What I do While I am Here

David Cates

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"What I Do While I Am Here"

by

David Cates

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Approved by

[Signatures]

Chairman, Board of Examiners

[Signature]

Dean, Graduate School

[Signature]

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"What I Do While I Am Here"

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Dakota Crossing

In a Scenicruiser rolling east through frozen North Dakota, a bus that began the journey in Billings, passed through Miles City at dusk and Glendive in the twilight, then over the state line toward toward Bismarck and Mandan and Jamestown under a new moon, Carl listened to the old woman in the seat behind him begin scolding her son. Her voice was raspy and loud, and she claimed she'd been duped into selling the farm, duped by real estate salesmen, movers, bankers, board of trade speculators, neighbors, cowboys and the government -- all of whom ganged up to push her off the farm -- and why hadn't the son given them a better fight?

"I've worked hard," Carl heard her say. "Every day of my life I've worked hard."

Out the window the prairie was covered by silver snow drifts. Occasionally a light from a farmstead like a star on the land would appear and then pass out of sight again. Since he'd left Minnesota two years ago, Carl had become a welder. He could seal seams in pipes, make metal unite or
split as he desired. He could follow the plan, lay a pretty bead, and he'd earned a good living. But he hoped he never got so old or dumb or sad to believe that hard work had any cosmic significance. Hard work could protect you for a while but it was ridiculous to expect it would redeem you.

Carl was on his way to an old friend's wedding in Minneapolis. Somehow Becky found out about the wedding and his trip east, and she'd written him a letter asking him to stop by the farm. Carl couldn't get over her nerve. It'd been two years and two months since she'd asked him to leave, almost two years exactly since that Christmas Eve he'd practically begged to come home. In her letter she asked if he remembered the winter; she meant their winter together, and of course he remembered. But so what? She said she didn't know how to make things go away, but she could promise a new try, if he had it in him, and she didn't mean that as a challenge because she could understand perfectly if he didn't or couldn't or had other commitments. She said the farm looked pretty much the same, especially in winter, but she'd changed a lot. She said she'd grown up, and had even become a pretty good farmer. Well, if not a good farmer, she'd at least kept the herd together. She always liked the cows, but had since come to like other things: uncertainty for example, and taking risks. She said she didn't know how to apologize in a letter, so would save that for what she hoped would be the luckiest day of her
Carl always loved winter, and during the year he lived on the Minnesota farm with Becky, winter was the only season they were really happy. They began renting the house late in the fall and quickly fixed the broken windows, put foam rubber around the door frames. They bought a wood stove and rigged a stove pipe through the living room ceiling and into their bedroom, where it came up through the floor and curved into a hanging brick chimney. At night Carl would fill the stove with wood until the hot fire and pipe made the bedroom warm enough to lie naked on top of the covers. As the fire died down they'd get under the blankets and by dawn they'd be wrapped tightly around each other, both facing the same direction, looking out the window across the valley, their breaths visible in the silver light. Carl used to say they were like two squirrels in their nest, surrounded by acres and acres of snow fields and black trees. He loved that notion. He used to imagine an infrared photograph of the farm taken from an airplane, all green space and in the middle two red dots pressed close together, their warm bodies.

Carl let his head lie back against the seat. He watched the white, flat, empty land moving past the bus window and could feel the cold close to the glass. He used to fantasize that Becky would ask him to come back. He used to think about seeing her again, what her face would look
like when she saw him arrive. But it was a dangerous habit. It dragged him down too much, sent him into spiraling funks, and he'd had to break it. Becky shouldn't have written him. He was almost embarrassed for her. What could they possibly talk about that wouldn't be painful? And the idea of making small talk, telling little lies about how nice the farm looked, how great his own life was . . .

The night he left the farm she was standing at the kitchen sink doing dishes and he stood behind her a few steps, looking over her shoulder out the window at the hillside turned orange and russet in the fading sunlight. The sky was heavy and gray. She'd had that look on her face through dinner; she was trying hard, smiling, but obviously unhappy. Carl had wanted more than anything for her to say that her affair with what's-his-name was over. He'd wanted to put it all behind before winter came, to do so as if it had never happened. He'd made clear all along that his love for Becky was steady if she'd just finish the affair. A few times already Becky'd said she was finished, and a few times already she'd broken her word. So when she had her hands in the sink that evening doing dishes, and Carl came up behind and gently put his hands on her shoulders and turned her and tried to give her a friendly kiss, and she pushed him, pushed him hard away from her -- well, it wasn't even much of a surprise.

Also her stupid tears, which came fast, and then her
words, spoken quietly, "Please leave. Please please please leave."

No. He'd put a lot of slow time between him and that evening, and he didn't see how he could go back now.

Carl heard the old woman behind him struggling, apparently to stand. The son was saying no, it's okay, stay here, but she was telling him to let her go, that the bus had driven right past the farm, and the driver didn't stop, and also, again, that she'd worked hard her entire life.

She stood in the aisle now, and stepped forward next to Carl. She lowered her gray globe of a head and squinted past him out the window. "Tell the driver to stop," she said over the seat to her son. "I can walk from here."

Her face was just inches from Carl's, so close he could smell her. It was that not-me, flesh smell of strangers, and it gave him the creeps. He looked at the shadows of her wrinkles, her moonlit forehead and eyes. He thought of all the days she'd worked hard and now like some loony she was seeing things.

"There it is," she said. "I can still see it."

"It looks pretty cold out there," Carl said. He saw snow drifts and prairie that spread all the way to the curve of the earth, but he saw no lights or farm.

She turned to him and smiled.

"Cold," Carl repeated.

She nodded. Then she told him how before her husband
died she'd been so frightened of winter nights, the silence, the emptiness, the cold like even God was gone . . . The things she'd think! But all of those things, now, well, she missed them. She said she realized now that only immortal things wandered on nights like this. Things like . . like--

"Like coyotes," Carl said, laughing.

She smiled again, the smile of a sane woman, but she raised her eyebrows and said, "Yes, coyotes."

The son stood up and took the old woman's elbow again, pulled her gently back to her seat. "We're going to Minneapolis, Mom," he said, his voice different now. It seemed clearer, more a boy's voice. He said, "You lived in Minneapolis once, remember?"

"Remember what?"

Carl closed his eyes. The old woman smell was gone, replaced by wet rubber from the floor and Fritos from across the aisle. Somehow it was comforting. He liked the bus. He was warm enough, and he liked being able to sit and think and not have to do anything. He had so little time like this, working six and sometimes seven days a week. No, he wouldn't let Becky's letter ruin the trip. His life had gone from miserable to okay since he left Minnesota, and he didn't believe he could stand a regression. He had good work for the days and he managed to date occasionally, keep at least a semblence of hope alive in the night. He didn't
ask much from women and women didn't ask much from him.

He'd wanted to marry Becky. He'd wanted children, too. Love had made him reckless with hope that winter, and as spring came and the redbtails soared over the greening valley, he remembered feeling for the first time in his life completely unafraid of the future. He'd felt strong and brave and lucky with Becky, stronger and braver and luckier than he'd felt before or since.

It'd been different for Becky. Maybe it was the light, the smell of open earth, the sense of new possibilities that came with the spring, but the nights spent in his arms began to scare her. She told him she couldn't have children until she'd grown up herself. He tried to make a joke of it, assuring her that she was plenty growed. She complained that he didn't seem to be worried about anything. He teased her, asked if he drank more coffee, made himself good and nervous in the morning, would she love him more? He wanted to start farming, was convinced they could make a go of it, despite the fact that farmers were going out of business all around them. Carl leased the pasture and outbuildings, fixed the fences, bought some beef cows and arranged with a neighbor to bale the hay on shares. Becky liked the idea of farming, but said every improvement Carl made on the farmstead began to feel like another link in her shackles. She was frightened, and she told him she felt too dependent. Her declaration of independence was to begin going out at
night alone.

It was summer by then, and the cows had calved and the grass grew well. The land was rich and the harvest filled the barn with hay. Becky planted a garden, and as summer progressed they ate lettuce, beans, tomatoes, and eventually squash. It could have been a good life, but there was something wrong. Often when he'd walk up the long driveway from the front pasture, Carl would see her stand from the garden and fake a smile. Shame had begun to replace doubt in her eyes. He knew what she was up to and he also knew she wasn't cut out for it. He'd lie in bed at night and listen to the bard owls and the whippoorwills and watch the highway for her car lights. He still felt hopeful. He kept telling himself that she wasn't breaking any promise, that things would get better, that she'd drop the guy she was seeing, that it was just a matter of time before she realized she wasn't built to keep this up for long.

He was right, but when the time came to drop somebody, it was Carl she dropped.

Behind him, Carl could hear the old woman struggling to stand up again. Her son said it's fifteen below zero but this time the old woman didn't stop at Carl's seat. She made her way to the front of the bus, and Carl could see her silhouette in front of the windshield, the lights on the highway, the white night outside. This was the hard worker
now who bent over the driver and pointed, jabbed. The driver looked back for help. The son got up and followed her. He said something to the driver and took his mother by the elbow, led her back toward Carl and their seats.

"What story?" the old woman was saying as they sat down again.

"How you met Dad in Minneapolis," the son said.

There was a pause. Carl lay his head back so his ear was in the crack between seats. The old woman clucked as she sat, then sighed. "Oh, that story."

"You told me you could run like a deer," the son said.

"I could," the woman said.

"But after high school you wanted to see the city so you moved to Minneapolis and got a job in the post office."

There was another pause.

"Dad came in one day," the son continued. "You sold him a stamp. He smiled and you looked away until he left the building. Then you watched him walk down the sidewalk. When he passed your window, he tipped his hat. Do you remember now?"

The old woman said nothing. Carl held still, listening, glad for the diversion.

"You kept your eyes on him to see where he went, and he crossed the street to the barber shop. And you thought, 'How can a handsome man like that get any handsomer?'

That's what you told me. And when you thought that, when
you heard yourself thinking that, you said you knew you were smitten."

It was quiet again. Carl listened. He heard the old woman blow her nose and then say, "He was handsome."

The son laughed. "Sure! And he came in the next day, too. You weren't certain, but he seemed to wait until you were ready to serve him. There were other lines, but he chose yours."

"He scooted himself over."

"He needed a stamp again. He was in correspondence with some people in North Dakota, but you didn't know that. He was trying to find a farm to buy and you didn't know that either. You thought he must have a sweetheart."

"I was heartbroken when I thought that. I tried not to."

"Well he never said anything! He came in every day for about a week or more, smiling, tipping his hat, and you told me it made your legs weak to see him."

"And then I got the letter."

"Yeah."

"With all the stamps he bought from me pasted on the envelope."

"Yeah, and you told me you didn't know if you could go to work the next day. I used to laugh at that, remember?"

The old woman didn't answer. Carl listened to her breathe. The son asked again if she remembered, and this
time she said yes, very quietly.

"That was in Minneapolis, Mom," the son said. "That's where we're going."

The bus groaned and hummed and rolled, and then the old woman laughed. "Well, tell me what happened!" she said. "Don't leave me all alone with that letter."

"Well," the son began, "it started with that line from that poem you always say: 'Hope is a thing with feathers.' It wasn't signed, but you knew who sent it. You waited all day for him to come in. You could barely concentrate on your work. You couldn't believe he would send you that letter and then not come in. You kept your eyes on the door; you watched the street out the window. When it was time to go home and he still hadn't come, you were . . . well, by now you were almost heartbroken, Mom. You walked out the back door. The poem kept coming into your head, but . . . you kept your eyes down. You felt ashamed and embarrassed and when you got to the corner, he stepped out."

"He scared me!"

"Sure. And he smiled like he smiled, and he tipped his hat, and right when you thought your legs would give out, he extended his elbow. He handed you a bouquet of flowers and he extended his elbow. You said you practically leaped for his elbow. You said you hoped no one saw the way you grabbed it. You thought you were going to fall. That's what you told me, Mom, and it used to make me laugh to think
about. And he said, he said, 'May I walk you home, Miss Carson?' as if he'd known you all your life, and you said, you said, well, you supposed it would be fine. You held the flowers and his elbow and you walked home."

Carl listened as the old woman seemed to be trying to catch her breath. "Say more," she finally said.

"You know the rest, Mom," the son said. "You told me the story a hundred times. He walked you home every day the whole summer and into the fall. You got to know each other, walking, talking, and sometimes he'd just have to stay and sit on the porch where you lived because you would both be talking so well and so much and getting to know each other. You couldn't just say good-bye at the door. He had to stay on the porch for a while. Sure. You'd sit together. Then the summer ended . . . You told me this, too, Mom. About when it got cold . . remember? You say it, Mom, please. You tell it."

"Well," she began, pausing a moment, breathing. "Well, then the weather turned chilly and the porch was too cold and I knew your father and I must very soon be married."

Carl kept his head where it was, sideways, ear between the seats. The bus hummed and rolled and sped like a bubble across the frozen plain. He thought of the road speeding past just a few feet below him, hard and deadly, but it seemed a million miles away. He felt safe and would have
loved to fall asleep right then, to drift off to the sound of the old woman's voice and not wake up until Minneapolis. But every mile brought him closer to the farm, to Becky, and he still didn't know what he'd do when the time came. Perhaps Becky was ready now, for him and for promises, but he didn't know if he was. He didn't know how he could start winging it again after learning the meticulous, self-centered habits lonely people learn in order to fill their days. He'd bent himself to get away from her and he didn't know how to go back without breaking. He tried to think of her lying in bed watching for lights on the highway, wondering if he was coming. He tried to remember her smell but couldn't. He couldn't even remember her face. For too long he'd disciplined himself not to pine, to keep her features out of his mind. He tried to remember her voice. The last time he heard it was Christmas Eve, two months after he left. He'd been to a strip joint, figured it was better than being alone and hoped it might make him laugh. But one of the strippers, despite the tinsle in her hair and candy cane in her g-string, was a such an artist with her body, so good with the way she moved that all Carl saw after a while was waste. Back at the apartment, he'd called Becky. She'd sounded halfway cheerful, said a snow storm had knocked the electricity out, so she was looking at a candle on the bedside table. She said the bedroom looked eerie, but the woodstove was keeping things warm. She said
the cows were fine and she was enjoying doing the chores every day. Carl said he wouldn't call her again, but needed to know what she was thinking. Becky couldn't answer except to say that her affair with Doug didn't mean anything, that it was over, but she was still very confused and didn't know if she was capable of loving anybody. During the silence that followed, Carl felt the last piece of his fool hope collapse and begin to dissolve in the pit of his stomach. He could feel Becky in the phone, cradled under his chin, against his ear and the side of his face. He could feel her in his hand as if she were there but he couldn't speak. Becky said she childishly wanted to wipe away all of the damage she'd done, with magic, with the blink of her eyes. She said she liked the sound of his voice, but could understand if he didn't want to keep talking. She said she knew he needed a promise, deserved a promise, but she didn't trust herself enough to make one. She said she was sorry. Carl hung up.

The old woman stood again and made her way slowly up the aisle past Carl to the front of the bus. Outside the wind was swirling across the flats and breaks, and when a gust hit the side of the bus Carl could feel it through the window. The old woman didn't stop at the driver. She continued down the steps to the front door where Carl and everybody else on the bus could hear her banging with her
"Let me out!" she yelled. "We're passing the farm!"

The bus driver glanced back over his shoulder but the son hadn't moved. He remained in his seat behind Carl. The old woman sat down in the stairwell.

"Let me out of this bus!" she yelled again.

Carl heard the son sigh and whisper something to himself, but he still didn't move, didn't get up. The passengers at the front were beginning to talk, look around. The bus barreled across what looked to Carl like the ocean floor or the moon, but what looked to this woman like home. That's what did it. That's what made him get up and walk to the front of the bus.

"It's cold outside," he said, extending his elbow.
"Even the coyotes are in their dens."

She stared as though she'd never seen him before. Another of the conspiring world he was. Then for some reason she smiled, as she had before, and she even took his elbow. "I saw my house," she said, standing up. "We passed the farm and now I'm going to have to walk all that way because this dumb driver won't stop."

"He can't let you out here," Carl said.
"Why not?"
"Because you'd freeze to death."

She hunched her shoulders and shivered. "I'm freezing to death in here," she said.
"Come on and sit down," Carl said. "Put your coat on if you're chilly. We're stopping in the next town."

This seemed to catch -- the next town. She held onto Carl's elbow and he helped her up the steps, down the aisle and back to her seat where her son was curled under a blanket and turned toward the window. She told Carl how she'd worked hard every day of her life, how the whole family had, and what more could those guys want from her? Carl told her he respected that, sure, fine, but that was a ridiculous reason to freeze to death in the snow. She told Carl he was a gentleman, and if they stopped in Amsterdam she would be just fine. She had friends in Amsterdam. She told him things had changed so much she barely recognized some towns, but Amsterdam, surely, and the farm . . . sitting in that draw past the creek . . . She put her hand on his shoulder, a light, easy touch, and guided him down to look out the window--but what can you see through a bus window at night when you're standing way back in the aisle?

"See it?" she asked, pointing.

All Carl saw was her face and his, and the staring face of her son in the glass, which was enough to see that in Dakota anyway, in this big-bellied land where they let the children cry, her child, at least, was crying. And she said things have changed so much that she barely recognized the . . . but the home farm -- see it? -- tucked under the knoll by the cottonwoods . . . and then the crosses up on that bench
where her husband and father and mother . . . and did he know it was also an Indian graveyard where the spirits crossed between worlds? Could he see it?

Carl was standing in a Scenicruser going sixty miles an hour across the plains, but for a short time, with the woman's hand on his shoulder, he no longer felt the motion. There was stillness, and quiet, and something else, something slow and rapturous, something he recognized as the beginnings of hope. What the hell. He did what he'd do that first winter along the construction ditch before giving it up as a dangerous habit. He was on a job outside Billings, and finding himself alone among the pink and yellow cottonwood he'd stand as still as possible and think of home and Becky, feel the cold on his face and in his nostrils, and try to use his mind to warm his skin. The ravens would call Hey! Hey! above his head, flying into twilight with chunks of pink insulation in their beaks, and he'd close his eyes and picture the hills of the farm rising green and voluptuous in their summer dress. The sun shone on the house and the curve of the creek, and then Becky stood up from the garden, lean limbs straightening. She turned and looked back at him without shame or expectation or doubt or anything at all except curiosity, maybe, and daring too in the cool blue of her eye, the cool blue of the sky blue cool of her--

The Indians, the old woman was saying, when she was a
girl she used to hear them yelp greetings at night -- all the way from the river crossing! And when they died out or moved on she'd hear their ghosts, or on cold nights like this sometimes a knock at the door. One lone hunter. He'd sleep by the fire and in the morning be gone. What a strange people! They'd see our lights, poor devils, she said; they had no other place to go.
Rocio steps off a bus at the corner and walks down the sidewalk with her chin high and her black hair bobbing back and forth across her bare shoulders. Her face and half-closed eyes are aimed my way, skyward. It's dusk and I'm standing on the flat roof of my hotel, elbows on the parapet, just a half-block away and four stories up, and I like the way I can see Rocio before Arturo does.

He stands in the cobbled alley directly below me, leans against the white wall and smooths his hair back with his hands. I imagine he's a ball-bearing salesman from Monterrey. He crosses one shiny black boot over the other, and then uncrosses it.

Rocio's about 18, pretty, and wears a black skirt and a hot-pink tank top. When she turns off the sidewalk into the alley, she slows immediately to an amble. She smiles as Arturo stands up straight to meet her. They take each others hands.

The eastern sky is a soft shade of lavender now, the same as the falling jacaranda petals that litter the alley under their feet. I get goosebumps on my neck, and also a strange sense of loathing that climbs from the pit of my
stomach to form a tightness at the back of my throat. I was helplessly in love with my wife, Patti, for a long time, and now, on my own, I'm fascinated by scenes like this. I seek them out. I savor the happy stupidity of lovers.

I came to Mexico five months ago, but for the six years before that I worked as a quality assurance specialist for a Midwest clothing retailer.

I operated a machine that rubbed a metal finger back and forth across a fabric swatch three hundred times a minute. When the machine stopped, I'd remove the fabric and look for signs of wear. I'd hold it under a magnifier and compare its texture to the five giant photographs hanging in a row on the wall of our lab. Each photo corresponded to a number on The Wear Scale. Although it was a job for a technician, a trained ape, I liked to think of myself as an interpreter of art.

The #5 photo was our standard of poor quality. It showed a weave badly damaged by friction, by wear; gray mountains and wide stretches of rocky plateaus formed what I called the Himalayas. On the contrary, the #1 photo was smooth, undamaged, the highest wear standard. It reminded me of a wide, gray plain, the Sea of Durability. And the #3 photo, our "good enough" company standard, showed a few scattered hills that -- when I squinted just right -- formed the profile of a breast and neck and face. I called it the
Naked Aztec Goddess.

So there is a kind of logic to why I came to Mexico after Patti left. It started as a vacation, which quickly stretched into a leave of absence. And now I'm pretty certain it's simply an absence. I have some savings. I live frugally. By my calculations, I can be here two more years.

When she left, Patti wrote a note that said she'd be relocating to Denver, which was a better hub, and therefore the logical base for her operations. Those were her words. Her business is called Professional Looks. She started it six years ago, but lately it's really taken off. She travels around the country giving Personal Appearance Seminars, complete with Color Cards, Tie & Shirt Matching Overlays, and a Basic Guiding Philosophy Index, which begins with the statement: Define Your Goals.

For a while I wanted to kill her. That was my goal. I wanted to kill her lover, and I wanted to kill myself. I imagined I was a CIA operative with a cyanide tablet in my pocket, an inspired assassin. I kept track of her from here, knew exactly where she was, and when, and I'd call her sometimes. She didn't mind. In fact, she often ended up disarming me, making me laugh with her description of something she'd seen at an airport recently, or a person she'd met at a meeting. I'd listen to her voice and imagine her face, her smell, the way she could make her eyes the
size of platters when she imitated a client's exaggerated sincerity.

But I quit calling. After a while even her cheerful voice couldn't charm me. And I began to savour my bitterness, my despair. I don't know where she is now. Houston, L.A., Charlotte -- she could be anywhere.

I should tell you here that I used to be able to make Patti laugh with my faces and animal noises, which I've been good at ever since I was a kid. In addition to singing "Blowin' In The Wind" at my high school class play, I also performed my "Menagerie of Sound," as it was billed. I can do tom turkeys, roosters, stallions, and bull roar. Patti would laugh so hard she'd bend over and hold her stomach. When she'd recover, she'd often be flushed and silly and we'd end up making love in an "out-of-the-norm" place, as she used to say, on the stairs, perhaps, or the shelf of the laundry chute.

"My little beastie," she used to whisper in my ear. "My little quality assurance animal."

This is true.

Below me, Arturo and Rocio move slowly as though to stretch this last moment of daytime. Fingertips on Rocio's neck, Arturo seems to lift her until she's on her tiptoes. Then he slides his fingers into her hair, holds her head in his hands. And finally, tilting her face to his, he bends to
kiss her.

Laundry hangs to dry on the rooftops across the city, endless rows of white flags flying. Past the dome of the ancient cathedral, the mountains make a gray outline against the pink and orange sky.

The world is incredibly beautiful, really, and I feel awful for the people passing on the sidewalk, indifferent to the lovers in the alley, tragically blind. Arturo has one arm wrapped around her shoulder, and one around the small of her back. He bends; she bends. Their bodies melt into one another, fuse against the wall. My heart pounds with anticipated pleasure, and my breath gets short. They both hang on and just when I think I might cry, just when I don't think I can stand it anymore, I do something terrible. My legs give at the knees and I duck behind my parapet and I unleash a tremendous turkey gobble. I can't help myself—it makes me feel better for what I know is to come. I am a miserable man. I listen as it echoes into the alley and back up off the front of my hotel.

When I dare to peek down again, Arturo and Rocio are gone.

I used to spend my late afternoons at the Budapest drinking tea. There's a table outside where I could watch the arm-in-arm, hip-to-hip strollers on the sidewalk across the street in the zocolo. I'd watch the couples pass and I'd
lose myself in wonder: Did they sleep well together in the comfort of love and promises? -- or poorly in the anxieties and torments of the flesh? Or maybe it was the other way around?

A woman used to stop by one of the public phones in the zócalo every evening and make a call. She'd stand straight, her weight on both feet, brow just a little burdened. I could see she had responsibilities. I imagined she was from a village, the oldest of ten sisters, sent here to work as a hotel maid, where she slept on a cot on the fourth floor in a room the size of a closet. After she made this call to her mother or father or uncle, or to anybody in the village with a phone, breathing reassurances that her virtue's intact, she'd return to her room where she'd boil an egg and share a quart of warm beer with a . . . with a tired ball-bearing salesman from Monterrey, perhaps?

I wonder if my virtue's intact. It's a strange thought for a modern man. I'm certain those who think of me never wonder about my virtue. They hope I'm not sick. They hope I haven't run out of money. They hope I haven't gone off the deep end and given up all plans for returning to the States. But virtue?

I went days without speaking to anyone except to order food or pay my hotel bill. I'd sit by myself, and when I saw a lone woman I avoided her eyes, afraid I'd be tempted into making a vow I had no intention of keeping. Afraid
she'd care. I imagined all women were my estranged lovers. I even made up their pet names for me, Panther or Stroodle. As ridiculous as it sounds, these names made me sad. You could say I was depressed. I tried to separate the feeling of having an erection from the feeling of wanting to screw. I had a sense they were discrete, some memory from childhood, perhaps, but the feelings had been dancing so long and furiously that I'd forgotten or lost track of the distinction.

After I'd finish my tea I crossed the street to the zocolo, where I took a seat on a cement bench and waited for dark.

The woman who made the phone call at the same time every evening would hang up just as I was sitting down. She looked pretty in her blue or yellow skirt, her plastic sandals, her red lipstick, face wide and strong. I decided that if she wasn't a 30-year-old virgin maid from a village, then she was on her way home to three or four children in the two rooms she shared with a mother-in-law who drank and a brother-in-law who never bathed. I imagined her husband worked up in Oregon or Idaho, and that she couldn't remember which.

She paused in front of me on the way to the street, tilted her head back and looked up. It would be dusk by then, the sky gold and scarlet and streaked with high clouds. And in the branches of the laurel trees, just above
our heads, the black birds crowded so thick that every limb, every twig would sag beneath their feathered weight. Just looking at them -- so many, so loud, so black against the gorgeous sky -- just looking at them made her squint and shake her head slowly with amazement.

This happened every evening. She looked up at the sky and the birds, and then she lowered her eyes and saw me. She'd shrug ever so slightly in deference to the mystery of it all, and smile as though pleased I was there again too.

What do you say to a gesture like that? What do you need to say? She saved me in those first weeks after I stopped calling Patti. Her smile and shrug was the only human contact I had.

On the rooftop of my hotel is a cement-block wash house about six feet wide by ten feet long. It has a door on the far side and an open window on my side. And inside, in addition to a circular stairway that leads down to the third-floor hallway of the hotel, is a mattress where the day maid sleeps. But she won't be here for a couple of hours or so. Lovers know these things.

I hear footsteps on the stairs, his boots, her flats. This is Phase Two of Rocio and Arturo's nightly courtship. It took him eight days to get her up here, but by now she's lighter than air. He holds her elbow and guides her.

But I can't see them. I crouch in the gravel under the wash house window. I imagine she's a balloon and he's
holding her string. He's a balloon, too, and their strings are tied. They float, steps light and steady, stomachs full of butterflies and bubbles.

I stretch my legs out in front of me. I'm comfortable, my back to the block wall. Arturo and Rocio are a few feet behind me now, inside the wash house, and after the initial sounds of their lying down, the bustle of the mattress, the removal of clothing, they're quiet. Occasionally I hear a whisper but can't make out the words. I sit and feel a coolness come on, the beginnings of night. I think of the crowd dispersing in the zocolo, back to the cots and alleys and tiled saloons, to the hotels and villages and houses with white adobe colonnades, to the sweat and germ and sperm of back-alley breeding. Tap-tap go the feet on the sidewalk down below, tap-tap. I smell the soap from the laundry and the exhaust from the street, and pretty soon, sure enough, I can smell something else.

At first it's just a hint, an after scent, something I detect in every other breath. But I wait and soon it wafts through the open window above my head and pours down over the wall, covers me.

During the final month of my marriage, I used to go upstairs after work and sit on our just-made bed. Before I changed my clothes I'd sit and toe the carpet, finger the fringe on the white bedspread, and breathe deeply through my nose. It was this same smell, this same rich and musky and
unmistakable smell.

The cement blocks feel warm through my shirt. A few lights pop on around the city and above me I can already see stars. Here, on the rooftop under the window -- for this moment, anyway -- I feel like a god who knows all: beauty, love, temptation, folly, betrayal, and, of course, hate. Behind me I hear Arturo's low moan, Rocio's musical sigh. I take a long, slow breath. The last I talked to Patti she told me she was pregnant, and her wedding is set for June.

After Patti began her affair with whomever it was, ravaging the afternoon air of our bedroom, I started telling myself there was more to marriage than sex, that just because Patti had a boyfriend didn't mean it was over. I developed a twitching eyelid and a stiff back, and told myself they were totally unrelated to anything.

But nevertheless there were mornings I looked at her face across the table eating toast and I savoured the thought of smacking her. As much as I tried not to, I imagined his face against her neck, smelling her smell, and her looking past his head to the ceiling, letting him.

I took pleasure in griping about the State of the House, the State of my Job, and the State of my Health. My skin felt too tight, I told her, my head too small, and I had an overdeveloped sense of smell. She didn't get it. She shook her head, chewed.
"For instance, I can smell the kind of jelly on your toast," I said.

"Yeah?" She smiled, licked her lips.

"And I can smell your hair from here."

"Gross." She wrinkled her nose. Her hair was light brown and cut stylishly short and she quickly touched it. "It's dirty."

Behind her, out the window of our kitchen, children were passing in groups on their way to school. "I can smell what kind of laundry soap those kids' mothers use."

She laughed. She had a wide mouth, eyes that showed her pleasure, which infuriated me. Didn't she feel guilty? Didn't she feel ashamed? How dare she laugh and smile as though she could be happy. "From here?"

I nodded. "I can smell when those kids' mothers are having their periods."

She was done with her toast and standing up now, turned slightly toward the window so I couldn't see her face. But I could tell by the tilt of her head she was thinking, wondering. It's not that I didn't want to forgive her. I did. But I wanted her to suffer. I wanted her to suffer terribly and she looked just too good in her coordinated colors, her better-than-ever shape.

"Poor you," she said, without turning.

She left the kitchen without letting me see her face and I knew I'd missed a chance. In some weird way she was
still trying to love me. I could feel it. And I knew I loved her. But I didn't know what to do or how to do it, and after she left the room all I felt was sorry.

At work that day I stared long and hard at the Naked Aztec Goddess. And that afternoon I advanced a workplace flirtation with Cindy, a chubby, curly-haired brunette with thick, red lips.

Cindy wore black all the time, which made her pale skin look even paler. But she had a certain give to her movements, an appealing curve to the line of lips. I asked her what she was doing after work.

"Nothing," she said.

I imagined stripping her and making her stand under a bright light, circling her, poking her shoulder, hips, belly with my finger, checking structure.

"A drink?" I suggested.

It was a sham, of course. But she was accepting with a nod.

"Six-thirty?"

Nod, nod. She was an interesting woman, fun to talk to. She'd been in a religious cult of some sort and could tell a great story, but at the moment I could barely look at her.

We had the ritual refreshments at a bar. She wanted to talk about her family and I listened for as long as I could stand it and then I said, "Do you ever feel as though you're
in the belly of a beast?"
  "How do you mean?" She was confused, I could see.
  "It's got advantages," I continued. "I don't deny that. I mean, that's why we're here, right? We've got health insurance and time off with pay for funerals!"
  "Oh," she said, flustered, looking down to her drink. "You mean work?"
  I could see her beneath me in bed, feel the way I'd melt into her slow, full-lipped mouth, the way her eyes wouldn't stop me if I made her do things that were slightly painful.
  "Did you know we're insured for fifteen grand if we die," I said, "but double that amount if we're dismembered?"
  She looked at me for a long time, and then reached to my hand and covered it with hers.
  "If I happen to drop dead in your presence," I said, "quickly cut--"
  She touched my mouth with her fingers. "Hush," she said. "Just wait for me to go to the ladies' room, okay?"
  I nodded this time.
  Then she said, "And promise to take me to bed."
  I nodded again. I felt my mouth trying to smile against her fingers. My face was tense and full of sour blood. Poor Cindy. Poor me. She walked away and disappeared around the corner. As soon as I heard the bathroom door close, I left the bar and drove home.
I couldn't sleep. I got up from the hot bedroom and went downstairs in the dark, lay naked in the middle of the living room under the ceiling fan and thought of Patti upstairs. I wondered how anybody could know anything about anybody. I'd always wanted a daughter.

Patti didn't want children. She said it had nothing to do with me, that she'd figured out long ago that she'd be a lousy mother. I told her no, she'd be great, because I knew she would be.

I stared at the ceiling fan and indulged in what had become a common fantasy. I was part of a father-daughter folk singing team that traveled from town to town in a mini-van, and during the day Patti and I would teach our daughter(s) school lessons, and at night we'd sing. Everybody would say how lucky I was to have such a daughter, and everybody would say how lucky she was to have such a father, and after our shows people would walk away shaking their heads and murmuring how lucky they'd been to hear us sing. After we'd pass through your town, where we'd be booked two nights at a place called The Pyramids (dining and cocktails in an Egyptian atmosphere) seventy-eight percent more of you would believe in both Grace and The Essential Tragedy of Life, two concepts that sometimes inhibit happiness yet can certainly encourage ecstasy. People would say it's our gift.

Then I heard Patti coming down the stairs. She crossed
the living room and stepped over my naked, folk-singer body and disappeared without a word into the bathroom. The light came on under the door and I pictured her hunched over herself, slipping her diaphragm in (or out!), and then re-emerging from the bathroom. She'd cross the kitchen to the living room and stand over me, straddling me. I'd look up past her body to her eyes, and I'd forgive her. Just like that, I'd forgive her! She'd see me, and gratitude would bend her legs. She'd lower herself, slowly, gently, until her knees were on the floor on either side of me and I could feel her weight, her warmth. It would be easy, I thought. It would be painless.

But the toilet flushed and then the door opened, the light flooding the kitchen for a second before she turned it off. Patti crossed the linoleum to the carpet, and without a word, she stepped back over me on her way to the stairs.

I read a story once about a woman who fell in love with a man after hearing him croon old-pain songs to himself, this-hard-kind-of-life songs. So I'd started singing poor, poor, lonesome me on my way to the shower each morning, while getting dressed for work, while paging through a magazine on the kitchen table. If I could be one of those guys with a sad ol' life and sad ol' eyes, then maybe Patti would forget her afternoon lover and come swooning back. Singing made me feel darker, deeper -- it always had. But after a few weeks of listening, Patti called me a
sentimental idiot. She said if I didn't stop croaking that dumb song she'd strangle the cat.

As I lay naked in the middle of my living room that night, I heard Patti upstairs, walking across the bedroom floor to her aromatic bed. I heard the sad song of the bed springs as she lay down again. I could feel the cool floor drafts, smell camomile and honeysuckle through the screen. There was plenty a guy could know, really, if he paid attention. He could know when he was beginning to go crazy, could feel it coming on like a cold. And if he kept his eyes open, he could know when his wife was getting ready to leave him.

The sound comes from behind me, inside the wash house: a quiet, distant moaning that slowly gets louder until soon it seems suspended just above me. It raises shivers on my neck.

My back is still against the cement-block wall of the wash house, and around me dusk has progressed to night, the sky lit by the sickly yellow of streetlamps. The few stars that dared appear are now gone.

The sound is haunting, and fills me with an immense dread. It makes my heart race and I twist and pull my feet under me, reach above my head to the window sill. I want to stare down at them in judgment. I want to revel in their displeasure. It's my right after the way Patti treated me.
I've never dared before, but tonight I'm brave; I'm shameless; I'm possessed. I raise myself slowly toward the sound. I look through the window.

The mattress lies on the floor of the wash house directly below me, and what I see first are Arturo's bare legs stretching away, a few feet beneath me, in shadow. I raise myself higher, push my head under the open sash. The odd gleam of the streetlight behind me colors Arturo's buttocks and back silver.

The sound, the moaning, rises from inside Arturo, and just when it seems to have gone on forever, it breaks, and mysterious waves begin to move down his back. For a few moments he's silent. What I hear next are sobs.

I let my eyes adjust to the new light for a moment, and then I lift myself higher, push my head farther through the window. I'm looking straight down now. I can see Arturo's neck and the back of his head. And over his shoulder, looking over him, looking back at me, are Rocio's eyes.

My knees weaken but I hang on to the window sill with my hands. I'm frozen where I am, unable to move. Rocio doesn't flinch, doesn't blink, doesn't even look surprised. Her eyes narrow and then grow wide again. Maybe she doesn't see me? She's four feet directly below me, lying on her back under Arturo. She strokes his hair, keeps her eyes open, and presses Arturo's face tighter against her neck and shoulder.
No. She doesn't see me. She couldn't. If she did, she'd put a stop to it. She'd feel embarrassed, ashamed, terrified. She'd scream. But then a terrible doubt hits me. Maybe she doesn't care? Maybe she's known all along I was here. Maybe she saw me on the roof the very first time she got off the bus, and every evening since then. Maybe she's been waiting.

I look for answers in her eyes. They narrow -- in conspiracy? -- and then grow wide again. They are shiny shields, mirrors turned toward the intruder, me. The tender way she holds Arturo, her fingers disappearing in his black hair above his ear disturbs me, makes me think of something I've tried to forget. The pose, the silver light and shadow across their bodies remind me of a motel room in Oklahoma City. It was Patti's first business trip, and we spent the evening in a bar. We danced all night, and laughed, and I let my hands slide anywhere, still amazed she'd let me. We'd met just six weeks ago and were riding a comet.

In the room she held my head and kissed me hard. She dug her fingers into my face and neck, and pulled me down with such force I knew it had to hurt. Somehow her passion made me feel inadequate, as though I wasn't enough, could never be. She was needy; I was desperate. When we finished I reached for reassurance but she rolled away, curled into herself as though wounded. She was vulnerable and I knew it, and her nakedness suddenly terrified me.
I waited for a while and then rested my foot on the small of her back, rocked her gently, watched the mattress give and spring back. Light from the street spilled under the drapes and across the sheets to color her skin silver. She didn't stir, so I pushed harder, awed by the beauty of her shape, the curve of her waist, the perfect swell of her hips, and even more by the fact that she loved me. Did she? I pushed harder, and still she didn't wake. I was a scientist discovering things. Did she love me? I watched as her body reached the edge of the bed. I paused, breathed, and then straightened my leg.

When she hit the floor there was a loud bump and she immediately started to cry.

I felt horrible. I leaped after her and knelt on the floor, picked up her head and whispered her name. After a while I realized she wasn't crying from pain. It was something else. She said she couldn't believe how patient I was, and kind, and how she was such a pig sometimes with her moods, and she was trying to start a new life with me, a new life for us, but -- look at her! -- she'd got so drunk she'd fallen out of bed.

I knelt on the motel room floor holding her head, stroking her pink temple with my thumb. Her hair smelled like smoke, her breath minty and sweet.

"Marry me, Patti," I said. "Will you marry me?"

But she was already pulling me down, kissing my face,
wetting my cheeks and neck with her tears.

Rocio blinks and then I blink. Her body extends away from me, beneath Arturo's. And her head, I notice now, is propped up slightly, her clothes crumpled into a pillow, and she has to look up over her brows to see me. Yes...she must see me. I'm convinced of it, yet I can't move. I see no fear in her eyes, or even worse, more appalling, I see no shame.

We are we, and you are you, her eyes seem to say. She strokes Arturo's temple, dangles a finger along his silver spine, and blinks again. I believe she's in love with Arturo. I believe...I believe she's forgiving me.

I lower myself from the window and Arturo's sobs soften and grow quiet. The wall feels rough against my cheek. Around me are a thousand rooftops and above the relentless pull of sky. I think of Patti. I think of Patti in love with her lover, and I think of her happy.

From inside the wash-house I can hear the low, soothing sound of Rocio's voice. She's humming something extraordinarily ancient and it takes my breath away. I close my eyes and wonder what I might look like to Rocio when she steps off the bus each evening, when she wraps her arms around her lover in the alley: too much yellow hair, a loose red campshirt, top-heavy, dumb.

I am on my knees now, and I can feel the gravel
pressing through my pants. My hands are shaking but it's all a mystery to me, this grief, this breathing protraction of death. I am 35 years old. I am four thousand miles from anybody who knows me, and I have only the slightest idea what forgiveness is.

This is what I am.

I wonder what I can be?
San Juan Del Sur

Paquita has told me about a time after the wind and the sun and the surf have mixed violently in the afternoon, and the dust settles in this beach town, and the last of the contras have taken to the water and the gringos packed their stylish peasant clothing and hauled over the hill to the next country, when her white hotel with blue shutters will stand empty and washed in sunlight. She has told me about the coming of a moment when things will be done without anybody doing them, said without being spoken, and understood. First the cows and pigs and chickens will stand still on the beach, look up past the shiny green palm fronds, then out to sea -- something in the air, a lightness, a sound. The old woman will pause at her window; the boy will stop chucking rocks against the mud wall; the drunk will set down his drink. The man on the oxcart, the woman on horseback, and the girl sweeping dust along the curb will hold still, listening. It will be like the sound of butterflies at sea, she says, the sound of delicate wings thousands of miles away. It will be the sound of peace. These are the kinds of things she tells me.

But I should tell you about the first time I met her. It was the evening of my first day in town and I was eating
dinner at a little beachside restaurant -- rough wood frame, open on three sides to the sand and the sea. It was a place where men got drunk and talked louder and louder, the ubiquitous brown, round-bellied men of Central America's beach towns who own nothing but plastic sandals and shorts, maybe a wristwatch, and subsist on little but fish and liquor.

Paquita approached my table and sat down across from me. She had about twenty plastic bracelets on each wrist, and a tilt to her head that wasn't quite right. I'd seen her running on the beach that afternoon, back and forth, wearing the same long, black dress she wore now, carrying the same white patent-leather purse. Every fifty feet or so she'd stop and shout at a pig or chicken when one was near, or at something only she could see when one was not.

She noticed me writing, she said, resting her elbows on the table and staring at a place just above my eyes, and she had to tell me: her husband was a poet.

Years ago she'd sit with him here at this same beachside bar in the evenings after he got off work at the dock. They'd drink beer as the sun went down and he'd write poems. One day a drunk soldier -- this was during Somoza, she said, when the soldiers always drank -- one day a drunk soldier took her husband's notebook and thought it very funny to read aloud to the other soldiers at the bar.

Three times -- she held up three fingers -- three times
he asked for it back before he said to her, con permiso, with your permission, and then stood up and raised his chair high in the air and let it drop on the soldier's head.

The laughing stopped, she told me, and her husband stooped to remove the notebook from the hands of the fallen soldier. Again he said, con permiso, with your permission, but as he lowered himself back into a new chair, another soldier shot him.

Paquita hesitated then, squinted, and her eyes sparkled with the memory of something untouchable, something close and untouchable, which made me remember, too, her madness.
It is what the Costa Ricans call a soda; it's a lunch or snack bar, a soda fountain, a place to hang out. Glass jars filled with cookies, hard candies and homemade coconut molasses bars line the edge of the counter. Overhead a ceiling fan turns slowly, clicks softly with each revolution, marking time, stirring little but the tassels on the plastic and nylon Chinese lantern hanging from its post.

I sit at one of the three wooden tables painted pink, the one next to the window. The window is a wire screen and the breeze feels good through my moist shirt. I am here to escape the heat, and to try to catch some time before the bus leaves, before we leave.

Puntarenas is a hot, muggy town. Hotter even, perhaps, than Limon. In the evening the cement walls of buildings, the sidewalk, the streets and sand radiate heat like cast-iron stoves. Butter turns to soup in the cupboard, and drying yourself is impossible after a shower or dip in the ocean. When the water is gone, the sweat comes.

On the wall of the cafe hangs a photo calendar opened to March 1978, although that month -- and year -- have passed. Someone must like the picture: a smiling Indian
peasant and a burro posed in front of a candy-green volcano beneath a marvelous blue sky. The picture was probably taken in El Salvador, Nicaragua or Guatemala, where volcanoes seem to rise suddenly around bends in the highway like huge papier-mache models, inverted megaphones spray-painted green. The photograph has a sterile quality accomplished by careful posing and touch-up. The burro is groomed, its tail and mane braided for show. The Indian has a mouthful of snow-white teeth. He has no pores.

The thing to do is simply to chuck the hot hours of the day. Above all don't fight it. Don't fight the heat, and don't fight each other when it's hot. That is a good theory and Susan and I tried, but we failed as often as we succeeded, and sometimes more often.

Tacked to the wall, among various commercial advertisements for tortillas, flashlight batteries and cheese puffs, is a handbill that reads, Nicaragua venzo, El Salvador vencera: Nicaragua overcame, El Salvador shall overcome. And another that reads, Patria libre o morir: Free country or death.

From behind the curtain next to the counter, I hear a groan, and then the flip-flop of plastic thongs shuffling toward me. A hand pushes the curtain aside and a woman, who looks about thirty, steps to my table. She appears part Chinese, but if not for the name of the cafe, I might suppose that her black hair is pulling so tightly back into
a bun that it stretches the skin around her eyes. Her face is pale and sleepy, her mouth heavy, and her body full. She reaches into her pocket and pulls out a small notebook.

"What do you want?" she asks in Spanish, her thick lips hardly moving.

"Una taza de cafe."

"Cafe?"

"Yes."

"With cream?"

"Yes."

She turns slowly, her body relaxed. Her face, which has not changed expression since she entered, smiles a nice smile.

"Not from around here?"

"No."

"Where then?"

"The United States," I say. "But I've lived here for a while. Up by the stadium."

"By the stadium?" Her eyebrows rise. "Did you hear what happened near there?"

"Yes."

"Last night?"

I nod.

"What a shame."

She turns and shuffles back behind the counter, lets
out a deep sigh. The fan on the ceiling clicks in a steady rhythm. "Oh, but it is pretty to travel, no?"

When I don't answer right away, she repeats, "It's pretty."

"Yes," I say.

A moment later she brings my coffee, and asks, "Did you know her?"

"They lived next door."

"Pobrecita." Her face is genuinely sad.

"But I didn't know them very well."

"Pobrecita," she says again, as if she could cry if she wanted.

"Yes."

"I used to think they . . . I used to think now there is . . ." She turns away, shaking her head. "Sometimes people are such pigs it makes my head ache."

Most married couples in Costa Rica don't go strolling together, and most men leave their wives at home and go out with other men, or women. But Carlos always went walking with Gabriela, and whenever I'd seen them at the beach, Carlos and Gabriela were arm-in-arm. Sometimes in the evening, through the wall, Susan and I could hear Carlos singing one of a number of the same awful ranchero love songs. But in recent weeks Gabriela could be seen slipping through the backyard gate more frequently, carrying her blue-and-yellow plastic shopping back on her way to Eduardo
Lorenzo's butcher shop.

Eduardo had a large apartment behind his shop, with a private porch overlooking the estuary. Sometimes I'd stop by in the afternoons to pass the time. The air was ripe but cool. Eduardo was my friend and he liked to talk about Spain, where he was from, and Miami, where he wanted to go for Easter. Once Gabriela came in when I was there. She smiled politely at him but said nothing. She wore her hair pulled up in a bun, exposing a thin, straight neck. She had a fine body that there in the butcher shop seemed even more beautiful and vulnerable than I'd remembered it. Gabriela paused among the meats hanging from the ceiling in strips or lying in partially cut sections on the table. Eduardo cleared his throat and grunted, waved his hand past his face to scatter the flies. He spoke without taking his eyes off the meat he was cutting.

"The usual, senora?" he asked in Spanish.

"Yes."

"Do you know my friend Terry?"

Gabriela looked at me when she spoke, her dark, unblinking eyes showing more than her solitude: she knew mine. "Yes," she finally said, touching her hair once or twice as she made her decision. "We are neighbors. I know him very well." Then she turned and casually entered the apartment.
Eduardo carefully cut and weighed her order, wrapped it, set his knife down and meticulously washed his face and hands. "She trusts you," he said to me, smiling, as he scrubbed away the wet and dried blood from under his nails and between his stubby fingers. "You must have that kind of face." He looked in the mirror and began to hum, combed his hair and pressed back his gray mustache with a clean thumb and forefinger. "She is something, don't you think?"

I said yes, I'd always thought so.

Eduardo splashed more water onto his face, dried it, and once again went to work on his mustache. In his mid-fifties, Eduardo was a solid, broadly built man with thick arms and legs. He waddled when he walked.

"These women . . . This woman . . . one feels a certain . . ." Eduardo searched for the words.

"She goes shopping often," I said, laughing to show I meant no offense.

Eduardo held out his big hand and squeezed it into a fist. "She says I have her heart like this. Funny how that works. But you know this -- of course you do." Eduardo was talking to the mirror now. "Let me tell you something though. No matter how strong you are, she has to . . . And too many times they . . ." He picked up a towel and began to dry his comb. "Look, women don't fool men, and men don't fool women. Everybody fools himself! What use have I for a woman's heart?" He let the towel dangle from his wrist,
laughed and nodded toward the door of his apartment. "And yet what chance have I when she presents herself like this?"

"Not much," I said, smiling.

He shook his head. "Have you ever been to La Lucha, Terry?"

"No."

"There are trout there. You North Americans love to write about trucha. Maybe because it sounds like truth-a!" He laughed. "No, it is a literary fish with you, right?"

I smiled and told him yes.

"La Lucha is high in La Talamanca. The pasture is so soft it swallows your foot like a sponge. We will go. I'll shoot a wild boar and you catch some literary fish with small pieces of cheese. That's good stuff, Terry. Trucha en La Lucha. Very few lies."

Eduardo dried his hands once again and draped the towel over the sink. "You know, Terry, don Pepe is from La Lucha. He is a fighter and a great democrat. A Costa Rican hero. You can see his son driving a car very fast in the streets of the village and leaving rubber marks on the cement. His son is crazy, Terry. He reminds me of you. He needs to fight the fascists like his papa did. Everyone needs to fight the fascists. It gives one meaning and dignity!"

Eduardo untied his apron strings, laughed out loud. "This is it, Terry, write this down. This is the truth. When I was fourteen Franco's pigs were in Madrid. The
little sense that I have in my life . . . " Eduardo Lorenzo hung his apron on a wall hook, paused before following his lover through the door. "You see, Terry, I did fight the fascist sons of whores."

There are other truths, too, things like the rain and the heat and the cockroaches, the language and the bicycles and the smell of culantro and chile dulce, the soccer games on the beach and the drunks sleeping all day on the sidewalk in the Zona Roja smelling of fish and urine and guarro, cane liquor. Ideas . . ideas can be forgotten for the time being. That's okay because they develop and mature and come back better, probably. But when the country slips away with its sounds and smells, especially the smells, it is lost for good and you can never remember it well unless you take special notice the first time. Don't forget the chocolate-brown babies, or the brilliant midday ocean, or the sadness you felt one morning when suddenly you realized that most of the bright and playful young girls on the sidewalk will grow up to be fat, dull-eyed women looking through the same glassless windows as their mothers. Everybody's waiting for something. Some people wait for death and some for love, but another truth is that only death stops the waiting.

In The Soda Castro Ling, the woman sits down on a stool behind the counter, face animated now, smiling, cigarette in
hand. "A quien escribe?" she asks. To whom do you write?

"To no one," I answer.

"To your girlfriend or your wife?"

I tell her to no one again.

She giggles like a girl, waves her hand. "Mentiras," she says. Lies. She thinks I am flirting.

"No," I say, "It's true."

"I don't believe you don't have a girlfriend or a wife, or both!" She opens her eyes wide on the last word.

I'm curious. "Why not?"

"Because," she says, taking a drag on her cigarette and leaning back on her stool. "Because you are a man."

"Very good!" I laugh. "That's true, too. And I do have a wife. She's in the bus station, so I'm not writing to her. I'm writing--"

"To your novia?" She leans forward now, smiling teasingly.

"I'm writing to myself."

"Of course," she says. She glances away for a moment, but then looks back. "What do you write about?"

"A lot of things," I say.

Just then the bell on the door clangs and a fat boy, about thirteen, dirty and sweaty, and with a soccer ball tucked under his arm, advances into the cafe. He looks a little Chinese, too. He greets the woman as his mother, and heads for the refrigerator behind the counter.
The woman leans conspiratorially over the counter, whispers like it's our secret. "But what mostly?" she asks me.

"Mostly sex," I say out loud.

"Ai no!" she gasps, looking away embarrassed, laughing, waving her hand. "And to yourself!"

On the way down we took trains and trucks, taxis, boats and buses. Years before, when traveling by myself, I flew over the Sahara Desert and felt I'd missed something. I'd been told I was saving two weeks by flying, but don't remember what I was saving it for. Two weeks would be a nice thing to have, if you could have it. Since then though, I'd learned that that was just the way people talked, and all you could presume to have was the moment -- but to have that you had to be quick, quick but unrushed, and lucky. So if you had the moment and hope, you were very lucky.

We started in the train from Mexico City. We sat together sipping beer in our little compartment with a couch and a sink and a toilet and a fold-down bed that came out of the wall. For some reason this luxury was cheap for us. This was our honeymoon and only the beer seemed expensive. We had yet to pass through the mountains and jungles, through wide valleys marked by broad-crowned trees and villages with unpronounceable names, past shacks, rocks,
sticks, girls staring and pointing, boys throwing stones at
the passing train, clack-clack, lying in our berth together,
perspiring. We drank two beers apiece and held hands with
the fan on in the dark, watching the city and the hills
light up with nighttime.

Late one night the train stopped and we were told to
round
up our things and transfer to another train up ahead on the
other side of an obstruction. Through a moonlit field of
maguey, one line of people passed another, northbound and
southbound, blankets, paper bags and cardboard boxes tied
with string propped on shoulders or heads or hanging from
the hands of old people. It was like a great migration, the
exodus of Jews from Russia. The Great Train Swap. Children
strayed from their parents, chasing back and forth in the
rows of cactus. Shouts went up, Paquito!Jose!Esmeralda!
Vengan ya! along the length of twisted steel into the dark
air made thick with diesel oil, damp earth, rust and human
sweat. The derailed train looked comical and unnatural the
way an elephant would look comical and unnatural rolled over
on its side, sleeping.

In the cays of Belize a lobster meal cost two dollars,
three with rum. We snorkeled near the reef in water as
clear as the Blackfoot, but even more beautiful because it
was blue-green and deep, and you could dive down as far as
you dared. I'd been uneasy in the ocean because I didn't
know anything about the fish or coral, and when I swam out on the far side of the reef the bottom dropped off much deeper than I could see. The guide, Tony, a man with skin as brown and creased as saddle leather, told us there were sharks on the far side of the reef, but also other fish you could not see on the near side. He said it was wonderful to swim over there because there were beautiful things to see but also many dangers. Fear made me want to take off my mask and swim without looking, but that wouldn't make the danger go away, and it would be a lousy waste to have come so far only to be afraid to look. As I dived the ocean got colder and darker, and the fish were bigger or perhaps I felt smaller, and everything got so quiet I could hear my own heartbeat. The ocean bottom dropped away into an indigo darkness, and hanging there between the surface and the depths, I felt as vulnerable as I'd ever felt before. I tried to make myself stay down as long as I could hold my breath, but I cheated and came up sooner. I burst through the surface feeling like a fool and a coward, and quickly swam back to the near side of the reef.

But later, when Susan asked how it was I lied and said wonderful.

Going south from Stann Creek, the lorry dropped us off in the jungle where two red roads crossed: a major intersection marked by two broken, illegible signs. The bus was supposed to be coming soon, but it didn't arrive until
two hours and one driving rainstorm had passed. I did push-ups and handstands in the mud while Susan stayed under a tree with the suitcases and typewriter and books, which were covered by both our ponchos. We sang "Singing in the Rain" because, after all, it seemed appropriate and also because it was one of the few songs we both knew.

Steam rising off our clothes, we rode the rest of the way to Punta Gorda in the bus aisle because there were no vacant seats left. The bus got two flat tires in three hours of road time, which wasn't surprising considering the road was clay and rock and the bus drove right through, not over, the rocky creeks.

Costa Rica was our destination and we felt it more and more as we approached. I had been anxious to work and Susan was anxious to find out what this Costa Rica was like and what she would do, and both of us were anxious to have the good feeling of knowing just exactly where we would sleep at night and what we could afford to put in the cupboard for breakfast.

We dug in our heels when we got here. I worked well and the loneliness of the first months didn't matter because I was forging a discipline. With time the discipline became habit, and that was easier. The loneliness let up and we went to the beach again, this time with new friends. The mornings were cool and bright and getting up became easier
and easier, and I made progress quickly the way progress always comes quickly to beginners. We lived just three blocks from the ocean and the movie theaters were close and inexpensive. Susan got a job, and I had my job and there were places to walk after I finished working and cafes and kiosks with comfortable chairs where I could go to read.

But things happen. Time requires that they do. After a while I wasn't writing as much or as well, and I hadn't been a writer long enough to know that progress can't be measured by weeks or months or pages, or numbers of anything. I knew I had to be patient, but patience is hard when you don't even know what you are waiting for, and patience is not patience if you are always asking "How long?" or "When?"

Before we were married, I believed, Susan loved me for my hunger. But as she lived with hunger's daily manifestations -- moodiness, manic outbursts of enthusiasm and sullen periods of despondency -- it became obvious she'd come to resent the very thing she'd fallen for. I could see it in her eyes, in the bitter way she looked sometimes when we argued. She was disappointed because somehow she'd always believed the lies about fairy-tale princes. Maybe she thought I was one -- and maybe I'd helped her to believe it. She thought "hungry" was just another adjective listed before the names of achievers, like "enthusiastic" or "diligent." She hadn't realized it was a way of living, an
urgency in waking, and had very little to do with "achieving." Susan was disappointed in arguments and tenacious doubts, and how hot it got in paradise. The cockroaches became my fault, and so did the leaky plumbing, and the refrigerator that never worked. And if a man scowled at her in the market, that too became my fault. The bitterness intensified and sharpened its sting. More and more frequently she spun away from my groping, indeterminate reach and over-sentimental embraces. Was I reaching for her, she'd ask, or just anything in which to lose myself. My fault was that I truly couldn't answer. I only knew I felt betrayed.

For a while then, I tried to forget myself in reading. I body-surfed and even drank with the muchachos sometimes, even though I couldn't afford it and felt as though I was playing out a role, living in some Jimmy Buffett song. I was disappointed, because looking at the sea didn't put me in a trance anymore, and, in fact, many of the things that had appealed to me at first were now boring. Susan told me I should write about her, and if I couldn't write about her I should be able to write about sex, which seemed to be the one subject from which my imagination hadn't fled. But when it was hot, when February and March and April came along again, and the air and people were still and the sun shone straight down and the mangos came and went, I spent my afternoons in my room by myself watching the ants make a
highway on the wall.

Susan stood at the bedroom door. She told me the ants would carry me away someday, as they carried off the baby in Garcia's novel. The last generation carried away by the ants. That was good writing, I'd thought, and I wanted to write like that someday, or like Tolstoy when he wasn't preaching. I thought I would be the future still seemed to much longer than the past even though now, at least, I had some past. Left foot in front of right will get you from here to Timbuktu in two hundred and ninety-one days provided you could walk on the damn ocean. I figured it out once. But writing was different in that writing was walking for the sake of walking, with no such ultimate destination as Timbuktu. Everything a writer writes, or has written, is training for what he will write next, I'd read somewhere, and the training never stops and the destination keeps moving ahead, until no matter how good or successful a book or story might be nothing matters except what yet remains unwritten. Because, after all, that is what he trains for, has trained for: the yet-to-be-written. It general it was true, sure. But in the particular it was a self-defeating lie.

"Did you hear me?" Susan had asked. She was angry, I could see.

"What?" I lay on our straw-stuffed mattress.

"I said, someday the ants will carry you away!"
"Yes," I said, "I heard." The mattress made dry crunching noises when I moved, and sometimes poked through the sheets.

"Well, why on earth didn't you answer? You never answer me! Where do you live, anyway?"

"Huh?" We'd discovered a black scorpion our first night and Susan had fled laughing and screaming to the door while I (the prince) brushed it off the mattress with a broom and then splattered it shapeless against the tile floor with a stomp so furious I bruised my heel through my tennis shoe. "I thought I answered," I said.

"What's your problem?" She wrinkled her nose and squinted disbelievingly, put her hands on her hips.

"Don't pry," I said.

"Pry? For godsake, talk to me!"

"Respect my mystery." I wanted to hurt her. I wanted her to feel as rotten and isolated as I did.

"Your mystery! My god." Her arms dropped limp at her side, her mouth hung open.

"Respect my solitude," I said.

The next week she went back to the States. She said that although I might be training for the "yet-to-be-written," she couldn't wait that long for either her life, or her marriage, to begin. I knew she'd be back but her leaving was still a shock so I used the shock and even wrote a pretty good story. Mainly I took up fishing in the ocean
when she was gone. And I had a brief affair with a
neighbor, with Gabriela.

She knocked on my door one evening while I was brushing
my teeth. She handed me a note written in English that said
she had seen me swimming at the beach, and that she loved
me. Then she took the toothbrush out of my mouth and kissed
me. I didn't love Gabriela, and I knew she didn't love me,
but I knew what she meant. She was dark and beautiful, and
she smelled exotic. She wore a big, awkward smile and when
she left me she said, "Lo que tu quieras, yo te doy, pero no
te devuelvo los besos." Whatever you want I will give, but
your kisses I will keep.

In the weeks and months that followed Susan's return, I
felt uncomfortable at times, but never very sorry. I was
failing, of course, but it wasn't the first time I had
failed. And since
when was failing permanent? It was nothing to think or
worry too much about unless my love for Susan lessened, and
that clearly hadn't happened. In fact, I needed her more
now, and she seemed to sense it. When the days were hot we
both found it easier to forget about everything for a while
and lie on the bed after lunch with the fan on and the
window open and listen to how quiet the town got.

But there was this new feeling too, a hard-to-get-used-to
feeling of being an adult, and having learned how to tell
lies like other adults. In a way it made me less righteous,
and more content. But there was no denying it also made me sadder.

From behind the curtain in The Soda Castro Ling comes a hollow moan, barely audible, like the faraway sound of wind. "What's that?" I ask the fat boy, who is sitting at the next table now, drinking something red through a straw.

"What?"

"That noise, hear it?"

"Oh," he replies, matter-of-factly, "that's Grandma crying."

The moan is interrupted by faint sounds of human choking and breathing, and then the creak of something wooden. "Is she all right?"

The fat boy shrugs. His mother looks at me and shakes her head slowly. She replaces the ashtray under the counter, and retreats past the curtain toward the crying.

"She's old," the fat boy explains. "She sits in her rocker and sings in Chinese, or else she cries like that." He shrugs again, as if he decided long ago that it was nothing to be concerned with. "She's from China, you know. Grandpa can't speak Chinese and she speaks Castilian worse than you."

"Oh."

A couple walks by the window holding hands and dragging their feet through the almond leaves along the curb. The
wind picks up. I look to the fan on the ceiling and then to
the fat boy again, who has resumed staring out the window,
his cheeks dry now and eyes dull.

Neither Susan nor I had lived by the ocean before, and
for a while it enchanted us. "I love you," Susan told me
once when I was listening, "and that's the most frightening
thing I can think of."

When the revolution began in Nicaragua, I'd wanted to
join the Sandinistas because they were fighting pure evil,
and to fight pure evil was a very tempting proposition. But
I didn't because in the end I realized I wasn't ready to die
for Nicaragua, or anything else that I know of.

Frightening. One time Eduardo told me about making love to
Gabriela on the beach. "Matame, matame!" she whispered past
his ear, fingers digging into the flesh of his back. Kill
me, kill me! Eduardo proudly showed the scars like war
wounds. "I gave her gusto, eh? That one . . . she dies for
love."

Gabriela screamed twice, the second lasting for a long
time until something in the silence of the night choked her
off. Carlos called her puta, whore, and then the sound of
two slaps were followed by a thud and a crash as her body
fell against he corrugated zinc fence just a foot and a half
through the wall from where Susan and I lay in bed, our
packed bags on the floor beside us. Later, after it was
over and the ambulance came and went, I began to shake in
bed and the fan couldn't stop the sweat. Susan touched my face and kissed my ear. Through the darkness she whispered that the world was wonderful, too, that there were many many happy things. On the trip down she used to sing, *By the sea by the sea by the beautiful sea*, and now she sang it again, *You and me you and me oh how happy we'll be*. I felt her breathing in my ear. I felt her warmth and it was good warmth, but I couldn't return her touch and I had no kiss to give. I was thinking of the reef off Belize, Gabriela, the blood of the fascists and fascists fighters, the yet-to-be-written, and I shuddered in my not-so-private light. I'd begun to understand about isolation and cruelty, that's all. I'd begun to understand about the danger and consequence of lies.

"Hey," says the fat boy, BB eyes suddenly showing interest. "Do you really write sex stories?"

I smile and say sure, of course, and laugh when he slips a pulp booklet out of his pocket and shows me the amazing picture on the cover.
Chocolate

The woman on the stool next to Jenkins was dressed in red to match her lipstick and earrings. She leaned toward him and touched his chin with her finger, said *muneco*, doll. Two drunk old gringos at the end of the bar said *Viva Costa Rica!* and raised their glasses. They'd been in a very detailed discussion on the merits of 19-year-old women's bodies versus 24-year-old ones and apparently reached a consensus.

Jenkins was waiting for Ana, who was in love with a Spanish movie director. The Music Man and the librarian on tv above the bar sang in English, "Do I love you? Yes, I love you."

"Asesino," the woman in red said to him. Killer.

Jenkins felt himself blush. She was older than he, but nice looking. "It's not something I'm often called."

"No?" She smiled.

Jenkins had come into Costa Rica from Nicaragua, where he wasn't fighting or killing, but everybody else was. Or if they weren't then their brother or mother or father or sister was. And everybody's cousin was dead. He'd been
there for nine months working on an irrigation project. Two times they'd almost finished, and two times the contras blew it up. He'd met a woman there, Marielos, and she'd taught him some Spanish, among other things. He didn't realize all she'd taught until after she died, killed early in the morning by the first blast, and then everything else seemed important again, getting new money, supplies, rebuilding the dam. The Nicaraguans cried and had their ceremonies and then got up and worked again. Jenkins admired their bravery and general good cheer, and had made himself remember it to keep from feeling sad.

Earlier this evening, Ana and Jenkins ate together in a restaurant along Avenida Central here in San Jose. They were guests at the same pension and had gotten to know each other over the past couple of days. People waiting for a bus crowded the narrow sidewalk just outside the restaurant window. A boy stepped up to the glass and opened his mouth, pointed at his tongue. A smaller boy stood next to him and did the same thing. Jenkins was eating cake by then. He lay his fork down and gestured the boys in and gave them the cake, which they quickly broke in half and devoured. A man at another table gave both a piece of chicken.

Ana asked him what he cared about, what the most important things in the world were.

Jenkins answered love and then nature. He'd never thought it before but he was trying to answer her question.
He was also, he realized, trying to impress her. He laughed.

Ana laughed, too. "Aren't you the Nicaragua man? What about truth and justice, Comandante?"

"Love carries its own truth," he said. "Nature its own justice." He couldn't believe his ears, his words. Maybe they came out so easily because he was speaking Spanish. Or perhaps he was trying to start over, floating up words like balloons, like a child. Somehow Ana helped. He could say things he'd never thought about and then laugh at himself.

"Well then," Ana said, still smiling, although it was an effort he could see. "I love el hombre de la pelicula." The man of the movie, her directer friend.

Jenkins felt a pinch of envy that both surprised and pleased him. He looked at her thin face, her dark eyes, and lips that twitched at the corners when she smiled. He wanted to kiss her and taste the cake on her tongue. He wanted to feel what she felt. Maybe she'd show him how.

Now, while Jenkins sat at the bar with the woman in red and the two gringo men and the Music Man on tv, Ana was at the fruteria. They'd found it while strolling after dinner. There was fruit, of course, and hundreds of kinds of desserts, but not what Ana wanted. She'd suddenly found it important to teach the owner, the Guanacasteco, how to make chocolate as it is made in Barcelona. In all of Costa Rica you couldn't find good dark chocolate, she'd said. And in
Barcelona you could buy it everywhere!

She'd licked her pale lips, smiled a smile that was too big for her face. "Chocolate makes you feel in love, right? And that's first on your list."

Jenkins wished he would have said todiendo was first on his list. She would have understood that, too. A few days ago, in one of the first conversations he'd had with Ana, she told him she used to love to toder anybody and everybody. They were playing ping pong in the giant old lobby of the pension where both were staying. Her hair kept falling across her face so she had to play with her head tilted at an angle, or with one hand on the paddle and one holding her hair up.

But then, she said, she'd met her director friend and fallen in love and learned what that was all about, and now she couldn't even imagine todiendo someone she didn't love.

She was a bad ping pong player, and she moved awkwardly. She was short and thin and had sunburned white skin, pink now, and black hair. Still, she was pretty. And her intensity fascinated Jenkins. He couldn't take his eyes off her.

The Guanacasteco at the frutería hadn't been able to take his eyes off her, either. She'd pushed into his little storefront cafe and kitchen and started giving orders, and he'd followed them with a half-amused, half-amazed look on his face. She told him exactly how his frutería would look
if it were in Barcelona, and how she used to stop at a place like it on her way to the university every day, and how it was in a bad part of town but if you asked her a woman could rape a man just as easily as vice versa, and she felt strong now that her job was leading aerobic dance classes. Then she announced the missing ingredients; they must go shopping.

Jenkins tagged along for a while. Ana's change fell out of a hole in her skirt pocket and she, he, and the Guanacasteco crawled around on the sidewalk picking up coins. While they were on their knees, she said her man-of-the-movie, her director, was married and lived in Madrid and she lived in Barcelona, of course, so they'd seen each other every other weekend for two years. Before he came to Costa Rica to make the film, he'd broken it off with her. He didn't even know she was here until yesterday, and she had only one more week of vacation to win him back before she had to go home to Barcelona. Then she started listing the things they had to buy to cook good Barcelona chocolate, thick like pudding, and her voice never changed but tears dripped down her cheeks to her chin.

That's when Jenkins had left to come to the bar. More than envy, what he'd begun to feel was jealousy, and even a little anger. He wanted her love, her devotion, her sex. He could feel his insides get soft and he was afraid he might cry. From behind the hopeless and brave tears still
clinging to her eyelashes, could she even see him? He told her he'd meet her back at the fraternity in an hour or so, but he didn't want to go shopping.

Gary the Canadian walked into the bar and sat down by Jenkins. They knew each other from the pension, too. Gary drank beer from the time he woke up until the time he went to bed, but he always looked as though he drank too much coffee. He tapped his foot against the bar rail. He bobbed his head, eyes shifting from Jenkins to the tv, to the woman in red, and then back to Jenkins.

"Guess what?" he asked.

"What?" Jenkins said. With Gary it could be anything. This morning Gary told him he'd just won a scholarship to be an orchestra conductor, but to hell with it, he'd go back to Toronto and wash skyscraper windows. Good money. Good view. Good times.

"Somebody stole that book I showed you," Gary said. "Nothing's safe at that goddamned pension."

Jenkins shook his head. Gary amazed him. A young man, lean and muscular, he moved as though he had vital bones missing.

Gary tapped his forehead with a forefinger. "There's a lot going on up here. Too much. I got a letter from my aunt. She thinks I'm going to happen soon. I am going to happen soon. But that book . . . that book's where my head's at right now and I want it back."
"Sorry it's gone, man," Jenkins said.
"It's about the living dead and vice versa," Gary said. Jenkins laughed.
"A comedy."
Jenkins laughed again. "That's better."
"About how half the world can't go to a doctor and how the other half makes fine bombs in good health!"

By now the woman in red had her hand on Jenkins's thigh, which accounted in part for his new animation. Gary noticed. "You know," he said, leaning toward Jenkins. "Latin women are animals."

Jenkins made his way along the crowded San Jose sidewalks toward Ana and the fruteria. He passed an old Indian man, wearing a baggy white smock and a Baltimore Orioles baseball cap, sitting on a bench playing a flute. A little farther along, Jenkins watched a young man in black leather pants and white Pura Vida t-shirt stroll by trailing three women. The women wore flower print skirts, sling belts, shirt tails, sunglasses at night, and one wore a derby. The Pura Vida man paused in front of a stereo store blaring salsa. He lit a cigarette, which went well with his black and white color choices. The women bobbed their heads to the music.

The fruteria was well lit, yellow and orange, and one entire wall was a photograph of a birch and maple forest in the summertime. Jenkins liked this place. He liked the big
green picture. He walked past the counter and stuck his head into the little kitchen.

Ana leaned over a pot on the gas burner, faded jean skirt, cheap black flats. He could see her bra strap through the back of her shirt. The tall, dark-skinned Guanacasteco stood looking over her shoulder nodding solemnly while she talked non-stop about thickness, color, and taste.

That afternoon in her room before dinner she'd given Jenkins his first hope. She'd stood, tying a ribbon around her hair while she told him that early in the morning she'd gone into the mountains on location to see her director friend, her man of the movie. Jenkins sat on her bed holding a cassette tape. Recuerdos, memories, was handwritten on the cover.

"I caught a glimpse of him working," she said. "He saw me, too." She didn't say what happened but Jenkins could tell by her face it wasn't promising. She pointed to the cassette tape and her head made a sudden tilt; so did her voice, eyes opened wide. "It's music we like."

In the bright, tight kitchen of the fruteria now, she noticed Jenkins and turned around. "Hola amigo."

The Guanacasteco didn't look up.

"I think it's done," she said. "You're just in time."

They sat down at one of the yellow tables out front, the three of them. They used spoons to dip the thick, dark,
semi-sweet chocolate from one bowl in the middle of the table. They didn't talk much. Jenkins held each spoonful of chocolate in his mouth as long as he could before swallowing, feeling saliva rush from under his tongue. With just a little chocolate left, he put his spoon down and used his finger, making broad, cleaning strokes across the sides and bottom of the bowl.

Afterward, Ana and Jenkins walked back through the by-now quiet streets, all the way up the hill to the pension. Nobody was in the lobby when they arrived, and except for the lights from the porch, and the bathroom down the hall, the big room was dark. Ana disappeared around the corner, and when she came out she had a bouquet of roses she'd ordered that afternoon, a vase, and her toothbrush.

"Do you think flowers can conquer a man?" she asked.

Jenkins looked at the roses and at her smiling face and smiled back, afraid to think what he was suddenly, foolishly thinking.

"What man?"

She showed him the card. When he turned sideways he could make out the writing in the light from bathroom. To the man of the movie from me.

"They're pretty," Jenkins said.

She shrugged, raised her eyebrows hopefully, and slid past him.

Jenkins stood in the hallway then, and listened to Ana
brushing her teeth at the sink. The light shone under the bathroom door across the tile floor at his feet. He tried to reproduce Marielos's voice in his mind, how she'd said his name, but it was difficult. He remembered how the rain came fast and hard, sounding like a burst of applause in the trees behind them. He'd scrambled for a tarp, told her he'd stay, take her guard shift, but she laughed and told him to go get some sleep, *mi gringo serio*, my serious gringo. This was her war before it was his, she said. He insisted but she refused again, and then she promised to come to his cot early in the morning when she was relieved. She promised. Jenkins promised. He didn't know what he promised exactly but he liked repeating the words. The contras seemed a long way away and the rain and the kisses and the promises made him feel brave.

Soon he'd be home in Virginia. The war wasn't over but he didn't know if it would ever be over. No. That was a lousy excuse. A better one was that support for the project dried up after the dam blew a second time. But there were other dams, other projects. The truth was that his feeling had gone away, and leaving Nicaragua was a privilege of his passport. After that he wasn't so sure.

He could hear Ana rinse and spit, begin to gather her things in the bathroom. He thought now was the time to go back to the bar and the woman in red. That's all he'd have to do. They could check into a hotel and lie down for days,
and when they ate or smoked cigarettes she would do all of
the talking for both of them. This could happen if he left
right now but his feet weren't moving.

The bathroom door opened and Ana walked toward him in
the hallway. When she got close he held out his arm so she
couldn't pass. She stopped, looked at him, head tilted so
her hair was out of her face. She looked small, standing in
shadow framed by light from the bathroom, her hands holding
a vase full of flowers.

Jenkins put his finger on her chin, touched her and
almost said you're a doll, muneca. Instead he smiled and
said, "Good chocolate, Ana."

She blinked self-consciously, licked her lips. "Thank
you, Comandante."

Then she ducked under his arm, and the sound of her
plastic slippers tapping down the hallway behind him carried
a sense of strange relief, an echo of gladness and regret.
Two Very Short Train Stories

On A Train

The curve pushed us all toward the wall. In the tunnel the darkness was pure, so feeling the train turn and the leaning shoulders of neighbors was welcome solidity. We all blinked when we came out.

His eyes were red and sunken, and seemed small tucked into so much skin. Maybe he was tired; maybe he was restless. His wife giggled and hung onto his arm. He blinked sheepishly at her, and then at me.

"It was in sixty-one, sixty-two, and sixty-three," he said in Spanish.

"I was very young," I said.

His eyes looked out the window but his body and head remained facing forward, rocking just a bit in the rhythm of the train. Our seats faced one another and we tried not to stare but there we were, so we talked. He'd unbuttoned his shirt to catch the breeze from the window, and his round stomach looked like a partially deflated basketball. He'd told me that for twenty years he was the foreman of a place that made molasses from sugar cane, but before that he played for the Baltimore Orioles.
Patting his belly, he said, "I was a hundred and forty-five pounds. I played shortstop." He said shortstop in English.

"You must have been quick," I said.

He cast a slow look toward his wife, not a proud look, or an I-told-you-so, but more as though he wanted to see if she was still there. Then he looked back to me.

"I could never hit well," he said. "But I was good in the field." His pink tongue lingered between his lips.

"Three years?"

"Yes."

"So you speak English?"

He shook his head, looked out the window and down the mountainside. The train was high in cane country and the view spectacular green down the canyon.

"There were other latinos," he said.

The train jumped and his wife squeezed his arm.

"We went to thirty-eight states. Washington, New York, Chicago, Minnesota." He licked his lips again, and I thought I saw his eyes really smile. "Do you know Minnesota?"

"Yes."

"It's lovely," he said. "We went fishing on the lakes."

Then turned to his wife and explained to her about lakes, lake after lake, and pine trees. He said it was very
blue and clear. He said there was no place like it.

"They threw me out," he said to me. He raised his fist to his mouth, thumb up and little finger out, a sign for drinking. "For this I knew enough English."

His wife giggled and turned away, pretending for my sake to be embarrassed. He glanced down and re-folded his hands on his lap.

"Someday I'd like to get back to Minnesota," he said, blinking two patient blinks. "It would please me to take my wife there."

The train tossed as we went around a corner and began descending. She held his arm and leaned against him; he stared out the window at the passing cane, and the gorge, and the far side of the canyon rising to the north like a fortress wall.

An Unlikely Cure

It was hot and I was nauseous from hangover, but while the train was stopped an attractive woman entered the car and made her way down the aisle. She wore a black skirt and red blouse, and she dragged painted fingernails over the top of each seat she passed. She sat down across the aisle from me and began to fan herself with a newspaper. When she noticed
me watching she leaned toward me and whispered in Spanish, pointing at the floor, that a man had just been killed under our car. She pursed her lips as if tasting something sour, and then turned and reported the same thing to a group of passengers gathered at the window. A few of them nodded; some shook their heads soberly. The woman glanced back at me and—apparently deciding I hadn't understood—sliced her hand as a knife across her waist.

Going out to look seemed bad, but since it happened only a few feet away (just below where I sat), sitting still seemed even worse. So I stood up and walked down the aisle and out of the car.

On the sidewalk the sun made it hotter. Three soldiers were loading a large bag into the trunk of a car, and after some discussion, decided to close the trunk. Apparently it was the dead man because the burlap had begun to darken with blood. Once the bag was in the trunk and the trunk closed, the soldiers argued about where they should go first, the hospital or the morgue. Finally a compromise was reached. They'd drive to their commanding officer and let him decide.

Some kids were dragging a broken bicycle out from under the train onto the sidewalk, talking loudly and pushing each other. A girl, the biggest of the children, was trying to make the bent wheel spin. It wouldn't, so she started slapping the rubber tire.

"What's the name of this town?" I asked her. Suddenly
it seemed important that I didn't know where I was.

She stared without answering, still slapping the tire.
"What's the name of this town?" I asked again.
"Lupe," she finally said. Then she turned away from me and pushed a smaller boy who was trying to take her place by the bent bicycle wheel.

When I got back inside the train car, the crowd at the window had dispersed and everyone sat in his own seat ready to go. The air was stuffy and there was little talking. I said the name of the town to myself a number of times. I would have said it to the woman in the black skirt and red blouse but she was leaning forward, fanning herself vigorously and staring at the floor between her legs. I noticed wet newsprint beneath her red pumps and then I smelled the vomit. My feeling was that this was fitting. I was glad somebody had done something, and also I no longer felt hungover.
On Location  (an essay)

The first morning on the movie set a Mexican soldier who is really a Nicaraguan soldier sitting in the shade between the costume truck and the prop truck shouts out a question in Spanish when I pass: Gringo, why are you an Immortal?

The rest of them laugh. The whole group is looking pretty battle-weary, the result of costume and make-up, and they slump on the ground and in folding chairs drinking coffee. They don't think I can understand, so when I stop and turn they are surprised.

I tell them I don't know, that they probably know better than I because this is my first day as an Immortal (a soldier in William Walker's 19th Century mercenary army), and the only reason I am here at all is because I went to a jazz bar in Managua last night and there was no beer.

They laugh. A red-eyed soldier points to a chair with his foot. I sit, and I tell them that in the bar last night the electric guitar was drowning out the saxophone and it made me thirsty. No beer, so I went back to the window and asked for a Pepsi. No Pepsi, so I bought a Rojita, a red
carbonated soft drink. Then the contras blew up an electrical tower outside town and the whole bar went dark. The band kept playing but without the electric guitar, just sax and drums, and standing there in the dark with my Rojita, I met Celeste. You all know how pretty Celeste is. Well, she asked if I wanted to be in a movie. How could I refuse?

We are in the shade on the yard of an old ranch: stone walls, stone fences, old white adobe buildings with red tile roofs. The country is wide and open, good cattle land. The scene they are going to shoot is supposed to be northern Mexico, and this place looks it. I'm dressed like a grubby cowboy in a Spaghetti Western, a heavy, long, single-shot cap and ball rifle across my knees.

Early that morning I boarded a bus outside a hospedaje in Managua with about 25 other Europeans, Americans, Canadians, Australians -- anybody who looked like he could be an American soldier of the 1850's. We were driven about an hour north to this place near Leon Viejo, and then dressed and made up out of the back of a couple of semi-trailers parked on the lawn. There was coffee, juice, rolls, and lots of sliced fruit.

These soldiers looking at me, gathering around me now, arrived in their People's Army fatigues, the army of the Sandinistas, but now they wear the battle-worn blue and gold of a 19th Century Mexican army. They lean on each other, elbow to shoulder, elbows on knees. They lean back and
stare, chew on grass, sip coffee from plastic cups. My
government has committed millions of dollars to kill these
men, to make them surrender. And for the past five or six
years they have been preparing to defend themselves against
an American invasion. Sitting in front of them, gun across
my knees, I am more than just a fellow extra in a Hollywood
movie.

The group grows larger, surrounding me as other
soldiers pass and stop. They're curious, morning tired, and
maybe a little bit mean. When we are done for the day they
will take off their costume uniform and put on their real
uniform, return their prop rifle and pick up their real one.
In the battle scenes to be shot around the ranch, and later
in the streets of Granada, they will know better than me how
to run with a rifle, how to fall, how to shoot from their
bellies, how to die realistically. I heard one of them say
earlier that dying was really very boring, so if and when he
was shot, that is how he would die.

Am I for or against my government? one asks. He
squints, smiles, brushes his hair off his forehead. Another
interrupts, asks seriously why the American soldiers, the
mercenaries in Walker's army, are called Immortals. I say
it's poetry maybe, poetic license. History, another soldier
says, historical fact. Perhaps in the film we never die, I
say. And in real life? he asks.

I say in real life they probably died or they'd still
be here.
This makes them laugh, laugh hard, and it takes me a while to realize the joke: There still are American mercenaries here. Perhaps they never do die.

I am asked if I've heard of Eugene Hasenfus, the American whose plane was shot down carrying weapons to the contras. Yes, I say, he's from Wisconsin and I am, too. About twenty soldiers are listening now, but two of them are doing most of the questioning. Both have probably imagined killing me, or killing an American like me. But one in particular, the red-eyed one who first called me over, seems to have savored the thought. He smiles, eyes bloodshot, his face very much like a movie Mexican soldier: round and brown, hair falling down in his eyes, teeth just a little crooked. He runs a finger like a knife in front of his neck.

"I will kill you in the battle," he says, and laughs.

Everybody laughs because of the way he says "the battle," like he means, or could mean something beyond the movie battle. I laugh too, but in my reply I refer to the movie only. I tell him I am one of the Immortals, as designated by the red ribbon tied around my arm by the costume woman. I didn't choose to be an Immortal, but was directed there, to the Immortal truck, by men more important than I. As an Immortal, I say, I believe I have a certain claim on long, if not interminable, life.

"And what if the script changes?" he asks.

"Well," I say, "if the director proves capricious and
I am no longer an Immortal, I ask only that I be advised in advance."

He smiles. I slide easily into the roll of Gringo Clown.

"For example," I say, "if I am to die this afternoon, please may I know at noon so I might take advantage of the wonderful free lunch, a Last Supper, and then call my wife and tell her that I will soon die and she won't have to meet my plane on the 7th after all."

They all laugh this time, and seem to move closer.

Someone asks: If Hasenfus is from Wisconsin, and I am from Wisconsin, do I know him? What do other people from Wisconsin think of Nicaragua? Of Hasenfus? Have they, have you -- a young soldier asks -- seen the photo taken of the boy half Hasenfus's size, the boy who captured him, leading Hasenfus down the country road, Hasenfus handcuffed, the little boy with a large wooden cross on a necklace hanging outside his shirt and an AK-47 in his hands? Before I can answer no, I am asked by another soldier if it is true Americans are big talkers but cowards?

This brings more laughter, nervous laughter. I feel their eyes on me as I say seriously that I don't know, that I don't think so. Is it true that Americans, if forced to battle here, would run? Some would, I say, but most would not. Americans can die too, a soldier says, it isn't hard. This is the same man I heard earlier say that dying was boring, and if killed in the movie he would die boringly.
He may know something about it. Most of these men have lost family members -- all have lost friends in the Contra War.

"And you?" the red-eyed solder asks, "And you?"

I look at him, and then at the others. "And me, what?"

"Would you run?" he asks, "Or would you fight and die?"

Mainly they are curious, very curious. They sit casually, rifles against the trunk of the tree or across their knees, but there is an edge to their voices and in their eyes, a mix of pain and bafflement, hate and friendship, and pride, lots of pride. He is asking if I would fight him, if I would die trying to fight and kill him. He asks because it is something he's had to ask himself about me, and about my countrymen. It is morning, and sunny, and although it will be hot there is a breeze now and the coffee is good.

"I don't know," I say.

They nod, politely, of course, but blankly. All of them except the red-eyed guy who just stares. I don't know if he's got me pegged as a coward or not, but killing and dying don't exist in the hypothetical, nor do courage or cowardice, and he knows it.

"Except as an Immortal," I say, referring to the movie again. "As an Immortal I will be fierce."

They laugh now, and the red-eyed one smiles, and somebody important directs us to get up. I am to go where Colonel Walker needs an Immortal to walk back and forth with an ox cart. They are to fight here at the ranch. Until
later, we say, Until then. The red-eyed one is still
grimacing, and he catches my eye and once again runs his
forefinger across his neck. I shrug, thinking, Jesus, man,
let up, will you? But I laugh and for the hell of it I
salute. He stands and salutes me back.

All day long the director has pointed to people and said,
"You, you and you! Have you died yet? No? Then die this
time. Get shot and fall here. You here and you there." He
looks like a bass player in a country western band. A tall,
skinny Englishman in his early thirties, he wears shorts and
no shirt, and a straw cowboy hat bent down on both ends.

The Nicaraguans have ambushed us again and again,
opened fire from the roof tops as we marched through a
Granada sidestreet, the explosion of their shots sending us
diving for cover, the horses spinning, the carts over-
turning. We fired and ran, fired and fell in the sewage and
the dirt, in the rocks or against the curb. We are called
Immortals, sure, but after three days of battle I can see
that's no guarantee of long life.

It's almost sunset now. We are lined up at one end of
a street facing a furniture barricade -- wooden rocking
chairs, tables, old doors piled ten feet high across the
street down the block. About fifteen of us Immortals
survive, including our inimitable Colonel Walker. Dressed
in black and wearing a wide-brimmed preacher hat, he's
neither ducked nor veered but walked resolutely down the middle of the street, oblivious to the Nicaraguan guns.

The Nicaraguan soldiers have taken cover behind the barricade, and I can see their rifle barrels pointed out through the gaps. Probably ten bodies lie in the street, Nicaraguans in their white smocks, their hats still on, their guns lying at their sides. Somebody yells that they don't all have to be wearing their hats, that the guns don't all have to be right next to them, that they are dead, remember, so don't move.

The sun is low, just above the barricade, making the sky orange and red. Wind sweeps the narrow street raising dust in plumes that slide across the dead and into the white walls. Somebody shouts "Silencio!" and "Please close the doors!" in American-accented Spanish. It has been a day of street dirt, hot sun, sewer mud, Coca Cola, mineral waters, sliced melons and many windsprints down the same street. Over and over again until the light was right, the action right, until the director was satisfied he had something.

We are told to take our places, get ready. The wind rises again and the dust trips up over the scattered bodies in the road ahead of us. One of the dead lifts his head and is told to lie quietly, please, be dead. It is still very hot and my clothes are sweated through, my black felt cowboy hat soggy from the band halfway up the crown.

Action, the director says, and Walker begins his resolute march toward the barricade. We watch as he walks
into the sunset, into the imminent fire of Nicaraguans guns. When he's about ten yards ahead of us, one of his officers, Mr. Hornsby, jumps out and confronts us in front of the camera. He is a big black man bald, an earring in one ear and a weapon in each hand. Cussing us, calling us cowards, he urges us to charge. We charge.

Trying to aim and shoot and cock, and aim and shoot and cock again while running is difficult. Because even these blanks are dangerous at close range, we've been told not to fire directly at anybody. The sound of the firing is deafening, frightening enough to make me want to fall and hide. Seeing the guns pointed at you, seeing the smoke and hearing the explosion of the shots can almost knock you down. It helps you imagine the fear of actual bullets, though, imagine death as a possibility.

Up ahead I see Walker standing maybe twenty feet this side of the barricade. He's waving his arms as if to say cut, cut, cut, but the Nicaraguans keep shooting. They've been told to cease fire as soon as Walker passed the last dead man, because at that point he would be too close and the blanks could explode that far out. We charge up to him, shooting, and Walker is waving his arms wildly now, until finally we pass and we stop shooting and the Nicas do too. Walker's angry. He doesn't speak Spanish and it's a good thing because apparently he felt the shock of a blank go past his head, and his face and his English get the message across. It's the second time today he's been hit.
"Somebody is going to get killed," he says, turning and stomping back the length of the street. He raises his voice when he sees the director. "Doesn't anybody know how to tell those guys that these guns are dangerous!"

The director hardly pauses, charging the barricade as Walker is retreating. They pass each other in the middle of the dusty street, and the dead Nicas in the road lift their heads to catch the commotion. The director looks like a large, angry bird, arms flailing, body bending at the waist. He speaks in the first angry voice I've heard from him to tell the Nicaraguans (these are soldiers, remember, real soldiers) in British-accented Spanish that the guns are dangerous, and for the tenth time, please, don't aim at anybody. And for godsake stop firing when Walker crosses this line! He drags a heel across the dirt road. "Bien?" he asks. Do you understand?

Behind him the sky is a fantastic red now, and the barricade looks darker and even more formidable in shadow. The director runs back down the street toward us. "Reload," he yells. "Immortals get reloaded and do it just like before. That was very good gentlemen. Colonel, I am sorry. That was really very good, though. Do it just the same. This is going to be fantastic."

The street clears, the onlookers crowd to the edges, a rooster crows, the wind and dust become the major activity on the street. We wait, catch out breath. "Places again," somebody shouts. A black dog weaves through the street from
the far corner sniffing the dead. They remain still. It's unplanned, but it looks good and I hope the camera is rolling.

The people who live on the street are told once again to close their doors and windows, pull their heads in. A couple of days ago, early in the morning when we'd been ambushed by the Nicas on the roof tops, and the shooting started loud and fierce, a man about forty years old burst out of one of the doors leading from his house onto the sidewalk. He stood there in his shorts and t-shirt, blinking, obviously just awakened, and he was crying. A stainless steel watch band shone on his wrist as he covered the top of his head with his arms. The director shouted cut and as gently as possible the man was led back into the house. The door closed, and stayed closed until sometime late in the afternoon. We were still shooting the same scene, and this time when the door opened the man, stumbling and laughing and swaying, stepped out onto the sidewalk spectacularly drunk.

We are filming this scene, this whole battle from the ambush up until this final charge on the barricade, in a section of Granada where by all appearances it might be 130 years ago. The sewage leaks out a pipe in front of each house and makes a stream down the middle of the dirt street. The buildings are mud and plaster, and the roofs are clay tile.

I wait, rifle in my hand, in line with the other
Immortals. The dog is still out in the orange road, sniffing the dead. A man runs out holding a light meter in his hand above his head. He does a few pirouettes, looking up at the meter, and then runs back behind the camera. All day long we've been charging down the street, getting shot at by Nicaraguans on the roof top, stepping over their large silhouettes on the ground. While we waited between takes we shared a New York Times somebody brought from Managua, talked about the NCAA basketball tournament, who'd won so far, who'd lost, who was likely to make the Final Four.

Nearby the cook sits cross-legged in his tiny cart, playing the drums on his pots, looking like a dough-faced leprechaun. Behind him, leaning against the white wall, is a guy everybody calls Joe. In his shredded trench coat, long, grubby hair and beard, Joe looks like a boxcar hobo. He told me this morning in his English accent that he was "just an old rocker," but I didn't realize what he meant until for some reason we were talking about New York and I asked him if he'd been there and he said yes, he'd done a concert at Shea Stadium.

Another Immortal extra standing along the wall, an American man about my age, gives me a thumbs up, smiles, winks. He's married to a Nicaraguan woman, and described his wife's family situation as "not untypical: Her father's dead, mother recently migrated to the States, sister's husband crippled six months ago by a mine, younger brother just back from the war, lazy, a little loco." I liked this
guy, but he was killed earlier in the day, this American Immortal, picked off in the ambush, selected for death by the director's long finger. We sat together on the bus from Managua in the morning, trying to hang onto sleep as the bus stopped at the hospedajes picking up guys like us to be soldiers for the day -- hippie-types, tourist-types, political-types, all types. Two Basque revolutionaries always sat in the front chainsmoking, changing cassette tapes, keeping the bus in cigarettes and music. We passed the early morning lines for ice, lines for rice, the women and men with bags waiting at unmarked corners and unmarked closed doors. This is a country under siege, at war, and the bleakness of daily life is made bearable, it appears, by the struggle itself, by the threat and the sense that danger is imminent, sacrifice everywhere.

Wheelchaired men are too common, and soldiers on foot, going here, going there, carrying rifles or books or both, climbing into the back of lorries with school children. We passed ox carts carrying bricks, mule carts carrying fruit, trucks carrying soft drinks, and buses overflowing with people. The dawn turned from orange to gray as we broke out into the smokey countryside, slowed for goats crossing, passed fresh tilled earth, cultivated and burned earth, earth-brown children already playing stickball in a field.

This is my fourth time in Nicaragua. I passed through under Somoza in '78, again in '79, just weeks after the
Sandinistas overthrew him, and again in 1980. My stays were always brief, enough for only a glimpse: the first time of terror; the next of exhuberance; and the last of hard work.

And this time, it seems, all I can sense is mystery and metaphor, a grimness, and a certain siege mentality. The terror comes from without, from the north, and it's connected to vagaries like money and power, and it exploits the fear and loathing behind closed doors. What I've seen so far in the public Nicaragua, the Sandinista Nicaragua, is the pain of poverty and the zealousness that comes when a populace is forced to arm itself against a confusing and gigantic invader. The only thing clear beside the sky at night in these walled cities and wide-open valleys filled with bloodshed and grief and work is an unshakeable faith in something not yet named, or fully defined. The Sandinistas have their billboards and posters and rah-rah slogans, but they don't really say it. What comes closest, perhaps, is stenciled in small letters on building walls, office walls, house walls, park sidewalks, restaurants -- the painted words: No se rinde aqui nadie. Nobody surrenders here.

"Places!" a woman shouts. "silencio, por favor!"

Flies buzz everywhere. Neighborhood people crowd the street and sidewalk behind us to watch the last battle of the day. They sit in rockers and benches and on the ground. A boy carrying a bucket full of ice and Coca Cola bottles sits down on the sidewalk. He told me his brother died last
year when the contras shot down his helicopter. Yesterday, at dusk when we were waiting for the bus to leave and take us back to Managua, one of the other Immortals sang a Simon and Garfunkel song for a crowd of children. He sang funny lyrics, which the kids didn't understand but enjoyed anyway. They wanted all of us to sing, so a group of us started a song which degenerated quickly because we didn't know all of the words. They asked for pencils and bullets, our spent blanks.

When an Immortal appeared from the bus wearing a large rubber Ronald Reagan mask, the kids went crazy, screaming and running away from the big goofy puppet grin. "Who is the new William Walker?" the Immortal shouted in Spanish. "Who is the new American President of Nicaragua?" Young kids giggled and squealed, and the bigger ones played brave and ran up to the Immortal, trying to touch or grab the mask. The Immortal leaped up onto the sidewalk, spread his arms wide and said threateningly in English, "Back you commies, back!" And then, in Spanish, sweetly, "Children of Nicaragua, don't be afraid. I bring you freedom. I am a contra!" The kids laughed and hissed and cheered and jumped up and down. They loved the show.

"Silencio!" the woman yells again. The light is fading fast and the cinematographer is trying to hurry. We all wait for the director to say action. Another Immortal next to me, an actor with a familiar face, winks at me. He looks bad-assed in his Derby hat, rifle in one hand, pistol in his
belt, knife in his boot, licorice-flavored tobacco juice on his chin. Colonel Walker is to my right, head down, rocking back and forth, occasionally taking deep breaths and then jumping up and down to stay loose.

Most of the Nicaraguan soldiers, the ones not behind the barricade, are slumped behind us on the sidewalk, watching. I scan their faces, find the red-eyed one who asked me all the questions my first day on the set. He's given up the finger-across-the-throat trick, and he smiles back, quite friendly. Earlier, he introduced me to his compañeros, and asked if I'd survived the ambush.

"I survived today to die tomorrow," I told him. He saluted, as he does again now. It's become our game.

The same woman shouts silencio again, and it's silent, finally. I squint into the sunset and at the barricade, at the dust and the dog and the dead. During one charge today I fell when my moccasin boots lost traction in the dirt and I tore the skin off my knuckles. The Mexican doctor on the set cleaned the gravel out of my wound and applied disinfectant, then covered each knuckle with a Band-Aid. I wrapped my hand with a bandana so the Band-Aids wouldn't show, and then dipped the bandana in blood that I got from a make-up woman.

Don't step on the dead, I think. When Walker is ahead, shoot way over his head. Don't aim at anybody behind the barricade. Run like hell and shoot like hell, and don't think about anything else.
"Action!" the director says.

Walker strides out past the camera onto the road, walking over and past scattered bodies, his black form ominous. Then bad Mr. Hornsby leaps out, weapon in each hand, cussing us, urging us to charge. The Nicaraguans are holding their fire. We hold back one beat, two, and then, with an unplanned, group-like groan and scream, we attack. We charge, the survivors of these days of mock massacre, only about fifteen of us left, sprinting into swirls of orange dust and sunset. The barricade looms. The Nicaraguans wait. They've been told to shoot over our heads but I know some have us in their sights, the charging Yankee Immortals, our rifles suddenly blowing sound and smoke, whiffs of a timeless national nightmare.

The onlookers love it -- even the drunk man who two days ago cried. They cheer and clap when the director finally says cut.
We are sitting in a deserted San Jose barroom at 3 a.m.: Juan Carlos the Costa Rican poet, Fernando the Salvadoran tool salesman, Javier the Marxist Spaniard, and I. The fluorescent light is bright off the white formica counter, and when I squint the rows of colored bottles sparkle nicely along the wall. Our table is scattered with glasses, an empty jar of the house rum, and a bowl of melted ice.

Javier's a photographer and he pulls some Nicaragua prints from his leather folder, passes them around. One is of a young woman holding a semi-automatic rifle and a coffee basket. She sits on a log in the photograph, her rifle strapped over her shoulder and her coffee basket on her knee. The pose is already Nicaragua kitsch, but there's something in her face, her eye, the shape of her mouth. Javier says she's a second-year medical student and in the reserve, and she lost two brothers fighting Somoza and two more fighting the contras.

I examine her lips, the corners turned upward slightly as though she were hearing an old joke told by a friend. Her smile is both clean and dirty. It's gentle and hardened, pained and brave and fun. I want to marry her, and say so.
Javier the Marxist Spaniard tells me to save my promises, the world has heard enough from gringos.

Juan Carlos the Costa Rican poet kicks me under the table, but pretends to be dozing when I look at him. He's trying not to laugh. He thinks Javier's a riot.

Nobody really believes the Russian lie, Javier says, head forward, eyebrows raised, that all-knowing, continental look. He's lean and blue-eyed and arrogant.

But the American lie, Javier says, the American lie is destructive because it's believed. Everybody ought to have a cassette tape player and enough money to go to a gringo movie, right?

Then, out of the blue, Fernando the Salvadoran tool salesman, who has lost a tooth and a half up front when hit by the rifle butt of a suspicious Salvadoran soldier, says, well, as long as we're showing pictures, what do you think of these?

He takes from his wallet two photos of his girlfriends back in Salvador. He asks which we prefer, La Negrita or La Otra.

I prefer La Otra, and point to her. She reminds me of someone I love who is a long way away. Well, I'm stretching it. But not about the long way away. And love is part of what I imagine when I look at the picture. In Nicaragua, where I just came from, I often was afraid I might disappear, be swallowed by loneliness on long nights,
or simply fall into a pothole on a dark street and break my leg, come home with a limp.

Juan Carlos the Costa Rican poet opens his eyes long enough to smile and say, gringo son of the great fascist, and then kick me again under the table. He shakes his head, holds his hands as though trying to hold water.

You are letting it slip away, he says, your precious freedom. Then he looks at Fernando's pictures, says he prefers this one, no -- he prefers La Negrita. He groans, painfully.

Juan Carlos scrounges enough money to eat by digging plants in the country and carrying them into the city on a bus in a plastic bag. He pots them and sells them to businesses. We've been sharing a room at the pension, and his back is striped by scars he claims to have received when two Costa Rican guardsmen pulled him off the street, tied him to a tree, and whipped him with a cattle switch. When I asked him why, he raised his eyebrows, smiled and said, Who knows?

The waiter blinks the lights in the bar so we stand up, pay our bill, and move the discussion into the empty street. We walk together. Javier the Marxist Spaniard and Fernando the Salvadoran tool salesman begin arguing about the cause and effect of revolutions and empty stomachs, which comes first.

Juan Carlos is telling me that he has come to the
conclusion that although gringos are marvelous liars, it is still easier to lie in Spanish than in English. Then he says he's thinking seriously about becoming one of the bourgeoisie because everyone else is always talking about giving the people bread or spectacle, some god or another, Marxism or Jesusism. He says he wants people to read his poems by themselves and think. And frankly, at the risk of sounding insensitive, he doesn't give two shits for The Masses.

Javier breaks his argument with Fernando and turns to Juan Carlos. He says the stupid bourgeoisie don't believe in anything but their stomachs and their groins -- and since neither amount to much in Juan Carlos's case, he'd never make a good bourgeois.

Wrong, Juan Carlos says. The rich and the poor believe in those things. The bourgeoisie believe in white bread and monogamy, and he thinks he eventually could get used to them both.

I like the way our voices and footsteps echo off the front of the old buildings as we walk down the center of the street. Juan Carlos makes me laugh and when I laugh I'm immortal. I can't die now. I tell myself I'm okay. It's become my refrain and I'm tired of it but I say it again. I'm okay. I'm alone but have no major scars. I walk well.

Fernando the Salvadoran tool salesman has been using a streetlight to re-examine the photos of his girlfriends. He
slides them back into his shirt pocket as the light fades.

But on the other hand, Juan Carlos says, after looking at the pictures of Fernando's whores, who can think very straight?

Fernando says, Juan Carlos, you are a filthy pig who never could think straight. All you really need to know is God and you don't even know Him.

This is not the first time Fernando has brought God into the conversation.

Juan Carlos laughs and rolls his eyes. He says, Ha! If I could attract two pretty girlfriends with a toothless grin like yours, Fernando, I just might believe in God, too!

Fernando shrugs. He says none of us have met God yet, and God is waiting to meet the whole bunch -- especially Juan Carlos.

Why me? Juan Carlos asks. I don't want to meet God . . . And even if I did, it's not much different from being horny -- it passes!

Why you? says Fernando. Well, because this one is a gringo, and not even God understands gringo Spanish very well. And this one is a Spaniard, and God knows that regardless of what a cocky Spaniard says while living, he will beg on his knees when dying.

Javier the Marxist Spaniard stops, spins, hoots, throws his long, skinny arms into the night and laughingly says this is all pure shit, this idea of God, and just exactly
how good little fascists are made!

Juan Carlos is thoroughly enjoying himself, big grin on his handsome, young face. Just to rile Javier, he says to Fernando, Okay, maybe you're right. I'm ready. Introduce me. Let me meet this God.

We've arrived at the pension where we've been staying, where we first got acquainted, and we stand on the old, cracked cement steps leading up from the sidewalk to a wrought-iron gate. Juan Carlos nudges me with his elbow and says he'll be sure to ask God to speak slowly for my sake. Javier mutters something I don't understand. The night is beautiful. The volcanoes across the valley are jeweled silhouettes. There's no traffic on the boulevard, and although down below shine the lights from the city, the stars show easily past the branches of the mango tree.

Fernando steps forward and puts his hands on each side of Juan Carlos's face, tilts his head back and says, God, allow me to introduce Juan Carlos . . .

I look at Fernando smiling and showing the gap where his teeth should be, and I look at Juan Carlos, smooth face relaxed between Fernando's hands, mouth hanging open, eyes aimed at the stars. It's quiet. But for the touch of breeze, it's very quiet. Longing grows wings and flies away.

*Mucho gusto, Dios,* Juan Carlos says politely. Pleased to meet you, God.
I wake in the morning at the Pension Juanita when the hammering starts on the other side of the wall next to my bed. The underwater-green plywood booms and rattles each time the hammer strikes. I'm sweating and my head is heavy, and for the moment I can't move. Luis left me months ago but still the dream lingers, a knock at the door, his sweet and frightening return. Like the cockroach that shakes loose from the ceiling and falls between my bed and the wall, the dream hides but won't go away.

I pull on a t-shirt and shorts, leave my room and walk down the hall and around the corner to take a look. It's the World's Oldest Carpenter. He's standing in the common shower, shirtless, shoeless, a leather tool belt around his waist, and he's nailing a piece of shiny sheet metal to the wall.

When he sees me he stops hammering, lets his yellow eyes drop down my bare legs and then back up again. I'm too skinny for him. He already told me once.

"Buenos días, Beth Crawford." It comes out Bet Crawford.
I touch my hair where it stands up, try to flatten it, smile, I think. His torso is bent sideways from when a horse kicked him. It takes him forever to reach down to a bucket on the floor for a nail, and even longer to stand up. On the new sheet metal behind him are the words, *Sea educado, No se orine aqui*. Be educated, Don't urinate here.

"*Buenos dias, don Jose,*" I say.

At the table in the polished-tile hallway, I drink coffee with Pepe the eleven-year-old runaway and Teresita the teenage prostitute. Coal smoke wafts in from the dirt courtyard out back.

Pepe has a crush on Teresita because she wears torn t-shirts over black bras, and pink knit pants that show her bottom and waist and legs to be . . not too skinny. He teases Teresita for being so successful at what she does.

She sneers like a big sister, smiling, acting embarrassed because I'm here. But she's proud, too, of her body and face and eyes and lips, of the way she looks and how men pay to touch her. But she isn't proud of her teeth. She covers them when she smiles because they're pretty crooked.

"*Do you miss your parents?*" I ask Pepe in Spanish.

"No," he says. His eyes drop to the floor. He's a handsome, black-haired boy. Six months ago he snuck out of his house while his father was passed out. His mother had
been gone for months. The woman who runs the Pension Juanita found him hungry on the street, his face shiny with glue, and took him in. He sweeps the floors in the morning.

Then he looks up. "What does Hey Ju mean, Bet Crawfor?"

I think about it for a minute. I translate what I can, which isn't much. I tell him Jude is a name, and Hey is just Hey, like Hey Pepe.

He's disappointed, but he smiles bravely at Teresita. "Hey Teresita," he sings, "don be a foo."

Teresita rolls her eyes and stands up. She walks very slowly, hips swaying, through the open door into the dirt courtyard out back.

Pepe looks at me, his brown eyes big enough to swim in. "Amor?" I ask.

He nods solemnly.

The first thing my boss, Frederico, does when I get to work is walk me out to the 50-foot steel boat frame surrounded by scaffolding and tell me in English that he hasn't taken a lover since Vicki, who was an ex-prostitute and had scars on her wrist, and who was once married to a Greek sailor.

Then he points to where some of the wire mesh strips hang too loosely on the hull. "Wilma and Idali did these, right?"
I don't even have to look to say yes. I'm examining the underside of the scaffolding, looking for cracks in the planks. A person could fall. I'm afraid of somebody falling.

Frederico shakes his head. He's a tall man, thin and strong, with gray-blond hair. He's had a crazy life. He used to have a fishing business, but gave it away (threw it away, his ex-wife would say). He's shirtless, shoeless, and he squints into the glare of the sun off the white cement yard.

"I've got to let them go," he says with exaggerated sadness. "I'll have Mr. Garcia send the letters and this afternoon you can tell them."

Wilma, Idali, Sari and Sonya slump on the bench against the gray siding of his shed, about fifteen feet behind us. The heat is already bad so they are sitting close together on the shady end of the bench. They look like a team, red and blue bandanas holding their black hair back.

Frederico does this often, takes me aside, gives me the plan. He enjoys the way the other women watch us talk, the way English, at least, makes us intimates. He's a Costa Rican but went to school in Germany. He was drafted into Hitler's army, deserted, and re-trained by British intelligence. After the war he met a Portugese woman in England and they married. He built his first boat over there, and he sailed back here with his new wife. I often
get the feeling Frederico's still neither here nor there, which may be why he wants to get this boat built and spend the rest of his life on the ocean.

"Mr. Garcia told me to dump Vicki because even though I loved her she'd kill me some morning," he says.

I can see the sparkle in his blue eyes, the yellow of his teeth. He's old, much older than I am, but I like his eyes.

"Mr. Garcia said I'd thank him some day."

"Well, have you?" I ask.

Frederico laughs. "No," he says, "but sometimes I'm grateful nonetheless. I've read books about Greek sailors coming back."

He's close now. I'm not looking but I can feel on my scalp how close his face is. A few years ago he was thrown out of his house by his ex-wife so now he spends his nights on his cot in the work shed in the boatyard, where he lives with his tools, pipes, brass hinges, books and music. He made a deal with Mr. Garcia of the tuna plant to build a tender, which he finished last year. His pay is labor and materials to build his own boat, this one.

"Speaking of Greeks," he says, "Who are you playing the Penelope for?"

"Jesucrist, Fredrick," I say, turning toward him.

He raises his eyebrows, takes a step back. "I'm sorry."
He looks so sincere I feel myself blush. I want this to end. "He left," I say. "He's gone. That's all."

Frederico turns away. His eyes scan the shed and the bench where the other woman are sitting, looking at us.

"But unless I'm imagining things," I hear him say, "you're still here."

Luis was a wanter. I mean, it was always there in his eyes, the way they'd move from this to that, the way he'd make this little, hungry half-smile. He was a gambler, and I suppose by being here, by doing what I did to get here, I am too.

His desire was charming. It was sexy. But it was contagious and so tiring sometimes I could have screamed. He wanted money. He wanted a red truck that he could park on the sidewalk and wash every Saturday. He wanted the doors so shiny they'd be like mirrors and little kids would gather around and make faces at themselves. He said it'd be for me, for what I must be used to.

I told him I was all right, we'd be all right. I told him all of that, but it didn't matter. I told him that where I grew up nobody had anything but dirty trucks and heating bills, but his eyes would light up when I said "truck," so I couldn't even talk about it.

We walked in the evening. This was his town and he liked to show me around. I mean that both ways. He thought
I was beautiful, which not a lot of men have thought. He knew everybody and he'd introduce me wherever we went, graciously, sweetly, I thought. We'd stroll by the nice houses, white with red-tile roofs, walls surrounding the yard topped with shards of broken glass to discourage climbers. We'd pass purple and red bougainvillea growing in clusters, and the air was perfumed.

But it sneaks up on you, restlessness does. It happens anytime, but the worst is during the slow time of day, the mean, burning part of day. You feel it in the drip drip of warm rain from the rusted roof, the hum of the insects in the garbage under the lemon trees, the occasional plunk of a mango onto the roof of the house next door.

More is what it wants, more of everything. It's a floating, private ache, and it's why I came here. It's why I walked off a slushy, gray Bloomington sidewalk into the Globe Wide Travel Agency almost two years ago, soon to be married and desperate for what I didn't feel. I stood under the white fluorescent lights and let my eyes wander from poster to poster, castles, mountains, turquoise seas.

"Where do you have that's hot," I said, almost as a joke. I wanted out of my engagement. I wanted out of my skin.

A woman with giant hoop earrings and inch-long auburn hair, pointed to a chair, so I sat down. She handed me a brochure, very business-like, her red lips pursed. She'd
been waiting for me, I'm sure. They'd taught her all about people like me in travel agent school.

"Have you ever heard of Costa Rica?" she asked.

The women I work with get off the morning bus from La Barranquilla in their pretty, cheap dresses and high heels. They walk down the sometimes muddy road past the big, white petroleum tanks to the mangrove-lined estuary, and Frederico's shed, and the 50-foot steel boat frame surrounded by scaffolding. They take their good clothes off and put their work clothes on, and we work all day layering the hull with wire mesh.

Before they leave, even if it is to go one block away to the hardware store for a part or a tool, they must get dressed again, and re-apply their make-up, and re-comb their hair. So Frederico gets impatient and usually sends me.

"Everybody knows gringa women don't bother with these things," he'll say in Spanish, and it usually gets a laugh.

Often new women wander down the driveway looking for a job and telling their stories: can't buy milk for the baby, sister needs an operation, father is dying, landlord kicking them out. It's my job to talk to them.

Frederico stands behind me and listens, smiling. He likes to hear the stories, but he's also checking on me. He says to stop telling the women we don't have work, to stop saying we can't give them a job or promise them one, even if
we can't.

He leans back against the little steel table he built to spot-weld wire into six-foot long strips of mesh that are layered onto the boat frame. Once the six layers have been applied -- nine months, maybe a year from now -- Frederico will spray on cement to form the hull.

"In Spanish 'can't promise' means no," he says, "and it's rude. Their lives are hard enough. Tell them we might be able to take them on, that they should come back tomorrow, that we hope so, that if God is willing there might be something soon."

Before I can say anything, before I can argue for straight answers, for things I still consider decent, Idali is standing next to Frederico. She has a pretty face and a tall, delicate figure. She's in love with Frederico and used to leave him anonymous love poems. He taught her to arc weld.

He smiles at her and then at me. "Don't worry," he says to me in English. "They understand Spanish. They'll know what you mean."

I met Luis in the tourist hotel where I stayed the first week I was here. He was the afternoon bartender, with quick but graceful hands and an intriguing way of talking without looking at me. He knew a little English and was patient with my Spanish. What can I say? I guess I was ready for
something to happen.

In the evening when he got off work we'd cross the street and sit on the cement bench along the ocean and smell the honey breeze. We'd watch the black and white man o' war birds fly in formation over the beach and listen to salsa drift through the bamboo walls of the dance clubs. Sometimes clouds grew from the sea, their tops on fire with sunset. We'd watch the liquid blue belly of the world fade and then darken, stretching off into forever like the new hope of our lives.

I fell in love on the wide beach, in that dark place just beyond where the sidewalk lights fade in the sand. Or maybe it wasn't love. Maybe it was flight, and I needed someone to see me, watch me soar. Whatever, once we touched I knew I was out there. I'd never felt it before. There was the sensation of leaping, of suspension, of absolute, unbearable danger. I was afraid to close my eyes so I kept them open, watched over his shoulder the phosphorescent waves breaking on the sand, felt on my body the weight and pulse of the sea.

Poor Luis. We were married within a month. I was a long way from home and I hung on awfully tight.

Idali has two small children, is 18-years-old, has an ex-husband who lives in another town and comes here when he wants to see the children or to beat her up. Her mother
says she should move back with her ex-husband because he's going to be a doctor and speaks English and went to the United States once. He even looks a little like a gringo.

Idali says she was raped last year by a man who came to her in the dark and woke her up with a knife against her neck. She thinks her ex-husband got the man to do it, was trying to scare her into moving back with him and his mother where she does all of the housework and his mother does none. Idali is a rebellious Cinderella, but her prince is a bad one and nobody in La Barranquilla has ever been invited to a ball.

Frederico taught Sonya to arc weld first. Before Sonya got this job in the boatyard she worked in the tuna plant for two years, where she earned a total of two thousand dollars and one baby. That's what she told me, giggling. She had her first child before the tuna plant job. She thought she was going to marry that man, that father, but he got a job in the capital and then the baby died.

This new father, this tuna-plant father, just boxed cans with her and for good luck they never talked about getting married.

Sonya and Idali were friends until Frederico took Sonya aside and called her his factotum, in English, and made tea for her and began to teach her about welding rods, voltage, metal gauges and alloys.
Idali was falling in love with Frederico at the time, so she told Frederico that Sonya was rara, odd. She told the other women that Sonya drank beer and smoked marijuana. She said Sonya was an old piece of leather, and that she was grinding coffee, which meant you could see too clearly the way her hips moved under her dress when she walked.

Sonya wasn't in love with Frederico. She was a good worker and she tried to do her job, but she also tried to keep her distance from Frederico because she could hear the others talking. Frederico didn't like a factotum who shied away from him. He called her chucara, which means like a pony that spooks easily. Finally, he replaced her with Idali. That's when he started getting the love poems, unsigned, left on his cot or behind a pot or pan in the corner of his shed, and he figured out the situation.

He never said anything about the poems but one day he told Sonya to put on the welding gear again.

That's how Frederico got two factotums -- Sonya and Idali have been alternating the arc welding job every other week. They can't work together because they won't speak to one another. For a while, Frederico gave it coal, which means he fanned the fires, which means he found it funny and interesting to watch Sonya and Idali fight and he wouldn't do anything to mediate. He told me he'd read War and Peace eight times and knew there was nothing he could do. He told me there was love and hate and work and sin and everybody
did them all because they couldn't help it, even if they tried not to.

Luis and I lived in a two-room cement block house with a wooden table, a few wooden chairs, a two-burner gas hot plate, and a refrigerator that worked for a while and then stopped. Luis worked in a fish house and I didn't, and that was the best we could do.

My fiance in Indiana worked as a J. C. Penny store manager. I was studying to be a medical technician. We did all right, would have done all right, I'm sure. He had soft brown eyes and a black beard, wide, white, gentle fingers that he used to stroke my neck, the length of my spine. But it was his eyes that were something. His devotion showed in them. That's why I couldn't look at him when I left. That's why I could never look at him.

I left a note. I told him I was sorry, which was the only true thing I wrote. And I wasn't sorry to leave, only to leave him. Sometimes when I ache the most I think of him. I'm sure I broke his heart. He was decent and kind and I wonder if that's the part of me that's missing. But I felt close to nothing good or bad with him, nothing rich or grand or dangerous. I didn't love him.

Here, in the evening after dinner both the rooms of our house were lit by a single bare bulb hanging from the ceiling. So Luis and I would go out. We'd walk. I'd hold
his arm and we'd stroll past the other couples on the benches in the park, down the brightly-lit Avenida Central past the shops selling pretty furniture and fans and electrical appliances, past the bars and the restaurants and the cars blaring music. I'd feel as though I was hanging from a delicate spider strand, twisting in a brave new world. The bottom had dropped out of my life and yet everything glowed. We'd eat ice cream, sit just inside an open window. Luis would relax and smile, and for a moment be happy.

But on the way home we'd wind back along the dark estuary and I could feel the tension come back in his arm. We'd pass houses with walled gardens. He didn't like to stop, but at the wrought-iron gates I'd pause long enough to glimpse the stone paths twisting through ferns and hanging plants, the yellow glow of useless lanterns, the shiny, parked trucks.

I wanted a tended jungle. Luis wanted a truck. And because we had each other, maybe, because we were a couple, the urgency grew until it was bigger than both of us. I'd hold his arm and we'd covet together, feel the seeds of envy begin to choke our stomachs with weeds.

The women went to The Exorcist last night. Standing up on the scaffolding this morning, using little wire clips to attach the strips of wire mesh to the hull of the boat,
Wilma tells me about a girl in La Barranquilla who had the devil in her.

It is very hot and there's no shade here where we work. My neck is sore from looking up at the hull, my eyes from squinting, and my fingers are oily from twisting the clips. I use a pliers and twist each piece as tight as I can.

Wilma doesn't. I watch her fingers carefully while she tells me how the devil entered this girl in La Barranquilla, how the devil made her pregnant and crazy so that whenever she was in a room by herself, the walls talked and the ceiling laughed. The girl had to be outside, Wilma says, even in the rain, and all she ate was earth. Finally she was taken away by a witch, but nobody knows where, or what happened because she never came back and it was bad luck even to talk about her.

Wilma says *si Dios quiere*, if God wills it, or *que le guarde Dios*, may God protect you, more than anybody else. She has never been to the capital. She's never even been to Esparza, which is only ten kilometers away on the road to the capital. Although she's never been farther than three miles from the Pacific Ocean in her life, she's never gone swimming. Her parents are very strict. They won't let her out past ten p.m., which nobody is very sure of because they don't have a clock in the house. She told me she's scared of the capital, and has never even wanted to go there.
Wilma is scared of many things, peeping out at the world with almond-shaped, black, vacant eyes, as if earth were the moon. The world somehow turns without her, and always has, and she's not going to get into an act she has no idea of. She doesn't work to do a good job; she works to try not to screw up -- which she does all the time anyway because she never trusts her judgment, because she never learned how, because she never pays attention, because the universe has always consisted of her on one side and the world on the other.

She tells me her father says there are piles of bull dung in the pasture, not to mention mean bulls. And little girls (especially little girls) with bare feet shouldn't go walking. If you can stay out (little boys must tease the bull, but little girls are allowed to stay out) then you should, right?

Nevertheless, Wilma has been sneaking around with a married man lately. Talk about bull dung. This man has children all over town. The other women laugh and tell her to watch out, that if she even goes so far as to drink from the same glass as he, she might get pregnant.

The back of my neck is sticky with sweat. Occasionally a breeze ruffles the mangroves along the estuary and a moment later I feel it on my skin like somebody's warm breath.

Idali is welding with Frederico by the shed. They are
working on a 10-foot tall piece of scrap that looks a little like a lunar landing module. Frederico is going to make a compressor that can build enough pressure to spray cement onto the hull of the boat. He wears a leather apron and a welding mask covers his face, but Idali keeps her mask up as much as possible. She shows Frederico her tentative little smile, or else she knits her brow in order to magnify the depth of her concentration, reverence.

Sonya and Sari are at the spot-welding table, stretching six parallel wires along its length and attaching short cross pieces to make the mesh. Every half hour or so, Sari carries over what they have done and lays it on the scaffolding, where Wilma and I work. They are close enough so that I can hear them talk and every now and then Wilma joins their conversation. I listen and here are some of the things I learn:

If you're pregnant, eat a lot of pineapple and papaya. Drink a teaspoon of Linaza. Lemon juice is good for tired eyes but stings terribly. Sugar in water is good for tired eyes, too -- sugar in water is good for everything. Feed a baby corn starch with milk. Skinny babies die. Sonya's first baby was a skinny.

The lottery means something, sure it does: 16-death. 9-marriage. 13-rain. 4-somebody you know will get sick. 5-a baby (no specifics). 10-you will soon fall in love.
When we take a break, Sari lights a match and drops it--many long nights at home waiting and wondering where he is--and whichever direction the burning end points is the direction her boyfriend is. Sari is fat and her nickname is Mortadela, which means bologna. She has a double chin and droopy eyelids painted pink.

She has me try the match trick. I drop it and the match points toward the estuary. I stare for a while through the mangroves at blue waves and the folding green mountains that rise from the far shore and I think it may as well be true.

But as long as he's there and not here, it doesn't matter where there is, does it?

Frederico is standing behind me, so close that when he speaks I'm startled. He says that what men do is smoke cigarettes and throw the butts. Men wonder if they are being thought about.

He holds the cigarette and explains that if the burning end lands pointing toward the thrower, his love is thinking of him.

He flicks the butt and it lands just right, the ash pointing back at him. I suspect he's got the method down, but for a moment I'm very uncomfortable.

He looks past me and smiles and says in English, "Probably Idali. She's about half mad, don't you think?"

I tell him she just burnt her fingers playing with
matches, which makes him laugh out loud.

I'm lying on his cot, the only place to lie down in the cool shade of his shed during noon break. The shed is full of tools and pipes, and it smells of condensed milk and engine oil. We've eaten rice and beans and fried plantains, so I can smell those, too. Frederico is tinkering with a piece of metal that makes an uncomfortable scratching noise when he moves it across his bench.

"Frederico?" I say.

The walls are brown planking and the ceiling corrugated zinc. The only light comes from a window above his bench and the large open door on the far end. Next to the window hangs an engraved panel that Frederico told me he'd salvaged from the cabin of his first boat, the sailboat he built in Europe. Engraved in the wood are German words, a quotation of some sort.

It's taken me a while but I'm curious.

"Frederico?" I say again.

The scratching stops. He walks over and sits down on a stack of wooden pallets next to the cot. He leans toward me.

"What does the quote mean?" I ask.

He's surprised, and a crease deepens between his brows.

"What quote?"

I point.
"Oh!" His eyes grow wide. "Haven't I translated it before?"

"No."

He stands up anxiously then, like a child getting ready to recite, smiling. "Nietzsche," he says, without looking at me. He licks his lips. "'Would we cross the sea? Where does this mighty longing draw us? Will it be said of us one day that we too, steering westward, hoped to reach India -- but that it was our fate to be wrecked upon infinity?'"

His eyes twinkle with pleasure and irony and generosity when he finishes, and he sits down again on the pallets. He's a little closer this time.

I'm about to tell him I think it's a pretty gloomy quote for the cabin of a boat, but he's suddenly launched into a story about when he went to San Francisco once. He says somebody took him to a dirty movie. He says it was like putting food in front of a hungry man, and then taking it away. Outside the theater, hookers came around but he thought them very expensive.

He doesn't smile when he tells me this story. He says everybody should see one of those movies and I know he means me.

Frederico often talks to me as though I were a man. Once he said this is the way it is with a woman: first she wants you to love her, to say you love her. Then she wants you to
promise you'll love her forever, to marry her. Then, after that, she'll want a house and a family from you -- the house for her comfort and old age, and the family for her immortality. Then, maybe, those wants met and secure, she will want to change the color of the walls or the rug. And if she has everything else (your love, your promises, your house, your children), if she has everything else she will want this new wall paint or rug just as badly as she ever wanted anything.

"See," he said, smiling, but this time sadly, "women can be as rapacious as men."

I remember not having anything to say. There was a time in my life I might have argued with him, might have pointed out that what he said wasn't true in all cases. But I knew that's not what he meant, that's not what he was thinking.

After lunch on the way into town to get an electrical switch from the hardware store, I pass a familiar man selling snowcones from a pink and orange cart on the sidewalk.

He sneezes and quickly says, "Jesumaria!" Then he says hurry, hurry, only forty left.

Nobody buys any. He scrapes some more snow from the big block of ice on his cart, puts it in a paper cone. Then he says here's one, here's one, un copo con toda la pata, toda la patona! A snowcone with all of the leg, all of the (very much-big-wonderful) leg!
The snowcone begins to melt. He takes off his white canvas hat and rubs his fingers through his hair and then replaces the hat. He sneezes again -- "Jesumaria!"

He is older than most of the snowcone sellers and I used to wonder if he was married, and if he was how he could support a family. But it is finally sinking into my brain that he can't. He does what he can like everybody else and then keeps a little for himself, enough to get drunk, enough to play the lottery. When he sees me he smiles, points to the snowcone and says in English, "Vedy cheap, my love! Almost free!"

By the time I get back, the letters from Senor Garcia have arrived and are sitting in Frederico's shed, still unopened. I justify the firing in my mind. It's not hard. Wilma's strips of mesh are horribly attached to the hull, and Idali is absolutely distracted by her love for Frederico.

On the scaffolding behind me I can hear Sari talking about how her television zapped out in the thunderstorm. She just bought it and still owes most of the money to El Polaco. Sonya says Sari was born with bad luck, something about the moon.

El Polaco is the fellow to whom everybody owes money. If you miss a payment, you make it up with two more. If you miss two payments, the threat will be made. If you miss three . . well, you beg, you prostitute or you steal but you
don't miss three.

Besides the television, I know Sari also bought a sewing machine that will take three years to pay for. These are good things, a television, a sewing machine. But the job, the pay, it comes and goes and three years or even a year and a half is a gamble. **Si Dios quiere.** You've got to do something and all you can do is gamble. *Que le guarde Dios.*

Luis's plan was to go to Panama, buy some things cheap and smuggle them back into Costa Rica to sell. Things like blenders and portable stereos, anything and as much as he could fit under the false bed of a friend's pickup truck. It was a chance to make a lot of money, a chance for a change. What could I say? I never thought he wouldn't come back. I waited for three or four days and when he didn't arrive I expected a note or a phone call, and when that didn't happen I got angry. I could see him wasting our money in the city. I could see him doing all sorts of things I didn't want to imagine. I thought of great arguments to fling in his face when I saw him again.

But he still didn't come. Weeks passed and then a month. I went from angry to worried to downright panicky. He was in jail, I thought, prosecuted as a kingpin of a blender and stereo smuggling ring. He was being tortured. His body would turn up mutilated and swollen beyond
recognition in a jungle mass grave. I'd be asked to take
the bus down to Panama and identify his teeth. I tried to
imagine what his teeth looked like and wondered if I'd
recognize them. I wondered if I'd have to hold a
handkerchief over my nose.

I was running out of money too. The spider strand from
which I'd been hanging was fraying, and the world quickly
dulled. What I feared most was falling and having nobody to
call with. I began to fear being alone.

I spent the hottest part of the day walking the streets
of the city, or strolling the mile-long beach from the dock
to the point and back again. I was trying to believe as
hard as I could that he would come back. I thought if I
remembered him hard enough, if I endured long enough, he'd
come back.

I kept telling myself that the world was the same,
really, that the ships would keep coming in and unloading
grain under a dust cloud, that the freight cars would keep
rumbling up the wharf empty and coming down full. I told
myself the waves splashed the beach just as always, the
long-legged shore birds still stayed ahead of the foam, and
Luis would be sitting outside in our blue plastic rocking
chair when I got home.

And then I got sick.

This was three months ago. It was my neighbor,
Frederico's ex-wife, dona Margarit, who nursed me out of it.
I don't know how much time I passed in bed, a week or two. But that's when the dream started. I'd close my eyes and I wouldn't even have to fall asleep to hear the knock on the door, to see Luis. For a long time I wanted to stay in bed with my eyes closed and never open them again.

But the dreams got weirder. I'd hear the knock and immediately think it was my ex-fiancé. I'd be naked, above the sheets, and I'd sweat with fear and shame because I didn't want him to see me. But then the door would open and Luis would step in. He'd stroke my head until I calmed, blow cool air the length of my body. I'd be as happy as I'd ever been. I'd surrender to his hands and breath, and then he'd start to choke me.

Dona Margarit spoke Spanish with a heavy Portugese accent. She checked on me four times a day, brought me plates of rice and beans, with culantro and a fried egg. She blamed the dreams on the fever, said something in my head had changed shape, and now the rest of my brain was getting used to it. They'd go away, she said. She'd been through a lot of times of bad dreams. She brought me tall, cool glasses of tamarindo water whenever she'd hear me wake up screaming.

When I was well enough to get out of bed, dona Margarit got me this job in the boatyard with Frederico.

I couldn't afford the rent on the house anymore so I moved down to the Pension Juanita. The day I left, dona
Margarit invited me inside her cement-block house that opened directly onto the sidewalk.

It was cool inside, white, and the ceramic floor immaculately polished. A wooden rocking chair with elaborate carvings and an orange-vinyl coffee table were set in the middle of the front room. A large fan on a stand sent a breeze from the corner.

She told me that although Frederico was very talented, he wasn't a man for steady work, for the house, for the children. Well, she said, sometimes for the children. She told me his family had money. She said his sister in San Fernandez had a palace for a house, but Frederico was content to eat and read and listen to beautiful music, even though the front window was just a piece of screen for sixteen years and the walls were unpainted cement and there was no kitchen to speak of and barely any furniture.

She led me into her bedroom, where she took a yellowed lace handkerchief from the top drawer of her particle-board dresser. She unwrapped the handkerchief and handed me a photo.

"This is the girl he was going around with," she said.

The photo meant nothing to me. Out of courtesy, I held it in front of my face. The young woman's black hair had been puffed up in the style of the 1960's. I gave it back.

"When his old friends from Switzerland came to visit,"
dona Margarit said, "Frederico went completely crazy. They went out every night. I'd lock the door so when they came home they'd have to cut the screen and crawl through the window to sleep on the living room floor. Each day for two weeks Frederico would fix the screen, and then at night he'd cut it again."

She was re-wrapping the photo carefully in the handkerchief. She placed it back in the top drawer of the dresser. Her hair was dirty gray and she rarely dressed in more than pajamas and a bathrobe. After the war they'd lived in England and Frederico taught German and Spanish, she said. They bought bicycles and pedaled through Germany and France and Spain to Portugal. Her family was crazy for him, everything for Frederico!

Now she sold homemade popcycles from her back door, and trying to picture her on a bicycle and young was hard.

We stepped outside then, over the threshold onto the sidewalk. I held her elbow as she lowered herself into the rocker in the shade of an almond tree. I loved dona Margarit, and I pitied her. I tried to believe that life and love would never do to me what they'd done to her. It's amazing the things you can make yourself believe if you have to.

"Of course you never know when you marry a man," she said. "There are so many things that you simply cannot know."
Idali's eyes have swollen from welding without her mask. They are red and puffy and watering, and she stands on her tiptoes and gets very close to Frederico so he can see.

Sari tells her that leche del pecho, breast milk, is just the thing. The others agree. Sari's breasts are filled with this miracle drug. The two women giggle and press into the bathroom together to somehow get milk from Mortadela's breast into Idali's eyes.

Frederico is smiling and pacing and talking, curious. "Nipple to eye directly," he asks, "or some other way?" His question is in English so he can only be talking to me: teasing me, prodding shameless gringa me: I've never even seen breast milk: what am I?

"I'm going to tell them now," I say.

"Well, tell them there's just not enough money right now," Frederico says. "Tell them nothing is certain forever, a job or a lay off."

Of course it is certain. It was his decision and he made it. He wants to be ready to spray cement in six months and we're not even close to where we should be.

"Tell them it all depends and it's out of our hands."

Idali comes out of the bathroom blinking. She shifts from one foot to another, standing in front of Frederico.

"Agua fria?" Frederico says to her, smiling, handing
her the blue plastic jug.

She's wearing a red bandana in her black hair. She lifts the jug to her lips and tilts her head back to drink. Sweat shines on her forehead and neck, and water drips from the spout, making a wet spot on her pink tank top between her breasts.

I would love to stand the way she stands, so straight, comfortably, it seems, her soul alive in her flesh. I envy her feeling as though that were enough, the mere fact of her body, a gift.

Frederico teases her. He says he'll make her a wonderful chicken dinner with fruit salad if she would care to join him after work. He says she's welcome to stay the night on the extra cot, of course, and he'd take her to the hospital should her eyes get worse.

Idali is almost dying, she's so happy, but she says she can't because her mother would wonder.

I step forward, ask to speak with her and Wilma alone. They accompany me to the bench in front of the shed, where they were sitting this morning. It's shady now, the entire bench, which is what I want because the heat and everything else is making me impatient.

They both sit down and I give them the news. I tell them the letters from Mr. Garcia are in the shed on Frederico's work bench. I tell them I'm sorry.

Wilma's broad, almond eyes drop to her bare feet, which
she keeps together. Her toenails are painted bright red.

Idali's eyes search the mangroves behind me and then look at Sonya spot welding, and then directly at me. She can't look at Frederico because she's still in love with him, but she can look at me. I know she's laughed at me before, at the way I dress and the way I talk, so I want to feel good for the power I hold over her. But I can't. I'm older and I have been much farther than the capital, but what she shows in her puffy, red eyes makes me feel much less lived.

"We might be able to hire you back," I say. "Check again tomorrow. It's up to the plant and it's out of our hands . . ." They nod and shrug at the sound of my voice. They know what's meant. But something they do with their faces tells me I'm not really in the game, that I'm from there and not here, that I'm telling a lie and they know it and they're politely letting me play.

Frederico finishes measuring a piece of re-bar and then walks up behind me. Idali blushes. Wilma tells him she thinks she's pregnant. Frederico nods and shrugs. He's interested; he wants the story. What she says is probably a lie, but si Dios quiere might just as well be true.

After work Frederico asks me to stay. He knows I'm not feeling good about things. He invites me into his shed and I sit down on the cot. He's rearranging a lot of stuff on
his counter, setting up an old portable record player.

He bustles around the room like my mother used to bustle around the kitchen. He fishes a bottle of wine from behind a shelf. He pours some into the steel top of an old thermos jug, hands it to me.

"Thank you," I say. I drink it fast, a couple of gulps, and he pours me another quickly. I can feel my face flush, a little burst of high. I smile at Frederico. He raises the bottle to his lips.

My hands are oily from the wire mesh, and probably my face is too, but I don't care. I drink the second cup and I feel all right.


He pours me more, tilts the bottle back and takes a long drink himself. He licks his lips when he finishes. Then he turns and walks over to the record player, stops, and leans back against the steel counter. He has the most used-looking hands and feet I've ever seen. They are wide and calloused and strong. "The Nazis drafted me but I deserted," he says. "Do you understand that?"

I'm suddenly confused by the subject, but I nod.

He smiles with his lips together. "My blood is German," he says, "I'm not."

I finish the third cup of wine. I like the sound of his voice. I like the way he looks framed by the light from the window as he puts a 78 rpm record on the player. Behind
him, the green of the mangroves seems over-exposed and the water in the estuary shines like a mirage.

Then he leans close and pours more wine into my cup. I can smell his hair. When he bends his arm I can see a faint scar about four inches long on his elbow. I imagine a bayonet wound. I imagine an undercover mission into Germany.

He's standing up straight now, at attention, looking at the wall above my head. All he's wearing are a pair of cut-off shorts, and safety goggles that hang from his neck.

The music begins, scratchy band music, an oom-pah-pah, and then a baritone voice singing an old German marching song. I can't understand the words. Frederico's eyes narrow as he listens. The surface of his skin, the smooth edge of his form, seems to dissolve in the light and I can feel him going far away. He's thinking of someone he loved. Someone left behind by time, someone who lives only in this song. Maybe Margarit. I suddenly feel very sad.

Then he begins to sing, to accompany the recorded voice. And when I hear him I know he's singing a duet with himself, that the voice on the record is his as a young man. I can barely stand it. I see beer gardens, and happy men marching. I see women waving handkerchiefs. I see blue European skies on cool, fall days. And for a moment I think I could love him. For a mad moment when the goosebumps rise on my neck and I see his chest hair sparkle in the light from the window, I know I could.
When he finishes the song, I put my cup down, stand up, and walk toward him. He's still standing straight, at attention. I try to catch his eyes, but he won't look at me. I stand next to him, on my tiptoes, and stretch to kiss his cheek.

Then I leave.

Back to the Pension Juanita, I take a shower. The heat and the wine, and the ride home on my bicycle, have given me a headache. The water is neither hot nor cold, but something tepid and briny. I duck my head and let it wash my neck and shoulders, stream down the length of my body. I look at the new sheet metal on the wall, finger the red, hand-painted letters, and suddenly I see how relentless it can be. We are born; we grow up; we learn to desire and to be afraid. We love and lose, and as time passes it can leave a hole so aching we try to fill the emptiness with little pieces of our soul.

The sudden simplicity makes me laugh. Maybe it's the wine. I'm as relaxed as I've been in a long time. I feel the relief of the fear draining, the actual physical flow of it, and so I'm surprised when I smell the first acrid smell of my urine. The line between hope and despair is thin, and the falling feels the same, so you don't know to which side you've fallen until you land. When I look between my feet the last of the yellow swirls is draining through the hole
At night in the hollow of my mattress he's here again. I can feel him very close. His breath warms a spot on my neck; his lips make tiny noises near my ear. Then the bed sways to his weight and his fingertips linger at my waist. We're sinking through blue water, holding on but twisting and falling, and his face and mouth are mine. His hands and body are mine. He's here. And I'm drowning.

I stop. I open my eyes and over the door of my room I can see the gray light from the television in the lobby, hear the sounds of the nightly horror movie, the growls, the supernatural screams. He's gone. I think about that. He's gone and he's not coming back. And for a moment in this near-dark, half-dream, I begin to understand something about being alone.

In the lobby the show has ended and the set is turned off. I listen to the quiet voices of Teresita the teenage prostitute, Pepe the runaway, Violeta the cock-eyed cook, Berta the housewife from next door, and don Jose, The World's Oldest Carpenter.

Their voices flirt and dodge like yellow and blue butterflies in the heavy air. They talk about babies and roosters and people who died, about the Virgin Mary and cousins in Chicago, fathers who drink and the price of rice, about witches and dreams and the sons of whores. They talk
about the absolutely endless possibilities presented by this year's quadrangular soccer championships, and in the background I can hear Pepe's sweet voice singing, Hey Ju, don be a foo.

When I dare to close my eyes again I'm floating on my back in the Gulf of Nicoya. I see the blue sky and the clouds and the fishing boats and the decks piled with pretty red and orange fish. I'm expecting to sink, to drown here, alone, to watch the sky blur as the first wave rolls over my face. But I don't.

What I do is let my feet drop, and to my surprise I feel the sand. I stand and walk as best I can out of the waves.