Presently tense [Short stories]

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PRESENTLY TENSE

by

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PRESENTLY TENSE

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Acknowledgment

"Six of One" was previously published in the Fall 1987 edition of Pacific Review.
Like all seasonal restaurants, Manero's is overpriced and understaffed, yet the barroom is packed with sweating people who shout at each other when they're not shouting orders at the bartenders. They act like they're still at the race track. I wade through these people, hoping to spot one of my debtors. I scan the dining room as well, but there is no one here who owes me. The favorites must be coming in today. I slip out the patio door that a man in plus fours holds open for me. A downstater in matching jacket and Bermuda shorts carrying a drink in one hand and a cigar in the other steps on my toes. He smiles at me from within the picture frame his raised arms make.

"You walk on the bottoms," he says, "and I'll walk on the tops."

I feel like a chameleon set beside a glass of water. It's not just the tourists. At least they'll be leaving at the end of August when the thoroughbreds quit running. Besides, in this town, everyone becomes a
tourist in August. Everyone but me. I'll bet I'm the only local who refuses to drink at the seasonal bars. I know I'm the only one who doesn't regard the track as the Delphi Oracle. But I have no gripes with the tourists. My travel agency does a tidy business with them. It has to just so I can lend money to friends who will never save enough to leave this town. Their dreams, like the race track, are circuitous. They never plan ahead, at least not past the eleventh race. They all bet on the big win, not the smart win. To a man, they bet on longshots that never come in. They are losers betting on losers.

I cross the flagstone patio and at the far end of the veranda, I spot a man in a seersucker suit whom I haven't seen in two years. Quickly, I turn around and attempt conversation with an older couple. I know I'm grinning madly, but I can't help it. For once, I'm the one who wishes to avoid notice.

The strangers want no part of me. They look at me, impetuous youth, and then at their empty highball glasses, and then silently, they peel away. The man in the plus fours has closed the barroom door. There is no way out but to cross the veranda to the stone gate.

"Fencik!" I hear a man call. I try to avoid his attention, an impossible act. John Bain and I are the tallest people here. We stand a head taller than everyone else.
We share a smile above everyone while cutting through the crowd. I notice that he is sporting a flat top, the same haircut his mom used to give the two of us twenty years ago, and that his clothes, as always, fit and move as effortlessly as he does. But the closer we get, the worse he looks. He is thinner than I remember, almost gaunt. And he is pale, no longer maintaining a perpetual tan.

In grade school, we used to shovel off the court and play basketball in our parkas and gloves until it got too dark to play. Bain and I would play one-on-one long after everyone else had quit. When we tired of that game, we would play H-O-R-S-E until somebody's jump shot went sour. We never went anywhere without a basketball. We grew up thinking that the world was one big asphalt court with no out of bounds.

In high school, Bain and I played on the same side only during varsity games. In practice or in pick-up games, we were always pitted against each other, and not just because we were the two biggest or the two best. During the off-season, most of us got jobs so we played on Sunday. We played in the morning to escape the heat, but we always played too long. Inevitably, our hands would turn black from the hot tar the ball picked up from the court. Bain loved to wipe his hands on his face and arms and tell us that we had to look like soul brothers in order to play like the brothers. I hated the
tar. I regarded it as the stain of sin for missing mass.

I felt bad about cutting out from church. I believed that we were supposed to be absolving our sins instead of acquiring new ones. It was Bain's idea to extend our playing time, to meet at the drugstore instead of St. Anthony's, to meet in a booth instead of a pew. Bain named our meeting place St. Fred's, after the owner. And although he never confessed to it, especially once the police began investigating, I knew it was Bain who had shinnied up the drain pipe to spraypaint a day-glow crucifix around the RX sign he had altered to read INRI.

"Who are these people?" Bain wants to know.

"The legion of the lost."

"Apparently not. At least they're getting served. What's the set-up here? Scotch by appointment? God, an atom bomb wouldn't get this bartender's attention. Come on, Fencik, you must know all the good spots. Find us one."

Bain grabs my elbow and guides me off the patio. We walk away from Manero's, away from the canopied outdoor bar, beyond the sizzle of bar-be-quet steaks and sausages, passing the Cape Cod summer homes, all of them rented, none of them for sale, up to where the sand ends and the curb begins, past the jockey club alongside an eight-foot high pruned hedge that obscures the riders.
Here, Bain lets go of my arm to eavesdrop. He sticks his head into the hedge then jerks it out just as abruptly. "As if small men need to hide," he says. "Do you still play ball?" I ask.

Bain shrugs.

"There's usually a game at the park around supper time. I've got an extra pair of sneakers. You want to play tonight?"

"No."

Bain's new saddle shoes sound off smartly on the sidewalk, but I prefer to walk on the soft, silent grass. Passing cars play soothing jazz. We are the only ones on Union Street walking away from the track. In the distance, the track crowd roars. Stretch drive. We pass porch after front porch of men in ties and jackets and women in billowy dresses. We are beyond the smell of horses and deep-fried food. A man in a Madras sports coat waves to us with a gin bottle, but Bain and I refuse.

The approaching storm clouds are the color of macadam. The sky and the street are one; Union Street looks like it will lead us straight to heaven. All around us the shrubs and maple trees begin to unfurl their leaves. They remind me of myself, fingers extended, trying to stop Bain from driving to the basket. Two women I should know slow their convertible down, but I defer their invitation, pointing instead to
our destination.

"Are you on glue?" Bain asks.

"We couldn't have fit in their car."

"One size fits all," Bain says and waves wildly at the next five cars.

He's doing it again, turning my reluctance into his excess just to show me up. Just like on the court where he loved to pit his power game against my finesse game. I want to shove him away, cross the street, walk in any direction but his.

I love this town!" Bain says. He throws an arm around me and hugs me. And I let him. "It's just lousy with intelligent, single women, if that isn't redundant. Better yet, they want to remain that way. It's a drunkard's dream. A town without motivation, that's what Saratoga Springs is. No one wants to leave, get married, or do anything. It's perf. I know why you live here, Fencik. God, I should too. I could shill this town."

Ahead of us, soft rain starts falling.

It rained the day Bain and I went on our first date. The movie theater was dark, but I was still too scared to make my move on Nora Hall so I flagged down Bain three seats away and out in the lobby I asked him whether I should put my arm around Nora or the back of the seat. He told me it depended on which one I wanted to feel.

Bain was the first of us to make out, the first to
get bare tit, the first to break up with a girl. I asked him once if he ever touched a girl where it counted.

"Sure," he said. "Haven't you?"

When Bain got his driver's license, we abandoned the Sunday games in favor of cruising through Ballston Spa, through Malta and Maltaville, through Schuylerville and other towns to gaze at their women. Lust felt like a bigger sin than missing mass, but one worth committing.

"Check this out," Bain would warn and we would leer out the window hoping for a reaction. We liked to invent stories about the girls we passed. Sometimes my shyness silenced me, but Bain never noticed. His interest, like his taste, never faltered. He never grew weary of the chase. And he never drew attention to a loser. "I'm telling you," Bain loved to say, "the world is a library full of women on loan."

"Is the chain to keep people in or out?" Bain asks.

I leap over this barricade, the only one in town, turning a one-eighty in midair. Bain still has moves too. He leaps and twirls over a post, not the slackened chain, and lands facing the same direction. All this in a suit. Hard rain hits the puddles, bringing the street to a full boil. The rain on our faces is indistinguishable from our sweat.

"Look at this!" Bain says. "A sleeping policeman!"

"It's just a speed-bump," I tell him.
"Why all the retardants? Why do you need sleeping policemen on a chained-off street? You got a problem with runaway pedestrians here?"

"It isn't always chained off," I say. "They only close it off to traffic when you're in town."

Bain races to the next speed-bump. He's oblivious to me, to the rain, to the people who dash in and out of the doorways like they're being chased. The rain silences and hastens everyone else. But Bain systematically examines each speed-bump. Careful not to step on them, he bends down and pats each one. He encircles each speed-bump as if there will be a slip of paper wedged into one, a note meant only for him.

I run to catch up with him. "Come on," I say, stopping him with a hand. "We better duck inside before we get soaked." I notice that his hands are dirty. And that he's out of breath.

Bain slaps my hand from his shoulder. "Nick," he says solemnly, "we don't need a reason to drink."

The bar, like all the shops and saloons on Caroline Street, built a century ago when storefront was at a premium, is a rectangle of brick walls twice as tall and five times longer than it is wide. The oak floor is new, but the white patterned ceiling is original. Pictures of the owner with an arm slung around famous tourists adorn the walls. We pick a table halfway in, directly across from where the bartender sits when he's not busy. The
patrons at the bar, mostly men, mostly strays, prefer to stand. The tarnished brass and tile bar they face looks like a large urinal.

"Did I ever tell you, Fencik, what finally propelled me into the lap of luxury?"

"Probably."

"Ski poles."

"Well, that's one way to get there."

"Let me tell you something, Fencik. There's skiers and there's people who ski. It's the same with aerobics. Do you think aerobics would exist without the accompanying fashion? No way. It's not like basketball. We've evolved into the age of fashion sport, an age where leisure means more than career. How you burn it matters more than how you earn it. Skiers are the worst. Namedroppers, every one of them. They don't want a bargain. They prefer to pay more for things."

"What do you want to drink?"

"We were selling a perfectly good ski pole, but more and more skiers wanted something else. Something better. Something with more snob appeal. They're maniacal that way. Tell me the truth. Can you remember anything you ever wore on the court?"

"Just my sneakers."

"That's right. Anyway, I contracted our manufacturer to dye the X-10 in two other colors taking ten points on all the action. We called these trend-
setters the X-20 and the X-40, and today, the X-40 outsells every pole in America. Costs twice as much as the X-10 and it's the same damn pole."

"Bain."

"Time to shake hands with the unemployed," he announces not to me, but to a passing redhead as he makes his way to the men's room. "We lead great lives," he calls from over his shoulder.

"Beer or scotch?" I shout. Bain does not hear me, but everyone else does. They turn and face me, anxious for a free round. They mistake me for a winner.

I have never shared Bain's zest for meeting strangers, even when the strangers are women. I always feel deceptive at first and I think women sense this. But for Bain, deception has always been part of the allure. He'd always begin with a lie. He'd introduce himself to each wife-for-the-night as Chris Smith. Later in the evening when it mattered, he would laugh and tell the woman not to worry about getting pregnant because Chris Smith comes but once a year.

I remember him referring to himself that way at a lounge show at Tahoe. My agency had just earned its first free airline pass and I had no where else to go. It was the only time I ever went west to see him. We were seated at a Beatles impersonation act. We had dates, day shift dealers from another club whom Bain had befriended the day before. Between songs, Bain took it
upon himself to entertain everyone, but whenever the
band played, Bain withdrew and laughed to himself.

"These guys aren't that bad," I said, unsure of
what to call him. "I think the McCartney guy is actually
quite good. He's got Paul's skip step down. Hell, he's
even left-handed."

Bain dismissed me with a wave of his hand. "It's
not the band." He laughed and our dates laughed with
him. "I don't usually care for anything fake, but these
guys make you wonder. Do you think there's a Mark
Chapman imitator in the audience?"

The women roared. I laughed, but nominally. John
Lennon had been a hero.

"Why do you always wince when you laugh?" my date
asked me in front of everyone. "Is your funny bone
broken?"

I had no reply for her or for Bain so I avoided
their eyes. I looked out into the audience wondering who
among us really was an assassin.

We got slaughtered at the blackjack tables, but had
good luck with the women. They weren't that private.
They didn't mind sharing a double room. It was the first
and only time Bain and I ever screwed in the same room,
and though I felt kind of faggy about it, I was more
curious about his performance than my date's. Maybe
that's why when I awoke the next morning, both women
were lying in Bain's bed.
"Oh, my funny bone," I heard him moan from across the room. And I heard my date laughing.

"Your fly is open," I tell Bain upon his return. He smiles and shrugs and stares at the label on the beer I've bought him. Outside, the rain still pounds against the awnings. Each time someone enters the bar, a cacophony of rain, like a shadow, enters with him.

"Don't you care?"

"I'm fly fishing," he says.

The couple behind us leaves. The rain makes things sound urgent. Bain brushes away his glass and drinks right from the bottle. "I'm trolling for queers," he says.

"You always have to be different, don't you, Bain?"

He tilts his head back and stares at me with the same expression he gave the label.

"But I am different from you, Fencik." He shows me his wrists. Moles the color of tar dot both arms. "God's thrown shit at me through a screen door."

"What is that?"

"The enemy within. My own body has turned against me. I'm spilt beer, Fencik. In a year I'll be gone. I'll be just a whisper then. Just another ugly rumor."

"What are you talking about? Those are just birthmarks."

"It's all over, Nick. I'm being sucked in by my own
body's black holes. But it's only fitting. I've always been a social blight. I guess it's just blight on blight. Kind of funny, don't you think?"

"It's not funny." I try to swallow my beer, but it won't go down.

"No, I guess not. I don't really know what it is. I'm not supposed to be drinking. Or become overstressed. Stress is definitely out, not that it was ever in. I'm not supposed to sweat a lot or dehydrate. That jump I took outside was my first in a year. I couldn't tell you the last time I played ball."

"So don't tell me about it."

Bain sits back and smiles. "I should never take that first piss. Once I do, it's off to the races."

The races. They must be over by now. Surely somebody who owes me must have won today. I drop my hand into my lap and discreetly check my watch. Barring a photo finish or a foul claim, the eleventh race has just ended. Anyone without a winning bet to claim is passing through the turnstiles on the way to somewhere else. The rain will herd them all, winners and losers, into the closest bar: Manero's.

"We should have gone to the track today, Fencik, you and I. The track, not us, should be paying for this day. I know we could've come up with a kharma ticket."

Bain stares at the picture beside us, a photographic porthole of the owner and Neil Armstrong.
"I'm not sure," he finally says, "but I think I'm going
to look weird pretty soon. I think I'm going to turn
into a big connect-the-dots game." He clutches his beer
bottle so tightly I expect it to shatter.

"It doesn't scare me that much," he says, "the fact
that I'm yesterday. I just don't like the idea of being
in one place forever. I sure don't want that place to be
a hospital."

"Why don't you stay here? You've got money."

Bain flashes an expression of pity, the look that
should be on my face. "I couldn't live in Saratoga," he
says.

"But you do live here," I say. "This is your home
town. This place was your life. You'll always be a
citizen of Saratoga. People still drop by the agency
just to ask about you. You're a celebrity. I wish you
were a tour. I could make a bundle."

"Don't say that," he says. "People here don't know
who I am. Really, Fencik, who am I? Mommy's Cousin Jack,
that's all. And Mommy comes from a big family. I come to
town with a suitcase. Money spills out of my pockets and
in a week, I'm gone. The only reason women give me the
time of day is because I'm not a bother. I pay my own
way, and usually theirs too, and I never overstay my
welcome. Always pay for a round trip in advance. You're
the travel agent. You should know that."

"I'll put you up at my place."
Bain extends an arm. Fingers flexed, he pretends he is palming a basketball. "Was my life," he says and lets the imaginary ball bounce away.

"You're so lucky," I say. "The rare breed who knows it all. Most people go the grave never knowing, but not you."

Bain's determination seems to lapse. "This beer," he says, looking at his open fly. "It runs right through me. I wish they'd let us piss on the floor."

By now, people at Manero's are probably buying champagne and setting up coke deals. I watch Bain walk shamelessly to the men's room. He walks haphazardly like he's stoned, not gracefully like an athlete as he stops to examine each picture he passes.

Bain once told me that he used LSD in college not just to trip, but to get laid. He'd split a hit with a girl, call it their tandem ticket, and then wait until she was good and stoned before propositioning her.

"It's foolproof," he claimed. "An act of altruism. They never say no because they're afraid of bumming me out."

"Aren't you afraid of bumming them out?" I asked. Bain smiled. "No chance for that."

"Where's your sense of honor?"

"Honor?" he said, as if the word meant just the opposite. I wanted to slug him.

"God, Fencik, no wonder you can't get laid. You've
got the whole thing backwards. You don't provide honor; you remove it. You make things as easy as possible."

The redhead allows him time to settle in before passing by our table once more. A dozen beers will not slake my thirst today. I drink while Bain sits and waits. As the woman approaches, Bain leans back. His eyes widen as if to clear a path for her.

"Mary!" he calls as soon as she pulls even with our table.

"How did you know my name?" she asks. "Who are you?"

"Chris Smith is my name. And this is my oldest and dearest friend, Nicholas X. He's a retired pope or a white Muslim. You decide. Please. Sit down."

Bain stands. He pushes his captain's chair at her and grabs one for himself from the vacant table behind us.

"We were wondering, X and I, how to best make a graceful exit from these cumbersome beers, liquid ballasts really. X and myself just aren't the proper ante, but you, Mary, you make it three, and that's the perfect number for a pitcher of chi-chis. What do you say? In or out?"

She doesn't have to say anything. Instantly, Bain is off to the bar. Mary pulls her chair up and lays her cigarettes and wallet on the table. She is even more
striking up close. Her eyelashes, if they're real, are
the longest I've ever seen. They roll slowly,
rhythmically, like waves. I feel like a lighthouse every
time my eyes sweep past her.

"Did you have any luck today?" she asks Bain upon
his return. His look of disbelief makes them both giddy.
"Well, what about you, Nix?"

"I live here in town," I reply. "I usually only go
to the track on Saturday for the stakes races." I stare
into my chi-chi. It's the color of her skin.

"She looks like Tessie, doesn't she?" Bain says.
"Fabulous," the woman says. "I've always wanted to
look like someone else."

"Tessie is my sister," I tell her.
The one I caught Bain in bed with.
I was the only one who had felt shame. Bain didn't.
Tessie didn't. Tessie wasn't embarrassed; she was angry
because I'd entered her room without knocking. She
ordered me out of the room and slammed the door, but
even standing at the bottom of our stairs, I could still
hear the thumping of her headboard against the wall. The
only remorse Tessie ever felt was that their involvement
didn't survive the night. Bain's only regret was that
her breath smelled like mine. Like tomatoes. Bain never
had any use for guilt or shame or anything that could
make him feel bad. His emotional palette carried only
bright, vibrant colors. He couldn't even hate. He grew
bored first. The only thing I ever knew him to hate was his name.

"It's something given to me that I never got for myself," he once told me. "Most men's names are euphemisms anyway. What's a john? Something people piss in. Someone a hooker wants to screw without wanting to know. What's more degrading than that?"

"I don't use a blow-drier, and I don't use a comb," Mary tells me while Bain is getting a refill of chichi. "I don't like pointing pieces of plastic at my head. It's unlucky."

Bain proudly sets a white, foamy pitcher on our table. "Had to milk the cow myself," he says.

"Don't try calling me on the phone," she warns him while offering her empty glass. "It's plastic, too."

Bain crouches over our table filling up everyone's glass to the brim. "Tessie," he says and laughs. "Now there's a cow's name."

"A contented cow, I hope," Mary says.

"Stop it," I tell them.

"A toast," Bain says. Mary raises her glass. I do not. "Here's to all women, the ships of our land. May they sail at full speed, and be always well-manned!"

Bain draws his glass to the bottom. He pours himself another before sitting down.

"Your fly is open," she tells him.

"I know it," he says. "I've lost the use of my
hands. Chi-chis make me arthritic. I think it's the coconut."

"What about it?" I ask Bain. "Won't you at least consider moving back here?"

"I thought Tessie was Truman's wife," Mary says and then regards me with newfound respect.

"Have you looked at these pictures on the wall?" Bain asks. "Have you figured out what's wrong with them?"

"Was it strange," Mary asks me, "growing up with Secret Service men in your home?"

"I'll tell you what's wrong," Bain says. "There's only people in these pictures. There's jockeys all right, but no horses."

"Do they take off their sunglasses when they're inside?" Mary asks.

"It's not fair," Bain says. "The horses are the real athletes. They're the stars. They're the ones who deserve to have their pictures taken."

"I've got a camera in my car," Mary tells Bain. "Is the owner here? We can round up some horses, and maybe some cows, and correct this problem right now." She glances at me suspiciously. "Unless we're already being photographed."

"Enough," I tell them.

"Pictures of horses," Bain says. "In casual poses."

"Horses," Mary says. "Horses and cows. A cavalcade
of cows." She stands up. "Hide! Hide! The cow's outside!" she shouts and dances around our table holding her skirt away from her body.

"Hide! Hide! The cow's outside!" Bain shouts. And together they prance around our table.

"Hide! Hide! The cow's outside!"

"Enough!" I push my drink away but too abruptly. Bain and Mary dance blithely out of range. Only the table top gets doused.

"What's wrong with him?" Mary asks, one hand clutching her chair, the other shaking her wet wallet. The two of them sit down away from the table.

"He's got VD," Bain says.

"That's impossible. Crabs don't catch social diseases. They are social diseases."

"Yes!" Bain roars in delight, louder than I've ever heard him laugh. "Blight on blight."

"Do you mind?" I say to her. "We were having a serious conversation before you intruded."

"God," she says, "why do I keep coming back to this town? You'd think I'd learn. Coming back here is like turning over a rock on a summer day. Every insect in the world comes slithering out." She glares at me briefly, preferring to gaze at Bain while she searches for a dry cigarette.

"Well?" she says.

"Oh, don't you get uncorked too," Bain says. "Old X
is upset. I told him that I've got melanoma and he
didn't appreciate hearing it."

"Melanoma?" she asks. "What's that? Sounds like a
musical instrument." She stares at me and pours the last
of her drink onto our table. "Come, you," she says to
Bain. "Let's get out of here. Show me how you play the
melanoma. I'd like to hear you play it. I love
musicians."

They rise, each offering me the same vacant look.

"What did you expect?" Bain says.

"My name is Alice," I hear her tell him as she
grabs for an arm that will lead her away.

Bain looks at me over his shoulder. "This is my
life," he says. "Not was. Is."

Two waitresses and a new bartender now spell the
barman. They are anticipating the postrace crowd. One
waitress surveys the bar, but remains at her station.
The other waitress, short and tan, seems eager to work.
Already, she is out on the floor taking orders from
several tables. Soon, she'll be at mine. I push my chair
away from the dripping table, grab the soggy money, both
Bain's and mine, and head for the men's room.

I'm sure now that Bain will die before I do and just
before he does, when I'm sure he is no longer able to
beat me in basketball, or buy me a beer, or recognize me
by my breath, I'll go visit him. Maybe then he'll tell
me why he kept coming back to Saratoga. Why any woman's friendship was always worth more than mine. Why it was so important to have me on the opposite side.

It's the vogue to have your ashes blown about, but I think when the time comes, Bain will select a nice Catholic cemetery. I used to consider us best friends, but I look at all that now as just my projection, a child's greed, just my own selfishness, and not anything that ever really existed. I'll visit Bain, but only while he's still alive. I won't visit his grave, not while the still soft ground buckles above him, forcing people to slow down, to go around him, to take notice. His tombstone will be that wedged-in note, but I won't read it.

I return to an empty table. One of the waitresses--I know which one--has taken the half-full pitcher and glasses and left the table barren and dry. I'm tired of drinking chi-chis so I don't hassle her about the missing pitcher. I'll buy a beer when I get to Manero's.

Outside, the dampness extracts a pleasant odor from the street. Little ribbons of earthworms now line the sidewalk. The sun is a siren. People exit from the bars as if alerted to do so.

Across the street, woman in tow, Clean Gene realizes that he's been spotted. He waits, gazing away, for my approach.

"Hello, Gene," I say. "Did your luck run with the
horses today?"

"Gene hit an exacta!" the woman says while pinching away white trails from both nostrils. She looks like someone who was in my agency this week, but left without buying a ticket.

"I looked for you at Manero's," Gene says. He punctures her zeal with a glare while handing me the larger of his two wads. "You weren't there."

"I know." I nod my thanks to his companion. "Well, this is certainly unexpected," I tell her. "But then, it's rarity that gives a thing its value." I pocket the money without counting it.

"Aren't you going to introduce me to your bodyguard?" I ask Gene, but he doesn't. Instead, he escorts her to the curb, away from the chain, from the speed-bumps, away from me. I don't care. I don't need to go to Manero's now so I scan Caroline Street for another bar, one where I'm apt not to know anyone.
Leonard raps on the door then stands to the side to avoid being seen through the fisheye peephole. Thinks Leonard: the real distortion is inside. His eyes veer upward to the fretted rows of condominiums that loom above the trailer park. Leonard knocks again. He scans the other mobile homes. Each one stands on its own raised mound on its own tiny, empty lot. To Leonard, each single-wide is a sad testimony to solitude and claustrophobia. These must be the serfs' quarters, Leonard thinks, as a husky voice shouts for him to get the hell in.

Leonard sets his valise down before greeting her. Jackie is seated, legs crossed, one arm raised, hand cocked holding a white-filtered cigarette that sports a Peter Pan collar of red lipstick. She is wearing a collarless, electric pink blouse elasticized at every port of entry, blue jeans rolled up in pirate cuffs, white go-go boots. Leonard smiles, but he is disappointed that she is still in full make-up, still
has her hair done up in a beehive, still wears the tin-
man bra. Leonard had hoped to see a different version,
someone only he would be privy to.

"You didn't bring any beer?" she asks. "I thought
twenty-one dealers made good money."

"I didn't know what brand you prefer," Leonard
says, but it's a lie. A mile away at Harrah's Cabaret
Bar, Alex waits with two female tourists. Leonard knows
what Jackie's expecting, but he plans to stay just long
enough to sell her his earrings. This deal is strictly
cash and dash.

"I don't have a brand," she says. "I take whatever
I can fit into my coat." She lights another cigarette
and leaves the room without it.

Leonard surveys the trailer, surprised at how
cavernous it seems. His eyes complete a lap around the
walls after pausing at each furnishing: the pine board
veneer that serves as wallpaper, the twin couches that
face each other, the shrivelled aloe plant, the brass
elephant head book ends that hold no books, the assemble-
at-home rattan rocker, a shadeless lamp, an empty,
bright red wooden coffee table, a paint splattered
magazine rack full of torn, dated fan club magazines,
the high-fidelity stereophonic television home
entertainment center console. Most of all, he notices
the day-glo velveteen picture of Cher that hangs above
the console. Adorned in fringed cowhide and a beaded
headband, Cher stands arms crossed in a Mona Lisa pose.

Leonard wonders why every piece of furniture lies flush against a wall. Her place reminds him of his grandparents' attic.

Leonard drags the red coffee table over to his couch. He unhinges the elkhorn clips of his leather case and lets it unfold. He holds it at arms length like a calendar, then shakes it until the dozen sets of earrings rest untangled. He sets the display in the center of the table. He studies each set, wonders which pair or how many she will buy.

The idea wasn't his, but his sister's. She, not he, was the one who came home wearing the Royal Coachman Leonard had abandoned after inadvertently clipping the barb.

"This is a cool earring," his sister said. Her friends thought so too, and within a month, Leonard had fashioned and sold a hundred pair. Some of her punk friends had even asked him to leave in the barb.

At first, Leonard sold Blue Duns and Bitch Creek Nymphs, flies that he had learned to tie while growing up in Montana. But when the genuine articles didn't sell as well as his more garish creations, Leonard sacrificed authenticity to avarice. Now Leonard no longer had time to tie flies, much less fish the Truckee, but it was worth it. Now he was hooking a new kind of fish. Women who had previously regarded Leonard as strange and
evasive now saw him as artistic and sensitive. Now Leonard saw it too. Even better, the earrings became the pick-up lines he never possessed. Leonard always kept a pair on his person. In his sports coat pocket lay a pair of feathered beauties Leonard would use tonight to attract his half of the tourists.

"Here you go, Cash Daddy," she says and thrusts a beer at him that is a different brand than her own. She places a bowl of stick pretzels on the coffee table and sits beside him, closer than she has to.

"Neat!" she says and plucks free a pair of Muddler Minnows to examine.

Leonard knows he is staring at her excessive make-up, knows that she knows, but still he cannot avert his eyes from her eye shadow. The iridescence reminds him of fish scales. In her, he sees the eyes of an old tired stockie that has somehow survived. Leonard guesses that she is a good five years older than he; thirty, maybe thirty-one. He assumes that she is from Stockton or Modesto or one of those Lost America farm towns in the California Valley where the cold, chiseled types till flourish.

"Have you lived here long?" he asks.

"Six months," she says. "Is that long?"

"This is only the second mobile home I've ever been in," he tells her. "The first one was an office on a used car lot. I liked the car, but I didn't like the
salesman, so I didn't buy the car."

She drops the earrings into the display. She selects another pair and holds them up to the light.

"How much did you say these cost?"

Her eye shadow now reminds him of an Earl Scheib paint job his parents once got on the family Ford.

"Still $29.95," he tells her. She lets this pair as well plummet to the display.

This afternoon, Leonard was in the casino to sell a pair to a dayshift roulette dealer and to visit with his former cronies in the slot department, to let them know that he was still their friend, that he wouldn't be trading them in for a set of snooty dealer friends now that he had become one. Now that he was working on a different shift in an elite department of anonymously handsome men and women. Now that he was making three times as much as a slot department manager. Jackie wasn't someone he'd planned to visit. They hadn't worked together that long, and Leonard usually avoided women who were taller than he. But the thrust of her chest into his had seemed intentional so when she beckoned him to follow her down a row of slot machines, he did.

"Guess what?" Jackie said as she stuffed wrapped rolls of coins into the pockets of her change apron. "This is the last day I'll ever have to wear this apron. Starting tomorrow, I'll just be paying off jackpots and
fixing the machines. No more geriatrics poking me in the ribs when they want change. Starting tomorrow, I'm jackpots only."

Leonard followed her down another slot aisle to a woman seated on a stool between two quarter machines. From her telltale right-handed glove, worn to keep her handle hand clean, Leonard could tell that the woman was a regular. That she wore a dress glove instead of a more durable gardening glove marked her as a regular but not a local.

"This one's jammed," the woman said and slowly ratcheted the handle of the good machine.

"I'll call a keyman," Jackie said.

"Why can't you fix it?"

"If I could, I would," Jackie said and then remembered. "Tomorrow, I can fix it."

"Oh no," the woman said. "We're leaving tomorrow."

Jackie leaned across to turn off the service light as the good machine spat out ten quarters.

"Cherries, always cherries," the woman said. "I hate cherries. How come I can't get any other payoff?"

"At least you got a payoff," Jackie said.

"Who are you kidding?" the woman asked, but Jackie had already turned away and again, Leonard thought, had purposely aimed her pointed breasts into him.

"Careful with those," Leonard wanted to tell her. "You could poke somebody's eye out."
"Come here," Jackie called as she walked by two service lights, past two surprised customers who would have to buy their rolls of quarters from someone else.

Leonard wondered why he was obediently following someone he hadn't come to see. Beyond the rows of slot machines, he noticed the disapproving frowns of the bored twenty-one dealers who had nothing better to do than vent their frustration at him. He had only been dealing twenty-one for a month, but already, he had been warned about the automatic censure invoked upon any dealer who hung around slot people. Especially Jackie and her roommate, Lois.

Leonard knew that the slot department hated Jackie Lois even more because they had to bear the full brunt of Jackie and Lois' oddity. They were the ones who became guilty by association. The slot department suffered enough as an elephant burial ground for those employees too ugly or obese to be promoted to a better paying glamour job in some other department. So even the other exiled fatties hated Lois for being fifty pounds overweight and not resenting it, for wearing her change apron slung below her gut like a bandido which caused her blouse to perpetually hang out and expose a role of fat that no one wanted to see. As a slot floorman, Leonard had heard the others laugh at Lois' acrylic blond wig. He had witnessed their disbelief that someone that size would wear stretch pants. He had heard them
calling her Miss Piggy behind her back.

He also knew that they disliked Jackie more for she was an attraction, and it was only a matter of time until she moved out and up. He watched Jay Faldo, the dayshift slot manager, peruse their section daily to see if Jackie—Nefertiti to the department—was violating any dress code procedure. It was obvious that Faldo disapproved of her false eyelashes, excessive make-up, the beehive hair-do, capri pants, the black stiletto heels. But as long as she wasn't violating casino procedure, there was nothing he could do but lay in waiting for the day when she would slip up and come in wearing brown shoes or oversized earrings. But until that day, if Jackie felt like wearing her change apron like a cumberbun, Faldo was powerless to act. Too bad if it made her Jack Haley breasts jut out that much further.

By her locked change drawer, Leonard realized that Jackie was looking past him, looking for someone else. That someone else was Lois, who came when Jackie nodded.

"Show Lois," Jackie told him and Leonard did. Carefully, he withdrew a wallet sized jewelry box that contained seven sets of his earrings. He looked at the two women as they examined his wares. For the first time, he felt sheepish about being in their company.

"Yeah, so?" Lois said.

"I think they're fab," Jackie said. "I want a
"I don't," Lois said and walked away.

"I do," Jackie said. She shut her eyes for a full second, enough time for Leonard to compare her kalaidescope green eye shadow with her red lipstick.

Merry Christmas, he thought.

"The money's at my house."

Leonard smiled. He could interpret that line. He laughed and dismissed the notion, but afterwards, he went home and crafted five new pair.

He cannot hear the wind, but from his seat in the living room, Leonard feels it, sees it pressing into the walls of the trailer.

"I feel like I'm being digested," he says.

"What are you talking about?"

"The wind. This trailer. This room. How many rooms are there anyway?"

"Four, if you count all this as one room."

"That's it," Leonard says. "We're inside a cow's stomach. We're nothing but cud."

Jackie raises a penciled eyebrow. She looks at Leonard with some concern.

"Have you ever milked a cow?" he asks.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Didn't you grow up on a farm?"

"Yeah," Jackie snorts. "A funny farm."
"I had an ant farm once," Leonard says. "But all the ants died. I put new ants in, but they died too. They all crawled to the bottom and died. It took me a month to shake them through the passages and get all of them to the top. It was like owning a labyrinth. Sometimes, I used to feel that way about our slot section."

Again, Jackie extends the same raised eyebrow. "I'm going to take a piss," she says.

Make sure you put it back, he wants to tell her, but fears she won't get that joke either. Leonard checks his watch. He knows that Alex and the women will not wait around forever. He knows he could drain his beer, gather his valise and be out the door before she returns, but he remains. There's unfinished business here, he realizes, and it's not just the money or the sex.

As Leonard eyes the day-glo painting, he realizes that with Jackie, his elliptical words and his seductive earrings are no more than bullets being fired into the sky. It's situations and not people, Leonard knows, that he's learned to master. But tonight, Leonard knows he controls nothing. And that is the attraction. Leonard twirls a set of earrings, then lets them drop to the table. He realizes his choice. He can remain within his usual safe boundaries or he can cave in to the chaos and see what happens.
Leonard chooses Plan B.

And thinks Leonard: I'll see this woman naked. I'll bump uglies with her until her eyes fall out of their sockets. Even if it was her idea.

Jackie returns with a fresh round of beers. Four beers: four brands.

"You really don't have a brand, do you?" he says.

"I don't have time to look," she says. "What's the difference? What are you, a beer snob? I got them free. You get them free."

Leonard avoids her eyes. He counts the sets of earrings hanging inside the valise.

"Do you like music?" she asks.

"Did the Kennedys die from lead poisoning?" Leonard says and immediately regrets his glibness.

As she strolls by, Leonard notices that she has removed her rouge and eye shadow. The eyelashes and lipstick remain, but the absence of other coloring makes her look younger. She's a chameleon, Leonard thinks. She's assuming my colors. Leonard watches her stack four albums onto the spool. He hears her slide the control arm over the top LP. The first album begins to play and Leonard is surprised how unscratched this version of "Half Breed" sounds.

"You really like Cher, don't you?"

"I adore her," Jackie says and picks a new set of
earrings. "I named my daughter after her daughter. Wouldn't it be cool if they became friends someday?"

"You have a daughter?"

Jackie nods solemnly. "Chastity. She's six."

"She's not here, is she?"

"No." She draws a cigarette from a red vinyl case. She murmurs the words to the song as she lights up.

"Why Cher?"

"I love her hair," Jackie says and strokes her own. "I love her nose, those teeth, everything about her. I admire her taste in younger men. I really like the way she dresses. It's cool. Before Chastity, I used to dress like that."

"Why?"

She impales Leonard with a look. "Why does anybody do anything? The way I see it, those who got it, show it. Those that don't, hide it." She pulls at her sleeves, and Leonard sees the lines on her arms that the elastic has made.

Leonard tries to guess when this album was first released, but cannot. He wonders what the appeal was, tries to imagine what a Cher concert would have been like, wonders who would go, what they would look like, what the original Cher fans took for a buzz. "You're an anachronism," he tells her.

She blows out distasteful smoke. "I have no idea what you're talking about," she says. "I'm not that
complicated."

Leonard stands up and stretches. Again, he counts
the sets of earrings. He swallows half his beer and asks
the anachronism to dance.

She offers him her erect arm then draws him to her.
She wants to lead and Leonard lets her. He hated it in
seventh grade but tonight, it feels wonderful to be
dancing with someone his height. They dance in a slow
continuous circle. Leonard is glad that she is still
wearing her funnel bra. It no longer matters that she is
different from the rest. What matters is that she is
different from him.

They dance through the silence between songs. They
swirl slowly, cheek to cheek, chest to chest, right into
"I Got You, Babe." She does not recoil when Leonard
kisses her ear.

"If I could only get a dealing job," she says. "If
I can make some money, show them I can hold a job, then
maybe I can get my daughter back."

"Who's got your daughter?"

"The state."

Leonard doesn't ask which one. "Where's your
husband?" he asks instead.

"How would I know?" she says, and stops dancing. "I
never had one."


Jackie fidgets for a cigarette.
"So where's the father?"

"How the hell should I know?" she says. "He could still be in this town for all I know. Does it matter?" She looks at her cigarette, at the earrings, at him. "This beer sucks," she says. "I'm getting another."

Leonard sits down in his same spot. He rests his feet on the coffee table and shakes the display of earrings, purposely trying to entangle them. He notices that one pair is missing.

The entire side of an album plays before she returns. She is now dressed in a pink fluffy bathrobe and carries with her two jelly jars full of wine. A single strand of stiff laquered hair, a Medusa snake, curls free from her beehive. Leonard thinks that she has been crying. He knows that she has removed more make-up. Now he guesses that maybe she is his age, a disturbing thought. He feels witness to some sort of reverse metamorphosis, a time lapse film being rewound, a video in which the butterfly forsakes its lustre and returns to the cocoon.

"Dance with me," Leonard says, but she wants to wait for a fast song. She is chain smoking. Leonard drinks, then shudders.

"What is this?" he asks.

"MD 20/20. I'm out of beer."

Leonard sets down the glass, picks up the valise. "Pick a pair," he says. "Try them on."
Without hesitation, she extracts a pair and hooks them both onto one ear.

"Good," Leonard says. "You needed color."

"I got color," she says. "I got three tattoos. All cherries. I went out and got them when I found out about Cher's tattoo."

Leonard braces himself, then swallows more wine.

"Show me," he says.

"This'll do," she says and stands up to a new song.

Leonard does too. La da da de dee. She gyrates in a succession of dances, calling out the name of each one: the Shimmy, the Shing-a-Ling, the Fish, the Hully Gully, the Boog-a-loo, the Skate, the Shake. Futilely, he tries to mimic her. La da da de dah. But each time he successfully imitates her, she switches to a new dance. And the beat goes on.

It's the last song on the last album and the silence seems to bother her. She shakes when lighting a filterless cigarette from a fresh pack.

"God damn it," she says. "He never should have left."

"Who?"
She looks at him in full malevolence. "Sonny."

"How do you know it was his idea?"

"How do I know?" She walks over to the magazine rack and grabs a handful of magazines. Each one that she throws at him has Cher on the cover.
"I know," she says. "Besides, it's always the guy."
Leonard drinks the last of the Mad Dog and goes to the kitchen to pour himself another. He hears footsteps and thinks she's coming after him. He turns, but she is gone.

Leonard stares at his own reflection in the kitchen window. He laughs at his paranoia. He hears the wind and looks outside for evidence. But there are no rustling leaves, no trembling trees or tumbleweeds. There are no signs of weather except the sound. Again, Leonard catches his reflection. He wonders if Alex and the tourist women have danced the Hully Gully tonight.

Gone now are all vestiges of make-up. She has removed her eyelashes and, Leonard notices, the earrings. She has taken her hair down. Stiff and straight, it falls almost to her waist. Thick bangs now cover her forehead. In a small way, she does remind Leonard of Cher.

"Show me your tattoos," Leonard says.
She walks out of the kitchen to the console to play the same stack of records. She brings her glass and cigarettes back with her.

"Show me," Leonard says.
"I'll show you one," she says without affection. And slowly, she separates the top of her robe. Her right areola has been colored cherry red. Attached below it, embossed in the same color, rests the
tattooed rump of a cherry. Above it, connected and curling toward her sternum, lies the cherry's stem.

Leonard cups the adorned breast. The tattoo delights him as do her breasts, so pleasing, so different once free from her geometric bra.

"No," Jackie says after a minute and slowly covers herself up.

Leonard recognizes the music. "Dance?" he asks at the next slow song.

"They used to drive his and her pink Mustangs," Jackie says. "They used to do everything together."

In her arms, under her lead, again he finds contentment. Slowly, ethereally, they dance, and linger in embrace after song's end. This time, Leonard is the one who breaks free. He flashes her his biggest set of cow eyes. She lingers only to grab a pack of cigarettes, a different brand, before allowing herself to be lead down the hallway.

"This one," she says at the second door then closes it behind them.

In the moonlight, Leonard watches her while he strips naked. He sees that she has kept her panties on.

She's got Cher's teeth, he thinks. And her hair. Yet Leonard wishes that she'd kept it up in a beehive for now she looks like all the women he's ever bedded. Leonard wants to ask her about Sonny. He wants to learn why any man would leave Cher, but he doesn't. He's
afraid Jackie will see the Sonny in him.

He knows his hands are ice so he is careful where he puts them, one on her rump, the other where her beehive stood. Her hair feels stiff, fake. It reminds him of his sister's doll, the one with the hair that grew longer or shorter with the push of a button. Leonard wonders if Jackie has such a button. He draws her to him. Her hair feels strange, but her kisses stranger. Stiff, exaggerated, offered in amateur passion.

"How old are you, Jackie?" Leonard asks.

"I'm twenty-one."

He kisses her and tastes cigarette smoke.

"Is Jackie your real name?"

"It's Jack," she says. "I stretched it out to make it longer. I think my parents wanted a boy."

"It could have been worse," Leonard says. "In China, they toss female babies into the gutter like troutheads or else torture and maim them for life by boxing their feet. At least they did until the Boxer Rebellion."

He hears her sigh and thinks, I'm boring her. So he makes his move.

He is refused. She is willing to be held, but not fondled, and after his third wave of passion, defeats him with a single "Please" before rolling away to her edge of the bed.
"Fabulous," Leonard mumbles. He props himself up and tries to catch a glimpse of her face. He wonders how many more years her pillow will erase from her face, wonders how complete her metamorphosis will be, wonders if he'll be waking up beside an eight year old. Her face is a sketch pad to him. This is wonderful, Leonard thinks. I'm falling through the cracks. It's Mission Impossible, and I've gone to bed with Martin Landau.

Leonard scans the room for a clock. He thinks about leaving, but remembers he has yet to collect for the earrings. Leonard fluffs his pillow. He closes his eyes and vows to grill her about the missing set of earrings. "Jackie?" he calls, but she is fast asleep.

Leonard is almost asleep when he hears a door being slammed. A second slam brings him upright. He remembers where he is and for a horrifying moment, wonders if Chastity's father is the one making all the noise. He stares at Jackie wondering if he'll fight for her honor. If Jackie has heard, she does not let on.

A third slam and now the whole trailer rocks.

The fourth slam is softer, muted. It sounds like someone knocking on their door.

"Who's there?" Leonard asks. He looks at Jackie for help. "Who's there?" he asks again before an even more horrifying thought strikes him. Perhaps it's Lois, drunk and amorous and preparing to join them. Leonard grips the top of the covers. Like other men, he has often
dreamed of a menage a trois. But not this one. Not tonight.

Leonard hopes that whoever is out there will go away, but the next slam, coming a minute later, is the loudest yet. It rattles the trailer stem to stern.

"Who's there?" Leonard calls.

The next slam, louder still, gets Leonard out of bed. He kicks around the rug, but can't find his pants. Slam!

"Screw it," Leonard says, and leaps into the hallway, naked. Through the gauzy light extending from the kitchen, Leonard spots a white plastic belt lying in the hallway. He raps the perforated end around his palm. He sees that the front door is open.

"Who's out there?" he asks, swinging the belt like a sling. "Who's there?" he shouts, leaping into the kitchen.

No one is there. Not under the sink, not in the front closet, not behind the console. Leonard ambles up to the door. He peers out at the starless sky to the rows of unlit condos. "Who's there?" he wants to know.

Leonard walks to the bathroom. Afraid to let go of the belt, he pisses with one hand, then stares into the mirror trying to decide where he might situate a tattoo. Maybe a nice stack of chips on his breast or an ace and a face on his bicep. Maybe a pair of rolling dice, one on each eyelid. Leonard kicks the bathroom door out of
his way. Boldly, he opens the door to the first bedroom and peers in.

There is no bed in the room. The only piece of furniture is a hair dryer, the dome and seat type he's seen rows of in beauty parlors. I was right, Leonard thinks. These women are aliens. I've saved the earth, he thinks. I've discovered their transmutation machine. In triumph, he shakes the belt at the hair dryer.

Leonard struts down the hall to the only other door. He hesitates, then opens it, but all he finds is a washer and dryer and a cement basin. He returns to the living room and feels the front of both couches. Neither one is a fold-out bed.

When he returns to her room, the light is on and she is awake, smoking a cigarette.

"Was that you?" she asks.

"No."

"What's with the belt?" she asks, but he won't tell her.

"You got scared, didn't you?" she says and laughs smoke.

"No. Yes."

"What are you so scared of?"

"I don't know," he says, and fumbles to unravel the belt. "I thought there was someone out there."

"There probably was."

Leonard wonders if he's safer in or out of bed.
"You're afraid of the dark. That's sweet," she says as she walks out of the room.

I know your secret, Leonard thinks. You won't transmute me.

She returns from the bathroom fully naked. Leonard notices a second tattoo. It lies on her left thigh beside her crotch. It, too, is a cherry, of equal size to the first.

Leonard points to the new cherry, to her groin. "Who are you kidding?" he wants to know.

She kisses him and allows him full range of herself. Her hands become active, curious, knowing. She disengages only to reach for the light.

"Can we leave it on?" Leonard asks.

"Cool," she says.

Leonard's hands touch everywhere, but especially her tattoos. He is disappointed that the dyed skin feels no different, but still, his hands race all over until Jackie grabs both his wrists.

"Slow down," she says. "It's all right here." She does not know that Leonard is searching for the third tattoo.

Leonard wakes up alone. Beyond the closed door, he hears running water, raised voices, smells coffee. He rises, kneeling on the bed, and looks out the window for evidence of wind. Outside, nothing moves. Leonard
dresses himself and for laughs, fastens the white belt around his waist.

At the kitchen table, Lois stares into a make-up mirror and applies mascara to fastened eyelashes. Across the table, Jackie primp in front of her own mirror. She dabs at her eyelids with a finger of iridescent goo. Her face is thick with make-up. Her hair is back in its beehive. Leonard removes the white belt. Only Lois notices.

"Morning," he says, and sits in the chair between them. Lois moves her mirror and chair away.

"Thanks," Leonard says, grateful for the room. Lois glares and moves away even further.

"Would you like some coffee?" Jackie asks.

"Yes," Leonard says and then, "I'll get it," when neither of the women budge.

"That's him?" Leonard hears Lois ask. "That makes me feel even worse."

From the kitchen, Leonard watches Jackie light two cigarettes and hand Lois one. "You'll get over it," he hears Jackie tell her. "You always do."

"But why do you have to flaunt it?" Lois asks. "Why can't you ever go over to their place?"

"I told you on Day One," Jackie says. "I'm a gypsy; I'm a tramp; I'm a thief. Help me with my hair, will you?"

Leonard avoids Lois' stare when she rises and
stands behind Jackie, but he notices her caressing Jackie's shoulders. "You think I like sleeping in someone else's car?" he hears her ask.

Leonard thinks about leaving, but decides that would be something the old Leonard, not the Plan B Leonard, would do. So he returns to the table and stares Lois down. And for thirty-five minutes, Leonard drinks instant coffee and watches them pluck, smear, curl, comb, dab, gloss, spray, and pat until he finds them both unrecognizable. He witnesses their return to leaden-based butterflies, but remembers: "I know who you are."

Leonard finds his shoes and sports coat in the living room. He closes his valise after counting nine sets of earrings.

"I'm off," he says upon his return.

"This is great," Jackie says. She stands up and tugs at her blouse, further accenting her gravity-defying bra. She checks her contours in her mirror.

"You look nice," Lois says.

"I feel great," Jackie says.

Leonard beams.

"No more change apron," Jackie says, not to Leonard, but to Lois. "Starting today, I'm jackpots only."

Leonard doesn't hope for a good-bye kiss. He waves to Jackie and slips out the door.

The sun's reflection on the dirt lawn startles him.
Not one person in the entire trailer park has thought to plant a lawn or a tree. Quickly, Leonard slides in behind the steering wheel and is immediately overwhelmed by the smell of perfume. Leonard flexes his fingers, struggling to find a comfortable grip. He stares out at the condos that seem more distant in the sunlight. "Serf's up," he says, and leaves a trail of dust behind him.
The street is again silent when Janet bolts upright. She peers around the room, then at her digital clock, then at me as if I've purposely done something to antagonize her. "It's after midnight," she says. "What are you still doing awake?"

"It's not twelve yet," I say. Janet has trouble falling asleep, but more trouble waking up. She's habitually late so she sets her clock a dozen minutes fast.

"I just had a horrible dream." Janet lays her head on my chest which makes it impossible for me to read. I close my book without noting my place. Together, we listen to my heartbeat.

"I dreamed I was riding in a car with our dentist, Mrs. Hardimann, and somebody else, I don't remember. We were riding down Higgins Avenue talking about the leaves turning colors and suddenly we got into an accident. It was horrible."

"That was no dream," I tell her. "Somebody outside
just slammed on their brakes."

"Maybe you should go check."

"No. There wasn't any accident." My wife is funny that way. She always expects me to satisfy her curiosity. If someone strafed our house with machine gun fire, she would want me to go outside to investigate.

My refusal sends her retreating back to her half of the bed. I wonder momentarily if she is angry with me or just trying to fall asleep. My attention span has lapsed. I lay down my book and read the print on my beer can.

Someone a couple of houses away is whistling for their pet using the three note call. I listen and wonder how that particular retrieving call became universal. Or if it is universal. I wonder if Croats and Serbs and Taiwanese call for their pets the same way. I know from watching the Olympics on television that whistling denotes approval in America, but censure elsewhere else. Perhaps other people have different signals for everything. Perhaps in Kowloon they clap for their pets, or sing, or click their tongues.


She alternately whistles, then commands. Her whistling is loud and shrill (I envision her with a finger stuck in each corner of her mouth), but it brings no response. Apparently Digger is across the street
romping through the public golf course.

"Come on home, Digger. Mama's waiting." The owner's voice is so captivating that I forgive her cuteness.

Her voice, in contrast to her whistling, is lovely. Its timbre, full and clear, is optimistic and full of love. She sounds like she is in her mid-twenties. What a fine age to be. If I were still single, I'd get dressed, invent some pretense for being up so late, and help her look for her dog. I'd tell her that her whistling had put a bookmark in my novel. Then I'd walk the golf course with her, hoping to spot Digger first. I'd scold the two of them for keeping me up so late. I'd accept her offer of a late night cup of coffee.

I sip from my almost empty can. I recall that I first met Janet over the telephone and how surprised I was to learn that the owner of that lifeless voice possessed such an ardent face. I still don't like talking to her over the phone. I rarely call her office. And when we argue, I usually close my eyes, not in exasperation, which is what she thinks, but to separate the drone from my image of her.

The woman's repeated calls do not attract Digger. I drain my beer. Her voice is so seductive, I imagine that by now, Digger must be the only neighborhood pet not at this woman's doorstep. I wonder just who is at her doorstep. Janet and I can't be the only ones within earshot.
"Come on, Digger. Be a good boy. Come home to Mama."

Janet rustles underneath the sheets. Her thrashing muffles the woman's calls, but not her whistling. I wish Janet would stop. Her insomnia makes me restless.

"My God! No!" the woman shrieks in a voice that rushes anxious blood to my fingertips. "Digger's dead! Oh, Digger. Oh, my poor baby."

Janet readjusts her pillow. We strain to listen because the woman's wailing fluctuates as she paces up and down the street. Her sorrow wavers like a siren.

"I wonder if it was that Springer Spaniel," I say.

"It was a cat, not a dog," Janet says.

"Digger is a dog's name."

"She's saying Tigger, not Digger."

I wait for the voice to come our way. Janet is right. The woman is saying Tigger. For some reason, I feel better knowing that the dead pet is a cat and not a dog.

"Poor woman," Janet says. "I think that's terrible. How could someone run over an animal and not stop?"

"You can't always tell," I say. "I've come close to running over dogs before. You never see them in your rear view mirror. And even if you have clipped one, you can't be sure. They always run away. An accident makes them hyper. It throws them into a frenzy."

Janet stares at me, saying nothing. I hear no other
voices. I wonder if I should get dressed and go help the woman. I stand up and just as I do, the moaning ceases so I go to the kitchen for another beer.

I wonder if anyone is aiding the woman. I look out the kitchen window at the Stenhouses' place, but no lights are on. I walk over to the living room window. The Millers' house is just as dark. I listen futilely for slammed doors, for the shuffling of hurried feet upon the sidewalk. I peer through the front picture window. The street light illuminates nothing. I feel my way to the sofa and sit down.

Janet and I are both originally from back East, we were married there, and even though I don't think we'll ever live here, it saddens me to realize that during the two years we've lived on South Street, except for the Millers and Stenhouses whose yards border ours, neither Janet nor I have met any of our neighbors. We get together with Ed and Alice Miller twice a year to trim the hedge, but it's always at our suggestion. What we know about the Stenhouses we've learned from their son, Eric, who mows our lawn in the summer and shovels our driveway in the winter. We know that they both work, but we don't know their professions. We know that they vacation a lot because Eric often consigns his work to another neighborhood boy. But Janet and I really don't know what kind of people live next door to us. We've never seen the insides of their homes. We see cars pull
up to their driveways at night, but we've never been asked over for a drink.

Our neighbors, like digital clocks, don't possess faces anymore. Maybe people out West—it's always out West and back East—are more respectful of other people's privacy, but I miss the feeling of belonging to a neighborhood. I grew up in a town where nobody ever moved away. I lived on a street where the houses didn't have numbers; they had names. We could cut through someone's yard without feeling sneaky. Every summer our parents threw block parties. Whenever we ran out of something, my mother would send me next door. She never told me which direction.

When Janet and I run out of something, we walk three blocks to the all-night convenience store.

I hope that Janet will have fallen asleep, but when I return to our bedroom, I find her awake and terrified. As soon as I slip into bed, she is on me, clutching me.

"Oh God, Jerry. What if anything ever happened to you?"

"Don't worry," I say. "I would never run out into the street without first looking both ways."

She holds me tighter.

"If it'll make you feel any better, you can tie a bell around my neck."

Janet trembles. Silently we hug, both sharing the same thought. What if something did happen?
"Tigger. My poor baby." The moaning returns, just as loudly. "Why did you run out into the street? Why?"

I release Janet. I am angry with Tigger's owner now and I am glad I did not go help her. I am sorry that her pet has died, but it is only a cat. She can always get another one.

"I think she's overplaying her hand," I say.

"Why, Tigger? Why did you run away? Didn't you like your home?"

"Now she's becoming existential."

Janet makes no reply. She kisses me once, to touch me, and rolls over to sleep.

I hear a truck pull up. I get out of bed and look back to see if Janet's eyes are open. My clock reads six of one. I kneel down by the window and clutch the sill. It's too dark to make out the stencil on the truck or the logo on the driver's uniform or which house he has pulled up to. I can only guess that he is from the city pound. I never do see the cat's owner nor do I hear her again. She must have collected herself while the pound collects her pet. I watch and listen to stillness.

I don't remember hearing the truck pull away. I sleep fitfully and when I awaken, I can tell that Janet has slept just as poorly. We sense each other's grumpiness. We avoid contact. We rise from our bed like brothers and make the bed in silence. We take separate showers. Janet makes less coffee than usual and serves
only herself. We hide behind blinds of newspapers. I read, but I don't retain. We leave the house at different times.

Janet is busy tossing a salad when I return from work that evening, but she drops what she is doing and comes to kiss me. "How was your day?" she asks.

"Long. I'm glad to be home. Boy, do I need a good night's sleep. I hope that woman doesn't own any more pets."

Janet picks up the paring knife. "I couldn't believe it," she says. "I must have told twenty people about last night and everyone I told the story to thought it was the funniest thing they'd ever heard."

The kitchen table is covered with coffee cups, dirty dishes, opened sections of the morning newspaper, and Janet's coat and valise. I yank loose my tie and add it to the clutter.

"I don't think I did more than half a day's work today," Janet says. "Everyone had a dead pet story that was funnier than the previous one. Evelyn told us about her dog who once brought home the flattened family cat that had been run over a week before. Then Donna told us about a hamster that she once had to give to her school because she was about to move away. Her science teacher apparently fed it to the science lab's snake that same day. Poor Donna made the mistake of asking the teacher what that bulge was."
I grab a beer from the refrigerator.

"Bob Hampton had the topper, though. He went to a Catholic school that had a haywire electrical system and when his homeroom came back from a weekend, they found the fishtank boiling and all the fish lying on the sill around it. They had all leaped to their death. And the tank was still boiling."

I sit down at the table behind Janet. With a backhand swipe, I clear out some elbowroom. My office was amused as well, not to the point of hilarity, but then, Janet tells a better story than I do.

Then again, I wasn't telling the story to get a laugh and when people kept laughing at my tale, I stopped telling it. I like the woman down the street better than I did last night. I wish I knew her. She's not like the Millers or the Stenhouses. She's more like the old clocks that possess distinctive hands and faces. Clocks that tick and hum and jar you awake with their nettling alarms. The new clocks are indistinct. They break their vows of silence only to awaken you with someone else's music. On the old clocks, you can watch the hands of time sweeping past. You witness motion. On the new digitals, time gets posted like the score of a ball game. The digitals note change only after it has occurred.

I accept my salad from Janet. I think about the pound truck and its nightly collections. There is no
evidence of pain on our street anymore. The pound truck and the street cleaner have seen to that. I ask Janet to get me the pepper before I realize she has left the room. I grist my own peppercorns and watch a shower of black fall into my salad. Outside, a procession of headlights ushers drivers to their homes. I don't want to spend another quiet evening inside. We must get to know our neighbors.
The bat is a Louisville Slugger, Reggie Jackson model, thirty-six inches long, thirty-five ounces in weight, big barrelled and thin handled in order to provide good whipping action: the perfect bat for turning on a low outside pitch and pulling the ball. Welker has jerked off the handle with a pine tar rag so that the bat won't slip from his hands. And though he has never seen a bat shatter at the fat end, tradition dictates turning the label so that he can read it.

WHAP

Welker has to choke up, something Reggie never did, in order to smack the side of his skull with the fat part of the bat.

WHAP

Another clean stroke, thinks Welker. A hit in anybody's league. Already he can feel blood oozing down the side of his face. The buzzing in his left ear he is less sure of. Perhaps it's the hum of the refrigerator he hears. Or a roar coming from Wrigley Field only four
blocks away.

Welker sits perched on the loveseat. He has cast off his suit jacket and shoes but remains in his button-down oxford shirt and Italian raw silk tie. He dabs at the blood with the end of his tie without bothering to loosen the knot. He prefers not to think about his oblivion, but of what Louise told him two nights ago, the second to last time he'd seen her.

"A person will always hurt someone else to avoid getting hurt," she had told him. At the time, he thought she had been talking about him.

He hadn't counted on Louise or any woman stealing into his life. After his divorce with Gwen—worse than salary arbitration he told his business partners—Welker had vowed to love only baseball. But catching Louise's autographed ball was like a veteran receiving one final call from the Majors. And though he detested his lack of gumption, Welker responded.

Welker appreciates baseball for being a game of statistics. Accordingly, he has left a suicide note. On a legal size canary pad, he has made four lists: in alphabetical order the thirty-one ballparks he's been to, his ranking of the top ten pitchers of his lifetime, the date and location of the six baseballs (the fateful one is recorded in red ink but is otherwise not singularly noted) he's caught in the stands, and a mock
line-up card of his nine reasons for ending his own life. Five of them mention Louise. None of them mention his ex-wife, Gwen. Also included are two requests. The first is that a six by eighteen inch rubber plaque be placed over his grave in lieu of a headstone. Welker hopes, but does not specify, that the dirt in his grave will not flatten out, but remain arched above his casket like a pitcher's mound. His final inclusion is a request to be buried behind the center field wall at Yankee Stadium beneath the plaques of Gehrig, Ruth, DiMaggio, Stengel, Mantle and the others. Welker doesn't consider this request a breech of loyalty. He's been a Cubs fan for twenty years, but feels that a person should be buried in his homeland.

Welker doesn't expect anyone to honor this last request. He includes it only to show the survivors, Louise included, that his death was a rational conclusion and not the vindictive act of a scorned lover.

WHAP

Welker curses himself for having moved his head, something a good batter never does. This time the bat doesn't resonate with crisp contact, but rather, emits a dull thud as if swung into the pocket of a catcher's mitt. Welker thinks about striking himself again. Instead, he rises to his feet and walks over to the lakeside window. He is disappointed that his
coordination remains unimpaired.

He can't see Wrigley Field from this vantage point, but he knows Louise is there. The Cubs have a daytime game--what else?--against the Astros. This will be the first home game Welker's missed this year.

The game. Welker recalls his first Major League game. Braves-Yankees, 1957 World Series. He remembers thumbing his nose at his second grade pals and their looks of admiration and jealousy as he alone was permitted to leave school. He rode the Short Line into New York City and was met by his dad at the Port Authority Bus Terminal.

He remembers being frightened by the laughing man in the gray suit and Yankees cap because he'd never seen his dad so joyful. Everyone there seemed cheerful, too much so. For the entire subway ride, Welker kept both arms wrapped tightly around his father's leg for fear of being separated. He hadn't thought it possible that so many people could fit inside one car. When they reached the stadium, he was horrified by the frenzied crowd. Again he clung to the grinning giant and didn't let go until the fattest man he'd ever seen dusted off their seats with a fuzzy mitten before lifting Welker into his seat.

Immediately, Welker stood on his seat. He observed everything, the basepaths, the flaglike bunting that adorned the railings, the umpires conferring behind home
plate, the agitated faces of the people around him, and was amazed by it all. He couldn't believe how excited everyone was. Even the adults seemed happy. He stared at the crosscut infield grass. His eyes traced every inch of both foul lines which he thought had been painted on until a second inning pop-up hit the first base line and sent up a cloud of limestone dust. Welker saw how both pitcher and batter dug their spikes into the red clay in order to secure better traction. Whenever a batter dug himself a foothold in the batter's box, Welker instinctively imitated him.

His dad bought Welker a hot dog and a bag of steamy peanuts and himself, a scorecard and a beer. Welker was captivated by the beer vendors who carted around racks of beer above beer soaked pant legs, singing out "Beer here" as they poured foot long streams of beer from punctured cans of Schaeffer and Reingold and Ballentine into big wax cups without spilling a drop. The cement stands sent the smell of beer everywhere. Before ordering another, his dad punched out the bottom of his cup and gave it to Welker to use as a megaphone. Later on, he bought him a pennant with a team picture of the Yankees embossed on it. At age eight, Welker decided that a baseball park was the grandest place in the world.

New Jersey was basketball country, paved land underneath a paved sky, but as a boy, Welker played only
baseball. Even in the dead of winter he would bring his Rawlings Big-8 glove to school and relentlessly pound his fist into its pocket at every opportunity. He spent hours throwing pink rubber balls against the back of the garage. He became a masterful fielder by learning to anticipate the erratic rebounds of the ball whenever it struck a seam in the aluminum siding. In the town's Little League All-Star game, Welker hit two doubles and a triple and cried when he was removed in the fifth inning.

In seventh grade shop, Welker began making his own bats from ash his father, not the school, provided. He fashioned several bats on the school's only lathe using a thick handled Nellie Fox model, almost a bottle bat, as his prototype. Welker figured that such a bat would allow him to get good wood even on inside pitches. Most of Welker's paper route earnings were spent inside the batting cages at Palisades Park where the tourists would peer in and marvel at the dexterity and power of someone so small. There, Welker would hit pitch after stinging pitch until his hands blistered.

Despite the hours hitting against the iron mikes, Welker never learned to hit a curve ball. He flopped in the older Babe Ruth League where every pitcher, having just learned how to throw a curve, threw nothing but curves. Too quickly, Welker became a pinch runner, a late inning fielding change, a second stringer until he
could endure it no longer. One day, he simply left his
glove at the field and never went back for it.

At fourteen, he became a has-been for he refused to
learn any new games. Softball he considered a slow
motion mockery of the genuine article. Basketball was
too frantic, a game for physical freaks. Hockey was
thugs on skates. Football? A game for beefy cheap shot
artists. In college, Welker jogged and took up tennis,
but quit the latter when opponents began employing drop
shots and top spins and slices, shots Welker considered
dishonest. He still considered a curve ball a deceitful
pitch. Every pitcher on his top ten list from Koufax on
down was predominately a fastball pitcher.

Welker decides that the ringing he now hears is
coming from the telephone, but by the time he gets to
the phone, the ringing has stopped. Welker retrieves his
bat, assumes a relaxed, perched on the balls of his feet
Charlie Lau style stance, and then sends the telephone
flying off the table with a casual swing. Keep that left
shoulder square, pointed toward the pitcher, he reminds
himself. Welker then tries to duplicate his late
father's 57 Series smile on his own face while he lands
another blow to the same pulpy spot behind his left
temple. Welker buckles at the knees, but does not drop.
For the first time, he notices blood on the bat.

Welker never minded the sting of an inside pitch on
a cold March day. He never pouted over cracking one of his ash bats especially if his swing resulted in a broken bat single. To Welker and his mates, a broken bat was a symbol of honor, a confirmation of all that was right and good. Whenever a bat cracked, play stopped immediately. If the bat had not yet splintered in two, the batter of record would rail the bat against the metal backstop until it did. Then, as the others watched, he would hammer the shortened spike into its designated spot until the knob of the handle lay flush with the ground, until all that showed was the branded number at the end of the bat. From thirty years of broken bat handles, the town boys had formed two on deck circles and half a third base coach's box.

Welker always anticipated the first spring thaw. Like all the boys, he hoped that this year's thaw would be one that pushed the knobs an inch or two above ground until they resembled mushrooms. Such a spring thaw meant a good season for all the town teams. Pounding the knobs back into the ground also became a ritual, one that always took place on the first day of practice before any ball was thrown. Welker, like the other players, always hoped to be the first to discover the rising bat handles for the lucky discoverer inevitably had a career year.

Welker slumps into a brown leather chair. The back of his eyes ache, and he thinks about having a drink,
but decides against it. Even now, Welker prefers to remain habitual. Only if the game goes past ten innings does Welker ever have a beer at the ballpark. The Madsens, season ticket holders of the adjacent box, never tire of teasing Welker about his peculiarity of eating peanuts without an accompanying drink to wash them down with. Sometimes Welker shrugs in response, but he never diverts his attention from the game. And the truth is: he likes the peanuts not for their taste, but for the sound the shells make underneath his shoes. Since he was ten, Welker has scored every game he's ever attended. As with his consultants firm, Welker prides himself in the steadfastness of his own accumulated data. His firm has never lost an account because of insufficient data. He will not risk invalidating his scorecard for a beer. He finds it contemptible enough to have to alter his scorecard the next morning because the official scorekeeper has kowtowed to home town sentiment and ruled an error a hit hours after a game's completion. Welker has written to the commissioner himself about this peculiarity. He has also written to the scorecard publishers asking them to provide more than one extra inning frame.

Welker smiles his own smile as he wonders how his two business partners will react to his death. Surely, they must think he's attending today's game, but after Louise's brushback at yesterday's game, how could he?
None of the three has ever kept his personal life private from the other two. So Welker told both Kerns and Mozeleski (Bears fans!) about Louise just like he told them his ex-wife's ultimatum of choosing her or the game. To his surprise, Kerns and Mozeleski had pondered the issue for some time as if it were a new account. To Welker, Gwen's ultimatum was no choice at all.

"There are fifty million eligible women in America," he had told Gwen. "But there's only twenty-four Cubs. Twenty-nine if you count everyone who wears a uniform."

Thirty, Welker now observes, if you count Louise.

Too vividly he recalls spotting Louise on Opening Day perched on a stool by the warning track not more than fifteen feet from his box. Instantly, he detested her exuberance and wondered if her vitality was a conscious effort on her part to conceal her neophytic nature. To Welker, she was just another inferior replacement, just as if the real grass of Wrigley had been replaced by Astroturf, the real fans by a mascot, true managerial decisions by the DH, hot dogs by nachos or pizza in a box. Welker knew too well that the replacement rarely exceeded the original.

Welker didn't consider his attitude sexist. He simply felt that a bat boy should be just that, a lad who looked like a future player, someone who could catch the caroms and fling them back with authority. To
Welker, being a bat boy was an honor best bestowed upon someone who dreamed of playing in the bigs. It wasn't meant to be a job given to some bimbo in tight shorts—shorts!—and a crooked hat, someone who wore nylons instead of sanitaries, aerobic sneakers instead of spikes, someone who used a nail file for precisely that.

Welker also hated Louise the first time she bent over and snared a tailing one-hopper because she reminded him of Gwen. Same hair. Same defiant smile. Same banana thighs.

Welker recalls that his last conversation with Gwen, excepting their exchanges in divorce court of course, was about her thighs.

"Do you think I'm fat?" she asked. He had come home to change clothes.

"Do you?"

"I don't think I want to answer that question," he said, pleased with his Solomonic reply. He sensed that she was having one of her "fat days." Whatever that meant, Welker had never figured out.

"I can't go," Gwen said. "I don't have anything to wear."

"You've got plenty to wear," Welker said. He strode over to her walk-in closet, yanked three backless sun dresses off their hangers, and flung them over a chair. "Any one of these will do," he said. "Wear all three if you like."
"I can't," she said. "I'm too fat."

Welker patted his breast pocket, felt the tickets and the silver Cross pen he always used to score the games. "We're going to be late," he told his wife.

"I can't go," Gwen said. "I feel like an avocado with legs."

"Fine," Welker said and lit for the door.

"You go to your stupid ballgame," she shouted. "You don't know what it's like to have fat thighs. You've never had a fat day."

Welker shot back into the bedroom. "There are no fat days," he said. He spoke without separating his teeth. "There are only two kinds of days in this world. There are game days and there are off days. Today is a game day. Now put on some clothes and let's go."

But Gwen wouldn't budge. And when Welker returned home after a magnificent Cubs victory, Lee Smith had fanned four Mets in two innings of hitless relief, he found her gone. Soon after, he would learn of a third day.

Divorce Day. Gwen's lawyer had gone the distance on him. So had his own lawyer, but in a losing effort. All Welker wanted was the house and his season tickets, but his lawyer had negotiated instead for the condo.

"I'd rather have the house," Welker reminded him.

"Yeah, well, that's why they call them housekeepers," his lawyer said.
Gwen was also awarded two of the four box seats, but she never went. Since he had never regarded the game as a social event, having all four seats to himself suited Welker fine. Free from having to explain to Gwen such nuances as intentional walks ("No, the pitcher isn't giving up,"), or suicide squeezes ("Yes, he could get hurt, but no, that's not why he's sliding,"), Welker realized how deeply he revered the game. He felt like a born again Christian. His refound appreciation for the game became stronger than his original love had ever been.

His unrequited pleasure confirmed his belief that he had been right not to contest the divorce or seek reconciliation. In his mind, filing for divorce was like playing a game under protest because of an umpire's missed call. A misruling was sometimes reversed, but an umpire's judgment call on a play always stood. Gwen might have convinced the judge that her husband was an unfeeling lout obsessed with the game of baseball, but Welker knew better. Blaming the game for their troubles was like blaming the institution of marriage. Baseball had nothing to do with it. Baseball had rain outs, not fat days. He had told the judge this. No, he and Gwen had simply handed in faulty line-up cards. He and Gwen were two starters who had been left in the game too long. They were two fastballers who were getting roughed up in the late innings by throwing pitches that had long
ago lost all their zip. All Gwen's filing signified was a change in her line-up card. And Welker knew that it was only a change in her card, not his. No one had the right to tell Milwaukee Braves fans what kind of beer they should drink, tell Earl Weaver to use a five man rotation, tell Ed Welker that he couldn't go to a ballgame. Gwen should have known that.

Still, Welker had never anticipated the enormity of the loss. It was if Gwen had stormed onto his field to steal a swatch of sod as a victory souvenir and ended up stealing his entire infield. After Gwen, Welker considered women and baseball a conflict of interest.

So why had he asked Louise to autograph the foul ball he caught?

And why had she thrown the ball back after inscribing both her name and telephone number?

WHAP

Welker thinks about the double zeros Louise wears for a number on the back of her jersey then smacks the other side of his cranium. This time he does fall to the floor. Thinks Welker: a good piece of switch hitting. Things seem darker now. Welker stares at his watch but can't make out the time. A chill runs through him. If the wind is up today, the hitters will be jacking out homers to the bleacher bums. If it's really gusty, any well hit ball will sail out over everyone, past the shirtless spectators and out into Waveland Avenue where
teen age boys, true fans worthy of being bat boys, wait with anxious gloves. Longball games are long games Welker knows. He crawls over to the balcony window but sees nothing to gauge the wind by. Since his divorce with Gwen, Welker hasn't had anything to put on the porch.

It appears to Welker that the sun is sinking. Slugfest or pitchers' duel, the game must be almost over. Welker attempts to stand up, but he can't even get to one knee. He collapses, rolls over, crawls over to the phone. He replaces the receiver onto its cradle and notices the dark wet streak on the rug.

"Spitter," he says, and lays back down. He closes his eyes slowly, pretending that his eyelids are ground tarps being laid over two infields, that his eyelashes are the grounds crew preserving these infields for future play. He tolerates the knifing throbs of pain by imagining them as cheers from his own rooting section.

Welker recalls his first drunk, seventeen years old at Fenway Park, cranked on four cans of Naraghansett Beer. Naraghastly, they called it then. This was 1967, the Dick Williams pennant year, and Welker had to sit in the mens room for two hours while he vomited himself sober because the toilets were the only empty seats left. Welker remembers his Uncle Terry, a detective on the Milwaukee city force, flashing his badge at a ticket scalper outside County Stadium, shaking the man down for
four of his best. Welker remembers the bundled up, blanket toting fans of Candlestick Park who looked liked refugees. He remembers the bikini-topped Padre fans who preferred catching tans to baseballs. Through his binoculars he had seen a home run ball land ten feet away from a pair of teen age girls who made no effort to claim the ball. They weren't like the bleacher bums except for their disregard for clothing. The bleacher bums received a lot of national press, but Welker regarded them as groupies, not true fans. He told Louise so the first night he called her and she invited him over on the spot.

"I think they're cute," was her reply. If the word made him cringe--to Welker, cute meant aiming a pitch instead of just rearing back and firing--it was forgotten by midnight when she lead him by the hand, intentful on showing him (what he told his partners was) "her version of a suicide squeeze." It pleased him that Louise seemed to appreciate his love of the game. She seemed truly flattered when he compared her pubic hair to the grass of old Forbes Field, turf purposely kept long and thick and uncut in order to slow down ground balls so that the aging Pirate infielders could field them.

In the morning, she fried him breakfast and over the kitchen table talked of fidelity and permanence. He left Louise's apartment feeling the best he'd ever felt
on an off day. Finally. Here was a catcher he could throw to. A battery mate who knew his repertoire of pitches. No signals to shake off here. No curveballs.

For that's what Gwen had tried to turn him into, Welker realized, one of those sand-filled, made in Japan baseballs he and his friends used to buy at Woolworths for a quarter. The first good hit inevitably put a visible dent into the ball. The second turned it into a grapefruit and from then on, the ball moved funny when thrown. Each boy took his turn throwing major league sliders and screwballs until the ball split a seam. Then one of them would finish the job, would bash the fraudulent ball, split all its seams, beat all the sand out of it, and leave it on the ground in a heap atop its own stuffing.

That's what all women did, Welker decided. Made a travesty out of a game they didn't understand. Even his mother had tried to deny him his passion. More than once she'd hidden his glove on game day because he hadn't passed a history test or collected for his paper route, or cleaned out the garage after promising to do so. But Louise was different. At least Welker thought so until two nights ago when he went to her apartment upon her invitation, and found her horizontal with a thirty-eight year old side-arming has-been now relegated to long relief.

Welker's rage had surprised him, surprised
everybody. In both sets of eyes, Welker saw true fear. If he had known which of them he was supposed to strike, he would have.

"He wasn't supposed to be here," Louise said, a remark both men disfavored.

"They never are," Welker said as both Louise and the reliever slowly reached for their clothes.

"Don't dress on my account," Welker said.

"I have to," the reliever said. "I'm due home."

Louise took Welker's advice. She propped up her pillow and slipped back underneath the covers.

"How could you?" Welker shouted at Louise. He raised a clenched fist, but kept his eye on the pitcher, not her. "He's a has been. He's their mop-up man. Christ, he throws nothing but junk."

"Wait a second," the reliever said as he fastened his belt. "How well could you pitch when the game's already been decided? It's not my fault we got lousy starters. At least I got one of these." In Welker's face, he flashed a World Series ring. Dodgers, 1978.

"You had a fastball then," Welker reminded him, and then to her: "How could you do this to me, Louise? Was a one night stand with someone from the Bigs worth ruining what we got going?"

Welker was amazed how easily the hand on his right shoulder was able to spin him around. "I'm not a one-nighter," the man told him. The look on Louise's face
confirmed this.

The pitcher sensed that Welker was no longer a threat. He sat on Louise's side of the bed and began to tie his shoes. Welker sat beside him.

"Are you going to retire after this year?" Welker wanted to know.

The pitcher shrugged.

"You're a five and ten man, aren't you?"

The pitcher nodded, stood up, and kissed Louise before leaving.

"The '78 Dodgers were a great team," Welker shouted at him. Afterwards, he stared into his palms for a full minute.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Louise asked.

Welker shook his head.

"I can't help it," Louise said, and then she got angry. "You're not the only fan in the world. Besides, it's nice to meet famous people. That's why I took the job."

He couldn't look at her anymore. It was just like coming home and finding Gwen gone. Only this time, it was he who seemed to be missing. Cradled in Louise's arms, he listened to her talk about fidelity as if it were a game of run-down. He wept, but it made no difference. What was spilling out of him was more than sand.
Feebly, Welker rises to his knees and fetches the bat. He flexes his fingers, tries to feel the adhesion of the pine tar. The crimson circle on the front of his shirt reminds him of a Japanese flag.

Welker clutches the bat with both hands and swings. He strikes himself on top of his head, but it's more of an admonishing slap than a damaging blow.

"Strike one," he tells himself. He recoils and aims another blow. This time, he misses altogether and the force of his swing topples him. He falls backward, banging his head on the floor.

He closes his eyes and this time, he sees umpires, not a grounds crew, scurrying to cover his eyes with fleshtone tarps. He's always hated umpires for shrinking the strike zone when the rulebook clearly states where the zone exists. But yesterday, when he saw Louise hand the home plate umpire a slip of paper along with a handful of new baseballs, Welker realized that it was himself and not any strike zone that had finally shrunk too small.

Welker thinks he hears the telephone ringing. He rolls over onto his belly then rises to his knees convinced that it is the telephone.

"All right," he shouts and to his surprise, rises to his feet and staggers over to the phone.

"What?" he asks. His parched throat throbs in unison with his head.
"Edward?" a voice asks.

Welker looks at the stained rug. Around each blotch of red, he sees bat handles, dozens of bat handles rising up through the thick green shag, rising in perfect formations of on deck circles and three sided coach's box rectangles.

"Edward, what's wrong?" the voice is asking, but Welker won't say.

He carries the telephone underneath his arm, but trips over a row of bat handles. He falls onto the Reggie Jackson model and groans as the telephone goes sailing.

"Edward!"

Welker can barely hear the voice. The speaker is a distant voice, like someone whispering into a megaphone. Is it Louise? Gwen? Welker's not sure so he doesn't reply.

"Edward, please." It's both of them. All of them. Begging him to forget the game.
GYPSY, WITH TUNA

She points the headlights of her rental car at each stand of mailboxes, but none bears the right name or number. She curses herself for not listening to his directions, but she was sure she would instinctively know which house was his. Gyp drives to the last street light, then turns around and heads back into her own trail of dust. She cruises past three lighted houses and parks by the one with undrawn curtains. She feels inside her jacket pockets for the half dozen joints and the cassette tape she will surprise him with, songs she thinks Tuna might have written and performed if he had pursued things.

She had almost cried this afternoon when he told her that the illuminated lumberyard she would be passing was actually a penitentiary for loggers. The sound of Tuna's voice, static for a decade, had set all the stills of her college life into motion. In bursts, she recalled his swaying ebony hair thick as bristles, the road map eyes that tattled on him whenever he was
stoned, his habit of smacking his lips before delivering a punchline, his penchant for wearing mismatched socks on the days he decided to wear more than one. After he hung up, she sat in her hotel chair for an hour, amazed at how much there was to remember.

Tuna wasn't the one who had tagged her, but he had made the nickname stick. After he found his Swiss Army knife underneath her bed, stolen silverware became a running joke. "Gypsies, Tramps and Thieves," he sang to her on the nights they watched the lights of Portland below while perched atop their favorite mausoleum in the Skyline Cemetery. He viewed dating as archaic so they never did. Still, Tuna was the only friend Gyp had ever slept with.

A decade ago, Tuna and Shakey and the others had graduated from Portland University and then started a chain of retail record stores. They had offered Gyp a job, a good one, and they were offended when she chose an advertising firm on the East Coast over them. But now she was back. She was making her West Coast swing, her first since graduation. She was seeing all the boys, even the married ones. Only Tuna remained.

In college, they had all shared rock and roll dreams. Pink Dink had borrowed a drum set, Shakey, a fretless bass. Gyp had bought a pedal steel guitar from a musician who was hocking his life for cocaine. Tuna had traded his lap guitar for a National steel in order
to showcase his sweet falsetto. They had dreamed of forming a band, but they never learned how to play.

Gyp hears the barking of neighborhood dogs. The house sits on a short rise just far enough from the road to make the bag of beers a burden. Her feet make no sound as she climbs the flagstone path, but the dogs keep barking.

She thinks about ringing the doorbell with all six joints stuck in her mouth, joints she has rolled in case Tuna is out of smoke. She decides against it. Gyp is still uncertain that this is the house.

In a downtown restaurant this morning, Shakey had told Gyp to forget it, to leave Tuna alone, that he had crashed and burned and wasn't one of them anymore, that people are only right for the brief time that you know them.

"Let sleeping dogs lie," Shakey said while covering a croissant with honey. "And let lying dogs sleep."

"But he was your friend, Shakey."

"It's Donald now."

Gyp stared away at another woman's shoes.

"It's too late," Shakey said. "He's let go of his own balloon string. He's out there somewhere, but it's in a different dimension. By choice."

"Shakey."

"Donald. Please. Call me Don if you want."
Gyp threw down her fork. Yesterday in Seattle, Pink Dink had done the same thing, insisted that she call him Dwight.

"Hey, don't get mad at me," Shakey said. "He's the one who abandoned ship. So did you. You're the one who went back East to sell time. Maybe you should have brought some back. Maybe you could sell us each a decade. Sell Tuna two. Give him a head start this time."

"He was your friend." Gyp couldn't bring herself to call him Donald.

"He was also a lousy business partner. Our Beaverton store lost money three years in a row. There's five thousand new businesses in the Tualatin Valley, and I'll bet Tuna's rung up the only loser. Hey, his replacement showed profit his first year."

Gyp swirled the coffee in her cup.

"We offered him another position. A PR job. He turned it down."

Gyp caught the waitress' attention and demanded the check.

"Don't go," Shakey warned. "It'll ruin anything that still remains."

"I'm going, SHAKEY."

Shakey laughed. "Gyp the hub," he said and kept eating. "Still the attraction."

"I was never the hub," Gyp said. "Maybe the rim. All I ever did was sheepdog you loadies into doing
things you would have eventually done anyway."
Shakey wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.
"Yeah, well, you lost a stray this time."

Gyp sees the doorbell, but knocks. The muffled
whelps of a small dog break a long silence. She hears a
staccato of commands, then creaking floorboards and
approaching footsteps. The front door swings open and
Tuna, arms extended, is there waiting.

Gyp drops the six pack and leaps into his embrace.
She burrows her face into his shoulder desperately
trying to recall his scent. What she smells is laundry
detergent.

"Come in, come in," Tuna says, flashing a smile
that isn't as big as Gyp remembered.

Tuna grabs the bag of beer and motions her in. Gyp
scans the small, dimly lit room. She does not focus long
on anything because of the woman on the couch.

"Linda," Tuna says, "this is my wife, Felicia."

"How do you do?" Gyp says. Felicia nods. She does
not put down her darning needles.

Gyp sits in the rocking chair by the door, the only
seat other than the couch. She wonders what Shakey and
the others know about Felicia. She had asked at
breakfast, but Shakey had shrugged and said he didn't
know, that he hadn't seen either of them in five years,
that none of them had been asked to the wedding. Gyp did
not tell him that she had.

"What's this?" Tuna asks as he sets the bag by Gyp's feet.

"It's called beer," Gyp says. "Would you like one?"

"I don't know. Are you going to have one, Felice?"

Felicia shakes her head. Gyp notices that the little Palmeranian by her feet is panting even though it is quite cool tonight.

"I guess I'll have one," Tuna says, and fumbles through the bag.

Gyp frowns, wondering why having a beer should be a dilemma. She steals a glance at this dull eyed woman and decides that Felicia must be a decade older than they.

Gyp scans the dozen hanging macrame plant holders, half of which house spider plants, the other half, no plants. She studies the bucolic paintings that hang too high on the cedar pannelled walls. She sees the chairless folding table wedged into the other corner by the door, a table covered by a hundred official looking hardbound books, all of them shut.

Gyp is careful to set her beer underneath the rocker. She squirms to find a comfortable position and feels the hollowness of this room. She knows something is missing.

Tuna's manner offers no clues. He is still trim and still wears the tight jeans, loose tee shirt and floppy sandals. But gone are his waistlength hair and his
paintbrush moustache. He is clean shaven and parts his hair on one side. And although his eyes, clear now, bulge in anticipation, his smile and his laughter seem subdued, controlled, no longer playful.

"Did you have trouble finding us?" Tuna wants to know.

"No."

Felicia's eyes stay fixed upon her knitting even as Tuna slips an arm around her.

"How long have you lived here?" Gyp asks.

"I've been here ten years," Felicia says. "I own this house. Charles has been here for five."

Charlie Tuna, Gyp thinks. Gnarlie Charlie Tuna Kahuna. Charlie Tuna was always ready to party with the lights off. Charlie Tuna brought spraypaint to parties. Charlie Tuna was there the night she singed her hair in a scented candle, an event that frightened then delighted everyone when they saw that the loss was minimal.

"Flirting with fire," Pink Dink accused.

"She carries the torch," Red said.

"You're a gypsy moth, Linda," Shakey said and the nickname stuck.

"Shakey says you have a little boy," Gyp says.

"I'll bet he's beautiful."

Tuna releases an untethered smile. "Felice and I have one of our own and she has one from her previous
marriage. Would you like to meet them?"

"I don't think that's a good idea," Felicia says. "It took me long enough to get Thomas down. I don't want to have to do it again."

Gyp feels the blood rush to her face. She tucks her feet underneath the rocker and inadvertently kicks her beer.

"I'll get a rag," Tuna says, rising. "I have to go to the bathroom anyway."

He returns with a handful of paper towels.

"Go," Gyp commands. She kneels down to mop the puddle avoiding Felicia's eyes. She hears the dog gasping.

"This is a nice place you've got here," Gyp says.

"It's home," Felicia replies and pulls a new ball of gray yarn out of a plastic bag. "What else is there?"

Gyp gazes at one of the landscape paintings. "Were you afraid of Tuna when you first met him?" she asks. His nickname pricks her tongue.

"Afraid of Charles? Not for a second."

"I was," Gyp says. "I'd never been out West before. I'd never seen Hawaiians and I didn't trust them. They seemed like the opposite of me. They were never in a hurry. And they talked so weird. So clipped. I thought they were all drunk."

Gyp reaches into the bag for another beer wishing she could follow her hand and disappear. She wonders how
any man, let alone two, could have seen fit to marry Felicia.

"Until I heard him sing," Gyp says. "There were four of them who sang their native songs a capella and played those skimpy little guitars. Back East, we grew up on rhythm and blues. I'd never heard anything like Hawaiian music before. It was so sweet. That's when I decided Tuna--Charles--was someone worth knowing."

"That's nice."

The women avoid each other's eyes. They search the room for someone who isn't there. Gyp stares at the other paintings. Every picture depicts a panoramic vista or a mountain meadow. Not one contains a person, or a bird, or anything that makes noise. Gyp scans the panneling for electrical outlets and black rubber electrical cords. She knows what's missing.

"Charles loved music," Gyp says. "Especially Hendrix. He used to have a wall of albums in his apartment. Tuna's tunes. It was his passion. Does he still buy albums every payday?"

"Hardly," Felicia says, now wanting Gyp's attention. "He hasn't cared much for music ever since your friends decided he wasn't the one who should be managing one of their record stores. I should think you would have known that."

Tuna returns unaware of the silence. He sees Gyp struggling to free another beer. He sticks his hand
inside the bag and takes her beer.

"Don't forget you've got that audit to do tomorrow," Felicia says. She gathers her things and stuffs them into the bag that she leaves in her place. The dog follows her jealously. Tuna withdraws an empty hand.

"Good night," she says and gives Tuna a perfunctory kiss. "Good night," she says to Gyp.

"It's Gyp," says Gyp, but Felicia is already gone.

"Here," says Gyp, offering Tuna a beer.

"I better not."

I better not. Gyp wonders what happened to the man who once tied a brick to his dying car's accelerator. The daredevil who rolled out of the car like a stuntman as it headed downhill to its fiery demise. The free spirit who collected the insurance money then threw a three day peyote party for fifty friends. The silence becomes testimony. Gyp longs for the sound of Felicia's clicking needles, the huffing of the asthmatic dog, the clink of a fallen beer bottle, anything that can quell the wake of I better not.

"Jesus, Tuna," she says, breaking the silence as if it were a pane of glass between them, "how did you and the golden Felice ever meet?"

"In a bank vault is where I found my treasure."

"You two worked together?"

Tuna nods contentedly. "Still do. We work below
ground. No windows, no people, just the sound of rustling paper. And us."

"Doesn't that get a little claustrophobic?"

He glances at her before closing his eyes and sighing. "Come," Tuna says. "Let me show you our horses." He opens the rear screen door for her, then takes the lead.

Gyp smiles at the familiar slap of his caveman feet upon his sandals. She follows him down a slow descent to an old weathered shack that serves as a barn. The tall Douglas firs on the edge of the property blot the sky. Gyp sees the barn, but little else.

Tuna frees a wooden slat from its latch and leans it carefully, like a rifle, beside the big Dutch door whose top half is already swung open. "Careful," he whispers, and enters first.

Gyp expects to hear the cacophony of barnyard animals, but all she hears is one horse snorting. A thin ray of moonlight slices through from the open door, illuminating the hay and dried manure. Gyp surveys the barn, disappointed. It is nothing more than two stalls containing two horses, a larger empty stall to their right, and a small passageway between them.

"Hello, boy," Tuna says. "Hello, lady." The stallion snorts. He and Gyp hedge away from each other.

From underneath his shirt, Tuna pulls out a pair of carrots. "Here," he says, and hands Gyp one. "You feed
the mare. She's more social."

Gyp still fears. She never takes her eyes off the horse, and when the mare flexes her lips to get a bigger bite, Gyp drops the carrot and jumps back.

Tuna stuffs the nub of his carrot into the stallion's mouth. Hunched down, he picks the debris from the other carrot before feeding it to the mare who whinnies in appreciation.

"Sorry," Gyp says.

Tuna smiles. "Everyone here is afraid of everyone," he says and hoists himself atop the rail of the big stall. "So afraid and so apologetic." Straddling the rail, he sings in soft syncopation a song Gyp can't identify. He sings past Gyp, to the horses.

"Do you still play your guitar?" Gyp asks.

"No. I don't own one anymore."

"Do you remember your car radio?" she asks and enters the big stall behind him. In full swoops, she gathers most of the hay into a waisthigh pile to sit in.

"What about it?"

"Do you remember getting so angry at the songs it played that you yanked it out of your dashboard and put in another?"

"No."

"Well, you did. You never sold that radio either. You refused to sell it, or trade it, or even destroy it.
You said that it played crummy songs that no one should ever hear. Don't you remember?"

Tuna swings his other leg across the rail and freefalls into Gyp's pile of hay. "I love the feel of hay," he says. "Or anything golden."

"Do you still have that radio?"

"I don't have anything from then," he says.

"Oh, Tuna," Gyp says and hugs him fiercely. His hands find the cradle of her hips the way they used to. He does not retreat from her kisses.

"I'll never forget the starfish at Cape Falcon," she says. "I'd never seen starfish before. I didn't know they came in colors. I didn't know if it was the starfish, the LSD, or if it was you that made them sparkle and shine. You were magic, Tuna."

Tuna shoves her away, hard enough so that she rolls off the hay pile. "I'm not Tuna," he says. "I'm Charles."

"Not you too!" Gyp sits upright, legs akimbo. She stomps her feet until the horses neigh. "I'm so sick of all this formality. Shakey is now Don, Dink is now Dwight, Red is Bill, and now, you're Charles."

"And you're still Gyp."

"Don't you care?" Gyp asks.

"About what?"

"About me. About all of us. How can you let it all go? I know about the record store deal but"
"Don't," Tuna says.

Gyp plops down against the far wall and brings herself to a ball. "You've got to feel something," she says.

"No, I don't," he says. "You weren't here. You went back East to pimp jingles to advertisers. You don't know." He stands up and kicks at the pile of hay until it doesn't exist.

Tuna leans across the rail, murmurs to the horses until they are again quiet, then turns to her.

"You want to know about your affectionate friends? You think they called you Gyp because you were a gypsy, or a moth that could never avoid the flame. You're wrong. They called you Gyp, as in gipped, as in gipped by nature for not having tits."

Gyp feels the hay stabbing at her, smells the manure close by. She looks at Tuna and feels her shrinking body. She wants only to hide from him. Every exposure of skin is now a travesty. She hunches her shoulders to hide her neck. She buries her hands inside her jacket pockets and feels the rolled joints.

"Do you still get stoned?" she asks.

Tuna shakes his head.

"I do." And to prove it, she lights one up.

"It's not a good idea to smoke in here," he says, but he comes to her and accepts the joint each time she passes it.
The horses bristle at the smoke until Tuna shows them the joint and settles them with a song. Gyp watches the stream of smoke from the joint break off and form little clouds.

"You were the magic man," Gyp says as the last wisp of smoke seeps out the open door and becomes a cloud in the evening sky.

"I was nothing."

"Yes, you were. You were special, Tuna Fish. You had the magic mushroom eyes. And your laughter! Remember when the only reward we ever sought was laughter?"

Tuna smiles.

"And I don't care if God did gip me, you never let me know it. You made me like my body. You never let me feel bad about myself. The only reason I ever ate LSD is because you made it comfortable."

"Linda."

She knows he does not want to see her cry.

"Linda, I've got work tomorrow."

Gyp stands up, sees the quills of straw that cling to her, plucks at them furiously until Tuna brushes her hands away.

"Voodoo child," he says and won't let her pick them off.

On the slow walk back to the house, Tuna tells her what it's like to work in the basement vault of a bank,
how rapidly he is advancing through the ranks, how much he enjoys the security of working for a corporation. He throws a brother's arm around her shoulder and tells her that he and Felice will be spending this year's vacation visiting her relatives in Utah, but maybe they'll come to New York some day.

"They were wrong about me," he says. "I am good with figures."

Inside, Gyp tiptoes to the bathroom. Tuna waits by the front door smiling. When she returns, he hands her the rest of the beer.

"Take it," he says. "Felice and I very seldom drink."

"We used to drain them just to get rid of the evidence," Gyp says.

Tuna plucks a piece of straw from her and dangles it in his mouth.

"Good night, Charles," she says. She dips into her pockets for her keys, but finds the cassette instead.

"I almost forgot. This is for you."

Tuna's jaw goes slack. The piece of straw slips out.

"Keep it," he says. "I haven't got anything to plug it into." He gives her a quick peck on the cheek, squeezes her hand, and then closes the door between them.

Gyp shakes from more than the cold. None of it
makes sense. She knows she has scared him, but she doesn't know how. Perhaps it was her kisses. Maybe he fears that Felicia will find out. Maybe it was the mention of music. Or magic. Gyp believes there is something here that no one has told her about.

Certainly, Shakey knew more of Tuna's situation than he let on.

Gyp decides to forego visiting Shakey tomorrow at the record warehouse. Shakey promised Gyp she could keep anything she touched, "Including me," he added, but Gyp no longer desires the physical clues.

She is almost to her car when she hears the slap of feet. "Here," Tuna says and hands her a car radio deck. Its connecting wires stand erect like the hair of a scared animal.

"Here," Tuna says. "I wasn't sure I still had it."

Gyp watches him race up the flagstone steps. She sees the lights in the house, one by one, flitter into darkness. Gyp cradles the radio for a minute before resting it on the seat beside her. She shifts the car into gear, rolls down her window, and passes slowly down this lane of unlit houses.

The sound of his retreat never leaves her. Every slap of his sandal now becomes a slap in her face. Gyp slams on her brakes. She shifts the car into reverse and backs up to his house.

A slip of cloud hangs above his home. Below,
curtains have been drawn. Gyp grabs the radio and jumps out of the car. Only now does she notice the din from the lumberyard.

"Frauds!" she shouts and heaves the radio at the mailbox she thinks is his. "Phony bastards!" She retrieves the radio and hurls it again, but the mailbox doesn't budge. Again, Gyp retrieves. This time she pounds the radio into the mailbox with short, vehement strokes, then jams the cracked and dented radio into the big metal crevice she has made.

Gyp is reversing her path, recrossing the bridge toward the starkly lit gray and brown lumberyard that stands by itself in a flat hollow by the river. She sees the moon for the first time tonight and it makes her shudder. As she passes the yard, she rolls down her window and flings the cassette tape as far as it will go.

Gyp turns on her car radio. She twists the volume knob full blast and feels the sweat trickling underneath her clothes. She presses the control buttons, but hears only static. The radio is programmed to stations from a different city. Quickly, she turns the tuner knob anxious to find a station that will play a song she knows.