McCANDLESS, CATHERINE BROWN. Three Stories. (1973) Directed by: Fred Chappell. Pp. 46.

Looking back, it seems that the one thing these three stories have in common is that they don't say what they really mean. It all happens that way because the characters must divulge more than they themselves consciously know. Don't believe them; they lie – accidentally and on purpose. Instead of believing what the characters say, believe associations and juxtapositions. In fiction as in real life, coincidences almost never lie.

THREE STORIES

by

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On the way down, the traffic was light and we made good time, even stopping along the way for one of the brothers to borrow a clean shirt. He was very nervous about his speech and kept consulting the Party's latest paper and making some kind of notes in a little notebook he carried. When he got up to speak, he forgot all about the notes. The whole time he was talking, police sirens wailed somewhere in the distance, and that made him more nervous than ever. His speech wasn't very good, even when you knew what he was trying to say. He brought up all the right things – freeing political prisoners, the pigs and how they'd vamped on Party headquarters, all about the local chapter needing money – but somehow it didn't seem to hold together. The coffee-house audience was polite at first – nothing more – but toward the end of his speech they started milling around and talking. It was hard enough to hear even when they were quiet, the room was so big. None of us knew at the time that it used to be a slave market. Richard kept on talking and when we finally got around to passing the hat, nobody had any bread.

While we were counting the money, some drunk Indian got up on the home-made stage and started talking about oppression. "You been listening to those black brothers," he said, "but the white man never put them on no goddamn reservations. Us Indians are more oppressed than any goddamn blacks. Nobody gives a shit about Indians!" He was so drunk his words slid together and you could hardly understand what he said. We didn't stick around long enough to find out what happened to him.

"Damn bourgeois kids," Richard said on the way back. "They got money. They can get anything they want from the old man. So how much do we get?" He counted the change. "Seventeen lousy dollars and thirty-two cents. A hundred-mile trip for seventeen dollars!"

"Where's this newspaper place they was talking about?" Addie said from the back seat. "Any you ever been there?"

"Keep goin'," Richard said to me. "You ain't even near. I'll tell you when to turn."

"Don't you go to sleep, Rich," Addie said. "If you go to sleep we'll never find it in this fog and we gotta have that typewriter."

"To hell with the typewriter. George said they got a check."

"Don't count your chickens," she said sarcastically. She was really much more of a revolutionary than he was. She knew more and talked better. She could have given a much better speech.

The other brother in the back — I forget his name — was already asleep and before long Richard and Addie dozed off leaving me alone to navigate through the fog. It was one hell of a fog too. I had to drive with the window down and once I had to stop and look around for the center line. I began to wish I'd never agreed to drive them down. Finally I had to stop and ask directions at a farmhouse. At first they wouldn't even open the door. They probably weren't much used to seeing black faces at the front door that late at night. After about five minutes, a guy came out on the porch and asked what I wanted. He looked mighty relieved when he found out I only wanted directions and said he thought the place was just down the road.

The newspaper place turned out to be some kind of commune in an old farmhouse in the middle of a sea of mud. The freaks who ran it were very interested in the local situation and wanted Addie to write some articles for their underground rag. After awhile they brought out a typewriter, a few reams of paper and a check for the Party. We left feeling a lot better about the trip.

We weren't but a half-mile from home when I first saw the kid running back and forth down the street. When I got closer, I saw he was headed straight for the car. "That nigger's drunk out of his mind," I said to myself, swerving to keep from hitting him. He changed directions, running directly in front again, and I had to stop the car. He came over by the door and yelled, "Take me to the hospital. I been cut!"

"Safe to let him in?" I asked Richard. Everyone else was asleep.

"Yeah," he said. "Ask to see if you wanna make sure."

"Lemme see," I yelled at the kid. He opened his coat and all down the front he was shiny, wet. "Climb in back," I told him, opening the door. He was crying, and every once in awhile he'd say "Oh God," and for awhile we thought he was a girl.

At the hospital, Richard helped him in and we all stood there and watched while the doctor tried to stop the bleeding. The cut was long and clean, a straight gash on the side of his neck that ended just short of where his jugular vein must have been. The skin pulled back a little and underneath the flesh was pink. "He's damn lucky to be alive," I said to Richard. About that time the nurse came in and told us to wait outside.

"This always happens to me," Addie said. "Last time it was some dude shot through the hand in a hold-up. Wouldn't give em the money."

"Stupid bastard," I said.

"He won't do it again."

We left as soon as they said the kid would be ok. They were sewing up his neck and said they'd call a taxi to take him home.

"Your damn lumpens killin' each other," I said when we were back in the car. "One hell of a way to fight a revolution."

"The man know that," Addie said. "It's part of his plan."

It was three in the morning when I dropped them off at the Party's unofficial headquarters. The brother who lived there wasn't home it turned out, but I didn't know that until later. None of us knew at the time he'd been arrested earlier that night on some trumped-up charge.

"All power to the people," they said, getting out of the car. I imagine they got in somehow.

"Right on," I said. "And death to the fascist pigs." I drove home wondering who the kid was and how you got blood off seatcovers without leaving a stain.

"Hey, man, you got a place I can stay?" The first sentence he ever spoke to me, the very first words! For all he knew I could have been the college president – a little young perhaps – or, with a haircut and shave, the chief of police. But, as a matter of fact, I *did* have a place, the back room I'd been trying to sublet for the past month, so I told him yes. Funny that I never wondered how he picked me of all people out of that little college town he probably hadn't even heard of the week before. In these five years since my senior year at college, I haven't thought of Ron more than once or twice until now, tie loosened and shoes off, I'm lying on the couch reading the evening paper. **Police Nab Three In Pre-Dawn Raids** it says, very big, across the top of Page One. I'm separated from that first meeting with Ron by a thousand miles, a marriage, a kid, half a dozen jobs. Still, the headline evokes his memory and every detail of that distant day in the spring of my last year at school comes back to me.

There wasn't much exceptional about the way he looked that day – a freak in a town full of freaks, his long curly hair blowing around in the chilly March breeze. He had on one of those old blue pea coats – somebody else's, judging from the size of it – and a scarf wrapped around his neck. Must be from a warmer place, I thought when I saw him bundled up like that, a little proud of my keen observation. Under all those clothes, though, he still looked skinny. "Hey, man," he said to me without fanfare, like it was no big deal, "you got a place?" He didn't run after me or anything, just met me face to face. "You got a place I can stay?" he said in his soft voice like he would have said it to anybody, meeting them on the street like that.

When I said I had a place he could rent, he followed me home and I showed him the room, the back third of one of the town's two condemned houses. Gloria and I had stayed there all winter and nearly froze to death so I felt duty-bound to tell him it was no picnic. "But," I added as sort of a consolation prize, "we all share the kitchen, the refrigerator and the bathroom, and you can use the living room up front when you want to."

"Great," he said, not even bothering to inspect the rest of the mouse-infested place, and threw down a full month's rent.

"Just one other thing," I said, wondering if he'd take his rent money back when he heard. He wouldn't be the first; other prospective tenants had left when they found out about the rules. "My landlord's got a thing about dope. If he even suspected we kept it here . . . well, we'd all be out on our asses. Please keep your stuff somewhere else."

Ron's expression didn't change and Gloria, sensing the tension and thinking he might renege, tried to smooth things over. "Take our case," she began, and I knew she was going to tell him where we kept our stash. A sort of we-trust-you ploy designed to gain his confidence. Girl, you're crazy, I thought. We don't even know this guy.

"Yes, take our case," I said quickly, deftly interrupting her. "If old Higby found anything, we'd be the ones shafted. I signed the lease so it'd be my ass . . . "

Ron cut me off just as my defense was getting eloquent. "Sure, man," he said, his expression the same. "No problem." He turned and walked out, leaving his rent money, and I gave Gloria a dirty look.

"You old cynic," she scolded me. "You think everyone's out to screw you. A microphone in every corner and a narc behind every bush. Maybe you should start running the faucet while we're making love."

That was the trouble with small isolated college towns. You smoked your grass in your back yard, slept nude on front campus, and went skinny dipping in the municipal swimming pool. When you didn't get caught, you got bolder, eventually assuming you couldn't be caught, a divine protection of sorts that was really based on the apathy of the local vice squad. Finally, you almost forgot there was ever a law against any of those things, you saw them done so often. The process was so common it even had a name: the cut factor, short for Complete and Unqualified Trust. When your cut coefficient got too high, then you got lax, like the guy who pulled out a reefer in the middle of Cleveland's crowded city park. He was puffing away at it, sitting under a tree, when the cops came. Naturally the arrest surprised him; things like that never happened on campus.

Freshmen usually had the highest cuts, maybe because they couldn't remember when things were different. When I first came to school, kids were scared to smoke in their own rooms, much less in the commons rooms shared by the whole dorm. Things gradually changed, though, until they smoked just about anywhere on campus with no real fear of arrest. Though I never shared the freshmen's solid confidence, I wasn't averse to cashing in on it, and one Saturday night, with the help of Gordon, a freshman I met in the dining hall, I conducted a full-scale raid in grand style on one of the freshman dorms.

I knew he was a freshman from the books he was carrying in the lunch line – Art Appreciation, European History, Calculus, all the things freshmen end up taking – and from the fact that he was carrying them around on Saturday. Upperclassmen always knew better than to sign up for Saturday classes. What sold me on asking him to help me, though, was the buttons he was wearing. The kid had some guts, wearing a red and white button saying *Smash*

Red Treason right over his heart at a school where the liberals were considered right-wing. He wasn't straight or anything; his bushy electric New York Jew hairstyle made him fade right into the background. He just had a funny, sarcastic kind of sense of humor I liked. The other button, the one on the right, said *Kill For Freedom, Kill For Peace, Kill Vietnamese.* A sense of humor like that made him a good risk for my plan. As I followed him from the cashier to the dining room, I saw the telltale cigarette papers in his jeans pocket so I knew he indulged. That made it a sure thing. He sat down at a table alone and I asked to join him. We talked awhile before I sprung it on him, the usual campus small talk: his classes, last week's anti-war demonstration, semester exams coming up next month. As I'd shrewdly predicted, I barely had to hint at my scheme before Gordon agreed to help me bust the freshman dorm that night.

Since I'd spent the whole semester as an exchange student at a college in another state, none of the freshmen knew me. In fact, it was my first appearance on campus all year. The kids were sitting around the freshman commons room and the smoke was unusually thick, even for a Saturday night. You could smell it half-way across campus. I slicked down my hair and put on my working-world clothes while Gordon waited in the commons room puffing leisurely on a joint. Suddenly I burst in upon the gathering, seized Gordon, and dragged him out. He gave me plenty of static, kicking and yelling "damn narc" and by the time I finally dragged him out the door, the toilets inside had already started flushing. As we'd ingeniously predicted, everyone was too concerned about his own skin to try to save Gordon's and we disappeared unobserved into the building's basement to collect our reward from the strainer we'd taped over the main sewage outlet. We carefully washed and dried

our haul, and even after generously offering Gordon half of it, I had enough to keep me happy quite awhile. In fact, I gave some of it away for Christmas presents that year. Even then I believed in sharing the wealth.

When the toilets finally stopped flushing, the phones began to ring and I was sorry I hadn't had the foresight to strain all the sewage on campus. Eventually word got out and the campus was plenty pissed. I was glad to be safe in another state when it happened, glad that the freshmen didn't know me. Odd that when I came back a month later, this time to stay, the night air was just as pungent. Gloria was a member of that same freshman class and my caution – *suspicion* she called it – griped her. "When your mother sends you brownies," she yelled at me, "I bet you take them to the lab to be analyzed for arsenic."

"Don't forget about Tom's cat," I yelled right back. It always shut her up. A guy we both knew told us his cat had been caught stealing candy bars from the local news stand.

"Cost me a dollar to bail him out," he'd said, and Gloria believed him. Next time we visited him, she brought Kitty a Baby Ruth but he wouldn't even taste it. "Picky eater," Tom told her. "Won't touch anything but Hershey bars." She'd believe anything if you said it with a straight face. I wasn't the one to gripe about it though. If she'd had one ounce of sense that way I never would have met her. Because she didn't it was a cinch. We didn't really have dates at that school – everyone always paid his own way. If you wanted to see a movie anyway, you didn't have a thing to lose by asking some girl to go with you. Knowing all this, I walked into a girls' dorm one afternoon, looked at the rows of mailboxes and picked a likely name.

"Is this Gloria Andrews' room?" I asked, knocking on the first door I came to. She was first on the alphabetical list.

"She's in 107," the girl said and pointed the direction for me. They were used to guys in the dorm.

"I'm from the campus paper," I told the curly-headed girl in 107, skillfully slipping my boot inside the door so it wouldn't shut. "You're Gloria Andrews, aren't you?"

She said yes and I told her we were doing a series called "Freak of the Week," that we'd chosen her to start it off. She was flattered, I guess; that was when it was just beginning to be hip to nonconform and she probably didn't want to be thought straight. "We conduct all our interviews in the coffee shop," I told her. "Come on." I dated her for three weeks before she ever asked me what happened to the article. It was a lot like the fake pot bust, really. It all depended on her being more concerned about what she had to win or lose than she was about what I was up to.

Too bad the kids whose bearded faces appear in the evening paper aren't as lucky as the toilet-flushing freshmen. This bust is anything but a joke. I mention the arrests to Gloria who's in the kitchen feeding the baby, then leave those three to their miseries – probably a prison term – and go on to the article I've carefully saved for last. There's a headline in very large type, and even though I've seen it plenty of times before, I still get a kick out of seeing my name in print. **Whitfield Compromise Averts Threatened Rent Strike**, it says. The wording's not very diplomatic. Both the landlords and the tenants will resent the word *compromise,* each wanting to think they got their own way. And, in a way, it's true. The tenants have a signed promise that the leakiest roofs and the rottenest porches will be repaired, even though they'll have to paint and plaster their own walls. Besides, they've gotten good publicity out of the incident. For the landlords, the publicity isn't so good but with housing as

tight as it is, even their oldest houses will stay full. They're happy to have settled the thing before the National Tenants Organization, the Urban League, the NAACP and who knows what other organizations get wind of it.

My own staff is ambivalent. "Hold out for complete repairs, inside and out," my assistant director told me yesterday, pacing back and forth in my office. He's a little guy and younger than I am, never went to college, but he can really talk. "Get a injunction if you have to."

"An injunction?"

"You heard me, brother. To keep them fat cat slumlords from collecting another penny of rent until they make some repairs."

"And if the court refuses to grant us an injunction?"

For a moment Perry looked stunned, as though the notion had never before entered his small fuzzy head. "Man," he said finally, "if they don't, give me one or two organizers and I can have 500 street niggers outside City Hall tomorrow morning."

"Nigger, you crazy!" My secretary, who hears everything, stuck her head around the corner. "You want the man to take back our grant?"

"Girl," said Perry as he left the office, "don't you think about nothing but money?"

The Reverend, our newest organizer, must have heard Perry talking about street niggers and it wasn't a minute before we heard him storming down the stairs. "Zipping up his pants, I bet," I heard Perry say to the secretary. "That man spends a hell of a lot of time in the john." There's a water pipe that runs from the upstairs bathroom down to the basement straight through my office and Reverend just discovered you can hear through it. When we

want to have a really private talk, we have to sneak upstairs and lock the john so the Reverend can't get in and listen.

"Don't you go putting ideas in the boss's head," he growled at Perry as he huffed into my office, gently easing his oversized posterior into my softest chair. "Listen," he said to me, still out of breath from his hasty descent. "The folks in my precinct are decent, peace-loving, hard-working colored people."

"Blacks!" hollered Perry from the front desk where he'd probably been flirting with the secretary.

"They don't want none of this screaming and shouting and agitating kinda stuff," the Reverend continued, ignoring Perry.

"Bull *shit!*" The voice from the front desk again. "You ain't got no tenants in your precinct nohow, Reverend. A bunch of damn bourgeois niggers, bourgeois nigger home-owners."

"Cut it out, Perry," the secretary said in a hoarse kind of stage whisper.

Reverend cleared his throat and his face darkened a little. "Please, Mr. Whitfield . . ." He was almost begging me. "Don't let him demonstrate. My precinct . . ."

"Whitey!" Perry is the only person who dares call me that. "Don't you cop out on us too!"

"Perry," the secretary said a little louder, threatening him.

"I'll never be able to face another precinct meeting!" Reverend was gesticulating wildly.

"You old tom!" said Perry, still in the other room, and the secretary let him have it with her open hand.

"Keep your hands off," she said.

"You folks fight it out," I said, mad as hell, "while I go pee."

"Sure, man," said Perry. "You gonna listen through the pipes like Reverend?" Perry's the only member of my staff who won't show an ounce of respect; behind my back he even calls me the Head Honkey.

"You don't need any goddamn pipes to hear this ruckus," I said, and to prove my point, I stepped out the back door and peed on the porch.

The paper doesn't know about any of this. It's full of praise for the crafty Housing Board which has pressured the landlords into making necessary repairs with the mere mention of a rent strike. "Only the militants object," the article reports, citing some statement made by Parker, the local militant leader, a statement which turns out to be a vehement denunciation of me and my staff. Parker and I get along much better face to face than in the newspaper. He was in to see me last week, waiting for me when I came in from lunch, his tennis shoes propped up on my desk and his carefully groomed bush bent over the latest edition of the party paper.

"Power, man," he said, looking up, short for Power to the People which he knows I hate. "Who's that short fat dude just left the building?"

"The Reverend," I said. "The new organizer."

"Looks tommy to me." Parker has built-in radar for detecting conservative sentiments. "Precinct One?"

"Yeah," I said. "Don't knock it. He relates pretty well to them. They like his suit and tie and all, I guess."

"Runs with Julius, I bet," Parker said. Julius Carey, a local legal aid attorney, is rumored to be making more than $30,000 a year practicing ghetto law. "I knew I been seeing him somewhere. Old Julius is real big with the good Knee-grows in Precinct One."

"Old Julius isn't *that* bad," I said and was sorry the minute I said it. Nobody asked me to stick up for the bastard. "Ever meet him face to face?"

"No, thank God." Parker was giving me his suspicious glare. "He a friend of yours or something?"

"Don't be silly," I said quickly. "You know me better than that. I just met him once at some benefit downtown. We were the only two guys in the room not in tuxes; old Julius had the only bush in the place."

"You call that thing a bush?" Parker said, pulling on a strand of his own luxurious 'fro.

"Well, it's more than the Reverend's got," I said, trying to extract myself from a difficult situation. "Julius Carey's no friend of mine. All I'm saying is he can be plenty charming when he tries."

"So can everybody," Parker said, unimpressed, as he eyed me accusingly. "So can you if you want to."

"Like I said, Parker, just don't knock it. Julius and the Reverend, they both relate good to people."

"In particular, them Precinct One Knee-grows. Well, *I'll* relate to em," Parker said with a grin. "Try me."

"Hell, *you'd* scare em silly," I said. "Besides, if I gave you a job, you wouldn't be a lumpen anymore. You're the vanguard of the great and rising Lumpenproletariate, remember?"

"Speaking of lumpens," he said, "what you planning to do about this rent strike thing?"

"Rent strike!" I croaked. "Who told you about any rent strike?"

"I did," he said, and winked at me. "How 'bout it. Give us a week and we can have every lumpen in the city holding back their rent. Half them niggers can't pay nohow."

"Now, Parker," I warned. "We'll handle this. You guys stay out of it." When I went up to bargain with the big guys, though, I did happen to hint, ever so gently, that a rent strike might well be underfoot. Parker never reads the paper, though – calls it Establishment Lies – so he'll never know he gave me the idea.

This small-time political bag seems a hell of a long way from what I used to think I wanted to do. Ron and I would talk for hours – rather, he'd talk and I'd listen – about staying out of politics, staying clean so to speak. He'd sit cross-legged on the only chair in the place, skinny, bare-footed, soft-voiced Ron, a goat-faced guru. "Don't ever let them use you," he told me once, looking not at me but at the crack in the ceiling. How could I disbelieve his gentleness? When I wanted to campaign door-to-door for the left-wing gubernatorial candidate in the Democratic primary, he stopped me. "You put them in power and they spit on you," he said, the only time I ever heard him raise his voice. "They help you until you depend on them and then they make you sell out. You trust them and they stick a knife in your back."

"Ronnie's scared shitless of being used," Dena told me once, sitting in our kitchen waiting for Ron to come home from wherever he went in the daytime. She lived down the street in the new high-rise apartments built by the school, and Gloria took care of her little girl sometimes. That's how Ron met her, in fact; he stayed with Molly one night when Gloria

had to study. The whole evening was a fiasco. Ron knew too much about education to be a good baby sitter. He tried the Summerhill approach and the Montessori, and when they didn't work he tried playing little educational games. It was after ten before he got the first bite of dinner down her, and to do that he had to hold her nose and stick the spoon in her mouth when she gasped for breath. Afterwards, he was always kind of embarrassed when anyone mentioned the incident.

"Gets you in the pacifism," he said, holding his side. "A two-year-old kid making you do what Uncle Sam couldn't." Ron was a CO.

"Kids," I said, "they're good at that. You might have read a hundred books on the subject, but it don't matter a bit. No matter how much you know, they'll win in the end."

"Probably so," Ron said, brushing his long hair out of his eyes, and for the first time I noticed the purple on his wrist. Near the center of the bruise were little tooth-like red marks.

"Battle scar?" I said, holding back a chuckle.

"Uh-huh," he said and blushed. "You should see my knee where she hit it with the wooden hammer from her educational tool kit."

Since that night they'd been friends, Ron and Molly's mother Dena. She ate with him at our place sometimes and he smoked his grass at hers; probably kept it there too, we figured. Still, it wasn't the kind of thing most people thought. Ron had a girl from out of town who stayed with him on weekends and Dena knew about it and didn't mind. The thing between Ron and Dena was strictly friendship. "He's the gentlest guy I've ever known," she said to me that night in the kitchen. "Closest thing Molly's had to a dad."

In a little while Ron came back from wherever he'd been. "Troy," he said to me before he spoke to Dena at all, "there's a narc in town. I'm almost sure. Print me a few copies of his picture in photography class, ok? I wanna pass em around to my friends," he said as he handed me a Polaroid snapshot, "tell em to be careful and all." Then he saw Dena sitting there and the conversation changed. She was the main person he'd wanted to warn, I'm sure.

That was the way Ron did things. Always on an individual level, like warning a few friends about a narc. He would never have formed an organization to keep the bastards out of town like the Narcotics Agent Prevention League the Poli Sci majors started one year. "Screw organizations," he told me from his guru's chair. "Sooner or later they're bound to get corrupt."

"Sometimes," I used to argue with him, "you have to work through an organization before you can do anything as an individual."

"A cop-out," he'd say, "and a pile of shit." I wonder if he'd understand what I'm doing now. "The Mayor congratulated Whitfield for his work on behalf of the city's poor," the paper says, "and knowledgeable sources speculate that he may be asked to fill the vacant seat on the Mayor's prestigious Commission on Urban Problems." Fat lot the papers know. They don't even suspect I've already been asked. All that's left is to tell the Mayor yes or no.

Parker, of course, will be horrified. Even though I did run into Julius Carey at a benefit once, he thinks at least enough of me that he'd be surprised if the Mayor – the Head Pig, he calls him – should appoint me *(liberal me!)* to the Committee to Study Garbage Collection, much less the Urban Problems Commission. "You shit-ass!" I can hear him now. "You're

the Reverend and the honorable attorney Julius Carey rolled into one!" After he has his say, Parker will try his best not to believe I am actually considering accepting.

Ron would expect me to take it, though. "Once you start working through organizations," he used to say, "you're bound to sell out. It's only a matter of time." He was right about the narc, of course. It was the biggest bust in years. I was in the darkroom when it happened, printing that agent's picture as a matter of fact. I worked on some other things too, and when I finally came out it was light. Working mostly in the dark with no noise to distract you, you lose all sense of time. When you can't see – except for the two-dimensional print, that is, at very close range – and when you can't really hear what's going on outside, you seem to lose the ability to see in perspective. When I left the darkroom on the day of the bust, I couldn't believe I'd actually been there all night. I blinked in the sunshine, still seeing things in two dimensions, and hurried home. Ron met me at the door. "I'm in bad trouble," he said. I still hadn't heard about the bust. "Can you help me?"

He began to tell me about the raids the night before. The biggest hauls were in the new high-rise, the building where Dena lived. There'd been a great struggle, of course. Eggs and tomatoes flew from upstairs windows at the five squad cars parked below and at the poor cops who had to stay outside and guard them. Inside, people locked their doors and barricaded them so the police had to break them down one by one. The cops got so upset they confused the first floor with the second and hauled an old man and his wife out of bed and ransacked their whole place before realizing their mistake. In spite of all the delay, they caught plenty of people unprepared. They seemed to know exactly where to go. Even the kids who managed to dispose of the evidence weren't safe unless they had time to vacuum

away all the seeds and bits of stem; most kids didn't even own vacuum cleaners. "They're posting lists of the people caught," Ron said. "$4,000 bond for possession, $10,000 for sale." In that state, selling dope was the worst crime you could commit, next to murder. You could actually get life for a second offense. "The list is already three pages long," Ron continued. "It's over in the Union." I probably would have seen it there if I hadn't been so bleary-eyed coming out of the darkroom.

"Are we on it?" I couldn't imagine them finding my stash and even if they did they couldn't connect it with me. Smart move, I thought, impressed with my own clever idea of hiding it in a classroom building.

"Not yet," said Ron, "but it's getting longer. I know they'll get me. I gotta get out of town."

"Where were you when it happened, anyway?" I asked him.

"Over at Dena's. That's where I've been keeping my stuff. They'd have hauled Dena off last night if it wasn't for the kid."

"Who Molly?" I said. She was the only kid I could think of.

"Yeah," he said. "It was pretty funny actually, if anything's funny in the middle of a bust. You know the hammer she pounded me with?"

"Uh-huh," I said, a little surprised he hadn't forgotten about his baby sitting injury yet.

"Well, she hit *him* too, the fat pig, right on the big toe."

"That's pretty funny, I guess," I said. Any other time it might have been.

"Oh, that's just the beginning," he interrupted, grinning a little. "When he reached down to take the hammer away, she nearly bit his thumb off with those razor-sharp milk teeth she has." He rubbed his wrist with the other hand and I knew what he was thinking about.

"For *that* they let Dena go free?" My intuition told me that the run-of-the-mill small-town Ohio pig wouldn't take that kindly to being beat up by some little kid.

"Of course not," he said. "They'll be back for her today, now that the foster home people are there. They just didn't wanna be stuck for the night with some little toe-pounding, thumb-biting brat down at the precinct station. Listen, think you can take me to Cleveland?"

"OK," I said finally, thinking of the classes I'd be missing. I figured it was worth it to keep Ron from getting arrested. On the way, we talked some more about the bust.

"It's strictly political," said Ron as though he knew the inside story. "There's an election for sheriff next month. A good bust will give the incumbent all the publicity he needs to win."

"Yeah, I guess," I said. I wasn't thoroughly convinced.

"There's a smack ring too, you know," he continued, "but they won't touch it. Too dangerous. Besides, a little pot bust's all they need right now. Just enough to show the good citizens the sheriff's doing his job."

"At least we know who helped him," I said.

"Huh?" Ron said so suddenly I didn't think he'd heard what I said. He's really afraid he'll get caught, I thought.

"The pictures," I explained. "The narc pictures you gave me. I printed them last night."

"Oh," he said. "I forgot all about them."

We got to Cleveland by noon and I took him to the bus station. "Peace, man," he said, getting out of the car. I noticed he didn't even have a suitcase and thought about his stuff back at the house. "You and Gloria keep what you want," he said when I asked him about it. "I won't be back."

On the way home, I stopped by the Union to check the list. Ron was right about one thing – it was plenty long. *His* name wasn't on it, though. He'll really be pissed if he's skipped town for no good reason, I thought. That afternoon Gloria and I started sorting through his stuff. His mattress was a lot better than ours so we moved it out front to our room. Packed away in an old cardboard box we found a whole set of dishes to supplement the cracked plates we'd picked up at some rummage sale. "Ironware," said Gloria, dusting off the shiny brown plates as we put them in the kitchen cabinet. "My favorite!" Ron's clothes weren't much, but I did find a nice jacket, the blue pea coat he'd been wearing the first day I ever met him. I tried it on and was still wearing it when I went to answer the pounding at the front door.

"Where's Ron?" Dena practically yelled, not even noticing I was wearing his jacket.

"I took him to Cleveland this morning," I said. "He's scared they're after him."

"God, no!" she yelled at me. "You idiot! They're after him but it's not who you think. There are people in this town who'd kill him if they got a chance."

"Then he's not getting busted?" I sat down quickly, suddenly beginning to understand what was going on and how I'd been duped.

"Hell, no," she said. "He's a fucking informer."

"How'd you find *that* out?" I asked her, not wanting to believe it.

"He led em to my place." She was almost crying. "I was busted on *his* grass. I *told* him not to keep it there."

"Come on," said Gloria, putting her hand on Dena's shoulder. "Sit down and have some tea." She rinsed out three of Ron's cups and poured some of the mint tea she'd been keeping warm since lunch. Dena took a little sip and put the cup back down on its brown saucer.

"Hot?" I asked her.

"No," she said. "It tastes bitter." She must not have liked mint very much; it tasted all right to me.

After she left Gloria and I went back to sorting out Ron's stuff. Somewhere in the bottom of the box we found an old news clipping about him jumping a rap for heroin sale in Kentucky – $35,000 bond. Hating organizations like he did, he must have been proud of his escape. I wonder if he ever dreamed they'd catch him in that remote little town and make an informer out of him. He was right all along about the political situation, of course. Sometime between when he gave me the picture to print and the bust, the sheriff's men must have caught up with him. After he sold out, they treated him pretty good, I guess. They let him skip town with no questions asked. What pissed me most was my role in the whole thing. He lived with me, right under the same roof, and I never suspected a thing. If it hadn't been for me helping him escape, he might have got his just deserts.

It didn't take long for word to spread from one end of the campus to the other, and the story grew every step of the way. Someone said he had a wife and three kids he kept in a middle class Toledo neighborhood – not true, of course – and that he went home on weekends to take a dip in his pool and watch ball games on his color TV. Lots of kids thought the girl he used to bring to my place on weekends was on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted List for setting fire to the Xenia draft board office and burning all our draft status records in the files there. Someone did that a week or two before the bust but it wasn't Ron's girl. We were all delighted when we found out about the office, thinking smugly of the time it would take to reprocess the entire male population of three surrounding counties, but the way it

turned out, it wasn't even a federal caliber crime. The duplicate draft records in Columbus were shipped to a newly-rented draft board office in Xenia the very next day. In spite of all that, the story about Ron's girl caught on, and it always ended with him turning her in for arson and defacing public property. For awhile, some kids thought I was in on the whole deal, me being Ron's landlord and all. They figured there was a whole gang of us, all the people who knew Ron and liked him. That story didn't last long, though, when they found out what happened to Dena.

The telephone rings and it's the Reverend calling to congratulate me on the newspaper article. "I don't know what Perry and them's gonna say," he tells me confidentially. "They might just say you was wrong to do it, them being down on the Mayor and all. I sure hope you get on that Committee, though." I thank him but he keeps on going. "We're looking for wonderful things from you, Mr. Whitfield. Someday you might even be running for Mayor yourself. I'm betting you could go all the way to Washington if you'd a mind to." I thank him graciously again and hang up. I'm thinking I'll take the post, though. As long as you know not to take advantage of other people's problems, like Julius Carey using poor people to get rich off legal aid funds, you won't sell out. That's where Ron went wrong. He traded the skins of pot-smoking kids for his own.

"Honey," says Gloria who's now my wife, interrupting my thoughts about Ron and the lawyer. "Dinner's ready." The baby's finished eating now – there's just a few little wisps of apple sauce left in his brown bowl – and she's putting our plates on the table. We sit down to eat and talk about the baby's cold, the snow, my pending appointment to the Urban Problems Commission.

"I've been wondering," I say to her finally, "do you remember Ron?"

"Of course I remember him," she says without even stopping to think. "He gave us these dishes."

"Someday, Didi," Cardell said, addressing the rocking chair across the room. With fat pink fingers she stroked the blue velvet of Didi's fancy sofa. It was more of a loveseat really, she thought, a little blue loveseat. Cardell formed each word carefully in her mind, seeing them spelled out in front of her, going by on ticker tape, and felt their texture in the softness of the velvet. *Little blue loveseat.* Feeling the shape of the words in her mouth, she half-whispered them, making of each a little package of meaning. Phillip couldn't understand that, couldn't understand that words could have character, like people. Darling, he'd say, words can mean anything you want them to. See this, he'd say, holding up his spoon in discussions that invariably took place at dinner, if I say this is a fork then it *is* a fork. She always pretended to listen but it didn't make any sense. A spoon was a spoon and it didn't matter if the French wanted to call it something else. The minute he held it up in the air, the letters would form in front of her. That's why spelling was so important. If you didn't spell it right, it wasn't the right word. If you were spozed to use any old word, she always said to Phillip, everything wouldn't have a name like it does. *Little blue loveseat.* She said it to herself again, making the letters she saw fade into the velvet and disappear.

"Someday, Didi, I'm going to leave him." Cardell spat out the words in crisp units, waiting to feel the full impact of their meaning hit her in the chest and take her breath away as the words bounced off the wall where Didi sat and returned to her with the force of a wave. Instead, to her disappointment, they hovered in mid-air, halfway between the blue sofa and the yellow patch of afternoon sun where Didi's cushioned New England rocker creaked gently back and forth. "Oh, not right now," she continued hurriedly, anticipating

Didi's outrage. "Maybe not even anytime soon." She kept pushing the words out willy-nilly, hoping somehow to make them dramatic enough to bounce off the wall and return to her. "Not now, but someday. I know it." The letters formed, heavy and black, and hung in the middle of the room. She wondered if Didi could see them too. It was the first time she'd said it out loud, and frankly, she'd expected more of a reaction from herself. She wasn't sure what, just something more.

"Leave Phillip?" Didi's rocker stopped in mid-stroke. Her disbelief condensed into the Old English letters of Phillip's name and hung suspended in front of her face. Phillip, of course. Who else? Oh, he'd accused her often enough when he'd got drunk. What's that fella's name, lives across the street, he'd say, spoiling for a fight. John, she'd say or Jack or Richard or whoever. It didn't matter who he picked; she always fell for it. At times like that, it seemed more important to answer his question right than to second-guess his motives. After all, there *was* a man across the street and he *did* have a name. If she knew it, what could she do but say it? Know him pretty well, doncha – the inevitable response – and he'd raise his eyebrows. Never really accuse her outright; it wasn't his style.

"Now, Didi," Cardell said, "don't try to talk me out of it. It won't work." Everything was going wrong. First the words, like spoiled brats that wouldn't come when you wanted them. And the thought of Phillip drunk. Before, when she thought about leaving him, quietly, to herself, she'd been flooded with a strange sadness. It made her remember all the good things about him, never his overindulgence and jealousy. Didi's reaction was the last straw. She'd expected sympathy – *oh, you poor dear, what has he done?* – not simpleminded disbelief. It was almost as though Didi took Phillip's side in the non-existent quarrel.

"When did you decide this nonsense?" Didi said. "Why didn't you tell me before?"

"Oh, no, Didi, no!" Cardell said quickly, caressing the blue velvet again. The conversation was getting away from her and she grasped the cushion beside her tightly in a desperate attempt to bring it back. "I only just found out myself." It was a lie, and she hated lies, the spoken-out-loud kind, at least. Words meant something in spite of what Phillip said, and it wasn't right to make them say things that weren't true. "You're the only person who knows." That, at least, *was* true. She couldn't really tell how long she herself had known it; forever, it seemed like, since she was a little girl. For the past six months she'd been whispering it softly to herself and the words, the saying of it, made it real. The words themselves – and the sadness they brought on – were so pleasant, she repeated them over and over again to herself at night as Phillip lay sleeping beside her or in the morning after he'd gone and she stood over the sink washing the breakfast dishes. They conjured up images of him standing at the front door, kids in tow, pictures rendered all the more tragic by the fact that they *hadn't* any kids. The words had never failed before; she couldn't understand why they wouldn't work now when she said them aloud.

That crazy girl! Didi resumed her rocking, focusing her eyes in Cardell's direction, looking beyond her so that all she saw was a pleasantly vague blue and gold blur. What would she be wanting next? Dancing grizzly bears and absinthe served by Rumanian jugglers. It all made as much sense. Carly, who loved nice things so. *Phillip says he'd like to be poor for a week or two, to see how it felt – I couldn't stand it!* She'd said that just last week. Carly couldn't stand the shabby furniture that all looked alike, having just three old dresses and

all of *them* the same, eating the same left-over food day after day; she said so herself. Didi fingered her own tasteful silk blouse as she thought about it. Well, she'd like to *see* her leave Phillip, just let her try. She'd see what it was like to have to fend for yourself.

"I won't lie to you, Didi." Cardell's voice drifted across the vast space that separated them, bobbing up and down. "When it first came to me, I was shocked." Didi smoothed her tweed skirt and tried to listen. "Me, of all people. I couldn't believe it." She hadn't any place to go; she must know that. No relatives, nothing. Surely she wouldn't expect her, Didi, to put her up. As if she was really going anywhere at all! A petty quarrel, that's all it was. Didn't Carly think she had anything better to do than to be taking sides in every little spat? Tucking her long fingers beneath the bare backs of her knees, Didi allowed herself a glimpse of her friend across the room. In spite of her pudginess (*pudginess,* Didi thought, that was unfortunately the only word for it) Carly looked small sitting all alone in the very corner of the blue couch. If she was making any sense at all, Didi said to herself, joining her fingers beneath her knees and bringing them close together, I'd go sit beside her and comfort her, try to talk her out of it, at least sympathize. But she's not interested in my sympathy. She's got Phillip to coddle her and no matter what she says or thinks now, she won't leave him.

Didi made Carly's voice fade off into a gentle drone, focusing her eyes straight ahead so Carly wouldn't know she wasn't listening. It was like turning down the sound on the TV without cutting off the picture. She focused on the pink hands, round and soft-looking, that protruded from the tight sleeves of Carly's orangey-gold suit. Not as nice as her own hands, Didi thought. Still, Carly's hands were much nicer than most — clean, carefully manicured, hairless as a baby's. She wondered how they'd feel against her own cool skin. You could tell

a lot about a person from their hands, you really could. Some women had hands as rough and square as a man's; there was no excuse for it. At least they could let the nails grow. Even in a man she didn't like ugly hands. Roland's hands were ugly, big and awkward and covered with course matted hair. Even if she'd loved him, she could never have married a man with hands like that. The thought of them caressing her soft bare skin, even now, made her shiver, and she stared hard at Carly's plump smooth fingers to get rid of the image of Roland's ugly hairy ones.

Didi wasn't listening to her; Cardell knew it. Oh, she pretended to be, but she wasn't, not when she got that dreamy look on her face, that funny little frown. Cardell wondered what she thought about that it was always unpleasant, always made her frown. Probably about her family; she came from somewhere out west. Funny she didn't talk about them more. It was stupid to think a lot about people who weren't there. If they weren't around, they were dead, or might as well be. Phillip got mad when you said that. He wrote a lot of letters but it was stupid, like writing to a corpse. Sure, you might get a letter back, but so what? If you couldn't see a person, couldn't touch them, they were no better than a chair. Not as good. With a chair, at least you could count on its being around when you needed it. She used to tell Mama that Daddy was dead every time he went away on business and Mama'd tell her to hush, he was no such thing and not to say it or it might come true. She'd always say he wasn't staying dead long, just a little while like Jesus, and most the time she'd get sent to her room with no supper. What would your Sunday School teacher think if she heard you, Mama'd say. When Daddy's car hit a tree, Mama cried for a week and said what

would they ever do without him. Mrs. Arnold, the Sunday School teacher, said poor Mildred, it's all been so sudden, but that was a lie because they'd all had plenty of practice while he was away doing business. Then Mrs. Arnold said Cardell was brave not to cry and Mama quick hurried her out of the room so she wouldn't say anything about Daddy coming back like Jesus, but Carly knew he wouldn't be dead long, and sure enough, he showed up in a dream that very next night.

In a dream you could talk to him face to face and see him and touch him. He was as real as the blue velvet loveseat, which was more than Mama could say when he was off on business. And she did cry, but not then, not until later when she could think about it and be sad and say, "He's dead, dead, dead," over and over in a whisper and think about his body in the red dirt out at the cemetery and the worms crawling around between his toes. It was good to cry sometimes; she liked to do it when she was sad. Phillip didn't understand that and neither did Didi. They never cried, just frowned a lot, like Didi thinking about her family. They didn't do her any good way across the country and she ought to just forget about them and maybe she wouldn't frown so much. When I'm sad, Cardell thought, it's because I want to be and I can cry and get it over. She would like to have cried right then and been sad about someday leaving Phillip but the words wouldn't affect her right. It was probably the house; she'd never said it in someone else's house and it wasn't the same as if you were home. The words got weaker and the letters were littler and wouldn't come back to you once you said them.

Carly's hands looked better in the shadows than they would have in the sunlight; they were softer that way. In the sun, the rings would sparkle and ruin the effect. She had that huge diamond of Phillip's she'd never taken off since he gave it to her when they first got engaged. Didi hated diamonds, always had. They were so hard and cold and ugly in the sun. Most things she liked better in the sun. Everything except metal and diamonds. It made them hard and cold — everything else got softer and warm. Like your legs when you lay outside getting a suntan. Didi always brought her big pillow out so she could watch her legs in the sun. She'd like to have seen Carly's legs in the sun — they were so soft and warm-looking anyway — but Carly never sunbathed. If she did, they could take their towels out on the hill behind her house; nobody else went there. They could go every day after she got off work and she'd bring magazines for them to read, only instead of reading hers she'd watch Carly's legs turn soft and warm in the red sunlight. Or Carly could talk all she wanted and she wouldn't mind listening if she could watch the sun turn her golden. Carly'd never do it, though, and besides, it was too late. Almost October already and the sun went down too soon. It was practically dark out now, and not even six o'clock yet.

It always made her sad to see the sun go down; she didn't know why. It was the saddest time of day, much worse than night time. Her favorite poem was about that, only it was about fall, not sunset. The girl in it, though, was named Margaret like herself. Oh, she wasn't as stupid as a lot of people thought. She remembered poetry from when she was in school and could quote it if she wanted to. "It is Margaret you mourn for . . ." She used to say that over and over and think that if people called her by her real name instead of Didi, everyone'd know she was smart. But everyone still called her Didi and even Carly thought she was stupid. She'd have to be stupid to listen to all the stuff Carly told her. Leave Phillip, really!

Now Carly's crying, Didi thought, and she looks just like a big goldfish gulping air, all alone in the middle of a blue velvet pond. She keeps gulping air and gulping air and if somebody doesn't help her she'll die and float to the top. She'd have liked to go to Carly and say: "Don't worry, little goldfish, you can leave your pond and come home with me. We'll live all alone, just us two, and in the afternoons I'll put you in the sun and rub you with oil until you shine and shine and I can see my face in your fins when I look at you."

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Phillip would be home in just a few minutes, Cardell thought, glancing at the clock; she'd made it in time. She'd fix something quick and take these few minutes to catch her breath. Phillip would want his dinner promptly at six as usual. He had no use for ambiguity; he said that himself. He said a schedule was made to be kept and a disciplined body meant a disciplined mind. He didn't much like her plumpness — said it meant she had no will-power. He had his own spare tire, though he wouldn't admit it. Sometimes when they were in bed, all naked, she pinched him on the belly to remind him of it, just out of perversity. He always tried to idealize. "It's as inevitable as growing older," he always said. "I'm not eighteen, you know." She didn't mind, for heaven's sakes. She rather liked it; it made him more human. What would you do with one of those Charles Atlas men, she wondered. Too perfect, hard and cold. She tried to imagine Phillip like that, but couldn't. What he looked like, how he was shaped — it was as much a part of him as the odd things he said. She wondered how the husbands of those before-and-after ladies stood it. *I lost fifty pounds in two months.* It would be like living with a stranger. She didn't like to move, not even down the block,

things seemed so strange. Always running into walls that didn't used to be there. She knew why blind people got so upset when you moved something. She knew she could never get used to a husband who was fifty pounds thinner than he'd been two months before.

Steps on the front concrete walk — unmistakably Phillip's. No one else walked like that, sharp and precise. Even when soft and worn, his shoes sounded department-store new on the pavement. Even in snow, or when they mowed the lawn and grass clippings covered the cement. One night the porch had iced up and Phillip came in the back door instead. All night she kept thinking he hadn't really come home.

Whenever he approached it from the front at twilight, Phillip couldn't help noticing that the house looked a little like a ship and that the pavement, brown-looking because of the redness of the sky, looked like its deck. *If* you used your imagination. He would have liked to have been General Eisenhower on board ship in the midst of a Japanese bombardment. Eisenhower was in the Army, though; he never commanded a ship. Ahab, then, in *Moby Dick*. Phillip saw the movie twice, and, thinking back on it, it seemed to him that maybe Ahab had been the villain. Noah was a ship's captain and a hero too. Not such a bad job when you thought about it, taking care of animals. You had to feed them, clean up for them, teach them tricks for when company came; in return they'd be eternally faithful. Stooping to pick up the evening paper, he opened the ark door.

Dinner out of tin cans again! He could see the empty cans all the way from here, and even if he couldn't have, he could tell by the smell. You worked hard all day and what did you get to eat? Tin can stew. Late, too, no doubt. He couldn't imagine what she did all

day that she couldn't have dinner ready on time. He wanted to say something in protest, but nothing came out. Anyway, they never spoke until dinner was on the table. He sat down to read the paper and wait.

Sometimes she wished he'd just keep walking and walking and never open the front door at all. She liked the crispy sound of his shoes on the cement but the door closed with such a slam. All day she waited for that sound and then, with a slam, it ended. It was like the sun going down. You waited all day for it to go down, for the sky to turn red or golden. When it happened, it was so quick that before you knew it the sun was gone and you wished it was light again. So, you started waiting for it to go down again, a full twenty-four hours. Cardell didn't mind so much, though; she liked waiting for things. When she was little she used to dress up and sit on the porch and wait for hours. Sooner or later Mama'd come out and ask what was she doing, didn't she feel well, and she'd say she was waiting, just waiting. For what, Mama wanted to know, always for what, and Cardell would say for company, just to make her go away. Nobody's coming today, Cardell Lee, Mama'd say. Yes they are, she would say, I can tell, even though she knew it was a lie. Sometimes someone would actually come and it made her furious to have to stop waiting and come inside. Cardell Lee said you were coming, Mama would say to the guest, she's a good guesser. That made her mad, too, knowing Mama didn't believe she could predict when company was coming, even though Cardell knew good and well she couldn't. When the old people said someone was coming, their noses itched, Mama believed them, or acted like it; with Cardell, though, it was different.

Phillip would have believed her. He'd believe anything. Once she told him she ran away from home to join the circus when she was nine, just to see how much he'd really swallow. She made up lots of details about it, of course, to make it realistic. She told him how she wore a white skirt and walked across the tightrope and how, when she wasn't performing, she'd feed the elephants. She'd spent days imagining it all before she ever mentioned it to him so it was scientific, like an experiment, not like a lie. How soon did they catch you and send you home he asked, and she had to quick think up an answer. Finally she said she didn't know, it seemed like a long time, and he didn't even seem to notice how long she waited before answering. That's what I like, he said, a girl with experience.

Sometimes she wished she was like Phillip and could believe anything at all that anybody said. She used to, but it had been years and years. Daddy used to tell her the clouds were cotton candy and that sort of thing and she believed him for awhile. Mama said Cardell took after her great grandmother when she believed the things Daddy told her like the moon being made out of cheese. Great grandma's brother took her out in the woods one day, Mama said, and said to her: Laura, see that bird? I'm gonna name it a blackbird and from now on, everyone will call it that. See that tree? I'm gonna name it an oak. As long as she lived, Mama said to her, your great grandma believed Uncle Henry had named the birds and the trees. Until her dying day, Mama said, and Cardell takes after her. She'd decided right then that she *wouldn't* take after her. She'd seen the pictures, all grey and wrinkled – her face, that was. And she *didn't* believe just anything, not even then. She'd already stopped believing Daddy when he teased her – brown cows gave chocolate milk – and besides, she didn't believe for a minute that Great Grandma never figured out that Uncle Henry was playing a trick on her.

God, but the paper's depressing, Phillip thought, even the funnies. He'd like to give up reading it for good, but what was the use? Things would go right on happening the same whether you knew it or not. *Something* was happening out there and you might as well know the truth as to hear little pieces of it from all sorts of places. If you could shut yourself off completely, that would be different. If you didn't know a thing about what was happening, then, at least where you were concerned, it could probably be said that *nothing* had happened. Better still, if there was no newspaper at all, then you'd have an excuse. If a tree fell in the middle of a forest and you weren't there to hear it, would it make any noise? What if you didn't hear it yourself but someone else did? If the sun went down on Wednesday night and nobody knew about it, would it ever be Thursday? He hated things like that; they were even more depressing than the news.

"Dinner," Carly said from the kitchen. It was his signal to speak to her.

"Coming, sugar." Words, then the sharp, crispy shoe sounds on the wooden floor. Sugar – that was a new one. Every week he changed her name it seemed. Some weeks it was honey, or dear – she hated dear – and once every three or four months there'd be a week or two of darlings. He used them one at a time, though; never two names in the same week. He'd changed her real name, too, her given name. I never knew anyone named Cardell before, he said to her before they'd got married, but you don't look like a Cardell. Cardell's Mama's maiden name, she said, and I'm the only child. Why Lee, he said, who's your middle name for? For Grandma; Lee was *her* maiden name. Cardell Lee, he said; it's too long. How

about Carcie? So she was Carcie for months and months until he thought about it and decided it wasn't a good contraction – you needed the *L* in there somewhere – and started calling her Carly instead. That was the name that stuck. Everyone in town called her Carly. Once in awhile her own mother even used the name. She would rather have had the old long name back – it was, after all, her only *real* name – but Phillip insisted, so she put up with it.

Phillip pulled up a chair and sat down on his side, the side with the cigarette burn. He'd rather have sat on the other side – you could look out the window – but it was hers. The burn used to be over there, obviously, since he didn't smoke. One day he turned the table around while she was out and sat facing the window. When she demanded her usual place, he showed her the burn as proof that he was sitting on the right side of the table after all. You're the only one around here who smokes, he'd said; your side is the one with the burn. Don't pull your tricks on me, Phillip Adler, she'd said, I know which side is mine. That's always been my side facing the window and I don't care how many times you turn the table around, it won't change. Turn it upside down if you want; I'll tell my place by the chairs. Today, as always, she set the places opposite each other so when they bent over their plates to eat they looked like stalemated chess players. Except for the vase of wilted flowers, the stuff on the table was evenly divided. She had the pepper and ketchup on her side; he had the salt and vinegar. He had the white pieces and therefore the first move.

"Flowers look a little wilted," he said, chewing on hash.

"They're supposed to be that way," she said. "That's the kind of flower they are."

"Nonsense," he said. "No flowers are *supposed* to be wilted. You didn't water them today, did you?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact," she said. "If you can't believe that's how they're supposed to be, look at it this way: it's how they are. It's wilted flowers or none at all. Take your pick."

"Then I pick none at all," he said, getting up just long enough to throw the offending flowers in the garbage. He didn't even stop chewing.

"How's your exciting job?" she said after a respectable silence.

"OK," he said, ignoring the sarcasm, figuring she was still pissed about the flowers. "Got a lot done today. Still behind schedule, but I got a lot done."

"You and your schedules," she said. "You'd be a lot happier if you didn't have them, always worrying about getting behind."

"No," he said, "it would be worse." He gestured in the air with his roll for emphasis. "Without a schedule I'd be lost. I wouldn't know what to do next. Whether I was really behind schedule or not, I'd always be thinking I was. It would never work."

"Silly," she said, laughing through her peas, "without a schedule you could concentrate on your work. No more behind. Just *here's how much work I did today.*"

"No, it'd never work out. Without a behind-schedule there's no ahead-of-schedule. Without a schedule, I wouldn't have a job at all."

"Don't be ridiculous," she said. "Of course you would. How else would we eat?"

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Another damned erotic dream, Cardell thought, waking up all at once. Ridiculous, that's what it was. Absolutely crazy. Waiting all that time, just to see if it made it any better.

With Phillip, everything had to be perfect or he didn't want it at all. If he enjoyed waiting, that would be different. He probably did enjoy it; he must. He'd never admit it, though. "Phillip," she hissed. "Phillip, wake up!" She ran her hand up his leg until she reached the soft inside of his thigh and pinched.

"God damn," he said. "I'm awake. What do you want?"

"You *do* enjoy it, don't you?"

"Enjoy what?"

"Waiting," she said. "Abstaining. You think about things, don't you? Instead of doing it, you think about it, right?"

"Sure I think about it," he said. "Everyone does. Even when I'm doing it I like to think about it."

That she believed. Slow down, he always said. Slow down so I can think. It was absurd. There was a time and place for everything. If you wanted to think about it sometimes, ok. She never did. If you were making love, there was no need to think about it; if you weren't, thinking about it didn't change anything. Maybe if you were one of those people who could come just by pretending hard enough . . . but Phillip wasn't. She'd read about that somewhere; she wondered if it was true anyway. She'd believe it when she met someone like that. Still, she didn't mind if Phillip wanted to think about sex. That was his business. But in bed, he should *do* something, not just think about it. She'd be happy to trade whatever was supposed to happen in six weeks for a little ordinary lovemaking now. Like money and interest rates: money now is worth more than money later on. She wondered what kind of return he expected out of his investment.

She had to stop thinking about it. She never used to, before this abstaining business started. Except afterwards, after they were through, and that was different. Then you could be sad it was over which was nice in itself. If you slowed way down like Phillip always wanted, you missed that; you were glad when it was finally over and done with. It was one of those funny contradictions, that you could know all along you'd be sad when it was done and still do everything in your power to hurry things up. Like waiting all day for the sun to go down, then wishing it hadn't. It reminded her of the nursery rhyme about the rooster who thought that since the sun came up when he crowed, it *wouldn't* come up if he didn't crow. One day he overheard the cook say that the next day at sunrise, the rooster's head would be chopped off and he'd be made into chicken soup. Even so, Cardell thought, ready to fall asleep again, he had to crow just one last time, bringing up the sun which woke up the cook who came out and wrung his neck.

Phillip turned over on his back and listened to Carly's breathing get slow and regular; in five minutes she was deep asleep. He could tell he was going to have insomnia the rest of the night. Once he got woke up, he never really got back to sleep right. How many times had he told her not to wake him up for every little thing? And in the middle of a good dream. He'd dreamed he was a second derivative, a mathematical function sort of twice removed from itself. There weren't words to say what it felt like but it was a distinct and not unpleasant sensation. Like floating around in the air, the feeling of being pure math. You'd stay there as long as nobody plugged numbers into your x's and y's. In his sleep, that's what he thought Carly was doing when she pinched him — plugging numbers into his equation.

He turned again, trying to get comfortable. The mattress hurt his back. It was too hard for his taste but that's the way Carly liked it. Besides, it had been free. Just before he and Carly got married, his parents bought new twin beds. Not his parents, really – his mother and her second husband, his stepfather or something. He used to call him his father, just like he called his real father his father. It was Carly who'd pointed out the error to him – no one had two fathers. Not that anyone ever got the two confused. You could always tell from the context of a sentence which one he meant when he said father, and to their faces he called one Dad and the other Pop. Carly said it wasn't precise, though, and finally he started saying *my stepfather* when he was talking about Pop to someone who didn't already know him. Anyway, when Mom and Pop got new beds, they wanted to give the old double bed to him and Carly. He didn't want it – it was practically incest – but Carly insisted. It would hurt their feelings, she said, and besides, a bed was a bed. What did it matter who'd slept on it before? He'd given in and taken the bed in the end, but when he couldn't sleep – or when he and Carly fought in bed, for that matter, or when he was feeling unsexy – he blamed it on the incestuous bed.

Insomnia was a funny thing. Once you realized you had it, you were doomed. Exactly opposite from every other thing in the universe. "Identifying the Problem is Half the Solution;" someone had put that sign over the main entrance to his department at work. He could imagine the same kind of sign in a doctor's office: "Diagnosis is Half the Cure." He didn't know of anything else that got worse from thinking about it, but with insomnia, you just lay there and brooded until you knew you'd never sleep again. Ten minutes of contemplation usually got him to that point. His ten minutes up, he rolled over and tiptoed out of the room.

Sometimes it was hard to tell if you were awake or asleep. Cardell ran her fingers over the sheet feeling for Phillip and thinking that if he wasn't within arm's reach, she must be asleep and still dreaming. When she was awake she could always find him by feeling around the sheet if she set her mind to it. Trouble was, she wasn't dreaming; she'd just finished having a nightmare. You couldn't have dreams within dreams, especially not nightmares. Unless this was also part of the nightmare and she just hadn't figured it out. Maybe she was stuck somewhere between being awake and being asleep and would never escape. That was much worse than a dream inside a dream. It reminded her of the wooden chinamen you bought for a quarter when you were a kid. You pulled the head off the chinaman and inside was a smaller one just like him whose head came off the same way. It would be bad enough to be the third chinaman, stuck inside the bellies of the other two, but at least you would know where you stood. That was like having a dream inside a dream. If you got stuck somewhere between the first and second chinaman – not on the outside and not on the inside – that was much worse, and she was afraid *that* was where she was stuck. Only one way to tell for sure; open your eyes. She didn't want to, though. If she found out she was dreaming, then she'd have to figure out which was right, the dream or the idea she was awake. They certainly couldn't both be true, contrary to what Phillip would surely say, and she didn't feel like deciding right now. On the other hand, if she *wasn't* dreaming, what she had thought was a nightmare must actually be true. Not very nice either. Maybe it was better after all to be in limbo for awhile.

Cardell scrunched her eyes up tight and tried to concentrate on thinking where Phillip might be. In the bathroom, of course. He must have just got out of bed since she didn't hear the water running yet. He was probably just peeing. She listened for the flush of the toilet. He had the funniest way of peeing, flushing the toilet first. She was sure he had to hurry to finish before the toilet got done flushing. He probably made a game of it, like his damned schedules. She thought she'd ask him about it when he came back. *If* he came back. He hadn't even flushed the toilet yet. She tried to think what might possibly happen to him on his way to the john. He could trip over something in the hall, something little, a shoe or something. He'd come crashing down and hit his head on the wall and then he'd lie there on the floor senseless and bleeding, every idea knocked out of him. She would have heard all that, though, and she hadn't heard a thing.

She decided to pretend to call him. Phillip, she'd say, Phillip, where are you? Around; that's what he always said. Around what, for Chrisakes? Around was a preposition; it had to have an object. Around a lamp post maybe, around the pole lamp in the other room. She thought of him spiraled around the lamp, his fat creasing and bulging, the human equivalent of one of those oblong twisted doughnuts. Only raw. He'd have to be raw or his dough wouldn't twist around the lamp. Then the heat from the light bulbs would cook him and he wouldn't be able to get himself loose. At first, he wouldn't make a sound, just think and think about how to get unstuck. To himself, naturally. He would never ask her to help him think. Thinking about it wouldn't do him any good, though; in a predicament like that you had to *do* something. That's when he'd call her. Carly, he'd say, only he'd use her real name for once, Cardell Lee, could you help me? Very gently she would knead him and uncurl

him from the lamp. Then she would get some people to help her – probably Didi and some of her friends – and tell them to pull on each end of him while she kept on kneading. Phillip would groan a little because it would hurt, but he would know she was being as gentle as she could and was doing it for his own good. Afterwards, when they'd got him straightened out, he'd thank her for saving his life.

Phillip tried to be more careful than usual about rustling the paper. He didn't want her laughing at him today, at least not this morning. When he tried to be quiet, it seemed like every breath he took rustled the paper and every pen-line made a loud, raucous scratching. His better judgement told him that wasn't true, that he couldn't possibly wake her with the little whispery noises of drawing. He was inclined to believe his better judgement rather than his senses which, in the quiet of the early morning, were bound to be distorted. What was it she always said when she found him drawing? Playing at architect again, Phillip? As if he played at anything anymore. She acted like he got some mysterious, almost erotic pleasure out of designing things. It wasn't true. How many times did he have to tell her he drew things because he had to, not because he particularly enjoyed it? He had ideas in his head – ideas for houses, for churches, for highways – and they kept rattling around, trying to get out. He could always hold them off for awhile, a week or two, maybe a month. In the end, they demanded to be let out. Obviously he couldn't just go out and build all those things. Drawing them was the only way to liberate them from his overcrowded head.

He penciled in three windows on each side of the mountain cabin he was designing. He liked making things that were built around a principle; it was always sort of a game to see

if you could do it at all. The guiding principle for this house was the number three — three sides, three rooms, three doors. The sides slanted towards each other like a pyramid, only they never quite joined at the top. He wondered what the little top-piece triangle that connected the three sides should be made of. At first he'd wanted to make the top out of glass, a sort of tiny triangular sky-light, but it only emphasized the distance between the three sides. He'd about decided to abandon the glass in favor of wood — the same kind as the walls — to tie the whole thing together. It was an illusion, sure. He would have liked to have the walls meet in a point, but for structural reasons that was impossible. With a wooden triangle at the top, you could always imagine that the sides kept on going and met at some point above the triangle. If you were inside looking out through a glass sky-light, you could easily have seen that wasn't the case. He turned his pencil sideways and textured the building's top like the knotty pine of the walls.

Once he'd designed a five-sided house, inspired by a five-sided argument they'd had at work. There was a wall and a room for each point of view so no one would have to compromise; in a five-sided house they could all be right. Didi had seen the drawing and asked about it. "I'd love to live in a house like that," she'd said right away. "Why don't you have it built?"

"You and what four other people?" Carly had wanted to know. A silly thing to ask since he wouldn't be building the house anyway.

"Just me," Didi said. "That's all."

"No need to build it," he'd tried to explain to them when they kept bothering him for an answer. "It's here on paper plain as day." They couldn't see that, Carly especially.

That's why he had to keep hiding his drawings all the time. Cleaning up, she was liable to throw one out. She did once and he'd made her dig through the garbage to find it again. It was ruined, though, soaked from a half-full milk carton she'd also thrown away.

"Draw it again," she said, not even apologizing. "You drew it once; it should be easier the second time." He tried to, but he could never make it come out right. Once it was down on paper, it was gone from his head for good.