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THE NIGHT ENTERTAINMENT

by

Angela Sloan

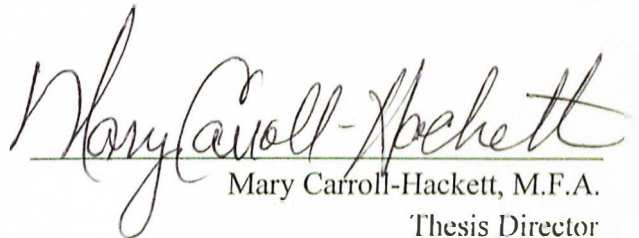
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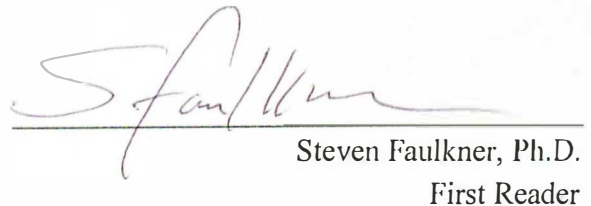
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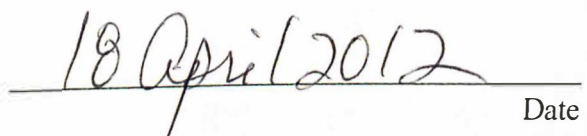
Department of English and Modern Languages

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Mary Carroll-Hackett, M.F.A.
Thesis Director


Steven Faulkner, Ph.D.
First Reader


David Magill, Ph.D.
Second Reader


Date

THE NIGHT ENTERTAINMENT

BY

ANGELA SLOAN

Longwood University

Spring 2012

Angela Sloan. THE NIGHT ENTERTAINMENT. (Under the direction of Mary Carroll-Hackett) Department of English and Modern Languages, April 2012.

The purpose of this thesis is to observe hidden female lives. It is my intention, within these fifteen works of short fiction, to examine the nature of those who seek power and protection through the artifice that is physical beauty, youth, and glamour, specifically through the wearing of makeup and glamorous clothing. Many of the women within these stories are also consumed with material wealth; they use that artifice as a shield from the reality of the environment in which they live, whether it is urban or rural. Sometimes they never even realize to what degree artificiality impacts their daily lives. In "Silk Powder," Jerry eats the cosmetic powder belonging to her lover, Margo. In "A Clown A Day," Pauline finds sexual satisfaction and compatibility with a man dressed as a clown. *The Night Entertainment* is a collection about people generally regarded as misfits. I write primarily female characters, many of whom are lesbian or bisexual. One of my overarching questions is why so many women hide their true selves behind masks. Issues dealing with sexuality are also addressed in these stories. I have been inspired by people living within novels and short stories: they have been some of my dearest friends and have kept me company throughout my life. One of my struggles in writing this collection has been creating characters who could fall into behavior that may be considered by some as stereotypical. It is my goal to have written real people, and not merely archetypes. I write fragile women who are searching for strength and women who do not realize their own power. Writers who have encouraged me have been as varied and diverse as Jackie Collins and Flannery O'Connor. Collins' decadent, fabulous bitches and O'Connor's recognition of the freaks – which I say with love and not contempt – and not judging

them, but treating them with dignity and humanity has been an inspiration. Fran Lebowitz sees people as they really are in her nonfiction essays and Terry Southern's dark humor and deviance is always exciting. William Faulkner's highly rhetorical sentences are some that I attempt to model mine after and the glamour, tenderness, and vulnerability of Truman Capote's fiction has greatly influenced my own characters and sense of storytelling. The dramas of Tennessee Williams are hugely influential: there is sensitivity, beauty and eccentricity to spare. Pedro Almodóvar's stories of gay life and his inclusion of misfit characters is something that is evident in my work, as are the characters of Martin Scorsese: he is never afraid to tell the truth.

This is dedicated to my mother and father, and to my sisters.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. Steven Faulkner and Dr. David Magill for their time and for their support. I would also like to thank Mary Carroll-Hackett for her kindness, patience, wisdom, sincerity, humor and encouragement.

Not a single word of this manuscript could have been written without the support of Katherine.

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Blue-Movie Baby Doll

Stephanie swallowed a handful of shiny red capsules from the plastic bottle of Phenobarbital. Todd had given them to her. They were only meant to be taken in small quantities, and in emergencies relating to anxiety – a condition that plagued her quite often, and was growing more frequent as the days passed. She ate all of them - one by one - by piercing each red jellybean with a hat-pin and then swallowing it with a gulp of champagne from a crystal flute. After removing each blue curler from her orange hair, she swiped her cheeks with a giant brush dipped in NARS Orgasm blush; her eyes she dusted over with blue eye-shadow and her red lips she glossed with her fingertip, after dipping it into a pot of her favorite makeup: Vaseline. She dialed Todd's number with her greased finger and waited for the sound of his husky voice. He answered after three rings.

“Hello, Dr. Wallace here.”

“Todd? Todd? Is that you, darling? I've missed you so much,” she cooed. Her twenty-two year old voice grew hushed and shaky – which made her sound even more like a scared child than normal.

“Stephanie – what's wrong with you? Have you lost your shit? I waited for you today. I packed a suitcase and drove out to the spot at Hollywood Reservoir like we planned. Why weren't you there? Did you get held up on the set or something?”

“I was fired. I didn't meet you because I couldn't decide on anything to wear. I've never run away with a married man before,” she mumbled. She laughed.

“What the fuck is so funny? I'd really like you to fill me in on that one. You selfish little actress.”

“Oh Todd, sweet baby doll, please don’t be angry with me. I’ve been so confused lately; I feel as if it’s all falling apart.” She could barely speak. “I took them all: the pills you gave me.”

“You took them all? Have you completely flipped? Don’t do anything – just try to stay awake. Don’t fall asleep. Take a cold shower. I’ll be right over.”

She dropped the telephone receiver to the champagne-stained shag carpet; her crying made her eye makeup run down her rose-painted cheeks in black rivulets; she was lying naked on her unmade bed of white sheets when Todd arrived with his leather medical bag.

* * *

Stephanie awoke to the sound of Todd humming “Crimson and Clover.” He lathered his face with shaving cream and removed one of Stephanie’s pink Lady Bic razors from the medicine cupboard. He began to shave the black stubble from his handsome chin and continued humming.

“What time is it? I feel like I’ve been asleep for a hundred years,” Stephanie said while yawning – exposing a mouthful of capped teeth.

“It’s time for me to go to the office. I’m late as it is,” Todd said.

“Why is my throat so sore?” Stephanie took a sip of water from a glass that sat on her nightstand. “It’s like I swallowed gasoline.”

“I had to pump your stomach last night. Don’t you remember that little stunt you pulled, nearly offing yourself? You polished off half a bottle of Phenobarbital with a bottle of champagne as a chaser. There are better ways of getting my attention, Steph.”

"I'm so glad I impressed you. Got a cigarette?" Stephanie got out of bed and walked to the bathroom where Todd, tall, sturdy and handsome in a white Oxford shirt and black slacks, was shaving – carefully avoiding his thin black mustache.

"You really should stop smoking. I don't like the smell on your breath," he said.

"And you should stop cheating on your wife." Stephanie lifted the toilet seat and sat down.

"Don't pee in front of me. I hate it when you do that," he said.

"Stop being so silly; I'm going to *burst*. You should shave off that sleazy mustache while you're at it, Todd. You look like a pervert with that thing on your lip."

Stephanie flushed the toilet and stood in front of the bathroom's full-length mirror. She ran her hands over her flat stomach. The letter M, the first initial of a previous lover, was tattooed in black ink on her sharp hipbone. She had never told Todd what it stood for; they hated to talk of the personal, intimate details of their lives apart from each other. Stephanie knew Todd felt that he was the only man she ever had desired, even though the movies she had been forced to star in as of late had become little more than pornographic "art-house" pictures.

"Does your wife know I exist?" Stephanie twirled a strand of orange hair around her finger.

"Don't talk about my wife."

"Why are you so protective of her?"

Todd rinsed the pink razor under the spigot, splashed his face with water and toweled it dry.

“You wouldn’t be angry if I decided that I couldn’t do this, would you darling?”

Stephanie asked.

“I should’ve known that you’d act like a child.” Todd stomped out of the bathroom into Stephanie’s bedroom and sat down to pull on his black-and-white saddle shoes. He began knotting his raspberry-colored necktie, fouled up, and began again.

“Let me do that, Todd. You’re making a mess of it.”

“Don’t you *dare* touch me. Don’t come near me. Don’t look at me. You got that?”

“Calm down, Todd. Calm down or get the hell out of my house.” Stephanie slipped on a long, rainbow-colored caftan with translucent kimono sleeves.

“Get out? You don’t have to worry about that. I’m leaving! And I’m not coming back! You *selfish* little bitch!” Todd yanked off his sloppy necktie and stuffed it into his trouser pocket. He grabbed his leather bag from the pink velvet chair beside Stephanie’s bed and marched out of her bedroom and down the corridor.

Stephanie ran after him. She nearly tripped on her caftan as she flew down the stairs. “Todd! Don’t leave me!” She grabbed at his sleeve and clawed at his back. “I’ll die if you leave me alone,” she screamed. “I can’t bear my life without you. I don’t care about your wife. I want you to take me away from this shit hole. Please don’t leave me here alone.”

They kissed as Stephanie led Todd by his sleeve back into her house. She pulled her kimono up to her hips; she never wore underwear. Todd unbuckled his belt and pants and lay on top of her on the marble stairs. She wrapped her long thin legs around him as he made violent, furious thrusts into her, encouraging her to moan and scratch at his back as he bit into her shoulder. In that moment she imagined herself as a whore: a \$20.00

streetwalker whose cheeks were painted with cheap rouge. Todd had once told her about sneaking a prostitute into his dormitory while away at Princeton. She remembered the fingernail marks he had described seeing on the girl's buttocks and thighs and her bruised, split lip she wouldn't let him kiss.

"Go inside and pack your things. I'll pick you up when I get off from work tonight," Todd said while buckling his pants and smoothing his hair.

"I'll be ready. I need to get out of this town," she replied, pulling her kimono over her knees.

Todd drove away in his black Mercedes. Stephanie telephoned a taxi to come pick her up. She needed to purchase a few necessary items before Todd returned that evening. After tidying her appearance and grabbing her handbag and sunglasses, she was greeted by the sound of a honking automobile horn: her taxi had arrived.

"Melrose Avenue, West Hollywood," she announced to the African cabdriver.

Stephanie purchased silk scarves from Carolina Herrera's boutique, two cashmere cardigans from Marc Jacobs, an assortment of animal-printed wrap dresses by Diane von Fürstenberg, silk and lace lingerie from Agent Provocateur and a pair of silver and onyx cufflinks for Todd from Tiffany's. She stopped by Moon Nails for a manicure and by Wax for a Brazilian. She chose a shade of red entitled 'Sinful' for her fingernails and hummed along with the radio to Chris Isaak's cover of "Blue Moon" while the manicurist shaped and polished her nails.

* * *

She packed her new purchases into a Louis Vuitton suitcase, along with some other articles of clothing, shoes, toiletries, pills, a diaphragm, cosmetics, perfume,

cigarettes, her diary, and a copy of Fran Lebowitz's *Metropolitan Life*. She sat on the suitcase so that it would close and, with quite a lot of wiggling, forced its clasp to click shut. Sitting on the front steps of her home, puffing on an endless chain of French cigarettes wrapped in pink paper, she waited with her suitcase at her feet for what seemed like hours until Todd arrived in his black Mercedes. He was always late; she could count on that. When her pack of cigarettes was close to empty, Todd pulled his car into the driveway.

"Quit smoking? Fuck that," she mumbled to herself as she stubbed her pink cigarette out on the front porch step.

Stephanie walked to the car, slung her suitcase onto the backseat and slid in. She leaned toward Todd and kissed him on the lips, leaving a slick trace of Vaseline.

"You shaved your mustache. Just when I was starting to like it," she said.

"I thought you'd be pleased. I want to start over. Whatever you want, it's yours."

"That's the way it should be," Stephanie said while flashing a perfect white grin toward Todd and turning the radio dial.

Tommy James' voice rang out from the speakers: "Now I don't hardly know her, but I think I could love her, Crimson and Clover..."

"I've been humming this all day; I can't get it out of my head," Todd said.

Stephanie fingered the smooth patch of skin above Todd's lip, wiped the Vaseline from his mouth and grasped his hand. She noticed a thin white line on his left hand, in place of where his gold wedding band had been that morning.

"Let's go," she said. She let the music fall over her as they drove past the palm trees, strip malls and movie studios. Stephanie could smell his wife's perfume, Jean

Patou's Joy, on the upholstery and on Todd's clothes and in his hair. No one wears that scent anymore, she thought. He smiled and sang along with the voice on the radio. She sang too, all the while knowing it was only a song.

Silk Powder

Jerry dabbed her lips with a crimson stain, darkened her lashes with black mascara, rubbed her cheeks with a moist, pink balm, and sprayed perfume onto her neck, her chest, and into her hair. She blotted her lips with a Kleenex, wadded it into a ball, and tossed it over her shoulder. It missed the wicker wastebasket and landed on the speckled linoleum floor. The contents of her small medicine cabinet were scattered across the bathroom sink. A small greasy jar of Vaseline, a handful of rusted razor blades, one box of Fleet suppositories and a near-empty glass bottle of Shalimar, along with tubes, pots and sticks of makeup covered every surface. Stripping off her clothes and leaving them in a pile, she sat on the toilet and peed. Without bothering to flush or wash her hands, she raced into her bedroom and flopped onto her unmade bed of tangled white sheets.

She could not contain her excitement as she rolled around and kicked at the mattress with bare heels. Rifling through her closet of wire hangers, she chose a silky lavender slip-dress, and closed the door with a rattle. It was cool and fitted loose on her slender body; nothing she wore required a bra. She was rail-thin with narrow hips and a flat chest: she looked almost pre-pubescent, as opposed to her true age of twenty-seven. The dress had been given to her. It was stained with a tiny splotch of black ink and was, therefore, damaged merchandise: being one of Lloyd's of Lubbock's most trusted and hardworking shop girls had its perks. The slip's lacy hem rested on her suntanned thighs. Her long legs were fresh-shaven, smooth and perfumed with rose-scented lotion. The fancy black underwear she pulled on were a gift from her friend, Margo. Jerry's job, which surrounded her with luxurious things and gorgeous, wealthy women searching for

the perfect evening bag or pair of silk stockings, was enough to content her. She once pocketed a pair of pearl stud earrings, but felt too guilty to actually wear them in public.

She often pretended to be one of those confident, chic women with their shiny cars and billfolds crammed with crisp dollar bills and manicured lawns that surrounded large, clean homes full of children. Then she would look around her small, empty house and out the window at her scratched, dusty car. She would touch and smell the yellow, pink and blue blankets, booties and bonnets she crocheted for the children that she so wanted. She kept the baby clothes, along with a book of names, a rubber pacifier, some plastic bottles and a stuffed elephant-shaped toy in a cardboard box that sat on her closet's topmost shelf.

Startled by the sound of a doorbell buzzing, Jerry jaunted out of her bedroom and into the kitchen. The anticipated guest was Margo, her dearest friend and confidant since the day they met in church as children; she was also known as the town gossip, sexpot, and pawn shop owner. It was not uncommon for unsuspecting community members to find Margo swimming naked in their pools or munching on grapes at the local Winn-Dixie and then leaving without purchasing a single item. Margo was in possession of no real manners whatsoever, yet she believed herself to be the primmest and loveliest lady ever to wear pearls on Sunday - or pantyhose for that matter.

Jerry pushed the torn screen door open to allow Margo, dressed in a pink velveteen suit and puffing on a Pall Mall, into the sun-filled, Lysol-scented kitchen.

"I rang and rang. Have you been sleeping?" Margo asked.

"I was getting ready for your visit." Jerry leaned in for a kiss but Margo, unaware, walked past her to the kitchen table.

“Well, honey, you really should run a comb through your hair before answering the door; it’s a real bird’s nest. What if I were the paper boy or something? You’ll never find Mr. Right that way, Jerry.”

Margo stubbed out her half-smoked cigarette on a dish containing one half of a banana and mayonnaise sandwich and sat at the Formica table. She picked the banana pieces, one by one, off of a slice of Wonder Bread and licked the mayonnaise from each side. When she had completed her lapping, she placed the uneaten fragments onto the ash-strewn dish.

“Why would I want to find *Mr. Right*?” Jerry asked. Her voice cracked as she spoke and her eyes narrowed.

“It’s just an expression, Jerry darling. Nothing more than that.” Margo lit another cigarette and blew out the wooden match. The faint lines around her mouth, as well as the prominent veins in her hands, showed her age. The difference in the two women’s ages was only a few years, but Margo’s smoking and penchant for sunbathing aged her a few years more, which contrasted sharply with Jerry’s milk-fed, all-American, flower-child appearance.

“You want coffee with that?” Jerry asked as she combed her fingers through her long dark-brown hair and turned away from Margo. Jerry noticed a mouse run across the floor.

“Folgers?”

“All I have is Sanka.”

“I guess that’ll do then. Even though I’ve never been able to drink that cheap stuff; my stomach is just *too* delicate,” Margo said as she licked mayonnaise from her

fingertips. She took a small rounded cosmetic case from her faux-leather handbag and, after removing its complimentary gilded brush, dusted her cheeks and décolletage with such an abundance of powder that an ivory cloud filled the air and settled into Margo's blonde Aqua Net-coated hair.

Jerry spooned a generous amount of instant coffee into two white coffee cups and placed them on the kitchen table, along with tablespoons, folded paper napkins and a tin of star-shaped cookies. She set a kettle filled with water on the stove to simmer.

"You need sugar, Margo?" Jerry asked while taking a cookie.

"Aren't I sweet enough?" Margo laughed as she picked bits of lint and fuzz from her pink velveteen suit. Jerry could smell her from the sink: Margo always smelled of peppermint, tobacco, powder, and perspiration. Margo's scent lingered for days on Jerry's cotton bed-sheets. She only laundered them after the smell faded – after she had breathed it all in.

Jerry ran her hand over her satiny lavender breast to still her heart. "No. I mean, I just realized that I'm all out of sugar."

"That's all right; I need to watch my sugar intake anyway. Or so Dr. Perro tells me. You should put those cookies away, Jerry; my waistline can't tolerate them."

Jerry filled the coffee cups with hot water and stirred. "You saw Dr. Perro recently?" she asked, hoping Margo could smell the perfume she had splashed on for her.

"Sure. I stopped by his office this morning - you know I never bother to phone in and set an appointment - but he always seems to make room for me. Anyway, I really needed someone to take a peek at this kooky mole I've got on my shoulder-blade because the red backless I'm wearing to Sam's banquet next week will *not* cover it and I needed

to know whether or not I should have it snipped or something. Doc said it looked A-OK – I’ll just have to cover it with some Pan-Cake so that I can wear the backless. One week is *simply* not enough time to find a new dress. It just isn’t, Jerry darling. I *must* have time to prepare. I told Sam that you’d watch Ruby that evening. You know she loves seeing you.”

“Did he ask you to unbutton your blouse?” Jerry asked.

“Did who ask me? Dr. Perro? Of *course* he did, silly. He had to take a good look.”

“Did you unhook your bra?”

“You know, it must have slipped my mind to even wear one. Isn’t that a scream?”

“Did he *notice* that you forgot?” Jerry asked.

“He better have! And why exactly are you asking so many questions?” Margo sipped her coffee and nibbled the five points off of one of the star cookies.

“I trust him about as far as I can waltz, and you know I’ve got two left feet. He asked me if I’d have dinner with him sometime *while* I was undressing for my examination! The snake even complimented my perfume.” Jerry lowered her eyes to her shabby manicure: the nail varnish was chipped and scuffed and on her chewed cuticles were spots of dried blood.

“Why are you so repulsed by a man’s attention, Jerry?” Margo smeared another coat of pink lipstick onto her painted mouth.

“I can’t believe you’d ask me that. You of all people know why.” Jerry crossed her arms against her chest and lit one of Margo’s Pall Malls. She took a long, deep drag and coughed.

“I never wanted this to affect our *real* lives. No one would understand, Jerry. You know that as well as I do. Sam can smell your perfume on my clothes. He was upset that I wasn’t wearing what he gave me for our anniversary. He said that people are starting to talk about you; about why you’re not married, I mean.”

Jerry wiped away a tear that began to roll down her rouged cheek. She grabbed Margo’s hand and lifted her lavender dress to expose the black lingerie. Margo pulled her chair close to Jerry as she lit a Pall Mall for herself.

“I don’t think I can do this anymore,” Margo whispered while leaning in to kiss Jerry’s earlobe. She slid her tongue along Jerry’s cheek, chewed her lips and licked her teeth while her long, white hand explored the length of Jerry’s hairless thigh and stroked her through her silk panties, tracing the black-ribbon-bow and tiny appliquéd roses. Jerry’s hands were kneaded through Margo’s blonde hair, clasped against her scalp as they kissed each other’s lipstick-smearred faces.

“I know you don’t mean it,” Jerry said. “I know you don’t mean it.”

“I’m not prepared to lose my family, Jerry. I’m sorry,” Margo said.

Margo wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and dropped the package of Pall Malls into her purse. She stood up from her chair and shuffled to the bathroom to freshen her appearance. She reentered the sun-filled kitchen after what seemed like hours, teetering a bit on her white patent pumps, and taking long, slow deliberate drags off another cigarette. She left without saying a word; her eyes did not meet Jerry’s. She exited the torn screen door, walked to her beige Buick, slid into its opened door, started the engine and, after placing a pair of oversized sunglasses over her eyes, sped off down the gravel driveway in a cloud of dust.

Jerry wiped the white specks of Margo's powder from the table's cool Formica surface. She smoothed the silken flecks from her palm into the remnants of lukewarm coffee filling her cup, swirled them around so they dissolved into brown and drank it all up in one swallow. She then rinsed the coffee cups in cold water and left them to dry on the dish-rack, unaware of the smudged pink lip prints that still branded Margo's cup. Jerry walked to the bathroom to silence a drippy faucet and, upon entering, stepped on Margo's white plastic hair-comb. She lifted it from the floor where Margo had dropped it and, with great delicacy, removed two long strands of blonde hair laced through its spiked teeth. Fingering them as she ran the golden threads over her lips, she kissed them and tongued their smoothness in her soft, wet mouth.

Nina and Eve

Nina Honeycutt noticed the woman across the market looking at her, at her eyes hidden beneath a pair of dark sunglasses as Nina perused the produce section of Lawrence Parish, Louisiana's sole grocery. Nina looked at the woman with intense fascination, as if she were an exotic and rare orchid that stood beneath a small glass dome on a rich lady's mantelpiece. The store's gray linoleum flooring had a print of red specks and smelled of Clorox, which gave Nina a nauseated feeling in the pit of her stomach. She was reaching for a small bunch of brown-speckled, over-ripened bananas when Ralph placed his arm around her waist. Anyone who happened to notice would think they were a happy couple. Ralph, Nina's husband of six years, was Lawrence Parish's Deputy Sheriff and thirty-six years of age, twelve years his wife's senior. His sandy-blond hair, blue eyes and dark suntan gave him a look of boyish handsomeness, despite his closeness toward middle-age.

Nina felt self-conscious and exposed wearing the black plastic sunglasses in the dim grocery, yet the act of telling lies and fabricating stories regarding the nature of her more-and-more frequent bruises and black-eyes seemed to be worse. The bunch of bananas dropped from Nina's hand and tumbled onto the floor. She knew, despite his affection, that he was angry. The night before Nina had commented, in a very off-the-cuff manner, to Leonard Hutchinson, one of Ralph's policeman cronies, of her husband's noticeable weight-gain. That Nina made this sort of comment in public caused even more tension between the couple than was usual. Ralph was unaware of the woman Nina had seen collecting pink-lady apples and plump blackberries at the neighboring fruit stand

and her observance of the intimate encounter between husband and wife. The woman looked away and continued bagging her apples.

Later that evening, after supper had been cooked, eaten, and the dishes were washed and put away, Nina lay in the clear steaming-hot water that filled her sterile, porcelain bathtub to its rim. She rested in the water and thought of the woman she had seen buying apples in the grocery store earlier that day. She thought of her dark skin and her defined collarbone that had glistened with perspiration. Her long elegant fingers carefully grasping pinkish-red apples from the heap, as if they were precious jewels, played over and over in Nina's mind like a movie reel. The woman's face was angelic and soft, with large dark eyes and high cheekbones. Her long fingernails and lips were painted a shade of tomato-red that suited the sleeveless, red polyester dress she wore, and was of such a perfect cut and fit that it seemed to be painted onto her body, just as the lip-rouge and nail-varnish were painted on.

She wanted to be close to the mystery woman in red that ate pink apples. Nina wanted to smell her sweet perfume and run her hands along the length of her flawless, sculpted arms and smooth dark skin. Nina was startled out of her fantasy as the telephone rang. She heard Ralph answer, exchange a few short words with the caller and place the receiver back onto its hook.

"Nina, hurry up. That was Leonard on the telephone. He and Shirley want us to join them at Andy's for a drink. I said we'd be right there."

"Okay, just give me two minutes," Nina yelled through the bathroom door. She did not want to go out. She did not especially like Leonard's wife, Shirley, but Ralph wanted to go, so she obliged. Nina stepped out of the bathtub, dried herself with a towel

and entered her bedroom to find Ralph sitting on the edge of their bed, winding his wrist watch. Nina took a sundress of white cotton that came just below her knee from her closet and put it on.

“Don’t wear that. It’s sleeveless; everyone will be able to see your shoulders,” Ralph said as he stood and took a black dress with long sleeves trimmed in lace from Nina’s wardrobe.

“It’s like a furnace out there Ralph; I can’t wear a winter dress.”

“You’ll wear it, or we won’t go. You decide,” Ralph said as he tossed the black dress onto the bedspread and exited the bedroom.

Nina unzipped her cool, white summer dress and quickly slipped the frumpy black one over her Marilyn Monroe-esque peroxide-blonde hairdo. She slipped her feet into a matching pair of low-heeled black pumps, fastened a strand of pearls about her neck, grabbed her small leather handbag and left with Ralph in his new ’65 Ford pick-up. She had left in such a hurry that she forgot to put on her black sunglasses. They drove the mile and a half from their house to town to meet Leonard and Shirley at a bar that bore a sign above its doorway reading “Andy’s” in faded green lettering. Ralph walked into the dim, smoke-filled bar ahead of Nina, with her forearm grasped in his hand. Nina looked down as she walked so that no one would notice the purple bruise beneath her eye.

The barroom was crowded with couples and friends gathered around small round tables littered with glasses of beer, whiskey and ashtrays overflowing with cigarette butts. A melancholy jazz tune penetrated the room as the black woman at the piano played and sang.

“Over here, Ralph!” Shirley yelled as she waved her arms from the round table she shared with Leonard. Ralph and Nina sat down at the table and exchanged greetings with the other couple.

“What’ll it be, Ralph?” Leonard asked, as he sipped from his smudged glass of cold beer.

“We need some service over here!” Ralph said as he took a cigarette from the crumpled pack of Camels inside the breast pocket of his beige shirt and lighted it.

A pretty black waitress in a blue sleeveless dress complete with a white apron came to take Ralph and Nina’s order.

“I’ll have a glass of bourbon. Straight, no chaser,” Ralph said.

“I’d like a dry martini, please,” Nina added in a very soft tone.

“No. She’ll just have a Coke,” Ralph said and then gave a nod to the waitress as if to complete the order.

Shirley grinned slightly at Nina as she gulped the rest of her drink.

“You know that woman over there, at the piano?” Shirley asked.

“What about her?” asked Leonard.

“I heard that she’s funny, you know, sexually,” Shirley said as she let out a high-pitched laugh.

“What do you mean, sexually?” Ralph asked as he exhaled a cloud of smoke.

Nina felt that this might be the most interesting thing to ever come from Shirley’s mouth; she usually spoke of nothing but Leonard, her children, the ladies’ church auxiliary or her stomach ulcers.

“You’ve had too much to drink, dear. You don’t know what you’re saying,”

Leonard added as the waitress in blue served Ralph’s and Nina’s drinks.

“She’s a what-cha-ma-call-it – you know – a queer!” Shirley squealed as she fell into a fit of giggles and snorts.

Nina excused herself from the table and walked through the smoky barroom, past the length of the crowded wooden bar, the corner piano, a juke-box filled with songs by Patsy Cline, Tammy Wynette and Peggy Lee and into a small washroom. The room was hot; it smelled of stale vomit, homemade disinfectant and cheap jasmine perfume popular among prostitutes and heavily-powdered transvestites. The simple bathroom had a white porcelain sink and toilet, walls that were covered in peeling wallpaper decorated with red tea-roses and violets, and a mirror that had blackened marks of age around its edges.

Nina removed the elegant strand of pearls she wore around her neck and unzipped the collar of her dress so that she could splash her face and chest with cold water from the dripping faucet. As soon as she wet her face, she heard the bathroom door open.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” a woman said as Nina stood before the sink, her face dripping wet. Nina could see from the mirror that hung on the wall before her that the woman behind her was the jazz-pianist. After she had turned and looked at the woman even more closely, she could see that it was the same woman she had seen earlier that day in the grocery.

“What are you doing in here?” the woman asked as she tapped on the opened white door with a long red fingernail. The dim, sweltering bar along with the irritating antics of Shirley and Ralph had gotten Nina into such a frenzy that she had not noticed the sign painted in black block letters that the pianist was tapping. It read: “Colored.”

“I’m terribly sorry. I didn’t even notice the door,” Nina stammered as she dried her face with a dingy white towel that hung from a silver hook beside the sink.

“It’s all right, honey. No harm done,” the pianist said as she smiled and stepped aside so that Nina could exit the bathroom’s narrow doorway.

The image of the smiling black woman clad in red, standing in the bathroom door made Nina smile to herself as she looked down and hurried back to the table.

That night, as Nina undressed for bed, she felt around her neck and realized that the strand of pearls she had worn to the bar was missing. She was too exhausted to even give them another thought; instead, she fell straight to sleep. As Nina slept, she dreamed that the breathing shape lying next to her in the brass double-bed she shared with her husband was the beautiful jazz-pianist. Upon waking and the realization that it was Ralph next to her, with his bare sunburned chest and exposed, swollen belly made her wonder if what Shirley said about the beautiful woman was true.

The coarse blonde hair that curled around Ralph’s nipples, underarms, and ran down the length of his stomach to his navel seemed vulgar and obscene. She had felt this way ever since he began slapping her across her face whenever supper was cold, or slinging hot cups of black coffee onto her silken white bathrobe whenever it wasn’t strong enough. She thought of sex with Ralph as an irritating, yet necessary, medical procedure, like having blood drawn or a tooth extracted; it was an act she wished to be completed quickly, without her participation, and only when necessary. Nina had always thought of herself as someone who simply did not enjoy being with her husband. Until that night, as she stared at Ralph’s nakedness, and wished it were the beautiful pianist, she did not realize that she might prefer a female lover instead.

The next morning, while Ralph ate his usual breakfast of two poached eggs, bacon and strong black coffee, Nina bathed. Her bathtub had become her only sanctuary; it was one place she could go without being bothered to iron Ralph's uniforms, feed his rabbit-hunting dogs, or listen to his crude jokes. She lathered her entire body with white frothy foam that smelled of licorice and peppermint and proceeded to shave her fleshy white legs from ankle to hip with Ralph's silver razor. A thought of the mystery woman with skin like smooth India ink and lips like ripe red fruit, standing over her as she lay naked and wet in the steam-filled bathroom, made Nina grin.

After Ralph had left for work and the household chores had been completed, Nina curled her white-blond hair, applied a stain of coral to her lips, dressed in a light, pink cotton dress with capped sleeves, and slipped her feet into a pair of cream-colored high-heels. She carefully placed her large black sunglasses on her face, for she had tried to conceal the bruise along the bottom of her right eye with pressed-powder, but it was still clearly visible. After dressing, she decided to take a stroll down Lawrence's Magnolia Street to Andy's barroom, to retrieve the strand of pearls she had left there the night before. The searing, white heat that radiated throughout the town during the hot, dead summer caused Nina to feel dizzy and lightheaded as she wiped her forehead and chest with a handkerchief she kept hidden in her décolletage with a few precisely folded dollar bills that had now become moist with perspiration.

She stepped into the small, unlit bar that she would have interpreted to be closed if it did not have a plaque reading "Open" sitting on the inside window sill. Inside, the small round tables were empty, and the long wooden bar with red-cushioned stools that were cracked open at the seams, revealing cheap white stuffing that would surely irritate

bare skin, bore no patrons. Nina walked towards the empty bar where a smiling Creole bartender stood polishing smudged tumblers and jiggers with a white cloth.

“Excuse me sir. I was here last night with my husband and I seem to have forgotten my pearl necklace. Do you know if it was found, by any chance?”

“I haven’t seen no pearl necklace, ma’am,” the man smiled as he turned away from Nina to face an open supply room located to his left.

“Hey Eve, have you seen any pearl necklace? This lady says she left one here last night.”

“What’d you say? I can’t hear you,” Eve said as she walked out of the room carrying a box of beer bottles. As she placed them onto the bar top, she looked up and saw Nina.

“Hello, ma’am,” Eve said as she leaned against the bar.

“I asked if you’ve seen this lady’s pearl necklace. She left it here last night.”

“Oh, yeah. You left this on the sink,” Eve said as she reached into the pocket of her yellow sundress to remove Nina’s pearl necklace. “I figured you’d be back,” she said as she handed the pearls to Nina.

“Thank you very much. May I buy you a drink? It’s the least I can do.”

“No ma’am, I couldn’t let you do that.”

“I insist,” Nina said firmly. “After all, you did find my pearls, and they do mean very much to me.”

“All right, thank you,” Eve said as she turned to the barman.

“Andy, honey, could you fix me up a scotch and water?” Eve asked, as she leaned against the bar, filing a pointed red fingernail with a silver emery-board she had just removed from her other dress pocket.

The barman placed a tumbler filled with tawny scotch and a splash of water onto the bar top. The glass clunked as it hit the hard wooden surface, splashing enough liquid onto the bar to create a ring beneath the glass. The woman lifted her glass and took a drink as Nina handed the barman a crumpled dollar bill.

“Honey, why don’t you take off those glasses in here? It’s so dark in Andy’s joint you couldn’t see the boogeyman if he was having a drink beside you.” Eve let out a melodious little laugh that Nina knew was not intended to harm, yet she felt very upset. Nina turned her head away from Andy the Creole barman and Eve and began to cry. Her shoulders moved up and down a little as she sat sobbing into the palms of her hands. Eve looked at Andy with surprise and concern, while he continued to wipe smudged drinking glasses; it was as if he found crying women to be as commonplace to bars as cigarette-butts or cockroaches.

“Come on honey, let me take you to the ladies’ so you can splash that pretty face of yours with some cold water and dry your eyes.”

“Okay,” Nina sobbed with slight hesitation.

Eve walked beside Nina as she led her to the bathroom in which they had met on the previous night and closed the door.

“I’m so sorry,” the woman continued. “I noticed your sunglasses and I knew; you see, I was married to a real son-of-a-bitch myself, once upon a time. Honey, I really didn’t mean to hurt your feelins’ in the bar back there.”

“You didn’t, I just had hoped that no one would notice, but I guess that was stupid,” Nina confided as she removed her glasses and wiped away the remnants of mascara-stained tear rivulets from her cheeks and chin. Eve took a white handkerchief with a pink E embroidered in the bottom right corner out of the pocket of her strapless yellow sundress. She soaked the cloth from the leaky faucet, wrung the excess water from it, and began to wipe Nina’s cheeks. Nina no longer felt sorrowful, as she saw the reflection of herself and Eve in the mirror. She closed her eyes and stood very still as Eve blotted the deep-purple bruise beneath her eye.

With closed eyes, Nina felt warm flesh instead of the cool, wet cotton. Eve caressed her face with her fingers, her palm, and the back of her dark, exquisite hand. Nina kissed her index and middle fingers as they passed over her lips, while Eve stood very still. Nina moved closer to Eve within the small washroom, amidst tea-roses and violets. Eve removed her hand from Nina’s mouth and stepped away, as if to leave. Before she could open the door, Nina placed her hand onto Eve’s bare arm, as if to persuade her to stay.

Eve turned to face Nina and stepped towards her. Eve leaned inward and kissed her softly and sweetly on the cheek. Before she could step away, Nina turned and kissed Eve’s lips with her slightly-opened, wet mouth. Despite Eve’s slight hesitation, she let Nina kiss her. Eve placed her hands on either side of Nina’s waist and gently pressed her body against the rose and violet papered wall. Nina clasped Eve’s bare arms with her white hands as the hesitant women moved their mouths slowly over one another’s.

“You are a pretty little white baby,” Eve whispered, as she slowly pulled away from Nina, releasing her. She adjusted her dress and wiped her mouth as she flipped off

the light switch, opened the door, and walked out of the bathroom. Eve escorted Nina out of the bar while Andy was busy chasing a rat he had discovered confiscating peanuts from the bar's goody-dish of various nuts, Red Hots and chocolate-covered raisins. The women walked into the bright white heat together and, before parting ways, exchanged *les bises* the way the French do when saying *au revoir*. Nina lingered before walking away; she took Eve's hand into her own, gently kissed it, and then pressed it to the exposed part of her breast, so that she could feel her pounding heart.

Nina walked home smiling and occasionally stopping to look at her mouth in the small round mirror she kept in her handbag, just to verify that Eve's kisses had not magically changed its appearance. She delighted in the secret of running her tongue along her lips as if to moisten them, but actually to taste the scotch from Eve's mouth.

* * *

A feeling of panic swelled inside Nina, for she was met with the sight of Ralph's police car sitting parked in the driveway as she reached the small, white house they inhabited.

He was not to be home for hours, and his early arrival filled her with a sense of foreboding. She rapidly rubbed her mouth with the back of her hand, as if the act of doing so would erase the act she felt he had somehow discovered. She ascended the three wooden stairs of the porch that led to the already opened front door, inhaled a deep breath and stepped inside the threshold, where Ralph sat in the living room in his olive-green armchair, upholstered in slightly tattered crushed-velvet.

“Good evening, Ralph. I was in town; I hadn’t known you’d be here so early. What would you like for supper? I’ve got some pork chops in the freezer.”

“I know where you were. I was waiting for Leonard at Ted’s Diner across the street. I saw you kissing some nigger gal in a real pretty yellow dress,” Ralph said.

Nina didn’t speak or attempt to defend herself; she simply turned away from him and walked towards the kitchen.

“Didn’t you hear me talking to you? Don’t you turn and walk away from me; come back here, you bitch!” Ralph shouted as he stood up from his chair.

He grabbed her left wrist as she walked away from him, towards the black and white stove standing against the far wall of the yellow kitchen. His force jerked her around so that her face directly met his. Ralph slapped her hard across her face with the back of his free hand, bringing tears to her eyes as a stream of blood ran from her left nostril.

“You can’t stand it!” Nina bellowed. “You can’t bear to think of the pathetic excuse for a man you are! You goddamn piece of shit!”

Ralph’s shock and disbelief at Nina’s words caused him to let go of her wrist and stare blankly into her eyes. With her uninhibited fists, she pounded at his chest as blood dripped from her nose and chin onto her pink dress. Ralph grabbed Nina by her slender throat and shook her back and forth as she continued punching at his chest and clawing at his clothing. Her force ripped one breast-pocket away from his uniform, revealing a smear of blood as she clawed and tore at his flesh with her long fingernails. Ralph then shoved Nina with such force that the sound emitted as she hit the yellow kitchen’s

linoleum floor resembled that of a door slamming shut. He walked away silently, adjusting his belt and torn clothing as Nina lay curled in a ball on the floor.

* * *

The next morning, after Nina had nursed her new bruises, prepared Ralph's usual breakfast of two poached eggs, bacon and black coffee, and seen him off to work, she thought of Eve. She thought of her gentleness, her smooth black hands, and soft, warm mouth as she washed the dishes Ralph had eaten from earlier that morning. A sudden knock at the front door startled her so badly that she dropped a dish onto the floor, leaving a scattered mess of white shards on the linoleum.

"Just a minute," she said as she wiped the sudsy water from her hands onto her white apron.

She opened the door to find Leonard Hutchinson standing on the front porch with a look of compassionate melancholy on his face. She knew what he was going to say before he uttered a syllable.

"Ralph's been shot, he's in the hospital," he said. Nina looked straight into his eyes without blinking; only leaning forward a little so that he could bring her close to him in a comforting embrace. They stood together on the porch for a while without speaking.

"We got a call at the station around 9:00; it was Andy Duprée talking about some colored fella looking to start up trouble at the café; of course Ralph insisted on going alone, he thought it was just some punk kid."

Nina pulled away from Leonard at the mention of Andy's name. She was no longer only thinking of Ralph. "We were just there, all of us together," she stammered.

Leonard continued, "The fella was looking for his ex-wife, some woman who works there as a piano player. We didn't suspect him to be wearing a gun."

"Was the woman hurt?"

"He knocked her around a little bit, but let her go when Ralph showed up; at least that's what Andy told us. He panicked and attempted to run, so Ralph pulled out his pistol. That's when the fella shot him. He only got him in the shoulder. Dr. Hume said that he should be fine."

Nina remained silent, yet slowly nodded her head.

"The fella ran off, but we'll find him. Don't you worry, we'll find the son of a bitch; he couldn't have gotten far. Come on, go get your purse and I'll drive you to the hospital."

Nina stepped inside, removed her apron, fetched her purse from its hook in the hall coat-closet, locked the front door, and walked with Leonard to his police car. Leonard drove as Nina stared out the window at small weatherboard houses, churches, magnolia trees and dirt roads fresh with red dust. They soon reached the Lawrence Parish Hospital, which was a large brick building with few windows and a shingled roof badly in need of repair. Leonard and Nina walked inside, asked the white, middle-aged nurse who stood behind the front desk which room Ralph was staying in, and proceeded in that direction.

Ralph lay in the small hospital bed with his shoulder gauzed and bandaged and his arm in a sling. Nina stared at the bandages and the blood that had seeped from his wounded shoulder onto the white cloth, leaving only a slight trace of red.

“What is she doing here?” Ralph asked of Leonard. “I don’t want to see her. She’s the reason I’m in this hospital bed.”

“What are you talking about?” Leonard asked.

Nina turned and walked out of the hospital room towards the exit at the end of the hallway. She felt there was nothing she needed more in the world than a drink. She walked out of the hospital into the bright sunshine, headed towards Magnolia Street. She was going to walk into Andy’s bar, have a seat on a cracked barstool cushion and order two drinks: a martini for herself and a scotch for the jazz-pianist.

The Waitress

All she wanted was to shave her legs. It was a Sunday in early spring and she did not have to work; the diner was closed due to the manager's illness and the Mantello family would be able to spend their evening together: the four of them. The dress she was set on wearing was black polyester and cut just below the knee. Her pink waitress uniform, which was stained with cooking-grease, lay in a crumpled heap on the bathroom floor as she removed the 35-cent-razor from its perch in the medicine cabinet. The baby, smelling of sour milk, wailed in his crib. The kitchenette's scuffed linoleum floor was sticky with Tommy's spilled grape juice and Tony sat in the living room in the green armchair, watching the static-filled television screen as he smoked.

She was shaving the black stubble from her calves when Tommy began to knock. Her right foot was resting on the toilet seat and her hand was wet with shaving cream. The sounds of the crying baby, scratchy television, and screaming toddler filled the apartment. She began to shave quickly so that she could be with Tommy and he would not cry. She pulled the black dress, which was hanging over the shower rod, carefully over her hair, not bothering to wipe away the traces of white foam that remained on her leg. She flung open the door and leaned towards Tommy, so that she could straighten his collar. A red fingerprint appeared on Tommy's new white sweater; in her urgency, she did not feel the metal razor when it sliced her thumb. Her finger went to her mouth, and she sucked away the blood that was forming at the razor wound.

She lifted Tommy and sat him on the closed lid of the commode as she bandaged her bleeding finger. Dabbing a wet washcloth against the stain on Tommy's sweater, she

sang a Leonard Cohen song to him; he hummed along. She continued shaving her legs after the stain disappeared into the cold wet cloth; one foot was propped on the side of the bathtub as she shaved and the other was on the bathroom linoleum. Tommy began singing another song and this time she hummed along: neither mother nor child ever sang alone. She wiped his nose with a handkerchief and kissed both of his cheeks. Without Tommy, she knew, there would be no one at all to listen to her sing, nor would there be a reason to.

His Friends Have Always Been Lovers

I went to the corner café - our café, a small coffee house in Greenwich Village, to talk to Johnny. He wanted to know about Lenny: the man who was my big brother and his lover. Lenny was a photographer; his idols were Arbus, Avedon, and Warhol. He had their pictures tacked up around his apartment. His own photographs – mostly of drag queens, junkies, prostitutes, and aging fashion models – had hung in his apartment as well. His favorite time to take photos, out of all the days in the year, was Halloween night – when even the most inhibited person became an exhibitionist and dressed in their most extravagant and flamboyant costumes – complete with fishnet stockings, greasepaint makeup and neon feather boas.

Lenny had a habit of sitting in diners at 3:00 a.m. nearly every night of the week; he would sip sugary coffee and chain-smoke Camel cigarettes while doodling on paper napkins with charcoal and artist's pencils. Lenny once told me that his favorite men were young loners – those handsome thin men in their late teens and early twenties with smooth chests, rumpled hair, and distant, wet eyes; those were his type. Frantic fumbblings in alleyways and in subway bathrooms – those encounters that he told me he held most dear – with their moist, stubbly kisses and breathy whispered words helped him to relax for a few minutes; those encounters cleared his mind, and for a few moments, gave him comfort and peace.

Lenny never bought groceries and could barely afford to wash his clothes at his local laundromat. He ate out for nearly every meal. Most of his time and money was spent on his work: on taking photos and developing them in a small dark room in his two-

bedroom walkup. He worked in black and white; he always said that his subjects looked more beautiful and gentler without color. They were closer to perfection with gray lips and shaded, hooded eyes. Lenny found beauty in many things and people, though he never thought of himself as particularly handsome. He would often say that he felt ugly, that his body was too soft or his mouth too thin. He was handsome and many people had fallen in love with him. His imperfections made him who he was: he walked with a slight limp from a childhood car accident, was tall and thin, almost fragile, and his shorn brown hair bore strands of gray since his late teens. His eyes were perhaps his most extraordinary physical feature: they were closely set, almond-shaped and a deep shade of slate gray, nearly black.

When he was nearly forty, I overheard him tell a mutual friend that he had slept with over five hundred men since his teenage years. When asked about his conquests, he would say that he loved every single one of them, that their bodies and breath had kept him alive. We rarely spoke of our family, especially our parents; the only time I can remember him mentioning our mother – who left when he was a toddler and I was only an infant – was when we were in a diner having lunch near his apartment. We spent our childhood with our mother's elderly Russian parents in rural New Jersey, where they raised sheep and cattle – which became Lenny's first photographic subjects. He always loved animals; our dog, a small dachshund named Teddy, was one of the great loves of his life. As an adult, Lenny never had much spending money; everything he made went to paying his rent and telephone bill, yet he wore expensive cologne and was always cleanly shaven and shampooed, even though his clothing often appeared dingy and had a faint musty smell. I never knew where he got the money for the cologne.

Lenny had mentioned Johnny to me on several occasions, but I only met him once in the hospital, at St. Vincent's in Lenny's hospital room, and then again at Lenny's memorial service, even though they had lived together for three months. He was the person with whom he had the longest and most serious relationship. We met on a hot summer day, two weeks after Lenny's death, and sat in our favorite diner; Johnny picked at a tuna melt and sipped from a glass of Coca-Cola.

"Are you sick?" I asked.

"I don't know; I don't care."

"You need to get yourself tested, Johnny. Lenny cared about you. It's what he would've wanted."

"Do you think he loved me?" Johnny placed his hand on mine.

"He loved you." I put my other hand on top of his. He began to cry.

"Thanks, Leigh. I know that he loved you very much. Remember that cologne?"

Johnny asked.

I took a sip of coffee, which tasted thick and burned, and squeezed Johnny's hand.

"How could I not? He practically bathed in the stuff."

Johnny began to cry. He covered his eyes with one hand. I offered him a cigarette. He placed it between his lips and I lit it with a wooden match.

"Did he ever photograph you?"

"Yeah, he did. A few times actually. It wasn't a planned thing; it just sort of happened. He would say, 'let's take a few pictures - just for fun' and I would walk around the apartment and talk to him. Finally, he would ask me to sit down and be still so that he could get the shots he wanted."

“I’d love to see those. Do you have them?”

“Of course; they’re in a box in my closet. I can’t look at them anymore. It’s too hard. I remember his laugh too well when I look at them, and it makes me sad. It makes me miss him too much; he was always laughing at me, at my silliness.”

“That’s what he loved most about you. You made him laugh. He didn’t laugh much.”

“You know, Johnny, he would often say that photographing someone was the most intimate and personal thing a person could do – that taking someone’s picture was like looking into the most private and concealed part of them. He felt connected to all of his subjects.”

Johnny looked at me and smiled. He then leaned over and kissed my cheek directly under my right eye. It was very tender; it reminded me of the way I kissed my china dolls when I was a child.

“Did you want some of his ashes?” I asked.

“Yeah. Is that creepy? I mean, do you think it’s a sort of weirdo thing that I would want them?”

“I don’t think so. Not at all. I have them in a box under my bed next to a bottle of Thunderbird and a stale pack of Camels. Is that strange?”

“No; those were two of his favorite things.” We both laughed again.

“How old was Lenny?” asked Johnny.

“You mean you don’t know?”

“All he would say was that he was old enough to be my father.”

“He would’ve been fifty his next birthday, which was in September.”

“Typical Virgo: he would fuck strangers in bars but washed his hands like a fiend. It looked like he had a pair of permanent red gloves on! Don’t even mention his bathing habits.”

“I know! He shampooed his hair twice a day with that lemon stuff from Paris.”

“He thought I was a savage for only showering every other day.”

I paid the bill and we walked out of the diner together. The air was thick and sticky; men and women walking by us had noticeable perspiration stains under their arms. I fanned myself with a folded copy of *The New York Times*.

“Let’s go to my apartment. I’ll give you some of his ashes.”

“Right now? I mean, is it too soon?”

“I think you should have them. You can always scatter them at Coney Island – he loved it there, you know.”

“He mentioned wanting to ride the ferris wheel one more time, but he was too sick. I really wanted to go there with him, to make him happy.”

“He was happy. He called you his little Monty Clift. He thought you were the most beautiful boy he’d ever seen.”

We hugged in the street and we each began to cry; Johnny wiped my eyes with a red bandana handkerchief he carried in the pocket of his Levi’s and kissed me again, this time on the forehead. A spotted dog came by and sniffed Johnny’s boots; he leaned down and rubbed the animal on its head.

“Can I have another cigarette?” Johnny asked.

I gave him one, but took a puff for myself before handing it over to him.

* * *

In the living room of my apartment were stacks of back issues of *Vogue*, manuscripts in need of editing and vases of roses. We sat on the sofa together in silence for a few minutes.

“Would you like a drink?” I asked.

“What’ve you got?”

“That old bottle of Thunderbird – but it’s warm.”

“We can have some over ice.”

“I’ll get some glasses.”

I brought two painted tumblers filled with clinking ice cubes from my kitchenette into the living room. I placed the glasses on a tray on my coffee table, which was no more than an iron table more suitable for a garden, and poured the wine over them. We drank a few sips. I brought the box into the living room – the one containing Lenny’s photographs of me – and placed it in Johnny’s lap. They were all black and white shots: two in which I was wearing only a white slip, one where I wore Lenny’s favorite Salvation Army tweed jacket with the elbow patches and blue jeans and the other was of me, in a rose-printed nightgown, pouring Oolong tea into two white teacups with an unlit cigarette hanging from my mouth.

“You should have this one,” I said as I held out the photograph of me wearing Lenny’s jacket.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. I want you to have it.”

“He loved that jacket so much – he was always sewing on new buttons.”

We finished our drinks.

“I’m going to write down my phone number for you; I want you to call me if you ever want to talk. We need to talk about Lenny; we can’t forget him.”

“Thanks, Leigh.”

“I mean it; even if it’s three o’ clock in the morning; I want you to feel free to call.”

Johnny hugged me again; we held each other for what seemed like an hour. We parted and I went to the bedroom to get a small silver heart-shaped box from my dresser. I emptied the box’s contents – a pair of pearl earrings, a stray button, and beaded bracelets – onto my bed. I filled the box with a handful of Lenny’s ashes, and gave them to Johnny. Johnny kissed the box and then kissed my hand.

“I’m going to St. Vincent’s tomorrow,” said Johnny.

“What for?” I asked.

“I’m getting tested.”

“I’m glad. You’re brave, Johnny. You’re a brave boy.”

“Lenny was brave.” Johnny bowed his head and reached for his red bandana.

“He was the best of all of us.”

“Will you come with me?”

“I’ll be there.”

* * *

I sat in the waiting room for Johnny and sipped a Diet Coke; I flipped through old issues of *National Geographic*; I filled in my day-planner. Time crept by. I penciled in my eyebrows and painted my lips and waited. Johnny then came into the waiting room with a uniformed nurse. He was concerned. He wanted to be brave, but he knew. He had

told me the previous day that he had recently developed bruise-like lesions near his groin and he had awakened many nights drenched in cold sweat. It would be a week before the test results arrived – but we all knew. He spoke with the uniformed nurse, a woman with braided hair and a faded tattoo on her forearm. They embraced and Johnny began to cry. The nurse then walked away. Johnny joined me where I was sitting near a window in a vinyl-upholstered chair.

“I want to call my mother. I haven’t spoken to her since I left Pennsylvania,” he said.

“It’s never too late, John. Mothers never stop loving their children.”

“You got any kids?”

“No. No children.” I looked away from him.

“You should have a baby. You’d make a great mom.”

“Lenny used to say that. He would say that he wanted to be an uncle.”

“He knew things; I mean, he just *got* it,” Johnny said.

“Let’s go have a drink. Do you want a drink?” I asked.

“I want to ask you something first.”

“Yeah? What is it?”

“I want to know that you’ll make sure we’ll be together; I want to be with Lenny when I go.”

“Don’t talk like that; you don’t know anything for sure yet, Johnny.”

“Leigh, just make sure we’re placed together. Please.

“I will, Johnny.”

We cried, leaving the hospital waiting room at St. Vincent's; the sun poured through streaked, fingerprinted windows. We spent the afternoon in a nearby bar where we held hands and sat in air-conditioned silence, swallowing more tears than beer, and I prayed that this time, although fearing the worst, that my heart could recover.

Saturday Evening

Lena's apartment always smelled of Chinese food leftovers and scorched Folgers. She never learned to cook. The living room floor was carpeted with old newspapers: *The New York Times*, *The National Enquirer*, *The Daily News*. A cigarette fluttered from her plump lips. Her mouth, sharp as a bolo knife, bit and tore at the hazy air as I sat and read: the funnies mostly, sometimes Jackie Collins or a yellowed Harold Robbins paperback. Sometimes, I just filed my nails and dabbed on French Perfume – No. 5, her favorite – to pass the time. Finally, I would say something like “Let's go to bed” or “Let's go out to a club.” She reminded me that I hated to dance. I would say that I liked to watch her and that I loved her. Sometimes observing the person you love, as they live their own life, is all that holds them to you. She continued to smoke as I peeled off my nylons, smeared my lipstick on the back of my hand and spun a Nina Simone record. I pulled a cigarette from her pack and lit it with a match, even though I didn't smoke. I swayed to Nina's voice, combed a curled ribbon of hair from her smooth forehead and bent to kiss her nose and teeth – smooth as piano keys. She stood. We moved and breathed together, treading on half-finished crosswords in our bare feet – her toenails unpolished and mine a shade of Christmas red. I remember thinking – in that moment – that nothing can last forever, so I decided to allow myself to really feel it.

A Clown a Day

In the cafe of the Jane Hotel in Manhattan's West Village sits Pauline. She is alone at a wooden table-for-two drinking coffee from a china cup. She swirls the contents of her cup with a French-manicured finger, glances at her expensive wrist-watch, and adjusts the sleeves of her cashmere cardigan. She swipes a light-pink gloss onto her lips. The cafe is neither crowded nor is it empty. It is lit by sunlight pouring through large windows. A nearby couple sips coffee and reads their respective newspapers. Soft music plays overhead. Natasha enters the cafe of the hotel. She is an attractive woman who, apart from her tousled hair and bright lipstick, appears sophisticated and professional. Her designer handbag matches her shoes, one of which is missing a heel, and she wears a pair of chic, expensive sunglasses.

“Hey Tash,” Pauline says as she fingers a long lock of smooth hair.

“Hey Paul. I'm so sorry to be late. I broke my pump in one of those damned subway grates. I thought that only happened in the movies.”

Natasha removes her large dark sunglasses to reveal a pair of eyes coated in smudged black mascara and dark, faded eye-shadow. Her makeup, along with her hairdo, are both remnants of the previous evening.

“Are you okay?” Pauline asks.

“Yeah, yeah. But the strangest thing happened. I was rescued,” Natasha says.

“What do you mean, rescued?”

“A man dressed in a clown suit saved me from falling. I damn near fell on my face onto the pavement.”

“What? A clown?”

“Yeah, that’s what I said. Anyway, I was walking down the sidewalk when one of my Jimmy Choos wedged itself in a subway grate. I wiggled my foot to free it, but instead of unloosing itself, my damn shoe broke and sent me falling, face-first, towards the cement. Thank God, I was suddenly caught in the arms of a very tall, very tacky clown, who, stood me up onto the pavement, retrieved my shoe and handed it to me.” Natasha steadies her heart by placing her hand over her chest and patting her small breast. Her large eyes appear bigger than ever.

“That’s amazing, Tash. I’ve only read about that kind of stuff in fairytales,” Pauline says.

“It was more like a drug-induced dream, almost too wacky to be real.” Natasha removes a compact mirror from her handbag, powders her face, and gestures to a nearby waitress to come over. She paints a fresh coat of red lipstick onto her mouth and taps her long fingernails against the ceramic dish of artificial sweeteners that sits on the varnished wooden table.

“That’s a good manicure, by the way. I love the color,” Pauline says.

“Thanks, Paul. Anyway, I was speechless. We looked into each other's eyes for a moment; then I took the shoe from the clown and stared like an idiot with my mouth

gaping open. He just continued to walk down the sidewalk! He didn't even look back. I shouted 'thank you' as he walked away, but I don't think he heard."

"That's incredible. Did you say he also sprayed you with one of those goofy rubber daisies? Your mascara's smudged," Pauline says.

"No. And thanks for noticing my crappy appearance. Michael slept over."

"What? I thought you dumped that sleaze-bag," Pauline says.

"I did. And he's not a sleaze-bag. He's just a bit of a putz. Anyway, the shmuck called me crying. He said that his wife kicked him out and he wanted a peanut butter and jelly sandwich."

A young waitress wearing a white Oxford blouse and black slacks stops to take Natasha's order: a cup of regular black coffee with skim milk and a chocolate croissant.

"Did you make it for him? A peanut butter sandwich?"

"Hell no. You know there's never any food in my apartment. Only saltines and ginger-ale for when I get an upset stomach."

"Don't be a slut, Tash." Pauline crosses her legs and pulls small pieces of lint from her cardigan. She flicks the bits of dust and fluff into the air, and watches as they float to the floor.

“Slut? Don’t be such a prude, Paul. Since when have I had a squeaky-clean reputation to uphold, anyway? What’d you do this weekend?”

The waitress promptly delivers a white china cup filled with steaming-hot coffee to Natasha, along with a china dish containing a flaky croissant. She opens two pink packets of artificial sweetener, pours them into her coffee, and stirs the contents of the cup with a silver spoon.

“You know, I caught up on some laundry. I went grocery shopping and found these greats figs – they’re just wonderful. Then I had a manicure, pedicure and eyebrow wax, and later I went to lunch with Mom. We had Chinese. Then Bob came over. Can I have a bite of your croissant?”

“Wait a minute. Bob? The dental hygienist? What’d he do, floss your teeth?”
Natasha asks.

Pauline sips from her coffee, adjusts her eyeglasses and runs a manicured hand through her long, blonde Jennifer Aniston-type hairstyle. “Actually, he was dressed as a clown.” Pauline takes a large bite of Natasha’s croissant and rubs her finger together to remove any crumbs.

“What? Where are all of these goddamn clowns coming from? Are they in the water supply? All I know is that the clown who saved me was definitely not Bob. He was much, *much* taller, and not as swarthy.”

“You always sound like such a bigot, Tash.”

“I only speak honestly. That’s why you love me.” Natasha adjusts her blouse so that it shows a bit more cleavage and winks at one of the men seated nearby.

“Never mind that. And stop flirting. Bob wanted to do it in the clown suit.”

“He sounds like a real sickie to me. A *short* sickie at that. Why do you like those short guys?”

“At first I didn't want to do it. I thought it would be strange – demented even. Kind of like those Cindy Sherman photographs.” Pauline clasps her hands together and takes a deep breath.

“It is strange. What happened anyway? I want details. – juicy ones. Don’t leave anything out,” Natasha says.

“We kissed for a while, and I got undressed. We started to fool around; all I remember after that is falling over. I fainted! I was out cold for like five minutes. He had to honk his toy horn in my ear to wake me up.”

Natasha nearly spits out the mouthful of coffee she has just sipped. She howls with laughter and, when the nearby man and woman begin to stare, she covers her mouth with her hand and takes a bite of the chocolate croissant.

“What do you mean you fainted? From shock? Fear? What?” asks Natasha with a full mouth.

“Not exactly,” Pauline says.

“You wild bitch!” Natasha bites her lip to keep from laughing. She wipes her watering eyes with her fingertips, careful not to smear her eye-makeup.

“Stop making fun! I knew I shouldn't have told you. You'll probably tell my mother for Christ's sake.” Pauline rolls her eyes and crosses her arms over her chest.

“It was that good, huh? Lucky girl. It's about time. So, was Mr. Right wearing those dumbass floppy shoes?”

“He was wearing orange ones, if you must know. And a polka-dot bowtie. But I think it was the big red nose that did it.”

“How did you kiss if he had that nose on? Did he wear a wig too?” Natasha asks.

“It was purple and sparkly, and we kissed just fine. I had to shower twice – with Lava soap – to get all his greasepaint makeup off me! I used the rough side of a kitchen sponge, you know, the wiry side. I had red lip prints on the bottoms of my feet, and there was glitter under my toenails! My new pedicure is ruined, but I don't care. My skin is practically raw.”

“I bet there are some other raw places too,” Natasha says as she covers her mouth.

Both women double over with laughter. Pauline glances over her shoulder to make sure that the couple is no longer staring.

“Who would've guessed? All these years of reading *Cosmopolitan* and going to all of those horrible ‘body awareness’ classes and all it takes to make your eyes roll back in your head is a dentist in a clown suit,” Natasha says.

“He’s actually a very gifted dental hygienist – the best man I know with a tongue scraper. You want his number?” Pauline says.

“Only if he brings a tank of laughing gas. And what did he use the tongue scraper for?” Natasha runs her tongue along her straight teeth and blots her lips together.

“I’ll tell you when you’re thirty-five. And trust me honey; you won’t need any laughing gas. You might need some new soap; I suggest something with pumice.”

“What about that vibrating bug I gave you as a birthday present last year? Should I buy one for myself, or what?”

“What do you mean?” Pauline asks as she closes her arms around herself.

“What do you think I mean? Come on. Was it as good as the magic clown?”
Natasha licks the chocolate from her fingers and brushes crumbs from the croissant off of the tabletop and onto the floor.

“I have a confession to make, Tash. I never used that thing; it gives me the creeps. It’s just too weird.”

“What? You’re one to talk about weird sex, Tash. Don’t think I’ve forgotten the homeless magician or the tattooed guy from Coney Island. And now this clown guy,

who's even weirder. Anyway, that thing cost me nearly a hundred dollars. Good sex in this town isn't cheap, you know."

"I'm afraid of insects," Pauline says as she looks down at the table and fiddles with her hair.

"It wasn't a real bug! It was only plastic, Paul. You are such a kook. A real nut.

"Don't trivialize my past relationships, and don't call me names; I really liked the tattooed guy. I can't remember his name right now, but we had some good times," says Pauline as she retrieves a \$20 bill from her wallet and places it on the table. "Let's just get out of here – I'll pay you back for the stupid caterpillar vibrator if that's what you want."

Both women drain their coffee cups, take their purses in hand and stand from their chairs; Natasha places her dark sunglasses over her eyes. "Hey, isn't that an Olsen twin over there? You should give her John's number. She looks pretty tense." Natasha jokingly elbows Pauline in her arm and sucks her cheeks into a fish-mouth face.

"Don't do that! Someone might see. They're regulars here." Pauline covers her mouth with her hand to stifle her laughter.

Natasha and Pauline walk outside and notice an attractive young woman dressed in a Diane Von Fürstenberg leopard-print wrap dress exiting a taxi-cab. A man dressed as a clown, complete with a glittery wig, over-sized bowtie and big floppy shoes, exits the taxi as well and pays the driver. Before parting ways, the clown and the woman share a

passionate, open-mouthed kiss. The clown squeezes the woman's breast. Natasha and Pauline stare at the kissing man and woman, and then at one another.

“What the hell is going on in this city? Where did all of these fucking crazy clowns come from?”

“I haven't got a clue. Maybe they've been sent by God, you know, to help all the lonely women in Manhattan: the women who are like us.” Both Natasha and Pauline begin to giggle as they walk down the street with their arms entwined.

The Night Nurse

Desirée De Mille walked through the bright corridor of the film set on which she was currently working. She adjusted the white wedge-cap atop her head and turned onto the corridor toward her dressing room. She entered the room as she teetered on a pair of towering spiked heels of white patent, and plopped onto the pink velvet sofa, furiously tearing the nurse's cap from her head and tossing it to the floor. She reached for her purse, which lay on the floor, and began fumbling through its contents, searching for a vial of pills. She found it, removed one tablet of Valium, and swallowed it dry. She lay back on the sofa and laid her arms by her sides, so that she seemed as still as a corpse. She had nothing but time to kill before being called back to the set.

In this film, which was to be released during the Christmas season of 1983, she had the leading role as a nurse working the nightshift in a Brooklyn hospital. In actuality, the picture was being filmed at Warner Bros. Studios in Los Angeles. The nurse, Patsy, possesses the gift of clairvoyance and suspects a chronically-ill patient of committing grisly acts of murder while Patsy administers morphine, gives sponge-baths, and replaces soiled bandages. Director Beau Lycknstrick's film, *The Night Nurse*, was a true piece of what film aficionados call "trash art," but in reality it was nothing much more than a smut-fest. Desirée knew far more about filmmaking than her director, but was left to reciting dialogue which embarrassed her, while wearing a ridiculous white nurse's costume that was one size too small, that loathsome wedge-cap, opaque white stockings, and stripper-esque high-heeled shoes which caused her feet to ache and blister. The paycheck was the only part of the film that she looked forward to.

Desirée De Mille had loathed the arrival of her fortieth birthday a week before and had been in a state of melancholy since being referred to as an “aging” actress by the bane of her existence: Beau Lycknstrik. Desirée’s grandfather was the legendary Hollywood director, screenwriter and producer Cecil B. De Mille. Her father was De Mille’s adopted son, John, and because of this tiny detail, she had never been taken as seriously as she thought she should. Desirée saw herself a part of Hollywood royalty as significant as the Fairbanks, Barrymores, or Fondas, and she never let anyone forget her rightful place in the spotlight. Her spotlight, however, had begun to dim as the years passed. Her face had started to line and her dress size was no longer a two. She had been forced from her position as the neurotic, yet sexy, woman she became famous for playing fifteen years earlier in a string of semi-successful film dramas, beginning in 1968.

Turning forty, along with the demanding work schedule of a B-horror movie of which she was ashamed to be a part, had sent Desirée into a state of depression and slight alcoholism. Her newly formed habit of swallowing too many pills did not help matters either. Beau Lycknstrik had become the proverbial thorn in her side and made each day more frustrating than the last.

Just as Desirée drifted into sleep, she was awakened by the sound of a man’s voice, shouting and knocking furiously.

“Miss De Mille...Miss De Mille,” the voice spoke as a fist knocked at her dressing room door.

“You’re needed on the set in ten minutes. Beau’s ready to shoot the attempted strangulation scene.”

It was Martin, the assistant director.

“Okay, Martin. I’ll be right out,” Desirée mumbled as she raised herself up from the pink velvet sofa and collected her shoes and nurse’s cap.

Desirée slipped her feet into her shoes, placed the wedge-cap atop her mussed blonde hair and opened the door to her dressing room as she folded a piece of chewing gum into her mouth. Martin, a man whose graying hair deceived his youth, rubbed his dark moustache and puffed on a cigarette as he carried his clipboard and walked down the long hallway to one of the set’s pseudo-hospital rooms.

“Beau, Miss De Mille is on her way,” Martin said into his portable radio.

They reached the hospital room and Karen, the head of hair and makeup, teased Desirée’s long hair with a round brush and misted her blonde coiffure with a can of aerosol hairspray. She blotted her brow with a handkerchief, dusted blush onto her sculpted cheekbones, exaggerated her pink-lined lips and held out her palm so that Desirée could spit her chewing gum into it.

Beau, the German-born director, was in his early forties; he had a bit of a receding hairline, a full dark beard, and large brown eyes whose extreme roundness gave him the look of always being surprised. He was not a classically handsome Cary Grant type, but seductive in a self-confident and assured way that only ruthlessly driven people can be. He crunched his cigarette beneath his brown leather boot and approached Desirée.

“Good morning, my dear,” Beau said as he leaned in to kiss her cheek.

“Remember, you’re not playing anyone’s mother in this picture.” He flicked open the top two buttons of her white nurse’s costume, so that the lace of the pink brassiere she wore was exposed.

Desirée breathed in deeply and sighed as Karen, the hair and makeup lady, stroked her on the arm and mouthed, “Don’t let him upset you.”

Desirée began pacing around the set as Bill Anderson, the actor who played the dying patient, had dark makeup dabbed beneath his eyes and white powder applied to his suntanned face.

Martin, the mustachioed assistant director yelled, “Quiet on the set!” and “Roll it!” Beau then chimed in, “Action!”

Desirée walked towards the hospital bed in which the patient, whom Nurse Patsy suspects of having murdered three people, lay.

“Cut!” yelled Beau. “Desirée, the script says that you walk *slowly* to the bed. Do it again, and don’t look so pissed off this time, you’re scared, remember? Look scared.”

The camera operator began rolling again so that the shot could be recaptured. Once she made it to where Bill, or rather, the sleeping patient lay, she began to fidget with a prop syringe that she took from the pocket of her uniform, along with a glass bottle of morphine. She stuck the needle’s point into the bottle’s opening and filled the syringe. She grazed the plunger with her thumb, sending a stream of fluid spurting out. Just as she brought it to the patient, before she could prick his arm and press down on the plunger, he awakened.

Bill began his dialogue: “What are you doing, Nurse Patsy? I didn’t ring.”

“You stirred in your sleep; I thought you needed relief from your pain.”

Bill rose from his lying-down position, snatched the syringe from Desirée’s trembling hand and threw it to the floor - shattering the glass syringe and its contents.

Desirée gasped as the patient pulled her by her arm onto the bed and wrapped his fingers around her neck, only giving the illusion of strangling her.

“Cut! Cut! Desirée, my darling, you’re supposed to look frightened, Fay Wray frightened! I want your eyes to be out on sticks! I want sheer terror! Do you understand? This *is* a horror picture we’re making! Now, do it right this time!”

The shot picked up after Bill hurled the syringe. She gasped and groaned as the choking scene dragged on, her face turned red and tears streaked her eye-makeup. Beau loved it.

“Cut! Print! That’s why I hired you, my dear girl! Now, unbutton your blouse a bit more, flesh is what sells movie tickets!”

Desirée walked out into the hallway; she needed to be away from Beau and all of his demands. She asked Karen, who began touching up her streaked mascara with a cotton swab, to get her a Diet Coke and a Valium from her dressing room. She replied with, “Certainly Miss De Mille,” and headed off down the hallway. As soon as Karen was out of sight, Bill, wearing a hospital gown and zipping a pair of blue jeans, walked towards where Desirée stood, leaning against the wall and looking over a new page of the revised script. The revisions seemed even worse than the original. The scene which she was reviewing was to be shot over the course of the next two days and required her to be running from Bill in one blood-soaked stiletto while haphazardly wielding a scalpel and screaming like a banshee.

Desirée looked up from the type-written page to see two male crew members pushing a large cart holding seven five-gallon buckets of faux hemoglobin concocted from diluted Karo syrup and red food-coloring. It was to be poured over the floor for the

next murder scene. Desirée would, upon discovery of her gruesome surroundings, slip and lose one of her high-heeled shoes, become covered in the sticky, red liquid and jump to her feet so that she could run and scream. The script called for her to look terrified, yet “sexy and youthful.” It was her director’s favorite combination in his leading ladies.

“Hello, Desirée.” Bill smiled as he ran his suntanned fingers through his wavy blonde hair. He was twenty-three years old and beautiful. He had a healthy, unspoiled farm-boy beauty, with an appearance nothing like that of the most recent crop of actors to make it big in pictures. He was not at all like those men; actors like Robert De Niro, Dustin Hoffman and Jack Nicholson all seemed like real people. They were disheveled, thin, and extraordinary in their resemblance to the common civilian with their common haircuts and common clothes. Bill’s hair was cut short and his face was clean shaven. His All-American athlete’s physique rivaled that of Burt Lancaster in *The Crimson Pirate* or Marlon Brando in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Desirée had coveted him from the very first day on set, and had made up her mind to have him for herself, as a sort of plaything.

It hadn’t occurred to her that he might be a bit too young, and that the snickering of other actors and crew members had nothing to do with the silly film, but rather with the romance between the middle-aged actress and the promising young heartthrob.

“Did you make an appointment?” Bill asked.

“Yes; it’s at 3:00 this afternoon. Tomorrow it’ll be like it never happened.”

“I’d like to pay for it.”

“No. I can’t allow that. This has nothing to do with you. This is my choice.”

Karen then met the two of them as she approached with a Valium tablet hidden in her closed hand and an aluminum can of Diet Coke.

“Here you are, Miss De Mille. I hope the Coke’s chilled well enough.”

Desirée didn’t say anything. She just smiled and took the pill from Karen’s hand and swallowed it with a sip of Coke. Karen walked away as Bill glared at Desirée.

“I hope that’s aspirin,” Bill said.

“It’d be none of your business if it weren’t. Bill, look, you have no idea what I’m going through. Beau is making my life a living hell and you think you can make everything all right by giving me a wad of money. What a child you are.”

“Can I drive you?”

“No. I’d prefer to go alone. I don’t want to draw any attention to the situation. If someone recognizes you and calls the newspapers, then there’s a chance of journalists and protestors showing up at the clinic and getting our photograph. This piece-of-shit film can’t handle getting any bad press. And how would that make me look? ‘Desirée De Mille seen entering abortion clinic.’ You haven’t been famous long enough to understand that in this town your reputation is everything.”

“I’m sorry, Desirée. I was only trying to help you. Call me if you need anything.” Bill walked away, looking very much like a little boy who had just taken a scolding from his mother.

Desirée sipped from her Coke and walked over to where Beau and Martin were talking over the next scenes to be filmed.

“Beau, could I speak to you for a moment?”

“Make it quick, we’re working here.”

“Beau, I need to leave early today. Something has come up and I need to deal with it.”

“What time do you need to leave? You’re not getting paid *not* to be here. What’s going on?”

“I’d rather not talk about it, Beau, just let me leave today around 2:00 P.M.; I have an appointment in The Valley at 3:00.”

“What the hell is going on Desirée? Are you sick or something?”

“Something like that. I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

Desirée walked away from Beau and Martin, down the long, sterile hallway littered with electrical cords, camera equipment, and extras loitering around in their bandages and hospital-gown costumes. She entered her dressing room, took off her nurse’s costume, wedge-cap and white pumps. She changed into a sleeveless black sundress with a pair of matching black leather high-heeled sandals, tortoise-shell sunglasses and a flouncy white hat appropriate for The Kentucky Derby.

She left the set without anyone recognizing her, hopped into her new red 1983 Camaro and began the drive to the private abortion clinic where she had an appointment in The San Fernando Valley’s Sherman Oaks area. Desirée just wanted to get there without anyone recognizing her, so that the procedure could be completed and she could return to her home in Brentwood and sleep. She was exhausted and wanted nothing more than a long rest: a rest from Beau, a rest from Bill, and most of all a rest from the being on the set of *The Night Nurse*.

Desirée parked her car near the entrance of the clinic’s parking lot and took the keys from the ignition and placed them in her purse. She glanced at herself in the rearview mirror, rubbed her lips together so that her pink lipstick was smooth, and fluffed

her hair. She wore her hat and sunglasses while she was inside the clinic, as she did not want to be recognized or asked for an autograph. She approached the Reception desk.

“Hello. My name is Fay Wray; I have an appointment with Dr. Jacobs at 3:00.”

“Oh, yes ma’am. I have you down for 3:15, but there’s some paperwork for you to fill out anyway.” The pretty blonde receptionist handed Desirée a clipboard with two white forms attached and a plastic ink-pen. “You can sit down over there and fill these out. Dr. Jacobs will be with you shortly.”

Desirée took a seat in a hard armchair with imitation blue leather upholstery. The form asked for her name, address, home telephone number, social security number, allergies, medications, previous illnesses and operations, payment information, and an emergency contact person. She could think of no one to be her emergency contact. The only person close to her was Bill, and she didn’t really even like him very much or know him very well. He was far too young to be her boyfriend, and too silly and immature to be considered a dear friend. She deemed him her lover: someone to help her make it through the night. She was able to cope with that. Neither of them expected their relationship to last longer than the film’s shooting schedule; it was built on nothing. She filled in his name and telephone number. She hadn’t the faintest clue of his home address.

Desirée took the completed forms back to the receptionist’s desk. The pretty blonde receptionist smiled and looked down at Desirée’s paperwork.

“Thank you Miss Wray. You know, you really do look familiar. Hey! Didn’t you used to be in the movies? You were! I recognize you. I couldn’t really tell with those sunglasses, but you *were* famous. Weren’t you? Fay Wray doesn’t sound right. Isn’t your name Deborah? Deborah De Mille?”

“My name is not Deborah. It’s Desirée, and I *am* famous! I’m working on a new picture right now, as a matter of fact! It’s due out this Christmas and I play the lead female part. Beau Lycknstrick just so happens to be directing it. You certainly are the rudest little receptionist I have ever met!”

“Who?”

“Never mind.” Desirée almost burst into tears; she hadn’t realized just how bad her career had gotten. She felt foolish and ashamed. She would have left the clinic if a nurse hadn’t called her name at that instant.

“Miss Wray. Fay Wray, we’re ready for you now.”

Desirée walked to where the nurse stood. The eyes of the pretty blonde receptionist followed her.

The nurse gave Desirée a blue cotton gown to change into. She took her temperature, blood pressure, asked her basic questions about her overall health, how many days it had been since her last missed period, and many other pertinent, rudimentary questions that are common to clinics and procedures of that sort. The room was white and sterile and smelled of a potent disinfectant. The doctor, a handsome dark-skinned man in his late forties with thick bifocal eyeglasses came in soon after the nurse exited the room. He shook Desirée’s hand and asked her more questions; he then explained what the procedure was to entail and slapped on a pair of latex gloves. He gave her a mild sedative and asked her to lie back on the table and to relax. He told her that it would not hurt, but, would indeed be a bit uncomfortable. She held her breath.

* * *

Desirée opened the bottle of Codeine that had been prescribed by Dr. Jacobs, in the event of what he had referred to as “intolerable pain.” She emptied the white tablets into her palm and swallowed them down with mouthfuls of Stolichnaya vodka, one by one, until the bottle of pills was empty. She opened her white satin dressing gown, and let it fall to the floor so that she could ease into the tub of hot water she had drawn for herself. She sat in the bathtub for five minutes, letting only the ends of her hair dip into the steaming-hot water. She then rose from the bathtub and walked to the telephone that sat upon her bedside table. She rang Bill up on the phone, and, in a shaky voice, asked him to come over right away. He knew what she had done. It had been two days since she appeared on the set of *The Night Nurse*. She knew that Beau wanted to fire her, but her contract would not allow it, and there would not be time in the shooting schedule to hire another actress to take the role.

Bill got into his car and drove from his house to Desirée’s mansion in Brentwood; the house was in need of slight cosmetic repair and the garden was overgrown with weeds and ivy. She had left the gate open for him; he opened the front door with the key she had given him during their first week of working together. He ran up the staircase located in the mansion’s foyer and ran down the hallway to her bedroom. He found her collapsed onto the bed, naked and wet from the bathtub that was still full of water. He sat on the bed, flung the sheet off of her, and pulled her limp body so that she was sitting up and leaning against him. Her lips had a tint of blue beneath their natural shade of pink and her breathing was very shallow. He took her chin in his hand and began to violently shake her all over.

“Wake up! Why did you go to sleep? Wake up, Desirée! Wake up, you selfish little bitch! You’re not going anywhere! Wake up!”

He continued shaking her and slapped her across each cheek. She began to mumble incoherent syllables. Bill dragged her from her bed into the bathroom and left her on the cold marble floor, while he ran to the downstairs kitchen. He brought a drinking glass, a spoon, and a bottle of yellow mustard into the bathroom so that he could concoct a vomit-inducing remedy of mustard and warm water, which he dipped from the full bathtub.

He shook Desirée so that she was again awake and forced her to drink the liquid. She was hesitant and incoherent, but after she had swallowed nearly the whole glass, it began to work. Bill held her hair back as she kneeled on the bathroom floor and vomited into the toilet bowl. It nearly made him sick to watch the beautiful has-been-film-star in such a state: vomiting so violently that he thought surely a lung would plop into the basin. He flushed the lever periodically until she had vomited the entire contents of her stomach into the toilet and collapsed onto the floor, shivering, coughing, and pale as chalk. Her hair was matted and lay around her on the marble. She was gasping for breath, naked and trembling and in the position of a fetus on the cold bathroom floor, sweating and clutching at her stomach.

He dialed the number of Dr. Jacobs’s office that was printed on the discarded pill bottle that lay on the bathroom floor. Dr. Jacobs did not make house calls, and would not have been in his office that time of evening if Bill had not interrupted him completing some necessary paperwork. However, Bill was insistent and Dr. Jacobs understood that Desirée would not want to be seen in such a state entering a nearby Los Angeles hospital.

Dr. Jacobs arrived about an hour after hanging up with Bill. He asked Desirée, who was now in her dressing gown and resting in bed, what sort of pills she took, if she had really wanted to die, how she felt, what she drank, and many other questions. She was alive, but not out of the woods completely. Dr. Jacobs recommended some strong black coffee, lots of rest, and that Bill stay the night with her. It was deemed unsafe by the doctor that she be alone. He also recommended that she be admitted to a drug clinic after the next few weeks of filming were complete.

After the doctor had left, Bill flushed each and every pill, tablet and capsule that he could find in her bedside table, pocket book and medicine cupboard. He also emptied all of the bottles of liquor into the kitchen sink. Desirée slept like the dead that night, and Bill slept right next to her, making sure every few minutes that she was still breathing and that her pulse was beating. She awakened the next evening to Bill running his fingers through her hair.

“You’re awake. I wasn’t sure you would actually pull through. Dr. Jacobs says that you should be fine in a few days.”

“Dr. Jacobs? Was he here?”

“Yes. Don’t you remember?”

“I thought it was all a dream. Goddamn, I feel like hell.”

“You should, you nearly puked your fucking guts out last night.”

They both laughed, Bill’s laugh was loud and a bit sad, and Desirée’s was faint and weak.

“I’m so embarrassed,” she said as she began to cry.

“There’s no need to be embarrassed. You’re all right; that’s all that matters.”

“I thought you wouldn’t care if I died.”

“Of course I’d care. I love you. I know I shouldn’t, but I do. I love you.”

Desirée just smiled a sad little smile. She was happy that Bill said he loved her. She did not reciprocate his words, but she smiled, and he accepted it.

“I’m sorry I called you a child. You’re a good man. I wouldn’t be here if you hadn’t come last night.”

“Well,” Bill paused to think, “We’ll always have *The Night Nurse*.”

“Yeah,” Desirée retorted, “That piece of shit will outlive the both of us.”

Desirée returned to the set of *The Night Nurse* two days later. Beau was furious with her, but she paid him no mind. She just recited her lines and continued on in a mediocre, melancholy state.

One week after the nearly-fatal suicide attempt, just as Desirée parked her red Camaro in her usual parking-space in the Warner Bros. parking garage, she was happy. She was elated: the man who met her at her car was Brian De Palma. He had been visiting his old friend, Beau, while Desirée was absent from the set, and knew exactly where to find her when she returned.

“I’ve been watching the Rushes of *The Night Nurse*. I’m impressed with your maturity as an actress. I no longer have any interest in ingénues. You have a new, almost, intangible quality that isn’t in your early films. I’d love for you to come and work for me in my next film.”

“Thank you. I’d absolutely love to work for you, Mr. De Palma.”

She nearly started to cry; she hadn’t actually been approached by a director for a role in nearly five years. She had to audition and compete for horrible roles she knew

were beneath her talent, and then she only got cast because the other, younger actresses always found something else, something better. Desirée held out her hand to shake his, but instead found herself being hugged.

“I’ve always admired your screen presence. Actresses like you are why I make movies. It will be a pleasure to direct you, Miss De Mille.”

Desirée could barely speak. She had not been complimented in such a way, by anyone whose status in Hollywood mattered, in years. Desirée and Brian parted after a few moments and she walked to the set of *The Night Nurse*. Beau was standing outside of Soundstage Four smoking a cigarette when Desirée approached the door.

“You’re ten minutes late, Desirée.”

“I’m sorry; I got held up.”

“What? Another *appointment*?”

“Excuse me?”

“Everybody knows, Desirée. You can stop pretending that you’re so much better than everyone else working on this picture.”

“I don’t pretend. Brian De Palma just offered me a role in his new movie. I’m only working on your nasty little picture because I need to eat. You see, I’m not so different than everyone else.”

“I guess you’re right; you’re just another bitchy little actress.”

“I may be a bitch, but I’m also going to be a star, and in this town, one doesn’t exist without the other.”

Butcher's Peppermint

Sally was precise in folding Mr. Malloy's veal chops in white paper, making sure not to stain the package with the traces of blood and fat that slicked the front of her otherwise pristine apron. A patron's child – a young boy with eager hands – caused the blue jar of fat peppermint sticks adorning the countertop to topple and crack open onto the newly-mopped floor. Mr. Malloy slapped his son's cheek and jerked the package away from Sally's trembling hands. He stormed out of the butcher shop while tugging the child along behind him by his little sleeve.

"I can't take you anywhere!" the man said.

The boy was embarrassed and weeping, his face red from being struck. Sally shouted for Ira - who was in the meat-locker taking the week's inventory - to bring a broom and dustpan so that she could clean up the candy and shattered glass. She picked up each peppermint stick, blew away the grit and hair that stuck to them, and placed each confection onto the counter.

The large glass shards she was able to remove with her hands and place in the garbage; the other slivers and particles she swept into the dustpan, careful not to embed an invisible fiber into her hand. It was not until that night when Ira was asleep that she went to the bathroom and examined the triangular blue shard she had decided to keep. She slid the straps of her white eyelet nightgown down over her shoulders and held the blue memento to her left breast, sinking its sharpest point into her flesh. Blood welled at the wound; she wiped the redness away with a Kleenex that she wadded and flung into the trash can. She wrapped the glass in a handkerchief and placed it in the pocket of her

folded blue jeans lying atop the wicker hamper. She turned out the light and returned to the bed she shared with Ira; he was sleeping soundly, and for the first time in a long time so did she. She eased into sleep while curled up next to her husband, feeling the warmth of him and listening to the rhythm of his breathing.

Wash it Away

My mother twirled into the doorway of the bedroom I shared with my baby sister, Daisy. We lived in an old farmhouse that bred lady bugs in the fall, ants in the spring and flies in the summer. Mother was dressed in a long red and purple skirt and had ropes of glass beads twisted around her slender neck.

“Guess what I am.”

“You dress in the same costume every year,” I said.

“Don’t you like my gypsy alter-ego?” my mother asked as she adjusted her red fringed headscarf and plastic hoop earrings.

“It’s just your regular clothes, only with a few more bangles and necklaces added on.” I continued to paint my toenails from the bottle of Revlon Fire and Ice I had taken from my mother’s dressing table.

“I hope you’re planning on returning that when you’re done.” She gestured to my smeared pedicure. “And why do I smell burned hair?” she asked.

“One of my braids fell into the skull candle, but I pitched some water on it – from the fish bowl,” I said.

“What did I tell you about burning candles in your bedroom, Inez? You know it’s dangerous.”

“Sorry, Mom. I forgot.”

“You seem to be forgetting a lot lately.”

This was the Halloween of my fourteenth year. I didn’t yet understand who my mother was. I knew that she had given me life and had loved me; she had nursed me at

her breast for two years, but this year, she seemed a stranger to me: I didn't yet know that mothers could have a life apart from their children.

* * *

I had awoken one morning, not long before that Halloween, to the sound of a ringing telephone and my parents shouting. My father struggled to pull the phone away from my mother; he then hollered something at the caller and slammed the receiver down. Daisy, my tiny eleven-year-old sister, slept through it all. A few hours later, Daisy, with eyes as big as teacups and shorn dark hair, walked into the kitchen for breakfast. I followed behind her.

“What’s wrong, Daddy? There are drops of blood on the floor.” Daisy said.

“Don’t worry, baby-doll. Everything’s okay; I just cut myself shaving.” My father, with his large calloused hands and rolled-up shirt sleeves sat at the head of the kitchen table on one of our wooden chairs and gritted his teeth. Mother dabbed at his bleeding cheek with a handkerchief.

“I don’t think you’ll even need a stitch,” she said.

My sister and I sat close enough so that we could see every move of Mother’s elegant hand as she cleaned his wound with peroxide and cotton. I bit my bottom lip and squinted, while Daisy took tiny bites of candy corn, never finishing one piece without taking another from the dish.

“Daddy, don’t shave your beard. I like it,” said Daisy.

“Mind your own business, young lady. And stop eating that candy. Your breakfast is on the stove.”

My mother threw away the soiled cotton; she folded the handkerchief with my father's blood on it and placed it in her apron pocket. After washing her hands at the kitchen sink – paying extra attention to her long fingernails – she served our breakfast of fried, salty eggs and buttered toast on chipped plates and carried them to the kitchen table. We all ate except for her; she just sat and smoked Marlboro Lights in silence. My father dipped his toast in the pool of egg yolk; his full gray beard looked soft and tears welled in his eyes behind his glasses.

* * *

That evening, while my mother and Daisy finished the supper dishes, I sat on my father's lap as he sat on our antique sofa and watched *Gunsmoke* on television and smoked a cigarette.

“Can I have a puff?”

“Just a little one; don't tell your mother.”

I took a short drag and exhaled, not coughing a bit. My father placed the cigarette between his lips.

“Come on, Inez: the caramel apples are ready.” Mother stood in the kitchen doorway wearing a jack-o-lantern apron and holding a frayed dishtowel. “And get out of your father's lap; you're too old for that.”

The doorbell rang.

“I'll get it,” I said. I rushed to the front door and peeked outside. “There are little ghosts outside!”

Daisy ran to where I was standing in the foyer; she was nibbling on a caramel apple.

“Since when do we get trick-or-treaters?” I asked my father, who had turned off the television and was now standing next to myself and Daisy. He opened the door.

“Cut on the porch light!” my mother bellowed.

Mother went to the kitchen to retrieve the platter of warm caramel-coated apples. She returned from the kitchen and greeted the three little children dressed in white sheets with cut-out holes for eyes.

The children’s mother, our new neighbor, stood in a witch’s hat and tattered orange and black dress with pointy shoes.

“Thank you very much. Say thank you, kids,” our pretty new neighbor said.

The little ghost children mumbled thank you as they each took a caramel apple from the Blue Willow platter.

My father just stood there, quiet and smiling. He placed his arm around my mother’s waist, but she brushed it away and walked back inside as the little ghosts and their witch mother headed back down our long driveway.

* * *

After Daisy and I ate two caramel apples apiece, I sat on the closed commode and flipped through the pages of Mother’s latest issue of *Cosmopolitan* as she washed herself in the bathtub.

“You’re so pretty,” I said.

“Thank you, sweetheart. You’re pretty too.”

“Not like you. I look more like Dad.”

“Your dad happens to be a very handsome man.” My mother shaved her plump, stubbly legs in long clean strokes with a pink Lady Bic razor.

“Is that why you got married?”

“I guess so. What’s gotten into you? Why are you so curious tonight?” She finished shaving and rinsed the white foam from her legs.

“No reason.” I dipped my fingertip into a jar of pink cosmetic jelly and patted it onto my lips.

“Why didn’t you use Daddy’s razor? I think he likes it when you do.”

“I like to use my own things. Toss me those nylons.”

I handed her the pair of stockings that had been flung onto the vase of fake, dusty hydrangeas that sat on top of the towel shelf; she rubbed them with the bar of Dial and then rinsed them out in the milky bathwater.

“Wash my back too, darling. I almost forgot.”

I squeezed some water from the balled-up washcloth, rubbed the bar of soap onto my mother’s suntanned skin, and cleaned the soap away. I paid close attention to the small dark freckles on her back and the faint red lines that were left by her tight bra straps.

“Thanks, baby. Hand me a towel.”

I took a white towel from the shelf and gave it to her. I noticed that it had a faint stain of her menstrual blood on it, but Mother didn’t seem to notice: she never threw anything away.

She stood from the tub and dried every spot of water from her skin. She had long, freckled arms, large breasts, a flat stomach and full thighs.

“Why isn’t Daddy going to the Halloween party?” I asked.

“You know your father doesn’t like parties,” she said as she wrapped the towel around her wet hair in a turban.

“Can I go?” I asked.

“What kind of mother would I be to take such a young girl to an adult party? Maybe when you’re older. Stay home with your father and sister and watch *The Twilight Zone* or something.”

I followed her into the bedroom she shared with my father.

Mother opened the closet door and took her favorite night robe from the hook: the satin one with red and yellow roses printed on it.

“What’s this new perfume? It’s not your birthday.” I stroked the bottle’s blue glass.

“Why don’t you try and mind your own business for a change?” She strode over to where I stood at her dressing table and swatted my hand away.

“I’m sorry.” I sat down on the floor and picked at the red paint on my toenails.

Mother sat at her dressing table with its few bottles of nail polish and worn-down tubes of lipstick. She applied black mascara to her dark eyes. The expensive bottle of Evening in Paris perfume stuck out like a sore thumb among her drugstore-purchased cosmetics and costume jewelry.

The phone rang. “I’ll get it,” I jumped up and rushed to the telephone on my parents’ bedside table.

Mother stopped me. “Who do you think you are? You’re not the woman of this house.” She answered the telephone and I ran out of the room.

Daisy was sitting in her pink nightgown on our bedroom floor; she was busy cutting pictures of flowers, champagne glasses, movie stars, and anything pink or yellow, out of old issues of *Marie-Claire* and *Town and Country*. I sat next to her and cut out a picture of a wedding cake covered with white candles.

Mother stepped into our bedroom a few minutes later. She was wiping her tear-streaked face with the stained handkerchief she had used to clean my father's cheek. Standing in her satin night robe, the one with the red and yellow roses printed on it, she looked like more of a child than myself or Daisy.

"Mama, why are you crying?" Daisy asked.

"I'm not crying. It's just that my friend called and canceled. I'm not going to the party after all," Mother said.

"You were crying. You have raccoon eyes," Daisy said.

"Be happy you have nothing to cry over; it'll come soon enough."

"Is that your friend who gave you the perfume in the blue bottle?" I asked.

"Yes, it was," my mother replied.

Mother sat with us on our bedroom floor, took a pair of scissors, and began cutting out a picture of a diamond ring. Our clippings littered the floor.

"I'm glad you're not going. I want you all to myself," I said.

Mother gave Daisy and me both a kiss and we sat together on the floor, clipping photos of our dream homes, our dream swimming pools, our dream husbands and our dream wardrobes. Mother cut out pictures of convertibles and places she had never been: New York, Paris and London. She started to cry again. I could smell her perfume. Her robe had a hole in it, but she didn't notice, and I didn't say anything.

Mother Butterfly

Warm midday sunshine showered over the valleys and hills of their sheltered town. The little tow-headed girl fingered a dead butterfly's wings – the black and yellow iridescence leaving glittering traces on her smooth palms. She stood and brushed away dried grass and dirt from her plaid dress – it was nearing mealtime and her mother required help preparing lunch; knives were no longer kept within her mother's reach – she would attempt to slice a tomato or peel an onion and would, without feeling anything, ruin another hand-stitched apron with a spattering of blood. Drinking glasses were smashed regularly and her normally up-pinned hair now lay combed and smooth over her shoulders. The young girl washed the dishes as her mother sat at the table, humming and stroking the cat's soft fur as it licked dried blood from her fingers.

The Night Entertainment

Lulu Lionheart sat before the mirror at her dressing table as she applied her face. On Christmas Eve, 1978, she was to perform with her lover and creative partner, Lieutenant Leech, on the stage of one of New York City's most lascivious punk clubs, Pulse. She began by applying a dark grease paint to her eyelids with her forefinger which she smoothed into a dark shadow that rose to meet her perfectly stenciled eyebrows. She painted a dark line of makeup beneath her eyes, and drew a small blue star beneath her left. Her lips she painted a glossy, candy-apple red and her face she powdered a matte alabaster. Her black hair was streaked through with white and shaved into a tall mohawk complete with a glistening short black fringe across her forehead.

"Grab your coat and get your hat," Lulu sang as she applied her makeup. "Leave your worries on your doorstep. Life can be so sweet on the sunny side of the street."

Lulu looked directly into the mirror, this time not cheery and singing, but serious as hell.

"There will be some goddamn gold dust at my feet on the sunny, sunny side of the street," Lulu said. She kissed the mirror, which left a red lip print.

Lulu was the front woman and lead singer of the act Lulu Lionheart and Lieutenant Leech. She and The Lt. performed pseudo love songs of romance gone awry and of the perils of passionate entanglements. Lulu and The Lt. had been a couple for five years, an act for three, and had been living together for two in a renovated packing plant with wooden floors and brick walls within the Meat Packing District of Manhattan, complete with a small recording studio in the basement. They were both twenty-five

years old, and had met one day when they were both only twenty, and Lulu (formerly known as Jane Smith) was standing outside of a pharmacy in her hometown of Valentine, Nebraska, sipping from a plastic straw in a glass bottle of Coca-Cola and humming the title track from The Stooges' record, *Fun House*.

She was quite taken with The Lt. (formerly known as Tom Lewis) and his looks, as he was with her voice. She had nothing but a job at the local beauty parlor as a shampoo girl to lose, so she decided to join him wherever he was going. They drove in The Lt.'s red pickup truck to the west to see the Pacific Ocean, and then back to his hometown of New York City. Jane took the surname of Lionheart after hearing of a Native American legend concerning a Sioux warrior whose bravery and physical strength was so extraordinary that it was believed inside his chest beat the heart of a lion. Lulu was a nickname given to Jane by The Lt.; he was never fond of her given name.

They never talked very much about the small details of their lives before they met each other; all they knew was one another's mutual ambition of living an exciting life filled with music and endless possibility, where each day was never the same as the previous. The only other band member was a roughly handsome drummer with tawny, pitted skin and a harelip from Detroit called Buster, whom they picked up outside of an oil refinery in Rawlins County, Wyoming.

When on stage, as well as off, The Lt. typically wore a silver heart-shaped locket around his neck containing Lulu's photograph and black suspenders attached to scandalously tight, black leather pants, without a shirt. A black patent policeman cap and "shit kicker" boots were his other trademark accessories. His thin, almost feminine frame was pasty white and his brown eyes were always lined with black kohl. He had a

delicately sculpted nose with a long bridge and pouty lips that were always made-up with the same stain of red as Lulu's. His hair was an inky shade of black that was cut short and slicked back so that it always appeared to be wet. He wore a silver safety pin pierced through his left cheek and "Lulu Lionheart" complete with a small red heart and skull with crossbones was tattooed on his scrawny left bicep.

"Hello my love, my dear rose and goddess," slurred The Lt.

He stumbled into the bedroom he shared with Lulu, as he clenched the stub of a lighted cigarette between his teeth and an emaciated, chalky white girl clung to his arm. She was a spiky-haired barmaid they were mutually acquainted with from Pulse, who wore a tattered rabbit fur coat, a torn white t-shirt which revealed one rosy nipple, frayed denim shorts, black stockings full of runs, and bubblegum-pink ankle boots. Lulu saw that the girl's red lipstick was smeared across her face as The Lt. bent down and kissed her cheek.

"Hey Lu, you know Stevie," The Lt. mumbled as he began to snicker.

"Where the hell have you been? And why did you bring this used up smack-hag into my apartment?" Lulu scowled, as she painted her long, sharp fingernails a deep shade of crimson. "I thought you vowed against ever taking that shit again. Remember last year? You almost fucking killed yourself, you damn idiot. Go take a shower and sleep it off, we're on in three hours."

The Lt. mumbled something under his breath about Lulu being his girl and not his mother, undressed and stepped behind the clear plastic curtain into the shower with the cigarette hanging loosely between his full lips. Lulu pulled the spiky-haired girl by her

wrist as she stumbled along behind her, out of the front door, down the hallway and into an elevator.

“Don’t you ever come back here again, or I’ll kill you. I’ll push you off the balcony into the street and the garbage man will have to sweep your skinny carcass into a dustpan and toss you into a dumpster, you understand? Good!” Lulu yelled as the elevator doors closed shut.

Lulu prided herself on her abstinence from drugs; she and the Lt. had both nearly overdosed on various narcotic opioids including cocaine and heroin, and had vowed to one another to never use again. The Lt., however, was not very good at keeping his word. Lulu stormed into the bathroom, threw back the clear plastic shower curtain and pushed The Lt. against the shower wall.

“What’re you doing? I’m trying to wash up,” The Lt. scowled as he rubbed a fat bar of white soap across his chest.

“What am I doing? You’re the one who brought that slut into our home! You’re the one who can barely stand up straight! I can’t believe it. You promised me.”

“What did I promise?” The Lt. asked as he stepped out of the shower with runny eyeliner and fresh soap suds sliding down his torso.

“You promised to stay clean, and to be faithful to me. I thought we loved each other. I thought we were partners in all of this.”

Lulu began to cry and remained as still as a statue as The Lt. wrapped his wet sudsy arms around her and rested his chin on top of her head.

“There there, little girl, don’t ruin your face; you look like a drowned clown when you cry.”

The Lt. walked from the shower to the sink basin and began to lather his stubbly face with white shaving cream. He took a straight razor from the rusted medicine cupboard behind the mirror and opened it, so that he could begin to shave. Lulu remained very still as she gently wiped her tears away with her fingertips and turned towards The Lt., as he stood wet and naked before the mirror, shaving his face.

“What did you say to me? I look like a drowned clown? I think I look pretty good, compared to the skin-and-bone street whores you were accustomed to before you met me.”

The Lt. smiled, placed the razor on the sink, and turned towards Lulu. “You’re jealous because of how wide you’ve gotten since you quit using. It’s really quite sickening to see your bare, fleshy thighs on stage.”

Lulu slid the razor into her hand before The Lt. noticed it missing. He reached down to lift it, but it was not there. He gave Lulu a look that said he knew she could not possibly hurt him, yet he knew better. They had always been volatile and had gotten along like a house on fire. They burned each other up, and they loved it. It made their relationship thrilling and provided an electric, almost tangible energy between the two of them while performing onstage. Lulu held the opened razor before him.

“I’m giving you about one second to apologize. How dare you speak to me that way, as if I were some fat, phony punk chick. You are so lucky to have me! You don’t even have a clue!”

The Lt. would normally have responded in a way that was tender and heartfelt; however, his chemically altered state provided nothing but a snicker and a crooked grin. He truly looked like an imbecile, for he was naked, dripping wet, sudsy, and now covered

in shaving cream so white and fluffy that he looked to have been smacked in the face with a cream pie. Lulu lunged towards him with the silver razor and sunk it deeply into his bare left arm, just below his tattoo of her name. He looked at her in bewilderment as he noticed the blood beginning to drip onto the black-and-white-tiled floor. Lulu shrieked and reached for a towel; she had not meant to cut him so deeply, yet his blood spoke otherwise. It seemed to cry up from the crevices between the white tiles.

She pressed the towel against the bleeding gash and set him down upon the closed toilet lid. He sat there holding the towel as Lulu ran to the bedroom to retrieve a spool of black thread, a shiny silver needle and her sewing scissors. She kept a sewing basket underneath the bed they shared, for it was quite ordinary for Lulu to create her own stage costumes. After cleaning the wound with peroxide and cotton, Lulu proceeded to thread the needle and stitch her beloved's arm back together. As she was about to reach for the scissors to snip the end of the stitching, The Lt. took them from their perch on the sink and snipped off as much of Lulu's mohawk as the shears would hold. The long black tendrils floated down to the floor as if they were feathers from a raven's wing.

"What have you done?" cried Lulu. "I'll look like a fool! Is this the thanks I get after doctoring you up so perfectly?"

"I'm not thanking you. Not after you nearly sliced my arm clean off, a fucking butcher couldn't have done any better."

Lulu bent down to the floor to sop up the blood from the Lt.'s wound with the already soaked towel, and proceeded to pick up the strands of hair that had been severed. The Lt. stood from where he sat upon the toilet lid, took a crumpled package of Viceroy's from his leather pants that lay amongst a heap of clothing on the bathroom floor and

lighted a cigarette from a wooden match he ignited with his thumb. He took the first drag from the cigarette and exhaled through his nostrils. He then gave the cigarette to Lulu and kissed her forehead.

“Just shave it off,” Lulu sniffled as she nursed her cigarette.

The Lt. took the sewing scissors and cut off all of Lulu’s hair, so that it lay about them in heaps on the bathroom floor. A few strands even stuck to the Lt., as he was still naked and a bit wet from his shower. He then took the straight razor, rinsed it, lathered Lulu’s head with shaving cream, and shaved her scalp as clean as a newborn babe’s. Her scalp bore a few nicks that The Lt. cleaned with his forefinger by wetting it with his tongue. Her head was as white as an egg, yet, she looked fresh and clean, as if she had just been baptized by a Baptist preacher on Easter Sunday. The Lt. then took a handful of Lulu’s hair and placed it in a heart-shaped box they kept beside their bed. The Lt. took a long swig from a bottle of cheap vodka to help ease the pain of his newly stitched arm wound and lighted a cigarette for himself.

They lay on their unmade bed of dingy white sheets that bore more than a few cigarette burns, smoked their cigarettes and polished off the bottle of liquor. Afterwards, they slept. They slept with their arms wrapped around each other as The Lt. snored very loudly. Lulu occasionally prodded him in the ribs with her elbow, to stop the snoring, but he was sound asleep and did not stir. After about an hour they awakened and began to get ready for their performance at Pulse. Lulu touched up her dark eye makeup and further exaggerated the black lines beneath her eyes and the redness of her painted pout. She cleaned The Lt.’s face with cold-cream, to remove the smudged eyeliner, and then drew beneath his eyes with a pointed black makeup pencil. He squeezed into his leather pants,

hooked his suspenders to the waist band, pulled on his boots and slicked his hair back with a foul smelling handful of pomade before placing on his trademark policeman cap.

Lulu looked sensational in her fitted bustier, black panties and fishnet hosiery; The Lt. was right, her figure had filled out. She was no longer rail-thin with visible bones, but the vision of a buxom screen goddess. Lulu and The Lt. wore fingerless gloves and matching black leather jackets with square and star-shaped studs adorning the collars and cuffs. He carried his electric bass guitar in its case over his left shoulder and Lulu carried her guitar over her right as they stepped out of their front door, in and out of the elevator, and out of the building into the night. The Lt. took two balled-up dollar bills and purchased a cheap bottle of Ripple wine from a corner liquor store. He carried it down the street in a brown-paper bag and drank from it as the salt-covered sidewalks of New York crunched beneath their boot heels.

Snowflakes fell onto their shoulders and the city glowed with red and green Christmas lights that were strung above the windows of every storefront and butcher shop. Light poles were wrapped with faux garland and white lights and Christmas wreaths were tied with red velvet bows. Their breath was indistinguishable from the smoke that The Lt. exhaled from the cigarette he held between his pursed lips as they completed the two-block walk from their apartment to the back entry of Pulse.

The heat from the club hit them like a slap across the face as they opened the heavy, metal door. They took off their jackets and met Buster, their drummer, who had arrived early and was flirting with Stevie, the junkie barmaid The Lt. had brought to the apartment earlier that day. Once she saw Lulu and The Lt., she quickly walked through

the door that led from the back room to the bar, making eye contact with neither of them. Buster yelled out for her to come back, but she paid him no mind.

“What the hell did you do to your head?” asked Buster of Lulu.

“The Lt. shaved my hair off. What, you don’t like it?”

Buster simply nodded unconvincingly; he did not want to start a brawl with Lulu; after all, the black thread stitching in The Lt.’s arm was clearly visible, and he knew who had done the job. A young tattooed man with a ring in his nose, a clipboard and a wad of chewing gum in his mouth swung the door open and called out to the band: “You’re on in five minutes!” The Lt. and Lulu exchanged a showy, wet kiss that made Buster avert his eyes and left a red ring around The Lt.’s mouth. He crunched his cigarette beneath his boot heel and walked out of the door with Lulu latched onto his suspender and Buster in tow with his drum sticks in hand.

The crowd of skinny, milky-white, tattooed teenagers and NYU students with silverware in their faces and spiked hair of every color of the rainbow cheered so loudly that the walls seemed to shake. Preoperative transsexuals dressed in drag costumes were speckled about the room. The heat from the bright stage lights caused the band to sweat profusely; Lulu’s head shone, as did The Lt.’s bare chest. They opened their set with a raucous tune called “She’s All Elbows and Knees” that The Lt. wrote for Lulu when they used heroin regularly and she appeared to be no wider than a broomstick. The energy in the room was electric; Lulu swayed back and forth before the microphone stand while she strummed her guitar and The Lt. fiendishly bounded about the stage playing his bass. They exchanged wide-eyed smiles while Buster pounded his drums within an inch of their plastic lives.

After playing such hits as “Your Candy Fingernails,” “Little Lulu’s Lost,” and “Chocolate Covered Crucifix” The Lt. put down his guitar and stepped over to Lulu, spit onto the stage, and kissed her long and hard. The crowd went wild with applause as The Lt. screamed into Lulu’s microphone: “Thank you, you load of outlaws and thieves! I wish you all a very Merry Christmas! Goodnight!” They walked off the stage as the crowd threw polyester pieces of cheap, black and leopard-spotted lingerie, cigarettes, condoms, and wilted roses to them.

The Lt. and Lulu walked out into the dark Christmas Eve night arm and arm, smiling and laughing. The snow continued to fall as the glare of yellow streetlamps and red and green Christmas lights illuminated the flakes that swirled about their heads. After they walked the two blocks back to their apartment and peeled their sweat-stained clothing from their bodies, they fell onto their unmade bed and made love. She began to cry because she knew that it would be the last time. Lulu then showered and removed all of her makeup with cold-cream and a wad of toilet paper.

After she had dried off, she lighted a cigarette and lay down beside The Lt., who was fast asleep and snoring. She leaned over and kissed him goodnight on his shoulder and stared at the black stitches beneath his tattoo. She smiled to herself, as she rubbed her smooth bald head. The ash from the end of her cigarette fell onto The Lt.’s bare chest, but he did not notice and Lulu carefully blew it off, onto the floor. Lulu’s pale, naked form was illuminated by the light from the full moon and streetlamps that filtered through the bedroom window of the apartment. She looked as white as a ghost and was completely hairless, as even her stenciled eyebrows had been washed off. She appeared almost inhuman, like a storefront mannequin before it has been dressed for the day’s customers.

That night, Lulu lay in bed and prayed for a Merry Christmas and for a New Year that would be better than the last. As she fell asleep in the wee hours of Christmas morning she hoped that her hair would not take too long to grow back in, and that The Lt.'s arm would heal into a scar the shape of a perfectly straight line. She fell asleep with the plan of rising early, before The Lt. awakened, so that she could visit the corner pharmacy and purchase a .50 cent safety-razor to place in The Lt.'s ratty velveteen Christmas stocking. He would laugh; he had a wicked sense of humor.

Lulu awakened the next morning at around 8:00 A.M. and prepared for her small excursion to buy The Lt.'s Christmas present. Snow had accumulated on the sidewalks from the night before which gave the city a look of cleanliness and beauty. She dressed in a white undershirt of The Lt.'s, torn blue-jeans with fishnet stockings underneath and scuffed, black leather boots. She painted thick red lips over her ordinarily thin pale ones, powdered her face and lined her eyes in a Cleopatra sort of fashion, with a defined triangular shape extending from the outer corner of each eye. She put on her leather jacket and exited the room, where The Lt. still lay asleep and snoring in bed.

Lulu crossed the street from her apartment and entered a small pharmacy. She could faintly hear Elvis Presley's "Blue Christmas" playing in the background of the shop as she searched for an inexpensive Bic razor. She found a thin plastic one with a black line running through the center and bought it, along with a small paper sack of hard candies in various shapes and colors. As she walked out of the shop and onto the street she bumped into Buster, who was headed into the pharmacy to purchase a bottle of aspirin tablets to help ease his hung-over headache.

“Merry Christmas, Buster!” Lulu squealed as she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed his cheek, leaving a perfect replica of her red mouth, which she proceeded to rub away with her fingers. “Don’t waste your cash. Why don’t you come back to our place and take some; we’ve got a bottle of aspirin.”

“Okay. Do you have any coffee?” asked Buster.

“Just an old, half-empty jar of instant. Let’s stop somewhere and have a real cup.” Lulu and Buster walked down the street together, in the opposite direction of Lulu’s apartment, as they headed towards Tony’s Diner to have a cup of coffee and some breakfast. They sat in a booth on opposite sides of one another as a middle-aged waitress with a bouffant peroxide-blonde hairdo took their orders of two stacks of pancakes with maple syrup, orange juice and black coffee.

“Your new look suits you, Lulu. I mean it; you were terrific last night.”

“Thank you, Buster,” Lulu gushed, as she emptied nearly half of the sugar dispenser’s contents into her coffee cup. “It’s because of how happy I am. The Lt. and I have turned over a new leaf. We’re going to both be clean from now on, and he knows that if he ever cheats again, we’re finished. I just couldn’t respect myself, you know? if I stayed with a two-timer. It wouldn’t be right.”

Buster’s dark eyes could not quite meet Lulu’s as she made her statement, for he knew she would only be hurt and disappointed if she held such a naïve notion concerning The Lt.’s nature to be true. He nodded politely and sipped his coffee. They finished their breakfast while exchanging unimportant bits of small talk and New Year’s resolutions.

“I should lay off the booze,” Buster said with a chuckle as he held his throbbing head in his palms, pulling back his sandy-blond hair.

“I should call home more often,” Lulu stated quietly.

Lulu ordered The Lt. a plate of fried eggs and bacon to-go with a cup of coffee. They each chipped in on the bill, but did not leave a tip, as Buster did not especially care for the look of disdain given to them by the peroxide-blond waitress as she took their orders. Buster and Lulu walked cheerfully to Lulu’s apartment she shared with The Lt., as the snow was very beautiful and Christmas always filled Lulu with a childlike sense of happiness. They entered the renovated packing plant Lulu and The Lt. called home, rode the elevator to the third floor and stepped out into the hallway. As Lulu was about to take her key out of her pocket to unlock the door, she paused; the door was already slightly ajar. She pushed the front door of the apartment completely open and stepped inside with Buster following behind.

“Honey, I’m home. I’ve brought Buster with me,” Lulu shouted as she took off her leather jacket and tossed it over a chair. She took the new razor from its bag, along with the sack of hard candies and placed them in The Lt.’s stocking which hung from a nail in the cracked plaster wall. She walked from the living area to the bedroom, carrying the plastic plate of eggs and bacon and a Styrofoam cup of steaming coffee for The Lt. Lulu gasped as she noticed The Lt. stumbling around the bedroom, pulling on his leather pants and suspenders.

“It’s not what it looks like,” The Lt. gasped, as if panicked and out of breath. At that moment Lulu looked to her left and saw Stevie, the junkie barmaid from Pulse. She was standing in the doorway of their bathroom, stark naked and bearing an expression crossed halfway between a smile and a grimace. Lulu stood for a few quiet seconds in shock and disbelief with her mouth hanging open as Stevie managed to pull on a pair of

white cotton underwear, which looked to be the exact shade as her frighteningly pale skin.

“I think it is exactly what it looks like! Do you think I’m some kind of an idiot?” Lulu shouted as she hurled the Styrofoam cup of steaming hot coffee towards The Lt., which splashed onto his bare chest and caused him to moan like an injured animal. Buster then entered the bedroom, as if The Lt.’s wincing were some sort of call in need of response. Lulu pitched the plate of breakfast at the wall and proceeded to scream and curse.

“I hate your fucking guts! You’re dead to me! It’s Christmas day and look what you’ve done; you’ve destroyed it! And you,” Lulu growled as she wiped her tear-streaked cheeks with the back of her hand and turned towards Stevie, “I told you I’d kill you if you came back here again. I guess you’re not a very good listener!” Lulu pounced onto Stevie and clenched her hands tightly around her neck.

“Lulu, stop it! She isn’t worth it!” yelled Buster as he dove into Lulu and pried her hands from half-naked Stevie’s slender neck, who stood trembling and gasping for breath as she modestly held one arm horizontally across her breasts and the other to her finger-printed throat. Buster held Lulu away from Stevie as she clawed at him, screamed and manically flailed her arms, trying to get within reaching distance of Stevie, who stood on the other side of Buster, staring as if in a trance. Lulu finally gave up her attempt at beating the whore barmaid and simply sobbed onto Buster’s shoulder as he lovingly rubbed the back of her bald head. Buster let Lulu go after a few minutes and she stopped crying, caught her breath and stood erect. She caught a glimpse of her face in the bathroom mirror and realized she did look like a drowned clown, as her face was smeared

with black makeup that ran in lines down to her chin and streaky white powder that left traces of her true complexion, which was a bit rosy and faintly freckled.

“I’m going out; I can’t look at you right now,” Lulu stated calmly to The Lt. who stood next to Stevie. “She better be out of here when I get back, and you should pack your things. You don’t live here anymore.”

Lulu and Buster exited the bedroom, and as Lulu entered the living room she took The Lt.’s stocking from its nail on the wall and pitched it out of the window into the street. She put on her leather jacket, lighted a cigarette, walked out into the hallway with Buster and slammed the apartment door shut.

“I should have cut that bastard’s throat,” mumbled Lulu to Buster.

“That wouldn’t do any good, you’d only stitch him up again,” Buster said while emitting a dry little laugh.

“No, you’re wrong. A snake like him should stitch his own wounds,” and they exited the building and walked down the street. Lulu puffed away at her cigarette as their boot heels crunched on the freshly shoveled and salted sidewalks. The cold air replenished her. She breathed in deeply: it felt like something new, like something she didn’t realize she had needed for such a long time.

All She Has To Do

Patty drives her aged 1988 Ford LTD Crown Victoria sedan and, as she turns left onto Maple Lane, remembers the run in her sheer pair of L'eggs panty hose. She lights a cigarette and inhales twice before stubbing it out in the overflowing car ashtray. She turns the radio dial until settling on a country-western song and hums along as she parks the vehicle in the near-empty parking lot of Arthur's Grocery. While regarding her appearance in the smudged rear-view mirror, she applies dark blue eyeliner with a fat wooden stick in need of sharpening. Before entering the grocery store, she blots her pink-glossed lips on a Kotex panty-liner found in her purse, fluffs her frosted blonde hair, runs her tongue across her top row of teeth and turns off the car engine.

"Hey Marty. How's life treating you?" she asks of an elderly man in overalls stained with motor oil. He extends one flannel-swathed arm to place around her waist, his other sleeve empty and tucked neatly inside his denim pocket.

"Not too bad. Not too bad. How's my pretty girl?" Marty says while squeezing her tightly.

"Not so pretty these days." Patty laughs and kisses the man on his unshaved cheek, feeling the white stubble against her smooth lips.

Patty enters the small grocery and waves at Marty as he drives away in his battered red pick-up. She chooses a shopping cart and glides directly to the produce section as the click-clack of her scuffed high heels on the linoleum echoes throughout the store. She can vaguely hear Loretta Lynn on the store radio as she picks three ripened pears from a heap of mostly un-ripened fruit and places them carefully into her cart. One pear is so ripe that her long fingernails sink into its skin. The memory of her husband,

Paul, speaking of his disdain for pears and their grainy texture causes her to pick them out of her shopping cart and place them back among the heap. Her head fills with his shrill voice and his favorite statement: Your only responsibilities are to keep the house clean and food on the table. Is that too much for you? She fills the cart with tangerines and bananas instead. This is all I have to do, she thinks.

Now, Patty is flooded with a memory of John, her first real love, her high school sweetheart and the boy she had been engaged to marry. John loved pears. She smiles as she remembers him using his pocket knife to slice a yellow pear for them to share, drying the blade on his blue jeans and placing it back into his pocket after giving her the first taste of the slice and then eating the rest himself, kissing her between bites and laughing about some old black and white movie they'd just seen on television. John's mother gave her that pocket knife when he died; it was in his jeans the night during senior year when he smashed his small pick-up into the back of a logging truck. Whenever Patty opened the blade of John's knife, her head would immediately fill with the scent of ripened pears and memories of the Marx Brothers, particularly *Animal Crackers*: the last picture they had seen together.

She dries her eyes with the back of her paisley dress sleeve and notices a tiny old lady with curled grey hair watching her from behind a mound of fat red apples, her face barely visible except for her eyes, which are magnified twice their natural size by her thick eyeglasses. Patty forces a smile for the old woman and pushes her cart into the next aisle. She feels the back of her heel being rubbed raw by her pump; looking down, she sees that a splotch of blood has stained her stocking. After kicking off her shoe and removing her thigh-high stocking in the middle of the grocery aisle, she fishes a Band-

Aid from her purse and bandages her skinned Achilles tendon. The nosy, bug-eyed old lady stares at Patty as she does this, her small red-painted mouth agape at the sight of a young woman removing her undergarments in public. Patty, after looking up and discovering her new shadow, waves the tattered nylon stocking in the air like a flag.

“Shoo, you old buzzard!” Patty says.

The old lady shuffles away, shaking her head and muttering something Patty can not completely understand, but she knows included the words tramp and hussy. Patty notices bottles of cheap champagne with curly script on the labels idling on a faux velvet cloth: a display of holiday sale items. She runs her index finger across the raised lettering, closing her eyes to remember the time she stayed up all night, drunk on champagne, eating maraschino cherries from the jar and making love with Bobby, her only serious college boyfriend, atop a wooden table littered with glittering figurines of fat little snow men. She opens her eyes, removes the stocking from her other leg and fashions it around one of the champagne bottles, tying it into a crude Christmas bow.

She tosses a new box of panty hose into her shopping cart, along with a package of disposable razors. Paul will complain if her legs and underarms aren't shaven, refuse to have sex, and then blame her for ruining his birthday. She will shave all the way to her hip *and* wear the cheesy French maid costume he buys –feather duster included –if it will keep his mouth shut. After five years of marriage, the only thing that brings excitement to his eyes is to see his wife in trashy lingerie: a faux leather studded bra and panties with a patent leather policeman's cap and Billy-club; a scratchy see-through lace nightgown in chartreuse and a Playboy Bunny-esque merry widow in powder-pink satin, complete with fluffy white tail, rabbit ears and fishnets. “Why won't you paint on whiskers? Darling,

please!” Paul will ask whenever she wears the bunny costume. Sometimes she agrees, but most of the time she refuses and only darkens her button nose with a black makeup pencil.

Patty pushes her cart to the deli counter. “I’d like two of your finest pork cutlets, please,” she says to a man in a white apron, as she chooses a small plastic tub of German potato salad and an aluminum tin filled with flour-dusted dinner rolls. The man wraps the pork in white paper and hands them to Patty. She takes the meat without thanking him and continues on with her shopping. All I have to do is make Paul supper for his birthday, she thinks. The idea of completing this small task grows larger in her mind with each squeak of the grocery cart. She picks up a can of green beans and a large fruit cocktail with syrup. Eggs for breakfast, frozen sausage links and orange juice from concentrate are the next items she places in the metal cart.

The colorful packages of chewing gum, bubble gum, breath mints, candies and chocolate bars catch her eye as she waits for the total cost of her purchases to be tallied. At the moment she notices the bright yellow packages of Juicy Fruit, which remind her of her first date with Paul. He was chewing a stick of Juicy Fruit when he picked her up for dinner in his blue Mustang – the sugary sweetness of his breath intoxicating her. She asked for a piece, unwrapped its aluminum casing and placed the yellow gum on her tongue, allowing it to soften before chewing it. Paul then removed his piece and leaned in to kiss her. Patty followed cue and took out her gum and kissed him softly, first with her mouth closed and then slightly open. She always places a package of Juicy Fruit in his Christmas stocking to remind him of their first date and every year he says, “What’s with the gum? You know I prefer something with coconut.”

Is this going to be all, ma'am?" asks the young male cashier, startling Patty from her thoughts.

"A package of Marlboro Lights please," she says.

The young boy hands the cigarettes to Patty; she winks at him and wishes him a happy new year.

Patty collects her two brown paper sacks and walks to her car, her heels clicking on the cracked asphalt. She carefully places the brown bags on the floor in the back seat of her old white Ford, pulls her new package of cigarettes from her purse and lights one with a scratched yellow lighter – the black circles which had once been the happy face's eyes now long faded, leaving only a swoosh that had once served as its mouth. Slamming the car door shut and clicking her seat belt secure, she pulls out of the parking lot and drives down Maple Lane, turning onto Birch Avenue where Paul will be at home waiting for his supper, past the brick churches, quaint houses and mom-and-pop shops of Laurel County and into the dusky evening, turning the radio dial and searching for something, anything, as she drives.

The Parting Gift

The silver wig was on the floor, along with an empty bottle of Bali Hai. She stepped into the shower and washed with a bar of soap, watching as the stained water swirled into the drain. The roll of twenties on the scarred oak dresser was collected with a rubber band. Hailing a cab was easier than she thought at 2:00 a.m. on Christmas Eve; the streets were lit with warm white lights: shreds of tinsel stuck to her pump. In the pocket of her new sable coat – the coat that had been hanging in his hotel room closet moments before – was a stranger's tube of red lipstick. She scrawled two words on the inside of the taxi-cab window before exiting at her stop: Love Me.

The Lovesick Picture Show

1.

Flora spent the rainy Tuesday afternoon of her twenty-ninth birthday alone in Manhattan in a darkened movie house. She decided to see the schmaltzy romantic comedy instead of the gory slasher picture. She bought a large box of popcorn and ate it all while sipping a Coke.

2.

She met Jack two months earlier on an equally rainy afternoon at a dry cleaner's near the Village. He was wearing a tweed jacket with leather elbow patches. She wore a blue silk blouse and black trousers. They decided to go into a café next door: he had a cup of black coffee and she had a slice of strawberry pie with whipped cream and chocolate shavings. He complimented her pink lipstick and long black hair; he told her she looked like Snow White. They decided – before her pie and his coffee were quite finished – to go back to his apartment and have sex.

3.

Their second date, they concluded, should be something fun and frivolous, something neither of them had ever done before. They decided to visit a porno theatre. The woman in the movie had a Marilyn Monroe-type hairdo. She had large natural

breasts, a small heart tattoo on her left thigh and glossy red lips. She wore gold strappy high heels while having sex with a man with black chest hair. Flora didn't like the movie very much, but Jack was transfixed, even when Flora leaned over to give him oral sex. They left the theatre and stopped at a corner hotdog stand: he had a frankfurter with sauerkraut and mustard, but she didn't want anything.

4.

Flora called her best friend – a kindergarten school teacher named Christine – the next week. They decided to go to the Woody Allen double-feature down the street from Christine's apartment: they saw *Crimes and Misdemeanors* and *Hannah and Her Sisters*. They ate Milk-Duds and Red-Hots and held hands. Afterward, they walked around the neighborhood and smoked menthol cigarettes.

"I'm seeing a new guy: his name is Jack. He teaches Film Studies at Columbia. I think he's married or something. All we do is have sex. I don't even think he likes real movies, only the dirty ones," Flora said.

"At least you have a date – all I do is wash my hair and go to the dog park."

"There's nothing wrong with that, Chris."

"Harold got the dog when we split up," she said. She tossed her cigarette into the gutter and lit another.

5.

Flora went to the cinema every day that week. She saw the same movie each day, and wore the same dress.

6.

She called Jack at his office and at his home many times that Wednesday evening. She left a message on his office's answering service telling him that she missed him, and that she was starting to fall in love. She told him that she had worn the same dress since they went to the porno theatre a week earlier.

7.

Jack didn't return her call, so she decided to look up his home telephone number in the white pages and call him. A woman with an English accent answered and she could hear piano music and ice clinking in glass tumblers and laughter and many voices in the background. One of the voices belonged to Jack. She could hear him asking the woman who was calling. Flora pretended to have dialed the wrong number and hung up.

8.

Jack showed up at her apartment the next week. He asked for a drink. They had vermouth cassis and talked about their sexual fantasies. Jack said that he wanted to be tied up with silk rope, while all Flora could say is that she wanted to get married and have a child. *A Place in the Sun* was playing on the television. She could smell his wife's gardenia perfume.

9.

That night, Flora dreamed that she was Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*. She was wearing the blue and white gingham dress and had braids and was carrying a brown basket. Toto was dead on the side of a winding road and Dorothy's feet were not wearing their pair of ruby-encrusted slippers, but were covered with blood.

10.

Flora dressed in fishnet stockings and a black polyester merry widow. She frizzed her hair and painted on a pound of Max Factor: she was ready to see *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*'s midnight showing at the Elgin theatre with Christine, who was going as Riff Raff.

11.

Flora – with smeared lipstick from kissing strangers during the musical number “Touch-a, Touch-a, Touch Me” and popcorn stuck in her aerosol-coated hairdo – spotted Jack and his wife as they were leaving the theatre. He did not see her, but she saw him with his arm around the nipped-waist sophisticate with whom he shared his bed and his heart. She asked Christine if she had any marijuana, and if they could go back to her place and smoke it. She said no, but told her that she had a bottle of bourbon and they could take a hot bath together and watch re-runs of *I Love Lucy* on television.

12.

Flora continued to see Jack around her neighborhood drycleaner's where they first met. She sometimes saw him picking up silk dresses, and even once a fur coat. They didn't speak when they saw each other, but she remembered the gleam in his eyes when he spoke of being tied up, and the growl he tried to suppress in the back of his throat when he came in the porno theatre. She would never forget it. She decided to buy a pair of gold strappy high heels – just like the ones the actress in the adult movie had worn.