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MEADS, KATHY ANN. Stories. (1977) Directed by: Fred Chappell. Pp. 79.

The major characters of the following four stories hold this in common: the need to control the events of their lives. The woman in Madrid assumes that the solution, at least for a time, is desertion. Leeta assumes the answer is money. Aziza the model believes it is beauty, and Stephen Crinshaw, although unsure of what the formula is, believes there is a formula to power.

Each ultimately discovers the limitations of his or her approach and begins to live with that futility.

STORIES

by

Kathy Ann Meads

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro
1977

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APPROVAL PAGE

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WAITING FOR THE THIRD WOMAN IN MADRID

In July, Spain is dust. It swirls around this café in small tornadoes whenever there is movement; no one escapes. My water glass, slanting toward me on this black table with its one leg too short, is already soiled. It is an object too close to movement although it did not initiate. I watch the liquid try to dissolve the alien particles, succeed only in pushing them to the bottom where they remain, less obvious. The waiter comes toward me again. He is only half smiling, the best he can manage, for I am being a difficult customer, refusing to decide between espresso and cappuccino.

--Senorita? He does his best; bows toward me. But I only shake my head, keeping my tongue wet and tucked inside my mouth. If I let it loose it will coat like all the rest of Spain, turn lazy and boorish, refused to be rushed.

--Senorita, you must order something or you must leave. He clicks his heels together. I notice that the cuffs on his white shirt are frayed and the second button on his left sleeve is missing.

--Senorita?

--Either, I say, which irritates him more, for when it finally arrives the liquid is darker than black and cold. When he splashes it on the table it dulls the shine. The aroma has been lost for days and I suspect him of stirring

dirt into water to get even, but it seems not. He has not even waited to watch me take my first sip.

The café is deserted except for myself and an older man whose stomach demands that he lean over the table with his neck to drink. He is sitting in the back, totally shaded, reading the morning paper. Sometimes he laughs and conscious of his outburst, turns and explains what is so funny to the waiter. The waiter barely nods. He is wiping off the back tables again, restless.

I sit with my head in the shade and my legs sunning. I wonder the use; with the low morning sun, the unshaven hairs and the dust, how many rays can possibly get through on such a kamikaze mission? There are only a handful of people on the street. The quiet is languorous but I see no one yawn. Two women turn the corner, walking close but unknown to each other. One sits, the other continues to walk. They are only two but they are enough. Enough to assume I was right in saying within a woman there is the possibility of two strong loves, the one contained, the other extended. Perhaps a third, mutation. I do not know.

This woman walking toward me, waving, her face wrinkled against the sun, her hair splintered in curls, straw bag scratching the side of her calf until it blooms red, and hurrying, hurrying toward the Prado, the Plaza Mayor, she is preoccupied with the first. That woman over there, whose nails are finely polished, who chooses to sit complacently

within the canopy's shade, whose hair is bandaged tightly against the frying heat and who never looks up curiously until he comes, she is in the spell of the second. They shall probably never meet, but if they do, they will probably never like each other. One would say the other is self-negating, that she whines when she speaks, that her smile pulling her head to the floor is affect and no one but a man would take such frailty for virtue. The other, if she were pressed, would sniff at the woman hurrying past windows, her sidelong glances at herself. What is a woman who tests her strength on mirrors she would ask. Does she not know that a mirror is never satisfied but a man, a man can sometimes be pleased?

I AM STILL WAITING. STOP. HAS SHE BEGUN TO ARRIVE.
STOP. I MISS SOMEONE. STOP. RICHARD.

The same telegram arrives every four days but most of the time I do not read it again. Richard is my husband but I do not write because I cannot decide whose lover I am. I am in Spain and cannot speak Spanish as well as someone should who presumes upon a country. I am a 26 year old American whose hair, long and luxurious for six years, was bobbed for this trip. Who did not pack mascara or a curling iron in her knapsack but who could not give up her tweezers. Some would say I was saddled with a good man too early and didn't have to work long enough or hard enough to earn him. Richard would say I never took enough "selfish time." He speaks as

if time comes in a volume, like sheetrock, and once you've gotten your hands around enough of it, you settle down into its framework, wise. If he were beside me right now, his shirt carefully buttoned to the neck as a conscious if quiet rebuff to his rivals' exposure, he would say my theory was half-baked and ridiculous. Narcissism and coupling in the finest unions intersect, he would say, they would thrive upon each other. He would say that, confident of its truth, slightly irked but more confused that I did not see his point and agree. Looking grand in his La Cost shirt and cut-offs, he would reach for my hand, smile that puzzled smile that has translated so many times: you see, don't you? If I nodded, the inquiry would end. He would lean back in his chair on two legs, shout for another espresso in commendable Spanish, look back at me to make sure my face had taken in the nod and believed it. If I remained unconvinced his optimism would demand a recount, and again, until his lean energy would push too far, swallowing the table, the chair, the coffee, all but my doubting eyes. And then, even if I warned him, he would begin to cancel out as I cancel all unpleasanties. He would shrivel into an annoying but ignorable fly, slapping a tune from this heat.

In Bridgeport, North Dakota, where Richard lives, finishing a house that he designed, financed, and built by himself, women are making their choices. All around me in Madrid, Spanish women are acting their choices. The telegram

is torn on the edge where my name is typed. I try to melt it whole again with my licked finger but it splits again as soon as the pressure relents. If I wrote back I would have to say, adamantly, there is an answer, for I feel confident of that one singular fact with no clauses added or withdrawn. But Richard would take it as a sign. He would suspect I knew the answer and was coming home, so I do not write.

As I walk back to the pension, the smell is rotting vegetables. A woman strung in apron is digging into the bottom of her wooden street stand for produce too long on the bottom, mashed and browning. Two copper-colored dogs are sniffing at the garbage pail at her feet. When they press their cold noses on her ankles she kicks at their teeth and they scatter momentarily, but do not get far. They do not want to waste the energy of going and coming back.

Madrid in the summer is bad, but not so bad as one would think. The heat is more lulling than oppressive. My landlady is convinced that, having endured this long, I will stay the season, and her son, Emanuel, believing the same this morning showed me the roaches he had dried and mounted on paraffin. All but two have died perfectly with no sign of struggle, no broken limbs. When I asked how he got such good specimens he led me to his room, pointed to a trash can full of discarded corpses. I only keep the prettiest he says, smiling, one out of twenty.

I suspect Emanuel's passion is the reason my pillow smells of bug spray. Poisoning leaves the corpses pretty

and unmangled, a nonviolent death. There are no windows so I keep my door open at night and sleep with my head at the end of the bed. Every time I wash, the charge is 30 pesetas. My landlady looks apologetic when I give her three times that amount each day. She puckers her lips and frowns and talks of Paco and the government, of rules and regulations before slipping the money into her breast pocket. But I do not mind. It is one of my pleasures. I wash each part meticulously standing on old newspaper in her bathroom that has only a toilet and sink and bare walls. There is just enough room for me to raise my foot and get it into the sink without opening the door. I wash at the dust in all the corners and crevices of a body until another guest knocks and demands time. The landlady is usually in the kitchen when I pass through, studying the passports of her guests. Better now? she always asks, then remarks: You Americans, you do not like to smell the real self.

They are having breakfast when I enter and tell them I am going to Toledo and will not be back until mañana. My landlady shakes her full black ponytail and laughs, upsetting her glass, one last drop of goat's milk.

--El Greco, she says, he is your only love?

--El Greco and his clouds, I answer, pulling out the battered train schedule, Madrid to Toledo, Toledo to Madrid, underlined twice in blue. 10:20. Gate 3. 11:40. Checking again although it is all memorized.

--Si, si, she is still laughing, Toledo, blue like your

eyes.

I wonder how, walking down the dank stairway into the brightness of Calle Leon, how in all this tan and brown he saw blue-grey. I want to understand the method of his nervous brushstroke, his theory for turning cumulus to cirrus. I want to believe he was a visionary. From my green backpack I take my black book and write "perhaps visionary," believing he saw the world about to turn into oblivion and blue-grey was the color he cried with. From Grete and Venice, a sad sea color so long it dripped off the canvas. A guide in Toledo told me, the storms, they rise up so quickly from these mountains, so quick, the sky, it cannot hold them back and they explode in the valley. I asked if maybe they didn't drip and he said: no comprendo.

Tan and brown and dust in July, Spain is dust. The streets fan it, the windows lick it off the breeze. Already I feel it coating, a second layer of skin. Ten steps ahead on the street a mujer is pulling her toilsome cart piled high with tomatoes. I see that she is wide-hipped and pigeon-toed and that her husband is walking behind, smiling at the carrier of his car. I am watching, keeping behind, and watching when a Volkswagen filled with Americans takes the corner too fast, skids between us, then on. The dust unsettled, settles and she appears again, her head turned, white teeth smiling at her husband who walks behind carrying nothing.

From the metro stop I can reach the train station in five minutes if I walk thinking I am on a mission. The train

is panting as it pulls into the station, its engine missing every third beat. I settle for the fourth compartment back from where I entered. It is not so crowded today and I have my choice of window seats. The north south east west sway is interrupted frequently to pluck natives off their hot soil. They come aboard chattering, greeting the conductor I think, thankful for this long mule they have exchanged for their tired one. But I do not know. I write in my black book I do not know. Perhaps they hate this dusty machine.

The conductor makes his way toward me, collecting tickets. He sees my dusty foot prints on the seat opposite and demands I clean them off. I do but he is still unsatisfied. He says something about Americans and their lack of respect. I cannot understand all his words but the tone is apparent. He is about to pull out his white handkerchief and wipe at the vinyl when I volunteer to sit on my invisible foot prints to make him happy. But he is not happy. His next tirade is on filth and filthy Americans.

Left alone, I watch the brown outside the window streak long and lean interrupted with smudges of green, the occasional tan of sheep herds. All is familiar my ninth trip to Toledo. At night the sparseness must turn empty: cold greys and silver stabbing into darker holes, the moon a white scar. The moon insolent, taunting its distance, how far you must fly to touch her. The brakes squeal and stop the train at Aranjuez and I am glad for the distraction of three nuns

climbing aboard, their white habits incomprehensibly white on these plains. In the distance, finally, Toledo rises like a green oasis above the Castillian heat. From the top of the mountain El Greco could see it all: the blue sliding into the earth.

--Listos, listos, the woman says, settling across the aisle, arranging her cascade of children. She does not have Spanish black eyes, they are blue. They are not clean eyes, they are dustbowls. Her green lap is a layover station through which Spain passes, her wrinkled fingers designing its fate. She does not seem to mind my speculations. I smile and she smiles tentatively at me, my brown socks and tennis shoes, khaki shorts, the fairness under this guise of brown skin. She allows herself no curiosity or perhaps she was born with none. She is preoccupied with family and cannot be bothered by my strange existence across from her. I am only important if I threaten her young and then like a mountain lion she will draw all the devil she fears into her teeth and pounce on me, fight me to the death believing it is her duty or perhaps believing nothing as instinct draws the predator's blood. Her son kicks over one of three empty straw baskets she will fill in Toledo. As she reaches to right it, her son sees me, points to my head and giggles before she can cover his mouth with her working hand and still the sound.

The mirror hangs conveniently across from me, between a

picture of a street in Madrid, another of the running of the bulls in Pamplona. In the second picture, the men are suspended just inches from the horns, smiling. Even the bulls cannot hold me now that he has laughed. Intrigued, my eyes wander to the beguilingly silver middle. It is not quite a shock after six months. My skin is brown, wooden. My teeth white. My hair a tumbleweed. Involuntarily I press it flat to my head, hold it firm, but on release it springs up, each strand triggering another's bounce. I bring out my scarf, turning to show the little boy and his laugh my solution but he has lost interest. His mother is unpacking cheese, a hard brown bread to nibble and he is full of appetite. He smacks his lips and grabs for another share. I turn my face to the window just in time. I can feel the mother's eyes dart over my face. In another moment she would have offered me something to eat and I would have accepted, afraid of insulting here. Then we would have tried to talk. Both of us trying until Toledo saved us.

It is midday and there is no shade. Stepping off the train several tourists think the straw hats at the station's entrance are a good buy. They are looking for El Greco's home. Information repeats itself: the bus comes every hour on the hour. Please buy your tickets then. Every hour. No there is no other way but to walk up the mountain. De nada. De nada. He is perspiring in his navy blue uniform and closes his window when the last of the trainful has passed.

I seek out the cafe with the giant Coca Cola sign blinking red and white in the window and order lemonade. It is my second favorite drink in all of Spain. The straw collapses near the end so I must drink the last few drops from the bottle if I want them. I am still thinking which I prefer when I see them, an American man and woman, mid-fifties, peering up into the tower of the fifteenth-century mosque across the plaza. He reads from the guidebook, his finger following the print, his mouth transmitting. From far away they look to be good monastery and nunnery recruits. Each has the soft round belly of celibacy. Martha and Fred I name them and take out my black book and write: Martha and Fred enjoyed peering up at 15c mosque. They could have gone to Puerto Rico and enjoyed but they came here--what is the reason? I am still writing when I feel her breath. She has started our conversation with a big "woooooooooo" and I am supposed to agree in kind by wiping my brow and nodding.

--Isn't it lovely? she says, taking off her straw hat. Her lips make o's and straight angles. She uses her hat to fan her face.

--You're an American too, aren't you?

When I nod she says: I thought so. I told James I could tell a fellow USAer, even from across the street. She is calling for her husband to join her at our table as I draw concentric circles with the toe of my shoe on the floor, waiting for the tour bus. Richard believes it is my childish

rebellion not to speak. He believes the mind is a trap and talk releases the bite; that people should practice witty repartee as a tool for survival. He says impasse in a conversation is stubbornness and affectation; that humans make a conscious decision to resist. The natural motion of the word is back and forth and back and forth.

I excuse myself just as James sits down saying I want to walk up the Calle de la Plata. They look puzzled but unscathed, call "see you later" to my back. The sun in full power explodes freckles like random ink blots on my face. Fearing blisters, I smear my nose with suntan cream up and over the bridge, paste it white. The streets of Toledo are sharply sloping and beautiful, a maze of stony walls and paths. I can feel the pull in my calves, the steady upward resistance to my flat feet but the effort feels good. I am climbing at a steady pace, having gotten a second wind, when a mujer recognizes my foreignness and, shielding her lidless eyes, trails me like a hungry lizard.

--Senorita, seniorita, muy bonita, she cries, waving a shawl black and fringed, a bush of red roses in its center. Replacing the faded bandana with a battered canvas hat, my eyes disguised behind green tint, I walk past, smoothing the wrinkles in my shirt. But she is no fool.

--Senorita, seniorita, she petitions again, this time a soft brown wine pouch swinging from her arm.

--Si, si, but no I say and stop. Ask her if she makes

them herself, extend a compliment. Begin again. She is still smiling when I escape for she knows there is only one path down the mountain and she will have another chance.

--Muy bonita, she calls after me, ah ha ha ha ha.

A mile or more and I stop to rest. Perhaps the idea of hiking was not a good one. The skin under my second toe is swelling and my eyes burn from the glare. I take out a spare blue scarf from my back pack and tie it around my toes, stuff the tennis shoe in the pack and replace the sock on my foot so that now it looks like I have four swollen toes instead of a tiny blister inside. If I take a diagonal course I might be able to flag down the bus. Considering the likelihood of success, I pull out my canteen, send coolness down my desert throat too fast and the backwash drips down my chin, two meandering streams. Around the curve a mule and its master come, stepping slowly, carefully along the stones, heads bent low.

--Buenas tardes, I say as he approaches but he does not hear. He is singing to the rhythm of his fired pots bumping the old mule's ribs, singing his way down to bargain. Communal chickens scatter, regroup in his wake, complain in angry clucks but he does not hear, singing, passing through the iron filigree gate. The chickens have forgotten the interruption when another comes: a truckful of workers heading home for a leisurely siesta. I am seen by one aficionado, his forehead framed by two curlicues of black, and then I am

seen by all. The noise they send to invite me sounds like the angry chickens only faster and with smiles. I ignore their propositions but they do not stop, only increase the frenzy of their calls. I do not know if eventually they give up their game or if their truck straining up the hill is a louder echo.

I wipe the last of the water off my mouth onto my shirt. Two dark polka dots of sweat hang from my arms. I am just about to move but before I can convince my body to do it, I am sat down with. Having only one good foot, I know I cannot escape him, so I look. He is not so ugly I think, with his flat nose and his blunt chin.

--Ah senorita, why is a pretty one like you here all alone, eh? He is wearing a lace shirt and smells stale.

--Would you like to make love he asks, fingering my thigh.

--Why, I ask.

--Que? He laughs. Si or no, senorita.

--Give me a reason.

--Ah, senorita, if you need to ask . . . if you need to ask then you must make love with the Spaniard. The Spanish, they are the best lovers. You will see. Then you will not have to ask why. Come with me, you will see. He is motioning me toward the nearest alley, confident. To argue with him is to become a parrot squawking. I do not even tell him his mother is a whore so he will leave. I answer truthfully.

--Casado, I say.

--To an American, he asks, and when I nod, he spits his disgust at my feet. One of his countrymen told me they believe American men have no balls so I understand the roundness of his saliva frying on the ground. He is leaving as my eyes close on him and Spain and all its dust. I try to shut them all out but the black is not pure; the halo of a bright yellow ball ripples and persists. The skin is not senseless, the tiniest touch of breeze makes it shiver. When I open my eyes again he is still visible, his compact ass swaddled in black, the short jockey legs carrying him down. His cross I imagine hung below his pectorals, imitating his gait. It occurs to me with a good wind I could still send an answer wet and sticky to cling to his neck but it seems useless. Perhaps his buddies placed a bet on the outcome. I wonder as I watch him submerge into the road: will he tell them I am a mother or whore or married to Richard? But he does not know Richard, the only truly handsome man I have ever seen. He does not know my brief married life has been watching women watch my husband. Watching their stares tell me that I must look at him to see myself. 6000 miles away, Richard, the ultimate mirror, disapproves; condemns the baggy pants, the wider middle, the pus-filled pimple under my nose, the indecision. Shaking his head, bewildered Richard.

The water has leaked out of my blister and has circled my sock with wet when I reach the main road. I do not wait

long before a bus driver, kind or pitying, stops, and I hobble onto the crowded bus for the last tour of El Greco's home. The tour guide is pointing out the fortress as we rise, explaining the wars, pointing out the Tajo, explaining blue. But I can't listen. I am beginning to feel miserable inside, like a cast of six months is being hacked at, and the only thing to look forward to is a lot of shabby skin, perilous bones that have split once before and might again, leaving me stranded.

--El Greco, he loved his Spain, he loved his town of Toledo, the guide says, fifty-odd of us waiting for him to stop, waiting for the engine's idling to cease so we can push past the wooden door of El Greco to the cool. He finishes and the commotion begins. I have to bend my head to get inside the door, but once in I do not listen to the introduction and welcome by the woman with the ebony bun. Push instead past angry Americans and indignant Germans, up the flight of stairs so that I may have it all to myself for a moment: the vined gallery, the last of the sloping sun. Open and encapsulated his castle stood, the panorama sky and nothing else to see.

It is quiet despite the questioning tourists below. It is peaceful down on the inner court where a self-portrait stares from an easel: El Greco with pointed head, brown slits of eyes, a dark dark green of robe. I watch the master paint his reflection in quick anxious strokes. He is about to tell

me how he sees, he has just cocked his head to the side gathering my eyes in his, about to tell me the secret of his art . . . I can almost hear the notes of his first word when she interrupts, stout and smiling, a German whose guttural question I misunderstand.

--No comprendo, no comprendo, I say, still looking down.

--This El Greco, she counters in perfect English, was he really a faggot?

At first I do not look at her, waiting for my face to master contempt. Waiting as the last shred of robe dissolves and there is nothing. When I face her, she is still in wonder.

--Is he a faggot do you think? she asks.

When I look down again I see her El Greco has brought his lunch of wine and cheese to the garden and is entertained by ten lovely boys instead of a plump loving wife. Still standing beside me, she waits for an answer as I take out the black book and add after "perhaps visionary," "perhaps fag."

"It is a possibility" I write as she reads over my shoulder. I try to say something about truth, the sum of its parts, but her satisfied face stops me. We walk out together and she is telling me where she read of El Greco's sexual preference and asking if I want her to send a copy to my home in the United States.

The air is cooling fast. All but the last sliver of sun is below the mountains. When we climb aboard the bus she

introduces me to her husband who has been ready for twenty minutes he says. When she tells him I am an American he asks if the United States is cleaner than Spain.

--Sometimes, I say, instead of some places. A mistake but he does not seem to notice and continues to clean his nose with a linen handkerchief. The bus is stuffy with too little air and day-old bodies. I open my window but must close it again as the bus brakes down the mountain too slow to escape the dust that hangs to the tin like a misty vulture. I reach across the aisle and ask the German lady who is fixing her face if I can borrow her mirror and she nods, passing it over her husband's lap. It is so small I can only see a portion of my face at a time so I look first at my nose that needs a compliment, my left ear, perfect without flattery . . . the few bangs that have escaped the cap's lock. They could still go either way.

When I hand the mirror back across her husband, the German woman looks up to see my adjustments. She stares too long at nothing and shrugs. Richard shrugs. The two women fighting for control of my seat shrug. I wet my finger and draw a circle around my knee, dot a bull's eye in its gritty center. We are, all of us, tired of waiting for the newcomer.

CASHING IN

As Leeta walked up to the bank window, her best friend, Sheila, winked from behind the cage.

--Hi hon! Same as usual?

At that precise moment Rudy Markham's nose--red and once broken by a fast flying baseball--snorted into a dusty handkerchief, causing her to answer too loudly:

--Yea. Thirty dollars again. Leeta deposited it now after a week of hoarding only because four o'clock would bring it back.

--Why does the hospital always give you thirty ones instead of two bills? It would save me a lot of trouble. Sheila was counting off the ones with a licked thumb.

--I like the weight.

--What?

--It makes me feel like I'm putting more in, Leeta said.

--Ahhh. Gotcha.

She had told Sheila that the money she got from her three-day-a-week receptionist job was going to buy George a surprise on his birthday, an outboard motor that he wanted. So the money would have to be kept in a separate savings account and Sheila would have to send the interest statements to her at the hospital because George read all the mail.

--But don't you pick up the mail yourself? Sheila had asked.

--Don't you think he goes through it with a fine-toothed comb? He still thinks I'm getting love letters from Preston.

That had done it. Sheila with her peroxidized wisps of hair, who wore her circle pin on the left side, run-around side, even before it was fashionable, was once again her partner in intrigue.

--So how are you going to waste the rest of your free week?

--Haven't decided yet.

--I'm drooling, kid! Want to change places?

--Yea, Shel, you have a rough life all right.

--Hey, what do you say I try and get off an hour early this afternoon and stop by? The gleam had come back into her brown eyes. We could watch The Edge together.

--I thought you girls had talked out after all these years. Rudy. Tapping her on the shoulder with his brown envelope, his hand chapped by the cold, speckled with the grease that sinks in like a birthmark and stays, screaming poor, poor, and getting poorer. She hated farmers' hands, George's hands. Scraped in the winter, scraping her body in turn.

--Yea, just my luck to get behind you, Leet. I swear. He was chuckling to himself, his nostril balancing a drop of snot so agilely that the laugh might cut it loose. Rudy Markham who thought Dowell's Point was heaven on earth. Who

sat in the mud in his backyard in aluminum chairs on Sunday with his wife, drinking beer while their kids roamed the river bank, shooting at stumps with their BB guns.

--Better get home to Selma and those starving kids, Leeta said to him. They must be tired of waiting for the charmer.

Sheila pretended a disapproving frown.

--Thanks, Shel. Detain this jerk, she whispered, until I can get to my car. Selma must have decided five was enough.

Sheila's giggles floated over Rudy's. --What's so funny there, Pollyanna?

A real wit, that Rudy. Jesus Christ.

She eased the '69 Ford out of the bank's driveway onto 158, waiting only for Morris Griggs to pass in his Griggs Electrical Appliances truck, silver blue. He lifted an index finger from the steering wheel in recognition, passing. During the summer getting onto the highway was a major feat. One continual motorcade from Friday to Sunday driving to and from the sand. Virginians, mostly, coming to ruin Dare like they had their own beaches, littering 158, the only access road, the highway that stretched the length of the county, bridged the Sound and joined Dare and sun and fun. She hadn't been to the beach since high school. Silly, George always said as he left so many times with his father, rod

and reel in hand. But she had no urge to see them ski down the slopes of Jockey's Ridge, their Winnebagos parked along the side. No urge to wedge her towel between a landscape of terrycloth when before you could neck for hours, never seeing a soul. Her father said she wouldn't complain if she was making money off the passers-by like the Barcos, the Brick-houses, the Cantrells, the Lewberns. No reason why she couldn't put up a fresh-vegetables sign too and make a little money on the side. Her father's idea of extra money was five dollars a day, maybe, after sitting in the heat on your only day off and saying everything twice to make sure the accent didn't confuse the price.

It wasn't much better at the hospital. Having to drive 45 miles twice a day for peanuts and sit behind a desk and pass out visitor's cards to people who are crying or had been crying or never smile and say thank you. Watching those nurses with less sense than you pass with their noses stuck to high heaven, making up to any doctor who will look twice. Having to cross three counties to work because all this county was good for was selling peaches and tomatoes and hamburgers in the summer.

She had begged George to sell their house and land before the black steamy asphalt moved any wider to accommodate the traffic, ten feet from their doorstep now. Did he want to stay and see it all go, week by week, the fields ironed

out, the strangers moved in, every place of their childhood chewed up and spit back shiny and plastic? Soon they would be paying for city water, garbage collectors, a police department instead of Mark Forbes and his deputy. If they sold to Larry Morgan they could buy twice this much land, three times this much land in Creswell. Hadn't her cousin done it? Hadn't he started with nothing and now was farming 200 acres? Making a killing her mother said to her and she forwarded to George. We could start over again she had said and George had answered: It's hard starting over. Don't you know that? At least we know what we're up against here.

She had to brake sharply, almost tore down the red reflector swinging in too fast, missing the ditch but hitting all the mudholes in the driveway. She drove the car as close to the house as possible, leaving a wide space to the right and got out. The mud loaded on the back tires would not budge when she kicked it. She pulled back and hit the left rear whitewall with another swift kick before going in, to prove it wasn't a question of strength. She was almost inside the porch when she remembered Mrs. Sasnett's roving eye and checked to make sure the front bumper was invisible from her neighbor's window. The last thing she needed was a long friendly visit.

The remains of George's lunch were scattered, even though he had attempted to clean up after himself. The sink looked like it had been fingerpainted brown. He had left the

dish towel folded neatly on the plastic table cloth, blacker than she had seen it last. Abandoned there in desperation no doubt because he had forgotten where she hung it. Wonder Bread crumbs like mouse droppings around an imaginary plate. Probably potted meat, she guessed. Right. The Libby's can was half-wrapped in wax paper on the top shelf of the ice box, half-eaten. A beer missing. Iced tea was too much "to mess with."

She knew although he cleaned up enough to avoid her anger, he never cleaned up entirely for a reason. He wanted her to quit working at the hospital. He said they could get along without the money. He never saw any of it anyway. Besides, it was worth it to him to have a little less and have her home with him at lunch, he said. He hated to eat alone.

She took a Pabst from the refrigerator and wandered toward the dial. Switched from Channel 10 to 13 on the TV. Only the first segment of the soap opera had passed and now one minute of Peter Pan's magic tricks in the kitchen. Maytag repairman blues and Dove for Dishes. A couple, looking normal, flashed on washing dishes together (which was not normal), laughing and singing in the middle of the day (which was not normal). She, scrubbing madly and talking nonstop until he sticks his finger between her lips which she probably, ordinarily, normally would bite, but smiles instead for the camera. They are holding hands on the fade-out as the kids dance quietly behind them. Sure thing.

George wanted boys, he used to say. Now he said girls would be fine. Next year he would say idiots were all right if she continued to hold out. She heard those stories. After one kid, wouldn't two be nice, then three, then four, then let's see if we can outdo Rudy and Selma. One would be lonely, two would compete too much, a third would be left out, a fourth would be just right. She couldn't take the pills. Dr. Snipe had said the headaches were from the pills. Yet she hated the familiarity of round rubber snapping into a crevice that she couldn't see, only felt. Hated sucking in her stomach to pry it out, sticky with white paste, the smell of him and her. Once again, George took the responsibility, like they were back in high school. Like they were on those cold vinyl sheets in his back seat at Harry's Hump. She always checked for holes, though. George wanted a baby.

Violet appeared on the screen tousled from one of her zillion sleepless nights now that her man was unfaithful. She dug her fingernails into her face while a far-away voice told about their first argument. Violet was pretty good at being miserable. Leeta had asked Sheila once, how much money soap stars made and Sheila had said 20 thou at least. They're not as good as real movie stars, so they get less, Sheila believed. Not bad, though, twenty thousand. If she had twenty thousand the first thing she would do was have a fancy hairdresser give her a real dye job and throw Clairol to the dogs.

Leeta roused herself from the sofa and turned off the sound, sick of hearing what she already knew about Violet and James, preferring her story to theirs. Sophie entered, her favorite, bitch with black hair and eyes, coy, twirling her gold necklace in her fingers. A flashy set of caps smiled winningly. Six thousand dollars spent in her mouth alone, Leeta bet. A pout in the shape of a butterfly forming on her lips licked to sparkle.

--I don't give a damn what you want, it's me I'm concerned with.

Flash to curly-haired, dewy-eyed Brad, awkward with his hands.

--I only think about me, she said. What I want. Nobody can stop me now.

--Sophie, wait!

--No, Brad. It's too late.

--But Sophie!

--I have my career to think of. I'm going to be a star!

--Don't you think if we try we can . . . please, Sophie His hands whirling like a wind vane. His face warped with wrinkles.

--Don't try and find me, Brad. We're through. Finished. Over. And she turned on her heel and left, slamming the door triumphantly.

But when Leeta turned up the sound, awkward Brad was muttering that he would find a way out of this madness, that

Sophie couldn't stop him from getting a divorce if he wanted it, and yes, he and Mary would find happiness together with his son; his family would be united again if it was the last thing he ever did.

Leeta stretched out her big toe and pushed in the "off" button, liking her version better. The push knocked over the five-by-seven pose of George's face. Ears too big, but a nice face, undamaged. She wiped at the layer of dust with her elbow, set it upright again, catty-cornered on the set. Nothing you could say or do to George upset his face. It held onto bliss with or without a reason. Even when she sneaked out on him in high school, while wearing his heavy ring waxed onto her finger, even then, the upset was never in his face. It was always in his hands, cracking his knuckles one finger at a time, one hand at a time, his shoulders hunched into the yellow windbreaker she had given him for Christmas, calling "Leeta, Leeta, just a minute," as she pretended to open her locker. Most popular superlative. Homecoming Queen, two years in a row (a school record), cheerleader assured of being captain in two years and then she could wear a white sweater instead of red and show her boobs off more. George's knuckles always came to the exact level of her breasts and when she would turn to face him by her locker, she always bumped into their popping and cracking and his blustered sorry, his cheeks beet-red not because of the contact (he had held more, often enough), but because of

the stares.

No one could ever figure out why George was popular without playing football, basketball, baseball or at least running track. He never talked much but when he said anything it was funny so people called him a card. The girls called him a Casanova. That was the first thing Leeta had heard about him in the girls' bathroom, smoking, her freshman year.

--George is so gentle, Sharon had cooed, putting on blue-tint mascara, winking in the mirror--her father had money--to see if it smudged off on the lower lid. Acting prissy in a place that smelled like an ammonia pit.

--I tell you girls, you can have Earl and Tommy and Charlie playing tackle football with you all night if you want, but give me George any day. He knows you don't choke a girl with your tongue. That's not the point. The point is . . . well She had looked around to make sure everyone had stopped competing for the biggest smoke ring and was listening.

--Take my word for it, George knows.

2:30. She put an extra touch of Desert Flower behind her knee before pulling up the panty hose carefully with her rough hands. When everyone wore the long-line girdles with four aluminum hooks holding the sheerness up, it was more

exciting. Each garter plucked free, each leg a separate intrigue, and now with one swoop the whole thing over and done with. She changed into her black wool skirt, the white blouse with the scoop neck. Switched again to red crepe and tucked it around her wasp waist. (It had been called wasp many times.) George said she was built better than any Miss America he had ever seen and he watched the contest every year.

She looked into the dresser mirror for the total effect. Bent over to examine the bangs slanted to the left and yanked until tears came to her eyes, trying to squeeze some fluff into the strands. Her hair was originally brown. The ordinary brown of Mawatuck County marsh mud. Red was an improvement. Even a home job. But the roots, she admitted, parting her hair again with her fingers, had already grown a brown telltale river, and it had only been two months. She powdered the "Ivory Snow" pancake makeup lightly over her slightly hooked nose, the few freckles, the shiny forehead that peeped below the bangs line. She had stopped using the orange tint the year she graduated, but Sheila still painted her face a pathetic sunset. She sucked in her cheeks, making her long face longer, swept the blusher in and out of the crevice, a last hint of color on her lips, the eyes left pale. George liked it that way. Pink, white, not black circling the moon of her eyes. That was slutty. Or desperate.

She smoothed the white corded bedspread, stuck her nose by the pillows to make sure the odor of last night's frying had disappeared. She would have to use the air freshener afterward to cover the cigar stench. She tilted the blinds so that the bedroom was almost dark. So she couldn't see his face or pale pink belly hanging like a blimp over his toes as he wheezed his way to her. But he thought money changed all that. He could have any woman he wanted, he reminded her as he handed over the bills. And closing the door on his boast some days she would give way to the disgust and vomit until there was nothing left inside to clean out. Scrub her skin in the boiling shower until it bled, searching for a different excuse this Thursday when George came home and wanted her. Unable to stand even the touch she loved after him.

She heard the gravel spit off the driveway, lodge somewhere in the lap of grass. The big Buick, heavy in its turning, scraped the dirt and sprang back with effort. The motor died far away under the shed in the back, disguised from the road and Mrs. Sasnett's curiosity by two umbrella trees. And now the heavy steps. Fat off other people's misery, her father said. George had argued there were still some decent lawyers around. Both agreed Mickey Denby wasn't one of them. The man who had his hand in all the developers' schemes, pulling strings with the politicians, twice bankrupt and

still the richest man in the county.

He handed her a bush of flowers. Red roses, the same beginning for three months though he knew she had to burn them before George came home.

--How nice, Mickey. Let me get a vase. His hair was fashionably white along his temples, swept back without grease. Brown striped suit, jacket opened, no tie, wanting to appear casual. Leeta saw him out of the corner of her eye take in the blue and red speckled linoleum of the kitchen floor as she filled the vase with tap water. His eyes traced the broken handle of the ice box, the bread box half-shut, then up the curve of her outline. The calloused heels, brown through the stockings and sandals, the muscular calves, the swell of hips. Reassessing, as if she might have developed some broken parts living here.

--Well, how was your day? Brightly. Get this show on the road.

--Oh, nothing much, my pretty lady. Searching in his pocket for a cigar. No. Can't let him start that.

--We'll be more comfortable in here, I think, her nylons swishing in the direction of the bedroom. Here Let me take your coat.

--Oh no. This will be fine, right here.

--Are you sure?

--Yea, fine. Settling on the couch before she could stop him. The cigar lighted, fumigating the room.

--Come sit down here beside me. Here. He patted the tweed cushion. My but you sure do look pretty in that red, honey.

--Maybe I'd better close the blinds.

--The blinds are fine. Things look more suspicious when you have everything all boarded up. People riding by will think there's some hankypanky going on in here. He laughed at himself, stretching his arm across the orange and white afghan George's mother had knitted.

--I guess you're right.

--Come on now and sit over here beside Mickey.

--I think we'd be more comfortable in the bedroom, don't you? She forced herself to wink.

--Hey, what's the rush, little lady? Don't we have time for some socializing? . . . Sit down here a minute.

A lump of still burning ash fell off the tip of his cigar onto the rug. Bending, she brushed at it with her fingers, dissolving it into the green.

--Here . . . let me get you an ashtray.

--I don't need an ashtray. What I need is a good look at you. He swung her around and down beside him. Her wrist burned as she twisted it free but she stayed.

--There now . . . that's better, isn't it? You've been flitting around here like some scalped chicken. Just sit here and let me get a good long look at you. He reached for her knee and patted.

--So . . .

--Don't talk. Just sit.

--Well, but you never told me how your day went. She moved just out of reach and repeated the question. It had been idle chitchat before, but suddenly her motives changed. The man who controlled everything refused to answer a measly question about his day; refused her even that crumb.

--Not the best, not the worst, nothing to interest your pretty head, like I said. But listen here, just looking at you has made it better already.

--Why was it bad? Didn't you finally buy out Jess Forbes' farm?

--Where did you hear that?

--Oh, I don't know. Around.

--Larry Morgan didn't tell you, did he?

--Larry Morgan? Why on earth would he tell me? It's common knowledge you've been angling for that land for months.

--Hum. The irritated look seeped away. Well now, it's all hearsay, honey. All hearsay. You know how folks in this county love to talk.

--Is that why it was a bad day?

--No, just the usual official business tires a man out after a while. And then he needs a little entertainment to tide him over.

He leaned forward toward a kiss.

--But I'm a silly old fool now, telling you what a man needs when you know all that already, don't you?

His hand pulled on her neck to bring her toward the purplish lips, the patchy beginnings of a mustache.

--But I want to know why you had a bad day. Why won't you tell me the truth?

--Because I know when you're just being cute to please me.

--I'm not just being cute, I WANT TO KNOW, damn it!

--I can't think of a thing that would interest you, honey, he said, the breathing harder, but the smile in place.

--You know ole Mickey would tell you if he could . . . His hand was pulling harder now, insisting this talk end.

--HOW DO YOU KNOW what interests me? she screamed and at that moment of shrillness lost it all.

She saw him waiting to hear what interests a homecoming queen who beds down every Thursday in her husband's bed for money while he is out working to support her.

She saw him smile, relighting his cigar.

Bastard. Did he think she would tell him anything? All she wanted was his money so she and George could run away from him and his county, this couch, frayed and sunk with broken springs.

--Why don't you just quit talking nonsense, he said.

She caught the smell of his after-shave lotion too strong. Too overwhelmingly sweet like homemade grape wine. He

breathed a little more heavily with her perched like a child on his knee.

She slid her fingers down his neck, pried them between the shirt collar and skin, further down the way George liked it. But the association made her snatch her hand away. She closed her eyes. It was easier if she closed her eyes. Why was he keeping them out here in this light, the horns of the highway jabbing at the stillness. She would do better in the bedroom, where it was dark, even on George's bed. She held her eyes together, trying to find the end of his back, her breasts pressing into his chest, the alligator belt too tight.

--Hey, now, he wriggled. You are the anxious one today.

--Why don't we move to the more comfortable room, she said, still sightless, not claiming the words.

--Not here.

--What?

--I've got a little surprise for you.

--What do you mean not here?

--I've arranged something different for a change.

Some of the Ivory Snow makeup had brushed off on his maroon shirt.

--I thought we'd go for a drive, down to the Yancey. The place is fairly deserted now, and I have a permanent room, due to connections . . .

--Have you lost your mind?

She struggled to free her hand wedged between his back and the sofa, pushed with her other hand off his lap.

--Of course I've taken all the necessary precautions. Signed us in as husband and wife ahead of time so we won't have to mess with the desk. The management is very discreet, and as I said, I have friends

--Do you think I would risk going to a hotel with you in broad daylight?

--We could have an early dinner, some champagne, steaks. Room service, of course.

He reached over to pinch her right nipple familiarly. Caught in mid-air, she threw his hand aside.

--Listen, I thought I made it clear, this is strictly a business arrangement.

--Hey, hey, no need to bring that up. I just thought for a change of pace maybe. It certainly would be more comfortable than that mound of lumps in there, now wouldn't it?

--Get out.

--What?

--I said get out.

--Hey now, kitten, what's all this? I thought you'd be flattered

--GET OUT and STAY OUT!

--Hey now. Hey now, just you wait a minute here. You ashamed to be seen with me in public or something? Is that

what you're saying? Is it? Cause I wouldn't like that, kitten, if that was the reason, moving toward her. No sir. I wouldn't like that one little bit.

--Just get out.

--But now, you haven't answered my question, trapping her hand in his. Are you ashamed to be seen with me, huh? Any woman in this county would show her ass to a preacher to be with me and now you're saying no? You're saying no to me?

--Get out of here. Can't you understand I want you out? She could no longer hold the trembling rigid, it collapsed her stomach, knees and words until all her threats were foam: dissolvable.

--Let me tell you something, twisting her wrist, the red wrinkling pain, I don't like being told to get out of anywhere. Do you hear me? Do you hear me loud and clear, I said I DON'T LIKE IT. Twisting harder, twisting her down on her knees, her stockings split and running down her legs in tunnels. But I'm going to give you one more chance to make everything all right and then maybe I'll pretend I didn't hear what you said. Do you understand?

Her face was pushed level with the silver zipper, zipping down.

--Do you understand, you crazy slut? Do you understand Mickey loud and clear?

What was left of the panty hose burned with the roses.

She stood watching them crumple to brown, chilly in her bedroom slippers and pink flannel robe. The fog was coming in across the fields from the river, flattening the grass and sending the humans inside, but today she stayed in the damp. Children jabbered like starlings from the trailer park too close on the right. When she and George moved in, there was nothing but the swishing of corn or wheat or beans to be heard.

The beginnings of sunset hanging over the trees was grey and white and ugly. It stretched long and thin as she watched, perversely, thinking she should. It would not be long before the sunset would hang on tin, the last of day burn out over a furnace of trailers. And she and George and Mr. and Mrs. Sasnett holding on. Holding on like holding onto their plot of dirt would make a difference when everyone else sold out.

The telephone could be heard as far as the road. She answered on the fourth ringing of three short rings, her number, "hello."

--Kitten, listen . . .

--Who is this? (It was a party line.)

--Listen, I know you said not to call. . . .

--If you don't tell me who this is I'll have to hang up.

--About this afternoon, listen, I don't know what got into me. You just made me so mad, acting like you didn't

want to be seen . . .

--I have to go now.

--Next week? Okay? How about it? Next week as usual?

--Goodbye.

--Say yes or no. Is George there? Is that why you can't talk?

--Goodbye.

--Next week, kitten. I'll make it up to you, I swear. There'll be something special. Kitten? Kit . . .

The slamming of the receiver was as pleasant as a direct hit. Like the hit, head-on, of a fly with a swatter, finally stilling the buzz, the aggravation, mashing it to death. All the dirt and ugliness scraped into the garbage. Over and done with. Settled.

She had just turned off the vacuum sucking up the last of the stray ashes when she heard a car door slam shut. Too early for George. She peeked through the blinds to see who it was, ready to run to the bedroom and feign sleep, when she heard Sheila's high-pitched "Leeta." Her fist banging the back door.

--Leeta, you in there?

--Yea, just a minute. She wiped the rest of the lipstick off on a stray paper towel in passing. Fresh makeup in the middle of the afternoon, Sheila would notice.

--Hi . . . What are you doing here before six?

--Can't you see these swollen glands, woman! Sheila bulged her blue eyes out, bent forward like she was the doctor commanding "ah" from Leeta and pulled down the orange turtle neck sweater.

--Nope.

--Well, you're supposed to! Everybody at the bank believed me. I'm sick, woman, sick!

--Want some coffee, sick woman?

--Don't mind if I do . . . Christ! This place looks like a morgue.

--You want some cream?

--No. Too fattening.

--I didn't know you drank it black.

--Just started since I read in last month's Journal everything redistributes at 25, and if you aren't careful the last five years will redistribute right in the old gut. She made a face at the strong blackness. Damn. This is awful.

--Don't drink it then.

--Easy for you to talk withat presto gold love you forever band on your finger. Your old friend Sheila hasn't been so lucky.

--Oh hell, Sheila, you could have married anybody you wanted and you know it. You're just too damn picky.

Sheila was glad to be reminded. Her dimples showed. She looked like she might break into the old rah rahs any

minute.

When she crossed her legs it happened.

--Damn! Why me, I ask you? Her blonde curls disappeared underneath the table. Do you have any clear polish around? I know that's tacky as hell but this is the third pair of hose gone this week.

--Yea, I'll get you some.

--No, Leet, I'll get it if you tell me where.

--I said I'll get it, Sheila! Jesus Christ, it's my house!

Sheila looked puzzled and followed her into the bedroom, preparing to hear about a fight with George, a bastard doctor at the hospital, that Rita Ferris was knocked up this time for sure.

--What's wrong, kid?

--Just a little crabby.

--You aren't on another one of those high-protein diets again, are you? You're not fat, Leet, it's really ridiculous to starve yourself so . . .

--I'm not on a diet! Really, Shel, just a little out of sorts. Don't you ever get out of sorts? The dresser drawer was jammed and she was having to yank at it with both hands.

--Well yea, but . . .

--Don't you ever get sick to death of going every day to the bank and coming home every day a day older and everything changing right in front of your eyes and you can't

hold onto nothing?

--Hey now, you don't look a day older than 18. Everybody says so. Rudy was just saying how good you looked today at the bank right after you left.

--So what in the hell does he know? Jesus, Shel! Don't you ever feel like this?

But Sheila was all confusion, watching her, thinking it had to be a man, something to do with a man.

She shook Leeta's shoulder.

--If you ever want to talk, I mean really talk, you know I'm here, don't you? Anytime, I mean it, Leeta. I'll just tell Mr. Dozier a friend of mine needs me and I don't care what he says. I'll take off that minute, you hear?

--Yea, thanks, she said to let Sheila off the hook and wipe away that big-sister concern. Still she found it hard to believe that her best friend did not want to escape like her. Maybe she had phrased it wrong.

--Here. She pushed the polish into Sheila's hand. Unless you tore the whole side off, this should be enough.

--Hey, remember the time . . . Sheila interrupted herself with giggles. I don't know what in the world made me think of this . . .

--What?

--Whew . . . just a minute, just . . . but the giggles attacked fresh and grabbing at Leeta in a spasm of laughter she pulled her over on the couch with her.

--Tell me for godsakes!

-- . . . I was just thinking about the time when I pierced your ears, remember? With that needle? And it hurt so much because I didn't get your ear numb enough with the ice before I started?

--That's not funny, Sheila, laughing despite.

--You remember those rotten strings you had to wear in your ears for weeks and you wouldn't go out with anybody because you were afraid they'd catch their fingers in the loops?

--You ruined me for a solid month!

--No, I haven't gotten to the funny part yet! I was remembering the last thing you gave me was that old rusty needle. You told me to take home and never throw it out because part of your ear must be hanging on to it!

They both squealed hysterically at the climax that wasn't much of a climax. Sheila falling off the arm of the sofa, almost on top of Leeta who was grabbing at her stomach and crossing her legs fiercely.

--You're going to make me pee all over myself!

--No! Sheila boomed, immediately crossing her legs. Why did you have to say that? She limped off in the direction of the john.

Exhausted, Leeta sat up on the couch, the smile not totally played out. When she looked up she noticed the white electric clock on the TV.

--Hey Shel?

--Wait a minute.

--Can you hear me?

--Don't say anything funny or I'll kill you!

--No, I was just going to tell you you missed your program.

--What? The flush simultaneous with her appearance around the corner. The brown wool bunched up in front as she reached for the edge of her blouse.

--After all that conniving too!

She looked at Sheila, preoccupied with smoothing the lumps around her waist, and wondered why. Sheila was her best friend, she could tell her everything, always had. She would understand if she explained it right; that it didn't mean anything, it was his money she wanted. If she said she got two days' worth of work done in one hour, Sheila could understand that.

--How about a celebration? Sheila was already tackling the ice box handle, trying to learn the secret combination.

--What are we celebrating? Leeta helped her open it with the pliers.

Sheila squatted, rummaged, and came out with two beers and two short legs of chicken.

--Get some plates or napkins or something.

--You still haven't told me what we're celebrating.

Sheila took the chicken leg out of her mouth long enough to whistle and point an accusing finger at Leeta's naked

thigh.

--Yea, yea, really racy. I can't get this thing open. She gripped the beer between her legs, trying to get some leverage and undo the stubborn cap.

--Did you get that just then?

--Get what?

--That bruise. She was bending across the table, inspecting the bright blue before Leeta could get the robe together again.

--Why don't you try to get this open, huh?

--Those doctors don't have enough patients to probe I bet. Her eyes sparkled, egging a confession.

--I just bumped into a table.

--Strange level for a table, kid!

--Oh, Sheila, cut it out! You're acting just like a mother today giving me the third degree. I got it right here on this very table that tore half your stocking off.

Can't you understand, Sheila? she wanted to say. Wouldn't you have done it for the money? She reached out to grab her friend's hand, all the playfulness of their banter gone. She was trying to begin that first impossible word that would lead her into a second and third, no turning back, when the back door slammed and George appeared, dusty, and grinning at them both. And the chance was lost.

--George! Hey old man! Want a cold one? Sheila set to work with the pliers, delighted to have a third party member.

--I didn't hear you come up, Leeta said, rising to his mouth, brushing at the brambles caught in his auburn hair.

--Well, I know why. It sounded like a hen party in here.

--I take all the blame for keeping your wife from her wifely chores. It's all my fault there's no hot supper waiting.

--It wasn't going to be hot anyway, Shel, she said, still watching George too closely as she always did on Thursdays.

He moved over to the sink, dumped detergent on the grime and started rubbing his hands.

--Broke down in Buckhorn today, he was saying as she fit herself around him, hugging him between her body and arms. But they had the part at Abbots. Dad got it after lunch so it didn't get us too far behind. You been home this afternoon, Leet?

He did not look suspicious today as he sometimes did. Those times when he sniffed the air and asked why in the hell did she spray that odor all over the place and waited for an explanation.

--You weren't back by lunch so I thought maybe you went off shopping or something.

--No siree, George, Sheila broke in. She's waiting to spend her money on something big. Right, Leet? Sheila started to imitate a motor's grind, thoroughly relaxed by the first sip of her third beer. George turned off the fau-

cet and turned around in time to see Leeta mouthing "shut up" to her friend.

--What's the big secret?

--No secret.

--Leet--a, Sheila teased, wagging her finger.

--Leave you two girls alone for one afternoon and you're up to your old tricks. But he laughed; carelessly, satisfied that whatever mischief they were brewing was silliness. Just like the old days.

--You gals will never change, smiling, for the notion pleased him.

They had another round of beers before he walked Sheila, a little tipsy, to her car. He stood and watched to make sure the headlights shone in the right direction and not toward the ditch. Leeta saw him wave goodbye and turn toward the only field left and spray the grass. She watched him linger, reach down and test a clod of dirt for moisture, pick out the longest and juiciest weed to chew. It was his land as long as he didn't leave it. As long as he came home everyday and found her there, he was content. No matter how many futures she tempted him with, George would stay. She finally accepted it as a fact, as certain as summer and tourists. Staying was the only way he knew how to fight.

When he opened the door, she felt the dampness blow in, smelled the putrid odor of rooting pigs. Rudy's.

--Saw Rudy at the bank today, she said.

--Oh yea? What's he up to? Passing out cigars again?

--No, just being his usual self. You know Rudy, a laugh a minute.

--Yea, poor cuss.

He picked up the Daily Report, thumbing to the comics. She turned the water on, pouring a cup of blue crystals in the tub to make it bubble, eased herself into the warm and soaked as the water continued to gush in. A nightly ritual. She was too raw to scrub. Her memory placed her and George sunbathing in the nude on Saturdays. They had put two double sheets on the clothesline in the back yard to keep the Sassetts from calling the sheriff, the only precaution they needed to take back then. She wondered as she swirled her toes in the steam if they might get away with it yet.

--Did you go down to the bank for money, Leet?

--Un-a. She shut the water off and let her body drift.

--Do you need any?

--No, sinking down until everything below her chin was covered and her neck undid its brace.

--Are you sure?

--Yea, I'm sure. That bank doesn't have half what I need.

She heard him laugh.

--We do all right, Leet.

--Yeah. The blue suds were already beginning to lose their froth. Yea, I guess we do.

THE SHORTEST DISTANCE BETWEEN TWO POINTS

The ocean surrounding Gay Head was grey like the rest of the island at Christmas. As far as Stephen could see from his perch on the promontory, the monochrome held. Even the famous cliffs were bleached out, all the red sucked under to bloom again in the summer. He had been here to see the red every summer since he was fifteen and no doubt would be here again next summer. This lark of crossing Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Rhode Island, Connecticut and Massachusetts in December was for her and for that small part of himself that still hoped she would change her fickle mind and come.

The lighthouse in black and white stripes looked menacing, towering over all the white boarded-up shops that in the summer hawked the tourists with Gay Head Indian memorabilia that really came from Cherokee, North Carolina. As the fog sneaked in, it cast a halo on the shops clutched on the very edge of the drop-off, all of it combining to make him feel strange and tiny, dwarfed by the scenery. He shivered.

The sweat pants and jacket were not as warm as the lady in Kaufman's had promised when he bought them there three weeks ago, back home in Pittsburgh. Red. A ridiculous color. His whole wardrobe had been navy blue until she bought him the red flannel shirt, for some zest, she said. "A red warning signal that businessmen who overwork and underpleasure

die young." "There is the theory of heroics, you know," he had said, "or don't they teach you about Andrew Carnegies and the Great American Dream in acting class?" She had been facing the sun at the time, in the lotus position, breathing so deeply that the bottom half of her body shrank to a string for the ballooning diaphragm. She had let the air out patiently, a little at the time, maddeningly refusing to shorten even one of the ten counts to answer him. He felt a little foolish as she continued, ignoring his sentiments, so he justified himself by repeating it, louder: "Don't you believe in heroes?" When the last ounce of air was expelled from her lungs she dropped her head and shoulders, relaxing. "There are no heroes, only martyrs." With that, wrestled him into the sand and almost had him in a half-nelson before he overpowered her and landed her kicking and screaming into the breakers so that she choked on the salt. He smiled at the memory. It had been one of his too few victories.

He made his way down the embankment, his sneakers gripping the steepness, his hands grabbing weeds to steady the descent. The fog was coming in fast now, like a second coat of iridescent grey bringing with it the "spooks" as he called it; that feeling of scared he remembered from childhood when his grandfather told him stories of Lake Erie and the pirate ships. He had always forced himself to memorize the order of the words, to listen to their logic as they shaped the story. Tensing his concentration into one straight taut line, he re-

fused to see the images that blew up around each sound, and it kept him from being afraid. Even when his grandfather added darkness, only a tiny candle blowing between them, and whispered the story of the old seaman leading his mare up and down the beach with a lantern swinging around the animal's neck, luring a pirate's ship to its doom on the treacherous coast line. Even as his grandfather imitated the nuances of the seaman's raspy voice, Stephen never gave way to the spell. He had held his body tight, focusing only on his grandfather's hazel eyes, and when the end finally came, broke the silence by clearing his throat and saying in his best adult voice: "They're both bad buys, aren't they?" His grandfather bel-
lowed with laughter then. "On the contrary," he said, turning up the lights, stripping the room of its shadows. "That seaman was bringing revenue to his village by ingenious means. A successfully entrepreneur if there ever was one." He said it swayed back in his tweed recliner, the head from a Lowenbrau clouding his upper lip. That left Stephen to defend the pirate. Once he had argued that impersonating a lighthouse was a violation of the Intercoastal Waterways regulations, thus the seaman was a felon. It had worked. His grandfather had laughed, conceded the case and taken him to a Pirates' home game. "A reward," he said, "for damn good thinking on his feet." He was "without a doubt his father's son." Stephen had since grown wary of that compliment. Why couldn't people say a son was somewhat similar to his father and leave it at

that? Then they would both have an excuse if things turned out badly.

When he reached the beach he started to run in lazy leaps, not concerned so much with the grace of the effort but with the consistency of the rising and falling; that each toe print, looking back, would be something near symmetrical. They never were. It was too much like driving a bicycle over earlier tracks in dirt. You never could quite make them become one latticed print.

The clay was slippery in spots where the tide had washed over it, creeping up little by little to reach its high before darkness. He stopped running long enough to reach down and test the clay's malleability, a habit since the day Celia had painted her face with the red in circular designs that resembled peacocks and, wearing a red kimono, had cartwheeled down the beach. She and the tides were kindred spirits she said, but laughed. Thank God she laughed. He never knew how seriously to take her dialectic of cosmic energies. He believed the universe was more at loggerheads than in harmony, but her little skit had amused him at the time. It was just that he had lived too long with his father to believe anything was organized very well before the advent of man, Celia or no Celia. After meeting her, however, he was convinced he had been delivered his own personal problem of disorder. He learned better. "Anything goes" has its own peculiar structure. What did she expect? That he'd tear off

to New York and throw all his plans to hell? He had priorities too.

Dear Stephen,

Deserted islands are for philosophers, monks and Republicans. Come to Fun City. Everyone is asking about you. Meg's here too. Remember Meg? Got an audition on Jan. 2. Big Chance. Really.

He had received that terse note in Pittsburgh two weeks ago after he had invited her to the island for a cozy week of fun and games. So what did she expect? Of course he was going to say no to New York.

He ran with the cliffs behind him. The air funneling down his nose and throat had eaten a strip of cold to his gut. He tried to establish an easy rhythm and to preoccupy himself with other things. Straggly driftwood. Random rocks. The litter of beaches. But distraction was harder to come by in the winter when all the flatness of a seascape was flatter, deserted. He tied the string of the hood tightly around his neck and pulled the flannel up over his mouth. He forced his largish hands into the small slits of pockets and ran as best he could without his arms to balance the flow. Celia was a good runner. She ran track in college, she said. Ran the mile in five and a half minutes without really trying hard. He had played a fairly vigorous game of handball three times a week with another executive suite lackey before he met Celia. But she had convinced him that exercising in a

hole was somehow missing the point. The point, she said, was to enjoy. "Wasn't it more fun jogging on the beach than sweating in a windowless pit?" He had pointed out at the time that Pittsburgh was not known for its oceans. However, he had promoted jogging to his father just to argue. Surprisingly enough, his ploy had failed and his father was quite taken with the notion. He immediately ordered fifteen red white and blue JOG FOR YOUR HEALTH posters which he had tacked to all the company bulletin boards with his added byline that executives must stay trim and fit not only for themselves but for the company. Paper boxes. Stephen didn't know why executives of a company that manufactured cardboard boxes need have such extraordinary physiques. When he said as much, his father frowned his famous frown of studied resolution, then said in his carefully controlled exasperated voice: "Some day you will see how the cog fits. When you are running this company" By that time Stephen was scribbling loop-the-loops on his pad, anxious to escape the familiar lesson. His father was great believer in time. Stephen "in time" would understand the complexities of organization. He would learn to respect every screw and bolt that twisted to become the almighty "whole." Several times this summer, he had caught that patient-exasperated look crossing his own face in the mirror and wondered if Celia were not his father's agent sent to hurry up time. Secret agents were probably tax deductible.

The muscles in his calves were beginning to tighten. The first time he had run with Celia she had continued a good two miles after he had fallen panting to the sand. "When you're an actress you have to be in great shape," she said, returning, her face barely splotched. "It's part of the price."

But he had persuaded himself that she was a little too lean for his taste. When she waited on him in the restaurant he thought it, having swallowed every morsel of soggy veal scallopini alone, telling her the meal was great each time she asked. He had convinced himself by the time he tipped too much and asked her what time Giordano's closed: she really was too thin. In that atmosphere of plastic chrysanthemums and glazed ivy, anyone who could smile would come out looking good. When she refused to accept his ride home after he had waited two hours in his car reading Ian Fleming by the street light, he was into calling her emaciated. But the next night he had seen her at the Colonial Inn with her buddies and she had motioned him over to their table. "This is the great tipper," she introduced him and he amended: "Actually I only make cardboard boxes."

He was too defensive about his father and money, she commented later in, of all places, his mother's exact replica of Louis XIV's canopied bed. "Why not just count yourself among the lucky and spend it in all the ways your father never did? Buy two hundred acres in Canada and let the draft dodgers live there for free?"

He had invited her and her friends over to his parents' "cottage" for more beer after the Colonial had closed. Celia had wandered from room to room (including his mother's bedroom, her soon-to-be favorite), feeling the carpets with her fingers and toes. "Feel," she said to her girl friend and they stretched out like clothespins on the white shag. When he walked in an hour later they both had their eyes closed, wriggling in the white, free-associating. "Seaweed." "No, no, no, more like clover. Heads of clover sewn together without stems." "How about lint balls in the dryer?" His father would have been amazed; the only stain they left on the rug was from carrot juice, freshly squeezed the night before. He was the klutz who dripped mustard from his pastrami and rye. They were vegetarians.

His heart was letting him know it was working--hard. The curve that would turn him from the southern edge of the island to the eastern edge did not seem that much closer. His shoes were sticking in the wet sand. He veered away from the foam and kept his feet steadily pounding but not one pleasant thought could he sustain. No amount of strong-er heart, long-er life chants lessened the grind. He felt his face chapping, its cold foreign to the rest of his body's generated heat. Like a visor, his face felt plastic, capable of popping off.

He was almost abreast of No Man's Land. An island maybe five miles offshore. Celia had invented the dramatic explana-

tion that its name derived from the lesbian colony that once inhabited it but he had corrected her this time with fact. And in front of her agreeable friends. It was only a bombing range and a discarded one at that, he said as they prepared their garbanzo bean burgers on the hibachi, leaving him with a whole bag of marshmallows. He had been determined to use all twelve coathangers brought specifically for roasting even after they had mouthed the obscenity "white sugar" and declined his treat. He had fashioned an elaborate wind shield with the help of beach towels while they munched on their protein. The wind shield had impressed even her.

Sometime in July, he and Celia had established the habit of her staying every other night at his place before she biked back to her room on Summer Street and hitchhiked on to Oak Bluffs and work. He had told her in his own roundabout way that she didn't have to work at all if she didn't want to. His father had sent him off that summer with the specific requirement that he "live a little." Next year he was to be groomed for the Vice President's slot and contrary to public opinion, his father said, Vice Presidents in his company worked more than they played. Even if they were his relatives. He had told Celia all that and explained that there was more than enough money for two and she was welcome to it. He had even ventured to ask why she was working as a waitress anyway. "Do you know how hard it is to get into a good summer stock?" she retorted. "I can't just work in any old troupe."

He should have taken her resistance seriously. But he really had wanted to see her in her chosen element. The only time her eyes really blazed was when she and her friends talked about their destiny on the stage. They all wanted stardom in one form or another, but each of them had deferred to her status. If anyone made it, it would be Celia. Beauty, brains and vigor. How could she miss? By the time Stephen had heard each of them recount in glowing terms how subtly she could show a character with only a gesture, how delightfully she could upstage even the most seasoned actor with only one throwaway line, he was desperate to see her perform. She promised him a front row seat the night she opened on Broadway. "What's wrong with now?" he had asked and she had protested: "In what? A drawing-room farce? There is such a thing as inspiration, you know."

He had been so delighted to find out that the local Vineyard Players were doing Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? he had bought a whole case of Rubeo home to celebrate and, for once, invited her friends himself. He had even talked to the director and arranged an audition time for Celia. At first she had complained a week wasn't enough preparation time, that she had never even heard of the man producing it. "Who was this Jerry Maynard who claimed to be a director?" But she did admit it was a good play. And everyone agreed she would be a great Honey.

In his final year at Penn for a business project, Stephen had had to revamp the financial budget of an almost bankrupt repertory company. That had required several readings of the play in progress and weeks of sitting in on rehearsals to decide what was excess and what was essential for production. The play just happened to be Albee's Virginia Woolf. Celia could have interpreted Cassandra as a bored overweight housewife and he would have never been the wiser. The same applied to millions of characters. But this one play and this Honey he knew as thoroughly as Celia, and that was his blessing and his curse.

He had taken a seat in the balcony where it was impossible for her to distinguish his face even if she did look up. The scene selected for the audition was the climactic one when George retells the story of Honey's hysterical pregnancy and she reacts with titters, tears, sulking and nausea in a matter of minutes. A very difficult scene even for a professional and it was his educated guess at the time that Celia was no professional. For himself, he had claimed the role of "consoling good guy in the wings," ready to press the heartbroken young thing to his chest after her humiliating failure, ready to drive her along the moon-struck shore while she fed tears to her beer and, finally, ready to save her from her own scatterbrained ambitions. But as it turned out, he never got to enact the savior script.

Celia, calm and collected, had waltzed onto the stage, her expression no different than the one she wore strolling South Beach haphazardly looking for sand dollars. Just as calmly she continued to wait for her cue as the stupefaction spread down his neck in garish red. She might have slapped him for the insult. He had been more patronizing of her than his father had ever been of him, something he deemed impossible. He was still cowering behind the ledge, cursing himself, convinced he had badly misjudged her, when she began. Newly humbled, he expected any amount of love, amazement and/or reverence to explode in him during Celia's performance, anything but what he felt: a kind of horror that edged embarrassment, one tiny line from pity.

"You . . . told them! You told them! OOOOHHHH! Oh, no, no, no, no!" Those lines would ring in his ear forever, belted out by Celia in her mock Madam's voice, low and sultry as far from a mouse's whine as you could get. She half-sang, half-shouted the rest--all the grace of her natural movement given over to jerky mime. But he had to hand it to her. Throughout she never lost her smile. Bright and very wet, it headed toward the director and stuck.

He had thought he would never be able to face her again. He was tortured by guilt and satisfaction. So he had wanted her to fail but not so miserably. He felt by being there he had been party to some awful secret and now that her secret was his secret, all the power and mystery and fascination

evaporated and there was only the fact that she was a terrible actress.

He avoided her for two weeks, claiming he had gone off-island for an indefinite period. He met her in the grocery store accidentally and she asked him why he had been keeping such a low profile. He had mumbled some feeble excuse and then stood there somehow as she berated him for not asking how the audition had gone. He never did, sheepishly trying to blend into the Campbell soup display, but she told him anyway: "just wonderful." Everyone had said she performed Honey like no one had ever imagined her before. She only wished he could have been there to see. She was, incredibly enough, totally proud staring over the cauliflower. Somehow he got out of the check-out line without screaming, but the damage was done. The campaign to save Celia was again aflame. Why should she waste herself?

Why couldn't he let her? That was the question he should be answering after five months of trying to convince her and failing. Why didn't he let her fall flat on her face enough times to figure it out by herself? His lips were turning blue in the cold. A stray seagull picked at the water with no success. He wished he had sent a nasty second telegram instead of his typical monosyllabic "no."

Celia darling, I am sure the January audition is definitely, positively, oh-this-is-it-I-can-feel-it-in-my-bones big break you've been waiting for. Of course I understand you

can't come, just like last month and the month before. Lots of wishes. Break a leg, break two. Stephen _____ (fill in the blank. Can you?)

It was juvenile. It was fiendish, and it was exactly the way he felt.

He was walking now, trying to avoid the charley horse he inevitably got but never would admit to. He couldn't keep himself from taking a glance backward to see just how coordinated the footprints were. He walked on instead of retracking, thinking he would cross over the dunes eventually and take the road back to his car. The spooky feeling was coming back and he desperately needed a handkerchief to wipe his nose. He knew he looked like an idiot in his Christmasy suit. He had even bought her one to match. She looked her best in red when the blonde turned deep yellow. A whole shedful of logs to burn in the fireplace, champagne, and no one: that was the scenario she had turned down. A premature celebration. He wanted to see her once not ricocheting off her admirers, to separate her from her mass and convince her to give up on the Big Apple. A pipe dream. All summer she had never been without her clan. She had brought them in, one by one, Barbara, Ferris, Jason, Lonnie and Tina. They were the core that sometimes stretched to include Karen and her Saint Bernard and crazy Garrett and his musician friends. When he complained she insisted people were more themselves together than alone. Two was too close to one. And anyway hadn't it always been

fun? He finally made her understand it was not always fun and got rid of them for nearly a week. Then one by one she invited them back and he lacked the energy to fight it a second time. By then, he was tired of always being the one who objected. As if he were 25 years older than these people when the difference was a slim year, maybe. Celia claimed he only "hung loose" when asleep.

He kicked at a leftover conch shell. His toes were freezing in his soggy tennis shoes and his teeth chattered. What he really wanted to say was "Celia, the fact is you're lousy." Or: "Goddamn it, woman, no one in his right mind could call you an actress!" "Oh sure," he could hear, "you know, Stephen, you are so right. Being an excellent waitress should take top priority. Or perhaps you have a better suggestion?" He couldn't say it: "Come back to Pittsburgh with me. I need a speck of yellow in all that grey." Her face would turn into an old wrinkled sheet and he would become a proponent of all the "isms" she hated. "Don't tell me you want to make an honest woman of me as well?" What could he say? "Maybe. I haven't faced that one yet." He was always hindered by her proclamations of "selfish." Monogamy was the root of all selfishness, he should know that. Selfish. Selfish. Selfish. Her big word. He issued a quick left jab at her imaginary chin hoisted in the air and prancing in fine boxer style squared himself with her double-dare mouth and pelted out a fresh round of attack. The force of the blow

was still tingling his fist, his feet still jiggling, when he caught a picture of the fool fighting the sky and hurting no one. It took time, but a grin circled his face. Then a laugh of disbelief that mushroomed wildly into a cackle and threw him into the sand where he beat his fists and heels.

If she could see him now. If she could just see. The image of her incredulous face made him beat his fists in double-time.

"What in the hell do you think you're doing? Get up and quit acting like an idiot." And when he wouldn't oblige, she would call them all over to see, trying to turn it into her joke. "A once in a lifetime scene, folks. Stephen Crinshaw at loose ends." She would have her hands on her hips, her hair in braids, her nose would be flushed by the cold, and she would be jealous. Jealous that Mr. Tight Ass was taking her act away.

"Come on," he would egg, "relive primitive man in his primitive state, Cel." But as much as she would want to, she couldn't join him wallowing in the sand. Neither could she stop a man finally ridding himself of that capitalistic armor--inhibitions. She would just have to stand there frowning as long as he insisted on having the time of his life at her expense. And that amused him. For a long time in the cold and dark and quiet that thought amused the goddamn hell out of him.

NUDE STUDY, 1969

By 6:00 she was awake, the breeze of the electric fan prying open eyes she wanted blind for at least another hour. Aziza burrowed underneath the orange bedspread that matched her roommate's (the roommate herself being more phantom than flesh now that she was in love) and tried to forget which day it was. She turned over on her stomach, momentarily enjoying the delusion that this day was like any other muggy summer school day and she was not at 8:00, just two hours from now, going to strip in front of fifty art majors and Professor Aldrich.

She curled farther down under the covers, showing only a shag of hair to the world, but the fact remained: she would strip, having promised herself and a bitchy secretary three weeks ago she would.

"Is this your first time, honey?" the secretary had asked, insinuating she already knew with her Cleopatra eye-lined eyes. "Are you in this for the money?"

Aziza had made quite a show of indignation, the best she could do with her face the color of ripe watermelon, her hands like wind. She had stammered "no" but the truth was half and half. Today would be her first time, but she wasn't modeling for their token money. It was a case of self-coercion. At

8:00 she would enter Lenoir Hall carrying with her the twenty-year response of hating her body and at 11:00, after standing nude before them for three hours, she would leave liking her form. Standing as the center of attention with no clothes to drape and disguise what lay beneath was the best stimulus. She believed today would prove that.

She reluctantly climbed out of bed, stripped off her nightshirt, and exposed herself before the dorm room mirror. If you had asked her at that moment which body she preferred reflecting back as her own, she would have been mute. The fact was she had never envied another living woman's body. She very often vacillated in her description of "the best": huge swelling breasts and thighs, an Amazon's proportions, and then again it was the scissor-like thinness that caught her eye. She stared at her average body and sighed, gave her middle a pinch. She had no rigid standard of perfect. She only knew, after twenty years of assimilating the outside world, her specimen was not perfect, and that thought obsessed her.

Finding her good luck T-shirt and jeans, she dressed quickly and stuffed a caftan and an extra pair of panties in a brown paper bag. She locked the door behind her and pushed the key under it, just in case the assurances of science failed her at the last minute.

Crossing campus, she wanted to stop by Connor Hall and see her rats but she was afraid Dr. Sneider would be there.

She wanted to reward her rats one last time for approaching the mirror with a food pellet; shock them if they moved away. Dr. Sneider disapproved of her experiment. She was running a risk, he said, depending on her own reaction time to reward and punish. Positive reinforcement was more than adequate. He would look equally grave if she tried to describe her experiment of modeling to him, using all the best jargon to demonstrate her approach-avoidance paradigms; why it was necessary for her to re-order her operant stimuli and response pairings.

"But Aziza," he would say, "don't you see the serious flaw in your design?" He would say it gently in disbelief. "You cannot possibly be a participant and a reliable observer." He would shake his head in that sad strained way, holding back from saying what she knew he believed: "Have you ever considered the humanities, Aziza? Science is such an exacting art."

But she had heard him generalize behavioral principles from rats to babies to adults. Blackboard after blackboard charting the operant conditioning of man, breaking it down step by step, all so logically coherent and alterable. Above all alterable, once you understood the breakdown. And she understood her breakdown and the solution: her body needed more exposure.

In the bathroom of Lenoir Hall where all the sinks were mottled with paint, she shed her underwear. She tried to be

as inconspicuous as possible searching around the partitions for Aldrich's class in her billowing caftan and nothing else. She found it by a cardboard sign tacked onto the back of a chair. The sign read "Life Class--No Admittance" and entering, she was alone.

It was all dirty white: the partition, floors, and walls. Only a black square box of platform loomed up, distinct in the center of the floor where she would stand as model. All the desks, brown and rickety, faced the direction of the box. She walked over and tapped the black at its center, tapping to see if it were hollow. Her fingers met with a dull thud. She drew back from it and pictured what she had refused to thus far: herself stepping up on its blackness nude. She was interrupted by the shuffle of sandals, and turned to see the first artist, a girl with red hair and pink glasses carrying an oversized case, a Coke and Three Musketeers candy bar in her arms. A tall slim girl with a dog and shrimp-sized guy wearing flipflops and beige seersucker shorts followed and seated themselves around the box. The last of the group was another male hidden by sunglasses and an army coat, a leather satchel thrown over his shoulder. She smiled at them if they glanced her way but would not speak. This was an experiment. She sat in a yellow and red hardback chair and waited to begin.

When Aldrich arrived, he was breathless, his hand running over his bald top. A fringe of dark above his ears twirled

out obstinate from his head.

"Shall we get started?" he asked, checking the absentees without looking at her.

When she agreed, he decided not: "On second thought, maybe we should give the stragglers a few more minutes. Art students are oblivious to the university's sense of timing, you know. . . ." He looked at her for the first time, smiling. "Can't be rushed and all that."

She didn't know, but felt she must say: "Really?"

"I actually had one of the more mystical students tell me he was glad God had no deadlines. You know the type," he said and allowed himself a laugh.

She nodded vacantly and got up from her seat. The caftan billowed out but she clamped it down with her arms before anyone saw the movement. The platform distracted her again. Her eye gauged the distance as six feet or more between its edge and any of the desks surrounding it. She remembered her mother saying plump girls fared better at a distance. They looked healthy while thin girls looked like sticks. And her mother had always cautioned her to wear vertical not horizontal stripes. They helped "draw you out," she said. The eye would go up and down, not back and forth measuring width. The caftan Aziza was wearing was red and white and green vertical stripes but it had to be abandoned. What good could it do her then?

She returned to the ill-painted chair as a few more students arrived. At Aldrich's request she twisted her brown hair into a snail's shell and secured it at the nape of her neck with some stray bobby pins she found at the bottom of her suede shoulder bag. For twelve years her mother had cropped her hair close around her ears. She undid the bulk and let it fall long again, the cover reassuring her. But Aldrich warned it was very important for the students to see the curve of her spine, so she tucked it short again, leaving even her neck bare.

"How about getting started?" he asked and this time she only nodded, too nervous to speak, too far into this to turn tail and run. Now she was going to stand willingly in front of strangers completely naked as she had planned. Her legs gave way to rubber when she stood.

"This is life class, in case any of you are misplaced now for the second week in a row." Nobody laughed.

The trembling had spread to her fingers and hands, the lids of her eyes.

"The model will take several one-minute poses as a warm-up . . ."

She was sweating in the style of Japanese water torture: one drop of wet at a time bouncing off her hips, sliding to her toes. She gave a quick swipe at her underarms to start fresh.

". . . working up to a ten and finally fifteen before we break. Remember to sketch as rapidly as you can"

She unclutched her hands from behind her and tried to look grand and meditative at once, a real object of silent art.

"Your purpose is to encompass as much of the figure as possible with one line in the one-minute sketches. Is that clear to everybody?"

No one even nodded.

"Okay, then, shall we begin?" He turned to face her.

She should have had this moment over, the cover off, waiting when the "ready" arrived. Her toes felt the grit leading her toward the black box. Stepping up, she lifted the hem of the caftan above her knees, her skin like sheer nylon showing the panic. Should she dip her head, pull it down and off, bending forward? Her face would have a brighter red seizure if she did, her hair tear wild as ragweed from the bun. Should she pull it up little by little, fixing a stare somewhere in the blur of faces?

"Are you ready to start, Aziza?"

Why did he have to say her name? They could never trace a face, but her name She wondered if they could see the tiny white splinters of stretch marks on her thighs, were they surprised at the width of hips, her navel deep enough to hold an olive She wondered, finding light, spitting

the hair from her mouth, settling into the chair on the platform, her legs crossed and holding: did anyone smirk?

She tried for Art but the closest she could get to it was a certain rigid plastic, no grace. She braced her body, her knees folded under the chair, and endured five minutes of sameness. After the initial fright of knowing the caftan could not be recovered, an uneasy peace set in and she pre-occupied herself with the sounds of their scratching pencils. Their heads ducked from behind their art, then back again as they studied her, but their faces were free of comment. She tried to catch the professor's eye and elicit a nod or a frown, but he was busy making the rounds, mumbling this or that as they busily ignored him. The thought occurred that she would have 27 pictures of herself at the end of 5 minutes. By the break she would have 27 times 8, 6 carry the 5, 17, 176 observations of herself--27 cameras recording her experiment--a set-up better than any psychology lab.

"Go ahead and give them a ten-minute pose," Aldrich instructed, skipping the second five-minute stance, the one she had already thought out and was prepared to do.

"Go ahead with the ten," he said and nodded toward her, but her mind was blank, completely flat without a ripple, her body numb and dangling from her head that was racing off into nowhere, trying to structure its lower part. The girl with

the red hair had pressed her point of charcoal on her paper and was ready for the first stroke. The girl beside her was patting her dog with her palm, her eyes glued to Aziza's body, waiting.

Someone coughed. A pencil was dropped and retrieved. She tried to stretch, stalling for time, but her arms reached only part of their length. She tried to conjure up a textbook pose but the images were hazy, impossible to duplicate. She looked into their faces for help and finding none, flushed, would have stammered "I can't" in another two seconds when she saw the headless women of Greece, cool in their alabaster, drift by in a vague memory of museum scents and archways.

She imitated as best she could. Her weight redistributed to the left, grounded by her left foot; her hips swayed to the right, the right foot balanced on its ball. Her head tilted left, a concession to symmetry. They were waiting and still her arms hung, amputated below the elbow. Her lower back twisted into this arbitrary angle ached. She placed her left hand on her hip to ease the strain and left it there, the right hand dangling limp on her thigh. Their scratching signaled acceptance. Only the fingers of her right hand twitched. She slid her left foot out as imperceptibly as possible to make her legs a wider base of support, but was caught.

The silence was deafening. She squirmed again.

"Are you ready to start?" Aldrich asked for them all.

"Is this okay?" Her voice was in a cave.

"Yes, fine."

"Are you sure?" She would have liked to talk forever.

"Fine, fine."

Such a thin word, she thought, "fine," erasing mishaps with its magic marker. Did he really mean fine or was he just trying to shut her up? She began one hundred and one, one hundred and two, the endless count to six hundred. Already her right leg was beginning to shake, a little jiggle of muscle strain. She tensed the bicep but her attention made it worse. Like the game of "Green Light Yellow Light Red Light Stop" she had played as a child, she held this frozen movement until the leader allowed her to go.

An ache was building in knots in her calves. She tried to focus on the cigarette butt of the guy in the "Keep on Truckin'" T-shirt, as it burned toward his pad. Left on the pencil tray it would set fire to his art. She wanted to speak, to point, but her finger was suddenly unconnected to her commands, its tip dead to feeling. Perhaps if he turned the burning ash on her she would feel nothing as her skin scorched black, the stench rising in smoke. The cigarette was knocked accidentally to the floor. He squashed it with his boot heel and continued to sketch.

She had watched them all very carefully and there had been no sneers. She recorded for her experiment; they had not drawn back in contempt. And yet there was a dispassionate blankness in their peephole eyes that left her cautious

and afraid and unchanged in her feelings for her body. She could not say she liked herself any better for what they did.

"Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers How many pints of pickled peppers did Peter Piper pick?" She mouthed the tongue-teaser to herself but it lost its challenge in silence and the stiffness of her knees cut back into consciousness.

A weak pain began to throb in her lower back but outside she was wood or plastic or stone, something other than alive. They were passing with their dogs and newspapers and children on Sunday and she was a mannequin on display, a demonstrator of anatomy. Pressing down hard with her left foot, she tried to relax the rest of her body. The sweat running in rivulets down her sides was cold, felt some other color than the clear she saw. She could smell the last scents of this morning's powder floating away, replaced by musky strain.

"How much longer?" she asked out loud but the sound was so soft no one heard. Even Aldrich continued circling the room, unaware. Only the male in the far left corner had stopped his pencil and was staring with eyes anonymous behind his green shades. She returned his stare until the green melted all over his chin and the room began to slip away in paleness. She blinked to bring the edges back into focus, fighting off the vague numbness that was trying to take her body away from her; breathed as deeply as she might without external movement and held on. His pencil was thread-

ed between his fingers and, like her, he would not move. She accepted his challenge and the contest stretched on and on until it seemed forever and she would explode but then he left, with all of them. It was over for fifteen minutes and she was alone once again in a vacated art class.

She sat on her hands, decomposed, trying to feel her body. She pressed her sweaty fingers on the shape of her breasts, a thigh, but the touch was blocked by a foreignness. The quiet held her motionless like the air. As if through layers of a deep well, she heard the echoes of beginning conversation float through the window. A breeze ruffled the pages of drawings as she covered herself with the caftan.

Her experiment was failing. She imagined the write-up as kudos to her stamina and nothing else: "The subject shows a remarkable endurance to the task at hand. No particular difference in behavior could be discerned at the end of one and one-half hours; however, the subject continues to perform with agility and remarkable skill for a novice."

The breeze ruffled the pages again, hinting there was a second chance; a way of by-passing their stone faces and collecting all the data she needed without any of them. She hesitated before accepting, listened to make sure the silence of the hall held before walking almost giddily to the first easel to spy.

The smile fought hard to continue, planted so hopefully before she was massive in black, only the edges of the paper

gone uncolored. If it had been someone else she might have laughed at this absurd portrait, some mate of King Kong's struggling to be human.

But the second depiction was more of the same. The woman with the red hair, who smiled sometimes when she worked, had taken the model's body apart, penciled it randomly back on the page in cones and triangles and circles. A hand bloomed from her head, the elbow fractured at her breasts. Her nose, the only part of her body that was truly small and delicate, was drawn huge and crooked, twisting from the ear like a saxophone.

The blood rushed to Aziza's face but she forced herself to look at another self, hanging from the limb of the page, buzzard-like, mocking the viewers with huge eyes, shoulders hunched and gnarled by the anger of the line. A foot was discernible at the bottom; all the rest of her body lost in the scribbled violence.

One by one she felt the slaps, then again, one common slap that reduced her too foolish; her and her pathetically naive experiment so carefully planned to make her body loved. "A wasted effort," as Dr. Sneider might have predicted. Fifty response patterns. How did she expect to control even one?

She was fingering the buzzard on the pad when he walked in, the artist with the green sunglasses. He asked if she had seen all the drawings and, when she failed to reply, he

steered her toward his own, obviously proud.

"What do you think?" he asked.

She was forced to look up.

"Well?"

He had drawn only her face with a half-smile crowding the edges of her mouth, meticulously curled tendrils framing her jaw. It was a perfectly realistic face, beautiful, and for a moment she let herself be flattered.

"It's very nice."

"You really like it?"

He was expecting more than "nice," but she only found a voice for that cool, distracted compliment, for she suddenly realized it was all wrong: this experiment, her anxiety, everything. This portrait had nothing to do with her.

"It's nice," she repeated, but he no longer listened. He was wholly immersed in the brushing of stray charcoal from his creation; a creation she finally saw to be only his, as useless and as false to her as any buzzard or King Kong the others might have drawn. Even Picasso would have failed her, she knew, as she watched the artist in front of her blow the black dust into the air, step back to admire his own.

She left the classroom for the first time since she had entered it and walked down the hall to the water fountain. She drank the cool for a long time and when she returned, she was ready to begin.

She moved to meet Aldrich as he walked toward her in his wilted shirt. A touch of soreness pulled at her calves. She listened to him explain what he wanted from her during the next fifteen minutes. "Don't be embarrassed to say stop," he said and smiled, "I don't want you fainting on us."

The platform felt familiar now. The caftan slid over her head easily. She folded it in half and set it down beside her without hurrying. She began the pose that Aldrich had described, twisting her trunk 180 degrees, all the tension thrown onto her right leg, knees slightly bent, her left leg swung out to balance. It was the pose of an iceskater about to leap into the air and spin into a pirouette.

She could feel the balance blending into every seam of her body, every muscle joining in the hold. Her left leg swayed gently, settled into still. They began to sketch her stillness and she knew, without a word from any of them, this holding was beautiful.