Mrs. Love [Short stories]

Keith Dunlap

The University of Montana

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Mrs. Love

By

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Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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Table of Contents

Good Behavior................................................................. 1

Marly................................................................. 25

Mrs. Love................................................................. 48

Twenty-Three Hours In A Day................................. 60
Carolyn Farmer uncoiled the long and uncooperative hose from its storage shed near the primate house. Bobo, the alpha male of the zoo’s small tribe of orangutans, made a big pretense of not seeing what she was up to, as if the hose and its jet of water meant nothing to him. Like a bully in a playground, he swung himself on his knuckles across the rock-a-pile where Penelope, his concubine, sat, preening and cooing over a stuffed animal. Carolyn worried that maybe he was going to use the docile Penelope as a shield. Over a period of several months, Carolyn had introduced the principles of motherhood to Penelope, using the teddy bear as a stand-in for the real baby who would arrive courtesy of the San Diego zoo as soon as it was born. Carolyn had painstakingly demonstrated how to cradle the infant, how to feed it with a bottle, how to pick it up and set it down tenderly as a real mother would her own child and Penelope had learned to mimic these behaviors, always eager to please her favorite zookeeper. And Carolyn had
been pleased, but now that the big day approached, she vacillated between excitement and dread as if she were going to have a baby herself. Bobo, for one thing, could not be trusted. For the most part during the training sessions he had kept his distance, but every once in a while, like all men, he had felt the urge to assert himself. He would take Penelope as one might take a shirt off a hangar and abuse her in the most vulgar way, and she would give in without a shred of protest, dropping her charge at her feet until he was through. Sometimes, Carolyn thought, she would like to cut his balls off. He was such a hog for attention and mean-spirited, infamous for spitting at zoo goers whom he had tricked by waving them into his range. Perhaps it was because he had been sterilized.

"Tough beans, buster," Carolyn said.

The orangutan colony had a minor lice epidemic and, since she suspected Bobo was too proud to clean himself, she hosed him down vigorously. The stream of water chased him back into a corner away from Penelope and, when she was finished, he pouted at her, begging for a reasonable explanation. He didn’t understand that she was only doing her job.

"Sorry," she said.
She had some life-savers in her pocket and she tossed him one, knowing how much he liked sweets. He took his consolation prize and stuck it on the end of his tongue and wagged it at her. What he did with it was his business as far as she was concerned. Twenty minutes until quitting time and she wanted to check the voice-mail account she had reserved at the Seattle Stranger. A week ago, she had placed a personal ad.

Attractive SWF, 35, seeks man, 30-40, for meaningful conversation and possible romance. No drugs. No smokers. Must love animals.

She had fretted over the word “attractive.” She didn’t want to appear boasting, but understood that she had to describe herself somehow. Even if she didn’t fully believe it herself, it seemed general enough that no one would take exception. She changed in her office as she always did. This morning when she had weighed herself, the needle on the scale had hovered uncertainly at 97 lbs., but she was sure it was lying to her, that she had gained some weight recently. Her jogging shorts were baggy enough that she hoped she looked skinny even if she wasn’t. She ran her fingers over her hip bone to feel if any fat had sprouted there.

Every night after work she ran exactly 7.2 miles around Green Lake in a clock-wise direction. It was
Wagner Hour on her favorite radio station and she kept her headphones loud enough so that she couldn’t hear the other runners yelling obscenities at her. Seven years she had been running in the same direction and she wasn’t going to change just because the city council two years ago had decided that everyone should go counter-clockwise around the Lake. At the north end, she saw the reading man sitting on the same bench where he always sat. Although he never looked up from his book, she measured her pace as she passed, making sure that her strides were long and graceful, and she was ready to wave hello if he did. A girl would be lucky to get a man like that, she thought. Someone dependable. Someone with interests. He was obviously careful about his personal appearance. His hair was short and neatly combed. His shirts, oxford blue or white, clean and pressed. She even considered stopping to engage him in conversation, ask him what he was reading. It was a natural opening. But then, she thought better about it. Her heart rate was getting up. She was burning calories and she needed to keep going.

Her best friend, Triana, had been nagging her to take some chances with her life. The personal ad was her idea. “You could do much better than that loser, Mark,” she had said. It was easy for Triana. She had a high metabolism. Men flocked to her. Also, she didn’t
understand how sweet Mark could be sometimes. She didn’t understand his problems. Mark had what was called Attention Deficit Disorder. It wasn’t his fault that he couldn’t stick to anything. He did his best. Just last week he had called her on her birthday.

Besides she wasn’t convinced that she needed a boyfriend. Her stock portfolio was as moody and aloof, delivered the same mixture of disappointment and delight. Her real problem was that she never knew what to look for in a man. Handsome men were too vain. Rich men too pushy. None of them could look after themselves.

Her cat, Fifty-Fifty, sprawled on the sofa where she had left him that morning. He was too sickly to raise his head. The phone on the kitchen counter had more life than he did.

“Meow,” she said as she prepared an enema for Fifty-Fifty. “Meow.” She was always scared that he would be dead when she got home and she reprimanded herself for even thinking to listen to her messages before she gave him his medicine. The vet had wanted to put him down, just like a man, but she had kept him alive for five months now. She couldn’t understand how people could give up on something that only needed love and help, especially something that was so dear to her. Just last week she had read a story about a woman who had abandoned
her baby in a dumpster down at the waterfront. It was unthinkable. Fifty-Fifty needed her help. Mark needed her help.

Maybe the ad wasn’t such a good idea. Maybe she should give Mark another chance. Not only had he remembered her birthday, but when he had called, he had told her that he was back on his Ritalin and was thinking about not smoking so much pot. When she had proffered this bit of news to Triana, Triana had laughed in her face. "It takes seven years for THC to get out of your system," she had said. "You want to wait?" She wished she was that carefree and sophisticated. Triana belonged to a reading group, did the crossword puzzle, and had a new haircut and a new boyfriend every week. But life wasn’t as simple for her. She felt responsible for Mark’s misfortunes. She had, after all, left him at a very difficult time, just when he had found out that his disability check was going to be discontinued. She decided she would brush her hair first and then listen to her messages. After a harrowing day, it was just the thing.

Her father had brushed her hair for her when she was a girl, showing her the proper way to do it. The trick was not to drag, but to glide the brush over the ends, holding the hair firmly so that it wouldn’t pull the
scalp. "My perfect little princess has perfect princess hair," he would say. It was still her best feature. She sat on the far end of the couch away from Fifty-Fifty. She didn't want to disturb him in case he had fallen asleep. The morphine sometimes made him groggy. She was almost done, the strands of her hair practically purring, when she finally made up her mind. She was hungry, but, she could always make a cup of bouillon for herself later. Half a cube only had sixty-five calories.

She dialed and waited, then punched her account number in as she was instructed. Everything was so much more complicated than it needed to be. Penelope had it easy. No dating. No fuss. One zoo was going to send another zoo a baby. She didn't need to know anything about it. She didn't have to endure the tedium of courtship nor the agony of being pregnant. Instant motherhood. All she had to do was take care of the thing when it arrived.

A mechanical voice announced that she had six messages in her mailbox. Six, she wondered. Was that a lot? Maybe she should have been more specific in her ad. In order to narrow it down, she would have to think of something. Perhaps she would ask each of them what his favorite book was. In order to hear the first message, she hit the pound key and, then, the number one.
"I’d like to fuck you doggy style. I’d like to fuck you and make you bark like a dog, you bitch, you fucking bitch."

She panicked, fumbling with the buttons on the phone. Her fingers couldn’t work fast enough, trying to make this message go away and skip to the next. It was offensive and rude and uncalled for. Didn’t that sicko have anything better to do with his time? Finally she found the right combination of buttons to make this creep go away.

None of the rest of the messages did much for her. She flipped through them the way you would flip through the channels on the TV. There was a religious freak.

"What you are seeking cannot be found in the right man or the right job. It is not too late, however, to find salvation. Welcome Christ into your heart and all your worldly troubles will melt away."

This time her fingers had no trouble finding the right buttons. He had one thing right. A boyfriend wasn’t really a solution to anything. The problem was in thinking there was a problem. She had a good job. She had Fifty-Fifty. She had stocks.

Number Three was a real doozy.

"Elizabeth, I know this is you. You can’t fool me. I know what you are doing. Two can play at this game. Maybe
it's not you. I'm sorry if it's someone else, but it just sounds like it could be my girlfriend."

For some reason, this message disturbed her more than all the others. She didn't like the idea of someone thinking she was someone else and, at the same time, she worried for this woman she didn't know, whose boyfriend was so jealous he was scanning the personals, searching for an excuse to cheat on her. There was nothing she could do about it and that bothered most of all.

Four and Five was the pervert again.

"Doggy style. Woof. Woof."
The last time she hit the button before he was half-way through.

"Take that, smarty-pants," she said.

Six caught her by surprise.

"Hi, my name is David Andrews. I saw your ad. I don't normally do this kind of thing, but I figured what the heck. I don't smoke. I don't do drugs. Oh, and I have a hamster. Does that count? My number is 836-35-oh-5."

Finally. It was only one genuine response, but it was a relief. She would have liked him better if he had said zero-five instead of oh-five, but he had a voice that sounded bright and normal. She wrote his number down and immediately called Triana.

"Any nibbles?" she asked.
Carolyn walked into the kitchen while she talked so she wouldn't have to see herself in the hallway mirror.

"One," she answered. "Well, two, but the other one was some kind of sick person. Oh, and some guy called thinking that I was his girlfriend. He reminded me of Mark, sort of."

"Was he stoned?"

"You know," she started to say, but didn't complete her thought. She didn't want to get into a another discussion about Mark with Triana. "He had a good demeanor on the phone."

"The Mark guy?"

"No. Mark gets freaked out by phones. Bachelor number one."

Triana laughed. She thought Carolyn was a riot, although most of the time she hadn't meant to make a joke, or didn't think she had.

"Are you going to call him back? Mr. Demeanor, I mean."

"His name is David Andrews. Do you think I should?"

"Isn't that the point of placing a personal ad in the paper? You don't have to see him. Just call him up and feel him out. If he's garbage, you don't even have to get your hands dirty."
The image disgusted her. She thought about sitting with Mark in the basement apartment of his parent’s house and giving him a hand job so that she wouldn’t have to take her clothes off in order to have sex. She didn’t like to do it, but she felt she had to, if she was going to keep seeing him, after all, men had needs, and she always packed a stack of tissues and a travel-size bottle of baby lotion when she went on a date.

“What if he’s a weirdo?” she asked.

“You are hopeless. Who could be weirder than Mark?”

“I don’t know,” she said.

“Here’s what you do,” said Triana. “You call him right now, then call me right back and tell me everything he said, word for word. I’ll tell you yes or no. Okay?”

As she listened to David Andrew’s phone ring, she prayed that he would not be home and that she could hang up without leaving a message.

“Hello,” said the same chipper voice.

“Is this David Andrews?” she asked. Already she was on the wrong foot. His voice unnerved her. It was professional sounding, like the recording on the movie line.

“What can I do for you?” It was a thrilling question. She thought of him mowing her lawn, ironing her hand-towels, re-caulking the border of her tub.
"This is Carolyn Farmer. You answered my personal ad."

"Ms. Farmer," he stated without surprise. "I'm so glad you called me back."

Ms. Farmer. She liked that.

"I'm sorry if I sound a little strange," she added. "It's just that I've never done this before either."

"Not at all," he reassured her. "You probably have some questions you want to ask."

She should; she tried to think of what Triana would want her to ask, but she couldn't think of one question that wouldn't sound rude. She abandoned the idea of asking him about his favorite book. It seemed too planned and fakey and she didn't want to put him on the spot, even though he sounded like a man, with many responsibilities, who was used to explaining things to people.

"Maybe we should meet," he offered. "Tomorrow would be fine with me. Is there a restaurant in town you like?"

She hadn't thought about that. It had never occurred to her that she would get to this point at all. He made it all so easy.

"I'm not really a restaurant person," she said.

"Of course," he said. "Dinner is a little intimate for a first impression. How about coffee?"
They made arrangements. It was painless. Even though she would have to hurry after work tomorrow to get her run in and shower and change and meet him back downtown, she thought it might be worth it. She told him what dress she would be wearing and that she had blonde hair down her back.

"If you are as pretty as you are charming, I should have no trouble finding you," he said. It was corny, but she didn’t care. At least he was trying to be a gentleman.

The next day at the zoo, Bobo had been on his best behavior since opening time. He delighted the children and their parents by doing back flips and pounding his chest. He kept his hands off his privates and even left the female orangutans pretty much to themselves. He was a model of courtesy. He seemed to be showing off for Carolyn and she couldn’t figure it out until she remembered that she still had some lifesavers left in her pocket.

He was probably toying with her in some way that she couldn’t understand, but you had to reward good behavior or there was no hope of ever establishing any cooperation when you needed it. She peeled one out of the pack and he scrambled for it as if he had been waiting all day for
this moment. Again, he stuck it on the end of his tongue and wagged it at her, the green lozenge like a Cracker-Jack wedding ring, taunting her, daring her to watch what he was going to do next. It got a rise out of the crowd, especially the kids who all clamored for life-savers to throw to the pretty monkey. An odd thought popped into her head that it was Bobo who had called her last night and said all those nasty things on her voice-mail account. He bared his teeth in a display of male dominance, as if to confirm her suspicion, the green life-saver still on the pink tip of his tongue, and laughed at his own virtuosity, at his ability to get what he wanted from her. Oh no, she thought, what is he going to do next? There were enough small children for her to worry, their parents holding them aloft like believers at a shrine, but she didn’t have time to do anything. The hose was locked safely in its shed. Before she could even think of it, Bobo found Penelope and forced her to her back, pushing her legs apart, and, in full sight of the horrified and confused families, began to give her head, sliding the sweet and sticky candy in and out of her vagina, a game they had probably invented the night before.
She ran herself as hard as she could, clipping several other joggers who wouldn't get out of her way. The harder she pushed herself though, the worse she felt, the more her sweat felt like saliva on a gooey piece of candy, and she couldn't get the image of Bobo's indifferent tongue flapping at her, threatening her with her own vile and shameful desires. Why had she let Triana talk her into making a fool of herself? On her third lap around the North end, the reading man was still there, only he wasn't reading. His book was closed and he smiled at her like he was the thirteenth apostle or something. It seemed to her as if he knew something funny that she didn't know, like there was some big joke, and she was the only one who didn't get it. What if it was him? What if Bobo had told him that she had placed a personal ad in the paper? You couldn't tell the religious freaks from the perverts these days. She couldn't take it anymore. She staggered to a halt and ripped the headphones from her ears, the last strains of Tristan Und Isolde clanging around her neck.

"What's your problem?" she yelled. "Are you some kind of nut job? Don't you have a chair at home? Why don't you go the library and stare at people instead of sitting here, watching other people get on with their lives? Freak."
He didn’t answer her. He kept on with his know-it-all smile. Freak, she thought. If there had been a rock nearby, she might have thrown it at him. Taught him a thing or two. As it was, she shot him the finger before snapping her headset back on, and ran harder and harder around the park. The phrase “two can play at that game” popped into her head. The fourth time around, he was no longer there.

When she got home, Fifty-Fifty was dead, his paws splayed out as if he had stretched for some unreachable comfort and just cracked. His eyes were frozen open like putrescent marbles and his mouth was as black as charcoal ash. He never did make much noise, even at his best; she was the one who did most of the talking in their relationship, and, perhaps, for that reason, the silence that surrounded him now was intense. It spread from the couch into the rest of the room and into her arms and legs, like a chill from an open window. She knew it was bound to happen, but she had lavished so much loving care on him to keep it from happening that now she felt cheated and drained. A dull meow stretched its jaw inside of her. Nothing seemed real enough to ward off the emptiness she felt. She turned him on his pillow as one might turn a work of art, trying to find a position for him that did not disturb her too much. Finally, she
covered him with his blanket. His head peeked out from the covers like a new born infant swaddled in hospital sheets. It made her crazy to think that he was lifeless and there was nothing she could do. It was important not to feel too crazy. Hunger wrenched her stomach and made her dizzy.

She pushed herself off the couch and looked at the clock. Oh, she thought. Oh, I have a date tonight. It’s all my fault. Maybe it’s not too late to cancel. But, it was too late. David Andrews waited for her. The dress she had promised to wear was hanging on the back of the bathroom door, red and leering, waiting for her. Fifty-Fifty was dead and she had a date. Maybe she could take him with her. If she had a stroller, she could bundle him up and take him with her. She wondered how David felt about children. Stop it, she said, to the voice inside her head, but it only pressed harder. She worried that the red dress was too suggestive, tawdry.

She collected herself. No time to shower. No time to get her hair wet. It would never dry. She found some moist towelettes and scrubbed her arms and shoulders, even though she knew she could not get herself clean. A little girl is only as clean as her thoughts, her father used to say to her, and she could not rub away the image of Bobo, his double-jointed fingers glittering with
candy-colored rings, as he broke off the haunches of a
dead and barbecued cat, and waved them at her while he
ate and told her to mind her manners. What was a person
supposed to do in this situation? She made a stab at her
face with a lipstick, crowded her shoulders into a
jacket, turned the lights off, turned them back on again,
off, on, off, on; the dark, empty apartment didn’t seem
right, but neither did leaving the lights on. Nothing was
as it was supposed to be.

As she waited, she peeled through the pack of
lifesavers to find a lime flavored one and shoved it into
her mouth. Time seemed to be snapping its fingers in her
face. She snapped right back at it. She didn’t care. She
felt god-awful. She was trying something new. Triana
would be proud of her. She was taking chances in her
life. So what if she was doing things that didn’t make
any sense. What if David had walked in and out without
recognizing her? She decided there wasn’t much you could
tell by looking at a person. What if she had been
disfigured as a child? Would her life have been
different? Perhaps she would have been more sensitive to
other people’s failings, more caring.

A commotion stirred the crowd at the door. As if
ducking its head under the eaves, a bunch of flowers
sank and then rose into the room. They seemed to have an
idea of where they were going. Carolyn folded her hands in her lap. As the crowd broke at the edge of the seating area, she saw that there was a man attached to the flowers. His jacket sleeves and his pant legs were too short for his build, making his arms look longer than they actually were, like a monkey's. He grinned at her. It was a trifle lewd and spontaneous for her taste. This one doesn't waste any time, she thought.

"Carolyn," he said. "It's me: David. I wanted to surprise you. These are for you."

He shoved the flowers at her, but she waved them away. It was thoughtful, but she wasn't in a mood to be impressed. She had an apartment full of dead cat after all. She patted her stomach. She didn't want to talk with the candy in her mouth. It was as dry as a cobblestones.

"You don't like flowers," David said. "Sorry. That's the kind of guy I am. Pretty flowers for a pretty lady."

He tossed the bouquet on a chair and took a seat at her table. As delicately as she could she spit the remnants of the lifesaver into her napkin. The gooey lozenge looked like the a piece of jade that had been polished until it was translucent.

"Remind me not to order that, whatever it is," said David.
Carolyn laughed a laugh that sounded like someone trying not to hiccough. He was a funny man. She laughed so hard she was afraid she might have to stand up and hit him.

"That was easy," he said.

"What was?" she asked, just barely getting the words out.

"Making you laugh," he said. "I think humor is a great ice-breaker. Of course, I might be a little biased." He was obviously enjoying himself.

"We all have our little quirks," she said, winking at him.

He pretended not to understand what she was saying.

"You see, I make people laugh for a living. I'm a clown."

"You're not a clown," she said. When she was five, her father had hired a clown for her birthday. She had wanted a tea party, tea and cake, with white gloves, so that she could show off her manners, but the clown had ruined everything. He was noisy and self-centered. None of her friends had paid her any attention and she had cried until her father had sent the clown home and her friends home and locked her in her room without supper. "When you can say thank-you to your father, you can come out," he had told her through the door.
"I do mostly kid's parties, of course, but also some corporate work," he added.

"Do you do funerals?" she asked.

"Listen," he said. "I make a pretty good living being a clown."

"Do you think you're funny?" she asked. "Or do you think people just laugh because they're afraid of making you angry?"

"There's no reason to get nasty," he said.

Why, she thought, why was she always right about people?

"My cat died," she said. She had tried so hard to keep him alive, but the experiment had failed. It was no use. You could pour your heart into something and all you got was a dead cat or a guy who made his living as a clown. Sadness descended on her like a blanket that was too thin to keep her warm. Suddenly it was quiet again and normal in a disappointing way. She was sitting across a cafe table from an agreeable stranger. It was true. There was nothing so wrong about him. She understood that. She was wearing the dress that she had taken out of her closet that morning and her mouth tasted funny, like too much mouthwash. There was a bunch of flowers on the chair next to her, long-stemmed gladiolas tightly wound, with the buds not open yet.
"Are these for me?" she asked.

"Are you okay?" said David. He didn’t seem clownish at all. He rested his pale, sickly hands on the table. Each one quivered slightly as if each one had a small nervous heart beating rapidly underneath.

"Do you do magic?" she asked. "I feel like I need to be un-hypnotized."

"I better go," he said.

"Don’t go," she pleaded. "I’m sorry if I’ve been rude. I haven’t been myself all day."

"Okay," he agreed, although she could see that it was just temporary, that he was still on guard. That was okay. She didn’t need much right now, just someone to sit with her until she finished her tea.

"Do you want anything?" he asked, twisting in his chair toward the counter.

"Maybe just a bagel," she said. "No butter."

The next day at the zoo, Carolyn was exhausted. She had made the funeral arrangements for her cat that morning. She envied Bobo, the way he slept without a worry in the dead branches of a dead tree while the rest of the colony ambled around. A light rain dripped on the few stragglers who shuffled past the scene. Carolyn was about to return to her desk when she saw a blur of
something fall from the top of the cage and hit the concrete floor with a smack, as if a piece of rain-sodden cloud had tumbled from the sky. A squirrel had lost its footing and lay stunned inside the cage. It was loud enough to wake Bobo who opened his eyes, wearily at first, and then flashing with predatory hunger. Oh no, thought Carolyn. Here we go. She was thankful that it wasn’t a busy day. The sudden, unprecedented sound had scattered the females to the edges of the cage where they huddled for protection and waited anxiously for Bobo to take care of this business. Without a second thought, he swung down from his branch with delicate purpose, death and destruction flexing in all his limbs. The squirrel twitched, spasmodically, unconsciously, too stunned to fight as he gathered it into his malevolent grasp. He held it roughly and looked around to see if anyone had an objection to his absolute right to dispatch life before their very eyes. The females cowered. Carolyn frowned. Just get it over with, she thought. Stop showing off. But when Bobo saw Penelope, his countenance changed. He relaxed as if a puzzle had been solved. He stopped short in recognition, bleated at her, and quizzed her with his face. Penelope warily detached herself from the huddle, slowly gaining understanding as she propelled herself toward him. She had been well-trained, after all. She
took the fragile, nearly lifeless thing from his hands and cradled it as she had been taught, cooing over it and flashing up at Carolyn, while Bobo, who couldn’t care less about all this women’s business, dragged his indifferent ass back to his nest so that he catch a little more shut-eye.

"Good for you, Bobo," shouted Carolyn. "Good for you!"
Outside the train station, the air was thick with the abiding heat of a southern city, the smell of October loitering in the exhaust of taxis as a herd of clouds ambled overhead. Samuel Quintero was looking for someone. He gripped his overnight bag in one hand and shielded his eyes with the other. A long time had passed, almost six years, since he had last seen Marly. She had been one of those college friends with whom he had promised that he would stay in touch even though he knew he wouldn’t. He saw her right away. Crumpled inside the tubular frame of her wheelchair, a thin blanket thrown over her knees, her arms as white and spindly as the tendrils of an albino spider, he saw that she too was looking for him, searching the crowd for a face from her past. She had a Mets cap on. On the bright, warm day the bright, orange insignia flashed like a hazard light. He wondered whether the cap was an ironic touch. He doubted it. Marly had never been cynical enough to manage that sort of irony.
She was always the kind of young woman who did things to make others feel welcome, like wear a New York baseball cap for her old friend from New York. Samuel didn’t know a lot about suffering, but he knew it couldn’t be easy to think of others at a time like this. Right now between the cancer and the chemo, her flesh was being ripped from her bones.

A woman stood behind her chair in a custodial way, a woman just past the prime of middle age, a redhead with a pale speckled throat. She had the flagrant blue and gold of a Liberty scarf tied around her neck, orange circles of make-up where her cheeks were meant to be, and a look of fear in her eyes. Her mother, he guessed. Marly had complained about her in their phone conversations. She had called him unexpectedly about a month before, and told him that she was dying and that she needed someone to talk to, someone "outside the nuclear tragedy" as she had put it. The conversations had been a little forced. Sam guessed that there was something Marly had wanted to talk about and that the phone calls were just a prelude to break the ice. He thought it might be a legal question. He had been a practising attorney for three years and had already grown accustomed to friends calling him for free advice. But, Marly had so far been unable to come to the point. That’s why he had suggested he come
down for a visit. On close inspection, Marly’s mother didn’t look so horrible to him. The flowered blouse and the suit she was wearing said church bazaar and garden club, not the hysterical nag that Marly had described.

“Marly,” he said as he approached the spot they had staked out. He extended his hand and bent slightly so that she could take it without much trouble. Her handshake was cold and dry and frail. He let go as soon as he could without being impolite. He wanted to keep this meeting as lighthearted as possible.

“Sam!” she exclaimed without making any attempt to hide her surprise. He wondered that she had not recognized him. Her voice was the same: deep and musical, husky from long, late nights of smoking cigarettes and talking until dawn. That’s what had fooled him on the phone. It was hard to believe that she was really sick. It was hard to look directly at her, but he made a show of being nonplussed. The cancer had polished her features so that they were almost transparent, everywhere her skin stretched tightly over her bones. It made her look like a mechanical doll that had come to life. She didn’t seem to notice or care. Her gestures and her tone seemed too ordinary to him. He wasn’t sure how he should respond, whether he should be grave and respectful, or, like her, act as if nothing were the matter.
He had never courted her friendship. She was not the kind of woman his gang would have approved of. She was not skinny, fashionable, and serious, and her attentions had always been sort of an embarrassment to him.

“How was the train ride?” she asked. “Did you fall in love? Lots of people fall in love on trains.”

“I didn’t really mingle,” he said, trying to pick up the joke where she had dropped it.

“You really should,” she returned, a little cool, as if his ruse had backfired, or as if she wasn’t really paying attention to anything he said and was just sizing him up. He did not appreciate the way she looked him over. It was her eyes. They burned like gas jets. They were the most frantic, fiercest eyes he had ever met. A real competitor. She might be dying, but she still had some fight in her. It was a part of her personality he hadn’t noticed before. Perhaps it had been in hiding or perhaps she had changed. While they made small talk, her eyes frisked him, coaxed him, teased him; it was almost as if she was daring him to say something about it.

“This is my mother, Mrs. Gloria Stanton,” she said absently.

“Marly tells me you’re from New York. She says you’re something of a snob.”

“Mother.” Marly rolled her eyes.
His mentor at Harvard Law once had told him that the only thing he really needed to know in order to be successful was how to keep his mouth shut. "The world is filled with awkward silences," he had said. "And they are like bear traps for the foolish. The best lawyers are the ones you never hear about."

"New York," said Mrs. Stanton with a kind of resigned disgust. "I love the Broadway shows. I like the singing. Some people like the sets and the costumes, but I like the singing. Maybe it's not cool, but that's what I like. Marly is a wonderful singer. Did you know that? I've always tried to encourage her. She doesn't do that kind of singing, of course. She does her own thing. She always has. That's okay. But, I sure love those musicals."

Sam watched Marly carefully while her mother prattled. There was clearly some disagreement between them about whether it had been a good idea to invite him down to visit. He wondered himself. Marly was so skinny that both the blanket over her knees and the sweater around her shoulders looked as though someone had tossed them there without bothering to fold them. The Mets cap wobbled on top of her hairless head. Like a piece of perfect marble that had been over-worked, her face seemed almost brittle, the skin was so thin. There was some
trouble, something wrong with the way she was arranged in her chair. He wanted to ask her if there was anything he could do, but he stopped himself. He did not want to overstep.

"Mother," she said. "I'm sure Sam doesn't need to hear about all that."

Mrs. Stanton walked a few steps away as if to compose herself. She was clearly caught in the cross-current of not wanting to upset her daughter and wanting to slap Sam across the face. He couldn't imagine what he had done to offend her.

He did think it would be all right if he took over the navigation of the wheelchair. It seemed appropriate. He steered Marly behind her mother who led them back to the car, as if wheelchairs, cancer, and anxious mothers were a matter of course for him. He wanted Marly and her mother to know that he wasn't afraid of them. He would do his part and do it cheerfully if that's the way she wanted it, the message being that he was not the source of her troubles.

"It's been kind of a trying day," she said. "We spent the morning going through old photographs, looking for ones that might be right for the memorial service. We're all a little cranky."
Her mother’s car was a rust-hacked red Ford Escort that didn’t look entirely safe to him. He sat in the back seat with old newspapers, an empty bag of cat litter, a carton of vitamin shakes, and part of the dashboard that had broken off. He did not approve of this kind of slovenliness. He held on to what he could and tried to look as unperturbed as possible while doing his best to make sure that no part of himself came in contact with anything that might stain.

He had never been in Baltimore before. As they drove away from the train station, they passed through a neighborhood that seemed like an expensive old antique that had gone to rot. Soon they were on a beltway heading out of town. The leaves hadn’t turned yet and the dark foliage that overhung the shoulders of the road was aggressively green—like waves splashing up against a sea-wall. Sam watched Marly carefully as she gazed out the window. Again she played it nonchalant. This was her home town. This stretch of road probably as routine to her as anywhere else. But, at the same time, Sam thought he could see her melancholy, as if she were seeing all of this for the last time.

Marly’s mother spent as much time checking the rearview mirror to see whether he was still there as she did watching the road. Although she did not get specific,
Marly had mentioned over the phone that she had joined a class-action lawsuit against the cigarette companies. At first he thought that’s why she had called. To ask him for legal advice about the lawsuit. But, she never mentioned it again. He wondered whether Mrs. Stanton was the one pushing her to sue. She seemed pissed off enough. Looking for someone to blame. The victims themselves almost never had the stomach for it. He wondered whether she could tell right away that someone like he and Marly would never have been friends under normal circumstances, but that he was going to have to suffice for whatever it was that Marly needed right now.

“Marly is an artist. Aren’t you, honey? She makes beautiful watercolors, but she won’t let me have one. She keeps them all to herself. She’s a very private person. I respect that.”

Marly did not interrupt her mother or seem concerned about her reckless driving. She kept her eyes on the scenery out the window. The trees along the road sagged with the humidity. There was no hope of air-conditioning in this car and he started to sweat into his shirt. Marly cranked her head around to follow a bird that soared and circled overhead. Some kind of hawk.

When they worked to unload her from the car, Sam had to take stock for the first time how sick Marly really
was. Getting her out of the front seat and into her wheelchair was like trying to open a piece of lawn furniture under water. Marly did not have the strength to be cooperative and it made them all cross and uncertain how to proceed. Sam, finally, had to take charge. He told Gloria to hold the wheelchair still, and he lifted Marly in a honeymoon carry and set her down as gently as he could. Her thin arms tickled his neck and she laid her head on his chest as if it had been a long time since she had been in anyone's arms.

"I told her she shouldn't have come to the train station," said Gloria. "That she didn't have the strength. She was sick all morning. She finished a round of chemo yesterday and it really knocked her out. But, she insisted. She's stubborn that way. She said she wanted to see you outside, in the open."

"It made me happy to get out," said Marly. "Everything hurts so much, I hardly notice the nausea. Besides I'm half stoned most of the time."

"It must feel good to get out," added Sam quickly, embarrassed by the notion that he had anything to do with her happiness or her discomfort.

The house was in a makeshift neighborhood, one of a series of houses built to the same plan and crowded into square plots without trees. He tried not to look. The
neighborhood in Brooklyn where he had grown up was not much different and he wanted no part of it. He noticed that, although the lawns were sprinkled with neighbors going about their weekend chores, nobody greeted them and Gloria and Marly did not pay them any mind either. That was fine with him. He had no desire to be a part of anyone else's business. The house itself was lopsided and untended, the grass long and full of weeds. They pushed Marly up a ramp that had been jerry-rigged to a side door which led directly into her room. A hospital bed dominated. Stacks of papers and books clamored around it. The television had been left on, but the sound off. An oblong-faced commentator mouthed a silent incantation while financial hieroglyphs scrolled underneath him at the bottom of the screen. The room was a war room, connected to the outside world by two phones and a laptop computer, all of them sitting at the foot of her bed. Something was being planned here. Last minute decisions were being made. He was right. She was a fighter. Perhaps the litigation had been her idea after all.

"I need to change," said Marly. "Do you mind waiting outside? It's an awkward process."

He did as he was told. He wandered down the hall to the kitchen. He was already feeling the fatigue of keeping up appearances. Focus. He wanted a cigarette, but
knew that wouldn’t fly. He was anxious to get this started and get it over with. He didn’t even sit down, unsure how long it would take for Marly to get undressed and into bed and what he would have to do next. It all seemed to have nothing to do with him. The kitchen too was a swirl of interrupted activity, dishes in the sink, newspapers and magazines at the ready, an incomprehensible mish-mash of groceries spilling onto the counters and the table. There was even a paper bag of apples shoved into a corner. The phone stuck to the wall had the longest cord he had ever seen, knotted and twisted like the dead skin of a snake, and one of those shoulder rests on the receiver so that Gloria Stanton could talk and cook at the same time. He didn’t want to touch anything. He was afraid it would all tip over and break.

“You must be hungry,” said Gloria from the hall.

As she walked into the kitchen, she limped slightly as if she had twisted her ankle. She was obviously in severe emotional pain, but she also wanted to make some sort of truce with him. He held his ground. He reminded himself that she and her daughter were at odds in some way and that he was here to support Marly, even if it meant taking sides. Mrs. Stanton peeled her scarf off her neck and sank into a chair.
"Marly needs to rest a little," she added. "It will give us a chance to talk."

"Sure," he said. He was hungry. Under different circumstances, he might have welcomed the chance to sit in someone's kitchen and have a little something to eat, shoot the breeze. As it was, he remained standing, leaning against the counter where Gloria could keep an eye on him and they could talk. He would let her say whatever it was she needed to say. There could be no harm in it. He could tell that she must have been quite good-looking herself when she was younger. Old age and sadness were splashed on her like paint, but he could see where Marly had gotten her inner strength. Gloria's face was not a face made to express sorrow. She should have been directing school plays, organizing lunches at a woman's club, writing long enthusiastic letters to distant relatives, that sort of thing.

"I don't know how much you know, how much you know about this case, this damn lawsuit," she began. "I don't want you to think that we're a couple of simple-simons. Marly's father is a bigshot attorney in New York. That's right. That's where Marly was born. We're divorced now, of course. He has a chair at Columbia. International Studies. You know how many people get chairs at Columbia? Not many. Anyway, what I'm trying to say here is I don't
want you to think that we’re impressed by the fact that you pay too much rent for a kitchen you never use. Am I right? I also don’t want you to think that either one of us has any illusions about winning this case. Surprised? Look, it’s a terrible world, a terrible world we live in, where a girl so young and full of life is going to die of this terrible disease. So, what are you going to do? You fight. It was Marly’s idea. You fight, Mom. You fight until you have nothing left. As soon as you give up, you’re dead. So you don’t give up. You fight.”

She passed her hand across her brow as if waving the thought away. She did not cry, but gave herself time to recover from what she had just said.

“I’m worried that you might think there is something you can do here that you cannot do. It’s not easy, but we have to accept it. You go ahead in there and listen to what Marly has to say, but, whatever you do, don’t patronize her. Be honest with her. Don’t worry about hurting her feelings. Tell her the truth. Marly likes you. I don’t know why, but she does. She sees something in you.”

She was talking to herself as much as to him. Sam could see that. Still, he felt a tremor of vertigo pass through him, as if the floor beneath them had opened and
revealed a long drop into a pool of dark water. He was hungry.

"It's okay to feel guilty," she said. "Just don't lie to her. Whatever she asks you, just try and tell her the truth."

Sam nodded as if he knew what she was talking about and she pushed up from the table and asked him if he wanted some soup.

"If it's not too much trouble," he replied.

She frowned at him.

"It's no trouble. Why don't you go ahead and sit with her? I'll bring a tray in when it's ready."

Marly seemed to be sleeping. She was curled inside a hospital dressing gown. A scraping noise came out of her mouth. He didn't want to wake her, but, when he moved a pile of papers off the chair next to her bed in order to sit down, she opened her eyes.

"Sam," she said with mild surprise. "I'm really impressed."

There was a note of teasing in that word, 'impressed.' Sam shrugged it off and smiled at her. He did not want to know what she meant by that.

"Sam," she repeated. She lay on top of the covers and her gown had twisted, exposing her bare legs, skinny
and nobbed. She looked like a paper boy who had been hit by a truck, her Mets cap tipped coyly over her eyes.

"You know what I miss the most?," she asked.

"No," he said. He was a little exasperated. He didn’t like being asked questions he couldn’t possibly know how to answer.

"Getting hammered and getting laid," she laughed.

"Mostly getting laid. When’s the last time you had sex?"

"Marly," he frowned with mock seriousness. "I really do not think it would be appropriate for me to answer that question."

"Listen to you," she hooted. "I’m the one who’s checking out here and you go and get all uptight. I bet it’s been a while. If you don’t mind my saying, you don’t look so hot. You’re starting to look like an old man already and you’re not even thirty yet."

"Marly," he implored. "Can we talk about something else?"

"Not so fast," she said. "Don’t think you’re any different from me. Nothing is happening here that doesn’t happen to everyone sooner or later. We all die. So don’t think playing possum is going to help. That’s your whole problem. You confuse invisible with invincible."

The only thing that bothered him more than being asked pointless questions was someone making sweeping
generalizations about him, especially someone like Marly who didn't even know him that well. He had befriended her once a long time ago when she was in trouble and had been paying for it ever since. He changed the subject.

"Do you remember the night we met?" he asked.

"Not really," she answered. "I mean yes, of course I do. It's just that night was like every other night of my life. I had been dumped by some jerk and was drinking my way through it and the last thing I needed was a good samaritan but there you were in your penny loafers asking me if everything was okay just because I was crying in a bar and you couldn't stand it, but it would have been bad manners to tell me to shut up. So you put the moves on me instead."

"I did not," he insisted. The way he remembered it he had wrapped her in a blanket on his couch after she had thrown up and passed out. He had cleaned her vomit up and washed her face after putting her to bed. The whole time he had been worried that someone might think that they were together in a romantic way and he had spent the next several weeks assuring his friends that it wasn't the case whenever Marly would call.

"You are such a liar," she laughed. "You tried to kiss me. In the bathroom. In the bar."
“Please,” he said. He didn’t want to get into a dispute about the facts. There was no winning an argument like that. “I felt sorry for you. That’s all. I always did.”

“Sorry for me.” She made the noise that women make when men are being impossible. “I suppose you feel sorry for me now.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Then what are you doing here? Or don’t you have an answer for that?”

“I thought you wanted to see me. I thought there was something I could do for you. I thought you needed some help.”

“That’s a neat trick you play. You pretend that you’re doing me a favor when it’s me who’s doing you one. You pretend it’s me who has a crush on you when it’s you all along.”

Marly’s accusation ran through him like a cold wind on a warm afternoon. Sam held his tongue and took a deep breath, hoping to let it pass. Some neighborhood kids had obviously concocted some game that terrorized the middle of the street and their shouts drifted through the window until a lawnmower engine finally drowned them out. At some point, they could just hear the strains of an argument down the block, then a door slam, and a car pull
angrily out of a driveway. It all sounded so far away to him. Like nothing he had ever known.

"I feel so sorry for you," she said after a moment. He no longer felt obligated to watch what he said.

"Don't give me that crap."

"You're right," she said. "It's more a yin and yang kind of thing."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"You're so afraid of your own feelings. That's why I feel so safe around you, I guess. I always feel like my feelings are going to destroy me."

"You are a piece of work," he said.

She laughed lightly, but even that twisted something inside her that made her wince with pain. In that instant he caught himself. He had almost lost his temper and it really wasn't worth it. Marly had been provoking him, but suddenly she changed her tack.

"Hey, you want to see the picture we chose," she said. "You see that folder over there? Can you hand it to me?"

She took the folder from him and pored over it piece by piece until she found what she was looking for.

"Here," she said.

She handed him a snapshot taken at a party, the kind of party that Sam had always avoided. The picture was
crowded and random, a bunch of youthful, contorted faces huddled together in the sort of forced conviviality that insisted they were having fun. Yet, frozen in the moment of that photograph, the next moment lurked, as if they were all about to be devoured by something they could not see: a job one would take, a house another would buy, a girl one of the young men would marry because he got her pregnant and she did not believe in abortion. One of them, his hair tousled by sweat, his tee-shirt shrink-wrapped across his chest, his eyes wild with an intensity that Sam didn’t recognize as ever being a part of himself, gazed with desire and attention at the young woman who somehow managed to draw that kind of attention to her. It was Marly. Her arms reaching out to the photographer, she made a vampy, pouting face. She looked happy and proud to Sam. It seemed as though her face were going to detach itself from the photograph and swim out to him. He felt dizzy again, as if the room might start to spin if he closed his eyes. He steadied himself by placing his hand on the bed and when he did, he touched bone, Marly’s foot.

"This is how I want to be remembered," she said. "Momentary, fragmented, passionate."

He did not have the heart to tell her that she was wrong, that what she wanted to believe was passion was
really a kind of horrible affectation. He wasn’t afraid of his own feelings. That was too easy. He was afraid of hurting her feelings. There was a big difference. He might have been worried about her, but he didn’t like her, not in that way, for sure.

"That was a long time ago, wasn’t it?" said Sam.

"You just don’t get it, do you?" she asked.

Nobody in his immediate family had ever been seriously ill. His father was sixty and still ran five miles every morning. Even his grandfather who had passed away the year before had never shown any sign of weakness. His death and funeral had the pomp and publicity of another one of his accomplishments; the obituary just the last of his many press clips. He did not know where she was going with all this. Her eyes rested on him the way the eyes of the priest at his high school graduation had rested on him, the same unnerving mixture of compassion and contempt.

"I’m sorry," he said. "I came down here because I thought it would make you feel better. I didn’t ask for any of this."

"No. You wouldn’t," she said. She put the photograph back in its folder. "Sam, when I first got sick, I saw a lot of different doctors. They were all liars, professional liars. They all said they wanted to help me,
but I could tell there was nothing they could do. The only one who had the guts to tell me the truth was my social worker. She said she was only telling me what I already knew, that I only had a few months at best and I had better decide what I was going to do with that time. She suggested I make a list. Keep it short. Make sure that everything I put on the list was something that I could really accomplish. I didn’t need any more disappointments than necessary. Be realistic, she said. Be selfish and be important. I came up with five things and I did all of them, all of them except one. There is one thing on my list that I haven’t done and I’ll tell you why I haven’t done it. Because I can’t. Even when I put it on the list, I knew it wouldn’t happen. Now it’s too late anyway. I’m not afraid of dying. At least I wasn’t, not at first. Lately things have been a little freaky. Okay, I’m scared shitless. But, there’s more to it..."

She was rambling, not really making any sense.

"We all have truths about ourselves we can’t face,“ he said. He didn’t believe it, but he wanted this conversation to be over as soon as possible.

Instead of saying anything more, she handed him a slip of paper from the same folder as the photograph. He turned it over and read what had been neatly typed. As he
expected, it was a list numbered one to five. Number one was 'Go to an Orioles game.' Number two was 'Do some painting.' Number three 'Make sure my parents know how much I love them.' Number four 'Spend a day at the lake.' There was nothing on this list that was troubling or odd, nothing that he could not imagine anyone putting on such a list. As a matter of fact, he was surprised at how ordinary these desires were. He thought someone like Marly would concoct some crazy stunts to satisfy her curiosity while she had the chance. Number five on the list was the sort of thing he expected of her. It confirmed what he had always suspected about her feelings for him, but seeing it in print made him feel suddenly tired. Written in the same matter-of-fact type as the rest of the list were the words 'Have sex with Sam.'

It was absurd. Sex was an answer for nothing. He wondered whether she had been thinking of this since the beginning, since the first phone call. A shudder of something like disgust passed through him and the words themselves almost trembled in his hands.

"Like I said. It's too late now. I know that. I am way too sick. I waited too long. I blew it," she said. "But, when you picked me up earlier and carried me into the house, that was good enough. Just that one moment, when my head was on your shoulder, that was what I wanted
in a way. I want to thank-you for helping me to finish my list."

He folded the paper so that it was closed like a book and handed it back to her.

"I need to go," he said.

"I know," she said. "I know you do. I just want you to know how important that was to me."

He didn't think she believed it herself. She just didn't want him to leave.

"Marly, we don't even know each other."

"Right," she said. "Right. You're one hundred percent right."

"I'm sorry, but I just can't lie to you, not now. You need to know the truth."

"You're right," she said. "You're absolutely right."

As a consolation, when he stood to leave, he bent over her, and gathered her lightly in his arms. He was very careful to make sure there was nothing sexual about the embrace. Even so, the gesture made him uncomfortable. He did not like to do or say things he did not mean. He was being a bit of a hypocrite. As he held her, he remembered that he was hungry and that Gloria had promised to bring him some lunch, but she had not. Marly had no weight at all and her skin was very cold. He was afraid if he squeezed too hard he might hurt her.
While her husband, Bud Fairchild, lined up a birdie putt on the eighteenth green, Tammy Fairchild furrowed her way down the back of the grandstand slope and out of the crowd. This putt was worth several hundred thousand dollars to their collective fortunes, but Tammy wasn’t thinking about the money, not too much anyway. Right now she needed to find a piece of shade where she could set Toby down for a spell and take a couple of deep breaths. Sometimes she felt as though she were blindfolded, as if the edge of the putting surface were the edge of a precipice, and she was being whispered forward to her doom by the crowd. When this feeling took hold of her, the long hot day fidgets of the spectators were like knuckles cracking under her skin. She would have to retreat to a quiet spot immediately before anyone noticed her panic, afraid that she was going to stumble onto the green, shouting and waving her arms, ruining the illusion of serenity upon which the game of golf
depended. Bud would have to put her into a mental hospital and he himself would be exiled from the tour. This thought that she might be able to destroy his career did not entirely displease her. She shifted Toby over to her other shoulder as they finally broke into the clear. Toby wasn’t heavy or anything; he just didn’t sit right on her today.

The big shot who manned the hospitality tent asked her for the third time to see her guest pass. She did not despise him for it. He was just another stinking hog-farmer to her, a red-faced, highball slugging, slaughter-house mogul who drove a Cadillac that smelled like after shave and picked up young hitchhikers for kicks. "Why do old men wear such ugly pants?" she wondered aloud to Toby. Little Toby answered her by worming his arms out into the air as if he wanted to swim into the future without her. "Oh no you don’t" she whispered in his perfect periwinkle ear. "If you don’t behave, I’ll dress you in plaid until you’re ten."

She could not catch the eye of the nervous-handed college student who was fixing drinks. She was as thirsty as sin, and wanted a soda or something, but he was too busy being one of the guys with the small herd of afternoon drinkers who had surrounded one end of his bar. On the TV over their heads, she could see a minaturized version of her husband. Whenever she saw his image on the television, she couldn’t help but think of a movie, The Clash of the Titans,
that she had seen as a little girl. In it, the Gods moved the mortals around like chess pieces on a board, and that’s what her husband looked like to her, like a little chess piece that had come to life. If memory served, the Gods all had British accents. There was something very creepy about this little man on the TV. There was no escaping him. He was not her husband, but he was the thing to which she was now married. She understood that, if he sank the putt, she would need to reappear, holding Toby aloft like a trophy for him to kiss. This she understood. Even if there hadn’t been a television behind the bar, she would know instantly from the sound the crowd made whether the ball had found the bottom of the cup or not. Meanwhile, her husband was taking his time about reading the green. Bud was the most methodical, gentle man she had ever met, but watching him play golf on the monitor was like being awake during open heart surgery. A year and a half had passed since his last official tournament win. “Bud Fairchild, proud father of a newborn baby boy,” the announcers would low-voice whenever he crossed the screen, whether as an excuse for not winning or a consolation for losing she couldn’t tell and didn’t care. If this one didn’t drop, she knew, Bud would be as quiet as a man breaking into a house for the next week.

It was cool inside the tent. The light that soaked through the canvas top felt as though it had been strained
through a cheesecloth. One of her sorority sisters had gotten married in a tent like this. The event had been a reunion of sorts; Mary Swain, her roommate, had even showed up. No one had seen Mary since graduation. She had run away to Chicago where she lived in a loft and worked in an art gallery. She was the only one of their gang who wasn’t married or engaged to be married. "I like sex too much," she had joked when Francine Winters had the bad manners to ask her why not. It had rained without mercy all through the wedding and the reception, so much water streaming down the plastic sides of the tent that the well-tended lawn on which it sat had turned to ankle-deep mush; finally when one of the banquet tables sank to its knees, spilling lobster finger rolls and champagne flutes into the mud, they had all crowded onto the platform that had been set up for dancing. Mary was the only one who didn’t seem to mind. "Why don’t you come visit me in Chicago for a while?" she had proposed to Tammy. "You don’t look very happy." Bud had made the cut at the Shell Houston Open that weekend and couldn’t make it to the wedding. Everyone else had told her how jealous they were, what a perfect life she had, and she had gone along with it, the way you do with college friends. She hadn’t appreciated Mary’s insinuation and had laughed and said that she couldn’t leave Bud alone now, not when the baby was due. And she was thinking about Bud, although maybe not in the
way that she had implied. By the time she had made it home, however, she had missed the highlights on ESPN and ruined a pair of shoes.

A breeze picked up her skirt and she jerked her head in the direction of the door flap. Jesper Parnevik walked in. He was chewing on an unlit cigar. He was so skinny and the cigar so big that she almost laughed out loud every time she saw him. There was something so goofy and so obscene about him, but he had sole possession of fourth place. He was in high spirits, awash with the relief of having finished and having placed in the money. They didn’t know each other well, but she waved politely and he waved back before heading straight for the prime rib. The young man carving the meat hacked at it with the abandon of someone who had just been publically humiliated. Often she would try to commiserate with the hired help; in her mind, she was one of them: they were all doing their duty in a way, but this one seemed about as philosophical as a galley slave. Earlier she had tried to strike up a conversation with him but had only frightened the poor wretch.

She had met Bud at a sorority mixer at the University of Texas. She had thought he was a new breed of man. She was naive. She didn’t even know that the Longhorns had a golf team. How could she know? She was from Westchester. She didn’t wear a bra. He shook her hand lightly and laughed
lightly whenever she swore out loud. At the time, she had a
 crush on her history professor, an expert on Jacksonian
 Democracy named William Peters, so she didn’t think she
could do any harm by being herself. Unfortunately, Bud had
hovered near her all night long and addressed her as Miss
Kincaid whenever she spoke to him. Even so, she didn’t
remember him the next time he introduced himself.

She was so naïve. She didn’t even know that Baptists
had their own Country Clubs. The first time she had met
Bud’s parents, he asked her politely not to use that foul
language. She managed to hold her tongue through the whole
sad affair— even when she slipped on the slate floor and
cracked her head open on the marble fount in the middle of
the dining room, the fount that for all she knew was full of
holy water.

“Just goes to show you bleed like the rest of us,” said
Bud’s mother, making her believe that Bud might have warned
his parents that technically, she was a Jew. If there was a
hospital gift shop to be run, Mrs. Fairchild was the woman
for the job. Tammy still fingered that scar under her scalp
when there was a word she couldn’t remember or a difficult
decision she had to make, a little white line almost
invisible, except that it didn’t tan. Who would have known
that the best plastic surgeon in Dallas was a Baptist too?
Even the breeze seemed to tense up as the crowd waited for Bud to make his putt. She hated that quiet, the way it sounded as if everyone was holding his breath, so quiet that she could hear the ice melting in her glass. Only Toby gurgled pleasantly. She had fed him on the plane. He had napped on the drive from the airport to the club and she had changed his diapers when they arrived. He was a comfort to her. She had many such comforts in her life.

She fingered the scar on her forehead. She had not unpacked her bags. She had set them just inside the door of the motel room as if she were leaving, not arriving. And, inside her purse, hidden like the crucifix Bud kept underneath his pillow, was the plane ticket she had bought with her own money at the airport, a ticket to Chicago. She had bought it on impulse, just to prove to herself that she could do something on the spur of the moment. Her heart rate had quickened and her sense of balance had gotten a little wobbly and strange as she handed the ticket clerk the cash. She felt as though as if she were buying a ticket in order to smuggle drugs or something. Now the ticket throbbed in her purse like something she had shoplifted, something she wanted to return to the store, but something she also wanted to keep.

"You just have to play the ball where it lies." That’s what Bud would have said. This wisdom from a man who took a triple bogey at the TPC in Florida when his ball landed in a swamp full of alligators. That was right around the beginning of his slump. "Why doesn’t anyone wear those alligator shirts anymore?" she wondered. "The nice cotton ones?" She knew the answer. Money. Even Bud Fairchild had more endorsement contracts than he could keep track of. People were always sending them merchandise. He turned a lot of it around at sporting conventions. "Pays the plane fare when I don’t make the cut," he reminded her. Golf wasn’t about money for him though. He could have been a surgeon easy. Those hands! The problem was he went to bed at night thinking about golf, dreamed about golf, and when he woke up in the morning, the first thing on his mind was golf. This dedication was the thing that Bud had that she did not. This was what had held her to him even before she knew what it was. Still she would have loved to sit down with a pencil and paper and figure how much corporate profit went into golf each year. It was mind-boggling.

"Bad Mommy. Bad."

She could turn a butter knife into a straight razor just by admiring her reflection in it. The thoughts of suicide had come uninvited, but she was smart enough to recognize that they were scientifically plausible. Post-
partum depression, the "stinky-blues" as the intolerable Mrs. Fairchild had painted them, combined with the stress of trying not to be what the sports psychologists called a "negative factor" in the delicate zen of Bud’s slide into misfortune and failure would be enough to make an astronaut lose his cool. Black thoughts alone didn’t scare her though. She tossed them aside like chocolates that were filled with some goop she didn’t like. No, there was something else, something peeking out from behind those heavy curtains, something beyond the usual pharmaceutical remedies, something no spa vacation could alleviate, that no kitchen remodeling could forestall. She had sold herself down the river. As soon as she had fallen in love, she had wanted to get married. As soon as she had gotten married, she had wanted to get pregnant, but now that she was married and pregnant, she wanted to run away, not to some desert island, but to some dirty, chain-smoking, jazz-packed city like Chicago.

Mr. Hands-in-pockets-if-there’s-anything-I-can-do-as-long-as-I-don’t-have-to-really-do-anything coughed, sounding a note somewhere between a rust-hacked muffler and the strangulation of a baby in its crib. On the screen, Tammy saw Bud looming over his putt, his pastry soft hands wrapped around the shaft of his putter. He checked the line, oriented his balance over the ball, checked his line again.
She could feel him breathing as if he were asleep next to her, how he inhaled on the back swing and exhaled on his follow through.

Tammy hadn’t been able to decide between going to law school and joining the Peace Corps out of college. If she had been able to make up her mind, she might not have married Bud Fairchild. She had almost forgotten that once she had wanted these things, that she had wanted them enough that it was hard to choose between them, but then Mary had grabbed her elbow under that rain-soaked tent and pulled her so close that she could smell the gin and cigarettes on her breath and smell the rank perfume that wrapped its arms around both their shoulders. Mary was angry at her. She could see that. She was really pissed even though she was being nice, even though she had invited her to come visit.

"If you don’t care for him, leave," advised her mother. Her mother was big on divorce, the way she was big on replacing the carpet in the living room. What Tammy hadn’t been able to convey to her was that Bud was not the problem. Bud was a gem. He stood gallantly between Tammy and his parents. He provided for her. And his religion would not allow him to be anything but faithful and kind. She had nothing to complain about and she knew it. At first, she thought that maybe that was the problem: she was like a toreador without a bull, but that was too easy. No, if she
was honest with herself, she would have to admit that somewhere along the line, somewhere between thinking he had nice eyes and thinking she would have another drink, she had turned her back on something important to herself: if only she could be one hundred percent sure what it was! If only Mary hadn’t frightened her a little, if only Mary’s eyes hadn’t been bloodshot, if only one of her nails hadn’t been chipped.

She could not hear the club head strike the ball, but she could feel it as if someone had pressed a finger into the small of her back. Even the smoothest of greens were, if you thought about it, terribly uneven surfaces; it was the spin on the ball that kept it in its path as if bubbled and skipped toward the hole. If it lost too much speed, it would detour at the last minute and all would be lost. Tammy wasn’t sure she could stand a playoff. It was all about confidence, about how firmly and surely Bud had hit his putt. A few seconds can seem like a long time when so much was at stake. Yet, almost immediately, everyone had the same idea. Each member of the crowd and all those people watching on TV. The putt was good. The speed was good. The ball dove into the cup, the ping and the pong of the plastic dimples bouncing inside the metal hole drowned out by the cheers and applause pouring down from the hillside like a wild torrent that had overrun its banks. In that moment, Tammy forgot
about the ticket in her purse. She squealed with delight.
She gathered Toby into her arms.

Her husband threw his cap in the air. The spell had been broken.

"Let's go," she said to Toby as she shouldered her way toward the green. Bud would be looking for them in the press of the crowd. Winning meant nothing to him if they weren't there to share it with him.
She said her name was Susan. Susan Paine. She could hardly lift her eyes to look at me when she said it. She had blonde hair and her eyes, through the curtain of her hair, were blue. At that time of my life, I still believed in blonde hair and blue eyes. She had a young woman’s face, but an old woman’s hands. My guess was the wrong side of thirty. She wore pearls with blue jeans and chain-smoked as if she had feelings she didn’t want to discuss with anyone but her therapist. She was from one of those enclaves around the Long Island Sound that had an ‘excellent public school system’, but she had maintained a private school drawl. When she spoke, she moved her jaw back and forth instead of up and down, chewing her vowels before letting them slide out of the side of her mouth. She was no more strange to me than all the other strange things I had seen so far in New York.
“I’m sure,” she said when I told her where I was from, an East Texas town about the size of a nickel. I understood that her interest was simply good manners. She was spoiled and rich, but I didn’t hold that against her.

It was the little boom back home. After a few summers of the hardest work there is, wildcatting in the oil fields over in Louisiana, I had saved enough to buy a Harley in Beaumont and drive it all the way to New York where Edwin, my best friend, had been living for almost a year now. I was only still eighteen, but I knew what I was doing. I had $1,500 stuffed into one boot, and, in the other, the Colt Special Action my step-father had given me for protection. I slept with the revolver under my pillow, and this funny feeling in my stomach that kept me awake at night, but I was more excited than scared. It was 1980. New York was the place to be.

“All those apartments have already been rented,” said Susan. I had gone back to squinting at the classifieds in the weekly paper where my friend, Edwin, had told me I could find a place to live.

“But, this is today’s paper,” I protested. I had been in the city for five days and all I had to show for it was a hacking cough and a couple of parking tickets. For some reason, I found myself smoking a lot more than I
was used to. Not only that, but I had already spent about $150 of my savings and I wasn’t even sure on what.

"Suit yourself," she drawled. "I don’t mean anything by it. I’m just trying to be neighborly. Half those listings are sucker ads anyway."

I did not want to let on that I didn’t know what she meant by that. We had been chatting back and forth for a while and things had gone pretty smoothly. Susan was sitting at a table squeezed next to mine in the smoking section of a place called The Hungarian Pastry Shop. Edwin had taken me there to welcome me to New York, the first and last nice thing he had done for me since my arrival. Even though the tables and chairs were so tiny and so tightly packed that sitting down was about as graceful as pinching into a kindergarten desk for me, it was a short walk from Edwin’s apartment on 112th Street and three or four waitresses worked there who were so pretty I was almost afraid to talk to them. Plain old coffee was a dollar a cup, but you could refill it as much as you wanted from a pot near the pastry counter. If someone had asked, I could not have told him why I kept going back there, except that it was like a library, only you could smoke. There were all sorts of oddballs there; half of them looked like as though they slept on the street. People came for the atmosphere, I suppose. People
with time on their hands. Some came to read or study, but mostly they came to talk to each other. At one table, I overheard a conversation about politics in Argentina and, at another, an argument about the films of Truffaut.

"I don’t normally talk to strangers," Susan continued. "I don’t take in strays either. Not that I’m anti-social. I have plenty of friends, too many really. Maybe friends is too strong a word. You can get laid quicker than you can find someone to help you move the fridge in this town. Do you have a lot of friends?"

I had been schooled to believe that people were not as friendly in New York as they were in Texas, so I was a little suspicious about Susan’s motives for asking me this question. I didn’t think she was trying to take advantage of me, but I did wonder if there wasn’t something wrong with her. The strain of the conversation was making her nervous. Her hand trembled so much, the match had a hard time finding the end of her cigarette.

"There’s Edwin," I offered although not sure that he still counted as a friend. Since he had moved from Texas to here to go to college, he had cultivated a pencil moustache on his upper lip and a pork-pie hat that he never took off. He spent more time in the bathroom than my little sister did, and both he and his girlfriend, Aphrodite, wouldn’t stop insisting on how welcome I was
to stay. I guessed that way I wouldn’t forget how much they wanted me to move out. There wasn’t much any of us could really do about it though until I found a place of my own.

“You seem a little out of your element. That’s all,” she said as if it cost her some effort to say it. “I don’t want to make a big thing out of this, because, really, it’s not a big thing.”

I assured her as quickly as I could that I did not have the wrong idea. I don’t know why, but my heart was pounding. It wasn’t that she was good looking. Pretty girls didn’t do it for me. They were no bargain if you asked me. I knew a guy whose girlfriend was Miss Junior Galveston and she was a royal pain in the ass. Don’t get me wrong. I liked the way Susan looked. I liked it plenty. But, what really got me was the whole New York thing. She had it perfect: nice red lips, a button or two unbuttoned, and some perfume that smelled like a brand new five hundred dollar bill. She also had a chin that looked as though it could take a punch. But, the whole time she talked to me, she never once looked me in the eyes. Not once.

“Do you have plans for the evening?” She exhaled a lifetime’s worth of smoke into the air. “I bet you’re hungry and I could use a drink.”
I thought maybe we were coming to this, but I couldn’t be sure and didn’t want to force the issue. I hadn’t had a lot of experience with girls. I had fooled around some, you know, the drive-in, out by the tracks, my parent’s basement, but this was something different.

“My treat,” she added and that clinched it. I was hungry. I tried to play it as cool as possible.

Turned out we were only going next door to a place called The Green Tree. They must have just opened for dinner. Not only were we the only customers, but our waiter, a long-haired gypsy with lopsided glasses on his face, was pulling on his jacket as we were walking in. None of the chairs looked sturdy enough to sit on. The tablecloths, the same color red as our waiter’s jacket, all had large grease stains on them. I kept my trap shut about it though. I did not want to appear ungrateful.

Our waiter made a big show about pulling Susan’s chair out for her. It was then I noticed that the fingers of one of his hands were fused all together. It looked like a dried pig’s ear sticking out of his sleeve. Susan either didn’t notice or didn’t care. She was busy skinning a fresh pack of Marlboros she had fished from her purse.

“Spike,” she mused. “That’s not your real first name, is it?”
I shook my head and left it at that. I did not want her to know that my name was Kenyon. Although we were Baptists every direction you turned, that didn’t stop my mama from giving me a name she liked the sound of. The way it got said in Texas, it sounded like Canyon.

“What do you do, Spike?” she asked, her unlit cigarette dancing like a baton between her teeth. “What’s your deal? I don’t figure you for a student.”

“Nah. I’ve got a little money saved. I’m looking for a place and then a job to get me by.” I didn’t want to unload any big story on her, like I was some amateur. Besides, I didn’t want to seem too desperate to someone who was buying me dinner.

Nothing on the menu made any sense to me. Susan suggested the cold cherry soup and chicken paprikash. She said it was pretty much the same thing as chicken and dumplings. After the waiter took our order, he barked some gibberish at a doorway with a beaded curtain on it. An old woman smoking a cigarette stuck her head out and mouthed something back at him. When they were done jawing, she stamped her butt out on the floor, and he went behind the bar to fix our drinks.

I was taking it slow, nursing a beer, and watching Susan try to drown herself with scotch. The drinks couldn’t come fast enough, but they didn’t seem to have
any real effect except to stop her hands from shaking. I didn’t want to seem too curious, but I asked her the basics. Turned out she had graduated from Barnard college the year before, kept her apartment on a Riverside Drive, and was working at an art gallery downtown. Her mother still lived in a place called Greenwich, CT. No mention of her father.

“You’re not an artist, are you?” she asked. “I have this uncanny ability of meeting painters wherever I go.”

“Well,” I considered. “I don’t like to call myself an artist. I haven’t really done anything yet.”

“I knew it,” she belted. “We don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to, but, at some point, I’d like to hear about your work.”

I shrugged my shoulders in a non-commital way. This discovery then inspired her to give me a lecture about the art world in New York. The more I heard the more interested I became. Apparently, you didn’t need to know much about painting to make it as a painter.

“A lot of my friends are a lot more talented than half the crap that gets sold for $50,000 or more.”

Fifty-thousand dollars for a painting? I couldn’t believe it! I tried to look as sympathetic as possible. A few names kept surfacing: Leo Castelli, Mary Boone, Holly Solomon. These were the people who pulled the strings.
Even the man she worked for, Winston Smart, in her mind, held too much power. A show at his gallery and good reviews from ArtNews and Art Forum and you were basically set for life.

Our food arrived, giving me time to think. The soup was pink and sweet like Pepto-Bismal. No matter. I could have finished six bowls of it and I told her so. When I got an idea in my head, I got hungry. And I had a couple of good ones kicking around.

"The meek shall inherit the earth. That's what the good book says," my step-father would say and then fix me in the eyes. "That don't mean you have to be a simpleton, Kenyon. That means you listen close to what people say to you. If you do that, the answers will always come clear. You will know what it is you got to do." I had more than a notion now.

We were having fun. The chicken was better than the soup. I started to ham it up, playing the back-country hick all the way.

"Shucks, Ma'am," I twanged. "I shore appreciate your kindness. If there's a thing I can do to make it up, I do wish you would let me know. I can dig a post or mend a fence better'n most."
The cowboy act amused her plenty. She laughed without making any sound, but it bumped her up and down in her chair. She could hardly squeak.

"I’m sure," she gasped.

I was nothing if not tall. I stood and straightened myself, then executed a deep Western bow, sweeping my hat off with my right hand.

"I am at your service, ma’am."

I was kidding and we both knew it, but there was enough in it to give her pleasure and pause.

"Sit down before you split your jeans," she said. Her glass was empty and that made her thoughtful too.

"Listen, Spike. You seem like a good kid, but you just don’t know. You just don’t know."

"Know what?" I asked.

"You just don’t know."

It pissed me off that she didn’t think I was old enough or hip enough or whatever to tell me what she was thinking. Just when we were starting to get along.

She threw a bunch of money at the check and we stepped outside. There was still plenty of city heat trapped in the air, while a slight breeze pushed the litter down Amsterdam Avenue.

"Well," I ventured. "I guess this is where we say ‘happy trails’."
"What are you talking about?" Susan frowned. The
drink had wound her pretty tight. Her eyes were a little
screwy, but determined. "You're not getting off that
easy. We're just getting started here."

Okay, I thought, if that's the way it's going to be.
The only other things I had to look forward to were
watching TV with Edwin and Aphrodite until I was tired
enough to go to sleep or staring into a beer by myself at
the college bar where they didn't proof. Besides, if she
kept drinking the way she was going, she might need a
chaperone down the road.

"Where to?" I smiled. I was clearheaded and
cooperative.

"I happen to know of a little party," she said.

"Great," I said in return.

"Yeah, well, we'll see," she craned her neck down
the avenue to see if any cabs were coming.

"Why don't we take my bike?" I offered.

"Your what?"

"My motorcycle. I've got an extra helmet. It's
parked right around the corner."

"I'm sure," she said.

Susan had never ridden on the back of a motorcycle
before, much less a Harley. The helmet was a little heavy
for her neck, but she was a sport about it. After a quick
lesson on being a passenger, she got the hang of it right away. Maybe she was too drunk to be anything but relaxed. "This is so great," she whispered in my ear every time we stopped at a light. She seemed completely oblivious of the constant danger we were in. Cabs were the worst. Twice I was pushed out of my lane and had to downshift to avoid being crushed between two cars. Riding a bike in New York was about as relaxing as watching a drunk man clean his gun.

I was also skeptical about parking the chopper in the neighborhood where the party turned out to be. The buildings didn’t look like apartment buildings to me. The streets were cobbled and filthy. There was no street light and no other cars parked nearby.

"It’ll be fine," Susan moaned. "Do you see any lurking hijackers? Come on, there’s a party upstairs."

The elevator needed a key so we had to walk up the stairs which were wider and steeper than normal stairs. The higher we climbed the more distinct the dull roar that throbbed in the walls above our heads. By the time we reached the landing, the noise had obliterated the distinction between inside and outside. We were part of it and it was part of us.

There were more people at the party than lived in all my hometown. Pushing through the crowd was like
fighting your way through a forest at night. They were all stretched out and skinny and wore dark clothes. I figured it for some sort of drug scene. The noise. The flashing light. It was almost too much.

"Stay here," Susan said before I had even got my bearings. I turned and she was gone. On my own and pretty sure that people were making fun of me, pointing and laughing, I dug my heels in and tried to locate the bar. No question I was out of place. No mind. I was getting used to people staring. I just gave them the five-mile stare, like I was above all that.

Other than high school dances, I hadn't been to a lot of parties. I skipped the prom even though I probably could've rustled up a date if I had really wanted to. I heard I didn't miss anything. It didn't seem to me as though anybody was having much of a time at this shindig neither. Mostly everybody was standing around the way I was. It was so dark, I couldn't really see what anybody looked like. The music was so damn loud, I couldn't hear anything but. Even so, nobody was really dancing. Even the ones who were wandering around looked as though they just got a piece of bad news.

I found the bar. It had so many bottles, it looked like the Manhattan skyline. I stuck close to a bottle of Jack and poured myself a glass of good fortune. While I
was cooling my heels, not a single person said a word to me. That whole time, I just eyed a girl who kept drifting in a dancing sort of way into my vicinity. She seemed to be showing off a bit. Most of the girls in New York had a kind of sickly appearance, but this one could have been a cheerleader if she had wanted the job. Her tee-shirt came down to her thighs and it didn’t look like she was wearing anything else underneath it. I didn’t mind watching if she didn’t mind my watching. She didn’t seem to be dancing with anyone, just throwing her hair around as if she was Tina Turner or something. I couldn’t believe nobody else was paying her any mind.

"The mating dance," said a voice in my ear. "A rather vulgar display of female aggression, don’t you think?" The voice sounded like bubbling black-top on a hot day.

I didn’t know how this fellow got so close to me without me knowing it. I could feel his breath on my neck. It smelled like cinnamon and butter and it made me a little sick. He was hardly a man at all, small enough to be a little kid dressed in a grown-up suit, but there was nothing silly or childish about him. For one thing, I never saw someone who could stand so still. It was weird. You don’t think how much people move around until you see someone who doesn’t do it. Not tense, just quiet-like,
like if there was a problem with him being that close to me, it was my problem. There wasn’t a wrinkle on him, not even in the handkerchief that peeked out of the breast pocket of his jacket. His little head was as round as a stone and he wore little round glasses with lenses so thick it looked as though his eyes were squashed and squiriming in oil. I was afraid of him. I took a step back and he smiled and that smile made me feel even sicker.

"You’re new to me," he said as if I owed him an explanation. I thought maybe it was his party, but I let it slide anyway. Not saying anything seemed like a good idea. He yawned.

"Did you read the Randy Cohen article about energism in Art Forum?" he asked. "What a hoot! If you don’t mind my use of the word. But really, you can pump as much air as you want into a flat tire. You know what I mean, man? I might be the only person in New York who doesn’t have my own -ism. Whatever happened to taste? Good old decadent taste?" He kind of leered at me when he said that last part.

I could have walked right then and there. I probably should have. The dancing girl had disappeared into the crowd and I had half a mind to find her and ask her name. The way it was with me standing there and this guy
talking my ear off, I wasn’t sure what I should do. I tried to smile as much as I could so as not to seem too impolite.

I could have almost sworn the guy was wearing make-up. I had never seen a man with lipstick and rouge before and it fascinated me, although it was so odd, I couldn’t be sure. It almost looked as though his lips were smeared across his face. He had some kind of eyebrows too. Big bushy twisty things. Weird.

After a while, he stopped trying to make conversation with me, and we both stood scanning the crowd together like two old buddies passing the time.

That was when I heard the scream, or at least I knew that someone had screamed. Some sounds you hear without hearing them exactly. It was like that. The music was too loud to hear a chainsaw on the other side of the room, but this cut through somehow. I even thought for a moment that it might be Susan. Somehow I knew that something bad had happened on the other side of the party. My new friend knew it too. Like a wolf who smelled blood, he focussed his attention over the heads of the crowd. The panic spread outward from a spot we couldn’t see. Nobody ran. There was no danger of a panic. Half the people, the ones who were really drunk, went on dancing as if nothing had happened. But, a fair number of people started
herding toward the exits, looking around nervously as if for help, jabbering and pointing and making explanations. Part of me wanted to see what it was about. The other part wanted to follow them towards the door.

I wanted to find Susan to see if she was all right. I was going to go look for her, when she re-appeared all of a sudden. She and the odd little man looked at each other as if they had met before and had nothing nice to say about the acquaintance.

"We have to get out of here," she whistled. She seemed almost sober. Something bad had happened. Most of the stuff people get in a twist about is bullshit, but, in this instance, I took Susan at her word. I didn’t like her grabbing my arm though.

"Now," she insisted. Her voice was steady, but her hand was shaking.

My bike was where I had left it. But, by now, plenty of other party-goers had spilled onto the street and sidewalk, all of them skittish with the kind of excitement that comes from having been close to, but escaped from an unforseen and sudden danger. Nobody thought to act cool at this moment. With everyone dressed in hip New York black, the sidewalk had the atmosphere of a funeral where the corpse had sat up and said "what’s
all the fuss about?” Speculations popped and fizzled as quickly as the matches struck to light cigarettes.

“Did you see that? What did you see?” asked a young man with fuscia hair swinging in his eyes. He paced the small sidewalk as best he could. He obviously had his skirts up about something.

“It was like a flash,” swore a wild-eyed girl with a runny nose. “Like the light caught it just right. I didn’t even know what was going on. All I saw was the flash.”

Tucked into the arms of a guy a foot and a half taller than she, another young woman sobbed and sobbed without shame. Her comforter gazed over her shoulder and begged his friends “Did you call the police? Did someone call the police?”

I had a question or two of my own, but Susan steered me firmly away from the crowd and toward the bike.

“Come on,” she hissed. “We’ve got to go.”

A siren pealed in the distance. It might have been headed in this direction. It might not have been. All I knew was I didn’t like being rushed. I decided to double-check the sparkplug caps, before I started the Harley.

“What’s wrong?” snapped Susan. “What is it?”
"Probably nothing," I drawled, slowing down to a country pace in order to reflect a bit. "I may have heard the timing misfire on the way down here or I may have just been mistaken."

Susan twirled around like a dog trapped in a corner. No question. The siren was moving closer.

"I need to go." She was almost in tears.

I had no desire to make problems for her. I just wanted to see how far she would stretch. That, and let her know she wasn’t the boss of me.

"Whereto?" I asked, as nonchalant as could be.

"Just go," she snarled.

I kicked the bike into life. It spit so much noise in the dark canyon of buildings that more than one of the sidewalk crowd covered his ears and stared at us. Even the sobbing girl lifted her head off the chest of her boyfriend. When she saw us, she pointed and said something, but I couldn’t hear her and we sped away.

The night had chilled enough that I wished for a jacket. It was like traveling through space. I had one of the songs from the party stuck in my head and I whistled the tune softly as I drove. The wheels made a threshing noise underneath us. The streets were desolate and Susan clutched me too tightly. Traveling through space. I felt empty, contemplative, peaceful. I did not care so much
that Susan was overreacting to every bump and turn, wrestling me, almost throwing us off balance. I stopped whistling, but continued to tap out the rhythm of the song on the handlebars. I did not mind so much the sensation of her regular breathing, the whoosh of the tires, and the cool night air in my face. The solitude of it all. Two people who did not know each other. Two people traveling through space. Suspended animation.

Finally, at a stoplight uptown on Broadway, I said “Did you need a place to stay for the night.”

“I can’t go home,” she answered. She didn’t seem any happier about it than I was.

“Let’s get some beer,” I answered.

We stopped at a bodega near Edwin’s apartment. The light in the store made me ornery. I couldn’t decide what kind of beer to get. I settled on a sixpack of Bud tall boys. As I was digging into my pocket for change, Susan peeled a twenty out of her purse like it was a piece of toilet paper and handed it to me.

“You okay?” the man behind the counter asked me. He was Mexican or something. Looked like he hadn’t slept this week. “You need a bandaid?”

“What?” I wasn’t sure what he was asking me.

“Your arms. Looks like blood.”
Sure enough, on each of my upper arms where Susan had been holding on, two handprints of blood stained my skin. I hadn’t noticed.

"No, I’m fine," I told him.

This discovery made both of us quiet for the next while. I had already parked the bike so we walked the couple blocks to Edwin’s apartment. Susan seemed to have lost her momentary grip on sobriety. She lurched forward ahead of me as she punched her way through invisible curtains down the street. Every few steps or so, without warning, she would stop in her tracks and turn on me, demanding to know where we were and where we were headed. After I had calmed her by patiently explaining what she already knew, her hostility would abate, and she would lead the way again, only to stop after a few paces and repeat the same questions of a moment before. I had once held the hand of my little brother after he had been thrown out of our pick-up truck. We were waiting for the ambulance and he was like that; every few seconds he would ask me what had happened after I had just told him. I was beginning to consider that Susan might be more trouble than she was worth. Whatever had happened back at the party, she was mixed up in it, and, if she was in it, now I was too. I didn’t for a moment believe that she had hurt anyone. I didn’t know what to think. But, one thing
was sure. I couldn’t leave her. Not the way she was now. She could hardly stand up and walk. In the morning I would see how things shaked out.

Edwin and Aphrodite must have been dead asleep or not home yet. Wrangling Susan into my bedroom was no easy task. The hall from the door to there was so narrow and dark that we kept crashing into the walls. She fought me all the way and the more I tried to shush her the louder she became. Finally I let go of her and she collapsed onto the floor in front of the room like a voodoo doll. Back home, I had once helped a man unload 100 lb. sacks of concrete, but lifting her off the ground was twice the chore. There was nothing harder than lifting the dead weight of a person passed out drunk.

By the time I got her across my bed, I was shaking from the effort. I was a little worried too. She didn’t seem right. What if she was too drunk? What if she got sick in her sleep and choked to death on her vomit? I wasn’t even sure she was still breathing. I decided I should get her out of her clothes. Edwin’s cat, a blue-point Siamese named Spleef, was none too happy about the noise we were making. He screeched quietly as he prowled the foot of the bed. I began taking her clothes off, first removing her shoes. Somehow her socks had gotten wet. I tried to rub some warmth into her toes. She did not have good circulation. Then I unbuttoned her cardigan
and twisted her arms out of the sleeves, but without any cooperation, the best I could do was leave her turtleneck bunched around her bra and her jeans around her knees. Susan lay as still as sack of tools, her arms outstretched where they had fallen, her mouth open toward the ceiling. I had given up trying to undress her. It was pointless. I was glad I had been careful not to drink too much. There was barely enough room for me to curl up beside her. By using one of her arms as a pillow and draping my legs over her waist, I just managed to squeeze into a spot where I might be able to get some sleep. The room began to wobble. I was never going to do anything this stupid again. In the morning I would tell her she had to go. I had done everything for her I could. Like dark iron shears, sleep cut my thoughts into strips that floated away into the sharp edged shadows.

Something woke me. Susan didn’t have any clothes on and she was sitting on my chest, her knees pinning my arms to my sides so that I could hardly move. She had my gun. It was pointed at my head. She laughed as if she had just gotten a joke that someone had told earlier that night.

“You like boys, don’t you,” she declared.

“No,” I swore, although right at that moment I wasn’t sure how fond I was of girls either. It was too dark to tell whether the safety was on or not. Edwin’s
apartment was on the second story of a five story building, and there was a streetlight right outside my window, but there was only about as much light as if someone had left the television on. It made her look very strange. Her eyes were invisible, like glass candles, and her hair looked almost blue. Even though I had fooled around some in high school, I had never actually seen a girl with all her clothes off except in dirty pictures. Susan did not look anything like those pictures. She looked like some skinny guy with his shirt off, except she had tits. They were flat against her chest and the dark part around the nipples was bigger than the pictures I had seen. I was glad my arms were pinned down because if she had wanted me to hold her or caress her, I don’t think I could have.

"What were you doing with Simion?" she asked. She ground the muzzle of the revolver into my temple. It hurt. She was stronger than she looked.

"Simion?" I asked. "I don’t know who Simion is."

"Talking with Simion," she moaned. "Simion, the boy collector."

It took me a second to realize that she was still sound asleep. She was asleep! She had taken her clothes off, found my gun, and ambushed me in her sleep. Whatever was going on in her mind was all a dream. I wasn’t sure if this was good news or bad news.
Then she rapped me in the center of my chest with the butt of the gun. It did not quite knock the wind out of me. The only thing I could do was defend myself from further attack. She began to talk to herself now, chewing on her words by grinding her chin back and forth. It was an unintelligible monologue, private and resentful. I had a hunch that I was not yet off the hook. I was right. She cocked the hammer back on the pistol and waved it around over my face, lazier this time and easier to deflect, but still, I had to do something before someone got hurt. I freed my arms and caught her hand and wrestled her backward onto the bed, holding her there for a moment in case she had any more fight in her. I did not want to hurt her, just hold her still until she let go of the gun. I hoped that her mood would tire itself out. It was not long before she stopped struggling, but I did not relax my grip. Finally the gun fell to the floor and she started laughing. Back where we started. She was still asleep, in the logic of some dream, but she was laughing now.

"What's so funny?" I asked her. "What is it?" I wasn't going to let her go until she told me.

"Aren't you going to kiss me?" she said.

This was weird. The last thing I wanted to do was kiss her. A second ago she had a gun to my head. I let my weight collapse onto her. She was solid and warm. I could feel her heart beating beneath me on the soundboard of
her chest. This was really weird. I tightened my grip on her wrists. I put my lips on her lips, as meaningfully as I could, but since she was sleeping, it was like kissing someone who did not know what kissing was.

She laughed again.

"If you're fucking with me, I'll kill you" she said.