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domestic
blisters

Bernadette Miller
scars publications and design
Janet Kuypers
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blisters

Bernadette Miller
Janet Kuypers

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blisters

About Bernadette Miller

Bernadette Miller grew up in Crisfield, Maryland, graduated from the University of Maryland with a B.A. in drama, and moved to New York City. Later she studied fiction writing at New York University and The New School. She has completed two novels and the equivalent of four collections of short stories. In 1998, she was interviewed and read one of her published stories on New York's Channel 34, Manhattan Neighborhood Network. She has also been a featured reader at The Beaux Arts Society and various Manhattan pubs and restaurants.

Her first published story appeared in *Firelands Arts Review* (Firelands College, Ohio) in 1975. Since then her stories have appeared in numerous literary magazines, including *The University of Portland Review* (1978), *Reflect* (1981), *Calliope* (Roger Williams College, 1982), *Skylark* (Purdue University, 1983), *Writers International Forum* (1996), *Slate & Marrow* (a Scars Publications anthology, 1996), *Blister & Burn* (a Scars Publications anthology, 1997), *My Legacy* (1998), *Medicinal Purposes* (1999), *Jewish Currents* (2000), *Survive & Thrive* (a Scars Publications anthology, 2000), *Torture & Triumph* (a Scars Publications anthology, 2001), *Oh* (a Scars Publications anthology, 2002), and *Enigma Literary Magazine* (2003). Two of her stories were published online: Pulse (www.heartsoundspress.com, 2001, Vol. #4), and The Copperfield Review (www.copperfieldreview.com, Summer 2002).

Bernadette can be reached at her website, www.bernadettemiller.com, and would love to hear from her readers. More of her stories can be read on the Scars Publications website at <http://scars.tv>.

Bernadette Miller



Seeking Mother

That Saturday afternoon, I was shocked at seeing my red-haired mother lying in a Beth Israel Hospital bed, suffering from pneumonia. A large oxygen tube projected from her mouth, more tubes sprouted from her nostrils, and a needle violated her wrist. Overhead bags dripped liquid into her, while a beeping machine tracked her vital signs. Wearing a thin hospital gown, she slept, her mouth slack around the oxygen tube.

To avoid possible disapproval, even now, I straightened my thrift-shop designer suit, fluffed my gray poodle-cut, and checked my makeup in the cabinet mirror.

Finally, I leaned over the bed railing. Lacking wrinkles, Mother still looked beautiful at seventy-one with her firm jaw and heart-shaped face. None of her friends, not even Gus, her rich third husband, knew her age, thanks to a partial face lift that had smoothed a sagging jaw and eye pouches. Although lacking a college education, she'd seemed so strong-willed and self-confident. Now, she looked frail and vulnerable, a slender bundle huddled under the blanket.

"Mother," I whispered, and stroked her smooth arm against the blanket, swollen from antibiotics. Mother grimaced and jerked it sideways, her reaction stabbing me.

I remembered how she'd always hated being touched, shrugging off her visiting teenage daughter's hug.

"Jenny, you'll get my new dress dirty!"

Bent over the railing, I filled with the old resentments, and I relived our fights after my moving to New York from college.

In my tenement studio, she'd advised with her Brooklyn accent, "Get a decent job and try to snag a rich Jewish husband. "Don't expect me to support you."

Quivering, I stared at her across the linoleum table. "I've told you that non-pressured work allows me enough energy to paint during my free time! Why can't you accept that? Besides, why should you worry about supporting me? You abandoned me to your parents in Maryland so you could pursue a second husband who didn't want me either, just like my father. For God's sake, you want to control my life, but during my childhood, you showed no interest in my health, my friends, school grades, or aspirations. You gave birth to me, but no nurturing!"

“Jenny, you can’t forgive me for not raising you, but you keep forgetting my seven-year bout with tuberculosis.”

“Always the same alibi!” I shouted, my heart pounding, my blue jeans and tee shirt soaked with perspiration. “But after your cure, you didn’t give a damn about anyone except yourself--you left me with your parents who continually reminded me of my obligations to them for sharing their home. What a fool I was to adore you, desperately hoping for letters and visits, and receiving mostly silence.” Catching my breath, I rebuked myself: Stop arguing with Mother! She’ll always be self-centered.

Still angry, I stared now at the woman lying with eyes closed. Yet, watching her labored breathing, the soft hands resting palms up, like a beggar, I sighed at her condition.

“Mother,” I repeated until the older woman’s dark eyes opened. “Has anyone else visited?”

She shook her head.

“Oh, I thought Leah or Flo would come. They probably caught the flu, like everyone else.” I felt a smug satisfaction that her best friends, rather than I, were becoming secondary; they’d revealed that Mother said she loved them, something she’d never told me.

But I forced myself to act the dutiful daughter by kissing her forehead and saying, “I love you,” hoping to encourage her recovery. She closed her eyes. Disappointed, as usual, I watched her sleep and tried to persuade myself to accept her as she was. Yet, I winced with embarrassment, recalling her ridiculous belly dancing career; an elderly woman paid to undulate at parties and nursing homes with skimpy beaded bra, a feathered skirt, and a tambourine, her navel exposed.

Again I relived that climactic fight in my sweltering studio, a ceiling fan whirring above my easel and seascape of waves cresting against a lighthouse.

After Mother insisted that I quit painting and seek a husband, I lost my temper and finally shouted, “Leave me alone! I never want to see you again!”

From a windowed clay pot she plucked a pink rose, her rouged face damp with tears, a hand trembling against the tigerskin pant suit. “This is all I’ll have left of you, when I only wanted what’s best for you.”

“No, only what’s best for you! Arguing I didn’t need college, so it wouldn’t cost you money. Can’t you see the harm you’re doing to me? Get out of my life! I’ve finished having you slice up my heart!”

She gazed at the wood floor stained with paints, her hand still clutching the flower. “I never wanted to make you unhappy,” she said, crying in the moisture-laden air. “Maybe someday you’ll see it from my viewpoint.”

I scowled at her lame excuses, and watched her turn and step daintily along the musty hallway, avoiding the broken bannister as her high heels echoed on the stairs.

I heaved a sigh of relief at freeing myself of her debilitating influence.

But she continued calling, criticizing my appearance and life style, shredding my

ego. Finally, except for confiding in a favorite aunt, I rented a cheaper apartment, not telling other relatives who might reveal my whereabouts, despite Aunt Belle's pleading.

For eight years I refused to contact Mother, until Aunt Belle finally changed my mind. "Da'ling," she'd said with her heavy Polish accent, "your mama has breast cancer. Please see her at Beth Israel. She's changed. Eight years' silence is a long-enough punishment. She needs you."

Relenting, I first visited the hospital soon after the breast removal, hoping reconciliation would ease my bitterness. I repressed tears at Mother's bedside as she sobbed with relief in my arms; she'd caused enough anguish.

After our reconciliation, she tried to compensate for her "youthful mistake," as she called her abandonment, by bestowing gifts: clothes, jewelry, and handbags. My bureaus bulged. "That's how I show I care," Mother declared after offering to buy me a mink, which I refused. Struggling to pay bills with my meager secretarial wages, I hated depending on her materially, and I craved the maternal affection she withheld.

And now, despite our ten-year reconciliation, I once more visited Beth Israel with painful memories, and studied Mother who lay helpless from pneumonia.

"Mother," I whispered, wondering if I should awaken her.

The dark eyes opened. She turned her head toward me and smiled with recognition.

Flustered at the unexpected reaction, I stammered, "I...I've brought pink roses." I removed the flowers from a shopping bag, and got a vase from a nurse. In the room's stillness, I set the vase on the window facing Mother, who gazed at the roses.

I wanted to express sorrow at her illness and that I hoped she'd feel better soon, but that seemed too formal, as if from a stranger. I groped for news that she would appreciate.

"I've met a nice fellow at work. We've been greeting each other at the elevator. He doesn't wear a wedding band, and I think he's interested."

Unable to talk with the tube down her throat, she waited, her eyes gazing up at me.

"Dr. Gelberg said the antibiotics are clearing up your pneumonia. He thinks in several weeks you'll be discharged." She listened as if engrossed, but closed her eyes whenever I stopped talking, so I continued relating good news. "My seascape won an honorable mention in an art contest..." My voice trailed off. I'd long ago stopped discussing my paintings with Mother who'd dismissed it as a mere hobby, wounding me. Why couldn't she understand that art expressed my deepest feelings? But despite her present interest that I'd longed for, I felt uneasy about not letting her rest. I glanced at the January snowflakes melting against the hospital windows, and turned toward the bed.

"Mother, you must be tired. Would you rather I left so you could sleep?"

To my surprise, she shook her head and continued gazing at me, while I groped for more news.

The following Saturday, I explained that Gus called nightly, anxious to hear about

her condition. Remembering her complaints about all the cooking, cleaning, and slaving for her recently-crippled husband, I tried to reassure her. "Gus promised to hire a maid. You'll be a lady of leisure."

She smiled.

I chattered about the new fellow I'd met, her friends, my friends--anything to renew that smile. The next week, she'd been disconnected from the oxygen tube, but an occasional oxygen mask applied over her mouth and nose helped her to breathe. She opened her eyes at hearing my voice.

"Look, Mother, I brought the photograph of us taken at your birthday party last year. Remember? You said it was your favorite picture. I'll put it on the windowsill."

She gazed at the photograph propped beside my most recent flowers.

Seeing her cheerful concentration, I wished I hadn't complained that the picture had emphasized my scrawny neck. I recalled then her pride in introducing me to her friends. I'd avoided meeting them, assuming they were uneducated and crude; instead, I found them friendly and caring. How Mother glowed when Leah remarked that I was a classy lady. Why had I clung to sad memories and ignored the happy ones? Was I still punishing her by refusing to acknowledge any kindness since our reconciliation?

The urine bag hanging beside her bed began filling. Seeing her squirm against the pillow, I said, "Can I make you more comfortable?" She nodded. I pulled up the pillow and gently rested her head against it. Her dark eyes regarded me with warmth. I felt a flush in my stomach and wanted to do more for her. When the nurse entered to dispense medication, I exclaimed, "Before her illness, my mother was very active, a professional belly dancer! She and a male accompanist playing a keyboard were paid to perform."

"Really?" the nurse said, impressed, and coaxed Mother to swallow the pills.

She swallowed with difficulty and lay back. She looked up at me, her lips curved in a smile.

After that, my boss allowed me to leave earlier, and I visited her three times weekly. The oxygen mask had finally been removed, although overhead bags continued supplying antibiotics and intravenous feeding.

I whispered, "Mother, I'm here, but it's Tuesday, not Saturday."

Opening her eyes, she smiled at seeing me, and said, voice hoarse, "You got off from work?"

"Yes."

"I can't talk much." She pointed to her throat.

"I know, but I'm glad you're breathing on your own."

She nodded. "Is the new fellow you met Jewish?"

"I only know his first name--Pete." To lift her spirits, I explained that he wasn't poor like previous boyfriends, but owned a consulting firm. "He's continually borrowing little things: The Wall Street Journal, index cards, a tape measure. My friends think they're excuses to get to know me."

"Find out his last name," she urged, then sighed. "Well, after forty, maybe it doesn't matter if he's not Jewish."

"It really doesn't," I said, and we smiled.

Arriving for my next visit, I was relieved to see her sitting up. I spoon fed her the pureed lunch, gloppy unappetizing piles. I kept coaxing, until she ate about half and stopped, wrinkling her nose in disgust all the while.

She lay back against the pillow. "The doctor said that later I can have peanut butter, strawberry jam, and bread. Would you mind bringing it?"

"Of course I wouldn't mind." I stared, surprised that she feared imposing on me.

She looked away. "I don't expect you to forgive me for not raising you."

"Mother, don't worry about that now, just get well! July Fourth we'll have fun again at a singles weekend in the Catskills, like our other good times over the past few years. Remember The Hudson Valley Resort, how we laughed because the fellows thought you were still in your fifties and I was in my twenties? Remember Jack who wanted to take you for a walk until he learned you were married?"

"Yeah, maybe I should've gone with him. Gus won't come near me in a hospital. Despite all that money from his first wife's inheritance, he's a headache to deal with." She shrugged. "My stingy husband tells me on the phone he can't see me because car service costs a hundred dollars."

"You know Gus was never stingy, but now he's terrified of traveling alone in a wheelchair. I'm sure he loves you in his own way."

She smiled faintly. "Maybe." She shifted in bed and turned back to me with an earnest, "Should I order wedding invitations for you and the new fellow--Pete? A husband's important! You don't want to be old and poor. Jenny, I've tried and tried to tell you--" She stopped abruptly, as if to avoid nagging, and lay back against the pillow. "Will you visit tomorrow?"

I hesitated. I'd looked forward to meeting other artists at The Beaux Arts Ball.

Her eyes looked pleading.

"I'll come."

During the next visit, a steam mask was applied over her mouth and nose to help relieve her lung congestion. She hated the suctioning, the vacuum tube forced down her throat to suck up phlegm. She said it made her gag and she couldn't stand it anymore. I begged her to continue.

"Please, Jenny, don't ask this of me," Mother said, her dark eyes gazing up at me.

"Think how much better you'll feel without all that terrible phlegm!"

She sighed and turned her head. "I'll think about it."

Later, entering the bathroom, I heard her blurt out to a nurse, "She's a wonderful daughter. I don't deserve her."

I felt a pang at Mother's burden of guilt, sharpened by caustic reminders, and I wished I could ease her pain. Why hadn't I appreciated our fun times since reconciling: the movies, interesting restaurants, laugh-filled Catskills weekends? In the mir-

ror, I admired the tiny curls framing my face. Because Mother had begged me to cut my unbecoming gray hair, I'd shed twenty years.

Suddenly I welcomed other memories no longer excluded: being cuddled on her lap when I was very young. I could still feel that fuzzy red pullover she'd knitted for me, and I regretted having scorned her bourgeois tastes: the rhinestone sweat shirts and gold tote bags. Having different values shouldn't brand Mother as inferior. No wonder she'd stopped hugging me!

On Valentines Day, I brought a heart-shaped box of chocolates, and a card showing a child picking flowers. Rushing to her bedside, I said, "Look what I brought my Valentine."

She gazed at me, the head tilted against the pillow with wonder. "Why are you so good to me? Is it because of the gifts?"

I paused, fighting tears. "It's everything you've done for me since our reconciliation."

She nodded, her eyes shiny, as if glad I finally appreciated her efforts to compensate for her early neglect. She fondled the picture. "My little girl," she whispered, and looked up at me. "You must have laid out a fortune for this!"

"Isn't my Valentine worth it?"

She touched my arm. "It's nice having a daughter like you."

"It's nice having you around, too."

Returning her smile, I filled with warmth, and suddenly I realized that she probably loved me very much, but in a bumbling, human way--not like the perfectly rational, fictitious mothers of movies and television. Her gifts hadn't been bought randomly to ease her guilt, but responded to my specific needs: the patent leather, waterproof boots for rainy evenings, the opaque slip to wear under my beautiful lace dress, the silver stretchband watch that wouldn't fall off my wrist. And for the past ten years, her faithful Saturday morning calls to Manhattan, the jokes to lift my spirits when I sounded depressed. I prayed she'd call again, and I felt grateful for our changed relationship. Perhaps my newfound affection had prompted affection in return.

For a long time, I held her soft hand, grateful I'd found my mother, at last.

State of Mind

They'd agreed to meet late afternoon in Sutton Place. Ingrid arrived by cab from her Westchester apartment, the antique eagle head cane reaching out like a tentacle for the pavement. She tapped toward the corner and waited, her head twisting about to locate Vaughn amidst the sounds and odors. Behind her, patrons chatted at a sidewalk cafe. Nearby, a florist's violets and chrysanthemums perfumed the hot summer air, compensating for the honking automobiles and buses.

Blind since birth, she refused to succumb to helplessness. She created collages in her studio near her apartment, impressions of scenes from Braille photographs. She also insisted on cleaning her apartment, and shopped and cooked, allowing only the maid's weekly visit to ensure thorough cleanliness. After meeting Vaughn, her late father's lawyer, she'd excitedly called her sister.

"Thank God, he's normal," she'd told Dagmar, and laughed. "You know I won't date the blind."

"Well, Vaughn's pleasant and very handsome. But I think you should be more open about--"

"Dag, please, no more lectures. Let me seek happiness in my own way."

Dag had sighed deeply. "Yes, I know, Ingrid."

She frowned now. When Vaughn became engaged to Claire, his politeness resembled that of the nice artist she'd met last year while vacationing at Cape Cod. After telling her that she was the most stunning blonde he'd ever met, Phil had dated her for awhile, then suddenly one evening he'd broken the news as Vaughn had done, and the stockbroker the year before.

"Ingrid, I'm really sorry but I've met someone I care for."

Sighing, she removed a purse tissue to blot her perspired face. It was almost ninety degrees; too hot for a linen suit. Vaughn should have chosen an air-conditioned restaurant.

Then, finally, "Hi, Ingrid, waiting long?"

She lifted her head. "I just arrived," she lied, smiling, and held the cane at her side as Vaughn took her elbow and they walked.

“How was your morning?” he said.

“Mother called. She and Dag are leaving for Europe next month. I’m not going this year. All that hassle with planes and boats, and...” She stopped at what might be considered a complaint, her voice brightening. “Well, and how was your morning?”

He laughed. “Oh, the usual hectic atmosphere.”

She waited, still smiling, her head turned toward him. There was an awkward silence. As Dag had said, Vaughn was certainly tall, towering over her, and his musky cologne was enticing. She had to guess at his handsomeness; she’d never touched his face, discouraged by his businesslike manner. But it was too bad about his engagement.

“I’m looking forward to meeting David,” she said and laughed, too gaily, like a wound-up doll performing on cue. She hesitated. “Tell me more about him.”

“Oh, he’s a great guy. Owns a successful antiques business. At his last party I told him how lovely you are, and he wanted to meet you.” Vaughn paused. “Well, here’s his apartment building!” Guiding her to the lobby elevator, he warmly greeted the doorman as if he’d visited there often. The elevator whined to the thirty-second floor; they traversed an odorless, carpeted corridor that must be freshly-vacuumed. She nodded with approval while he stopped and rang the doorbell.

A young female voice exploded with delight, “Vaughn!” There was a pause, then, “And this must be Ingrid Swenson?” The girl’s heavy perfume drenched the foyer.

Ingrid nodded. “Yes, Miss...?”

“I’m Claire, David’s cousin.”

“Oh, glad to meet you,” Ingrid said, surprised, and waited awkwardly for Vaughn who was probably hugging his fiancée. That overly-sweet perfume wasn’t flattering, but Claire was probably very pretty.

Vaughn finally took Ingrid’s hand and led her past chattering people, tinkling silverware, and waiters scurrying past with whispered orders. A console played Mozart’s Flute and Harp Concerto. How lovely. She twisted about, smiling at the presence of the party guests, and was guided to a leather armchair that still smelled new. The air conditioner behind her hummed softly; a distant grandfather clock chimed seven, and the outside elevator continued whining as more people entered and left.

“Hi, Dave,” Vaughn said. “I finally brought Ingrid.”

A teaspoon clinked in a cup of coffee with an aroma of hazel nut. “Ingrid, at last—wonderful meeting you!” With his deep, husky voice, David sounded fiftyish, yet with a boyish enthusiasm. “Can I get you something? Champagne, vodka, Scotch? We just made coffee. What would you like?”

She smiled. “Diet soda, please.” She avoided liquor so as not to give people an excuse to say, “Look at that—blind and drunk!”

A waiter brought her an ice-cold soda that cooled her parched throat. Vaughn hurried off to find Claire, and she chatted awhile with David, who asked if she’d exhibited her work.

She replied, suddenly shy, “No, I just imagine scenes in my mind and hope they

capture my feelings.”

“My friend Ken has a brother who owns a gallery. Suppose Ken and I drop by, and if he likes your work, we’ll try to help you. Are you free tomorrow, say, about two?”

“I’d very much appreciate the help.” She beamed. It would be wonderful to exhibit her work. Relatives and friends meant well with praise, but professional opinions would help her improve. Besides, David sounded interesting in a romantic way. That deep, kind voice, the warmth and boyishness...

While they chatted, waiters served delicious dim sum: steamed kale dumplings, shrimp balls, pork pastries, and sweet, sesame red-bean buns. Balancing the tray on her lap, she ate sparingly, requesting extra napkins to avoid soiling her clothes and the thick carpeting.

David said softly, “Ingrid, I suppose Vaughn told you I lost my sight in an automobile accident. It was late, during a snow storm, when another driver skidded into my Mercedes. It wasn’t his fault with weather like that. My wife divorced me a year later.”

She paused. Vaughn should have prepared her for this! “Yes,” she murmured, at a loss to say more. Perhaps David sensed her sympathy. He didn’t seem bitter about the accident. “Sometimes events happen as though fulfilling God’s purpose,” she said, floundering.

“I believe that we determine our own destiny, at least somewhat,” David said gently, “otherwise we’re puppets on strings. But, as Unamuno said, we’re all in the mind of God, preserved there for eternity.” He leaned toward her, enveloping her in the odor of peppermint breath mints. He was adorable, like a little boy. He touched her sleeve. “Linen... Ralph Lauren?”

“Hmm...is Lauren your favorite designer?” Ingrid teased.

David chuckled. “Actually, yes.”

“Well, mine’s Natalia.”

Now it was David’s turn to tease. “Of course. I love her linen suits. May I examine it?”

“You may not. We just met.”

“Ah, then you don’t believe in special privileges for the blind.”

Ingrid smiled at the flirting and David’s sense of humor. As they began debating art, Vaughn arrived and said, “Well, Dave, thanks for a pleasant evening, but we must be going.” He touched Ingrid’s elbow. “Ready?”

“Yes.” Just once, it would be nice if she decided when to leave!

“I’m looking forward to tomorrow,” David said.

Her head swiveled toward him. “So am I.”

They left amidst a flurry of goodbyes, and Vaughn helped her into a cab. She turned her face toward the taxi window. David was fun! And intelligent and sophisticated! It was exhilarating to talk with him, unlike so many men with whom she had little in common.

At home, she settled with a Braille cookbook on the brocaded sofa. Perhaps David and his friend would enjoy home baked oatmeal raisin cookies. It was comforting having someone to bake for, like a husband and children.

The following day she wore an expensive silk dress that she'd bought originally to impress Vaughn, and spent extra time applying lipstick, daubing gardenia perfume on her thin wrists and behind her ears. She added pearl earrings to match the necklace.

David arrived promptly at two while the mantel clock chimed. She hurried to answer the doorbell.

"Ingrid?"

She smiled, "Yes," and turned hesitantly, waiting for his companion to speak, although there didn't seem to be anyone else in the tiled foyer, no clothes rustling, shoes scraping, or delicate coughs.

"Ken left on a business trip," David said, voice dropping like Dagmar's when she'd been caught sampling Grandmother's strudel dough in the bowl. "Ingrid, I hope you don't mind my visiting alone," David continued. "I'll bring Ken next time. I'm serious about helping you to exhibit." He seemed genuinely sheepish.

Ingrid smiled. He really was adorable. "It's all right. Well, we can chat in the living room. Give me your hand, please." She felt a jolt at the touch of his pudgy fingers, as if electricity flowed between them. Trying to ignore it, she guided him around a wing chair, Chinese Buddha, and lacquered coffee table, and toward the sofa. He was big, about Vaughn's height but heavier. Fighting nervousness, she felt for the sofa arm to sit as far away from him as possible. She must adjust to his not seeing her; two freaks stumbling around. God, how untrue! David was sweet and, in fact, exciting: the deep husky voice, the politeness which seemed natural and not forced, the warmth and sincerity, the peppermint breath mints...

They discussed Ken's art background, then David said, "Ingrid, I'd like to take you to dinner Saturday at Le Plaisir."

It was her favorite restaurant with intimate alcoves like little rooms. "I'd love to!" she exclaimed impetuously.

"Tell me about your work," David said.

"It started at about age five, when I touched a Braille photograph." She continued, surprised at her confiding in someone she hardly knew. "Creating collages is like stepping into a physical universe where I'm not blind." She paused. David might resent that last remark. It became difficult to concentrate. Her body tingled at his nearness. "My parents encouraged my independence. I resented groping to find my toothbrush when my younger sister Dagmar could easily hand it to me. But later in life, I realized that my parents were right; I developed persistence. I've been told I have an unusual gift--I wouldn't want to waste it."

"I feel that way about antiques," David said. "In fact..." he paused, as if reluctant to display vanity, "I'm considered somewhat of an expert on ancient artifacts from the Far East. Our fields aren't that far apart."

“Yes,” she said, smiling, and excused herself to serve the baked cookies with hazel nut coffee, and then showed him the apartment’s antiques collected by her parents. He enjoyed fingering the china cabinet’s exquisitely-carved ivory netsukes, especially the scene of a big-bellied, hook-nosed gnome perched on a garden bridge, and the dainty Japanese lady carrying a parasol.

The mantel clock chimed five--so soon.

“Ingrid, I must leave for a business appointment. I’ve enjoyed our time more than I can say.”

“Me, too,” she said at the door, but averted her face to discourage his kiss, and waited until his tapping cane entered the hall elevator.

During the following week, surrounded by canvasses, brushes, and Braille photographs in her studio, she assembled a collage--fighting the distraction of handsome, sexy David with his full lips and boyish mop of curly hair, drawing her toward him for a kiss. Finally, Saturday arrived. She chose a cool, sleeveless chiffon, high heels, and leather purse, then paced the living room. The doorbell would ring momentarily. How would they manage? He’d probably want to guide her, but how?

Suddenly there he was! Rushing to open the door, she blurted out, “Would you like a drink?”

“I don’t drink,” he said in the foyer. “I stopped altogether after the accident.”

“Oh.” Could he sense her chagrin? “That’s right, I remember now,” she added. He’d had coffee at his party and at her apartment. How silly to have forgotten; she must be nervous again.

He linked his arm through hers. “If you’re ready, we can go. The doorman will get us a cab.”

Their canes tapping in unison as they climbed from the cab was irritating, but his arm guiding her into the restaurant was reassuring. She held her cane at her side while he carefully swung his sideways along the aisle to avoid bumping people. He seemed to accept his disability as though blind since childhood, like her. Over *coq au vin*, they discussed literature, art, opera, classical concerts, and travel. David, a Harvard graduate, shared most of her interests, unlike Vaughn who preferred night clubs and skiing.

While sipping coffee, she rested her hand on the tablecloth; David covered it with his, and must have sensed her smile because he said, softly, “Ingrid, thank you for coming into my life.”

“I...needed to meet someone I could care for...”

“I know,” he said, caressing her hand. “I’ve been waiting for an intelligent, creative, warm woman like you.”

She flushed with pleasure at his remarks, and didn’t remove her hand. How could she? She didn’t want the evening to end.

Later, stepping out into the hot, muggy night, he hailed a cab, helped her from it, and then led her upstairs to her apartment. Sitting beside him on the sofa, she

sucked in her breath. For the first time in her life she eagerly awaited a man's embrace.

He touched her shoulder and finally drew her toward him for a lingering kiss that made her wrap her arms around him, and she trembled.

When they separated, he whispered, "Could you love me?"

"I don't know yet," she said, her heart turning to water. She reached up to stroke his face. Her manicured fingers touched flesh covered with scars. Shocked she jerked away her hand as though burned, and withdrew to the sofa edge. He was scarred and ugly. Ugly!

"If it bothers you that much I could seek a plastic surgeon. I didn't think it would matter." His voice trailed off, but now his boyishness didn't seem appealing.

Why hadn't he taken care of this? Didn't he consider a woman's feelings?

He said, "I thought..."

"You thought since I was blind..." She shrank against the padded arm.

"I'd...better go..." he said, rising. He hesitated, and stumbled toward the door, banging his cane against furniture.

She waited until the cane tapped to the elevator, then she reached for a tissue and wiped her damp eyes, smudging her mascara. For a long time she leaned back on the sofa, twisting the tissue until it shredded like dirty snow over her immaculate dress.

Ghost Story

Wendy sat beside the pink-ribboned teddy bear on the sofa, and opened a 1986 spiral-bound notebook used for a diary. Was it wise dredging up painful memories after taking all that valium and prozac to help her forget? She shook her head. Phil has been dead for many years, she repeated. Her favorite grandniece loved the furnished doll house on the living room stand bought soon after Phil's death. She must have noted the name of the mail order company in her diary.

Yet, as she began thumbing the pages, unwanted memories surfaced: long, lonely nights rocking before the stone fireplace, reliving their twenty comfortable years.

They'd shared movies, dancing, dinner parties, and traveled throughout Europe and the Middle East. Their artificial flower company, which she'd subsequently sold, had eased financial burdens. Now, despite her resolve, she again watched his cancerous body wracked by months of pain, and his inevitable death.

To steady her nerves, Wendy sipped coffee from the side table and glanced from the ballerina doll gracing the fireplace mantel to the diary entry for March 15th.

Startled, she looked again. The writing was clear, unmistakable. On that date, according to her diary, she'd vacationed in Puerto Allegro, which she'd completely forgotten. How was that possible? Of course, the drugs probably made the events hazy at the time and then lost to memory. Fascinated, she continued reading.

Although previous entries didn't mention the location, she'd written about a tropical climate. She wore mostly shorts and halters, and swam in a lagoon near the small, cozy hotel with private beach. The weather averaged 80 degrees daily and a cool 60 at night. Evidently she'd enjoyed herself. The diary described a friend she'd met there on the beach, a widow, Ethel Perez, who owned a house nearby--whom she didn't know now. But that often happens on vacations, meeting nice people who live far from New York and are never seen again.

Apparently, this Ethel had stayed on in Puerto Allegro after her native husband died. She and Ethel had spent most of their time at the beach, Ethel supplying an old blanket, and the hotel supplying umbrellas and picnic baskets. Unfortunately the hotel's name was never mentioned. "I walked back along the beach to the hotel, by

myself, wanting to be alone for awhile, and feel much calmer. I hope I can stop thinking so much about Phil.”

She'd gone sightseeing with her new friend: native huts along rutted roads, an old Spanish fort, and other hotels whose names also were omitted. At the Village Square, Wendy bought a scarf--it must be somewhere in the house if she searched. They'd nightclubbed at the hotel until four a.m. in a “neon-flashing, palm-laden room where I danced with several men.” Then, the notation, “I felt terribly guilty, having such a wonderful time in the midst of mourning Phil. It doesn't seem right...”

Curiously, the next page was blank, then the entries resumed. Ethel, a gangly, fiftyish blonde with a New Jersey accent, suggested an excursion to another island, Luminosa. They left the following morning, right after breakfast. The weather turned surprisingly chilly, a downpour was expected, but Ethel insisted they go because what else could they do in the rain?

Wendy wore a raincoat over blouse and slacks that had grown tight, her graying auburn hair tucked under the scarf. She hoped to lose the added weight since Phil's death that made her feel old at forty-five. The pair had boarded the ferry that crossed the lake some five miles from their hotel. It didn't rain, after all, and she was grateful for the coat during the unusually cool day. She'd described her chat with Ethel while leaning over the railing and gazing at the misty horizon and the island's palms waving in the mist, like a lovely dream of paradise. At Luminosa, they hired a quaint horse-drawn carriage that clip-clopped along Magdalena, the main boulevard.

“Oh, look at that!” Wendy had said, pointing to the rows of small pink and blue houses on opposite sides of Magdalena Boulevard. At the beginning intersection, large signs proclaimed the pink ones as “SUYA,” the blue ones as “SUYO.”

“Felipe, what do those signs mean?” Wendy called to the driver.

Smiling, he pivoted to explain. “It is our custom, Senora Taylor, that after a funeral the damas, ladies, live in a pink house for three weeks and the gentlemen live in a blue one. They please the dead by saying good things about them. Then there is a big fiesta, muchos comestibles y vino, when the familias get together again. You see, here we do not mourn for our dead. No, mi damas graciosas, it is the dead who mourn for the living...” He flicked the reins at the horses that lumbered along, their blinders shielding them from street distractions.

The dead mourn for the living... Wendy paused, resting the diary in her lap and sipped coffee. Had Phil mourned for her, remembering her tears at his hospital bed?

“My darling, please don't be unhappy.” His once-attractive face had been pale and gaunt. “We agreed you'd accept my illness and start a new life.”

“I can't--”

“Yes, you can. Together we could do anything--remember our discussion? I'll always be with you in spirit, you know that.”

She drained the cold coffee. She didn't want to grieve again over Phil. Yet, she must find out about intriguing Puerto Allego...

The diary described her return to the hotel that seemed lovely with ivied balconies and flower-filled lobby. So far, she'd stayed there for two months. The next page was blank, and somehow it irritated her more than it should have. Why had she left something out?

The following entry omitted any mention of Puerto Allego or Ethel. On May 12th she took an excursion to a deserted island. "At Perdido I saw large tortoises crawling among rocks, like at the Galapagos where Darwin had gathered material for his revolutionary theories on evolution. Manuel accompanied me."

Manuel? Who on earth was he? Wendy paused again, trying to remember. Her mind was as blank as the last empty page. She'd been haunted by her mother's suicidal death when she was ten, until helped by a psychiatrist. No wonder she'd taken drugs to get over Phil... Her gaze swept over the porcelain antique doll in a highchair, and returned to the diary.

She left Manuel near the beach and sat alone by a cliff to contemplate the palms behind her, the air fragrant with hibiscus; far below, gentle waves lapped against the pebbled sand. Suddenly she filled with dread. Unable to fathom the reason, she ran to discuss it with Manuel, but she calmed while helping him gather seashells to decorate the hotel nightclub.

The following pages finally revealed that Manuel worked as a bouncer at the club.

"He looked like a Latin movie star, tall and muscular, with a firm, square jaw, smooth complexion, and deep set dark eyes that stared at me so intensely I became nervous and began stammering, which finally caused him to smile with those beautiful white teeth. I felt wonderful."

Why so much interest in Manuel, half her age? Did they have an affair at the same time she mourned her husband? Impossible! Shocked she read the following entry.

"The day was lovely, the hibiscus and begonias blooming by my balcony window, the lagoon filled with splashing swimmers and the excited shouts of children. Observing the distant volcano, I became wildly passionate, an abandon I'd never experienced before, not even with Phil. I thought of Manuel waiting for me by the forest path and ran to meet him. We spent a glorious day at his house and then drove to his parents' farm for dinner."

Wendy put down the diary and thoughtfully entered the kitchen for more coffee. She glanced past the miniature tea set in the china cabinet, beside a child's gold charm bracelet. For a moment the bracelet appeared to glow. Startled, she blinked and stared again. The cabinet looked normal. It must be her imagination after reading about mysterious Puerto Allegro. But what else had happened there? It was too bad about the valium erasing her memories. She must find out.

The following days were spent with Manuel: swimming, sailing, or lounging at his house. Ethel kept her company during the evenings while Manuel worked. In August, Wendy suffered with morning nausea. She argued with Ethel, who insisted that Wendy keep Manuel's child and Wendy saying she must get an abortion--

Shocked again, Wendy put down the diary. She'd gotten pregnant and with a stranger's baby! She and Phil had agreed never to have children; it might disrupt their relationship. She couldn't imagine getting pregnant by Manuel, almost a child himself. And if she had, what happened to him and to their baby?

An entry described Ethel's pleading, "If you don't keep the baby, you'll always regret it! Believe me, I still wish I'd gotten pregnant, shared the joy of life with my husband. Now, it's too late."

"But how can I keep an illegitimate baby born so soon after Phil's death? It's disgraceful, immoral. It shows how little I cared--"

"Stop concentrating on you, and think about Manuel, the father, who probably wants this child."

"Yes, he insisted we marry immediately, but I said I didn't want to see him again. How can I marry a bouncer and live in a hut? And I can't bring home an illegitimate child! How could I face Phil's relatives?"

Wendy had burst into tears and was finally soothed by Ethel saying gently, "Okay, abort if you must. I just hope that someday you don't regret the loss."

Several days later, Wendy chose an American expatriate, like Ethel, who practiced medicine on Luminosa, near the village square. He performed the operation so efficiently, she later felt as if she'd never conceived. Afterwards, the diary expressed no lingering doubts, no wondering what her little girl might have been like.

For the next three weeks, she and Ethel stayed on at Luminosa, in a pink house on Magdalena Boulevard, but not to comfort the dead child.

Ethel had said, "My husband died twelve years ago today. I remember him by living in the pink house once every year, and then I celebrate so I won't dwell on it."

When Wendy returned to Puerto Allegro, she found Manuel waiting for her in the lobby, and she told him what she'd done.

"Dios Mio!" His handsome face looked ashen, the brows glowering. He turned away and stared at the beach beyond the window.

"I had to do it, Manuel, please understand. Who would raise the child?" She touched his arm, but he jerked it away and suddenly strode from the lobby. "Manuel, wait!" She ran outside and around the hotel toward the forest. He'd disappeared. She paused, filled with regret at disappointing him so harshly.

There were two more blank pages, then abruptly the diary described her being back home in Long Island, and travelling to the cemetery to place roses on Phil's grave. The baby wasn't mentioned again, but by then Wendy was taking prozac.

Closing the diary, she felt as if a portion of her life had been excised and re-written. The entire trip must have been a hallucination, resulting from the drugs. Still, it was unthinkable that part of her life was missing.

She ran upstairs to rummage in the attic's old trunk that had remained unopened for years. Abruptly she stopped. Among the yellowing linen from her mother's closet was a faded triangular scarf showing white-capped waves and multicolored boats.

A corner of the scarf read, "Buenos dias de Puerto Allegro!"

She sat very still. Good God, she had gone there. She had gotten herself pregnant--No, that was impossible! She would never have destroyed her child...

Shaking, she returned to the living room to put away the diary. It was simply a horrible nightmare from the drugs. Crossing the room, she opened the bay window bench to replace the diary and saw a lovely white box from Tiffany's. Shivering suddenly, she unlaced the velvet ribbon. Inside, gleaming against the velvet cushion, was a silver baby rattle.

What Should I Do?

Elaine concluded that Misha had probably never meant to abuse her mother when they married in 1977. Back then, Dorrie was still beautiful at sixty-three with long, thick red hair that framed her heart-shaped face. To tall, husky Misha, she must have seemed ultra feminine: petite with soft, dainty hands and long, manicured nails. Offering him soda in her tiny Brooklyn apartment, she shyly listened to him talk, and laughed at his jokes while modestly straightening her thrift-shop dress. He appreciated her frugality, relieved she wouldn't drain him of money.

She rarely challenged him. "I can't stand fights," she said. It's not in my nature." He smiled and kissed her.

During their Atlantic City honeymoon, Misha said he was still surprised that a beauty like Dorrie had placed a personal ad in a newspaper. His first wife, met at a dance, wasn't nearly so beautiful, and she was temperamental. He'd tolerated her because of her substantial inheritance, enabling him to retire from the Post Office during his fifties. She'd died five years ago of cancer.

Giddy over several glasses of wine, Dorrie let slip, "Well, when a woman turns middle-age, it ain't so easy finding someone."

So Misha probably figured that after divorcing her second husband, Dorrie must have been desperate not to work as a secretary.

"I hope you didn't marry me as a meal ticket!" he said during dinner.

She shook her head and bent over her plate.

Dorrie didn't realize it at the time but the abuse started soon after they moved into his Brighton Beach co-op, when Misha also probably realized that despite her good looks, Dorrie wasn't bright. She'd barely graduated from high school, whereas he'd endured two years of college accounting courses. Watching television in the living room during Elaine's visit, his legs sprawled before him on the green sofa, he tested Dorrie's knowledge by asking questions like whether she knew about the rich Jew who financed the American Revolution.

She called back from the kitchenette, "Misha, please don't ask me complicated questions when I'm busy cooking dinner."

He shouted back, "I bet Elaine knows! She has a masters degree in education. It wouldn't hurt to use your brain sometime. How can you be so dumb?"

Elaine, face flushed with embarrassment, said, "I don't know who financed the American Revolution."

Ignoring her comment, he braced himself for supper, although he'd warned Dorrie he hated vegetables. His mother had prepared only burnt meat and watery soups, but his henpecked father, a railroad conductor, never complained. Nevertheless, in their alcove dining room, Dorrie still piled vegetables on Misha's plate, arguing they were healthy. The baked sweet potato with marshmallow tasted good, but he frowned at her disregarding his requests.

When she also nagged him to take vitamins, he shouted, "I don't need any! Leave me alone!" Then, while chatting with Elaine at the table, he caught Dorrie mashing a vitamin into his applesauce, and he sighed. He couldn't watch her every second.

Maybe that's why, when Dorrie said during another meal, "Misha, I have plenty if you're hungry," he'd stared at his plate with his thinning gray hair and pale blue eyes, and exploded, "You know I hate carrots! Give me something I can eat, for God's sake!"

Seated opposite him, she calmly replied, "Try the brisket. It's very tender. See if you like it."

He ate some juicy brisket, which practically melted in his mouth, but because he was still fuming about the carrots, he grumbled, "The brisket's okay."

"Is it tender enough?"

"I said it's okay! Let me eat in peace!"

In addition, Dorrie seemed fanatical about keeping his clothes clean. His mother hadn't cared about the laundry, spending most of her time screaming on the telephone at imaginary callers. But Dorrie appealed to his vanity by pleading, "You look so handsome with clean clothes!" Then, she'd show him a blue polyester shirt she'd bought, hold it against his chest, and say, "See how nice it matches your eyes."

Could he say no? Well, why should Dorrie care about saving money? She didn't have a job, just spent her day doing housework. Perhaps he abused her because he felt women couldn't be trusted, like his mother who'd yelled at him every time he tried to hug her, and in fact she was finally confined to a mental institution where she died. Misha might have thought a husband had better yell as soon as he spotted something wrong, before it worsened.

He didn't physically abuse Dorrie. God forbid a six-foot man with a few muscles left should strike a wife who was five-foot-two. No, he merely made his wishes known so Dorrie would know who was boss. Dining out Saturday nights with her friends and daughter in a fancy restaurant, he'd snapped, "For God's sakes, Dorrie, are you brain dead? I told you the fish is okay! If it wasn't we'd know by the stink. Don't ask stupid questions." He resumed eating, ignoring the glances around the table, as if they thought he was cracked. At birthday parties, he kept to himself in a corner, refusing to shake hands which he said wasn't necessary, and he watched Dorrie make

a fool of herself by dancing with the other women since he'd forbidden her to dance with men. Perhaps he intended defending his rights as a husband, not allowing another woman to run his life, like his crazy mother. If he'd spoken up to her, instead of whimpering that she didn't love him, he might have saved himself heartache.

Weeknights, the couple watched television: game shows, soap operas, the news, musicals, and old movies. But Dorrie's dozing annoyed him. He'd shake her arm, demanding to discuss the program, and she'd reply sleepily, "I'm sorry. My mind wandered."

As if all this wasn't enough to make him grouchy, Dorrie had tried redecorating their small two-bedroom co-op as if it were The Taj Mahal, although, except for Elaine, they rarely had company since he'd said in the beginning he didn't want people tramping through their home. No problem with his friends; he didn't have any. As he often repeated: a wife is enough aggravation for a man. He wouldn't invite more with strangers. He'd yelled until his gaunt face flushed scarlet and his eyes practically bulged from their sockets that the living room didn't need new tulle curtains; who noticed fraying hems? But Dorrie went ahead anyway, and also ordered green carpeting to match the furniture. It looked comfortable, the plush carpet soft underfoot, but why all that needless expense? Just wasting his money, as usual!

Winters, Dorrie nagged him to repair the living room radiator, although he'd explained it was the landlord's responsibility. Cold air didn't bother him, his lungs were in good condition, perhaps inherited from his Russian ancestors, but Dorrie said she couldn't stand it. Yet, she wouldn't drape herself with a blanket, preferring to shiver on the sofa beside him, and expected him to pay for a plumber, which he refused to do. He still had plenty of money, but Elaine thought he might have worried about spending his last dime and ending up on welfare.

The abuse had alarmed Elaine and Dorrie's friends. After a year of marriage, Elaine urged her mother to leave Misha. Nervously ruffling her auburn curls, Elaine said, "Under the circumstances, you should be able to collect alimony, along with your social security. Your friends would gladly come forward as witnesses."

But Dorrie shook her head over coffee. "Honey, you like teaching high school science and being single, but I gotta have a husband. I didn't love Misha, I saw him as a meal ticket, just like he said. I couldn't stand working again or looking for another husband." She paused. "I tried to compensate by taking care of him. Plenty of husbands are worse! Misha pays all the bills, lets me buy beautiful stuff. I think he loves me in his own way, but he had such an awful experience with his mother and first wife, he don't know how to treat a woman."

For twenty years Dorrie endured his abuse, until she finally lost her temper and blamed him for her catching pneumonia and going to the hospital. Yet, Misha visited her daily and wolfed down the five-dollar lunch.

"So, what's wrong with the food here?" he told Dorrie while munching on cold hamburger. "You always buy the best and most expensive--determined to drive us

into poverty!”

Elaine glared at him from the nearby hospital chair, which he didn't seem to notice.

To make matters worse, when Dorrie returned home, Misha could hardly walk because of the pain shooting through his legs.

“Let me take you to a doctor,” Dorrie pleaded, but Misha shook his head. She knew he hated doctors for letting his parents and first wife die. Then she tried to help with leg exercises, and ended up spraining her chest muscles, and returning to the hospital. Misha yelled she shouldn't have been so foolish, but he paid all her doctor bills and bought her a mink coat for helping him, in addition to his anniversary gift of a diamond heart.

But did she appreciate his generosity? Back home, she said heartlessly, “Misha, your negative attitude drives me crazy. Please stop whining all day, ‘I'm a sick, old man, ready to die.’ You refused to see a doctor. You don't want to get better. You just want to complain about it.”

“Well, why should you care? Your legs don't hurt!”

But that afternoon he added six thousand dollars to their joint checking account to pay for his funeral.

And now, probably annoying Misha even more, Dorrie wanted to spend New Years at Borowack Lodge in the Catskills.

“Why can't we go to the Segalman's party in Brooklyn?” he'd urged. “There I can bring cheap wine. The Catskills cost a fortune.”

Patting her dyed red bouffant, Dorrie replied, “I might still look youthful but I'm eighty-three and not as energetic. I gotta have a week's relief from cooking and housework, and you need a change from your health problems.”

“Okay, okay,” he grumbled, but he complained bitterly while using the car service, “I know you caught me at a weak moment when I let my guard down.”

Late Wednesday afternoon, as soon as they entered the hotel, he said it wouldn't work out. Despite the ten-degree temperature outside, the lobby was freezing.

Guests bundled up in coats, huddled on fancy velour couches, rubbing their hands, or jamming them inside pockets, and stared at the marble floor and massive marble columns that made the room seem icier.

The pimply clerk behind the reception desk, looking as if he'd recently graduated from high school, apologized that they were trying to repair the heating system and to please excuse the inconvenience.

Misha warned Dorrie that with her delicate condition, her lungs being weakened from her previous pneumonia, they'd better leave.

“You paid a thousand dollars,” she reminded him, taking advantage of his thrift. “We should give it a chance. Maybe they'll fix it.”

“Nah, they won't fix it, and you'll end up getting sick again. Let's call car service right now, or it'll cost a lot more than a thousand.”

Despite his seemingly reasonable remark, she replied that she desperately needed a vacation (obviously forgetting they were there because he needed it). He watched Dorrie shivering beneath several sweaters and a coat that she wore even in the dining room.

“Please, Dorrie, do you want to catch pneumonia again?”

She stubbornly shook her head. “They’ll fix it.”

By Friday, Dorrie gasped for breath. Misha called car service, and as soon as they arrived at their apartment building, he sent her to a Brooklyn hospital by ambulance; the doctor put her in intensive care, on a respirator. But this time Misha couldn’t visit because he couldn’t walk. Elaine persuaded him to see a hip doctor, who said the joint was worn out, and he warned Misha that an operation was too dangerous at eighty-five. The hospital supplied a wheelchair, walker, and an attendant.

Which meant that Misha saw himself stuck at home with a middle-aged stranger who worked until mid-afternoon (he couldn’t stand the attendant being there all day), and forced without his wife to order dinners from lousy neighborhood restaurants, having labored slowly and painfully with a walker to the bedroom phone. The only light in his day was hearing about Dorrie’s condition during his nightly call to her daughter.

Elaine assured him that her mother was improving, and he confessed that he missed her terribly. “I’m used to having a wife,” he told Elaine. “Seeing the empty seat on the sofa, where Dorrie used to sit, is like a piece of me got detached. I want her home, where she belongs...”

Day after day he told Elaine how he longed for Dorrie’s recovery. She’d been removed from intensive care and assigned a room, but other complications threatened. She’d lost another ten pounds, an embolism had lodged in her lungs, and an infection invaded her stomach from the antibiotics. Still, Elaine was certain her mother would recover.

“But she ain’t getting better--that’s what worries me!”

“My mother shouldn’t have worked so hard at her age! Don’t you realize how miserably you’ve treated her?”

“No, I never realized...” He paused in subdued silence, as if aware for the first time of his abuse. Then, he pleaded, “Let her get well, her life will be much easier! I fixed the living room radiator--I can’t stand the heat, but your mother will feel comfortable, no more pneumonia.” He then promised to hire a maid for Dorrie.

“She won’t lift a finger,” he told Elaine. “Just let her come back to me.” He paused, and managed to joke, “She has to be tough, putting up with me all these years! When she was here, I looked handsome like Rudolph Valentino. Without her, I wear filthy clothes and look like Boris Karloff.”

Two weeks later, Elaine called one evening, and said, “Misha, I’m coming up tomorrow to the apartment. Mother needs a few things.”

“Sure, come up any time, I’m looking forward to good news about Dorrie.”

But when his stepdaughter arrived and sat on the opposite armchair, staring at

the green carpet, he drew back on the sofa, as if sensing something horrible had happened that he wanted to know, but didn't want to know.

She finally leaned forward and said softly, "Misha, there's no easy way to tell you this. Mother passed away yesterday at three o'clock."

He stared, stunned. "What? Passed away? You mean she died?"

The daughter nodded and turned, daubing at her eyes.

Misha burst into sobs.

The daughter sat quietly.

A moment of such agony washed over him, he began beating his head with his hands. He wailed, "Why didn't I call the doctors, instead of relying on you? Why did I let Dorrie die?" He swayed, moaning. Then he said, "How could this happen?" but the daughter shook her head. He looked accusingly at her. "You said she was getting better."

"She was, at first. We both know how attractive Mother looked before her illness, but she was old. At Beth Israel she fought hard to recover her health. When her weight sank to a hundred pounds from loss of appetite, she was too weak to withstand complications. She died from cardiac arrest after contracting meningitis."

Dazed by the news he shook his head. "Dorrie was my best friend, the only one who cared about me. Without her, I have nobody, nothing to live for. Oh, God, how could I lose her?"

He bent forward and moaned again, his body swaying in grief, repeating like a child, "God, why didn't you take me instead? I put extra money in our checking account for my funeral so she wouldn't have the expense, and look what happened..." He turned away, his face wet with tears. "I can't live without her. I just want to die. God, please, let me die..."

Elaine tried to comfort him. "Mother wouldn't want you to grieve like this. She was old and sick. There was nothing you could do."

He looked up at her, his eyes streaming. "I could have visited her with my wheelchair, instead of worrying about the ambulance cost! I never cried like this when my own mother died or my first wife. All her friends loved Dorrie--everybody loved her. But I never appreciated her." He buried his face in upturned palms. "What should I do? How can I go on?"

Suddenly, he gazed upward, as if memories prompted inspiration. "You don't know how wonderful she was to me! Made me eat healthy food and take vitamins, and injured herself trying to help with my physical problems. Who else would cook meals like her? Your mother made the most tender brisket, and delicious baked sweet potato..." He waved at the living room. "See how nice it looks? She bought new curtains when the old ones wore out, and made sure the new carpeting matched the furniture. She was very intelligent! Saved me a bundle of money by refusing to hire a maid. As soon as I met her I wanted to marry her. Even in her eighties, she was still beautiful with a slim figure. The sweetest, kindest woman I've ever known. Dorrie was perfect."

Grief

That fall, a mugger murdered Diana's husband. Apparently, Paddy had left the university where he was working late on cancer research, and was shot while he walked to his car. The police photographer snapped his slim body sprawled over the pavement, face up, the crumpled suit stained, an arm flung out in the pool of blood.

At first, when the policeman showed her the photograph, Diana rushed to her bathroom and vomited. Her brilliant, handsome Paddy murdered--for no sane reason? Impossible! Trembling, she rinsed her mouth and bent at the sink until she calmed. Then, straightening her dress, she returned to the living room and poured brandy from the buffet decanter.

"That isn't my husband," she said, despite the fact that the dark-haired victim resembled Paddy, wore a similar style three-piece business suit, and his open brief case strewn with papers had a wooden handle identical to the one she'd given Paddy as a birthday gift. But he couldn't have been shot, randomly, this way; it violated all sense of justice.

Officer Kulek looked down at her. "Ma'am, people at the university identified him as Professor Padraic Cavanaugh."

Diana shook her head and sipped brandy.

"Uh, ma'am, you've admitted he's missing--he hasn't been home since yesterday morning. You're probably in shock." The policeman hesitated. "I think you should consider... a psychiatrist. Just a suggestion--I'm not saying you're crazy or anything like that."

"I'm certainly not crazy!" Diana said, trembling again. With long manicured fingers she nervously patted her blonde hair drawn severely behind her ears, restrained with a bow at the nape of her neck. "I know my husband wasn't murdered, that's all. It's a case of mistaken identity."

"Yes, ma'am," the policeman said with a sigh, and left.

Diana double-locked the foyer door, and poured another brandy while a Mozart flute concerto played on the stereo. There must be a logical reason why Paddy hadn't come home. Perhaps he'd suddenly flown off to another medical conference--

important to his career. But Diana usually accompanied him. They traveled everywhere together: Paris, Durban, Mexico City... She scanned the comfortable living room with its antique Tiffany lamps, African art, and her mother's marble coffee table. Though ten years younger, Paddy wouldn't abandon her and the lovely home they'd furnished during two years of marriage. At their previous party, a professor had confided to Diana that Paddy's innovative research might lead to a Nobel Prize.

Entering the bedroom, Diana drew aside velvet drapes; the bridge lights far below twinkled across the East River like a string of jewels. Moonlight streaked across the king-sized bed and lit Paddy's portrait resting on the dresser: his dark curly hair and fine features. His tender brown eyes smiled, as though he were really there before her. Diana smiled back. How could she doubt he would return?

That night she tossed about, unable to sleep without Paddy. Slipping a chenille robe over the silk nightgown, she rose several times to drink juice and gaze at his portrait. Finally, hugging his pillow, she fell asleep.

During the following months, people called to see if she were okay and offered their condolences.

"He's just away on a trip," Diana said, irritated that the callers, including her own mother, hinted that Paddy had been murdered. Her mother had even dared to arrange a funeral for that man in the police photograph. Diana refused to attend. Finally, when her mother urged her to contact a psychiatrist friend, Diana exploded. She didn't need a psychiatrist; she was sick of people's lies! She immediately regretted hurting Mother who meant well, but simply didn't understand.

"I'm sorry," she said. She'd always prided herself on self-control, not crying when her parents divorced during her childhood. "He's on a long trip--that's all."

"Well, people cope with grief in their own way. It probably comforts you to think--"

"Mother, I don't need comforting." Diana added hastily, "I must buy groceries for dinner. He might come home tonight, you know." She hung up.

After awhile she stopped answering the phone and merely listened to messages on the answering machine.

One day Officer Kulek's message said, "Ma'am, we have a suspect who confessed to killing your husband."

Diana gripped the bedroom dresser until her knuckles turned white. The suspect was lying--nobody murdered Paddy because he never died. Let them deal with the killer of that other man. Still, she wished he would call, letting her know where he was. His silence made her feel as if he no longer loved her.

To ease the pain of her growing insecurity, she drank more brandy, skipping meals. It was about this time that she joined The Poison Club. It happened suddenly after hearing a Bach orchestral suite. As she stumbled toward the stereo to change the CD, she became aware of people standing in her living room, watching her.

She glanced about, startled. "How did you get in?"

"We're here because you want us here," Harriet Lawrence said. Wearing a sable coat, the elegant wife of Diana's gynecologist motioned toward the two men standing at her side. "Diana, we've elected you chairperson of our Poison Club."

"I don't understand..." Diana glanced down at her dirty chenille bathrobe. "I...haven't dressed for days. I'd better change."

"We can wait," blue-eyed Mrs. Lawrence said. She smiled, a lovely smile that revealed even white teeth and a flash of dimples. Mrs. Lawrence with her delicate pinkish complexion radiated charm, but her air of self-confidence left no doubt she expected her wishes to be obeyed. Diana had to admire her self-confidence. Why was she so poised when her only child had been killed by muggers last year? Mrs. Lawrence patted her black upsweep with a ruby-ringed finger. "Don't take too long, dear."

Nodding, Diana put the brandy on the end table, and staggered to the bedroom. She heard the group shed overcoats and boots at the foyer closet and return to the living room, commenting on the cold January weather. Diana donned a clingy peach-colored dress with cameo brooch at the plunging neckline. It was Paddy's favorite, worn only when they went out alone, dining and dancing at The Rainbow Room. For university functions or faculty parties, she chose sedate suits with pearls. But tonight was different. The uninvited living room guests were welcome--reminding Diana of dinner parties she and Paddy used to give. Thank heavens the liquor store had delivered plenty of brandy. If only Paddy were back, sipping it with her after the party while gossiping about these guests.

Diana stared at herself in the vanity mirror. Despite circles under her eyes, she felt desirable; Paddy would surely want her again and they'd play their delicious game of "ring around the moon." His lovemaking was wonderfully imaginative.

Smiling, she brushed her scraggly hair, drawing it behind her ears with a satin bow, and donned earrings and high heels.

"Ooh," the group responded in appreciation when she appeared.

Diana nodded, satisfied that the Valentino dress was still appreciated.

"Please call the meeting to order," Mrs. Lawrence told her.

Diana floundered. "What should I do?"

"Whatever you please, dear."

Diana shrugged and reached for the cloth potpourri doll on the sideboard. She beat the doll against the marble coffee table. "The meeting of The Poison Club is open for suggestions!"

Alex Gerakitis, Greek owner of the corner pub where Diana and her husband had often dropped by for a nightcap, rose near the window. "Let's kill a mugger," he said, heavy eyebrows twitching.

Diana trembled and poured brandy until the snifter was full. She took a long swig, and leaned back. Starting to relax, she recalled trying to console poor Alex after he'd lost a nephew to muggers.

Then, tall, slim Gary Monroe smoothed his wavy brown hair and nodded. "Let's

be creative, devise an ingenious plan, not something overdone, like in the movies.”

Diana remembered then that Gary, an attorney and neighbor, had lost his father to muggers several years earlier on Long Island.

“Poison is so civilized,” Mrs. Lawrence reminded them with a smile.

“Excellent!” Gary said. “How shall we do it?”

Alex’s eyebrows twitched rapidly. “We’ll wait at the university and grab the first mugger we see. I’ll offer him a cup of hot cocoa. That should mask the taste of rat poison I usually keep on hand in my restaurant.”

“Hot cocoa? Alex, you’ve become enslaved by television.” Gary poured his own snifter. “We’re striving for originality!”

Diana repressed a smile. They were all so enthusiastic.

“I’d be delighted to help,” Mrs. Lawrence said. “I always try to be useful to the community.”

Gary turned to Diana. “A beautiful woman would make good bait--the chair-person, for example.”

Diana smiled. “Yes, I’m perfectly willing to be the bait--”

Alex jumped up. “It’s settled then. Let’s use Diana to kill the bastard mugger!”

Gary and Mrs. Lawrence agreed at once. “Tonight!” they shouted in unison. “We’ll meet at seven at the university gate!”

Diana beat the potpourri doll. “Order! Order! We must stay calm.” She sipped her brandy. “Is there any other business?”

Nobody answered.

“Very well,” she said, “meeting adjourned.” She glanced past the graceful bell-shaped drapes; it had begun snowing.

While the group rushed to the closet for coats and boots, Diana sauntered to the bedroom, seeking proper clothing to lure a mugger. She chose a wool skirt, Scottish hand knit pullover, and mink jacket.

She arrived at the university on time, but the others weren’t there yet. She greeted the guard and decided to climb the hill to the faculty recreation building. In the cold, crisp air, the sidewalk lamps blurred; tree limbs laden with snow dipped against the whitened lawns. Pausing to admire the fairy tale landscape, she noticed the group straggling up the hill. Gary, ahead of the others, walked leisurely with his Brooks Brothers coat and feathered fedora. Mrs. Lawrence came next, clutching her sable so as not to brush against snow-covered bushes. Alex, dressed sensibly in sturdy blue jeans, fiber-filled jacket, and boots, brought up the rear. They joined Diana on the building steps.

Gary, warming his cupped hands with his breath, asked Alex, “Have you got the poison?”

He produced a packet of d-Con. “One taste of this and the mugger is finished!”

“I’ll take that,” Mrs. Lawrence said, smiling. She took Diana’s thermos of hot asparagus soup, unscrewed the lid, and sprinkled in the green rat poison.

The group chatted as if at a faculty tea. Diana began to feel restless; she wanted to fulfill their mission.

“It’s time we sought the mugger,” she said.

The others nodded.

“This way,” Alex said, taking the lead.

They headed around the recreation building, the fresh snow spongy underfoot. Alex suddenly emitted a grunt of surprise. “Look!”

Diana, stepping around the burly man, spotted someone sprawled near a trash barrel. “Is he dead?”

Gary bent over the man wearing old clothes and no coat. “Frozen to death.”

“The mugger!” Mrs. Lawrence said triumphantly, staring down at the figure. “That will teach him not to kill people for no reason!”

“Oh, yes!” Diana beamed that the club’s first effort had succeeded. Returning home, she poured out the soup and rinsed the thermos while humming an oldie, “Let a Smile Be Your Umbrella.” She could hardly wait for The Poison Club’s next meeting.

After slipping into her silk nightgown and turning down the quilt, she gazed at Paddy’s tender brown eyes in the dresser portrait. The gentle smile widened into a grin. He looked happy that she was seeing friends again, giving parties and broadening her social life rather than brooding over his unexplained absence.

The Senator's Punishment

When the photograph of Senator Lowe and his prostitute girlfriend appeared in *The Tylerville Gazette*, the small midwestern town was scandalized. There on the front page was a respectable state senator, a fiftyish Harvard law school graduate, caught frantically zipping up his fly in the hotel room while plump Margie Hagenstadt, her breasts bare beneath the sheer negligee, smiled demurely as though the photographer hadn't surprised her.

Local television reporters pressed the married senator for comments before his office building. One young fellow asked, "Why a prostitute?"

Senator Lowe scowled with bushy brows. "A man has a right to privacy with a consenting adult. It's still a free country."

"Not if he's a public official," the reporter said. "What about your obligation toward the voters? It doesn't include--"

"Oh, grow up!" Still scowling, the Senator hurried inside the small building, leaving the reporter with a frown for the camera.

"Well, folks, there goes another politician who thinks he owes the electorate nothing. We'll remember when voting, won't we." He ruffled his blond curls and smiled warmly. "But don't worry, we won't investigate your bedroom, if there's no cause."

After the newscast, the town buzzed with outrage. At *The Red Herring Bar*, the local pharmacy owner said Lowe should be banned from public office. The postmaster nodded emphatically over his beer and advised impeachment. Wasn't it unconstitutional for a senator to enjoy unrestricted sex while other married males must endure a boring wife?

Even the Heavenly Crusaders ghosts in the small Park Lawn Cemetery had been scandalized. As usual, they'd gathered above their graves before sunrise to assess good and evil in the town they'd disgracefully left, having themselves been publicly ostracized. As experts on sinning, they'd been chosen to punish mortals, thus coaxing them from temptation while awaiting pleasures in heaven. Mr. Purdy led the Crusaders' meeting when the other spectres finally quieted in the misty grayness.

Formerly a bespectacled accountant, Mr. Purdy had been elected leader because of his ability to reckon accounts, an aptitude which unfortunately had resulted in his embezzling bank funds. At first, he'd modestly refused the Heavenly Crusaders' honor of being president, until meeting their sexiest ghost, young Ginger, whose big blue eyes startled against her stark whiteness; charming dimples appeared in her misty cheeks.

"The leader and I are very close friends," she'd said during a conference, and floated toward him. Her long white lashes fluttered, her shroud slipped past bare shoulders to reveal a glimpse of generous bosom, her mother-of-pearl lips parted in coyne--a charming specter of innocence and lust.

Mr. Purdy, spectacles clouding, had peered at her in wonderment, and smiled at the heavenly promise.

"Well, who has a grievance?" he now asked, opening the meeting, his pale visage poking above the shroud's collar.

Mr. Olafson, a former insurance agent, stroked his white beard while floating in his air pocket. "It's inexcusable, Tylerville's bureaucrats having illicit relationships. Unheard of in my day!"

Mr. Purdy smiled. "Unheard of? What about your own affair with that cousin while your wife was touring Europe? Why should the media's reports about Senator Lowe surprise you?"

"And what about your gambling debts left for your poor wife to resolve!" Mr. Olafson snapped, and paused to calm himself. "Just because Lowe cleaned up Tylerville's corruption is no excuse to have sexual intercourse wherever he pleases."

"He'll probably be voted out of office," Mr. Purdy said. "That solves the problem democratically."

"But he might not be," Ginger said. "You know how the public eats up gossip. I think the senator should be haunted as a warning!" She paused, pushing her shroud neckline again below a shoulder. "And I want to do it. I never get a chance to haunt." She looked wistful, the pearly lips forming a pout.

"Well, haunting isn't exactly your forte, is it?" Mr. Purdy said gently.

"But I'd like to be well-rounded."

"Let her do it," Olafson said. "It would be proper irony, a beautiful ghost scaring the devil out of the lascivious Senator!"

"Besides," Ginger said, fluttering her lashes in nervous enthusiasm, "it's good practice for the Halloween spooking competition. I'd like to prove I've got other talents."

"Yes, let her haunt the senator!" the other Crusaders agreed--except O'Malley, a former alcoholic. Though having died years before, Tim couldn't forget the wonderfully tipsy effect of alcohol. As he spoke, he leaned first to the right, then to the left, conveying the impression of drunkenness, though he hadn't touched a drop since being buried.

"Well, now," O'Malley said, "Why blame the poor senator for a bit of fun, eh?"

Surely a lad accomplishing as much as he has is entitled to some earthly rewards. Consider his first year alone, how he refused bribes from greedy toy manufacturers to expose their slipshod products and saved thousands of children from mutilation and death. Who are we, I'm thinking, that we should pass judgement on him? Are we so fine, so high and mighty we can't bear faults in our leaders?" His shroud swayed from side to side. "No, ladies and gents, I fear not. Remember the old saying: a leader is still human, no matter how high he climbs." With that, he sank to the ground, his shroud bubbling around him.

Mr. Olafson's bearded visage vibrated with anger. "Who could forget that news photo of O'Malley staggering from a bar? Nobody in Tylerville would re-elect him as mayor! And now we have another profligate--Senator Lowe. His indiscretion must be punished, as a warning to other politicians!"

The Heavenly Crusaders debated plans for appropriate punishment, and delighted Ginger by electing her as official spooker. Finally, she'd make them realize she was more than a pretty face. Maybe someday she could even become their leader! She smiled. Then, there'd be some changes: no more handing it out for free. She'd charge, like in the old days.

"Gee, I won't let you down," she said, snowy curls bobbing with enthusiasm at her naked shoulders.

A week later, Senator Lowe, in his Westchester study that warm June night, was working on legal papers for his invasion of privacy suit against the Gazette; reporters, calling his behavior vile, had dug up every detail of his affair with Margie for the public's edification. Suddenly, something white flitted past the open window. The senator shrugged, murmuring, "Oh, probably just moonlight glinting off the sprinkler." But the next time he glanced up, a beautiful, shrouded ghost hovered near his desk.

"Good lord!" he exclaimed, startled. Then, calming, he said, "Ridiculous! Ghosts don't exist. Must be a practical joke." He rebent over his papers.

"Sen-a-tor Lowe..." Ginger tried to make her voice as scary as possible. She almost regretted having been elected since she knew she wasn't very good. But there was her possible rise to leadership; she summoned up courage. She'd teach the Crusaders a thing or two about haunting! "Sen-a-tor, sen-a-tor, what e-vil hast thou donnnnnne..."

"Can't you see I'm busy," he muttered. "I don't know how you got in here, but if you don't leave, my housekeeper will throw you out."

Ginger paused, flustered. The senator didn't seem to mind a ghost's presence. Her shroud rustled with her deep sigh. Ghosts should terrify mortals--reminding them of the awful future. Yet, being a ghost was fun: all that flying about and making objects move and magic she'd grown to love. She'd hate being banned from the Crusaders; membership among sinners gave her a sense of belonging.

Courage renewed, she floated to the window and rattled the venetian blind. The Senator ignored it, waving his hand absentmindedly as if she were an unwanted beetle.

She stared at Lincoln's heavy bust on a corner stand and caused it to float toward the expensive antique walnut desk, banging a corner and chipping the wood. He remained bent over his papers. Finally, she breathed into the senator's ear. There, that old trick should arouse him.

He glanced up, surprised. "Who sent you to bedevil me? I've got enough harassment by the media."

Ginger smiled with satisfaction. She finally had his attention. "No joke, love," she said, and settled comfortably above his desk, her shroud splitting to reveal a shapely white leg hovering across the other. "I'm Ginger, a ghost sent by the Heavenly Crusaders to warn you of punishment for your sin."

Senator Lowe, thumbs hooked under vest lapel, peered up through reading glasses. "By God, I remember--you were that prostitute who died from pneumonia when I was a teenager. The papers said it happened from overexposure during a particularly cold winter. Everybody discussed it for months. But, that was years ago, you can't be real--"

"Not real like being alive," Ginger said, long lashes fluttering.

"Must be a trick." The senator leaned back with relief. "Whoever heard of a beautiful ghost?"

"Oh, I'm here all right. Want to feel?" She placed his hand on her bosom filling the shroud's bodice.

His hand jerked back as if he'd touched fire. "I already have enough trouble with Margie!" He glanced up at her and back to his papers. "Whoever you are, you bought a terrific costume. That spun glass wig and blue contact lenses are fantastic, and the luscious body..." He paused. "But why will I be punished? My biggest sin recently was listing a few dinners with friends as business expenses--surely, not unforgiveable."

Ginger fought the urge to like him, remembering him as a handsome teen, then reminded herself how his politician father tried to run her out of Tylerville until angry male citizens said at the Town Hall meeting that if she left, they would, too!

"Why didn't you use common sense?" she said now, voice dropping to a husky softness. "Taking crude Margie to the fancy Venus Hotel was bound to catch somebody's eye."

"Well, I..." Senator Lowe floundered, trying to explain. "My wife Eloise had been ill for years, paralysis of the lower spine. Incurable. I...I... couldn't have sex with colleagues' wives, and I thought Margie would keep her mouth shut since she was trying to drum up business. Then, she insisted on a luxury hotel..." His voice trailed off lamely. "I did the best I could."

"Gee," Ginger said, feeling sorry for him. She reproached herself. Her job was to haunt, not cuddle!

The senator continued. "It's unfair that news hounds can destroy a reputation while raking in piles of money, and the victim merely proving how very much alive he is."

Shaking her head, Ginger floated to the window and glanced out into the landscaped garden. Poor Senator Lowe. She should have convinced The Crusaders to let her help relieve his awful need, just like she'd relieved most of Tylerville's males, who agreed that she was incredible. She sighed. But it was the overload and her determination to become the best that led to her body's weakening condition and eventual pneumonia.

She turned and hovered near his desk. "Gosh, Senator, I'm awfully sorry. But I've got to obey The Heavenly Crusaders by warning you about punishment that's coming soon."

His bushy brows lifted in doubt. "You're not really a ghost, are you? Ghosts are supposed to terrify, and you're beautiful."

She smiled sweetly and pulled her shroud up to her chin, her voluptuous body nakedly visible underneath. "Oh, I'm a ghost, all right."

He changed eyeglasses to study her closely, observed the misty outline of her face, and fainted on the shag carpet. When his married daughter dropped by later and revived him, he couldn't explain what had caused his severe fright--the Gazette would scoff at his explanations with screaming headlines: **LOWE BLAMES GHOSTS FOR EXTRAMARITAL LUSTING!**

Recovering in his private room at Tylerville General Hospital, he gazed from his bed at the open window, the room fragrant from spring flowers outside. Dinner arrived. He hardly touched the rubbery-looking food. Then, he lay back to rest. Suddenly, something white flitted through the window. Trembling, he rolled over to face the wall.

"Sen-a-tor Lowe..." Ginger tittered.

He turned toward her. Still beautiful with big blue eyes and dimples, she emitted a sweet perfume. She floated toward him and placed a cool, pulsating hand on his member.

He trembled with desire. "You aren't really a...a..."

"Yeah," she said, smiling, "a real ghost, just like I told you. I'm here to punish you on account of your indis-indis--oh, you know."

"Indiscretion." He thought for a moment. "You don't feel like a ghost."

She smiled disarmingly. "You'll see."

Tenderly, she peeled away his sheet and untied his hospital gown, her shroud heaping about her white ankles. Her gleaming alabaster body rubbed against him until he moaned.

They had sex all night, the most enjoyable the senator ever had, and even better than elderly Tylerville men had reminisced about. It was if Ginger had surpassed her earthly reputation in an effort to fully satisfy him.

When the doctor visited him in the morning, Senator Lowe lay quietly with eyes closed and an elated smile. But, alas, compared with extraordinary Ginger, all other women would henceforth appear unappealing.

The senator had been sentenced to a life of celibacy.

I I I u s i o n s

Amidst the tenements in Brooklyn's Red Hook section, near the dilapidated waterfront with its graffitied factory doors and rotting garbage piles, trucks crowded the darkening street, the film crew shouting, "Move it here! Let's go!" On the bus carrying extras, a woman of forty-five with plump cheeks and deep-set brown eyes sat with clenched hands. Loosening her torn bathrobe over skirt and blouse, she peered through the window at film grips swinging the truck camera toward a tenement stoop. Occasionally she fingered the tag in her pocket: number 46.

A man entered the bus; the extras abruptly quieted.

The woman gazed eagerly at Mr. Morgan, the handsome assistant director. Oh, God, please let him call my number, she prayed. Mr. Morgan read the list. Those extras whose numbers were called filed outside. Hands unclenching, she stared after them, reminding herself not to feel disappointed again. Her hard work would pay off.

Beside her, the young blonde with whom she'd chatted en route to the location, smiled and said, "Is Victoria your real name? Were you ever on camera?"

The older woman shook her graying brown hair barretted behind her ears. "Not yet, but someday." She smiled back. "Victoria Lansing's my stage name."

Estelle nodded, her big blue eyes widening. "I want to become a movie star but I love a wonderful boy and we might get married." She blotted her face with a delicate lace handkerchief. "I didn't think the neighborhood would be so run down--smelling of garbage. Too bad it's only April, or the bus would be air conditioned." She sighed. "Do you think they'll call my number?"

"Perhaps," Victoria said, and added defensively, "It's a remake of a movie about a doctor who takes care of poor patients in a slum." Reluctant to discuss complaints about filming, she changed the subject. "I nearly married Fred, a sweet pharmacist I met while working in summer stock. He even bought me an engagement ring, but then I realized my career was too important to tie myself down with a family. He finally stopped calling. I think about him sometimes. I'm not sorry--nothing like that. I just wonder if he got married, how he is..."

She studied Estelle's pretty floral dress. "The agent who hired me told me to wear

a shabby bathrobe. See, I even ripped a hole in mine and dirtied my slippers. It's important to make the audience believe." Victoria unclasped the barrette, allowing the dank wispy hair to hang loosely about her face, and glanced outside as film grips erected a makeshift table, beyond camera range. Grunting, they heaved onto it a large coffee urn and pastries.

She turned to Estelle. "All my life I've wanted to be an actress," she added softly, and explained how her mother, a former actress, had tried to dissuade her.

"It sounds glamorous but takes total dedication! You spend most of your life making the right contacts, work at lowly jobs, and compete with a hundred actors for every role. Besides, you're too plain-looking. Find a husband."

Victoria had run to her bedroom and slammed the door against her mother's criticism. Gazing through her Queens apartment window, she pictured Variety and Show Business headlines: VICTORIA LANSING'S A SMASH SUCCESS IN MAUGHAM'S OF HUMAN BONDAGE... Despite her mother's discouragement, she got a drama degree, then studied acting at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, and still spent Monday evenings with a Greenwich Village coach, along with other hopefuls. She didn't waste time on parties and having fun with friends. Mornings, she'd worked as a waitress, and during late afternoons made the rounds of agents and casting calls.

"Finally, I became an extra and got paid," Victoria told the girl listening intently on the bus. "I'm a professional."

"Gosh, I'd wanted to come just for the learning experience," Estelle said, looking impressed. "Have you ever worked on Broadway?"

Victoria smiled. "I'd love to, but movie work's exciting, too! It's more real than the stage. And I can see the stars close up. I keep hoping that someday I'll be on camera, preserved for eternity. Imagine being seen by millions of people years after I'm dead. Isn't that inspiring?"

"Yes, but--" Estelle glanced through the window and pointed at the limousine pulling up to a curb. "Oh, look, there's sexy Mark Hunt with his dimpled chin. And isn't Heather McCarey gorgeous! Wow, if I looked like her, I wouldn't have any problem getting movie roles."

Victoria, brushing aside her hair, touched a pimple. She sighed. "Estelle, you're beautiful, but there's more to getting parts than looks. You must develop your craft."

She could still hear Daddy stressing his hard work to become a fine carpenter. "Oh, sure, my angel," he'd said with his Cockney accent as she sat on his lap, "folks lie to themselves that life's easy if you know the tricks. But success must be earned. That's why I came to America, no more coal mining, like my dad! I wanted to learn a trade I could turn into my own business. And look what I got besides--a little girl that I love with all my heart."

If he hadn't died of cancer when she was twelve, he'd be so proud of her dedication, how she refused to brood about not getting feature roles. Nodding, she glanced

outside. The assistant cameraman with chalk marked X's on the street and assigned the positions to extras, who then moved to the sidewalk. The stars' limo waited nearby. Bystanders, gathering behind rope cordoning off the street, gaped at the actors.

Suddenly, screams pierced the night air as two black boys ran down the street carrying a black teenage girl and left her lying on a tenement stoop. "Oh, God," Victoria whispered, heart pounding, though the scene was make-believe. The boys, shouting to each other, ran off. The extras, playing neighbors, rushed from different directions. Carefully stepping on their assigned X mark, they stared at the girl and the retreating boys and chattered among themselves.

"No, that isn't right!" The plump director, shaking his head, turned to his assistant. "They're too alert, for God's sakes!"

When the director walked away, Mr. Morgan, standing before the tenement, shouted through a megaphone, "Listen, extras, it's the middle of the night, you hear a terrific commotion in the street. You walk sleepily from your apartment buildings and stand before the doctor's house, on your X mark, where you see the pregnant girl lying on the stoop. You're tired, confused, but concerned!"

They nodded and began chattering.

"Quiet!" He waited a moment until the crowd settled down. "All right, back on the bus!" He followed them and again called off numbers, but Victoria's number was skipped.

She laughed ruefully, hands unclenching. "I still need patience after ten years of waiting on these buses."

"Maybe they won't call my number," Estelle said. "I love acting, but I want children while I'm still young."

Victoria shook her head. "There's no comparison between marriage and acting! I've probably seen every movie ever made. They're magical, a place where anxieties only seem real. Acting takes me away from the negatives in my life. I concentrate on my role and feel uplifted, as if I'm part of something more important than petty problems--" She paused as Mr. Morgan again boarded the bus to call off numbers, and included 46.

"That's me!" Face shining, Victoria left the bus, jostled by the other extras, and stood on her assigned street position, smiling. She was in the middle of the second row facing the tenement stoop--bound to be seen if she appeared on camera. When all the extras had taken their positions, the director approached and said something to his assistant.

Mr. Morgan, nodding, picked up a megaphone and turned to the crowd as the director walked away. "We'll take our dinner break now! There's a coffee shop open nearby, but don't go beyond the corded-off section. And watch your handbags, ladies, this is a tough neighborhood!"

Estelle looked up hopefully when Victoria boarded the bus to shed her bathrobe and barrette her hair. "We're not filming yet?"

Victoria sighed. "Not yet. I'll walk you to the coffee shop."

Passing curious bystanders, Victoria proudly fingered her pocket tag. They were just ordinary people, but her tag made her somebody special--an actress. Head erect and shoulders straight, she entered La Corona Coffee Shop with Estelle. They carried their trays of soggy tuna fish sandwiches and tepid coffee to a grimy window table. The other extras had filled the small, dimly-lit room, eating and chatting.

"Is filming always like this?" Estelle said, peering at her dirty cup. "So far, we've just waited on the bus. We haven't acted at all!"

Victoria frowned. "There's always a chance of getting on camera."

"Why haven't you?"

She smiled wistfully. "Bad luck. Movie work takes patience. Something usually goes wrong--the extras are improperly dressed or it unexpectedly rains or grows cloudy instead of sunny. They return to the bus and after awhile the numbers are called again. Somehow, mine got skipped for the final shooting." She glanced at her watch. "We'd better get back! They'll start rehearsing again."

Leaving the diner, they headed toward the bus. Victoria smiled benevolently at awed onlookers. They couldn't imagine the self-sacrifices required to become an actress. But if she got on camera just once, it would be worth everything. She nodded gravely. It will happen. Her luck will change. She mustn't lose hope.

As they boarded the bus, a man turned to the lady behind him. "Would you believe it--neighborhood punks stole the coffee urn!"

"It's a good thing somebody's watching the bus," she retorted, "or they'd probably steal that, too!"

Ignoring them, Victoria focused on Mr. Morgan who reappeared and read off numbers, including 46. She jumped up, smiling. "You'll be called the next time," she told Estelle whose face sagged. Sympathetic, she patted the young woman's shoulder. "Believe me, I know how disappointed you feel."

Wearing her torn bathrobe and soiled slippers, Victoria left the bus, noted her X mark, and waited on the sidewalk. The scene was rehearsed fifteen times over several hours, until the director was satisfied. During the snack break, she forced down a cheese Danish because concentration required energy; she missed the coffee.

Standing by the pastry trays, she scanned the extras snacking and chatting, the director talking quietly with the photographer, and she longed to know whether she'd remain in the scene.

Finally, Mr. Morgan ordered the same extras to assemble for the shooting.

Victoria joined them on the sidewalk and crossed her fingers for luck. Now, the camera began panning the black boys who ran, screaming, to deposit the pregnant teenage girl on the stoop; again they ran off, shouting. And, again, Victoria walked sleepily to her assigned place on the street. Quivering, she gazed with curiosity at the stoop for what seemed a lifetime.

Suddenly she knew the camera was upon her as it scanned the crowd gathered

around her. She was immortalized... Chills washed over her while the other extras whispered among themselves, presumably about the girl, but actually about the stars: where Heather had her blonde hair done, and what Mark ate for dinner.

She longed to shout at them, "Get involved in the scene! Discuss what's happening!" Resolute to do her best work, Victoria stared with neighborly concern at the stoop as Mark Hunt, much younger than Paul Muni who'd originally played the neighborhood doctor, opened the door and saw the pregnant teenager lying there. Feeling the camera's eye upon her again, Victoria strained her attention toward the stoop, wanting to make the scene as real as possible for a future audience. When the scene ended she boarded the bus, her eyes shining with joy.

"You look as if you've seen God himself," Estelle said softly as Victoria took her seat.

Victoria, trembling, hoped to appear modest despite the promise of immortality. To her embarrassment, she burst out, "I got on camera!"

Estelle smiled. "I'm glad for you. I know it's what you always wanted." She glanced through the window. "Oh, there's Mark heading back toward the limo. I'd like to meet him, wouldn't you?"

Victoria sighed. Despite her beauty, Estelle would never become a star--she didn't understand the achievement and the years of striving.

Months later, in a Manhattan theater, Victoria tried to spot herself in the crowd before the tenement stoop. Unfortunately, running cast credits partly blanked out the scene that had been shot on the dark street. It was impossible to recognize individual extras.

"But I helped bring that movie to life," she reminded herself. Beaming, she sat back to enjoy it, except for the brief wish that Daddy and Fred could be with her to enjoy her triumph.

The Art Of Being Jewish

When Olivia on the phone invited me to Thanksgiving dinner, she described the hostess, Mimi Cohen, as lovable and typically Jewish.

“Typically Jewish” puzzled me into comparisons, but I said, “What do you mean?”

“You know. The accent, gestures...”

“Ah, yes.” Olivia regarded my Jewishness as irrelevant because of my Virginia upbringing. Since her father was a Pennsylvania preacher, she, of course, was “typically WASP”--tall and skinny with red hair and freckles. Fascinated by foreigners, she’d married Ambar, a brilliant biologist from India.

“Well, Rachel, do you want to join us?” Olivia said.

I agreed and, bearing Olivia’s home-baked pumpkin chiffon pie and my Beaujolais, we greeted Mimi at her foyer door. She had a small nose and mouth, blue eyes, and smooth complexion, but she dressed like a slob: a shapeless maumau and clunky sandals with anklets, her brown hair coiled in a wispy neck bun. I assumed she was a young fortyish, but when I asked Olivia her age, she whispered that Mimi was twenty-eight.

“Hiya, make yourselves at home,” Mimi said with a heavy Brooklyn accent as she grabbed my wine bottles.

While Olivia helped prepare dinner, Ambar and I headed for the living room with its modern oil paintings, white leather furniture on a spotless white rug, and a Brancusi marble female reclining on a smoked-glass coffee table.

Shades of Hava Nagila, I thought, amused, as I sank into a deep armchair. Where were the photographs of bar mitzvahs, graduations, and weddings, like my grandparents’ house in Virginia? Visiting relatives understood that our living room was simply “for show.” The spacious kitchen was where everyone ate, gossiped, and complained.

Ambar, with his huge black mustache and dark eyes, sat on the sectional sofa near the fireplace. Danielle, Mimi’s slender older sister, took the other armchair, near the window’s potted plants. The opposite of Mimi, she wore a clingy black jumpsuit with pearls and high heels, her blonde hair French-braided around her head. Mimi’s husband, Neal, looking suspiciously Waspish with his fine features and pale brown eyes, joined his university colleague, Ambar, on the sofa.

When Olivia introduced me, Neal said with perfect diction, “My sister writes, too. I’m sorry she couldn’t be here and chat with you.”

Danielle suddenly rose to grab her small son, a chubby Alpine climber with shorts and knee-high socks, as he gleefully stretched toward a fern. When he eyed the Brancusi, she abruptly carried him to another room. Ambar and Neal discussed biology; during a pause I asked about Danielle’s French name.

“Didn’t Olivia mention that the girls’ parents are French?” Neal said, boyishly sweeping hair off his forehead. “In fact, their father was a prominent attorney, representing people like the Rothschilds.”

“No, she never mentioned that.”

Olivia, emerging from the kitchen, exclaimed, “Mimi’s so unpretentious! She and Danielle attended an exclusive finishing school, you know.”

“I didn’t know,” I said. Exclusive finishing schools weren’t normal for a typical Jewish family--like my Latvian grandparents who’d emigrated poor and unable to speak English.

“Anybody who’s hungry, the food’s on the table!” Mimi announced in a most unfinished school manner, and we followed her into the dining room. Near the picture window overlooking the East River, the linen-covered table offered a Limoges platter of turkey, steaming vegetables, and hot croissants with herbed butter. Roses floated in a bisque centerpiece. Not exactly a typically Jewish meal, I thought, recalling Grandma’s modest gefilte fish followed by stuffed cabbage, hulupches, cooked with gingersnaps and raisins, the aroma of challah baking in the oven.

Danielle’s son, safely imprisoned in a high chair, squealed as he beat the tray with his fists. Danielle bent over him to whisper something. Her voice, soft and modulated, had no accent.

Mimi, pointing at the turkey, shouted, “Don’t be bashful, help yourself!” She disappeared into the kitchen.

“Mimi, when are you going to eat?” Neal called out, carving turkey.

“Yeah, yeah, don’t worry about me!” our well-bred hostess shouted from the kitchen. “Ess! Ess!”

Ambar chuckled indulgently. “A real Jewish housewife, your sister, eh, Danielle?”

Mimi finally entered, plopping beside Olivia, her lips curling in a “typically Jewish” sign of disapproval. “We attended a Shiva last week that was farblundget.” She motioned for Olivia to pass the turkey. “Neal’s cousin came, the meshuggah I told you about from Long Island, remember? Flashing her new diamond ring in all the women’s eyes--like this.” She flashed her large diamond back and forth. “To see if yours is as big as hers. Then, she gives me the business that if I’m nice to her, she’ll remember me in her will. Ha!” Mimi chewed turkey vigorously. “My husband’s after the Nobel Prize for his biology research and she thinks I’m worrying about her diamonds and will--” The phone rang; she jumped up. From the kitchen came a stream of fluent French sans Brooklyn accent.

Olivia, beaming with freckles, passed me a croissant. "Isn't she a riot? I told you she was typically Jewish."

"So I see." Inwardly I cringed with embarrassment. What a repertoire she could have amassed if my uneducated peasant grandparents had raised her. Emigrating at nineteen, they'd toiled in New York factories, scrimping to start a clothing business that became successful, and when it later floundered, my stubborn grandfather started over in an unfamiliar Southern culture because Blaisburg's rolling hills and gentle pace reminded him of Latvia.

"Mama wonders if we'd like her Philharmonic subscription tickets Saturday," Mimi told Danielle when she returned to the table.

"What's on the program?"

"Borodin, Elgar, and--"

"Syrupy."

"Dreck!" Mimi, the product of an elite upper class, licked butter off her fingers. "Mama always saves the Bach and Vivaldi for herself. But anyway..." She stuffed her mouth with turkey, indicating that Danielle should wait until she swallowed. Olivia smiled with amusement. "The Shiva was a mob scene," Mimi continued. "My uncle was such a famous Rabbi, many strangers came. And what they brought! Lady Godiva chocolates cost plenty of geld, huh, Danielle?"

Wiping her son's mouth with a napkin, Danielle nodded. "Actually, it was a lovely affair but too crowded."

"Ha! You can say that again!" Mimi glanced at me. "Oh, I'd better explain to Rachel what a Shiva is."

"I'm Jewish," I replied, smiling.

"She was raised in the South," Olivia volunteered.

"Oh, the South..." Shrugging, Mimi gazed at me. "She looks Slavic with those wide cheekbones."

"I sat Shiva for my grandmother," I said defensively. "Grandpa explained that we sit Shiva to tell jokes and cheer each other up over our grief. Grandma would have enjoyed the party."

"Our uncle's Shiva was very sad," Danielle said. "Nobody said goodbye. And you couldn't wear leather."

"Why not leather?" I asked.

Mimi, serving pumpkin chiffon pie, said, amused, "Even without an accent, Rachel acts Southern. What does she know about being Jewish?"

"Well, I'm not hung up about it," I shot back.

"Whaddya mean by that?"

"Nothing." Smiling, I accepted a slice of pie.

"Ooh, Rachel," Ambar scolded me kiddingly.

"Would anyone like more pie?" Olivia said hastily and turned to her husband. "Please, Ambar, no dirty limericks after dinner."

He nodded, his lips forming a small smile, making me wonder about “typical” Indian biologists who tell dirty jokes.

“Whaddya mean, hung up about it?” Mimi asked me, attacking her pie.

“An identity problem.”

“Problem, schmproblem,” she mumbled, mouth full of meringue. “Eight times Neal and I visited Israel. I’m a big shot at Hadassah. I want people should know I’m Jewish so our faith doesn’t die out.”

Neal, sugaring his coffee, said, “Mimi’s so Jewish, I sometimes feel that I’ve abandoned my faith and joined the Philistines.”

“Please pass the cream,” I said with my most Waspish tone.

The conversation fragmented over clinking spoons and a circulating plate of chocolates--Lady Godiva’s? Neal and Ambar debated biology, Danielle tended her son, Olivia and Mimi whispered importantly.

Left alone, I reflected on what being Jewish means. Dietary or religious laws? Attending synagogue? Dating Jewish men? I don’t even know many Jews. All I had were nostalgic Jewish memories: laughing at Cousin Arnie’s bar mitzvah when the Klezmer band played, “Heim Afen the Range.” Grandma praying Friday nights over lighted Menorah candles. And clinging to my ancestors’ belief in Yahweh... Yet, at family weddings and bar mitzvahs, I sometimes have the uneasy feeling of “them” instead of “us.”

Ruefully I thought of my “typically Jewish” mother in Queens: tight pastel pantsuits with gold studs, her formerly black hair dyed orangy-red, her apartment adorned with gilded cupids.

“You call yourself Jewish?” she’d sneered after I moved to New York. “You sound anti-Semitic! Don’t think I haven’t noticed how you feel about my home and my friends. Just because I was too sick with T.B. to raise you...”

“Mother, how can I be Jewish and anti-Semitic?”

“Oh, don’t be such a snob. It wouldn’t kill you to act Jewish once in a while.”

“For God’s sakes, what does that mean? Swagger like Aunt Polly with her mink coat? Dismiss anyone who isn’t Jewish--like my stepfather does?”

Well, my mother’s taste was appalling but at least she was honest--unlike Mimi. Why hadn’t I recognized this virtue?

Danielle lifted her son from the high chair and held him close to her body, his tiny arms reaching around her neck, his head resting sleepily on her shoulder. If mother had been as affectionate with me during her infrequent visits from the sanitarium, I might have appreciated the honesty more.

“Reminiscing?” Danielle asked me softly.

“The dinner brought back memories.”

She sighed. “I know. I...don’t think about being Jewish until I visit Mimi.”

The party soon ended and we scrambled for the foyer to struggle with coats, boots, and scarves. Outside, riding the bus back to my tenement apartment, I

thought how dangerous it could be, fiercely preserving one's identity until it fossilized into labels, accusations, and hatreds--separating "them" from "us," the melting pot stirred to boiling over.

This morning, after breakfast, Olivia called to ask if I'd enjoyed the party.

"I hope Mimi wasn't upset by my saying she was hung up about being Jewish."

"Heavens, no. She's concerned about not appearing snobbish because of her background. Another Jewish friend told me that her behavior got on his nerves. But I can't be objective. To me, she's simply a lovable, typically Jewish woman."

"Oh, she's Jewish, all right," I said, and laughed. "In fact, I'd say she's developed it into an art."

Echoes of Paradise

The only place she knew was warm, dark, serene. She had no fears, no hopes nor disappointments, no disturbing thoughts. Suspended in the womb, she was neither awake nor asleep; as her brain developed, she floated in and out of consciousness, soothed by her mother's heartbeat. The steady rhythmical pumping became familiar and natural: a throbbing lullaby affirming the permanence of her peaceful world. Later, she felt the cushioned movements of her mother's body, but that occasionally bumpy ride also became familiar and natural. Slowly she grew bigger. When she became aware of appendages, she sucked a thumb or kicked her legs. Convinced of eternal protection, she felt utterly secure in her nine-month paradise.

Then, one morning, she was rudely wrenched from that idyllic place. She screwed up her face in protest, but she was as helpless as someone caught up in a tidal wave and whirled toward an unknown destination. She was heaved down, down, down in what seemed an endless journey until hands gripped her head and eased her out into a harsh scene of blinding lights and abrupt movements, her undeveloped eyesight causing her to shut her eyes tightly against the glare. As air rushed into her lungs, she screamed her protest, while the nurse smiled, commenting, "What a lovely baby!" and the doctor cut the cord that had anchored her to that other tranquil world. She continued wailing her complaint. Finally, wrapped in a soft warm blanket she quieted, and was placed beside the smiling face of her mother.

"What will you call her?" the nurse said, smoothing the blanket.

"Sarah," the mother said. Tentatively she touched the baby's cheek. "Daniel and I want to name her after my mother whom we adored. She...passed away last year from cancer...only fifty-six. She taught the Torah and encouraged me to teach and attend synagogue, which is how I met my husband."

The nurse nodded in sympathy. "Well, Mrs. Rothberg, you have a fine, healthy baby. You'll be able to take her home soon."

"Yes, soon," the mother said, her face suffused by a joyful smile.

Sarah heard the odd sounds, muffled since her inner ears were still filled with liquid. After her isolation in the womb, a barrage of experiences suddenly confronted

her. Such difficult decisions hadn't existed before, and she yearned to return to her former Eden. She began to cry.

"It's all right, Eva said soothingly. She stroked the flushed face of her first-born. "Oh, Sarah, my beautiful baby. I love you very much."

The soft hand stroking Sarah engulfed her, comforting her like the amniotic fluid sloshing against that blissful place from which she'd emerged. For the first time since birth, she felt safe. Although blurry in appearance, her mother seemed protective, as Sarah had felt protected in that other place.

Eva snuggled close. Reassured by the warmth, Sarah lay calmly during these pleasant happenings, while her mother described the Westchester nursery.

By the time they left New York Hospital, Sarah still felt reassured, wrapped snugly in the blanket and held against her mother's body as they walked to Sarah's bespectacled father, his beard tinged with gray, waiting with a wide grin beside the Mercedes.

Her mother, swathed in woolen cape against the April chill, rocked her, whispering, "My precious one."

"She's so...fragile." Daniel gingerly uncovered the blanket to touch again his first child, who burst into tears. "Was it something I said?" he tried to joke, his narrow forehead creasing in a worried frown.

"She might be hungry." Eva smiled at her tiny, puckered duplicate. "Hush, hush, darling, we'll be home in a few minutes."

Comforted by her mother rocking her, Sarah enjoyed the speeding car that reminded her of those bumpy rides in that other place.

But in the Tudor-style house behind the tall, wrought-iron fence, before she could adjust to the pink nursery upstairs with its polka-dot curtains and huge, stuffed panda, voracious hunger gnawed at her insides; she felt intense gas pains and more hunger, abetted by loneliness until her mother picked her up and fed her the bottle, changed her diaper, or simply held and rocked her. At such times Sarah vaguely remembered her former peace when no arduous trials had faced her, and a yearning washed over her. She cried her grief until comforted by her mother's tender embrace.

A month later, she began recognizing Eva's dark eyes and black curls, the silver Star of David hanging against the crisp white blouse. Every day Sarah grew stronger. She began reaching toward the mobile angels dangling provocatively above her crib, hung there because her father, pious but not orthodox, had thought moving objects might hone a child's intelligence. Sarah stared, fascinated, at the swaying angels, though their cleverly eluding her grasp frustrated her. She felt unprepared for this new world fraught with unexpected danger, like the irritating object buzzing around her cheek that bit her. Her chubby arms waved in defense, but the fly, too, eluded her grasp.

Learning to stand and walk, she decided she liked this exciting activity. Now, finally, she could climb onto a chair and reach things; delicious, gooey things like the strawberry jam her mother had forgotten on the butcher block kitchen counter. Licking the jar, she then wiped her sticky hands on her cotton jumper and watched,

pleased, as the white metamorphosed into a pretty pink. She happily spent her time opening and closing doors and drawers, pushing and pulling everything within her grasp. Her new world seemed filled with exotic, mysterious things--wall plates from Israel, the mantel's candle menorah, the door jamb's metal mezzuzah--that whenever possible she stuck into her mouth for thorough inspection. She explored her toys by pulling off limbs or examining the stuffing.

One afternoon, spotting shredded panda on the white living room carpet, her mother shook her head and said, "Oh, that Sarah loves to rip up every toy we give her."

"She's investigating because she wants to understand," Daniel said from behind his paper-strewn desk. "I remember growing up in San Francisco, my father explaining the books in his synagogue office."

"Maybe our darling will grow up to be a lawyer, like her daddy," Eva replied, "or perhaps a rabbi like her granddaddy." She laughed. "That is, if the school is left intact."

Sarah, looking up from beside the tufted white sofa, clapped her hands and joined the laughter. She loved to laugh because the happy feeling seemed to recreate that sense of well-being she'd felt before, though memories of that other place had faded into fragmented sensations of comfort and security.

Learning to talk, though, pleased her most of all. Sarah loved words, loved to roll them on her tongue. "Ma-ma, ma-ma, ma-ma," she repeated to herself in the backyard playpen under the spreading oak. "Da-da, da-da." After awhile she discovered that words could be useful weapons against danger in these unpredictable surroundings. Sometimes at night, when she lay in bed and a thunderstorm rumbled its fierce warning, fluttering the polka-dot curtains with fright, Sarah would say aloud, "Mama," and suddenly, without any effort, she conjured up the image of her mother nearby, smiling and hugging her, so that the words themselves became substitutes for desires. Intrigued by this new concept, she repeated new words she'd learned, conjuring up, like magic, the images that satisfied her wishes: milk, potty, tv.

But it seemed that no matter how thoroughly Sarah investigated, her new world kept surprising her, like the Sunday her father brought home a puppy. Curious, she eyed the black ball of fur raising its front paws as high as possible against his new master's trousers.

In the parqueted foyer, her father stooped to pet the puppy. "Sarah, honey, come get acquainted with your birthday gift."

She reached over to touch it, but it suddenly leaped at her, stuck out its tongue, and licked her cheek. It was pleasant, not a stinging experience as the fly had been. She smiled, then giggled, rolling onto the carpet as the pink tongue insisted on licking her nose and ears.

"Well, I bet you two will become great friends," her father said, laughing.

Sarah and Mr. Sam did become great friends; she confided all her thoughts in the pup who followed her from room to room, snuggling under her chair during meals in the formal dining room, and rarely straying from her side. Unlike that other place, this world she'd been thrust into offered tantalizing pleasures, and yet, despite her

earnest explorations, she felt she'd never comprehend it. Her hopes rose and fell. She developed unpleasant fears, especially after being scolded for reasons she couldn't fathom, like her running past the manicured lawn and opened gate to inspect an old, abandoned house across the road.

"Sarah, never leave without telling me!" her mother shouted, face contorted with worry. "You must obey us or you'll be killed by a passing car!"

Despite her mother hugging her to comfort her tears, the scolding had terrorized Sarah. Afterwards, in her quilted bed, she couldn't nap, but stared past the curtains, fearful that for unintentional naughty behavior, her parents might abandon her, like that old house. Then, overwhelmed by despair, she fleetingly recalled her former home, not the place itself but the residual sensations: how cozy and serene she'd felt without these tormenting problems, and that yearning she'd had at birth returned, though she couldn't define it.

When school started, her mother drove her to the columned brick building a mile distant. In the small classroom, surrounded by curious children, Eva bent to smooth the black shiny hair, and said with a hug, "You'll be in good hands here, darling. I'll see you later."

Sarah felt shy at first but she soon made friends. She enjoyed playing with them and the ball of fur that had ripened into a basset hound who growled if strangers approached her. In her back yard, she'd pulled at Mr. Sam's droopy ears, and he shook his head goodnaturedly under the oak. Mr. Sam let her do anything she wanted; he kept following her and listening attentively to her conversation. Finally, Eva forced him to stay home when Sarah was old enough to catch the bus to school.

By now, Sarah enjoyed her familiar environment, the memory of her former home totally vanished. But during those moments when anxiety overwhelmed her, like the time her father broke his leg skiing on vacation in Colorado and Sarah realized with a shock her parents' vulnerabilities, she again felt that inexpressible yearning she couldn't tell anyone, not even herself, because after so much time elapsing, she'd forgotten exactly what the yearning was.

Which is perhaps why, when her parents discussed something called "God," their tone hushed and reverent as they celebrated the Passover seder, Sarah sensed they must be referring to that yearning she'd kept to herself for so long after leaving her former paradise. Afterwards, in her bed she whispered, "God," and conjured up the recent scene of her parents with their contented smiles. "God," Sarah repeated, her imagination focused intently on her parents' happy expressions, and she, too, felt happy. Once more, as in her remote beginning, she felt no fears, no disappointments, no disturbing thoughts.

Later, much later when a teenager, she had not even a trace of remembrance of the warm blissful place that had been her first home. She had only the word, "God," which seemed to satisfy that inexpressible yearning, bringing her a sense of peace, though she never knew why.

Dinner in Harlem, 1965

During the tumultuous sixties, when America's cities raged from race riots and the majority still refused to accept the Constitution's guarantee that all Americans were created equal, no white person ventured north of 90th Street without urgent business. Yet, here we were, Roger and I, in our twenties, our clothes damp in the July heat, climbing a brownstone stoop to meet his gay roommate's black relatives in Harlem.

As Roger pressed the lobby buzzer, I daubed at my moist face, and checked my blue silk dress, coordinated with simulated pearls, white heels, and matching shoulder bag. Nervously I scanned the overflowing garbage cans with their pungent odor, the street vendors selling sausages reeking of fat, the shops blasting Hispanic music. Black men, wearing the popular pegged pants and oversized jackets, had eyed us as we hurried from the subway; black women, their hair fluffed into Afros, frowned at us as they pushed baby carriages or chatted. I heartily approved of equal rights, but I felt out of place here, and wondered how Roger had talked me into this possibly dangerous visit, despite our ten-year closeness since acting class.

Panting, we climbed four flights and found the apartment at the end of a hall, whose fading wallpaper and worn carpet testified to once-better times when a white landlord probably catered to white tenants.

Mrs. Williams smiled hesitantly as she opened the door. She was gray haired and petite, a floral scarf pinned to her simple black shift. She studied us for a moment, then said softly, "Come in, please. Chuck's running late with organ rehearsals. Apparently the minister's wife isn't feeling well. Chuck said to go ahead and eat and he'll be here as soon as possible."

Although from North Carolina, Chuck's aunt had no Southern accent. I wondered why, since I'd exterminated mine after determined practice. Surprised, I followed her into the living room where Roger and I scanned the black faces and waited awkwardly, watching the whirring bureau fan flutter curtains at an open window.

"Sit down, please," Mrs. Williams said. "The sofa is very comfortable."

We sat gingerly on the dark tufted sofa while the family, filling armchairs and a hassock, inspected us.

Mrs. Williams introduced us. "This is Carrie Roth and her friend Roger Mainz." Her slender arm waved at her slightly-built husband, Melvin, wearing a pinstriped suit, like Roger's, and huddling on a hassock. Mopping his face with an enormous handkerchief, Melvin smiled with even white teeth, his gaze skimming over us but never quite alighting. She next introduced her young niece, Isabel, who startled me with her white skin and black features.

"Hi," Isabel said shyly and turned toward her aunt.

Mrs. Williams then introduced her cousin Hammond, husky and fortyish. He pulled his eagle-adorned beret down over his forehead and stared at us rudely.

"So these are Chuck's friends," Hammond said finally, leaning toward us. "That's unusual. Fact is, you're the first white people ever stepped foot here."

"Now, Hammond, don't hound our guests," Mrs. Williams said, her gaze darting from Hammond to us as she anxiously awaited our reaction. She fussed with her scarf, repinning it against the shift, and then smiled at me and Roger. "I have everything ready for dinner. I hope you like pot roast."

"Very much, I replied.

"Chuck mentioned you're an actress?"

Not wanting to deepen Hammond's animosity as he watched us, I replied modestly, "Just summer stock and an off-off-Broadway production after getting my drama degree. I earn my living as a secretary."

Mrs. Williams nodded, and turned to Roger. "And I understand that you represent artists now."

"Yes." Pausing, he smoothed his blond crewcut and leaned his slim body protectively against me, as if to indicate to Hammond that we were a couple. I let him but I assumed that the family must have known that Chuck was gay.

"I represent an excellent Cape Cod artist," Roger continued, and paused again, his hazel eyes scanning a chest of drawers crowded with photographs, as if trying to think of something to say.

Hammond shifted his beret. "Would you handle a black artist?"

"Hammond!" Mrs. Williams swerved to see our reaction, anxious not to make a bad impression upon her white guests.

"I just asked a question," he said and grinned at me good-naturedly.

Reassured that his antagonism was mellowing, I grinned back. "I'm sure Roger would if the person had talent."

Hammond nodded and paused in the embarrassed silence filling the room. He pointed to his cousin, Isabel. "See, her skin is whiter than yours, but she's still considered black."

"I'm tanned from the beach," I said, while Roger shifted uncomfortably. His only contact with black people was Chuck, his handsome mulatto lover whom he'd met last year in Central Park.

Hammond frowned. "Why is it that white folks can't stand black folks, but they torture themselves under a burning sun to get as black as possible."

"Please stop badgering our guests," Mrs. Williams said, looking distressed. Her brows shot up, her mouth quivered. "We want this to be a pleasant evening."

"I don't mind," I said, hoping to soothe her fears of having her guests harassed by a relative. "He's right."

Hammond, smiling, leaned toward me conspiratorially. "I belong to a militant group. Maybe you've heard of us? It's different from Martin Luther King's. We

believe in fighting for our rights, or we'll never get anything. Whitey will take it all."

"I've never agreed to laws denying black people's rights," I said, looking him in the eye. "Not all white people are the same."

Roger pinched my arm to stop talking, but I waited eagerly for Hammond's response so we could continue the discussion. I felt the urge to reassure him that Roger and I were different from the usual "Whitey."

Hammond scowled, his eyes narrowing to slits. "It's nobody's fault, is that what you're saying?"

"Of course not! As a matter of fact, I agree you have to fight for your rights, but—"

"Oh, you agree." He smiled then, his face relaxed.

The Williamses smiled too, probably with relief that the tension was easing.

"But I don't believe in violence," I said, ignoring Roger pinching my hand. "I feel that King will achieve his goals through non-violence."

"Goals being equal rights for all Americans," Hammond said, studying me.

"Yes."

"Then, tell me something, Carrie, would you marry a black man?"

"No," I said promptly.

The room tightened with fresh tension. Mrs. Williams drew back and rummaged in a handbag. Her husband patted her shoulder and whispered to her. She nodded.

Hammond leaned forward, eyes blazing. "I thought so! Carrie, you're just as prejudiced as other whites!"

"Everyone has prejudices, including you," I said, strangely calm. "The reason I wouldn't marry a black man is because marriage is challenging enough, plus I'm Jewish. I wouldn't want additional trouble."

There was a heavy, strained silence. Mrs. Williams gazed in embarrassment at the cabbage-rose carpet. Her husband gazed at the window with its shaft of early pink sunset. Isabel studied her scarlet nails.

Hammond's angry face filled me with pain. I tried to imagine his feelings at being a second-class citizen in his own country, but I could never grasp the depth of it. Trying to reassure Mrs. Williams, I said, softly, "It's okay," and turned to Hammond. "When you see a woman, you're judging her from your black perspective. When I see a man, I judge him from my white perspective. We can only judge others' beauty by what we like in ourselves."

Hammond paused a moment, then said, "Well, I've got to hand it to you. You're honest."

"I talk to you as I talk to everyone."

He nodded and smiled.

I smiled back, and felt a pleasant warmth as if being with friends. Roger smiled with relief beside me.

Suddenly Hammond's voice dropped to a pleading tone. "Carrie, how did the Jews survive with everybody else against them?"

Touched by his sudden struggle to understand his plight, I said earnestly, "You're forgetting that we've had five thousand years of practice! You've had only a few hundred. After a few more generations, a conversation like this might never happen because black people will be completely integrated into society."

"We don't want to wait that long," Hammond said. "We want integration now!"

"I don't blame you. But I want to explain something. In Virginia where I was raised, the biggest fear a white man had was that his daughter would marry a black man. They worried themselves sick about it. But don't you see, that's the worst thing that could happen to black people, too, for a very different reason. If black people, who are a minority, began marrying white people, after several generations they'd disappear! So from a practical point of view, the best way for white people to rid America of black people is to marry them."

The family burst into laughter, the tension vanishing.

Hammond finally looked up, took off his beret and handed it to me. "Try it on. I want to see you wear it."

I rose and tried on the hat. It hung over one eye, like the actress Veronica Lake. "It's too big."

"You look pretty—for a white woman," Hammond said, grinning.

Grinning back, I handed him the hat. "Thanks, I'll accept that as a militant compliment."

Mrs. Williams sighed and rose, determined to change the subject. "Carrie, would you and Roger like to see pictures of Chuck?"

At our nod, she led us to the photographs, where Chuck ranged in age from baby-hood, to twelve playing a piano, and, at thirty, smiling beside Roger under a spreading oak.

"I remember that one," Roger said, caressing the leather frame. "It was soon after we met."

"Chuck spoke highly of both of you," Mrs. Williams said, gently touching Roger's arm. She quickly withdrew it.

"I heard Chuck play Bach at St. Anselmo's," I said. "He should be playing in concert halls rather than churches."

She smiled. "We think he's brilliant. But, of course, that's just our opinion." She led us to a bureau near an open door, and pointed out Hammond's baby picture. A pudgy diapered fellow stared at us with huge inquiring eyes, obviously alert and intelligent.

"He's so cute! But where's his beret?"

Hammond laughed. "Yeah, that came later, baby."

Another photograph showed a young black man scowling in his Second World War II army uniform, angry enough to split the picture. And yet, Hammond could be reasonable with a sense of humor. I shuddered at the harsh indignities that had transformed a confident child into a bundle of hostility.

During the pause, Mrs. Williams said gently, "Let's have dinner."

Amidst savory aromas emanating from the oven, we gathered at a table with spotless linen cloth, food-heaped platters, and silver candelsticks. A center bowl held floating roses exuding sweetness.

"My grandparents loved roses," I told Mrs. Williams who passed the pot roast. "We grew them on our porch trellises."

"We did, too, down in North Carolina," Melvin said suddenly, pouring gravy onto his mashed potatoes. "My father was a wonderful gardener."

"So was my grandfather," I said. "He owned a clothing store near the waterfront. Grandpa worked hard at his sewing machine while Grandma sold merchandise, but early mornings and evenings he worked in our yard. Every square inch was covered with flowers, fruit, or vegetables."

"My grandfather could do just about anything," Isabel said, passing salad. "Fixed pipes, plumbing, electrical wires. He had to because no white men would fix the place."

I nodded sympathetically, glad they could talk freely without apology or embarrassment.

"Have more pot roast, Carrie," Mrs. Williams said, pointing at the remaining slices. "Later, we'll have lemon meringue pie."

"Thanks, but I'd better save room for the pie."

"But you know, talent must run in a family," Hammond said, resuming our previous conversation. "I became a musician playing the sax. Before retiring, Flora taught music appreciation in a black high school and Melvin was the principal. And Isabel here..." He turned toward her and affectionately patted her arm, "she wants to sing professionally. She'll make it, too. She's got a beautiful voice."

"Oh, Uncle Hammond, I don't know—"

"Don't you doubt yourself! You'll make us all proud someday."

She beamed at him.

"Can we have a concert after dinner?" I said eagerly.

"Looks like you'll have to come back for another visit," Mrs. Williams said with a shy smile.

"We will," I said, smiling back, and continued chatting with this interesting American family while eating their delicious Sunday meal.

But I never saw them again. Many opportunities are lost by accepting a society's customs.

EL

Compressed in a grapefruit-sized singularity, EL waited in darkness. Suddenly an explosion hurtled the embryo in all directions, stretching space within it so that it began creating itself, as a fetus creates itself by multiplying cells. EL's fierce atomic force fused its murky soup of particles to form working parts: heavier particles, gasses, and dust. And from these working parts came EL's organ-like structures, twirling galaxies of stars and planets that glowed from gamma rays, x-rays, and infrared, illuminating a universe that resembled EL's past existence before being sucked back into that dense place from whence it started, only to burst forth anew, the same yet different. These were the cycles of EL's births, deaths, and rebirths.

But now, in this particular space-time, in a particular solar system in an arm of a spiral galaxy, Earth's swirling gasses condensed and spun around a sun, past meteorites, dust storms, and solar winds, attracting EL's attention.

The vibrant Earth excited with its boiling center and smoky crust cooling with rain. Ah, it was alive, even as EL! Yet, something was missing. EL felt no peace, for it desired that which has no name.

Then, probing the universe with its intelligence, electromagnetic waves, EL reflected with sightless eyes upon itself, as if gazing at a mirror, and discovered its utter aloneness.

Agitated, its entire being shook, inflating itself into a vast entity, its organs ever farther apart as it continued expanding. But mere physical growth failed to satisfy, and EL determined to create something like itself, though it knew not how.

Soon, it rejoiced at the chemical compounds mixing in the Earth's warm ponds that engendered one-celled animals--other living beings! Perhaps now it might have something with whom to communicate. EL sent its radiant energy toward the Earth to analyze these marvelous bacteria, loops of DNA in jelly-like cytoplasm, engulfing other tiny creatures to sustain energy, their bodies dividing to reproduce more miniatures. But in their struggle to survive, they ignored EL as if it didn't exist. Finally, each floated, lifeless, to the pond floor, recycling the planet even as EL would eventually recycle itself by contracting back into that dark place of its birth.

Then, EL experienced a silent weeping at its failure. Alone for eternity! Hearing no sound other than one's own... Weeping by oneself, dreaming by oneself, perhaps doubting one's very existence for lack of verification. Why exist if one's ignorance must revolve solely around oneself?

Now EL's despair rippled throughout itself, and it wondered if it would ever find another living being with whom its intelligence could exchange information: similar traits which would reassure, differences which would establish its identity amongst others of its kind. For many eons, EL observed the indifferent creatures, and it longed for kinship, filling with anguish at its dilemma of uniqueness.

Again probing the universe with its radiant energy, EL discovered it must first appreciate being alive, so it turned its attention toward the Earth with its newly-blue atmosphere, green meadows lush with wild flowers and fruit-laden trees, majestic snow-capped mountains, glittering lakes, and the shimmering aurora borealis.

This time, EL's silent weeping arose from awe; it had experienced beauty within itself.

For billions of years, EL spent its youth exulting in pleasure, creating innumerable species of living beings, and it pondered no more on its early quest. But near the start of EL's maturity, the pleasures jaded, replaced by renewed loneliness. EL yearned again to share with another of its kind.

Probing the universe, EL learned that its image was changing. Youth had conveyed the impression that time stalled during the past billions of years. Instead, those years now appeared as fleeting as snowflakes, and EL realized that in order to find another of its kind, it must first strive to understand itself.

With renewed vigor it explored its creations, reluctantly eliminating species in order to select those who might someday communicate with it, but none revealed EL's essence. Finally, EL started aging, its anguish deepened at its seemingly-impossible task and never-ending solitude. Was its quest merely a pursuit of shadows? It reminded itself that, however arduous the task, the labor would prove worthy.

When mankind unexpectedly evolved from the apparently fruitless primates, EL experienced an inexplicable pull toward these brutish creatures who gathered, grunting, in their caves, fashioning tools and burying their dead—intelligence and feelings that might someday resemble EL's! Encouraged, it soon developed primitive man's DNA to construct within the brain an advanced neuron wiring plied by electrical impulses; perhaps, someday, men might perceive their creator.

But early men, becoming conscious of the Unseen Presence, at first cowered in terror in their caves. Then, wearing lion skins, they gathered about a roaring campfire and with outcries of supplication bore a child with slit throat to the pyre, roasting it like a wild boar turning on a spit, and they chanted magic spells to ward off danger to their tribe as they partook of the hideous feast.

"Oh, Great Lion God, keep us safe, our women fertile, and our caves warm and secure. See how we appease Thee with our finest offering. Do not destroy us for we are Thy friend and seek to merge with Thy spirit."

Then EL knew its ugliness by its creation's ugliness, knew its cruelty by its creation's cruelty, and experienced grief.

For countless millennia EL felt a silent weeping for its unspeakable creations. Yet, anxious to learn the extent of its possibilities, it again probed the universe with its electromagnetic waves and learned that each attribute of itself contained an opposite. Thus, the very truth it sought might also expose the distressful. For the first time EL experienced dread at uncovering the unacceptable, its own evils.

Still, its yearning to create others of its kind forced it to develop man's intelligence, its only source of hope. Soon, EL glimpsed unendurable, yet fascinating aspects of itself. Its hairy creations choked each other without remorse, yet tenderly placed flowers on a loved one's grave and drew figures on cave walls to hunt again the animals that climaxed their lives, feebly imitating their creator.

Now, EL determined to evolve in these creatures a perception that would reveal itself. Still failing, EL learned from its intelligence that it must first dissolve the fear of unpleasant truths about itself in order to reawaken that joy of creating that transcends good and evil.

Its will revitalized, EL encouraged specific DNA to arise within its animal creations. On Earth, child-like humans with loincloths, drums, and spears grappled with the Unseen Presence. Tribal priests finding no answers, even as EL had not reached the ultimate truth of itself, tried placating their creator with adoration, leading with outstretched arms for EL to hear their cries and calm their fears.

"Oh, Great Sky Spirit, we beg you to send rain to our parched village so that our crops may grow and our tribe not starve. Do not avert your smile and abandon us to catastrophe. Look upon us as your children, submissive to your commands, only do not turn your face from us, for without your protection we perish."

EL filled with love for these innocent creatures who needed it as children need parents, though it still could not communicate with them, its space-time being too vast for man to grasp. Yet, it strove to enlighten its creations, hoping that one day they might communicate.

Then with feelings akin to pity, EL perceived its creatures humbly erecting altars and offering grain: that fruit of their harvest that they'd strained under a burning sun and with aching limbs to produce so that EL would not harm them. And painting their faces to please EL, they bared their bodies and encircled the village fire, chanting mysterious words to soothe EL, and raised their eyes toward the starry sky as though EL dwelt there. To ease their frustrations, they later described EL in "holy" books, claiming that EL wrote them.

Grieved at man's inability to understand the Unseen Presence, EL longed to receive what man could not give, nor could man receive what EL longed to give--shocking EL at realizing its own limitations, even as the universe, though lacking boundaries, is limited in space-time.

Yet EL stubbornly pursued its evolutionary goal. Over thousands of years, while

civilizations rose and fell, EL glimpsed further contradictions within itself--armies clashing while philosophers, scientists, and artists grappled with truth, struggling, like EL, to comprehend the brain's complexity.

Despite these accomplishments, EL re-experienced that silent weeping. "Will I ever discover another, such as I, who can share my solitary process of becoming?"

Then there emerged from man fascinating revelations of EL. From cathedrals came intricate music and EL glimpsed its own harmony of stars whirling in orbits through galaxies studded like diamonds, the rhythm of billions of suns pumping radiation through itself like multiple hearts to feed EL's enormous intelligence--a gigantic orchestration of all those beats, tempos, and cadences arising from its working parts. On earth, painters revealed the brilliant colors of this multi-hued energy, scarlet, cobalt, aquamarine; playwrights revealed EL's own dramatic truths; and astronomers described structures that duplicated patterns in ever-larger structures to form the expanding universe that was EL.

Grasping then its delicately-balanced unity, EL finally understood itself within man's awakening intelligence, and it knew peace.

The Visitor

Reprinted from *Of Unicorns & Space Stations* (Summer 1996)

Above the Mozart flute quartet, Lillie heard a rapping at her door. She turned off the parlor radio nearby and listened intently, her newspaper sliding to the carpet.

The rapping was louder, insistent. Rising slowly because of arthritis in her knee joints, she straightened her wool cardigan, grasped the cane leaning against the wing chair, and walked to the foyer. He probably waited outside in the hallway, just like in her dream. Trembling, she peered through the peephole.

Grayish dust surrounded the tall, gaunt visitor, like a cloud. He wore a long black cape, his somber face shadowed by a wide-brimmed black hat. He waited, as if he knew she was studying him, until she unlatched the door.

"Lillie, it's time," he said.

"I...I'm not ready." She frantically scanned the apartment. "I have things to do, packing..."

"You won't need to pack," he said gently.

"I...suppose not..."

"Then, let's be on our way." He motioned for her to follow him.

"But I should call my daughter Vivian in Brighton Beach! And Peter, my grandson, will worry if he doesn't hear from me. The refrigerator needs cleaning out or the food will smell."

The visitor smiled. "Excuses, Lillie, excuses."

"Yes..." She turned about for a fleeting glance at her apartment, and for a moment studied her image in the antique hat rack mirror. She was ninety-five, surely time to leave. The white plaits wound around her head were wispy, her face deeply wrinkled, the flesh sagged on her shriveled arms. Her family would grieve, but they'd accept her death because of her age.

Yet, she resented going. Despite arthritis, she read voraciously--history, politics, novels; took courses last year at The New School on philosophy and modern literature, and anticipated next year's courses on astronomy and art. She'd made lovely friends; the teachers said she was their oldest student! In addition, she cooked, washed dishes, and swept, although a maid cleaned once a week.

"I'll miss my apartment," she said. "It's rent-controlled but large with beautiful views. And I'll miss Mr. Blumberg, the deli owner, and Mario's fruit and vegetable market. Do you know that for fifty years I've dealt with the merchants in this area?"

"Lillie, we must leave."

She nodded, and continued. "After I'd run away from Tennessee to become an actress in New York, I met my first husband, dear Willie, while working in Vaudeville. We just loved entertaining people! Then, he died during the Depression. I was determined to support my little Vivian so I worked as a maid, although my boss treated me as if I were poor white trash, when my daddy had owned the biggest pharmacy in Beauford. And then, the Good Lord sent a miracle, my second husband, who taught history and persuaded me to attend college and teach grammar school, but then poor Hank died, too, so I stayed on in our nice apartment. It's too hard to readjust again, now that I've gotten used to everything, all my nice things in their proper place..."

"It's difficult, but necessary," the visitor said. "However, we want your experience to be joyful. Would you feel better if we had some coffee before departing?"

She smiled, relieved by the delay, and ushered him inside. Walking slowly with her cane, she led him to the kitchen with its checkered linoleum, walnut cabinets, and dotted Swiss cafe curtains billowing in the breeze from an open window.

"I'll make fresh coffee," she said. "I had it ground yesterday at the supermarket." She washed the percolator and measured fresh tablespoons. "Do have a seat. You look uncomfortable, standing there, waiting."

The visitor removed his cape and draped it over the back of a chair. Wearing a long-sleeved black shirt with black tie, the hat resting on a nearby chair, he sat, gazing at the bridge and East River sixteen stories below, glinting in the fall sunshine.

"It's a nice view," he said politely.

"I just love it!" Lillie said, pouring two large mugs of coffee in the room filled with the tangy aroma. She paused. "Milk and sugar?"

His thin lips curved in a smile. "Black, please."

After serving him the coffee, she took the opposite chair, and spooned sugar from the tiger-shaped bowl bought at a carnival with her grandson. She turned to wince at the pain in her knees, and glanced back at the visitor sipping coffee.

"How about an oatmeal raisin muffin? I baked it this morning."

He shook his head. "Normally I don't eat or drink; I'm just being sociable. I want our future guests eager to join me."

Lillie's trembling hand groped for the loose hair pin to anchor a plait. "It must be difficult...having a task like yours."

"Not really. The elderly look forward to leaving. It ends all pain, of course."

"That might be comforting..." Lillie said, and sipped coffee. Her knees throbbed. Too bad she'd forgotten to take aspirin. She gritted her teeth to avoid exposing her pain and thereby proving she should leave. The thought of leaving was more painful than arthritis! Never again to see Central Park, hear a classical concert,

or read a good book... Silently they stared past the cafe curtains as a barge floated past the apartment building. A trawler tootled its whistle, making Lillie shiver.

She exclaimed, "Despite my age, I'm very busy! I write skits for the senior center, visit hospital patients, and wrap toys for needy children. I'm out every day! Just because I'm old doesn't mean I've stopped living. I still see pretty well with reading glasses and hear all right."

"And the pain in your knees?" the visitor said gently.

Lillie shrugged. "It's no problem if I take aspirin." She leaned toward him conspiratorially. "To tell the truth, I've so much to think about, I forgot it this morning. Otherwise, it hardly hurts." She gazed at the distant river. "Sometimes, I just sit here like this, drinking coffee and remembering my two husbands. Good men, both of them."

The visitor sighed. "Yes, I know."

She turned toward him. "How have they been doing since... since..."

"Just fine," the visitor said, smiling.

"Do...they...miss me?"

"There's no reason to miss anyone. Understanding removes all yearning. The departed are wrapped in bliss, connected to the entire universe."

"Oh..." Lillie breathed, fascinated.

The visitor, smiling, rose and donned his black cape. "Well, it's time to go."

"Can't I tell you about my grandson?" She was enjoying the chat with someone, even the visitor. "Vivian married a nice Russian fellow who inherited a successful wine business. Their son, Peter, became a lawyer, real smart, published articles on real estate. His portrait's on the parlor mantel. He helped me hold onto this apartment when landlords tried forcing me out."

"Yes," the visitor said, and motioned for her to put away the coffee mugs and unplug the percolator.

"But Peter's son, poor Nicolai, who wants to be an artist, has AIDS." She turned away, eyes dampening. "I don't care what his sexual preference is, he's a good boy and needs his Granny Lil during this awful time, in and out of hospitals... I must be there to comfort him."

"Yet, it's time to go," the visitor said gently, fastening the clasp of his cape.

"Time to go... Lillie echoed. "I don't see why the rush. We have eternity to reach our destination!"

The visitor grinned with even white teeth, his good humor startling Lillie. "That's true. However, I must make other visits today."

"Can't you come back for me? I'd like to call my family before I leave."

His face creased.

She added hastily, "I won't tell Viv the truth. I'll just chat casually, so she won't suspect anything. I'll ask how she and Sergei are, what's happening with Peter and Nicolai."

The visitor hesitated. "Well, I suppose it can't harm, especially since you won't

be calling them anymore.”

“Thank you, you’re really very nice,” Lillie said and felt a warmth toward the visitor. He was kinder than one would imagine. She rose, wincing with pain, and dialed Brighton Beach on the wall phone. It rang several times and the answering machine responded.

“Hi! Viv here. At the sound of the beep, you know what to do. ‘Bye for now.”

“She’s probably shopping,” Lillie said. “I’ll try to reach Peter.” She dialed the number.

His secretary said, “I’m sorry, Mrs. Fletcher, he’s in court.”

“Well, I might call back later,” Lillie told her and next tried calling Nicolai but he was out, attending an art class. Leaving a message on his answering machine, she turned toward the visitor. “Oh, dear, I did so much want to talk with them.” Absentmindedly, she poured two more mugs of coffee. She sat down and motioned for him to join her.

Reluctantly he sat down. “My dear, you’re only postponing the inevitable, but I must say, your reluctance to leave is unusual for a person your age.”

Lillie nodded and sipped more coffee. Despite his remarks about his guests’ contentment, she’d miss her delicious coffee; the secret was adding salt before perking. She’d miss many things... She glanced about the kitchen. It seemed wasteful to abandon a happy life. She still had much to do! Peter’s wife was pregnant again-- after all these years. She’d appreciate having Granny Lil as a babysitter. And what about all the wonderful books she hadn’t read yet.

“Why do I have to leave?” she asked.

“Believe me,” the visitor drained his coffee mug with a flourish, “it’s all for a good purpose.”

“Well, it still doesn’t seem right...” Lillie gazed out the window. “To be given life and then have it taken from you.”

“But, my dear, all will be clear to you once you have passed over. That’s one of the joys of leaving Earth.”

“Will I see...God?”

“You will know everything,” he said, and stood.

Lillie hesitated. The possibility of knowing everything was enticing. Yet, Earth’s pleasures tugged at her heart: chatting with interesting strangers; seeing a sunset, enjoying peach yogurt, visiting museums...

The visitor frowned. “Lillie, we must go now.” He waved an arm and she suddenly felt very tired. Perhaps it was his trick to convince her to leave. Like intruding upon her dreams, so that she’d wake up sleepy, instead of alert, and begin to feel old and useless. Well, he was fooling himself if he thought she’d want to die!

She gazed through the window, pondering awhile, and rose, smiling despite the pain. “All right.”

The visitor looked at her with eyebrows raised in surprise, and then he nodded.

Picking up her cane, she followed him to the foyer. "You first," she said sweetly. "If you wish."

He opened the door and stepped into the swirling dust. Before he'd turned to see if she followed, she slammed the door shut, and leaned against it, trembling. She waited in the foyer, trying to catch her breath.

"Lillie!" the visitor shouted behind the closed door. "Soon, you'll want to leave and plead for me to return."

"I won't!" she shouted back. "I'm not ready!"

Resting awhile, she listened for sounds beyond. There was a humming and then stillness. She peered through the peephole; the red-carpeted hallway looked normal.

She sighed with relief. Maybe someday she'd want to leave, after losing all her relatives and interest in life, but that wouldn't happen for a good long while. She finally headed for the large bathroom with Nicolai's metal wall sculpture. Better take plenty of aspirin for that knee pain. She planned to live at least another two decades!

About Janet Kuypers

Janet Kuypers (June 22, 1970), graduated from the University of Illinois in Champaign/Urbana with a degree in News/Editorial Communications Journalism (with computer science engineering studies). She had the equivalent of a minor in photography, and specialized in creative writing.

In the early 1990s she worked as a portrait photographer for years and she was an acquaintance rape workshop facilitator, and edited two literary magazines.

Since she eventually got fed up with her job as the art director, webmaster and photographer of a few magazines for a publishing company in Chicago, Janet Kuypers, to relieve the stress:

(a) vents her angst musically with acoustic bands “Mom’s Favorite Vase”, “Weeds and Flowers” and “the Second Axing,” does music sampling and learns to play the guitar,

(b) writes so much that she irritates editors enough to get her published in books, magazines and on the internet over 6,300 times for writing or almost 1,900 times for art work in her professional career, and has been profiled in such magazines as Nation,

(c) turns that writing into performance art on her own and with musical groups like “Pointless Orchestra,” “5D/5D” and “Order From Chaos,”

(d) in order to make her feel like a big shot she publishes eight books:

Hope Chest in the Attic, *The Window*, *Close Cover Before Striking*, (*woman.*), *Autumn Reason*, *Contents Under Pressure*, *the Average Guy’s Guide (to Feminism)*, and eventually *Changing Gears* and *The Key To Believing*,

(e) gets tired of thinking about her own pathetic life, so runs a non-profit publishing company in her spare time, where she does internet work and book design, and edits a literary and art magazine so she can read and broadcast other people’s depressing stories,

(f) performs spoken word and music, both locally and across the country - in the spring of 1998 she embarked on her first national tour, with featured performances, among other venues, at the Albuquerque Spoken Word Festival during the National Poetry Slam; in 2003 she hosted and performed at a weekly poetry and music open mic, and starting in 2002 was a featured performance artist, doing quarterly performance art shows with readings, music and images,

or (g) all of the above.

When doing all of that wasn’t enough, she decided to quit her job and travel around the United States and Mexico, writing travel journals (*Changing Gears*) and writing her first major novel (*The Key To Believing*), before traveling to many European countries. She also dove back into intricate book design, web design and engineering, using video, sound clips, writings and e-books for anyone to enjoy on line.

Janet Kuypers



crazy

This dialogue is transcribed from repeated visits with a patient in Aaronsville Correctional Center in West Virginia. Madeline*, a thirty-six year old woman, was sentenced to life imprisonment after the brutal slaying of her boyfriend during sexual intercourse. According to police reports, Madeline sat with the remains of the man for three days after the murder until police arrived on the scene. They found her in the same room as the body, still coated with blood and malnourished. Three doctors studied her behavior for a total period of eight months, and the unanimous conclusion they reached was that Madeline was not of sound mind when she committed the act, which involved an ice pick, an oak board from the back of a chair, and eventually a chef's knife. Furthermore, she continued to show signs of both paranoia and delusions of grandeur long after the murder, swaying back and forth between the two, much like manic depression.

For three and a half years Madeline has stayed at the Aaronsville Correctional Center, and she has shown no signs of behavioral improvement. She stays in a room by herself, usually playing solitaire on her bed. She talks to herself regularly and out loud, usually in a slight Southern accent, although not in a very loud tone, according to surveillance videotape. Her family abandoned her after the murder. Occasionally she requests newspapers to read, but she is usually denied them. She never received visitors, until these sessions with myself.

The following excerpts are from dialogues I have had with her, although I am tempted to say that they are monologues. She wasn't very interested in speaking with me, rather, she was more interested in opening herself up to someone for the first time in years, someone who was willing to listen. At times I began to feel like a surrogate parent. I try not to think of what will happen when our sessions end.

* Madeline is not her real name.

I know they're **watching me**. They've got these stupid cameras everywhere - see, there's one behind the air vent there, **hi there**, and there's one where the window used to be. They've probably got them behind the mirrors, too. It wouldn't be so bad, I guess, I mean, there's not much for me to be doing in here anyway, but they **watch me dress**, too, I mean, they're watching me when I'm naked, now **what's that going to do to a person?** I don't know what they're watching for anyway, it's not like I can do anything in here. I eat everything with a spoon, I've never been **violent**, all I do, almost every day, is sit on this bed and play solitaire.

Solitaire is really relaxing, you know, and I think it keeps your brain alive, too. Most people think you can't win at solitaire, that the chances of winning are like two percent or something. But the thing is, you can win at this game like over half the time. I think that's the key, too - **knowing you can win** half the time. I mean, the last four rounds I played, I won twice. Now I'm not saying that's good or anything, like praise me because I won two rounds of solitaire, but it makes a point that as long as you know what you're doing

and you actually think about it, you can win. The odds are better.

I think **people just forget** to watch the cards. Half the time the reason why you lose is because you forget something so obvious. You're looking for a card through the deck and the whole time it's sitting on another pile, just waiting to be moved over, and the whole time you forget to move it. People just forget to pay attention. They got to pay attention.

You know, I'd like to see the news. I hate t.v., but I'd like to see what acts other people are doing. Anything like mine? Has anyone else **lost it** like me? You know, I'll bet my story wasn't even on the news for more than thirty seconds. And I'll bet the news person had a tone to their voice that was just like "oh, the poor crazy thing," like, "that's what happens when you lose it,"

But I want to see what's happening in the real world. I just wanna watch to see what, you know, the weather is like, even though I haven't seen the sun in a year or two. Or, or to hear sports scores. They won't let me have a t.v. in the room. I think they think that I'm gonna hot-wire it or something, like I'm going to try to **electrocute** the whole building with a stupid televi-

sion set. They let me have a lamp in the room, like I can't hurt someone with that, but no t.v. They won't even let me have a newspaper. What can a person do with a newspaper? Light in on fire or something? If I had matches or something. But it's like this: I've never been violent to nobody in all of the time I've been in here. I haven't laid a hand on a guard, even though they're tried too many times to lay a hand on me, and I haven't cause one single little problem in this whole damn place, and this is what I get - I don't even get a t.v. or a newspaper.

You know, I don't really have a Southern accent. See? Don't I sound different with my regular voice? I picked it up when I started sounding crazy. See, I'm not really crazy, I just know the kind of shit they do to you in prison. I think it's bad enough here, I would've had the shit kicked out of me, I'd've been sodomized before I knew what hit me. I think this voice makes me sound a little more strange. I'm actually from New York, but I mean, changing the voice a little just to save me from going to prison, well, I can do that. Here it's kind of nice, I don't have to deal with people that often, and all the crazy people around here think

I'm some sort of tough bitch because I mutilated someone who was **raping** me. Oh, you didn't hear that part of the story, did you? Those damn lawyers thought that **since I wasn't a virgin I must have been wanting him.** And he wasn't even my boyfriend - he was just some guy I knew, we'd go out every couple of weeks, and I never even slept with him before.

What a **fucked up** place. You see, I gotta think of it this way: I really had no choice but to do what I did. In a way it was self-defense, because I didn't want that little piece of shit to try to **do that to me,** I mean, what the Hell makes him think he can do that? Where does he get off trying to take me like that, like I'm some **butcher-shop piece of meat** he can buy and abuse or whatever? Well anyway, I know part of it all was self defense and all, but at the same time I know I flipped, but its because of, well shit that happened in my past. I never came from any rich family like you, I never even came from a family with a dad, and when you got all these boyfriends coming in and **hit - ting you** or **touching you** or whatever, you know it's got to mess you up. Yeah, I know, people try to use the my-parents-beat-me line and it's getting to the point

where no one really believes it anymore, but if a person goes through all their life **suppressing** something that they shouldn't have to suppress then one day it's going to just come up to them and punch them in the face, it's going to make them go crazy, even if it's just for a little while.

Society's kind of **weird**, you know. It's like they teach you to do things that aren't normal, that **don't feel right down deep in your bones**, but you have to do them anyway, because **someone somewhere decided** that this would be normal. Everyone around you suppresses stuff, and when you see that it tells you that you're supposed to be hiding it from the rest of the world, too, like if we all **just hide it for a while**, it will all go away. Maybe it does, until someone like me blows up and can't take hiding all that stuff anymore, but then the rest of the world can just say that we're crazy and **therefore it's unexplainable** why we went crazy and then they can just brush it all off and everything is back to normal again. It's like emotion. People are taught to hide their emotions. **Men** are taught not to cry, **women** are taught to be emotional and men are told to think that it's crazy. So when something really shi-

ty happens to someone - like a guy loses his job or something - and he just sits in front of a friend and breaks down and cries, the other guy just thinks this guy is crazy for crying. Then the guy rejects the guy that's crying, making him feel even worse, making the guy bottle it back up inside of him.

I think people are like Pepsi bottles. You remember those glass bottles? Pop always tasted better in those bottles, you could just like swig it down easier, your lips fit around the glass neck better or something. I wonder why people don't use them anymore? Well, I think people are like Pepsi bottles, like they have the potential for all of this energy, and **the whole world keeps shaking them up**, and some people lose their heads and the top goes off and all of this icky stuff comes shooting all around and other Pepsi bottles want to hide from it and then the poor guy has no Pepsi left. And how can you do anything when you have no Pepsi left? Or maybe you do lose it, but you still have some Pepsi left in you, and people keep thinking that you don't have any left, and then they treat you like you shouldn't be allowed to **tie your own shoelaces** or you should be watched while you're getting dressed.

Can't you turn those cameras off?

I heard this story in here sometime about Tony, this guy that was in here for murder, and after he was in here he went crazy and cut off his own scrotum. I don't know how a man survives something like that, but I guess he did, because he was in here, and from what I hear he was using the pay phones to call 800 numbers to **prank** whoever answered at the other end. Well, I guess he kept calling this one place where **these women** would answer the phone, and they got **fed up** with it, I guess, and traced it or something. They got the number for this hospital, and talked to his doctor. I think he told them that Tony cut his balls off, now I thought doctor-patient records were private, but I suppose it doesn't matter, because we're just crazy prisoners, killers who don't matter anyway, but he told these **girls** that Tony cut his balls off a whole two months ago. And then he called them back, **talking dirty to them,** not knowing they knew he was a murderer with no balls and they laughed and made fun of him and told him they knew, and he hung up the phone and never called them back. True story, swear to God. Can you just imagine him wondering how they knew? Or were they just making a joke, or...

Did you know that I write? I figured that if they won't let me read anything, maybe I could put stuff down on paper and read it to myself, I guess. I try to write poetry, but it just don't come out right, but I've been trying to write a thing about **what I went through**, you know what I'm talking about? Well, I just figure that if other people that are in prison can get best sellers and make a ton of money, then so can I, I mean, my story is better than half the stuff that's out there, and I know there are a lot of **women** who have a little part of them that wants to do what I did. I think **all women feel it**, but the most of them are taught to **suppress it**, to keep it all bottled in like that. But now that I think of it, what am I going to do with a bunch of money anyway? I'm never going to get out of here to enjoy it or anything. Anyway, how would I get someone to want to read it in the first place, now that everyone thinks that I'm crazy.

Sometimes I get so **depressed**. It's like I'm never going to get out of here. I think **I wanted to have kids one day**. It's easier, I guess, not having to see kids, I guess then I don't miss them too much, but...

For the longest time they tried to get doctors to come

in here and talk to me, and you know what they did? They got **men doctors** - one after another - and then they wondered why the Hell I didn't want to talk to them.

Amazing. People really just don't think, do they?

I guess **it's hard**, being in here and all, I mean. I was going to go back to school, I had already taken the GED and graduated high school, and I was going to go to community college. **It was going to be different.** Sometimes

I wonder, you know, **why this had to happen to me**, why I had to snap. I really don't think I could have controlled it, I don't think this could have happened any other way. It's hard. I have to find stuff to do, because otherwise all I'd want to do is sleep all day and night,

and I suppose I could, but then **what would happen to me?** At least if I write a book about my life, about this whole

stupid world, then maybe everyone would at least understand. It wasn't really my fault, I mean, I think we

women have enough to deal with just in our regular lives and then they keep piling on this **sexism** crap on

us, and then expect us not to be **angry** about it because we're taught to deal with it all of our lives. Maybe this

guy was just **the straw that broke the camel's back** or something, maybe he was **just another rapist**, maybe

he was just another drunk guy who thought that he could do whatever he wanted with me because he was the man and I was his girl, or just some chick that didn't matter or whatever, but shit, it does matter, at least to me it does.

I know I've got a lot of healing to do, but I haven't really thought about doing it. I mean, what have I got to heal for anyway? To get out of here and go to prison? Then I'll just get abused by guards over there, have to watch my back every second of the day. At least here people watch my back for me. They think everything and anything in the world could harm me, even myself, so they're so overprotective that nothing can go wrong, unless it goes wrong in my own mind.

The story "crazy" was previously published in *Art/Life Limited Editions May 1994* and *v17 #3 No. 179 in 1997*, <http://www.mishibishi.net/kuypers.html>, <http://www.poetryboard.com>, *mal - content*, *Out of a/Maze*, *Plain Brown Wrapper #32*, and *Children Churches and Daddies magazine*. It has been published in the chapbooks *Everything and Anything*, *Knife, Gasoline and Reason*, and *The Written Word*. It has also been published in the book *(Woman.)*

The crazy fragmented body image on the opposite page was previously published in <http://www.mishibishi.net/kuypers/pages/the-kuypers-art-center.htm>, and <http://www.-authors-den.com/den/editpoetry.asp>. It has also been released in the book *Torture and Triumph*, and it was also used for the cover of the compact disc *The Final*.



stalker

And she got out of her car, walked across her driveway, and walked up the stairs to her porch, trying to enjoy her solitude, trying not to remember that he followed her once again. She thought she was free of him; she thought he moved on with his life and that she would not have to see his face again.

Why did he have to call her, on this one particular day, years later, while she was at work? Maybe if she could have been suspecting it, she might have been braced for it. But then again, she didn't want to think about it: she was happy that she was finally starting to feel as if she had control of her life again.

It had been so many years, why would she have expected him to follow her again? Didn't she make it clear years ago that she didn't want him waiting outside her house in his car anymore, that she didn't want to receive the hang-up calls at three in the morning anymore? Or the calls in the middle of the night, when he'd stay on the line, when she could tell that he was high, and he'd profess his love to her? Or the letters, or the threats? No, the police couldn't do anything until he took action, when it was too late. Why did he come back? Why couldn't he leave her alone? Why couldn't it be illegal for someone to fill her with fear for

years, to make her dread being in her house **alone**, to make her wonder if her feeling that she was being followed wasn't real?

All these thoughts rushed through her head as she sat on her front porch swing, opening her mail. One bill, one piece of junk mail, one survey.

It was only a phone call, she had to keep thinking to herself. **He may never call again**. She had no idea where he was even calling from. For all she knew, he could have been on the other side of the country. It was only a phone call.

And then everything started to go wrong in her mind again, the bushes around the corner of her house were **rustling a little too loud**, there were too many cars that sounded like they were **stopping near her house**. Her own breathing even scared her.

I could go into the house, she thought, but she knew that she could be filled with fear there, too. **Would the phone ring?** Would there be a **knock** on the door? Or would he even bother with a knock, would he just **break a window**, let himself in, **cut the phone lines** so she wouldn't stand a chance?

No, she knew better. She knew she had to stay outside, that she couldn't let **this fear** take a hold of her again. And so she sat.

She looked at her phone bill again.

She heard the creak of the porch swing.

She swore she heard someone else breathing.

No, she wouldn't look up from her bill, because she knew no one was there.

Then he spoke.

"Hi."

She looked up. He was standing right at the base of her stairs, not six feet away from her.

“What are you doing on my property?”

“Oh, come on, you used to not hate me so much.” He lit a cigarette, a marlboro red, with a match. “So, why wouldn’t you take my call today?”

“Why would I? What do I have to say to you?”

“You’re really making a bigger deal out of this than it is,” he said, then took a drag. She watched the smoke come out of his mouth as he spoke. “We used to have it good.”

She got up, and walked toward him. She was surprised; in her own mind she never thought she’d actually be able to walk closer to him, she always thought she’d be **running away**. She stood at the top of the stairs.

“Can I have a smoke?”

“Sure,” he said, and he reached up to hand her the fire stick. She reached out for the matches.

“I’ll light it.”

She put the match to the end of the paper and leaves, watched it turn orange. **She didn’t want** this cigarette. She needed to **look more calm**. Calm. Be calm.

She remained at the top of the stairs, and he stood only six stairs below her. She sat at the top stair.

“You really think we ever got along?”

“Sure. I mean, I don’t know how you got in your head -”

“Do you think I enjoyed finding your car outside my house all the time? Did I enjoy

seeing you at the same bars I was at, **watching me** and my friends, like you were recording their faces into **your memory forever?** Do you think I liked you coming to **bother me** when I was working at the store? Do you -"

"I was."

She paused. "You were what?"

"I was logging everyone **you were with** into my head."

She sat silent.

"At the bars - I remember every face. **I remember every one of them.** I had to, you see, I had to know **who was trying to take you away.** I needed to know who they were."

She sat still, she couldn't blink, she stared at him, it was just as she was afraid it would be.

And all these years **she begged him to stop,** but nothing changed.

She couldn't take it all anymore.

She put out her right hand, not knowing exactly what she'd do if she held his hand.

He put his left hand in hers.

"You know," she said, then paused for a **drag** of the red fire, "This state would consider what you did to me years ago **stalking.**"

She held his hand tighter, holding his fingers together. She could feel her lungs moving her up and down. He didn't even hear her; he was **fixated** on looking at his hand in hers, until she caught his eyes with her own and then they stared, past the iris, the pupil, until they **burned holes** into each other's heads with their stare.

“And you know,” she said, as she lifted her cigarette, “I do too.”

Then she quickly moved the cigarette toward their hands together, and put it out in the top of his hand.

He screamed. Grabbed his hand. Bent over. Pressed harder. Swore. Yelled.

She stood. Her voice suddenly changed.

“Now, I’m going to say this once, and I won’t say it again. I want you off my property. I want you out of my life. I swear to God, if you come within fifty feet of me or anything related to me or anything the belongs to me, I’ll get a court order, I’ll get a gun, I’ll do whatever it takes to keep you away forever.”

“Now go.”

He held his left hand with his right, the fingers on his right hand purple from the pressure he was using on the open sore. He moaned while she spoke. She stood at the top of the stairs looking down on him. He slowly walked away.

She thought for a moment she had truly taken her life back. She looked down. Clenched in the fist in her left hand was the cigarette she just put out.

The story “Stalker” was previously published in *Art/Life Limited Editions August 1994 and v17 #3 No. 179 in 1997*, <http://www.mishibishi.net/kuypers.html>, *Children Churches and Daddies* magazine, and <http://www.poets2000.com/kuyperswriting/>. It also appeared in the chapbooks *Everything and Anything*, *OldWives’ Tales*, and *This Is What It Means*. “Stalker” also appeared in the book (*Woman.*)

driving by his house

I know it's pretty pathetic of me, I don't know what I'm trying to prove. I don't even want to see him again. I don't want to have to think about him, I don't want to think about his big eyebrows or the fact that he hunched over a little when he walked or that he hurt me so much.

I know it's pretty pathetic of me, but sometimes when I'm driving I'll take a little detour and drive by his house. I'll just drive by, I won't slow down, I won't stop by, I won't say hello, I won't beat his head in, I won't even cry. I'll just drive by, see a few cars in the driveway, see no signs of life through the windows, and then I'll just keep driving.

I don't know why I do it. He never sees me, and I never see him, although I thought I didn't want to see him anyway. When I first met him I wasn't afraid of him. Now I'm so afraid that I have to drive by his house every once in a while, just to remind myself of the fear. We all like the taste of fear, you know, the thought that there's something out there stronger than us. The thought that there's something out there we can beat, even if we have to fight to the death.

But that can't be it, no, it just can't be, I don't like this fear, I don't like it. I want to be able to just go on with my life, to not think about it. I want to be strong again. I want to be strong.

I haven't done it for a while, drive by his house, but I did it again today. I put on my sunglasses so that in case he saw me he couldn't tell that I was looking. And then I picked up my car phone and acted like I was talking to someone.

I drove by, holding my car phone, talking to my imaginary friend, trying to unobviously glance at the house on my left. There's a lamppost at the end of his driveway. The lampshade was a huge glass ball, I always thought it was ugly. I drive around a corner, take a turn and get back on the road I'm supposed to be on.

One day, when I'm driving by and I get that feeling again, that feeling like death, well then, I just might do it again.

This was previously published in *Art/Life Limited Editions* February 1994 and v17 #3 No. 179 in 1997, *Children Churches and Daddies* magazine, <http://www.mishibishi.net/kuypers.html>, *liquid ohio*, *napalm health spa*, *opossum holler tarot*, *pacific coast journal*, the *owen wister* review, the *poetry superhighway* at <http://www.coolboard.com/msgshow.cfm?&msgboard=11059207679703&msg=90348940870278&idDispSub=66537967356536>, *Children Churches and Daddies* magazine, <http://www.poets2000.com/kuyperswriting/>, and the *poetry exchange*. An Italian translation of this piece was published in <http://www.my-diary.org/read/?read=2443>. A French translation of this (*piloter par sa maison*) is also published at <http://poetrypoem.com/cgi-bin/index.pl?sitename=poetry1344&item=home>, and in the chapbook *ferme le bousche!!!*. It also appeared in the chapbooks *the 4-1/4" x 2-3/4" poem Mini-book*, *Addicted*, *Dysfunctional Family Greeting Cards*, *Gasoline and Reason*, *New World Order*, *Right There By Your Heart*, *Someone Else Anyone Else*, and *The Written Word*. A Spanish translation of this was published in the chapbook *Se Habla Espanol (the prose)*. A German translation of this was published in *Ich Bein Ein Jelly Doughnut*. This piece was also published in the book *Hope Chest In The Attic and Slate and Marrow*.

GABRIEL

She had lived there, in her fourth floor apartment on the near north side of the city, for nearly three years. It was an uneventful three years from the outside; Gabriel liked it that way. She just wanted to live her life: go to work, see her new friends, have a place to herself.

But looking a bit closer, it was easy to see what a wonderful life she had. Her apartment was impeccable, with Greek statues and glass vases lining the hallways, modern oil paintings lining her walls. She was working at her career for a little under two years and she had received two hefty promotions. She served on the board of directors for the headquarters of a national domestic abuse clinic and single-handedly managed to increase annual donations in her city by 45%, as well as drastically increase the volunteer base for their hot-line numbers. She managed a boyfriend, a man who was willing to put up with her running around, working overtime for her job, visiting clinics. A man who loved and respected her for her drive. Not bad for a woman almost twenty-five.

Yes, life seemed good for Gabriel, she would dine in fine restaurants, visit the operas and musicals travelling through the city. And she had only been in the city for three years.

Eric would wonder what her past was like when he'd hit a nerve with her and she would charge off to work, not talking to him for days. She had only lived in the city for three years, and he knew nothing about her life before then. In the back of his mind, he always thought she was **hiding something from him**, keeping a little secret, and sometimes everything Gabriel said made him believe this secret was real. She told him her parents lived on the other side of the country, and even though they dated for almost two years there never was talk about visiting them. She never received calls from her old friends. There were no old photographs.



This would get to Eric sometimes; it would fester inside of him when he sat down and thought about it, all alone, in his apartment, wondering when she would be finished with work. And then he'd see her again, and all of his problems would disappear, and he'd feel like he was in love.

One morning he was sitting at her breakfast table, reading her paper, waiting so they could drive to work. "Hey, they finally got that mob-king guy with some charges they think will stick."

Gabriel minded her business, put her make-up on in the bathroom mirror, hair-sprayed her short, curly brown hair.

"Hey, Gabriel, get a load of this quote," Eric shouted down the hallway to her from his seat. He could just barely see her shadow through the open door to the bathroom. "'My client is totally innocent of any charges against him. It is the defense's opinion that Mr. Luccio was framed, given to the police by the organized crime rings in this city as a decoy,' said Jack Huntington, defense lawyer for the case. 'Furthermore, the evidence is circumstantial, and weak.' What a joke. I hope this guy doesn't get away with all he's done. You know, if I—"

Gabriel stopped hearing his voice when she heard that name. She had heard Luccio over and over again in the news, but Jack. **She didn't expect this. Not now.** It had been so long since she heard that name.

But not long enough. **Her hands gripped the edge of the ceramic sink**, gripping tighter and tighter until she began to **scratch the wood paneling under the sink**. Her head hung down, the ends of her hair falling around her face. He lived outside of the city, nearly two hours. **Now he was here**, maybe ten minutes away from her home, less than a mile away from where she worked, where she was about to go to.

She couldn't let go of the edge of the sink. Eric stopped reading aloud and was already to the sports section, and in the back of her mind Gabriel was wondering **how she could hurt herself** so she wouldn't have to go to work. She would be late already, she had been standing there for over ten minutes.

Hurt herself? What was she thinking? And she began to regain her senses. She finally picked her head up and looked in the mirror. She wasn't the woman from then, she had to say to herself as she sneered at her reflection. But all she could see was long, blonde straight hair, a golden glow from the sun, from the days where she didn't work as often as she did, when she had a different life.

She had to pull on her hair to remind herself that it was short. **She pulled it until she almost cried.** Then she stopped, straightened her jacket, took a deep breath and walked out the bathroom door.

Eric started to worry. As they car-pooled together to work, Gabriel sat in the passenger seat, right hand **clutching the door handle**, left hand grabbing her briefcase, holding it with a fierce, ferocious grip. But it was a grip that said **she was scared**, scared of losing that briefcase, or her favorite teddy bear from the other kids at school, or her life from a robber in an alley. If nothing else, Eric knew **she felt fear**. And he didn't know why.

He tried to ask her. She said she was tired, but tense, an important meeting and a pounding headache. **He knew it was more.** She almost shook as she sat in that car, and she began to rock back and forth, forward and back, ever so slightly, **the way a mother rocks her child to calm her down.** It made Eric tense, too. And scared.

Work was a blur, a blur of nothingness. There was no meeting, the workload was light for a Friday. But at least the headache was there, that wasn't a lie. **She hated lying**, especially to Eric. But she had no choice, especially now, with

Jack lurking somewhere in the streets out there, winning his cases, **wondering if his wife is dead or not.**

She never wanted him to know the answer.

Eric called her a little after four. “Just wanted to check if we were still going to dinner tonight. I made the reservations at the new Southwestern place, you said you wanted to go there. Sound good?”

Gabriel mustered up the strength to respond, and only came up with, “Sure.”

“Do you still have the headache, honey? Do you want to just rent a movie or two and curl up on the couch tonight? Whatever you want to do is fine, just let me know.”

She knew at this point he was doing all he could to make her feel better. **She didn't want to put him through this.** He shouldn't have to deal with her like this. She searches for her second wind. “No, Eric, dinner would be fine. We can go straight from work to save the drive. Thanks, too. You really have a knack for making my days better.”

Eric smiled at the end of the line. And Gabriel could feel it.

They got off the phone, she finished her work, turned off her computer, started walking toward the elevator when it finally occurred to her: Jack might be there. **She can't go.** Even if he's not there, she could see him on the street, driving there. **She just couldn't go.**

She pressed the button for the elevator. And he could just as easily see me walking out of work, getting in Eric's car, she thought. I have to stop thinking like this. **This is ludicrous.** And he won't be there, he won't see me, because, well,

the chances are so thin, and Hell, it's a big city. I have to try to relax.

But she couldn't. And there was no reason she should have.

At the restaurant, they sat on the upper level, near one of the large Roman columns decorated with ivy. She kept looking around one of the columns, because a man three tables away looked like Jack. It wasn't, but she still had to stare.

The meal was delicious, the presentation was impeccable. She was finally starting to relax. The



check arrived at the table right as the place began to get crowded, so Gabriel went to the washroom to freshen up before they left. She walked through the restaurant, feeling comfortable and confident again. She even attracted a smile from a man at another table.

She walked with confidence and poise. And she loved life again.

She walked into the bathroom, straight to the mirror, checking her hair, her lip stick. She looked strong, not how she looked when she was married. She closed her purse, turned around and headed out the door.

That's when she saw him.

There he was, Jack, standing right there, waiting for a table. He had three other men with him, all in dark suits. She didn't know if they were mob members or firm associates. Or private eyes he hired to find her. Dear God, she thought, **what could she do now?** She can't get to the table, he'll see her

for sure. She can't stare at him, it'll only draw attention to herself.

And then she thinks: "Wait. All I've seen is the back of him. It might not even be him." She took a breath. "It's probably not even him," she thought, "and I've sat here worrying about it."

Still, she couldn't reassure herself. She took a few steps back and waited for him to turn around.

A minute passed, **or was it a century?**, and finally he started to turn, just as they were about to be led to their table. She saw his profile, just a glimpse of his face. It was him, it was Jack, it was **the monster** she knew from all those years, the man who made her lose any ounce of **innocence or femininity** she ever had. She saw how his chin sloped into his neck, the **curve of his nose**, how he combed his hair back, and she knew it was him.

By the washrooms, she stared at him while he took one step away from her, closer to the dining room. Then she felt a strong, pulling hand grip her shoulder. Her hair slapped her in the face as she turned around. Her eyes were saucers.

"The check is paid for. Let's go," Eric said as he took her jacket from her arm and held it up for her. She slid her arms through the sleeves, Eric pulling the coat over her shoulders. She stared blankly. He guided her out the doors.

She asked him if they could stop at a club on the way home and have a drink or two. They found a little bar, and she instantly ordered drinks. They sat for over an hour in the dark club listening to the jazz band. It looked to Eric like she was trying to **lose herself** in the darkness, in the **anonymity** of the crowded lounge. It worried him more. And still she didn't relax.

And she drove on the expressway back from dinner, Eric in the seat next to her. He had noticed she had been tense today, more than she had ever been; whenever he asked her why she brushed her symptoms off as nothing.

The radio blared in the car, the car soaring down the four lanes of open, slick, raw power, and she heard the dee-jay recap the evening news. **A man died in a car accident**, he said, and it was the lawyer defending the famed mob leader. And then the radio announced his name.

And she didn't even have to hear it.

Time stopped for a moment when the name was spread, **Jack**, Jack Huntington, **like a disease**, over the air waves. Jack, Jack the name crept into her car, she couldn't escape it, like contaminated water it **infiltrated all of her body** and she instantly felt drugged. **Time stood still in a horrific silence for Gabriel**. Hearing that midnight talk show host talk about the tragedy of his death, she began to reduce speed, without intention. She didn't notice until brights were flashing in her rear view mirror, cars were speeding around her, horns were honking. She was going 30 miles per hour.

She quickly regained herself, turned off the radio, and threw her foot on the accelerator. Eric sat silent. They had a long drive home ahead of them from the club, and he knew if he only sat silent that she would eventually talk.

While still in the car, ten minutes later, she began to tell him about Andrea.

“Three years ago, when I moved to the city, my name wasn't Gabriel. It was **Andrea**.

“Seven years ago, I was a different person. I was a lot more **shy, inse-**

Cure, an eighteen year old in college, not knowing what I wanted to study. I didn't know what my future was, and I didn't want to have to **go through my life alone**. My freshman year I met a man in the law school program at school. He asked me out as soon as he met me. I was thrilled.

“For the longest time I couldn't believe that another man, especially one who had the potential for being so successful, was actually interested in me. He was **older**, he was **charming**. Everyone loved him. I followed him around constantly, wherever he wanted me to go.

“He met my parents right away. **They adored him**, a man with a future, he was so charming. They pushed the idea of marrying him. I didn't see it happening for a while, but I felt safe with him.

“And every once in a while, after a date, or a party, we'd get alone and **he'd start to yell at me**, about the way I acted with him, or what I said in public, or that **the way I looked was wrong**, or something. And every once in a while he would **hit me**. And whenever it happened I thought that **I should have looked better**, or I shouldn't have acted the way I did. This man was **too good for me**. And I had to do everything in my power to make him happy.

“Less than eight months after we met, he asked me to marry him. **I accepted**.

“We were married two years after we met; it was a beautiful ceremony, tons of flowers, tons of gifts—and I was turning a junior in college. My future was

set for me. I couldn't believe it.

“And as soon as we were married, which was right when he started at the firm, he got **more and more violent**. And instead of thinking that it was my fault, I started thinking that it was because he was so stressed, that **he had so much work to do**, that sometimes he just **took it out on me**. I was no one's fault. Besides, if he was going to climb to the top, he needed a wife that was perfect for all of his appearances. **I had to be perfect for him**. Take care of the house and go to school full time.

“Money wasn't a problem for us, he had a trust fund from his parents and made good money at the firm, so I could go to school. But he started to hate the idea that **I was going to college in marketing instead of being his wife full time**. But that was one thing I wasn't going to do for him, stop going to school.

“He'd get more and more angry about it the longer we were married. After the first year he'd **hit me at least once a week**. I was physically **sick half of my life** then, sick from being worried about how to make him not hurt me, sick from trying to figure out how to **cover up the bruises**.

“I'd try to talk to him about it, but the few times I ever had the courage to bring it up, **he'd beat me. He'd just beat me**, say a few words. Apologize the next morning, think everything was better. I couldn't take it.

“I threatened with divorce. When I did that I had to go to the hospital with a **broken arm**. I had to tell the doctors that I fell down the stairs.

“A long flight of stairs.

“When it was approaching two years of marriage with this man, I said to myself I couldn’t take it anymore. He told me over and over again that **he’d make me pay** if I tried to leave him, I’d be sorry, it would be the worst choice I could ever make. This man had power, too, he could hunt me down if I ran away, he could **emotionally and physically keep me trapped** in this marriage.

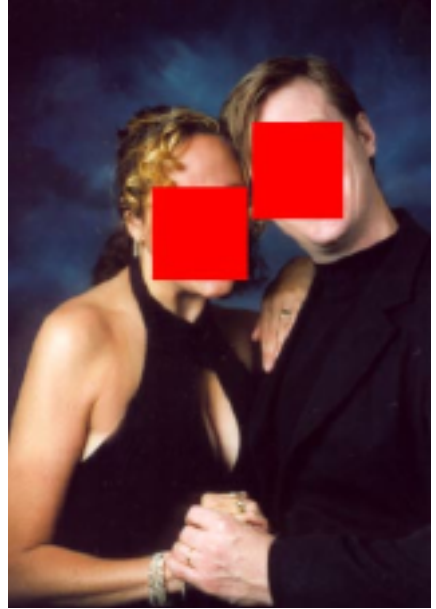
“So I did the only thing I thought I could do.

“I wrote a **suicide note**. ‘By the time you find my car, I’ll be dead.’ I took a few essentials, nothing that could say who I was. I cut my hair—I used to have **long, long hair** that I dyed blonde. I chopped it all off and dyed it dark. Then I drove out to a quarry off the interstate 20 miles away in the middle of the night, threw my driver’s license and credit cards into the passenger’s seat, put a brick on the accelerator, got out of the car and let it speed over the cliff. Everything was burned.

“So there I was, twenty-two years old, **with no future, with no identity**. My family, my friends, would all think I was dead in the morning. And for the first time in my life, I was **so alone**. God, I was so **scared**, but at the same time, it was the best feeling in the world. It felt good to not have my **long hair brushing against my neck**. It felt good to feel the cold of the three a.m. air against my cheeks, on my ears. It felt good to have no where to go, **other than away**. No one

was telling me where to go, what to do. **No one was hurting me.**

“I found my way two hours away to this city, came up with the name Gabriel from a soap opera playing in a clinic I went to to get some cold medication. I managed a job at the company I’m at now. Did volunteer work, rented a hole for an apartment. Projected a few of the right ideas to the right people in the company. **I got lucky.**”



She told him all of this before she told him that her husband’s name was Jack Huntington.

She brought him home, sat on the couch while he made coffee for her. He tried to sound calm, but the questions kept coming out of his mouth, one after another. Gabriel’s answers suddenly **streamed effortlessly** from her mouth, like a river, spilling over onto the floor, covering the living room with inches of water within their half hour of talk.

She felt the cool water of her words sliding around her ankles. And she felt relieved.

Gabriel, Andrea, was no longer Mrs. Jack Huntington.

Eric told her that she could have told him before. “I’d follow you anywhere. If I had to quit my job and run away with you I would.” It hurt him that she kept this from him for so long, but he knew he was the only person who knew her secret. He smiled.

There was a burden lifted, she felt, with Jack's death, the burden that she didn't have to **hide who she was** anymore. She didn't have to worry about public places, **COWER** when she felt his presence, following her, **haunting her**. It's over, she thought. She can walk out in the street now, and **scream, and run, and laugh**, and no one will come walking around the corner to **force her** back to her old life, to that little **private hell** that was named Andrea.

But sitting there, she knew there was still one thing she had to do.

She put down her coffee, got on her coat, told him this was something she must do. Gabriel got into her car, started to head away from the city. As she left, Eric asked where she was going. She knew she had done what she could for the last three years of her own life to save herself; now it was time to go back to the past, no matter what the consequences were.

He thought she was going back to her family. She was, in a way.

She drove into the town she had once known, saw the trees along the streets and remembered the way they looked every fall when the leaves turned colors. She remembered that one week every fall when the time was just right and each tree's leaves were different from the other trees. This is how she wanted to remember it.

And she drove past her old town, over an hour and a half away from the city, passing where her parents, her brother could still be living. She didn't know if she would ever bother to find them. Right now all she could do was drive to the next town, where her old friend used to live. Best friends from the age of three, Sharon and Andrea were inseparable, even though they fought to extremes. And as she drove toward Sharon's house, she knew she'd have to move quickly, **if her husband was still there**.

She double-checked in a phone book at a nearby gas station. And she turned two more corners and parked her car across the street. Would she recognize her? Would she believe she was there? That she was alive?

Gabriel saw one car in the driveway, not two; she went to the window, and looking in saw only Sharon. She stepped back. She took a long, deep breath. She was a **fugitive** turning herself in. She was a fugitive, asking people to **run with her**, running from something, yet running free. She knocked on the door.

Through the drapes she saw the charcoal shadow come up to the door. It creaked open. There they stood, looking at each other. For the first time in three and a half years.

Sharon paused for what seemed a millennium. Her eyes turned to glass, to a pond glistening with the first rays of the morning sun.

“Andrea.” She could see her through the brown curls wrapping her face. Another long silence. Sharon’s voice started to break.

“You’re alive,” she said as she closed her eyes and started to smile. And Gabriel reached through the doorway, and the door closed as they held each other.

They sat down in the living room. In the joy, Sharon forgot about the bruises on her shoulder. Gabriel noticed them immediately.

They talked only briefly before Gabriel asked her. “Is Paul here?”

“No, he’s out playing cards. Should be out all night.”

“Things are the same, aren’t they?”

“Andi, they’re fine. **He’s just got his ways,**” and Sharon turned her head away, physically looking for something to change the subject. There was so much to

say, yet Sharon couldn't even speak.

And then Gabriel's speech came out, the one she rehearsed in her mind the entire car ride over. The speech she gave to herself for the years before this very moment. "Look, Sharon, I know what it's like, I can **see the signs**. I know you, and I know you'll **sit through this marriage**, like I would have, this unending cycle of trying to **cover the bruises** on your arms and **make excuses**—"

Sharon moved her arm over her shoulder. Her head started inching downward. She knew Andrea knew her too well, and she wouldn't be able to fight her words, even after all these years.

"I went through this. When Jack told me I'd never be able to leave him, that I'd be sorry if I did, that I'd pay for trying to divorce him, that's when I knew I couldn't take it anymore. **No man has a right to tell me—or you—what you can and can't do**. It hasn't gotten better, like you keep saying, has it? No. I know it hasn't. It never does.

"I know this sounds harsh, and it is. If I was willing to run away, run away so convincingly that my own family thought I was dead, then it had to be serious. Do you think I liked leaving you? My brother? Do you think this was easy?"

Gabriel paused, tried to lean back, take a deep breath, relax.

"No. It wasn't easy. But I had to do it, I had to get away from him, no matter what it took. In spending my life with him I was losing myself. I needed to find myself again."

They sat there for a moment, **a long moment**, while they both tried to **recover**.

“You don’t have to run away,” Gabriel said to her. “You don’t have to run away like I had to. But **he won’t change**. You do have to leave here. Let me help you.”

Within forty-five minutes Sharon had three bags of clothes packed and stuffed into Gabriel’s trunk. As Sharon went to get her last things, Gabriel thought of how Sharon called her “Andi” when she spoke. God, she hadn’t heard that in so long. And for a moment she couldn’t unravel the mystery and find out who she was.



Sharon came back to the car. Gabriel knew that Sharon would only stay with her until the divorce papers were filed and she could move on with her life. But for tonight they were together, the inseparable Sharon and Andi, spending the night, playing house, creating their own world where everything was exactly as they wanted.

And this was real life now, and they were still together, with a **whole new world to create**. They were both **free, and alive**, more alive than either of them had ever felt.

“I want you to meet Eric. He’s a good man,” Gabriel said.

And as they drove off to nowhere, to **a new life**, on the expressway, under the viaduct, passing the projects, the baseball stadium, heading their way

toward the traffic of downtown life, they remained silent, listened to the hum of the engine. For Gabriel, it wasn't the silence of **enabling her oppressor**; it wasn't the silence of hiding her past. It was her peace for having finally accepted herself, along with all of the **pain**, and not feeling the hurt.

Andrea. Gabriel.

The next morning, she didn't know which name she'd use, but she knew that someone died that night, not Jack, but someone inside of her. But it was also a rebirth. And so she drove.

"Gabriel" was in a self-titled chapbook (*1993 the chapbook **Gabriel** was released*), and it was also previously published in *art/life limited editions*, *poets2000.com*, *ilovepoetry.com*, *Plain Brown Wrapper*, *poetryboard.com*, <http://www.poetrypoem.com/poetrybooks>, *Children Churches and Daddies volumes 8, 71, & 87*, <http://www.mishibishi.net/kuypers.html>, the chapbook ***Everything and Anything*** and in the book (***Woman***).

CHRISTINE, ON "GABRIEL"

All I can say is wow. This story is so moving. So many emotions went through me reading this. Thank you for sharing it.

Helena

the book of

time: 26 CE

place: Alexandria, Egypt

Helena only passively kept interest in Antony, the man who had once courted her in Greece, though he kept his eye on her. Her state treated her and other women on very unequal footing with men, but she knew that her country thought she had some value, even if her value could only be through raising children or tending a home for a future husband.

Knowing she wanted to tell the world about injustices she had seen in society as she was raised in Greece, she looked forward to her chance at further education and reading through the extensive libraries in Egypt. Thinking about chances to learn in new lecture amphitheatres and study in exquisite libraries and museums, Helena was sure her future would be strong and bright, finding fascinating new people to interact with and experiencing new elements in her society for her potential new loves of life.

Her awakening was after her moving out of her parent's house to live and study. There were great libraries in Alexandria, and her friend was moving there to work and study with Helena.

Everything was going to be different for her once she got out on her own.

Haimon and Rhea, Helena's parents, worried that it was not a good idea to let Helena to move to another country and live without a man, they worried she may be thought of as a loose woman and she would not find a man to marry and would resort to prostitution. But Helena's pleas were unrelenting; they knew of the greater chances she would have by working and studying in Alexandria versus their small town in Greece, and they understood that her intelligence and strength would help her through her life, and she could always come home if things on her own did not work well quickly. They wondered how she would be able to study in libraries to learn while there; but after Helena and her future roommate relented, Helena's parents were able to pay for her half of paying for Helena and Lana's home for one year. After a tearful good-bye with her parents just after she turned eighteen, Helena left with a carriage full of belongings with her friend Lana.

Lana and Helena were close friends, but they had their differences. Lana liked different music styles and had different interests from Helena. Lana was even thrilled

with watching the colosseum attacks in Greece - but Helena wasn't interested in Lana's interests and realized their differences when she was so much more interested in studying at the Library of Alexandria than Lana.

Either way, they were both happy to be on their own and were ready to celebrate their new home on their own.

Antony had worked the previous year for the State in Alexandria, and he was thrilled that Helena and Lana were moving to his city to study and work. He would live less than one mile from them; knowing they would be unfamiliar with customs and styles in their new town in this new country to them, he arrived at their home on the Sunday afternoon they arrived at their new home to help them move in.

When they first walked into the rooms where they were staying, Helena saw the area first as she carried her belongings in. As Lana and Helena scanned the space for where their belongings could go, they had to quickly decide where they would sleep and where their clothing would belong. Because of a lack of money and the difficulty in getting places to live in Alexandria, their home was one large room, so they shared the same area for sleeping, working and eating. They even just knew which side of the room each of them would sleep in - Helena liked being near where their book cases would be for her work; Lana liked being closer to spaces she can clean herself up to make herself beautiful for going out of having company over.

They knew they had more unpacking and rearranging to do of their things, but they were getting tired - and hungry - and they wanted to just take a breath and enjoy the fact that they were in their home - and in a new land - for the first time in their lives. Although they had moved most everything into their home, sunset was approaching and they had not considered food. After Antony explained to them that there are so many people from different countries in Alexandria they would not have to worry at all about learning another language to fit in, Antony then offered food and drink that he would bring to their new place a little later in the day.

The sun started to hide behind an adjacent building, so Helena pulled their candles out and placed them in lamps so they would have light for the evening. Lana grabbed one of the candles and went to a mirror to brush her hair. "Helena, you should be getting ready for Antony coming Over," Lana said.

"I'm just trying to clean up as much as we can tonight, so we can find our way through here more easily when we wake up tomorrow," Helena called back as she searched through boxes she was trying to still unpack.

"Well, he's your boyfriend, I'd think you'd want to look nice for him."

"Lana, I..." Helena tried to come up with the rest of her sentence before she finally knew what she wanted to say. "I - I'm not his girlfriend, we dated before, but we're just hanging out now."

"You still date though, right?"

"...Yes, but he's not courting me for a wife."

"You don't think. He still likes you, girl, and you could think of liking him back."

He's could be a stable man for a good home for you -"

"I'll worry about making sure I'm stable first, but thanks, Lana..." Helena turned back to the stack of books to start putting them on shelves so there was less to step over in the morning. she heard Lana yelling from the other side of their home, "Why did the two of you break up anyway?"

"Lana, he moved. He's been in Alexandria for almost a year working. He would come back to our town to visit his family, and that's why we still saw each other occasionally. Besides, I don't know, he may have spent time courting others and dating women since he's moved, and it doesn't break my heart that we're not dating - I don't think we were meant for each other."

Just as Helena finished her last words, they heard a loud thumping on their door. Because Lana was near the door, Lana ran to the door and asked, "Who is it?"

She could hear a muffled voice from outside. "It's Antony. Is that Lana?"

Lana laughed as she opened her door and saw Antony standing there with his arms filled with cloth bags for food and his fingers wrapped around a few bottles of wine and liquor. "Do you need any help carrying anything?" Lana asked as Antony made his first step toward to the doorway and Helena started to walk toward the front door.

"No, I'm fine, but thanks. Where is the table so I -"

"That table is right back here, before the cooking area," Helena said. She looked at what he brought in and asked, "Did you get all this food for us?"

"I know that cooking is done earlier in the day and you two wouldn't have a chance to go to a market right away, so there are fruits and nuts that can keep here."

"And you brought lots of wine!" Lana said as she walked toward them after closing the door and joining them.

"One container is of water, because you won't be able to get water until tomorrow. And the wine is drink for us to celebrate your moving tonight into your new home."

"I'm excited ... and nervous," Helena said. "I hope I'll be able to leave the house enough to read or get books from the main library."

"I see all the beautiful veils over by your beds," Antony said. And I know a few people who work in the libraries near here, and I think you can go to the library for work and stay in a corner where you can remove your veil and read. I've told my friends that you'll be moving in today, so you should be fine to read and study there. And you know, Helena," Antony said as he reached for her hand so he could pull her toward him to embrace her, "my friends didn't understand why you moved away to study."

"They haven't lives where we came from, Antony, and they must be too used to living here in Alexandria. It is amazing here."

"But Helena, I think they thought it was strange that a woman was so interested in reading and learning instead of finding a suitor and taking care of a home." Antony gave her a look to let her know that she would be thought of as an improper woman for wanting something more than what women are supposed to normally ever want.

"Well, if I'm supposed to be a proper girl and meet a future husband, this would

be the place for me to go, no?" She said, smiling after glancing at Lana. "And where would I find a proper man? Well, libraries would hold men of intellect, so -"

Lana cut in. "You've come up with quite the system, Helena..."

"I had to convince my parents there was a good reason for my coming here to study, Lana..." Helena said.

"Well, you'll have plenty of time to acclimate yourselves here," Antony said, "and - do you have money for food from the market? Because -"

"My parents gave us a set amount of money for this home for a year," Helena said, "but I found the place, and I know it's small, but it's much cheaper than what we had for money for this house, so we should have plenty of money for food."

Lana laughed and reached for the wine. "That's why Helena does the negotiating with money - it saved us..."

Antony cut in when he saw Lana getting the bottle of wine. "Where are any glasses for the wine? You two should be celebrating." Helena got up to get glasses and Antony saw her head looking toward one wall, So she got up to get glasses for the three of them. Antony came back with three cups and said, "I also have wine at home and I don't live far and my neighbors are going out tonight, so they might stop by with additional wine I had at my home, so we should have plenty for the evening."

"There's plenty here," Helena said, "I don't usually drink." Lana looked over at her when she said that to Antony, because Lana wanted to drink, and she wanted Antony to allow them to celebrate their new home together.

They only snacked on the fruits and nuts Antony brought them; after not eating most of the day they weren't hungry for a lot of food to fill them up. Antony kept refilling their drinks for them.

"It's a good thing my neighbors Senbi and Pamiu were going out this evening," Antony said as he finished pouring the last of his original bottles of wine into a glass for Lana. "If they didn't bring any more liquor, we'd have to call it an evening."

"But the night is young," Lana said.

Helena said mockingly, "Lana Kiya, what would your mother think..."

"My mother's not here," she retorted. "Are you going to be my mother now?"

Helena laughed. "Of course not. It's just fun to see you so excited to be on your own..." She thought in the back of her mind that it was strange that Antony was pushing so much liquor on Lana, but not as much on her. She eventually decided that he was probably just being nice to her because she said she didn't drink.

Helena was having a good evening, and it was nice to talk with someone other than Lana on her first night in Alexandria. Antony was there to bring food, though they didn't eat much of it that night, and he was like a servant bringing drinks for anyone who wanted it. "You know, it is usually the woman's job to cater to the group with food and drink pouring."

“I know, but I’m right here,” Antony said, “and it’s your first night here and you should enjoy yourselves. And you don’t know how good it is to see the two of you,” he said, as he moved over two feet so he could hug her. “It’s nice to have people from my home town here, people I have memories with and stories from our past.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re here too, it’s nice to have a sort of welcoming party for my arrival here.”

“I wish we came earlier in the weekend,” Lana said. “Then I might have places to go to celebrate our arrival.”

“You have plenty of time for that,” Antony said. “Besides, now you have all week to look around and see where you’d like to go next weekend when there are more people out and about.”

Another hour or two passed, it was getting very late, and Lana looked like she was about to pass out. Helena was drunk from the evening of drinking too; she was having a hard time holding her head straight up and her speech was getting slurred. Antony finally spoke. “Lana, if you want to lay down, that’s fine,” and he turned to Helena and said more softly, “I can go home in the morning to get ready for work, so I can stay here.” He then leaned over and kissed Helena.

“Um, if you want to, you can,” Helena said, “but there’s not a lot of room here.” She looked over at their two beds, not five feet apart.

Antony glanced at Lana Passed out, still sitting at the corner of her bed. He looked back at Helena and put his arms around her. “I can find room.”

Helena had to wake Lana from her sleeping sitting position in case she wanted to get ready for sleeping on her reed mat for the night, but Lana didn’t even want to bother changing into clothes to sleep in. Lana just groaned, giggled a little when she saw that Antony was still there, and started to move her body so she could just rest there and get to sleep. When she found a blanket from one end of the mat, she dragged it up her body and turned her head to face the wall.

Turning around to walk back toward where Antony was sitting, she watched him pick up his glass of wine, then extend it out to her. “What? That’s yours,” Helena said about the drink he handed her, but Antony answered with “We still have some left to go through, and Lana won’t mind.”

“We shouldn’t wake her.”

Antony didn’t even lower his voice; nothing woke her. “Of course not. But I don’t think she’s moving anywhere.” Antony looked over at her sleeping on the mat, and it seemed that she moved the linen cloths over her so nothing would disturb her.

They talked for a few minutes; Antony then leaned over and ran his hand along the side of her face and said, “I’ve missed you,” before moving to kiss her.

“...I’ve missed you, too,” she said, though he wondered if she just appreciated there

being someone she knew in this new town and new country more than missing him specifically. She didn't know what to think, but they were there together, and Lana wasn't waking up. She kissed him back. But Antony kept being more physical with her, and although she wanted him to go home, and although she didn't want to disturb her new roommate, passed out only feet away from her, she didn't think to say anything to him.

The next morning Antony was still there, and Lana still wasn't waking up. Helena saw that he was there and knew he had to go so she curled up into a ball at the far end of the mat before waking him. "Antony, wake up. You have to go to work."

When Antony came to and saw that it was daylight, he sprung up to get his things together. He went over to Helena to embrace her and kiss her, but she moved herself away and whispered that he shouldn't be late for his work.

His running out woke Lana, but only hearing the noises, she did not see him as he left. "Helena... how long have I been sleeping?"

"It's morning, you're fine, Lana."

"Did..." Lana looked around and saw they were alone, "Did Antony stay over?"

Helena knew Lana wanted Antony to have stayed over, and if he did Lana would think Antony would be obliged to marry Helena. Helena knew she did not want to be with Antony, but she feared anyone knowing what he did to her.

"Do you see him here?" she asked, hoping that would be enough of an explanation and Lana would not ask any more questions. Helena used most of what little water they had to try to scrub her skin and clean off from him, but she needed to take buckets to the nearby stream to get more water. "Oh, I'm sorry, Lana, but I used most of the water we had," Helena said. "I was going to get water before you woke up."

"We've got extra barrels," Lana replied, "so I can go with you and we can get a lot of water so we don't run out right away," she said as she moved off her mat to find walking shoes before she brushed her hair for going out. Helena and Lana got their belongings together to make the trip to get water for themselves.

As they got to the stream, there were only a few women there; Helena figures that most of the women probably already got their water from the stream earlier in the morning. Lana walked to the water with a cup and bucket, crouched down at the edge of the water and started scooping up water for the first bucket. She was working for a while because the buckets were relatively large, and she hoped that if she filled the buckets separately, Helena could walk back and forth with the water because of their weight once filled. Lana was almost finished filling the first bucket when she looked up to see where Helena was, so she could get the water and take it back to their home. In the distance, she saw Helena standing in the stream, with her knees into the water, dipping her hands repeatedly into the stream and splashing water onto her face.

Lana didn't know what she was doing; no one else was getting into the water the way Helena was, and she started to worry. "Helena," she yelled, and saw her silhou-

ette turn to face Lana. "What are you doing?"

Helena didn't have an answer, and waited a moment before yelling back her answer. "I had to do this after our move, Lana."

Lana knew the almost full bucket of water wasn't going to move, but instead of walking over to where Helena was, she said, "I'll bring the water back to the home if you'll stay here to fill the buckets with water. Is that okay?"

Helena knew she couldn't walk back and forth to and from the house repeatedly if she was soaking wet, so she started walking toward Lana. "Sure," she said as she got closer. "I'm sorry I got drenched like this. I can fill the water buckets if you don't mind."

"That's fine, I've got this first huge bucket almost filled, so I'll just take it now. You start filling the other ones here and I'll be back."

Lana reached down to get the large bucket filled with water for her trip back to their house. As she started to walk away, Helena took a bucket and saucer, then said, "Thanks, Lana," before starting to collect more water for them for their home.

Helena spent the rest of the morning working with Lana on getting food from the market they could keep for a week's worth of food, and they finished trying to rearrange their belongings in their new home. Lana wanted to go back to the market to see if there is anyone she could meet there; Helena wanted to head straight to the library to collect information.

Walking into the library, she tried to see where she'd need to go for books for the work she decided to research. As she turned a corner to go to a wing that contained Greek writings, a gentleman walked up to her. "Pardon me, are you Helena -"

"Do I know you?" Helena answered, wondering who knew her name and wondering if she was not allowed there.

"I'm sorry, I'm a friend of Antony's, and he told me that his girl Helena is in town and would be coming to the library today."

She let a moment of silence before answering. "I'm not his girl, but I am Helena."

"Oh," he answered. "Well, if you need anything at all, please feel free to track me down. My name is Pedibastet, and there are a few other people working here who knew of you being here, so I'm sure anyone can help you out."

"Thank you, I was just going to pull some books from authors like Sophocles and Socrates, or even some of Plato's writings."

"Helena, this section back here," the gentleman said as he walked further forward and turned right into a new wing with Helena following, "has Greek work from writers as far back in time as Homer. Do you need help finding anything in particular?"

"No, I'd like to just do some reading and take some notes," she answered, holding her tablet.

"There are extra ink wells at the tables over there, so good luck with your work."

"Thank you, Pedibastet," Helena said, as she started walking toward the aisles of books to see what her choices were.

Hesiod	Anacreon	Pindar	Lysias	
Alcaeus	Simonides	Hecataeus	Aristophanes	Aristotle
Sappho	Theognis	Sophocles	Herodotus	Menander
Archilochus	Thespis	Homer	Thucydides	Plato
Aesop	Aeschylus	Euripides	Xenophon	Dyskolos
Thales	Bacchylides	Socrates	Demosthenes	

She turned one corner and started reading titles of authors in the books set in rows on the shelves, listed in order of the dates of the writings.

Helena grabbed two volumes from Plato's work and was about to grab a book from Socrates, when Pedibastet walked from aisle to aisle to find her. "Helena, we just received a copied set of books from the philosopher/mathematician Aristotle. I don't know what you're looking for, but there -"

"What do you have. I want to see them."

Pedibastet saw Helena's eyes turn to saucers when he mentioned Aristotle. "Yes, these books were apparently in a vault until about 100 years ago, and they have been in a library in Athens. Before they were taken and brought to Rome, a scribe made a copy of the writings, and we were just able to get a copy of the volumes. So we have around 25 books."

Where are they? I'd like to look them over, please. And thank you."

They walked over to where the collection of books was held, and Helena immediately grabbed **Nicomachean Ethics**. "I might take **Magna Moralia** after I read this."

"Good first choice. I've heard people say that **Nicomachean Ethics** is usually favored over **Eudemian Ethics**."

"I've got plenty of work to do right now, with these other two books I first took. But thank you for letting me know about Aristotle's writings here in the library."

"Not a problem at all. What are you studying for?"

"I..." Helena didn't know what to answer, because the ideas she just created in her head was that she wanted to write, but she knew that as a woman her writings would be ignored. "I'm collecting writings and data for future work on a book."

"Does the writer have anything in the library?" Pedibastet asked.

"He doesn't, as of yet, I think he has just been collecting essays."

Oh. Maybe I know of his writings. What's his name?"

Helena had to quickly think of her pen name. "...Agathangelos Alcaeus is his writing name."

"Strength, and an angelic messenger - wonderful name for his work. I've never heard of the name, but I'll keep an eye out for it."

"Well, I should get to work for him, but thank you for everything."

Pedibastet smiled and went back to the other hall where he was originally working, and Helena turned to the row of tables so she could read and starting taking notes on her tablet for future work. As soon as she sat down, she pulled the pen from the holder and gave it some ink so she could write down her first thing in her notes. At

the top and center on the page, she wrote 'Agathangelos Alcaeus', because she just gave herself a name for her future work.

The first thing she did was start reading over **Nicomachean Ethics**. She scribbled notes, and started immediately generating theories of moral and sound treatments for women who have been abused by men.

“...and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (for at that rate the process would go on to infinity, so that our desire would be empty and vain), clearly this must be the good and the chief good. Will not the knowledge of it, then, have a great influence on life? Shall we not, like archers who have a mark to aim at, be more likely to hit upon what is right?”

Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics book 1 chapter 2

Helena knew that women were taught to be there for men, and they were taught to not fight back; she knew that women would not want to stand up for themselves, but something would have to be done if women would not be hurt from men in the future.

She had to stop and pull back from the table. She put her hand over her mouth. All she thought about was a forceful attack by a man to a woman, but this didn't happen to her. He just gave her liquor. “I know I don't drink,” Helena thought, but there is no crime in drinking the way she did. Or the way Lana did, who drank more than her.

Wait, she thought, Antony was pushing the wine of Lana more than her; she remembered that much. But why? Helena thought all along it was because he wanted the two of them to have fun, but then it occurred to her that Antony didn't have to worry about making any noises to wake Lana because she had passed out on the other mat.

It then clicked in Helena's mind. It was his intentional effort to make her roommate pass out so no one would stop him from doing what he thought he could do to Helena.

When she realized this, the thought made her sick.

Then she realized there were many ways people could be using their power to gain more power, but she was sure that there'd be no allowance for hurting others to achieve your own happiness. She happened to have **Nicomachean Ethics** in front of her, and this would only be one more scrap of evidence she would need to know that what was done to her was wrong.

She knew she couldn't tell anyone about it, she'd be forced to marry him - which she did not want. Maybe her writing would be her only way to win her rights back.

Days after their arrival, Helena let Antony know that she did not want to see him; although he did not understand why, Antony had no choice but to let her go. During the next three months Helena worked in the library feverishly with help from Pedibastet and other men who worked at the library like Eutropius and Paramonos, and especially Ariston, a transcriber for book printings. After reading extensively from Aristotle, Pythagoras, a little writing from Parmenides. She tried to find writings from

Anaxagoras and Anaximander, and during this time she learned to match writing styles to these philosophers and construct a number of essays on philosophy in reaction to non-violent behavior.

She made a point to make sure her references were not focused on treatment specifically, but underlying these readings, they could be used to help women as well. She managed through circulars to post smaller portions of some of her essays in common places so people could view them, and she even heard people talking about seeing the notes and reading them when they were in market near the postings.

One mid-week day in the library Helena found Ariston and asked him about his press capabilities.

"I don't work at a printer and declare what gets printed and distributed, but I transcribe things for those who need the type before printing," Ariston said.

"Oh," Helena said almost under her breath.

"What do you need it for?"

Helena looked up at him and asked, "Have you heard of Agathangelos Alcaeus?"

"...Yeah, I've seen postings of his around town. Alcaeus is a good writer, but I - wait - why did you ask me about him?"

"I've been taking notes for him and he has been writing in his spare time."

"Why doesn't he take the notes?"

"I don't think he has the time, Ariston. Besides, I don't mind doing the work and helping him out."

Ariston leaned back, and then moved forward to ask Helena his next question more personally. "You know, I do know people at the presses, and I think they'd like to get a hold of his works - especially the presses that do textbook printings. They might like his work. I can talk to them to see if they want his writing, or if they want to meet with him."

Helena couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. "I ... I'm sure he'd be thrilled ... He likes to lead a solitary life and he doesn't get out to talk to people, I'm sure I can talk to him about this, but he might want me to do his representing, but I can give you anything of his writings and do anything I can to help."

"Sure, that would be great."

"I could get rough copies of his writings for you, but I may only have one copy of some of the essays."

"Helena, I can transcribe anything, so I could probably make duplicates of everything so he doesn't have to lose his copy."

"Oh Ariston, that's wonderful. When would you like the writings?"

Ariston smiled. "Whenever you would like to give them to me."

Helena was too thrilled and said, "Name your time and place."

"...I can take you out to dinner and get these papers for transcribing."

"Let me give you notes to show you where I live," she answered, as she kept smiling and turned to a blank page to place directions on.

a (fe)male behind bars

January 29, production room, Seattle Magazine

For only two weeks she had been preparing for this interview. She struggled to get it approved at the magazine she worked for. See, Chris Hodgkins was a flash from the past, there was no current interest, no timelessness in doing an article on her. In fact, she knew from people who have checked on her whereabouts that she was just living in an apartment on her own, occasionally working, usually not in politics or her usual seminars. The public forget about her anyway - no one wanted to hear what she had to say anymore. Not that she had fallen out of favor with the American public - in fact, she was loved by most women when she decided to leave the public eye. If anything, the American public had fallen out of favor with her.

But Melanie wanted to write about her, find out why she left, why she really left. The editors knew Chris didn't grant a single interview since she decided to leave her work in the women's rights move-

ment. Besides, even if she got the interview, Chris knew how to deal with the media, with audiences, and she would probably manipulate Melanie into asking only what she wanted asked.

But the writer said she was sure there was something more, she could feel it in her bones, and the editors always told her to follow that feeling, so please let her do it now. So the editors and the high-ups told her to try to get the interview, and get back to them with her progress at that task.

They expected to never hear about the matter again.

But she came back to them not one week later, saying one phone call was all it took. She called Chris directly, and not only did this elusive leader grant her an interview, but in Chris' own home. Editors were a bit stunned. They let her go ahead with the interview, told her to focus on the "where are they now," "why did she leave" angles, and they'll put together a long piece for a future issue. A long fluff-piece, they thought, but they had to let her go ahead with it, after having no faith in her ability to get an interview.

Maybe it was just because no one tried to get an interview with her anymore, the writer thought. Maybe the editors were right, that there's no story here, at least not anymore. But now, even after feeling this fear which began to grow into a dread, she had to go through with it. She had to research this woman, inside and out, and talk to her. See what makes her tick. What made her decide to give it all up.

And the more she looked, the more questions she had. Maybe it was the journalist inside her, to question everything put in front of you, but she couldn't get those questions out of her head.

writer's cassette tape diary entry, February 11

I didn't know what I was getting into when I decided to interview her, Chris Hodgkins, **feminist leader**. I did all the research I could, but for some reason I still don't know where to start, and I have to walk into her apartment tonight.

The more I studied her, the more I was interested. She became a prominent figure in the **women's movement** when she wrote her first book, *A Woman Behind Bars*. The theory was that all women in our society were behind bars, in a sense, that they were **forced into a role** of looking beautiful, into the role of mother for children, servant for husband, employee for boss, **sexual object** for single (well, probably all) men.

The chapter that interested me the most was the one on how women adorn themselves in our society in order to please men. Women put on **make-up**, they grow **long hair** and **long nails**, both difficult to work with. They **shave their legs**, they **shave their armpits**. They **tweeze their eyebrows** - they pull hair out of their face from the follicle. Perfume behind the knees, at the ankles, at

the chest and neck, in the hair. **The list goes on.**

But that's not even the point of all of this. The thing is, a few years ago she managed to pull together the majority of twenty- and thirty-something women out there into her cause. **Everyone loved her,** in a strange sort of way. She had a **great command over audiences.** She would hold rallies in New York, then San Francisco, then Chicago, and before you knew it, **everyone was talking about her,** she was running seminars all around the country, she was appearing on morning talk shows. She was the **first real leader in the feminist movement,** a movement which for years was felt in everyone but laid dormant because **it had no Hitler.**

Did I say Hitler? **I just meant he was a good leader.** I didn't mean she was Hitler, not at all, she's not like that, she's not even calling anyone into action, she's just telling people to **educate themselves.** She's not even telling people to change, because she figures that if she can educate them, they would want to change anyway. And usually more **radical** feminists and lesbians are leery of that, they want more action - and she doesn't do that, and they still support her. A movement needs a strong leader, and she was it.

Chris is an interesting looking woman. You'd think she was a **les-bian** by her appearance - she was tall, somewhat built, but not to look

tough, just big. She had chin-length hair, which seems a little long for her, but it looks like she has just forgotten to cut it in a while, and not like she wants to look sexy with it. She almost looks like a little boy. Sharp bones in her face, and big, round eyes.

That was all I knew before I started doing research on her. I started looking into her childhood first, found out that her parents were killed in a robbery when she was fourteen, so she started high school in a small town where her aunt and uncle lived. Her aunt died a year later, and she lived with her uncle until she moved out and went to college. Her uncle died a year before she began to gain fame. In essence, there was no family of hers that I could talk to, to find out from if she played with **Barbie Dolls** with her best friend in her bedroom or played in the ravine in the back yard **with the other boys** from all over the neighborhood. To see if her **theories** were right - even on her. All of that was lost to me.

She took honors classes in high school, kept to herself socially. In fact, most of her classmates didn't know **whether or not she was a girl**, she looked so boyish. Even the other girls in her gym class didn't know sometimes, I mean, they knew she was a girl because she was in gym class with them, but she never even changed in front of them. She wouldn't take a shower and she would change in a bathroom stall.

So I started hearing things like this, little things from old classmates, but

as soon as they started telling me how they **really felt** about her, how they thought she was **strange**, they would then clam up. But it was in my head then; I started wondering what happened in her early childhood that made her so **introverted** in high school. Maybe the deaths of her parents did it to her, made her become so anti-social. Maybe the loss of her aunt, the only other maternal figure in her life, made her become so masculine. It was a theory that began to make more and more sense to me, but how was I supposed to ask her such a question? How was I supposed to ask her if her parents **molested** her before they died, and that's why she's got this **anger** inside of her that comes out seminar after seminar?

the interview, Friday, February 11

The apartment building was relatively small, on the fringes of some rough neighborhoods. Not to say that she couldn't take care of herself, she had proven that she could years ago. The interviewer followed the directions explicitly to get to the apartment, and Chris' door was on the side. She knocked on the door.

Snap one, that was the chain. Click one, that was the first dead bolt. Another click, and the door was free. With a quick jerk the door was pulled open half-way by a strong, toned forearm. Chris stood there, waiting for the interviewer to make the official introduction.

"Hi, I'm Melanie, from Seattle Magazine," she blurted out, as she tried to kick the snow off her boots and held out her hand. Chris nudged her head toward the inside and told her to come in. The interviewer followed.

She followed Chris down the stairs, looking for clues to her psyche in her clothes, in her form. Grey pants. Baggy. Very baggy. Button-down shirt. White. Sleeves rolled up, make a note of that. Not very thin, but not fat - just kind of there, without much form. Doc Maartens. She had big feet. She was tall, too - maybe five feet, ten inches. But her feet looked huge. The interviewer stared at her feet as they walked down the dark hall. I'll bet no one has looked at her feet before, she thought.

Chris lived in one of the basement apartments, so they walked past the laundry room, the boiler room, and then reached a stream of tan doors. Hers was the third. Chris opened the door, the interviewer followed.

She looked around. A comfortable easy chair, rust colored, worn. Walls - covered with **bookshelves**. Books on Marx, Kafka, Rand. History Books. Science books. **No photos. No pictures.** A small t.v. in the corner on a table, the cord hanging down, unplugged. Blankets on the floor. **Keep looking,** the interviewer thought. A standing lamp by the chair. The room was yellow in the light. Where were the windows? Oh, she forgot for a moment, they're in the basement. Sink, half full.

"May I use the washroom?" she asked, and without saying a word, Chris pointed it out to her.

Check the bathroom, the interviewer thought. **No make-up. Makes sense.** Generic soap, organic shampoo. Razor. Toothbrush. Colgate bottle. Hairbrush. Rubber band, barrette. Yeah, Chris usually sometimes her hair back, at least from what the interviewer can remember from the photographs.

"Wanna beer?" Chris yells from the refrigerator to the bathroom. "No, thanks," the interviewer says. She turns on the water.

She wants to look through the trash, see what she can find. No, that's too much, she thought, besides, what's going to be in the trash in the washroom that would surprise her so? Nothing, she was sure of it, and from then on she made a point of avoiding even looking in the direction of the trash can.

This was getting out of hand, she thought. There was no story here. Nothing out of the ordinary, other than the fact that Chris decided to give up her cause, and now she's living life in this tiny, dark basement apartment.

The interviewer walked out into the yellow living room. Chris was stretched out in a chair, legs apart, drinking a beer with no label.

"I really appreciate you offering me this time to talk to you."

"No problem."

The interviewer sat there, suddenly so confused. Chris was terse. She didn't want to talk, yet she accepted the interview and offered her home as the meeting place. They sat in silence for a moment, a long moment.

"What kind of beer are you drinking?"

"My own." Chris sat for a moment, almost waiting for the interviewer to ask what she meant. "You see, the landlord gave me some keys for a storage room on this floor, so I converted it into a sort of micro-brewery. I've come up with this one -" she held the bottle to the interviewer - "and another one, a pretty sweet dark beer. I call this one 'Ocean Lager.'"

The interviewer **felt she had to** take the bottle. "Ocean Lager, that's a nice name," and she took a small sip and passed the bottle back to Chris.

"Yeah, I used to be a photographer, back when I was in high school and college, and I loved **working in the dark**, timing things, and I loved **the stench** of the chemicals. I've given up on the photography years ago, so I thought that this would be a hobby like that. You know, it smells, it's dark, you have to add things the right way and wait the right amount of time. I like it. And it's cheaper, too," she said, and with that she took another swig. "Cheaper than photography as well as buying beer from the store."

The interviewer tried to listen to her voice. It was **raspy, feminine, almost sexy**, but it was very **low**; she didn't know if she'd ever heard a woman's voice this low before.

"Looking over your career," the interviewer finally started, "I didn't know why you just decided one day to quit. You had **everything** going right for you. People listened to you. What happened?"

She thought she had dropped a bomb.

No one ever got a straight answer for that question.

“Well, it was my time to go. I couldn’t take the spotlight anymore. I wanted to become who I really was, not what the world wanted me to be, not what the world perceived me as. I still haven’t done that. I haven’t become myself yet.”

“When were you yourself? Or were you ever?”

“I suppose I was, when I was little, but by the time I got to high school, I started **hiding** from everyone, because no one seemed to want to know who I really was. **I didn’t fit in** as who I really was. So then I started with my seminars, started trying to work my way to success, and people started to like me. But in all of that time that I was working on **women’s rights**, I wasn’t who I really am deep down inside. Not that I didn’t **believe in the cause**, but I was doing it because it seemed like the best route to success. And when I reached the top, people still wanted more out of me, more that I wasn’t ready to give. I wanted to take some of myself back.”

“Have you gotten any of yourself back since you’ve left the spotlight?”

“Some.” Chris paused. “I can sit at home by myself and act the way I want to, without having to **project a certain image for everyone else**. People have begun to leave me alone.” She paused, then looked at the interviewer. “Not that I consider you and interruption; I wouldn’t have accepted the

interview if I didn't want you here. In fact, I think I really wanted to be able to tell someone how I feel, what I've gone through. I don't talk to many people nowadays. This is like a confessional."

Melanie wondered for a moment what Chris was planning to confess.

Chris paused, swirled her beer in her bottle, then looked up. "Sometimes I think of getting a pet. I'd get a cat, but then I think of this stereotypical image of an old woman in an apartment alone with forty cats, where she keeps picking a different one up and asking, 'you love me, don't you?' I don't want to be like that. Maybe a dog. But a pet requires too much care, and I think I'd end up depending on it more than I should. I should have another human being in my life, not an animal. But I'm so afraid I'll be alone."

"Why do you think you'll be alone?"

"I carry this baggage around with me everywhere. People know me as Chris Hodgkins, and that's not who I am. I don't want anyone liking me because I'm Chris Hodgkins. That's not real. Chris isn't real, not the Chris everyone knows. The only way I could escape her is to go off to another country in a few years, maybe, and start life all over again."

"Isn't that a scary thought, though? I mean, you could ride on your fame for a while longer, make more money, be more secure. You wouldn't have to work as hard at anything. And people respect you."

"People respect a person that I'm not. Okay, maybe that person is a

part of me, but **it's not all of me**. The world doesn't know the whole story."

"What is the whole story?" the interviewer asked. By this time she put her pen and paper down and wasn't writing a word. She was **lost in the conversation**, like the many people who had heard her speak before. Suddenly she felt she was thrown into the middle of a philosophical conversation, and she was completely enthralled. "Can anyone know the whole story about another person?" she asked.

"Do you really want to know my story?" Chris asked.

"I wouldn't be asking if I didn't."

"You realize that if I tell you, it goes off the record. Besides, you won't be able to substantiate anything I say. More than that no one would believe it, especially not your editors."

At this point, she didn't even care about the interview. "Off the record. **Fine.**"

the confession, February 11, 10:35 p.m.

Chris sat there for a minute, legs apart, elbows on her knees, beer hanging down between her legs. She kept swirling the liquid in the glass. She took the last two gulps, then put the bottle on the ground between her feet.

"I wanna take a bath," she said, and with that she got up and walked toward the bathroom. Halfway there she stopped, turned around, and

walked to the refrigerator. It creaked open, she pulled out another beer, let the door close while she twisted the cap off. She walked into the bathroom.

The interviewer could hear the water running in the bathtub. She didn't know what to do. Was she supposed to sit there? Leave?

Chris popped her head out of the bathroom. "I hope you don't mind, but I really need to **relax**. Besides, it's cold in here. Sorry if the cold is bothering you. We can continue the interview in the bathroom, if you want," and she threw her head back into the bathroom.

Melanie didn't know what to think. She edged her way to the bathroom door. When she looked in, she was Chris with her hair pulled back, lighting one candle. "The curtain will be closed. **Is this okay with you?**" Chris asked.

Melanie paused. "Sure," she said. **She sounded confused.**

"Okay, then just wait outside until I'm in the bathtub. I'll yell through the door when you can come in." And Chris closed the door, and the interviewer leaned against the door frame. Her note pad and pen sat in the living room.

A few minutes passed, or maybe it was a few hours. The water finally silenced. She could hear the curtain close. "You can come in now."

The interviewer opened the door. The curtain to the bathtub was closed. There was one candle lit on the counter next to the sink, and one glowing from the other side of the curtain. The mirror was fogged with steam. Chris' clothes were sitting in a pile on the floor. There was no where

to sit. The interviewer shut both seats from the toilet and sat down.

"Okay, I'm here," the interviewer said, as if she wanted Chris to recognize what an effort she went through. "Tell me your story." She almost felt as if **she deserved** to hear Chris' story at this point, that Chris had made her feel so **awkward** that she at least deserved her **curiosity satisfied**. She could hear little splashes from the tub.

"You still haven't asked me about my childhood. You're not a very good reporter, you know," Chris said, as if she wanted the interviewer to know that it didn't have to come down to this. "You could have found out a lot more about me before now."

They both sat there, **each silent**.

"It must have hurt when your **parents died**."

"**I suppose**. I didn't know how to take it."

"What was the effect of **both of your parents dying** at such an early age in your life on you?"

"I **was stunned**, I guess. What I remember most was that **my mother was strong**, but she **followed dad blindly**. And dad, he had his views - he was a political scientist - but no one took him seriously because he didn't have the background. He wasn't in the right circles. I just remember dad saying to mom, 'if only I had a different start, things would be different.' In essence, he wanted to be someone he wasn't. He failed because he was-

n't who he needed to be."

"Did it hurt you to see your father think of himself as a failure?"

"He had the choice. He knew what he wanted to do all of his life. He knew the conventional routes to achieving what he wanted - he knew what he needed to do. But he chose to take a different route, and people thought he didn't have the training he needed, that he didn't know what he was talking about. But he made that choice to take that different route. He could have become what he needed to in order to get what he wanted. But he didn't, and in the end, he never got anything."

"But you, you got what you wanted in your life, right?"

"Yes, but that was because I made the conscious choice to change into what I had to be in order to succeed. If I didn't make those changes, no one would have accepted my theories on human relations and no one would have listened to my speeches on women's rights."

"How did you have to change?"

The interviewer finally hit the nail on the head.

"I'm not ready to answer that question yet. Ask me later."

The interviewer paused, then continued.

"Okay, so your parents died and you had to move in with your aunt and uncle. How well did you know them?"

"Not at all. In fact, they didn't even know I existed. You

see, my father had no family in the States, he moved here from England, and he lost contact with all of his family. Mom's family didn't want her marrying dad, I still don't know why, so they **disowned her** when she married him. She never spoke to any of them. In fact, my mother's sister didn't even know my parents died until the state had to research my family's history to see who I should be **pushed off on to**. When my aunt and uncle took me in, it was the first time they ever saw me. It was the first time the even knew I existed."

The interviewer could hear the water moving behind the curtain, and then Chris continued.

"My parents were in New Jersey, and my aunt and uncle were in Montana. It was a complete **life change** for me."

"How did you get along with other kids from school?"

"Before my parents died, fine. Once I changed schools, **I didn't fit in**. I didn't know how to fit in. I thought it would be too fake if I tried to act like all the other girls, even the ones who were like me, who didn't fit in. **I just didn't know how to be a girl**. I wanted to, and I tried, but it was so hard.

"I just wanted to be looked at as a girl. I didn't want anyone to question it."

"Why would they?"

"I looked so boyish. **I didn't go on dates**. Because I was so anti-social."

“Do you think that has something to do with the fact that your mother died, then a year later your aunt died? They were your maternal figures, and you lost them both at a crucial age.”

“Yes. But my aunt **didn't know how to deal with me.** She never had children. She left me alone most of the time. She knew that was what I wanted. I remember once she asked me if I had gotten my period yet in my life. I didn't, but I didn't want her to think that, so I said yes, so the next day she bought me pads. I didn't know what to do with them. The day after that I told her that I would buy them myself from now on, so she didn't have to, but I thanked her anyway. That way I knew she would think that I was still buying them, even if that box in my closet was the same box that she bought me.

“Relations with her were strange. And when she died, I only had classmates and my uncle to take cues from. I wanted to be like the girls in school, so I tried not to take cues from my uncle. I tried to avoid being like my uncle. But sometimes I couldn't help it.”

“Why did you want so hard **to be a girl?** Did you want to fit in? Or do you think it had more to do with your mom?”

“No, it wasn't that at all. There wasn't a part of me that said I needed to be **feminine.** But at that age I knew what I wanted to do with my life, and that was work in political science and sociology - specifically, in **women's rights.** I knew I wanted that, and I knew that I'd have a better chance of succeeding in that field if I was -

well, if I was a girl."

"But you were a girl, no matter how much you didn't fit in."

And that was when Chris decided to drop the bomb.

"But that's exactly it, Melanie - I'm - well - I'm not **a woman.**"

"There are sometimes when I don't feel **feminine** - when I want to go out and **drink beer,** I know what you -"

"No, you're not listening to me," Chris cut in. "I'm not **a woman.** I'm a **man.** My name is Chris, not Christine.

I am a man, I have a penis, I've got **testosterone** running through my body. Just not a lot."

"You don't really expect me to -"

"Look, when my parents died, I knew what I wanted to do with my life - I knew before they died. But I also knew that I wouldn't be taken seriously in the field unless I was a **woman.** So at fourteen, when they died,

I had a clean slate. I told everyone **I was a girl.** I was given to my aunt and uncle **as a girl.** I went to my new school **as a girl.**

"And I went to gym classes and I didn't have **breasts,** and I had to hide from all the other girls. Although I was boyish-looking, I wasn't manly, so I got away with it. I shaved only occasionally, only when I had to. And once I got out of high school, acting like a girl was easier. No one questioned who I said I was. **People accepted me** as a woman.

"Then I started doing the work I did, and people loved me. I got a lot more fame for it than I ever anticipated. I was **succeeding.** It was wonderful.

"But then it hit me - I'm all alone, and I can tell no one about who I really am. I've been doing this all my life, and people would look at me like I was a freak if I went out and told them the truth now. I'm a man, and I like women, I'm not gay, and I could never tell any women that exists that has ever heard of me the truth, because then they will no longer trust me or anything I have ever said regarding women's rights. I would take the whole movement backwards if I told the world who I really was."

"That you were a man."

"You still don't believe me, do you? I'm telling you because you wanted to know, and because I needed to tell someone. But I can't destroy women's chances of being treated with respect in this country by telling everyone."

"So what you're telling me is that at age fourteen you decided to become a woman so you could do the work you wanted to do in your life."

"Yes."

"But that's a lot to do to yourself, especially at fourteen. What made you decide to do it?"

"My mother's strength, but her submission to my father, made me want to go into the field. My father's desire to do what he wanted, but his failure to achieve it because he wasn't what the world wanted, made me decide to become

a **woman**. I realized then that I could never succeed in this field if I wasn't one.

"And look at the success I've had! Look at all of the people I managed to **bring together!** I was famous, people were reading my books, people wanted my opinions. I was succeeding.

"But even with all my success, people still expected a **messenger for the welfare of women** all over the world to be a woman - even the other women expected this. **No one would have listened to me** for a second if I was a man."

"And so you stopped because -"

"Because there's a price you pay by becoming **what the world wants you to be**. My father knew that, and he didn't want to pay that price. He didn't, and he failed at what he wanted to do. I was willing to pay the price, I made the sacrifices, and I actually beat the odds and succeeded. But then I realized that I **lost myself** in the process. I'm a man, and look at me. People think I'm a woman. I wear fake breasts in public. I have no close relationships. I have **nothing to call my own** other than my success. Well, after a while, that wasn't enough. So this is part of my long road to **becoming myself again**.

"I'm going to have to change my identity and move to another country, I'm going to have to start all over again, I'm going to have to more com-

pletely separate myself from working on **women's rights,** but it's the only way I can do it. I'll know I did what I wanted, even if it cost a lot. The next few years will now have to be me correcting all that I changed in myself in order to succeed. Correcting all my mistakes.

"I want to have a family someday. How am I supposed to be a father? There are so many things I have to change. **I couldn't go on** telling the world I was a woman any more. But I couldn't tell them I wasn't one, so I just had to fade away, until I didn't matter anymore."

The interviewer sat there in silence.

"Do you have any other questions?" Chris asked.

The interviewer sat there, confused, not knowing if she should believe Chris or not. She could **rip the curtain open and see for herself,** she thought, but either way they would both be embarrassed.

"No."

"Then you can go," Chris said. "I want to get out of this bath."

Melanie walked out of the bathroom, closed the door. Then she started thinking of all the little things, not **changing with the other girls** in school, looking so boyish, the **low voice,** the way she sat, her **feet,** the razor, the **toilet seats.** Could she be telling the truth? Could he be telling the truth,

the interviewer thought, is Chris a she or a he? She didn't know anymore. But it seemed to make sense. Her birth certificate would be the only thing that would prove it to anyone, unless she somehow got it changed.

She could have had her birth certificate changed, the interviewer thought, and therefore there would be no real proof that Chris was lying, other than **looking at her naked**. It was such a preposterous story, yet it seemed so possible that she tended to believe it. It didn't matter anyway, because she couldn't write about it, proof or not, she offered this information off the record. She grabbed her pencil and note pad from the living room and walked to the door.

Just as she was **about to leave**, Chris walked out from the bathroom. She walked over to the front door to open it for the interviewer. Melanie walked through the doorway, without saying a word, as Chris said, "Good story, wasn't it?"

The interviewer turned around once more, but didn't get to see Chris' face before the door was shut. Once again, she was **left with her doubts**. She walked down the hall.

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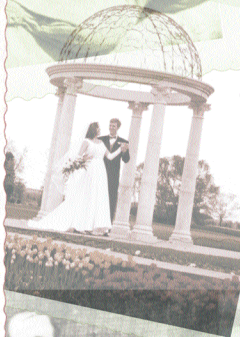
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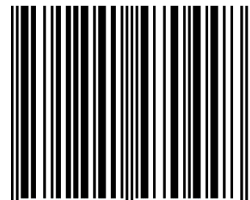


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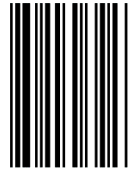


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