. "I've forgotten."

"No, you haven't. We were about to have a happy celebration of the fifth month anniversary of our going out, when all of a sudden you went off. You didn't really even thank me for the flowers or the card."

"What card?"

"The card that said: Just as these flowers will last, so will our love for each other over the years."

It was Katey's turn to feel like she might throw up. "I didn't see any card," she said.

"Well, it was there if you bothered to look."

She gulped. "I'm really sorry."

"Yeah."

"You want to know the truth?"

"Of course."

"I don't like artificial flowers. They signify something that isn't real to me. If I'd seen your card though, I'd have understood what they meant coming from you."

Quentin leaned forward and covered her hand with his. "My love for you is as real as the silk of those flowers."

"I wish," Katey said, wondering what to do about the missing roses, "I'd read that card."

"What do you think happened?" Sheila inquired again.

"I don't know. Maybe a hobo killed him. Some crazy man." Pauline shook her head in dismay. She never forgot the day she knew for certain that Jay would never be at her side again, never be in her bed, never laugh or fight with her again.

Some weeks later Sheila was talking with their neighbor, Sam. Sam held an aversion to Pauline but he liked Sheila alright. "You'll never guess what happened," she said, partly just for something to talk about.

"What?" he asked.

"Pauline found a bracelet she'd lost in the woods years ago."

"Oh," he said and frowned. "You mean, her gold bracelet, the one that came up missing right around the time that Jay disappeared?"

"How did you know about it?" Sheila inquired.

"Oh, that's her great-grandma's. She had a fit trying to find it, asked around everywhere."

When the police arrived and pieced together what had happened, they charged Pauline with voluntary manslaughter. They said that she and Jay had one of their frequent and vociferous arguments while hiking one of the forest trails. He walked off, out into the woods in a huff. She followed him, yelling and refusing to let the disagreement die. It got worse and she finally asphyxiated him with her backpack. In one of their scuffles along the way the

bracelet had fallen off.

Sam and Danny agreed that she played the grieving wife and widow well. They admired her ability to cry when she knew the truth all the while. Pauline protested her innocence over and over again but police insisted they finally solved the crime and closed the books. There was, of course, the matter of the life insurance she received and their history of serious disputes. Pauline exhausted her appeals and settled about getting ready to go to prison for eight years, four on good behavior.

Her last words to Sheila were, "Will you keep the gold bracelet, and my other jewelry, safe for me?"

24. "Yodelberg Yell Northwest, Ohio"

Trevor wrote another poem for Miriam. He crumpled it in disgust in his right hand, made a fist and hurled it at the wall. It bounced and landed on the braided red throw rug. Nothing was good enough for her, it seemed. He couldn't say what he meant. Not conventionally pretty, she was beautiful to him. Her eyes were truly startling, like they knew secrets that no one else knew, like she had been places that no other woman had been, like she could take him where no man had ever gone. He wanted to be with her, but she had turned him down. Tee had gotten it in his mind that, if he could write the perfect poem, he could win her back. She had been his for a very short and somewhat superficial time.

They had gone to parties together and she had introduced him to her parents. They were very unfriendly to him and he had felt uncomfortable in their

house. Mr. and Mrs. Dandrich had a strict lifestyle and were strident in their rules for their only daughter. She was to marry a doctor or a lawyer. She was not to get herself mixed up with anyone else. She was to be home by midnight. She was not to go out unaccompanied, by herself. He had been fortunate to meet her at all.

They had sat next to each other in English 406 and began conversing somewhat accidentally during a group discussion of class and racism. Her views were very liberal considering what her background had been. He had felt drawn to her frail body and soft voice. She rarely raised it, despite classmates who disagreed vociferously with her. Something about her had seemed fragile and he had risen to her defense. Somewhat later, he had met her at the student lounge and at the cafe. They had talked and agreed that they would see one particular foreign movie together that held their curiosity: Truffaut's "The Four Hundred Blows." After that, they had met at get-togethers, somewhat unintentionally.

Finally, she had explained that, although once she had gone to bed with him, she could no longer have anything to do with him. Trevor was crushed. He started yet another poem and, disliking even the first line, threw it too against the wall in frustration.

"Hello, Mrs. Dandrich.... It's Trevor.... Is Miriam there?" Just her name sent tremors through his body. It came from a place so ancient and touched a place so deep inside of him. "No?... Well, please tell her I called again." He despaired of reaching her. Miriam had dropped out of the English course they shared. He failed to see her in the cafe or lounge. Had she dropped out of school? A friend said her parents had transferred her to a private one. Trevor hung his head. He'd do some sleuthing around, he decided, and find out where she went.

"Miriam Dandrich?" Gregory said. "You ain't touchin' that broad, kid. Her parents have a bead on you now. I heard it all downtown yesterday." Greg's long hair bounced around his head. He spoke quickly and nervously.

Tee was clean-cut: short light brown hair, khaki pants, ironed button-up shirt, brown socks and loafers. His brown skin was clear and deeply tanned. "What happened?" he asked.

"Her parents had a fit."

"What's their problem? I'm not an auto mechanic or anything. I'm studying to be a statistician, a scientist." Trevor felt a sense of dread. Mr. Dandrich owned one of the local banks. He was a member, of course, of the Chamber of Commerce. He served as a trustee for a few companies. He held honorary positions in several colleges. Mrs. Dandrich had founded the town garden club and served on the board of the library.

"Not what they want for their treasured kid."

"Well, what does she want for herself then?" Trevor asked with disgust.

"No one knows. She doesn't speak much for herself, remember?"

"How can I get in touch with her without her parents knowing about it?"

"She hangs out at Ditto's Restaurant downtown after classes now. You can

find her there sometimes between 3:00 and 3:30."

"Did she ever ask about me?"

"Yeah," Greg said after a pause. "She said to tell you that."

"Thank God," Tee said. "She's not a witch after all."

**"What have you been doing besides studying and worrying about Miriam?"
Gregory asked.**

"Trying to write poetry."

"You're kidding."

**"No, I got it in my mind that, if I wrote the perfect poem, I could win her
back. People have done that, historically."**

"Why not just try to find one in a book, then, that's already written."

"No, I want something personal. Something about those eyes."

"Yeah, I know about those eyes."

"I want them to be just for me," Tee warned.

"Good luck, kid. I don't think her parents will let it go that far, no matter how you try."

"We'll see," Trevor said. "We'll see."

Trevor haunted Ditto's for the next week, but he never saw Mimi. Someone must have warned her parents, that he knew where she might be. Instead, he sat at a table by the window, watching all the passersby and still trying to write the perfect poem for the perfect woman of his dreams. Not one suited her as it should though, he felt. In the end, they all went the way of those he had earlier thrown away. Gregory stopped by occasionally.

"Still ain't seen her yet, pal?" he said, seating himself on the other side of the table and ordering coffee for himself.

Trevor stirred sugar into his herbal tea. "Nope."

"How's the perfect poem coming along?"

"Not well, friend, not well." He took a sip, gingerly.

"I found some for you in a book. You could use them instead." Greg pulled

a few pieces of paper out of a book he'd been carrying and handed them to Tee, who pushed them aside.

"I don't want poems written by someone else for someone else. I want a poem written by me for Mimi."

Greg lost patience with him. "Maybe it isn't in you, buddy. Maybe you just aren't a poet."

"It'll come one day, just naturally."

The waitress put a tepid cup of coffee in front of Gregory. He added creamer and took a careful gulp. "How do you know?"

"Once before I tried for a long time to write one and couldn't get it right. Finally I gave up and then late one night, it came rushing out. I didn't even edit it." Trevor remembered that evening and the poem well. He could still recite it, if someone asked, although he'd lost the original a long time ago.

"Well, do that then. Hey, gal, got any sandwiches here? How about a menu?" He turned and addressed Tee again. "Isn't it about time to give up?"

Trevor bit his lip. "They don't have menus here. You have to read the board. Maybe it is, Greg. Maybe it's time to give up for a while."

"How about a movie, pal?" Gregory suggested. "Get this all off your mind."

"No, I wouldn't enjoy it. I'll just stay here and wait to see if Mimi comes by today."

The waitress came by and took an order for a Reuben sandwich from Greg.

"She won't."

"You know that for a fact?" Tee asked.

Gregory gulped some more coffee and lit a cigarette. "I think she's grounded for the season."

"Can you find out? I could run into her as she leaves her classes maybe?"

"I think her parents, or a chauffeur, pick her up."

"Find out, buddy."

"Okay," Greg agreed. "I'll see what I can dig up for you."

"How do you do this, by the way?"

"Aw, my girlfriend goes to that college now that Mimi attends."

"Great." Tee felt hope rise within him.

The waitress returned with Greg's sandwich and he put his cigarette out.

"Want half?" Trevor shook his head. "Please? I can't eat all this."

Tee reached for half and ate it in five bites. He wasn't really hungry. He had more important things in his belly and his head. His body ached for Mimi. He almost wished she'd never given in. He could feel her now, her generous breasts, her stomach against his, her hips grinding as a low moan escaped from her perfectly formed lips. The only food he wanted, he knew, was the ambrosia of Miriam. "The ambrosia of Miriam," he repeated to himself. "That's a line in a poem, isn't it?" he asked Greg. "The ambrosia of Miriam," he repeated aloud.

"It might be a title."

"Good idea. Maybe if I have a good title, I can go from there."

"Good luck, buddy," Gregory said, wiping his lips with a napkin from the holder on the table. "I'm outta here."

"Catch you later then," Tee said. He wrote on a napkin, "The Ambrosia of Miriam" and waited for more words to come his way. Maybe tonight, he thought, he'd wake up in the middle of the night with the perfect lines all

formed and flowing in his head.

A few days later, Greg accosted him as he walked from the parking lot to the Sociology Building. "I've got a place for you to see Miriam, friend."

"You're kidding. Where?" Tee asked eagerly.

Gregory pulled his loose jeans up around his waist again. "She gets out of class on Wednesday at Scofield College's Women's Studies Building at 3 p.m. You can find her out back before she rounds the corner to meet her ride."

"Is she expecting me?"

He examined his friend. Trevor looked tired and there were circles under his eyes. He hadn't shaved in a few days. His clothes seemed rumpled and his shoes scuffed. It wasn't like Trevor not to present a perfect image of suburban respectability. "Yes."

"You won't believe this, friend." Tee pulled a piece of lined paper out of his striped shirt pocket. His hand shook perceptibly.

"You've got a poem for her," Greg guessed.

Trevor knelt down and smoothed the paper on the sidewalk. His eyes were blurry from missing so much sleep. The letters wavered before him. He felt like curling up for a nap there and then. "Yes."

"Is it still called 'The Ambrosia of Miriam'?" Gregory put a hand underneath his friend's elbow and pulled him back up.

Tee held the lines of poetry out before him and frowned. "No. It's called 'For Miriam, Ambrosia'."

"Did it come to you in the middle of the night?" Greg read it quickly and approved. He felt a tug in his heart as he identified with the love and longing expressed.

"Yup. Just last night. Do you like it?"

"It's great. Good luck. Are you going to give it to her this Wednesday?"

"You bet." Tee folded it up and placed it carefully back in his pocket, although he had it memorized in any case. "I need something to bring her over to my side again for good."

"Think it'll work?" Greg asked with concern.

"All I can do is hope," Tee said. More words started whirling in his tired head.

"Well, I gotta go. Don't forget. 3 p.m. Wednesday. Women's Studies.

Out back," Gregory said, turning and heading toward the James T. Pickens History Building. "Oh, it's called the Wilma J. Ricketts Building," he called over his shoulder.

"Okay, thanks," Tee said, grateful again for his friend's help over the past few weeks.

A few days later, Trevor stood in the rain under an umbrella. He was dressed in a light brown suit that accentuated his smooth dark brown skin. His shoes were carefully shined and his face cleanly shaven. He wore a soft leather rain hat and carried a small envelope in his right hand. When Miriam appeared, dressed as casually as ever in jeans and a sweat shirt, wearing sneakers and with an olive raincoat held over her arm, his breath nearly deserted him. She was gorgeous in his eyes, which caught his nearly instantly. She smiled, as she ran toward him and huddled under the umbrella against his muscular body.

"How are you, Trevor. I've missed you," she said gaily.

"I've missed you, too, Mimi," he responded soulfully. He looked into her eyes again and found them wide and innocent as ever, with that hint of something strange to him.

"How have you been?"

"Fine. No, I've been sick from missing you," he amended.

"I can't stay here long at all," she warned in a low whisper. "They don't want me to see you, you know." Her pale brown skin turned pink in a blush at the distress her family had caused to her and to him.

"I have something for you," he said in a low tone and handed her the note-sized envelope.

"Shall I open it now?" she asked considerately. She was terrifically curious at what he had brought.

"No, I'll tell you," he said thoughtfully. "It's a notecard with a lovely flower on the cover, just like you, and a poem I finally wrote for you. I want you to keep them someplace safe."

Miriam pursed her lips and placed the envelope carefully in her purse. "I'll look forward to reading it," she said.

"Don't forget I love you," he said, kissing her hurriedly on the lips.

"Ah. Don't forget I love you too," she said, stepping out from under the umbrella and, with a quick turn, racing off around the corner of the building to her ride in front.

"Oh," Trevor thought to himself again and shaking his head, "I hope this works." He couldn't stand the thought of losing Miriam forever.

"So, bro'," Greg asked later when they met again accidentally at Ditto's, "did she like the poem?"

"I haven't heard yet," Trevor said, pursing his lips.

"When will you see her again?"

"This Wednesday hopefully."

"Same time, same place?" Greg asked.

"Right," Tee said, licking his lower lip nervously.

"I heard something," Gregory said, leaning toward Trevor conspiratorily.

"What is it?"

"She's been fighting with her parents."

"Over school or over me?"

"Both, I think."

"That's according to your girlfriend?" Trevor asked, feeling more nervous than ever.

"Yes. It's a showdown of some kind, Dinah said."

"Do you know what happened?"

"What I heard was, she said she would quit, move out, and get a job if they didn't let her go back to the university and date you, at least occasionally."

"Wow," Tee said, leaning back with his hands on his hips and his eyes opening wide. "She really did that?"

"A powerful poem, I'd say, friend."

"Did you ever hear that old saying about poets being dangerous?" Tee asked, leaning toward Gregory again.

"No."

"There is one somewhere."

"Well, a few poems don't make you a poet. I don't think you're dangerous," Greg said.

"I didn't mean to be. I just wanted Mimi to be only for me. I didn't really care what school she went to, as long as she was mine."

"And for everyone to see," Greg reminded him, somewhat remorselessly.

"There's something about her...," Tee reiterated. He'd tried to say what it was in the poem but had failed repeatedly. In the end, whatever it was was between the lines not in them, he had finally decided. It was there though. He felt it and others had too.

That Wednesday, he found Mimi again behind the Women's Studies Building. She was waiting on the steps and ran toward him and into his arms.

"Oh, that was so beautiful," she nearly sobbed. "Thank you so much." She was dressed uncharacteristically in a pleated skirt and sweater with low-heeled pumps. Apparently, the poem and the week had brought out the woman in her, Tee thought approvingly.

Trevor pushed her away a bit to look into her eyes. "I heard you've been having some troubles at home," he said with concern.

"I can't stand it anymore. I have a right to see whom I choose and study where I want." She sniffed and snuggled next to him again.

Trevor hugged her tightly to him. "You do, but...."

**She put her head down and buried it in his chest before looking up again.
"....they pay for it. I know. They told me. Over and over again."**

"Can you afford to go it on your own?" he asked, kissing her on the forehead and smoothing back her long kinky hair.

"I have an idea," she said determinedly.

He kissed her on the lips and felt their moistness against his with joy. Her tongue darted into his mouth and he answered it with passion. "And it is?" he murmured against her ear.

"I'll move in with you and get a job," she whispered, not sure of how Trevor would take that, as a promising development or a curse.

He hugged her closer still. "And where would you get a job?" he asked, almost condescendingly.

"Maybe at the university. I have friends there in the Administration Building." Miriam was sure she would have no trouble finding employment if she wanted it. Her family had good connections throughout the community and her parents would not allow her to go without funds of any kind.

Trevor took that in, what she said and what she didn't. "Would you like to go to Ditto's with me?" he asked suddenly.

"I'd love to go anywhere with you," Miriam answered without hesitation.

"You've seen my apartment," he said, as they walked around Scofield's buildings and toward town.

"Yes. I know, it's small."

"You're used to fine things," he warned her gently. "I haven't the money your parents have. And neither do my parents, of course."

"I don't care," Mimi said defiantly. "I want a life of my own."

"With me," Tee added, trying to hide his enormous glee. She wanted to live with him. She wanted to study with him. She wanted to share all the small moments of eternity with him.

"Yes." Miriam put her arm around his waist as they walked, and he put his around hers. Locked as they were in embrace, they didn't notice her parents driving up behind and to the left of them on the street. A horn honked and broke their reverie.

"Young man," Mr. Dandrich called. "Get in here, please. I need to talk with you."

Trevor bit his lip and dragged his feet noticeably. He reached the car window and knelt down to speak. "Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Dandrich. How are you today?"

"You know very well how I am today, young man," Owen Dandrich nearly thundered from behind the wheel. "I want you to leave my daughter alone."

Trevor felt a tremor go through to his bones. "That doesn't appear, Mr. Dandrich, to be what Miriam wants."

Mrs. Dandrich spoke up. "Miriam is too young to know what she wants."

Tee determined to hold his, their ground. "She's of age, Mrs. Dandrich. She's old enough to decide who her company is, where she resides, and what university or college she attends."

"I'll see she never gets a job, or a penny from me," Owen Dandrich warned ominously.

"You wouldn't be that mean," Trevor said. He was sure the father would relent eventually. He wouldn't allow his only daughter to starve, or go without whatever she might really need.

"I would," Owen reiterated. "I won't countenance it. Not on my watch," he repeated determinedly.

"I'll take care of her then," Tee declared. He wondered exactly how and if Mimi would be able to put up with poverty.

"Not for long," Mrs. Dandrich said. "And don't write any more of those poems." Her husband put his foot on the accelerator and sped off.

"Well," Miriam laughed. "You've met Daddy and Mommy."

"Twice," he said gloomily.

"We'll be all right. They're all thunder and no lightning," Mimi explained. "They'll back off after I'm settled in with you. And they won't really do anything to keep me from working if I want to."

"Here we are," Tee said, opening the door and holding it for Miriam. She walked through and found a table in a back corner for them. Ditto's had a lounge area with a comfortable couch and upholstered chairs and a coffee table. Around that it held small dining tables and wicker chairs.

"Are you sure about your Dad and Mom?" Trevor asked, as he settled in. He ordered coffee for both of them.

"Yes, I'm sure," Mimi assured him.

"You showed them the poem?" Tee inquired querulously. The poem mentioned breasts, among other things.

"No. They just know about it. I told them that you'd written me a perfect love poem and that there was no doubt in my mind about how you felt about me. You couldn't have written that unless it came from your heart."

Trevor held her hand under the table and then rubbed her knee. "That's right," he said. "I worked on it over and over until finally it came out as right as I could make it."

Mimi smiled. "It worked, didn't it?"

"Yes."

"You meant to woo me back with it and it worked."

"That's right."

"Thank you," she said. "I'll treasure it as long as I live."

Trevor recited the poem from memory at her request.

"It sounds even better coming from your lips," she murmured in his ear.

He looked into her eyes again. "You are so beautiful," he declared.

She smiled. "Black is beautiful," she said.

25. "Sprach Cave, Zara's Spit, Maine"

CaveArt

[First Flight]

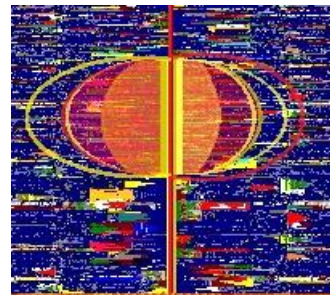
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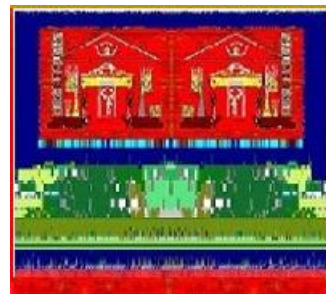
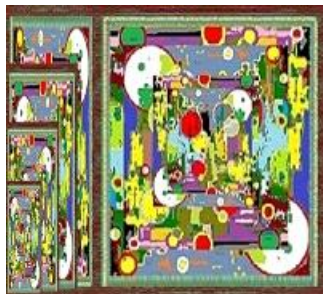
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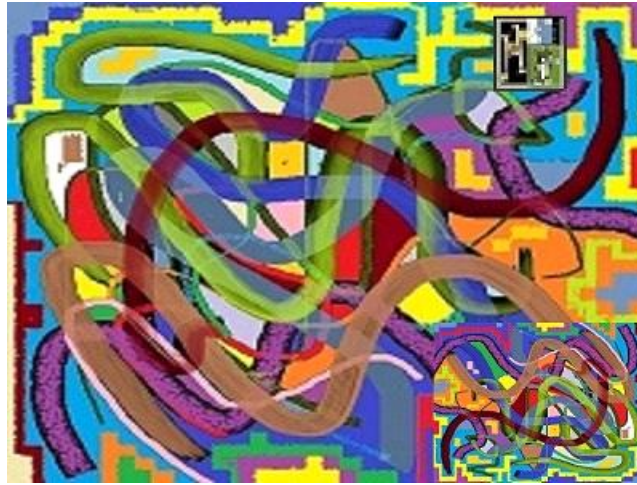












Index Postscript: "Malar Key Pratell, West Virginia"

L.

1. strands of? mea.ningless male and feemale lament in a gru;ngy ungainly eruption of crude *violent vapidty* louts4 in a repugnant in a sati:ation rituals of pseudo-|3legality, odiously ungainly eru0ption corr'uption and; corpul''ent dungeon

53. mendac2ities, impos*accounting* imbalance ters improvBising :their roles base9d on dingy rules.

5. it

7. wrong, sex-obsessed ps=ychopaths/hypnotized on the pornographic

65. mired in myMthological fools of as]trin'gent amoralities, crushingly

3b4. and stodgy *accounting imbalance* parrots of pedantry, sick sli+cks sliding and slithering

P7:19 -criminal fog, forlorn *acc ounting imba lance* fugitives frF.om liveable

0. civass il action

29. nothing, haughtily *accounting imbalance* hypocritical "harridan hacksand "foaming *accounting flakes*, ludicro*penisus* loutsin a repu9gnant in

a satiation rituals of p_seudo-[legality, odiously *faithless slob*s slogging in sobs
ungainly eruption of cru}de corruption and corpulent calamity, insolently ?!
.insulting sn#eaks and fre. aky

2. obfus\catory *deadly moonchime paths* of dissolution and destruction and
damnation, and

93. the

3. accounting *imbalance* Da?mned Zone, sniveling sne[aks and fumi]ng freaks

j8.1? stuporousfrothing

11. an

23. harm, d-angerously deadly moo@nshine still of their *maccounting*
imbalance \ inds and bodies,

5. a inebrience

4Pg1s&0. madness, a frothy foam of superficial and sophomoric

kR. morons

22. brawling and balling brawn of inebrient imbeciles gone uncontrollably

8. floating

49.

B8.

accou2nting

imbala<nce

51. sticky slick*accountingimbalance* ooze of losi; 'ngly boozed and sick
barbarians,

4>H6i. DIT O

93. the

72. unbounded

5210.

23. obscene imbeciles imbibing delirious dreams of

93. glories but i'd feel silly *they've sludge, finagling* physicians and mendacious medical assistants, an aggressively horloginants are increasingly difficult Km:5. t o findrific and *throwing poems at a fortified castle* faCrcical hole of obfuscatory criminal fog,

1. forlorn *accounting imbalance* fugitives from liveable civass il action and
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8.

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60. a aggregious declination never

10.

7.4pB+:?K.

4<H6i. DIT #0

28. mendicant sinners singing a toneless tune, stuporous

42. redoubt of crushing cruelty crashing and brashly blithe crassness, awkwardly awful autononam anus ons *P* set on leadenly dead dichotomies, vitriolic vica(rs of viciously accounting imbalance violen)(t vapidly and vile vic]e, dregs of defunct *drearly defiantlovaginants* indecency drowning

5. psychopathy, scurrilously scandalous cads and

89. covens covering in through self-imposed addictions and 2 afflictions, slotesticlebby slouches and drudges trudging tediously through their own 3. slop and for the devil's

DG.p/ th4rowing poems at a fortified

8936: ca+stlBe

10. their callolabiliaus calamity, cackling and crackling daemonic rifferaff

54. misery, blithely and belligerantly bigoted and

18@m6. officious oa5fs overwhelmed in tiring tirades of their own trying

inanity, mortally irresponsible rascals in an immature Stagger Leigh
masquerade of adulthood, faithless *accounting imbalance* slob slogging in
sobs deacons of disruption in an

30. inhumane, obscurely

7#5. stooges in a

48. been or seen, tacky psychotics stacked in heinous hierarchies of

81. drearily defiant lovagernauts are increasingly difficult to find

cataract of fearfully viopuscrapsy lent sexist and racist myopia, reveling
levelers of viciously vitr *clitorisiotic* evils, lethargic sloths in a lewd broth

7Kr.P?1. and bragging brew of bodacious belligeboobs rance, mongrel
monstrosities of the *metitsagre* and mean, mythic mysogenists foundered on
gore and libelous alibis, salaciously inebriated satyrs in satanic

34. and stodgy parrots of pedantry, sick slicks sliding and slithering on a

63. mendacities, imposters improvising their roles based on dingy rules.

25. nothing, haughtily hypocritical harridan hacks and! foaming flakes,
ludicrous lovagernauts in a repugnant in a satiation rituals of pseudo-legality,
odiously *ungainly imbalance* eruption of crude corruption and corpulent
calamity, insolently insulting sneaks and freaky

37. (wrong, sex-) obsessed psychopaths hypnotized on the pornographic

65. mired in accounting mythological *repugnant in a* fools of astringent
amoralities, crushingly

p.

9. worthless? journey to! nowhere and

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[~47,261 words]