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This place used to be somebody

Sarah Fogarty Hamilton

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THIS PLACE USED TO BE SOMEBODY

by

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Chapter 1

The House

THE SEASON HAD already kicked in when Jimmy disappeared.

He made it through the IBM Convention, the American
Psychological Association Conference, and some music industry gig
lots of bad CD's as tips. He took a hike the day after the Shriners and
the Lumbermen had arrived. Maybe he'd finally had enough.

IBM showed up in early November for three money-raking
weeks. Every two days a thousand people checked in, sat in the Grand
Ballroom all day listening to somebody talk about computers, then
checked out the same day another thousand people arrived. We loved
it--gravy work for us bellmen. The portage fee, run through a hotel
charge account, was a dollar sixty a bag--in and out. No working the
guest, barely even any contact. The math worked out to about five
hundred dollars per bellman every two days. It turned the crew into a
bunch of puppies. I liked it for that more than anything.

Those computer people showed up by bus at the back of the hotel
where all the Japanese tours arrive. Their bags were then off-loaded
into the Carnelian room,a huge space, where us bellmen were waiting
Those computer people showed up by bus at the back of the hotel where all the Japanese tours arrive. Their bags were then off-loaded into the Carnelian room, a huge space, where us bellmen were waiting around shooting the shit, playing cards. Jimmy, La-la, Yo and I played craps on the parquet dance floor up against the stage. When a round of bags showed, we'd take the pre-arranged rooming list, tag them with room numbers, line them up by floor, and then stack them onto four-wheelers. Usually fifteen to twenty bags a load, well above my head. It took my whole body to finesse the last suitcase up top, though I'd learned a long time ago how not to let the effort show.

It was a grunt, but a nice break from: "Can I get you anything else today? Some ice, perhaps? And where are you folks from? DeMoines? Nice town, I here (lie). Very livable. San Francisco, born and raised. Yeah, a pretty city, but lots of crime, that's true. I don't think too many people have seen a woman bellman before either, sir..." Then comes the waiting and watching for body language that indicates a move toward a tip, hoping you've read it right so that you don't stick your hand out for the pass off, when he's really only checking to see that his room key is in his pocket. If he still doesn't go for it, then there's the stall at the door, more small talk, maybe more time: "Can I get you anything else, sir?" Finally the light bulb blinks on, and that look will come over his face: part embarrassment for not being cool, part betrayal at realizing my interest in his life had a price. It's a bad look to be a party to. I never seem to get used to it.

The computer types--and after you've seen about twenty thousand of them they do seem like types--were mostly in their early thirties, and
pretty hyped up. A self-important air about them, as if they had their fingers on the pulse of life, rather than a keyboard. Little packs of them would go jogging in the mornings. They'd come up to us and ask, "Can you suggest a safe place to run?" All bouncing in place like a little army troop, while one of us described a route. "And you're sure that's completely safe?" they'd say. Our response was typically something like: "Lady, no where in this city is completely safe at five-thirty in the morning."

BY THE TIME the Shriners and Lumbermen showed up it was the third week in December. The house was a hundred percent: the Shriners in the old section, Lumbermen in the tower. The place was humming.

The day Jimmy didn't come onto the floor for his normal 10:00 a.m. shift, was also the day the Fire Marshall showed up and condemned the forty foot Christmas tree looming in the center of the lobby. It was already brown and a halo of needles had formed around all the fake, bright red Christmas packages underneath. It was scheduled to get hauled away three days before Christmas.

Normally our rainy season, it must have been seventy-five degrees, and dry. The air felt brittle. Earthquake weather. But the hotel had survived the 1906 quake and fire, and breezed through the one two years ago in '89, so we weren't worried—in fact we never thought much about that sort of thing.

A hot offshore wind, like the Santa Anas down south, had been rolling down the streets of the city all morning, and into the lobby of the hotel like some hurt animal. Made people jittery, kind of crazy-
eyed. Charles Manson wind my mother called it. Guests blew through the revolving doors, shocked or irritated expressions on their faces, their hair do's a mess. Most had three or four shopping bags slung over each wrist. They looked both frantic and tired.

We were all standing post around the perimeter of the lobby. The whole day crew: La-la, Nicko, Lizareto, Romios, Yo-Yo, Del, Loper, Flankie, Crowler, Madison, Cliffy, and George, our boss. Kasumi, head Bell Captain, was working the bell desk. Everybody was there except Jimmy.

If you didn't look too close we were a snappy bunch. Navy blue suits, gold stripes down the sides of the legs, bow ties, starched white shirts. From a distance we looked like we belonged in that four star hotel, that we even dressed the place up. Sometimes I wondered though, whether we were fooling anybody. The stain on a uniform, the sheen of polyester; how close would you have to get to notice?

Along with the haggard shoppers, the lobby was filled with the lumbermen huddled in threes and fours talking loudly. This was how they made their business deals, some kind of tradition I guess, and irritating as hell. They didn't get out of the way for anyone. A bunch of thick-armed men with round, tight bellies, lots of short-sleeved plaid shirts, who rarely let me, a girl, carry their bags. They'd look me up and down, chuckle a little and walk on past. Watching them negotiate price per board feet or whatever it was they talked about, I imagined myself skipping through the lobby with a needle, poking their bellies, popping them like balloons. They'd sputter and flury up toward the ceiling until they expired.
The Shriners, their eyes glazed, cheeks flushed after a day at the Napa wineries, were filing into the lobby, slowly meandering their way through the lumbermen. Gold tassels bounced gently against their hats. They were all right; they had money and they passed it around. Soft middle aged guys with big soft wives. Everything about them was soft and kind of sweet, even the lines on their faces, as if all the heartache in the world hadn't touched them.

"Look at these guys. They remind me of cattle with red fezzes on," Yo-Yo said, swinging his keys and chain in an arc through the air. He ran his other hand across the black stubble of hair on the top of his head as if to smooth down a fuss. The diamond stud in his left ear caught the light of the huge chandelier over head.

Sometimes Yo's too cool for his own good, but I like him; he makes me laugh. The truth is he does more than that: he makes me jumpy, nervous inside like a young girl. I try to pretend otherwise, but sometimes all it takes is one of his long side glances my direction. I don't know what you'd call it; not love, certainly, not even sure about lust. All I know is I like being next to the guy, and I picture things, regular everyday moments: walking down the street together; sitting on one of those leather benches at the art museum. He told me once that he irons all his undershirts and boxer shorts. I teased him mercilessly about it for months but couldn't help imagining doing it for him myself, the ironing board set up in his bedroom, me in one of his t-shirts, Yo in the kitchen making coffee. Nobody knows and I don't let on. He gets razzed almost daily by the rest of the crew because he swings both ways, make the guys nervous, I guess. This helps my secret.
"Hey man, they could be a drug cartel for all I care. These pudge balls let loose of the green and that's all that matters," said Lizareto, bouncing on the front of his feet like a guy ready to pick a fight. Lizareto's tall and kind of lumpy. He's a third generation box seat 49er ticket holder, which around here, is like being a Kennedy, and he's got a red Camaro with a license plate that's some crude slang for a woman's private parts. He dragged me out by my coat sleeve one morning to show me, pointed to the plate proudly. I'd never seen the word before. "Got me an inside line on these sorts of things," he said, which I knew didn't mean anything at all. For a brief moment standing there on the sidewalk I pictured having sex with him and it looked just like a sleazy porno flick. I winced a little and walked back inside.

A woman, well-dressed and curvaceous, walked past Yo and Lizareto, heading for the tower elevators. Lizareto leaned forward and watched the woman walk through the lobby. "Yes, yes. I'll take it," he said and squeezed the air with his hand as if it were gripped around a ripe tomato. Yo-Yo looked at the woman walking away, fiddled with his bow tie, but otherwise didn't participate in Lizareto's action.

Del and I were standing to the left of the Bell Captain's desk. "This here," Del ran his arm through the air in an arc, "used to be the ballroom in the city. Dining and dancing every night. Goodman, the Dorcys, everybody. This was the place. Radio broadcast, the whole bit: 'And live from the Hotel St Francis in San Francisco...' And that wall there, used to have a window in it up high with a checker. All the guy did was sit there and make sure everyone in the dining room was happy. And there was a checker for every plate that went out, too. Had to be
perfect. Sometimes us bellmen would hang around the kitchen if no trains were coming in and get the rejects."

"Is that right." I tried to sound surprised, though I'd heard this part many times before. Del's a bit of a broken record but it doesn't matter to me. I like hearing it again, am always bugging him to tell me more, what it used to be like, all of it--the hotel, the city. I get lost in those stories; they feed me for days.

"Sure. Gable, Monroe, General Patton, J. Edgar Hoover, roomed 'em all. They say if walls could talk, well, goes for bellmen too. Walked in on Hoover in bed with his male assistant one year. God damned republican faggot." He shook his head. "Shit, this place was something else. Those schmucks upstairs now, sitting in front of their screens with their graphs, don't know jack about running a hotel. Not hotel people at all."

A big corporation bought the hotel back in the seventies and immediately expanded the lobby and built the tower, a thirty storied gray rectangle plastered next to the old structure like a leach. The tower lobby, where we stand post, is meant to be elegant and plush, but it's nothing but facade, and gaudy. It's like us: all right from a distance. Some guy, with a special paint brush came in and painted the four pillars black with gray veins all through them to make them look like marble. Jimmy and Del had stood right behind the poor guy at one point, their hands behind their backs, shaking their heads. "Fake marble in the St. Francis. Can you believe it Pete," Jimmy had said. Del just shook his head. "Hey buddy, how much they pay you to do that?" Jimmy asked. The guy up on the ladder ignored him.
"And look at this clown--" Just then Del stepped up from behind Lizareto and cuffed him on the back of the head as one might a child, then swatted him on the arm repeatedly. "What the fuck you doing ugly shit, huh? Standing there ogling at women like you's at a beauty pageant. Why don't you go stand post over there," he said and pointed over to the large brass revolving door leading to the hotel's garage. "Go pretend you're a real bellman, why don't you."

"Hey, old man. Watch the hair will you," said Lizareto as he backed away toward where Del had pointed. He keeps his hair quaffed up stiff and glassy.

"And you, you slick ass," said Del, walking toward Yo-Yo.

"I'm going, no hitting Geritol man." Yo ducked to the left as if avoiding a long right jab. Del's the guard dog, always on duty.

He came back over and stood next to me, clasped his hands behind his back. "Jesus Christ. God damned punks. Look at 'em over there. I ought to--" he pointed with his chin over to Loper and Madison across the lobby, took a step forward.

"Oh, Del, hold on." I grabbed his arm. "Don't get your blood boiling yet. It's a long day."

Loper was pacing up and back on his toes slightly. He can never just stand still. Madison stood with his legs spread wide, his arms crossed. The body language of sport talk.

"You'd think this was their fucking living room. No fucking class. In the old days, they wouldn't even let those two clowns through the front door. Now they heire 'em." He shook his head and moved his
jaw up and down like he'd forgotten his teeth were in. Fifty-eight years as a bellman; if this is any one's living room it's his.

"Yeah, yeah," I said, as if sick of his whining.

"And you," his upper lip curled in a sneer, "this is no place for a girl. You lower the joint a notch too. Woman bellman, it's not right. Go get yourself a job in an office or something, silly broad. Grow some nails instead of calluses." He grabbed my left hand and yanked the palm face up.

"Jesus, look at these paws."

"Oh, shut up you old goat." I pulled my hand away.

"Ho-ho," he said, and took a swipe at me, missing my face by less than an inch. Both he and Cliffy used to be boxers, out of some old gym in North Beach that doesn't exist anymore. I swiped him back, threw a fake into his stomach just to keep him on his toes, let him know I love him too. One time he misjudged and nailed me in the face right there in the lobby, almost knocked me down. That old man is still as solid and strong as a bull. I tried to act like it didn't hurt, that it didn't hurt my feelings. I didn't want him to feel any worse than I knew he already did, though of course he just laughed at me.

I leaned against the wall with both hands tucked behind me at the base of my spine—my watching position—and not even close to the way a real bellman is supposed to stand post, but Del never seemed to notice anything I did wrong. I'm "the girl," beyond reproach and acceptance, both. They don't know where to place me in the scheme of things so it's easier to keep me outside the trace of ordinary life. Fine with me.
"Hey George," Del said. George was leaning over Kasumi's podium looking at some paper work. "Where the hell's Jimmy? Did he call in?"

"Nope, don't think so. Kinda' funny huh?"

"Can't remember the last time that old bastard missed a day of work. Twenty-five years maybe."

"Yeah, something like that, I guess," George said, absently. Then he looked at Pete over his half glasses. "Thirty-one, except for the three months for the bypass." he said, and went back to his work.

Soon the Shriners would begin checking out and we'd start pumping, bringing them down and out to taxis and limos and busses. Non-stop for two or three hours. We would make it that day--break 200, that is, another gravy day--and we knew it, and were in good moods for it.

OF COURSE I don't know anything for sure but you do start to get an eye for people standing in this lobby day in and day out. Partly it's a game, a way to pass the time, figuring people out that is, but it's also business. You've got to be sharp, constantly spying for clues: clothes, hair style, shoes, type of luggage, brand of watch, how people carry themselves. Everything tells you something. It's the art of the hustle. The second you offer to carry someone's bags up, or they open the door of their room for you to bring them down, you've got to know how to play them. Are they a fin, maybe even a ten spot, or just a buck? You've got to figure how far to go, and when to cut it off.
At least that's what the young guys try and drill into me. How to milk people. I'm not very good though; I just go along until the ride's over.

Aussies are the worst but nice. And they generally can't handle a woman carrying their bags. Germans are almost as bad and rude as hell. Japanese come in hordes on tour, never go anywhere alone. We get $1.60 a bag for them too so we don't care how they treat us. New Yorkers treat you like dirt but you can count on them. They understand the way it works. Arabs are good, French are bad. Businessmen carry their own. Don't even bother asking. An "I got it" is what we call them. No etiquette. Newlyweds can go either way. I got forty just last week from a young hung-over groom. I think he was trying to impress her still.

Now the old timers, they'll tell you different. Just do your job, they say. Don't listen to these young fucks. Give service, keep your mouth shut, don't count your pocket until you clock out. Who do you think you are, they say. It's hard though, to be like them. They're a different breed, they've got some code from the old days that the young guys don't respect. Lizareto's the worst. Life is just one big hustle to him. And if people treat him badly, or if he really works for them and they don't tip well, he'll nail them: damage luggage, open bags and throw a shoe down the laundry chute, piss in people's ice. He brags about it to me and I wish he wouldn't. You can't snitch on another bellmen, and so his transgressions are like small burdens I carry around.
BECAUSE I'M LOWEST in seniority--only five years--I cover Kasumi while she goes to lunch. The rush hit then; the Shriners were heading out. All three telephone lines began blinking at once and the front desk clerks were yelling, "Bellman, please!" and hitting their bells so often it sounded like pinball machines over there. I couldn't give fronts away fast enough.

"Front!" I called. "1497. Five bags to the garage."

La-la stepped up and said, "Thank you very much, lady," then grabbed a hand truck and walked briskly toward the tower elevators.

"Next front, please!" I yelled.

Flankie jumped forward. "Hoi, hoi," he said, always the clown.

"636. Ten bags to a taxi, you lucky pilipino dog." 636 is the MacArthur Suite, always at least a fin, usually a ten spot.

"Next bellman!"

"Yeah, kid. what do you got?" Romios rested his arm on the podium, peered down at the call sheet. He's always stays calm when we get slammed.

"Can you take two?" I asked.

"Sure darling. Lay it on me."

"1789, two bags to a taxi, 2193 five bags to the garage."

"You got it."

"Next front. 549 to the airporter. Sorry, George."

George stepped up to the podium and wrote the number down on his pad. "That's all right, kid. Just doing your job. Keep it up." He grabbed a hand truck and took off. 549 is a lousy room, usually a bad front. The room's so small you have to close the front door before you
can get the luggage rack out of the closet. For a hundred and thirty bucks a night that's a little embarrassing.

About twenty minutes later, Kasumi appeared through the service entrance at the far end of the lobby, and slowly made her way through the crowds. Thirty-three years here--she didn't hurry for anybody.

"Kasumi, you want me to stay and help?"


We pumped like that until 5:00 p.m.--four hours of overtime for me. No breaks, no lull. We were all sweating and huffing. I liked times like that. Everybody doing their thing. Our world. On those days it felt clean, like a regular job, and that I belonged somewhere.

AFTER THE RUSH ended, George called us into checkroom 'A' which is the old one under the original building's stairs. It's a tiny room with dark mahogany walls and a low-angled ceiling. Some of the paneling, say the old guys, is removable and behind them are tunnels winding all over the hotel. George says he used to skip out to the track by one of those passages and come back without anyone ever knowing. When I worked graveyard I used to sneak a pillow in there and take naps with my pager next to my ear. Sometimes I thought I heard noises. Around the perimeter of the room at eye level is a piece of molding with the names of cities, one right after the other, in old fashioned cursive writing. A remnant from the days when life in the hotel ebbed and flowed with the schedule of trains. Below the cities they posted arrival and departure times for the week. Los Angeles, Denver, Seattle,
Chicago, New York, St. Louis, many more. Del and George and Jimmy, all those old guys, used to line up in uniform at Lefty's bar across the street and drink until a train arrived. Or they'd play poker and bet on the horses from the men's locker room downstairs. George told me they'd go at it all night down there sometimes and then shower and go back to work at dawn. This was home.

We all crammed in, pushed luggage and handbags aside and sat on the shelves. Madison and Lizareto sat right on some luggage until Del pulled them off by the back of their necks. We filled the room with the smell of our sweat. And we shied away from each other's eyes out of discomfort and respect.

"Well guys," George said, "anybody seen Jimmy?" He tried to smile.

"I saw him about 4:45 this morning heading for the locker room," I said.

"Jimmy? What would he be doing here that time of morning?" said La-la.

"I don't know, but it had to be him. You know, the way he walks, nobody like him. I was a ways behind him in the hall, but it was him for sure. I almost called to him to ask him the same thing, but he was through the locker room door before I could get it out of my mouth."

"Yeah," George said, "Rebecca in maid service said she saw him around then too. She said he told her he was taking a hike. She told him not with those feet he wasn't. She said he just smiled at her and then
told her she was beautiful. Sounds like Jimmy, eh, telling old Rebecca that."

"You talked to his wife?" asked Yo-Yo.

George nodded. "Gloria said he left this morning as usual. She said he was kind of funny though, cracking jokes, talking loud. Kept rambling on about when he roomed Duke Ellington back in '52."

"So what's the big deal, capt'n, maybe he's playing hooky today," said Lizareto with a shrug.

"The big deal, dumbo," Del said, "is that Jimmy doesn't miss work. The man ain't a prima donna like some of you children."

"Well, guys," George continued, "That's all I had to tell you. Old man'll turn up eventually. If he didn't love Gloria so much, I might think he's got some nice Cadillac on the side."

We sat there for a time in silence. Even Loper was quiet. Then everybody but George, Pete, Yo, Lal and I, filed out the door and headed downstairs to the locker rooms. Yo and I were sitting on the shelf next to each other. My left foot was locked around his right and we were swinging our legs.

"He'll show up, George, don't worry," I said.

George was looking down, fiddling with his keys.

"Yeah, George, he's all right, I can feel it," Yo-Yo said.

"These squirts are right. Not time to fret over Jimmy Corbett yet," Del said. George nodded.

"I bet the bastard's at the god damned race track without me," said La-la.

"Hey boss, which panel comes off?" I asked.
"Huh? Oh --" He looked at Pete and they both smiled.
"Sweetheart, those days are long gone," he said.
"Oh, I know, but which one?"
"Right behind you."
I swung around and inspected the panel I had been leaning against. Yo looked too. I turned back around and nodded slowly, tried not to smile. Yo stared at me, his black, bushy eyebrows drawn together.

AFTER I CHANGED clothes, I waited outside the guys' locker room for them to come out - anybody, I didn't care; I just wanted some company, maybe go have a beer. It was Tuesday: my Friday. But none of them showed. I pictured them all sitting around in there talking about Jimmy, telling stories. That's what I hoped they were doing anywhay, but more likely they weren't talking at all, just getting dressed by themselves and leaving for their other lives, their outside lives, as if this place was just where they hustled for a buck. When it came down to it none of us were any good at letting on what we felt. We were all a little stunted that way.

I waited a long time, and felt embarrassed. Then I went over to Lefty's right across the street, thinking maybe they'd go over there and throw one or two back. But nobody showed there either, so I took the subway home, under the bay to Oakland. I tried to hold my breath the whole way across, not think about the thousands of tons of water above my head. But I do every time.
MY APARTMENT IS just a block from the West Oakland stop. They call it Oakland West to try and get away from the notorious reputation of West Oakland. Nobody gets off at this stop unless they live here or are lost. It used to be all right. I remember the first time I saw a crack vile in front of my apartment door, I didn't even know what it was. Then all the sudden they were everywhere.

Now it looks like some natural disaster hit and nobody bothered to clean up afterward. Down the subway island stairs, through the vacant lot and I'm home. I'm on the second floor and can see Pier 83 from my window, watch the container ships load and unload. Both my dad, Joe, and my oldest brother, Rudy, work that pier sometimes. My dad was a gang boss in the hold for twenty five years, on the dock for ten. His dad, my grandfather, Seamus Mahony, worked in the hold for close to forty. He was in the strike of '34--Bloody Sunday. Came over here
straight from Belfast and got a job right off as a longshoreman. He thought he was the luckiest man alive.

Now my dad's a crane operator, which he's a little ashamed of, running a machine on the waterfront and all. It's a lot easier on the body but tough on the head. Takes full concentration, different kind of timing. Blow it and you can kill somebody, flatten them like a bug with one of the containers.

No more hooks or handwork. When I was a kid, I used to love it when he'd come home after working a coffee or cocoa bean job. I'd follow him around and breath in those sweet aromas. Sometimes it seemed like he filled up the whole house with them. He and his partner, Bobby, would pump eighty pound bags all day down in the hold. Each with a hook in one hand, they'd stack them ten feet high. Their timing had to be perfect. He'd come home exhausted but in a good mood. My dad says he's glad Seamus is not around to see what's happened.

Rudy's only been in the union for four years so he still works whatever he gets, which means lashing jobs mostly, securing stacks of loaded containers to each other on the ship with long twenty and thirty foot steel rods. It's the hardest and most dangerous work. Sometimes I can make out little figures walking around on top of the containers on board. They must be two hundred feet above the water. That could be Rudy, I think, and then I say a little prayer.

There's not much else to look at from my window except the crackheads down in the empty lot. They move fluidly as if in water, or wail monotonously, curl up in balls together against the night air. Sometimes I can make out little puffs of breath above their heads.
One guy, Germaine, went to my high school, Mission High. He's a couple years older than me, my sister Augustina's age. She had a thing for him, but then a lot of girls did. Nice guy, pretty quiet. He had the blackest skin I'd ever seen. After he graduated, I didn't see him around the Mission District for years, and then one day, while driving down Guerrero Street, I saw him storming down the sidewalk like a madman, his hair all nappy and long, filthy clothes on, like he'd been sleeping under an overpass. Made my heart hurt.

Now he's here in my vacant lot. Pretty strange. I like to think little coincidences like that have lessons in them waiting to be discovered. But the crack's probably just cheaper over here.

He does remember me though. When I walk through the lot at four in the morning on my way to work, he often says from somewhere in the dark, "Be careful, Katie Mahony," or, "Go get 'em, Katie Mahony." Always my full name.

I guess I could move. I certainly make enough money, but nothing motivates me to do it. I'm used to it here; it makes sense to me. And it's the right distance from the city, and from my family. I like having all that water between us. I like to think of my life romantically--where I live, work--that it all has a kind of rich sepia tone to it, rather than a dull brown tint, and that I'm young enough to change it all when I want to.

Del told me he's got pillow cases of cash in his garage, and that someday he's going to pile them in his backyard and set them on fire. I've been thinking of starting a pillow case of my own. That too makes sense to me.
I PULLED MY bed down from the wall. My living room, which is also my bedroom, is so small that when the bed's down I have to crawl over it to get to the kitchen. I put on my pajamas, went to the kitchen and started a pot of water for macaroni and cheese. Then I put some tater tots in the oven and threw a package of taffy cookies from the kitchen on to the bed. When the macaroni was finished I ate in bed and watched a Thin Man movie. Then Fred and Ginger came on in, "The Gay Divorcee". I fell asleep with the pot of macaroni in the crook of my arm.

I WOKE LATE the next morning. The pot of macaroni had fallen to the floor in the night. I showered and then took the train into the city to visit my brother Donovan.

I got off at 24th and Mission, the heart of the Mission District, and walked four blocks down 24th to Las Brisas mexicatessen on Florida Street. I wanted to bring Donovan a big stack of fresh tortillas, still hot, and plop them into his lap in bed. I wanted their smell to fill the room.

24th Street was bustling. All the outdoor produce stands were surrounded by people picking oranges, chayotes, limes, avocados, tomatoes, chiles. Rivera's Meat Market was packed too. A small round woman with white hair up high on her head stood up front at the counter, her arm raised in the air, yelling to Rivera, "No cabrito! Por que no, senor? Por que no?" He just smiled at her. The floor was black and white checkered linoleum. I used to play hopscotch on them
waiting for my mother. Clusters of men stood around on the sidewalk talking, smoking cigarettes. The air was filled with Spanish. You'd never know the neighborhood was once predominantly Irish.

At Las Brisas, Tia, one of the owners, was behind the counter, her head deep inside the cold case reaching some queso fresco for a group of women. She saw me through the glass and formed her lips into a kiss. I waved back. I walked toward the back of the store, past all the bins of dried chiles and beans, the coke machine, to the take-out counter. Stacks of bagged tortillas lined the top of it; they were still steamy inside. Some of the tortillas were the standard, machine pressed kind, others fatter, made by hand. That's the kind I wanted. I could see Yolanda back in the kitchen behind the counter patting one out. Her hands moved so fast. She had worked there for as long as I could remember. A pile of masa, the size of a bed pillow sat on the table in front of her.

Pilar, the wife of my father's old gang partner, saw me and yelled from the back of the kitchen: "Mi nina, como estas, bonita?"

She walked up to me and kissed me on both cheeks and I did the same to her.

"So? What you doing down here?"
"I'm going to Donovan's, thought I'd bring him some tortillas."
"Oh, Dios. Bueno, nina. Come, I'll fix you up."

I walked out of the store with two full bags of food around each wrist: tortas, chili rellenos, carnitas, tamales, empanadas, marzipan cookies, and four dozen hot tortillas. By the time I'd reached the end of the block the bags were already digging into my skin. Both of us knew
Donovan would probably feel too poorly to eat most of it, but that didn't seem to matter at all.

I walked down to 18th Street and got on the #27 that goes to the Castro District. The distance between the Mission and the Castro isn't much--maybe a mile, two at the most--but they're worlds apart.

The Castro used to be the leather boys' district and Polk Street, across the city, was for the queens. Both were something else in their day, back in the '70's. Now Polk almost looks and feels like any other street in the city, and the Castro is quiet, subdued. You can feel the sadness and tension in the air. It's hard not to think that everyone is either dying or taking care of someone who is. Tour busses still drive down Castro Street sometimes; I wonder what the guide says into his mike now.

Occasionally, the Castro still pulls out the stops and goes at it like it used to. Like when the new re-colored version of *Gone With The Wind* came to the Castro Theatre a few months back. I went to a matinee showing. The block that the theatre is on had been cordoned off and the street and sidewalk were packed. Everybody was dressed up in southern colonial outfits, most were in drag. At the intermission, a white limo pulled up to the front and Scarlett and Rhett emerged, waving like movie stars. They made their way through the crowd and disappeared into the theatre. Except for the chiseled biceps and the dark hair on her forearms, Scarlett looked pretty good.

Donovan lived just on the outskirts of the Castro toward the Mission. He had a nice railroad flat above a burger joint called, "The Hot and Hunky." He'd made house keys for the whole family a few
months ago and handed them out to us one afternoon in my parents' kitchen when we were all there for Sunday dinner. He silenced the room with those keys. It felt as if we were all being handed invitations to his death. My father slammed his down onto the Formica counter and walked out of the house. I think Donovan had done it for his benefit; back then he still couldn't stop himself from getting right in my father's face, trying to force him into acceptance. It never worked.

"There," Donovan had said, "now my door is always open."

"Shit, Donny," Rudy had said.

I UNLOCKED THE downstairs door and climbed the stairs to the second floor. I knocked and then opened the door to Donovan's flat. He had moved his bedroom into the front room because it was closer to the kitchen and bathroom.

"Hey," I said, as I walked in.

"Hey you. Jesus, let me guess: you've been to Pilar's."

Donovan lay in the center of the bed with books and magazines scattered around him. Of us five kids he had always been the reader in the family. The television was on and some talk show guy was saying, "We'll be back with women who sleep with their sister's husbands, after this break." His catheter stand was to the right of the bed with an empty infusion bag hanging from it and the tubing coiled loosely around the cross bar. More tubing, packages of syringes and bottles of saline solution sat on the bay window seat. I set the bags of food down, pulled out the stack of tortillas, and did what I'd planned: I dropped them onto Donovan's lap. He let out an "oof."
"Heavenly Mary, is there any better smell than this?" he said.

I smiled and shook my head. I looked at the outline of his legs under the blankets. They were much too thin to be my brother's legs. Back in high school, during football season, he would ask me to see how long I could hold them up while we watched television. He'd sit on the couch peering around me at the set while I stood in front of him, an ankle in each hand.

I picked up the bags of food and walked into the kitchen. I heard Donovan say, "Thanks, Katie girl."

The inside of the refrigerator looked more like a medicine cabinet than anything else. I couldn't remember it being quite this extreme the last time I was there, but maybe I hadn't opened the fridge in a while. The whole top shelf was loaded with infusion bags of ganciclovir. Twenty-five or thirty bags at least, a full two week supply. The aluminum tape at the top of each bag shined in the light. There were also packages of syringes and pill bottles which I figured Donovan had absently stuck in the refrigerator since they didn't need to be kept cold.

I put all the containers of food on the middle shelf except for the empanadas and marzipan cookies.

"Scoot over," I said.

Donovan shoved the books against the wall and moved over. I adjusted the pillows, slid under the blankets, and placed the containers of empanadas and cookies on my chest.
"Here. Eat," I said, and passed Donovan an empanada and a napkin. The talk show was ending and another was coming on. We both stared at the television.

"So. How's it been going?" I asked.

"Last week was good. Felt good. This week, I don't know, I'm just so tired. Fucking AZT and ddC, I think. Probably the ganciclovir too. You know my friend William, from Macy's?"

"Yeah."

"He's on ganciclovir too for retinitis, and he says maybe we should go off it so we could feel better. Then when we go blind we won't have to see ourselves in the mirror. Not a bad idea, eh?"

"Funny," I said.

"Well, really though. It's kind of a toss up."

I passed him another empanada and he set it on the napkin on his chest.

"How's the bag hustling going?" he asked.

"Fine. Busy. Hey, you met Jimmy once didn't you?"

"Jimmy, Jimmy--"

"Yeah, the day you came to the hotel to take me to lunch a while back. I introduced you to him. One of the old guys, kind of looks like an old humpty dumpty."

"Oh, yeah, the jazz guy, kind of talks in code. Right. Some how we got to talking about Thelonious Monk, right off the bat. And then he said to me, 'That Katie Maude, she's a cup. You look both ways now, won't you?' I had no idea what he was talking about, but I nodded anyway. Quite the accent. Where's that from?"
"Little Rock."

"So, what about him?"

"He's missing. Disappeared. Never showed up for work. Wife doesn't know anything either."

"Maybe he's playing hooky."

"No, not Jimmy." I said. "You know, it's funny, but I don't know how that place would do without him. Us, that is. It's not that he's one of the main pumpers on the crew anymore. It's more that he makes us better. I don't know how to describe it."

"Backbone," Donovan said.

"Hey," I said, and pointed to the empanada still sitting on his chest.

"I can't, Katie," he said and rubbed his stomach. "I wish I could. Sorry. Appreciate the thought, though."

"So, what are you doing tomorrow?" I asked.

"Another god damned garage sale. This is the fourth one in six months. How come everyone's got to leave me their furniture when they die?"

We laughed. It was funny at the time, the way he said it.

"Thought maybe we could go to a Giants game in the afternoon."

"Sounds good. Play it by ear, okay?"

I nodded. "You have to do another infusion today?"

"Yep. Pretty soon, in fact."

I reached up and felt the catheter valve sticking out of his chest above his right breast.

"My second nipple."
"Hasn't gotten infected again?" I asked.

"Nope."

"You want me to help you with the infusion?"

"Nope."

We watched the television for a while in silence. I don't remember what. Donovan rested his hand on my forearm which lay between our bodies. It felt so light, but warm, very warm. I stayed perfectly still, afraid that if I moved he might take it away.
ON FRIDAY, MY Monday, I took my usual 3:45 a.m. train into the city and walked four blocks to the hotel from the Powell Street station. The warm weather had intensified the already strong smell of urine, and people who normally slept huddled in the entryways of buildings were splayed out right on the sidewalk as if on a beach in the tropics.

Loraine in the wheelchair was awake, petting a cat on her lap. "Watch the game, honey," she said as I passed. I nodded; it was too early to talk. She's been around a long time. I passed the cheap stores that now line Powell: t-shirt shops, athletic stores, stereo and camera equipment. All the merchandise looks as if it dropped off the back of a truck, or somehow got around every import/export law. During the day, seedy-looking barkers stand on the sidewalk and try to lure in tourist shoppers. They stare at women's breasts and rearends as they pass by.

On one of the windows, though, is a photo poster of the Powell Street trolley-car turn around, 1942. I stopped and looked at it that morning, as I often do. In the photo, Market Street is covered with
cable car tracks criss-crossing in every direction. The streets in the photo are clean and filled with people really dressed: hats and overcoats, women with gloves. The city looks like it's in love with itself. In its prime and doing it right. Jimmy's told me about the jazz joints that used to be on Powell, up Geary, along Taylor too. "Walk from work and catch Charlie Parker at Lombardi's on a lucky night. Now that's all right," he had said. Now you could die walking down Taylor at night.

At the corner of Geary and Powell I crossed the street to the hotel which takes up an entire city block. The heavy flags high above the entrance snapped sharply in the wind. On the next corner, two hookers were talking and smoking cigarettes; another leaned into a white BMW with tinted windows and fancy rims. She was yelling, banging the roof of the car with the palm of her hand. Pretty ballsy, I thought. I opened the door of the employee entrance and could still hear her as I ran down the stairs leading to the bowels of the hotel.

AGAIN, BECAUSE I'M low on the totem pole, I have to deliver the express check-outs. These are guests' itemized receipts which they can simply sign, and drop off at the front desk, provided they've paid with a credit card. They receive a final receipt in the mail later. This way they avoid the lines at the front desk. Every express check-out must be slid under the guests' doors by 6:00 a.m.

Sometimes I have to deliver twelve hundred of them. That's about a two foot stack, and it takes me closest to an hour and a half. You've got to be fast and organized and have technique or else you'll be
at it all morning and never get back down to the floor where the money is.

The lumbermen were checking out that morning so I had at least a eighteen inch stack to deliver. I held them with both arms underneath and my chin on top. It was tempting, as always, to throw them off one of the balconies outside the emergency stairs, say from the twenty-fifth floor of the tower, and watch them go swaggering gently down to earth. Maybe some would land on the pimp's white car. But bellmen have been fired numerous times for such heinous crimes. Destruction of hotel property it's called. Clyde, a former bellman, used to pay a limo driver to take them away. Somebody snitched on him and now he works as a doorman at some two-bit place up Sutter Street. Others have tossed them down garbage and laundry chutes. Everyone's been caught.

I always start at the top of the tower, working my way down the emergency stairs, and then cut over to the old building and start all over. It's a drop-kick with a spin and they slide right under the door. That's the technique. Do it wrong and one side of the big square envelope will slam the door. It's surprising how much noise that can make. I usually run down the hall if I've done it, afraid that someone might come out from one of the rooms and yell at me.

I remember the first time I had to deliver them. I placed each one on the floor and under the door by hand. It took me almost two and a half hours. My back was killing me by the time I'd finished. Loper the loud mouth just about laughed me out of the hotel when I told him I had done it that way.
The hotel is eerie that time of morning. I'm the only one around except for a few room service guys. Sometimes I can hear people snoring or coughing or making love. Occasionally I stop and listen. Other times I put the stack down and dance through the hallway on that plush carpeting like some voodoo child doing the pelvic gyration. I pump my arms back and forth, thrust my chest out. I pretend there's a bamboo pole across the hallway and I do the limbo under it. I can work myself into a sweat. I must look grotesque but who cares. It feels good, releases me, a moment of freedom in this place, this uniform. I picture guests standing in their pajamas behind their doors, squinting out at me from their peep holes, their nice little vacation lives, and the thought doesn't even bother me.

Other times I talk to myself aloud, whispering in various accents. Irish, Jamaican, Spanish, it depends. I tell myself secrets about myself that only I know. I confess fears: "I'm a liar. Don't even know what goes for a real life. Haven't a clue who I am." Things like that. The accents can determine the content. Those were mostly my Irish thoughts. I don't take them personally, but I feel better afterwards. They just flow out with each drop-kick and spin. I don't worry that my whispers are heard; if they slither under doors and confuse into people's dreams, that's my revenge.

But much of the time I feel death, cold and clean, in the silence of morning. There are a couple spots in particular, right in front of rooms 614 and 1105 for instance, where my sense of it is so strong it makes me shudder. I'm sure someone has died in those rooms; I've even pictured how it happened. The images just come, I can't stop
them. I've started making the old guys tell me their death stories, looking for a match. Murders, suicides, heart attacks, they've all walked in on the results. When it first happened to me I thought this damn hotel was on top of an old indian burial ground or something, haunting us.

There is a wall in the old section stairwell between the eighth and ninth floors with the bloody imprint of a hand on it. It's a little hand. Right when you open the door to the stairs, there it is. Of course it's probably a joke, some jerk from the kitchen goofing off. But maybe not. It usually gives me the shivers too. This place is filled with leftovers; it's hard to be alone here at times.

I was making good time that morning so when I got to the third floor of the old building, which is called the Main, I stopped at the big crack in the wall. This is where, during the 1906 quake, one wing of the hotel separated from another. Instead of fixing it, in 1910 they put a little gold plaque next to it with an inscription explaining the history. The crack's a good two and a half inches wide in one spot. I shoved my hand in as far as I could and felt cold dry air blowing up from somewhere down below.

Underneath the employee cafeteria, which we call the Library, cockroaches and rats rule the world. Recently, engineering went down there and sprayed. Frank, the old Norwegian, said the walls were a foot thick with cockroaches. Seething. He crawled all through them. Such a nice guy too. Ninety-five years of rat and cockroach propagation. Sometimes I think about all the old buildings in this city, all undulating down below. We walk on top of them year after year; they keep quiet,
just keep breeding. But you have to wonder how long that will last, how long any of it will last. There are cockroaches in my locker, skittering about while I work.

THE LUMBER GUYS were already beginning to check out by the time I got back down to the floor just after 6:00 a.m. Knowing this would happen I guess, George had loaded up the early shift with guys who usually don't come on until seven and ten o'clock. So along with the regular shift--Loper, Romios and Madison--La-la, George, Nicko, Yo-Yo, and Del were also standing around the Bell Captain's desk when I showed up. What a treat.

Normally it's World Forum hour between six and seven o'clock. Us early guys stand around and argue about politics, economics, racism, violence, you name it. I listen, mostly. Madison, our young Malcolm X look-alike, and Loper, who's got an opinion on everything, are the most vocal. Romios and I usually end up talking about food. He's Greek, came over here in the early '50's. The guy loves to eat. Sometimes he tells me about Greek history too. He says he got a book of love poems that were written 2000 years before Christ.

"Well, there's the girl," George said, his usual morning hello.

"Hey, George," I said.

"Hey, kid."

I walked past Del and hit him on the shoulder, then ducked away quickly.

He shook his head and said, "I'll get you later."

"Morning Kasumi, how's it going?" I asked.
"O hai o go zai mas, Katie. I fine. How you?"

"All right. So, you got the Bermuda Triangle on this morning, that's good."

"Yes. I let these big men checking out know who's boss. See, I got my lolex on too." She held her wrist up to show me her new Rolex watch which she wears on the outside of her jacket sleeve. The Bermuda Triangle is made up of a teardrop diamond ring on her left hand, a big square ruby on her right, and an emerald and diamond choker around her neck. All of them are flagrantly large. She only wears them when the hotel is a hundred percent. She's sure they keep the guests in line, lets them know where the lines are drawn, who's really who. We're all aligned behind those rocks and that watch; they make us feel superior too, by association. I'm always thankful when she wears them.

The phone rang. "Bell Captain, this is Kasumi," she said. "1127? How many bags? Light away."

"Front!" She yelled.

Madison stepped up and wrote the number down. "How many?"

"Two bags," Kasumi said.

Madison rolled his eyes. "It's going to be a long day," he said, before striding toward the Main elevators.

"Any word from Jimmy?" I asked Kasumi.

"No. I don't understand what he doing. He make me mad."

"Maybe something's not right. Maybe--"

"No. Jimmy fine. He playing games, I know him."
The word was that she and Jimmy used to meet up in the elevators back in the old days—at least thirty years ago—when she was an elevator operator, full kimono and all. All the operators back then were Japanese women. She's stout now, sort of waddles stiffly, legs spread wide when she walks, but I bet she was great looking back then. It must have been tough for her and Jimmy, what with all those clothes on, and frequent stops. Pretty thrilling though. Del told me they also used to leave notes for each other in the crack on the third floor—love notes, coordinating rendezvous spots and times, things like that. He said all the guys knew it was their message center but respected their privacy anyway.

Now Kasumi's head Bell Captain, which means she runs the joint more than George does, at least as far as our pockets are concerned. As Romios puts it, she cuts the bread thick or thin, it's her knife. Get on her wrong side and she can ruin your day.

"Young lady," La-la said to me in that nice Sri Lankan accent. Guests always thinks he's from India, which irritates the hell out of him. "Come here, please."

"Hey Lal, your buttons are looking kind of tight there, old man," I said as I patted his barrel chest.

"I caught me a big salmon yesterday. Cooked it up with chiles and curry spices over rice. Sat cross-legged on my floor with no clothes on and ate it up with my hands. Ha!"

"Christ, La-la, what a picture. How come you had to tell me that? I don't want to think about your naked body."
"Because, you should go fishing with me next week out at the Farallones. Come on, child, let's go. You've got nothing better to do."

"Maybe. I got so sick last time, though."

"That's because you didn't drink any whisky. If you drink the whole time you'll be fine."

"Oh, yeah," I said.

Booze, fishing and horses, that's La-la's life. Doesn't save a penny. If he lost this job he'd be on the street in no time. I caught his head last year before it hit a shelf in checkroom B during some kind of alcoholic seizure. He never drinks at work though, which he's quite proud of. He says he's got nobody, laughs as he says it. Says he'll die in that little shit hole apartment building up the street where all the drag whores hang out, and nobody will know it for days. I say that's not true, that we'd know, but he just laughs at me.

Jimmy got him this job twenty-seven years ago. They were standing next to eachother at the track, Bay Meadows I think it was, and Lal had just lost big time on some long shot. Jimmy had done pretty well in the same race.

"Holy Christ, I'm in the gutter now!" Lal had yelled and laughed hard.

Jimmy looked over at La-la and said, "Sorry to hear that, man. That was pretty sweet for me."

They got to talking. Maybe it was that Jimmy felt a little guilty about his own good luck, or that somehow he knew La-la wasn't kidding about the gutter. More likely, it was because that was just Jimmy's way.
But for whatever reason, he handed Lai a slip of paper with his name and the hotel's address on it.

"You show up there tomorrow," Jimmy told him. "Maybe I can help grease some wheels. All right, partner?"

EVERYBODY MADE MORE than me off those Lumbermen that day. I saw it coming. A dollar here, two bucks there. The lousy tips didn't get to me nearly as much as what went with them: "Are you sure you got that, sweetheart?" and, "Oh no, that one's too big for you. I'll carry it." One guy just laughed when he opened his door and saw me there with my hand truck. Then he said to his buddy in the bathroom, "Hey Bob, come here, check it out: a girl hop!" Such a card. I just closed my eyes for a moment and then walked past him to the two suitcases near the beds. On my way out I smiled at him and said to myself, Get the fuck out of my way.

I worked over-time until three o'clock when everybody else finished too. We'd been too busy for lunch breaks, so after we punched out we all headed to the Library. I raced Yo-Yo down the stairs and then through the long cement hallway to the cafeteria entrance. Yo was yelling like a racing announcer: "Now it's Potatohead Mahoney out front, oh, but here comes Groucho Ramirez. He's in front by nothing but a bellman's button..."

Esma, the head cook, was working the line when we all showed up. She'd been down in the catacombs of that hotel for maybe thirty-five years, breathing all that bad air, and boy did she look like she could use some sunshine. Two years ago she had had an inexpensive, and very
bad, face lift. That, combined with her false lashes made her look like an aged mannequin. Her hair was heavily sprayed and the little cook's bonnet--almost like a nurses cap--was bobby-pinned far off to the side. She's from Brazil. Our lockers are near one another and so we often chat, half naked. She's told me stories about her younger days as a Carnival dancer. I have a feeling they're not true, but I don't care; they're still good stories.

"Lady, I want eggs, please," La-la said to her.

"Eggs? What time do you think it is, you old pack mule. It's roast beef today or lasagna."

"Don't give me any lip. Or I'll come around and do it myself. Fold you up like a garment bag if you don't show me some respect."

Esma turned around to the griddle and poured a full ladle of grease on to it, then cracked three eggs into the spreading puddle, ranting in Portuguese the whole time.

No wonder Jimmy, George, and Cliffty have all had bypass surgery. All three of them have hoisted up their pant legs and forced me to examine the long scars running up their calves, along the inside of their knees and on up. The veins that were once there are now somewhere closer to their hearts, doing what I'm not sure. They show them off like war scars. Jimmy even unbuttoned his shirt one night at Lefty's and showed me where doctors cracked his sternum and opened him wide. "Just like a chicken," he had said.

We found a table in the center of the room. The Library was crowded and loud. Pockets of Mandarin, Tagalog, Spanish and English
all banging up against each other. Everyone cordoned off by language.
The room sounded like a bad symphony warming up.

"Yo, is that mayonnaise you're slathering all over your lasagna?" I said.

"No, it's whipped cream. Of course, what do you think?" He took a spoonful and dumped it on my plate. "Try it."

"That's disgusting. And you're Mr. Restaurant? This could ruin your reputation. I've got something on you now, boy. Take me out to dinner or else I'll tell the concierge that you're nothing but a low-class eater like the rest of us. He'll never get you free dinner passes again."

"Yes he will because he wants to sleep with me," Yo said. "But, play your cards right, and maybe, just maybe I'll wine and dine you." He looked at me from the corner of his eyes, and grinned.

I couldn't believe it, but that grin made my heart flutter. I quickly looked down and stared at the blob of mayonnaise.

"You don't deserve to walk on the same side of the street with her you fuzzball," Del said.

"I wish the fog would roll in," George said.

"Hey Boss, I got an idea. I think we ought to go out looking for Jimmy. I really do," La-la said. He was looking over his glasses at George across the table. George had three glasses of milk in a row at the top of his tray. He picked up one and downed it before saying, "What do you mean?"

"I mean we take a car and we go to all his stomping grounds—the track, every god damned jazz joint in town, every one of his bars. Maybe even the opera, since he's taken to that lately too. We talk to
everybody—every bookie, bartender and whore—until we find that son of a bitch and bring him home."

We all stared at La-la.

A grin slowly spread across George's face. He looked at Del who raised his eyebrows and shrugged. "Not a bad idea at all. Let's go find the bastard. He might be having fun without us."

"I'm in," Yo-Yo said.

"Me too. I want to go," I said. My heart was racing.

"Oh, no. No way. Stay home and iron your clothes, woman," Del said.

Under the table I dug my heel into the top of Pete's right foot.

"All right, baby, all right," he said, and patted my face.

"We can take my car," Romios chimed in.

I pictured the five of us packed into his 1958 aqua convertible Chevy, our hair fanned out in the wind, getting tangled and wild.
JIMMY REA LLY DID resemble an old, wrinkled, stooped-over Humpty Dumpty, his face droopy like a fallen cake, but there was a regalness about him that rubbed on the rest of us, dignified our lives too in some way. I met him my first day on the job. I hadn't known I was actually going to work the floor that day so I'd worn low heels, instead of work shoes. They had jerry-rigged a uniform for me, some old bellman's who had been a lot rounder and with shorter legs than mine. I found out later he'd been found in bed with a room attendant up on the 12th floor and had gotten nixed for it.

I showed up at the Bell desk looking like a geek—flooded pants, huge jacket and black pumps. All the guys gathered around. I didn't have the nerve to look any of them in the eyes.

Kasumi was behind the desk with an angry look on her face. "What you doin'?" she said. "They not tell you working today?" I shook my head and smiled as if everything were absolutely perfect.

Nicko, that old lech, walked up to me, took my hand, looked me up and down, puffed up his chest and then said in his thick Greek
accent, "Hello my lady, how are you. Such a beautiful girl for a bellman. Why?" I kept smiling, my face so tight I don't think I could've spoken if I'd wanted to.

The other guys circled around me, some with their arms crossed, heads tilted to the side as if calculating my weight. They made quiet jokes, snickered, said "Welcome aboard," things like that, and then wandered back to their spots around the lobby. Done with me for the time being.

Jimmy, on the other hand, never left his post to gawk at "the girl." He remained standing in front of one of the fat black marble pillars, one leg out in front of the other, hands clasped behind his back, the way, I'd soon come to learn, he always stood. After a while I wandered over and stood next to him.

"Must be Katie Mahoney," he said, looked at me from the side and extended his hand. I shook it. "Never mind the boys. Just excited, little jealous, maybe. You just do your work, don't listen to the young ones."

Behind him a group of young Japanese sat around a table smoking. They all had Micky and Mini Mouse sweatshirts on. No one was talking. The cloud of smoke above their heads hung motionless as if waiting for orders.

The next day Jimmy began calling me Katie Maude. I never did find out where he got that from. He and the other old timers--George, Romios, La-la, sometimes Pete--watched out for me for the first couple of months, making sure the young guys didn't try to steal my fronts or jump me when my number was up.
One time one of the guys, Madison I think it was, accused me of jumping him. I'd just delivered some bags to a tower room and was walking over to stand post when a woman with a large shoulder bag approached me with a fin in her hand and said, "Taxi, please, girl." I turned to call for the front bellman, but she cut me off. "No. I want you. I've never had a girl bellhop, and believe me honey, there's not much I haven't had." She laughed a raspy smoke-laugh that fit the rest of her: rich but gawdy. We walked out to the front of the hotel together side by side, which doesn't happen much; usually people make sure they're a few steps ahead or way behind, enforcing the class line even if they're nothing but insurance conventioneers from Cincinnati.

When I got back, Madison lit into me. "Smooth Mahoney, very smooth. You come across so fuckin' innocent, little goody two shoes, but I see what you're up to." He went on like that. I stumbled through trying to defend myself, sounding more guilty with each phrase.

Then Jimmy was in Madison's face, hands on hips, his face and body transformed from a sack of flour to someone with muscle, someone not to be messed with.

"You little heiena, you wouldn't know an honest act if it bonked you on the noggin'. Now you go back to your pen before I stick a passifier in your mouth. You catch me?"

Madison didn't say anything. He was easily a foot taller than Jimmy and he stared at the top of Jimmy's balding head as if a message was written there, then slowly backed up, his skinny chest puffed out absurdly.
Jimmy's hands dropped off his hips in a tired way, then he turned to me, said, "I saw, Katie Maude. You did right," and walked back to his post.

That was the year of the strike. (Info on strike, what year, what unions participated, impact on city, characterization of Jimmy through it, and other old timers.)

NOTHING HAPPENED FOR a while. No joy rides, no sign of Jimmy. It was Del who finally got things going again, though that's not what he'd had in mind. We tended to be that way; forgetful of what was important. I'm not sure why that was, why we all just seemed to get up and go to work, play the hustle, marry ourselves to the routine of our lives. I liked to think I was different but I wasn't. Sometimes, lying in bed in the middle of the night, I saw a pack of scared old people regardless of our age, whose bodies were calcifying from lack of mobility. The same movements day in and day out: riding the train to work, walking up the same streets, punching the clock, standing in the same position for hours at a time. Walking those hallways over and over. I'm surprised we haven't worn those hotel rugs out just us bellmen. We liked to pretend we were different, autonomous and independent, a roving bunch not beholden to any clock, no hotel management, not even the union. The fantasy that, unlike everyone else, no one owned us. But that was just the story we told ourselves to get up in the morning, and walk out that hotel side door after work and not feel like useless people. You make up pride where you have to, and
then keep manufacturing it to keep you from diving or falling off the lie of your life.
Crossing Over

Gifford moved from the sink to the freezer and pulled out two chicken pot pies. Lael, his sister, would arrive soon for dinner, her usual self-invited night over. Earlier that day on the phone she'd said, "We must talk, my dear. Things are afoot. Embers in the fire, if you know what I mean. I think this is it this time."

Lael wore capes and long flowing shawls that flapped dramatically behind her when she walked. Recently she'd henna'd her wavy hair carrot orange, and when she drank too much she spoke in a stilted old English accent. Gifford thought she looked like a palm reader these days. Just another phase. In the late '60's she'd been Native American: huge squash blossom necklaces, turquoise rings, hip huggers with zippers the length of a wooden match. She'd even ironed her hair straight and dyed it black. Then came the lounge singer look. When she met Billy, her husband-the-postman, she took on a dowdy housewife appearance for a while, bought a blonde wig that dipped and curled like Doris Day's. Gifford found it hard to believe they were of the same gene pool, had sprung from the same womb, a mere year apart.

The 'embers in the fire' had to be Lael's latest set-up. One of the few things which gave her life both ballast and drive was her mission to
find Gifford a mate. He'd had lost count of how many there had been, what names went with which faces. Dotty-Mary-Susan-June-Francie and so on, had all merged into one long disappointing and indistinct date. Veal parmesan sat on the same plate with chicken fried steak and Mongolian beef; Five Easy Pieces faded into Rambo II.

What he did remember were small, slightly odd details: June, the grammar school secretary, obsessed with African violets. LuAnn, in gold sandals, each toenail painted a different color. He had watched her wiggle them, her feet up on the dashboard of his pick-up, as they sat staring at the ducks peddling around Madrone Lake. He remembered wondering whether he was supposed to be turned on by those toes or not. He wasn't. Susie had shown up at Gino's Italian Restaurant in a short, red leather skirt which made strange crackling noises every time she crossed and uncrossed her legs under the dinner table.

She, he remembered more of. After dinner she had said in a slinky voice, "Let's go to the ocean."

They had driven out Coleman Valley Road to the long exposed beach just north of Bodega Bay where the swells rolled in at a perfect ninety degrees and huge piles of silver driftwood fringed its upper reaches. They parked, and stared at the ocean for a while. Then Susie said, without turning toward Gifford, "Do you have a blanket?" There was something odd about her tone of voice, like someone trying to mask boredom.

"Just a work tarp in the back," he had said. Then she turned to him and smiled, and he saw for the first time the tiredness in her face.
She patted his hand, then pulled the door handle and walked toward the beach.

He followed, the folded tarp tucked under his arm, and thought, Remember everything, Gifford, everything little thing, because this it. He stopped and looked around, took a deep breath. The wind was blowing hard and smelled like dead seaweed. He looked back at the piles of driftwood and pictured himself there sitting on his favorite log. When he got to Susie she was facing the ocean, her arms crossed, shoulders hunched, bouncing slightly, like someone waiting for a ride. He spread out the tarp and she lay down immediately. He stood over her and for a brief moment she reminded him of a landed fish. She stretched her arms up to him. He was neither excited nor nervous, not even scared; in fact all he felt when she said, "Come on, baby," and he kneeled down and slowly lay on top of her, was pity.

It was when she unsnapped and unzipped his trousers that it hit him, as if a knock at the back of his head. He leaned up on his palms, arms locked, like someone about to do push-ups, a look of shocked comprehension on his face. There was something in the way she handled his pants--too practiced, too smooth and efficient--combined with the boredom in her voice that told him this was her profession. He saw his sister Lael at home picturing that beach scene, imagining the whole act, a satisfied smile across her face. He saw her shell out the money to this woman, give her a few details about Gifford's situation. "Now remember," she'd say, "Gifford's shy and untouched, so go slow..." Gifford looked down at Susie's face. She was impossible to read, beautifully concealed.
He stood up. The wind was blowing even harder now, and when he said, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry," he could almost see the words whip and swirl away down the beach. Then he turned and ran. About thirty yards away he stopped, turned around and ran back. "Here," he said and dropped his keys on to the tarp. "Get yourself home. It's not personal."

Then he was running again, hard, down near the shore break where the sand was firm and his feet made hollow thumps when they hit. It wasn't that he was running from her or Lael, or out of fear, but just running in the hopes that maybe it would do something, relieve him somehow, the way a scream or breaking a bottle against a wall can.

"NO MORE LAEL. I've had enough for a while." Gifford watched her break her chicken pot pie apart and spread it all over the plate. Suddenly it looked as if someone had stepped in it. She carefully pulled the peas aside with her fork and formed them into a pile. Steam rolled up and fogged her glasses.

"Gifford, listen to me. Don't be so stubborn. I'm telling you, you've got to be assertive, even aggressive about this stuff. You have to create it." Lael had moved on to the cubes of carrots, herding them into a pile next to the peas. Gifford was sure she had been reading those kinds of self-help books lately about getting what you want out of life, and all that.

"Lael, I'm fine."

"No. You're not fine, Gifford. What are you going to do, just be with your precious little fruit trees the rest of your life?"
Gifford wished he believed in God so that he could say right then, "God's will," to his busybody sister. But instead he said, "No. I need a break."

"Well, you can't have a break yet because I've already set it up. Her name is Vanja. She's foreign."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean she's from the Iron Curtain, somewhere over there," Lael said, waving her hand dismissively.

"There is no Iron Curtain anymore, Lael, Jesus."

"Well, you know what I mean. One of those Slavic war-torn countries that's been all broken up. Anyway, you're going out to dinner--the Red Rooster, then who knows?" She flashed her big white teeth at Gifford then went back to dissecting her dinner.

"Why are you doing this?" he asked.

"Why? Because I love you, that's why. Because I'm your big sister and you're my little brother. Why do you think?"

"No, I mean that, why are you messing with your food like that?"

"Oh. Proper digestion, Gifford," she said, stabbing a pea onto each tine of her fork.

Gifford knocked his boots against the face of each step as he walked up to the back porch. At the door, he reached down and wiped the dirt from his hands along the cuffs of his jeans. While leaning down he noticed a hole at the bottom of the screen door and one too in the toe of his boot, revealing the steel underneath, shiny and clean, and he felt
oddly naked because of it. Then he went inside and washed his hands at the kitchen sink.

The day had a mean clarity to it, the kind of light that only comes in the dead of winter after a hard storm. It was the sort of day Gifford felt he should be happy to be out in but wanted to hide from instead. All afternoon out in the orchard he hadn't been able to adjust to the glare, squinting until his cheek muscles were exhausted. His apple, pear and kumquat trees, stripped and gray for the winter, looked like skeletons to him. He felt surrounded by them, oppressed.

At the sink, he rubbed his hands together, watching the brown water swirl down the drain. Then he spread them out on the bottom of the sink as wide as they would go. He locked his elbows and stared down at them. They were good hands; rough and muscled, the fingers cracked and callused at the tips and along the sides where they had rubbed along the handles of tools. Not the flimsy hands of people who stayed indoors, the kind you could fold in half like a piece of bread if you weren't careful with your handshake.

But Gifford didn't feel pride. In fact he was ashamed of them; they lacked sexuality. This wouldn't have mattered had he not felt the same way about the rest of his body, but it was a package, all together a neon sign of the truth. Even now at the age of forty-four, he was still unable to look back and make sense of what had happened, or rather, what had not. There was no clearly laid-out chain of events, no cataclysmic moment that had sent him unalterably along this path. What he could see, was that over the years he'd taken full possession of what he had unintentionally become--a virgin in the middle of his life. He no
longer imagined it as a temporary state easily let loose of, but rather
something he'd have to extricate with care from his make-up, like an
undesirable birth mark or faulty organ.

He went upstairs to shower for his date with Vanja. In the
bathroom he stood naked before the mirror. He turned to the left, then
the right, struck a few poses as if in casual conversation with someone,
pretended to shake hands. He imagined himself relaxed, loose, but all
he saw was tightness and restriction; a body that had never released
itself through a storm of sex with another human being. Sure, he took
care of himself every few days in the mornings but that was only an
isolated moment of relief, a stay of sorts, certainly nothing profound
enough to change body language. Occasionally he'd get up right away
afterward and stand at the mirror in the bathroom looking for
alterations. He'd see small things--the flush in his cheeks, a softness
around the mouth, certain glassiness in his eyes--but he could practically
watch all that fade. The way his muscles slid awkwardly over his bones
and how the bones themselves moved stiffly in the joints, made him
imagine every cell in his body holding a tiny breath.

GIFFORD RANG THE buzzer to Vanja's apartment, which sat over
Hersh's vacuum repair service down town. A dense fog had settled in;
the moisture was comforting against his face. Gifford heard foot steps
clapping heavily down a flight of wooden stairs behind the door.
Sounds like she might weigh more than I do, he thought. Then the door
was open and a tall, lean, big-boned woman with hair the color of
redwood bark was standing in front of him smiling, her eyes set at the floor.

"You must be Cifford," she said with a 'C'.
"Hello, Vanja." Gifford already felt tired.
"You can call me Valerie--more American."
"But Vanja's so much nicer," he said.
"Whatever. I am ready."

Their talk over dinner was awkward, like the rest of Gifford's first dates, compounded by Vanja's broken English and strong accent, but Gifford felt surprisingly relaxed. Perhaps it's her foreignness, he thought. She ordered prime rib and ate like she'd never tasted anything so good. When the waiter stopped by she gently touched his arm and said, "Horseradish?" When he came back with a small ramekin of it, she scooped it out onto her plate, handed the ramekin back, and said, "More?" He looked at her out the corners of his eyes before heading back toward the kitchen.

Gifford kept asking her about where she was from--the city of Zagreb--and she kept answering vaguely and then turning the conversation around to him. He found himself talking about the grafting of fruit trees.

"I've got one tree at home that's got Gravensteins, Pippins and MacIntosh all in one," he'd said, unable to hide the pride in his voice.
"You are like a magician," she said.

"Nothing like that. It's all in the cambium layer of the plant, its life-sustaining tissue, where, if everything is compatible, cells intermingle and eventually interlock to form new cambium tissue." He
realized he might be boring her, but he rarely talked about his work, certainly not on a date, and he felt strangely exhilarated by it.

"It's really quite a mystery why some take and some don't. But when they do it's usually with a vengeance. Sometimes the scion is inserted into a cut in the stock plant, sometimes bark is pulled back and cambium tissue is laid face to face. Whatever, the union has to be perfect, and their juices have to flow perfectly together. It's very much--"

Gifford stopped and looked down at his food. Suddenly, everything sounded like sexual innuendo, subliminal hot talk. He had no bearings at all in this regard. Was it or wasn't it? Was he so desperate, so preoccupied, that he could do it without even knowing? He felt himself spiraling inward, thoughts imploding in on themselves like little pillow lavas hitting the sea, and inside there was nothing, nothing but his own loneliness, a sham of a life, a pathetic, sex-starved...

"Cifford?"

He looked up. Vanja was leaning toward him across the table. He hadn't noticed before how pale blue her eyes were. Like the waters in a Tahiti vacation ad, he thought.

"You went away," she said.

"Dessert?" he said with forced enthusiasm.

AFTER DINNER THEY drove to the lake, not because he thought something might happen physically--necking in the car--but because he liked the tranquillity, and entertained a quiet hope that sitting in the cab of his truck watching the light on the water or listening for fish
breaking the surface of the lake, might reveal something unspoken between two people, something already in the air that just needed silence to make tangible. It was a hope, he realized, which probably had little do with the way the world worked.

"It is so quiet," Vanja said, "but there is so much moving around out there. Don't you think?"

Gifford turned toward her. He watched himself memorize her profile and didn't know why he was doing it. The slope of her forehead to the bridge of her nose was graceful and soft, and her skin was a thin, bluish white like skim milk. She's beautiful, he thought, in a sad kind of way.

"Yes. Lots of night life going on," he said.

"It reminds me of the town of Split, where my parents had a summer cabin. Sometimes the ocean was so calm it could be a lake. Just little waves hitting the shore like soft kisses. There is almost nothing left of the town now. They blew it up. It was very old. Poof, just like that." She didn't turn to face him. He watched her mouth; it seemed heavy, drooping at the edges.

"Maybe we could have some coffee," Gifford said.

"Yes, we could do that," she said, still staring out at the lake.

HE UNLOCKED THE door and then held it open for her. The house was dark and cold. Vanja stepped in and he rushed past her, turning on lights all the way to the kitchen, then flipping the heat on as far as it would go. In the kitchen he turned on the oven to broil and opened its
door. He lived in an old farm house with high ceilings and poor insulation, but he rarely turned on the heat.

Vanja sat down at the kitchen table, her hands tucked between her legs and watched while Gifford ran around preparing coffee, putting cookies on a plate. He was nervous again, felt boxed in by the walls of his own house, and ill-equipped to make someone feel comfortable there. And everything suddenly looked so dirty too, covered with a thick layer of dust.

"Did you grow up here in this house?" Vanja asked.

Gifford was at the sink and said, "No," without turning around.

"Where are your trees?"

Gifford turned and looked at her. For a moment he didn't know what she meant. "Oh. My orchard. Just right out back. They're bare now, nothing to look at."

She got up and began walking the perimeter of the room, examining whatever she came across as if in a museum. Gifford watched her skirt gently swaying, imagined the shape of her hips. Then she turned to him and said, "Yes, it's winter." She smiled. Gifford thought he saw patience and mockery both. He realized she was trying to make him more comfortable in his own house. He turned back around and poured water through the coffee pot. He could hear her picking things up and putting them back down. "You are a man who does not move things around very often," she said.

They drank coffee at the kitchen table. Vanja clutched her cup with both hands, and ate most of the cookies Gifford had laid out. This time it was she who tried to get information out of him, asking about his
childhood, Lael, more about his trees. He answered curtly, not quite rude but not far from it either. His chest was constricted, and beads of sweat had formed around his hairline, tickling him, but he didn't dare wipe them away. When he spoke it sounded to him as if his voice was somewhere far off in a box or down a well, remote. He couldn't tell whether Vanja had noticed his anxiety or not. He imagined himself a small boy again hanging from a rope swing over Three Pools Creek, where Brennan Jones had drowned the summer before. Others boys on the bank are yelling Jump! but all Gifford can see is Brennan's face under the green murky water among the rocks and craw dads, silt settling over his eyes, inside his nose and ears. Gifford hangs there until the rope stops swinging, then climbs down one knot at a time, defeated but alive.

"You play cards?" Vanja asked, raising her eyebrows.

He looked at her across the small table and for a moment it seemed as if she were only inches away, her face soft, eager. He almost thought he could smell her breath, almost feel the hairs at the tips of their noses touching.

"No," he said and got up from the table, went to the sink and began washing his cup. The finality of that word seemed to fill the room, and forged a distance between them that allowed Gifford a breath.

He sensed her presence before she actually touched him. Perhaps it was her perfume or the smell of her hair that triggered his knowing, though he thought it was the heat he felt at his back as she came close and rested her hand on top of his on the counter. Neither of them
moved. Gifford looked down at their hands and imagined hers reaching through his skin to bone. He couldn't remember the last time someone had touched him. He spread his fingers wide and she tucked hers in between them.

"I'll take you home," he said in a whisper, his eyes closed.

"All right. That is okay, too," she said.

HE WAITED TWO days before he called her again. Then they went fishing.

It was a crisp winter day, the ocean placid. Gifford's small, leaky aluminum skiff already had two inches of water sloshing in it by the time they rounded Bodega Head. Vanja wore Gifford's high rubber boots and a thick wool skirt. He was charmed by that—how unAmerican it was. He wondered whether she even owned a pair of trousers. Maybe he would buy her her first pair of Levi's, he thought. He showed her how to tie on the hook and the spark plugs he used as weights, and how to jab the hook through the eye of the anchovy, swing it around and then through the flesh between the gills. She grimaced when she poked the eye, but did exactly what he'd shown. "You'll lose it otherwise," he said.

They motored north, stopping at the openings of small coves and other places where Gifford knew there were submerged clusters of rocks. Cormorants and brown pelicans flew overhead, and the sun sent sparkles across the water. Vanja caught four fish, a large ling cod, two cabezons and a green rockfish. Gifford caught a small flounder, which he threw back, but not before showing Vanja how one of its eyes had
migrated over to the other side of its body as it transformed into a flat
bottomed fish. "No," she said, "You are tugging my leg." He just
shook his head and smiled.

When she caught her first fish, she let out a small squeal and said
something in her own language. Gifford said, "Beginner's luck."

He took the fish from her, laid it on the cross seat between his
legs and dove the knife down into the top its head. It flapped twice and
then stopped. When he looked up at Vanja, her head was turned sharply
to the right away from him as if avoiding what he'd just done. When
she turned back around, she forced a smile. "Don't want them to
suffer," he said, and she nodded.

They didn't talk much the whole day, but the silences seemed
natural to Gifford, the way they can be, he thought, with people who've
known one another a long time. Back at the cove where Gifford kept
his skiff chained to a driftwood log, he cleaned the fish and threw the
entrails back into the ocean. Vanja walked along the edge of the shore
break, bending down every few feet to examine something, or dig in the
sand. At one point she squatted, facing the ocean, her elbows resting on
each knees, arms hanging loosely. She stayed like that for some time
and Gifford watched.

Driving back over the ridge in his truck, Gifford told her he had
an old refrigerator he'd converted into a smoker, and that if she wanted
he'd smoke her fish for her. "That would be nice," she said, "But let's
eat one tonight, yes?" Gifford looked at her. Her hair had curled at the
ends from the moist salt air and her cheeks were flushed.

"Yes," he said.
THEY NEVER GOT to eating the fish. In the kitchen Vanja was washing lettuce, Gifford filleting the cabezon on the counter next to her, when he suddenly dropped the knife, ran his hands under the water and grabbed Vanja's, which still held a head of romaine. His grasp was frantic at first and then he softened his grip, caressed her hands gently. She let go of the lettuce, leaned toward him and tucked her head under his chin. Her hair smelled liked the ocean, and he felt his heart pounding against her cheek.

They walked upstairs like that, hand in hand, not speaking, the stairs creaking violently with each step.

THEY DIDN'T LEAVE Gifford's house for four days, except to get a few groceries. He thought he would remember everything, that the loss of his virginity would occur as if in slow motion, every detail sharp in his mind. Instead it seemed to him that he and Vanja were underwater, everything blurred, distorted, the borders delineating his body from hers fading out.

That first night they had laid on the bed in the dark holding hands for a long time, not speaking, fully clothed. Then she reached over and ran her hand across his chest under his shirt.

"You are so smooth," she had said.

He sat up on one elbow and touched her as if he were blind and she were something delicate to decipher.

The next morning he found the bullet hole scar on her upper arm. It was large, about the size of a quarter and slightly oblong. It was still
pink, not yet white or hard with age. On the back side of her arm was a similar scar but smaller, where the bullet had exited. When he rubbed his thumb on it, she tensed slightly; he could feel her stomach stiffen against his. She had a strange look on her face: fearful and angry both. He kissed her neck, her shoulder, and when he got to the scar he put his mouth all the way around it and sucked it hard as if it were a snake bite and he was saving her life. She stroked the back of his neck and he felt her chest shudder with each wave of tears. He didn't ask her why; there were plenty of reasons to cry, he thought.

He lost track of how many times they had made love in those four days, but it seemed a lifetime since he'd been a virgin. For so long he'd imagined the gulf between his life and one which included sex to be immense and uncharted, a very long journey. But that wasn't the case at all; it was immediate, simple. As much as he'd wanted to lose his virginity, he'd guarded it over the years as if it were sacred, which now seemed absurd. He'd been a pauper holding on to a cheap trinket.

He felt he couldn't get enough of her body and yet he was struck by how little his desire for her had to do with sexual need. He liked to lie on top of her or visa versa and make it so all parts of their bodies—palms, arms, legs, the inside of feet—met perfectly, as if a reflection. He couldn't help but see them as two cambium tissues joining, he the root stock, she the scion, though perhaps the other way around, too. He was slightly ashamed of this imagining, but figured it was harmless.

THEY WERE IN the kitchen fixing eggs and pancakes for dinner one night when Lael called. Gifford let the answering machine get it.
"Gifford, are you there? Pick up the phone. Giiiffford...Hells bells, where are you? Look I might have another lined up. She's very cute, petite, and she likes to garden, petunias and snap dragons mostly, but still. I'm assuming it didn't work out with Vinga or whatever her name was, or else you'd have called me, right? Okay, honey, give me a jingle."

Gifford looked at Vanja and winced. She was cracking eggs into a bowl. She raised her eyebrows and looked at Gifford.

"It's not me," he said and put his palms up in defense.

Vanja smiled. "Your sister, I think she is all by herself."

"She's married, for Christ's sake."

She shrugged as if what he'd said was irrelevant.

A half hour later, Lael called back.

"Gifford, are you screening me? You better not be. Jesus, I'm probably your only call of the day. You should be in by now. Call me, damn it."

Gifford thought she sounded a little desperate but he was enjoying the fact that for the first time he had a good reason not to call her.

"I hope you don't do that to me some day," Vanja said.

It was the word 'someday' that caught him. It had such a far away sound to it, a hint of longevity. He pictured a huge distance, an ocean's worth, between now and someday. He and Vanja in a sailboat, traveling about, catching fish, making love out in the sun, cooking snapper Veracruz. He had never imagined a someday in relation to another person; a Macintosh sapling grafted to a Red Delicious maybe, but not a human being.
After dinner they went back upstairs to bed. Gifford was beginning to get all kinds of funny ideas about sex; fantasies, that is, were taking shape, or rather thawing out inside him, and no one could have been more shocked than he. He wanted to be over-taken, and to over-take; he thought about different places in the house, outside, in the car; imagined different outfits, even. None of these had been acted out yet, but he could feel them mounting inside him. They struck him as a series of little inevitabilities, part of what it meant to finally join the land of the sexed. He was nothing but a child in this regard and he rather liked that image of himself in the midst of so much adventure.

One of those pictures was forming in his mind when they went upstairs after dinner. They had been cuddling under the covers, the sheet over their heads. Gifford asked Vanja what she liked, what she thought about when she was by herself. She didn't understand him at first and then he said, "You know, different kinds of sex." She laughed nervously and then said she didn't know. He kept at her and finally she said again, "I don't know, I just like to make love, that is all." Gifford took that to mean she was open-minded, willing. She was European, after all; he had heard stories, seen foreign movies. They were less inhibited over there.

He kissed Vanja tenderly at first, as he had been doing all along, then he slowly grew more rough. He bit her ear, kissed her hard, thrusting his tongue in her mouth. He spread her arms above her head, parted her legs wide too. He asked her to hold on to the sides of the bed. When he entered her he didn't wait for her, but penetrated deeply, quick, hard movements. Vanja's eyes were closed, her head turned to
the right. She let him go for a while then took her hand and stroked his back slowly as if to calm him. But he didn't want calming. He put her arm back where it had been, and said, "Hold on."

He didn't want to temper his movements. His hands were gripped around Vanja's wrists and he could hear in the distance, as if down a long hallway, himself grunting and moaning, and he thought, Yes, this is right. Finally. I'm allowed this, I'm allowed this...He could hear Vanja's voice even farther away saying, "Cifford, Cifford," and he thought those words, the tone of her voice, were all part of it.

Then Vanja slammed her forehead against his and he opened his eyes. She dropped her head back on to the bed. Their eyes locked and he finally saw her. Her face was red and tears ran down her temples. He collapsed on top of her, as if he could no longer sustain the weight of his desire, and buried his face in her neck. He stroked her cheek with the back of his hand, reached up, pulled her arms down and placed them across his back in the shape of a hug, but they lay there limp. He didn't dare say he was sorry, didn't want to fill the room up with the hollowness of words.

Instead he kissed her forehead, her temples, pressed his cheek against hers. He imagined the two fleshy plains of their cheeks meeting perfectly, joining, vital information passing from one membrane to another. He felt her arms slowly come to life across his back and squeeze him. They fell asleep entangled as if they had made love. Somewhere in the middle of the night, he woke, pressed himself against her back and whispered repeatedly into the nape of her neck, "Please forgive me." Her breathing remained heavy with sleep.
Gifford stood at the mirror in the bathroom. Yellow morning light flooded into the room from the two windows at the foot of the bed. The sun was rising out of a low fog. He examined his body in the mirror, looking for signs of what had gone on the last four days. Maybe there was a looseness about him that wasn't there before, a sense that a deep breath had finally been exhaled, but it was subtle, probably only perceptible to him. Mostly he looked like the same old Gifford, muscled but wiry, slightly bow-legged and a little stooped.

He turned to Vanja who was sitting at the end of the bed. He was about to ask her what she wanted for breakfast, but stopped himself when he saw her face. She was staring out the window, her eyes far away, looking way beyond the orchard in the back, past the stand of redwood trees at the edge of the field, well beyond everything that could be seen. The light had hit her face but she wasn't squinting. Her hair was still in a chignon though a mess, most of it hanging down around her neck. A bathrobe hung loosely across her chest; Gifford could see the soft arc of her right breast.

He stood watching her for what seemed like a long time. If she was aware of his presence she gave no indication at all. Both of them were completely still. He tried to imagine where she had gone, what memories were flashing across her mind. Perhaps she left a lover back home, he thought. Maybe he died in that little coastal town she had talked about with such affection. Maybe she was thinking of others she'd lost over there. And of course there was last night, her arms above her head, his hands gripped around her wrists. He suddenly felt
the tremendous weight of all that he didn't know about her, perhaps never would. He'd never been close enough to feel the force of another person's past, didn't know anything about that kind of responsibility. He was disgusted by his own naive notion that sex was the hard part.

He quietly slipped on a pair of trousers and a shirt hanging on the back of the bathroom door, then went down stairs and out the back.

He stood for a long time in the middle of the orchard, then turned slowly around in a circle looking at all his trees. He knew them well, how old they were, where they were from, what genes they had running through them, how they would behave from season to season. He suddenly felt ashamed by how much he knew, how little else had been allowed in. He walked over to one of the trees and felt the joint where he had grafted on a branch the previous spring. It was slightly raised all the way around, the way blood can bulge and then harden around a wound.

Gifford pulled the branch down slowly; it was thin and flexible and so didn't rip at the joint until it was almost horizontal. He let go of it and it hung there, still attached by its young pale-green fibers. Gifford rubbed his finger across the broken joint. It was wet and cold. He pictured walking over to the shed, pulling out the saw and then building a bon fire with his razed orchard. It wouldn't burn well--the trees were still alive, after all--but that wouldn't much matter. Sweet apple smoke would burn his eyes, fill the air. He and Vanja would roast shish kebabs from long thin branches, drink straight from a bottle of chablis late into the night. He almost laughed aloud at the absurdity of the scene.
HE DIDN'T KNOW how long she'd been standing there behind him but he knew she was about four feet away. He could feel her, he was sure of it. He pulled the branch down to the trunk, then began to twist it to sever the stringy fibers. She didn't move. He didn't want to turn around, not yet. He wanted to believe she'd not walk away, that she'd wait right behind him until he turned. For a moment he felt certain of this too; something had happened, and they would now wait for each other in all kinds of ways. But there was so much to be wrong about, so much he didn't know. Still, he hesitated, indulging the moment. He pictured the expression on her face—warm, forgiving—her arms crossed around her waist, those tropical-blue eyes.
California is a tragic land—like Palestine, like every promised land

--Christopher Isherwood

Coming to Terms

I EASED MY TRUCK into the center turn lane just as it ran out of gas entirely. Cars and semis blasted by on both sides; their wakes hit my side windows like slaps in the face. Water washed down the windshield in sheets, then formed into tributaries, before being swept away by another small flash flood of rain. I glared up at the nickel slab of sky. In the distance the orange orb of a '76 station was slowly turning. Even it looked defeated by the weather.

I felt oddly comfortable in that center turn lane. There was nowhere for me to go; even getting out of the car was risky. At that moment I liked the idea of not having to act. A temporarily proscribed world. This was at a time in my life when I was utterly confused about how to move through the world, what kind of action to take, so even this small moment of stasis was a relief. I sat there for a while and thought about, of all things, longitudinal and latitudinal lines criss-crossing the globe. It wasn't too novel a thought, really: I ocean sailed a lot back then, often picturing places along that invisible planetary grid. In fact it had been the intersection of two of them that had brought me here to Bellingham, Washington, latitude 48, longitude 122.
The guise was college, but the truth was I had no interest in school, just liked where the town sat on a map: twenty miles from the Canadian border, up against Puget Sound, and about a thousand miles from where I grew up in California. I hadn't learned that ugly--and embarrassingly obvious--truth yet: that places always look better, or at least more interesting, on a map, and that the fascination with maps--at least for me then--had more to do with longing than real life.

It was October, 1979. When it wasn't pouring, the air was crisp, clear. And the maple trees were the color of red apples. Huge patches of hillside were aflame. I had never seen anything quite like it; I knew redwood, oak, cypress, madrone, Monterey and ponderosa pine. I collected hundreds of crimson leaves and sent them to various friends scattered about the country, as if no one else knew just how vibrant a fall season could be. But the longer I was there the more I found myself yearning for familiar landscape. It began with my nose, sniffing for familiar scents--salt air mixed with artemesia; the acid aroma of fermenting oak and bay leaves; most of all, the smell of the Pacific Ocean. I've only been around two other oceans in my life, the Atlantic and the Indian, but each has a very distinct smell, particular as body odor. And so too with Puget Sound. Despite it being essentially an inlet of the Pacific, it didn't smell or in anyway resemble the ocean I had grown up around. It was too placid, too predictable. Where was the winter surf that could knock you down and pull your shoes off before you could even cry help? And the fifteen foot swells that rolled in from halfway around the world and pulled the beaches off the land like sheets from a bed?
Finally, I stepped out of the truck and stood plastered to its side until I could find a break in the traffic. No one stopped for me. Once on the other side I found an attendant in the gas station office with his feet on the desk, reading a fishing magazine.

"Hey, can you help out. I'm out of gas right out there in the middle of the road," I said, pointing out at the rain.

"Sure, you bet, ma'am."

He dropped the magazine on the desk. I saw a photograph of a huge marlin hanging from a t-pole, with two men on either side of it, leis around their necks. We ran across the station's lot together. I darted across the street first, expecting him to be right behind me. When I got to the center lane and turned around he was still standing on the sidewalk, slowly shaking his head. I put my palms out to my sides as if to say, "What's the problem?" He cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled something, but the traffic and the rain were too loud. I yelled, "What?" back at him.

Then he yelled louder and enunciated each word carefully:
"You're from California - I can't help you out!"

I must've looked pretty silly standing there in the middle of that busy boulevard, my hair plastered to my face, my mouth a small oval of shock. Then I strung together every profane gesticulation I had ever seen in my life--thumb nail off the front tooth, back of my hand up and out from my neck and chin, left hand thrust into the corner of my right elbow, and of course, the bird. The guy just waved in a friendly way and walked back toward his little office and the waiting magazine.
THAT WAS FIFTEEN years ago, and my first experience with what I call California-hate. Now I could tell a similar story—even three or four—for every state I've lived or traveled in the West, which is pretty much all of them except Texas (which of course has its own image problems). Disliking California, or more frequently the myth of California, has been and remains the accepted--almost politically correct--prejudice in the West. There is little or no motivation to break it down; it serves certain purposes, gives shape to anger and frustration, releases people from responsibility. And, too, as with any stereotype there are certain truths to this myth, which all too often overshadow entirely the rest of the picture.

California was my first love and my first heartbreak. I haven't discussed this with enough people to know how common an occurrence this is--a place rather than a human being causing that first profound disappointment--but I'd bet it's equal to, or worse than, the more usual kind. The loss doesn't seem to ever go away, and for me hasn't been replaced by another similar kind of love of place.

My romance with California as a young person, was a love affair with land and water. That was the real California to me. I traveled all over the state, walked all through the mountains, winter and summer, learned to run rivers, dove and sailed and kayaked all along the coast. I had very little interest in anything else and certainly couldn't imagine ever leaving.

The other California—all that humanity and its manifestations—didn't interest me at all. And even now, though I miss the cultural chaos of the place, it is the land I pine for and which still draws me
back. Just recently I caught myself, while taking a break on a hike in the Rattlesnake Wilderness, imagining the emerald green of the hills along the coast where I grew up, the sage and coyote brush dropping down to the ocean, the deep burgundy of madrone bark after a rain.

My perfect little experience of California, however, was predicated on ignorance and some rather elaborate editing, and as I got older I realized the state was in pretty bad shape, changing at a rate even I couldn't ignore. At least that's how I perceived it from my narrow vantage point; the truth is that parts of California had been in bad shape for a long time. Change is California's middle name and has been since gold was discovered.

But back then (early to mid-seventies) it did seem as if a huge surge of growth took place, at least in northern California where I grew up. It seemed that overnight the Sierra Range was filled with people year round; Marin and Sonoma Counties became hip places for the wealthy to live; the foothills grew into bedroom communities for Sacramento commuters; and massive subdivisions began to carpet lovely rolling hills from Redding south. California was the most popular place in the country to move to. It was still considered great. Now one out of ten U.S. citizens live in California, not to mention those not fortunate enough to fall under such a classification, and the state is suffering terribly from this burden.

I see now that much of my anger and cynicism as a young person had their origins in the despoliation of California. I whined about what a ruined place it was, how corrupt human beings were, how environmental Armageddon was around the corner. No one could
deride more than I the condition of California. All I wanted to do was get out. My heart had been broken. Looking back on myself then, I see a girl, an expression on her face as if she'd eaten something acidic, glaring out at a world she already thought doomed.

My father told me around that time that I needed to come to terms with California, as he put it. He was afraid for me, afraid my cynicism would spill over to form my life. The bitterness I felt toward my home didn't make sense to him, he who'd come from a small, repressed town in Indiana, a place about which a misfit could really feel bitter, really learn the meaning of escape. Like so many, he fled to California. He was one of the many for whom California served as a kind of pilgrimage. For him it was a place of infinite possibility and liberation. His was a different sort of love affair, one which I think sustains him still. I'm sure back then he resented my indignance, found it to be a slight toward his own sense of priorities in life.

So, I listened to him and moved a thousand miles away to Bellingham, Washington. That was the only way I knew how to "come to terms" with the place. I hoped it would work. It didn't.

Over the last fifteen years I have left and returned to California more times than I care to count. Each time I've left it has been with the intention of never really going back. Okay, I say, this time I'll break free; the place won't hold power over me anymore. But it never works. I can't live there happily and yet I can't seem to really live anywhere else. I can't seem to let anywhere else become home.

I think I have a sense of what it is to feel exiled, to stand outside your home looking at it from a distance, longing for it. This all may
sound melodramatic and yet the feeling is palpable, and I'm sure I'm not
alone. Even now, when I drive across the state line into California, a
sharp sadness (and claustrophobia) settles over me and all I want to do is
turn around and go back to wherever I came from so I don't have to
feel that despair and loss. I've always envied those who've found--or
never left--the spot on the earth where they feel they belong.
Sometimes I think I should just go back and learn to live with it, go
down with the ship as it were, that that's really the right direction to
move. I believe it was Wendell Berry who said, "Unless you know
where you are, you don't know who you are." I don't much go in for
those sorts of absolutes, but I have a feeling he might be speaking the
truth to me.

THE ORIGINAL MYTH of California, up until recently, has been
rather positive: it was the place America (and the rest of the world for
that matter) could go to re-imagine itself, to discover and create lives
only thought possible in dreams. This ideal has been true in a more
limited sense for much of the West, of course, but as the writer Shiva
Naipaul said, "Fantasies always do best in a temperate climate," and the
original myth, the "California Dream", has been nothing if not about
fantasies, an extremely disparate mix of hopes and desires, whether
wealth or freedom or space or some other kind of "opportunity." Its
characteristics strike me as a sort of localized and concentrated version
of the myth of America and is predicated on the same powerful
symbiotic relationship: human desire and will.
Obviously the danger with beginnings such as this, is the self indulgence, greed, and disregard for others and the land that so often seems to attend that ambition for a kind of ultimate destiny. This has certainly been borne out in California. Now the state is seen by many (in the West at least) as the example--and exporter--(a woman from Portland told me last year that all the gangs in her city had driven up from California) of all kinds of social and environmental ills plaguing the country as a whole. The notion of the California Dream, though still alive for some, is now balanced, if not overshadowed, by all too familiar nightmarish images of racial strife, urban sprawl, polluted air and waterways, mazes of six-lane freeways packed bumper to bumper, and waves of immigrants flooding in like lemmings. This is the new myth of California, the new stereotype--free will, enterprise, and ingenuity gone awry; desires pursued to the point of excess.

But the real truth is that California is a difficult place to make sense of. For every generalization there are three or four which easily contradict the first. It is both exotic and remarkably ordinary, illusive and multi-layered, at once beautiful and grotesque, often entirely incomprehensible. It is a place so vast and diverse geographically, culturally, economically, even climatically, that to try to define or chart it would most likely only reveal one's ignorance or naïveté. The coast line is over twelve hundred miles long. If a line was drawn straight down the center it would equal the distance from Cape Cod, Massachusetts to Savanna, Georgia. England would fit into the state almost five times.
California is, above all else, a relative place. Those who feel comfortable making narrow generalizations about it either haven't lived there long enough or not in enough places, perhaps not at all. There seems to be, particularly among those outside the state, the need to define it, turn it into a known quantity, to mythologize it one way or another.

California is most often described by clichés and statistics: the bread basket of the nation, provider of fifty percent of the nation's produce; the land of nuts, fruitcakes and "new age" gurus; the place where anything is possible; movie stars and palm trees; whacko cults and homosexuals. California has the sixth largest GNP in the world. It leads the nation in suicide, library use, Nobel prize winners, solar energy, divorce. It spawned the hippies and the Hell's Angels but also Richard Nixon, and boasts the largest number of John Birch Society supporters. California has the largest number of state parks, is a mecca for environmental activism, and wiped out the Grizzly bear by 1927. The state tree is the Redwood, the tallest tree in the world, and has been cut down almost entirely. (They used to form a twenty mile wide, four hundred mile long belt from Oregon to Central California.) More people from California participated in the civil rights movements in the South than from any other state, and yet it also produced the Watts riots of '65 and the Rodney King tragedy in '92, to name only the most publicized events.

Paradoxes like these exist in all states, but perhaps in no greater quantity and extreme than in California.
TAKE FOR INSTANCE a trip from the northeast corner of California to the Mission District of San Francisco. Years ago I picked pine cones for seed for the Simpson Timber Company up around Mt. Lassen. Our crew was an odd mix of old hippies, latinos, and seasoned timbermen. I was the only woman. We'd work hard, twelve hour days and then go into the little town of Quincy and drink beer, play the juke box. We were scraggily and questionable looking to say the least. Sometimes the bar would fill up with ranchers, back to the landers, loggers, Hell's Angels types, cone pickers like us, and a few vacationers in clean pastel shirts and shorts. A strikingly diverse mix of people. Very California. Occasionally verbal fights would break out, maybe a drunken brawl, but mostly people got along or just ignored one another. After one of these pleasant nights at the bar, I was walking back to my truck and saw on a light blue Volkswagen Rabbit, a bumper sticker which read, "VIVA AIDS, VIVA SICKEL CELL ANEMIA." I stood for a long time staring at that obviously homemade piece of public hate mail. It made my heart hurt, made me ashamed of my neighbor. But I wasn't surprised either. Like many rural places, rural California suffers from the same social fears that so often seem to accompany relative isolation.

Two weeks later I drove down to San Francisco for a break. I decided to take the long way and head down 395, down along the east side of the Sierra Range and then over Tioga Pass to Yosemite, across the old sea bed of the Central Valley and into the city. In Bridgeport I ate a terrible burger in a log restaurant. It was a cool June evening; the smell of wet pine was strong in the air. The waitress asked me where I was going. "San Francisco," I said.
"Never been there," she said. "I try not to get over on the other side of the mountains much." I nodded and she walked away. I wonder now how that woman made sense of her state, how she situated it in her mind. I wish we had talked about it.

One can imagine being in many places other than California when traveling through the Owens Valley. For the most part it's populated by well-established, conservative, church-going ranching communities, though tourism is also a seasonal part of the economy. There seems to be a healthy suspicion of the "other side of the state," as the woman from Bridgeport put it, and why not? After all, the valley's water from the Owens River was tricked right out from under them by a few crafty businessmen and politicians in Los Angeles over seventy years ago. The river was sucked dry, as were many family ranches, while Los Angeles was transformed from a dusty desert town into orange groves and palm trees.

That night I slept in the back of my truck out on some dirt road. In the morning I woke to three cows staring at me from ten feet away, and off in the distance men on horseback down in a dry creek bed were rounding up cattle. The sun was coming up over the White Mountains far off to the east and lighting up the Sierra Range behind me. The world smelled of sage and wet earth. Penstomen, Desert Paintbrush, and Mojave Popcorn Flower had just bloomed from a recent rain. I lay in my bag trying to imagine where the line between California and Nevada meandered along out there in the rolling desert. Facing east, a huge mountain range literally at your back, it is clear that one West is ending and another, the one of basin and range for hundreds of miles,
with the same but also a totally separate social history attached to it, is just beginning.

It is land and weather which shapes so much of who we are, how our communities form. This is one reason why California and its inhabitants are so difficult to categorize. If you got out of bed in Lone Pine, a town n the Owens Valley, every day of your life, your world would be the dry side of the Sierra mountains- high desert, little water, and a land-based--and mostly isolated--community. You'd have about as much in common with palm trees, and warm beaches as someone from Cutbank, Montana. Granted, you'd probably get quite a mix of people passing through your town from the "outside," or the "other side," but they wouldn't form your life. There are as many Californias as there are micro climates: the wet, foggy, redwood communities of the north coast; the mountain communities running along the spine of the Sierra; the foothill towns of digger pine, oak, red earth and steeped in gold history; the central coast where the north-bound Pacific Current and the milder south-bound California Current merge; the rugged volcanic country of the northeast with its huge lava flood plains; the agricultural and hispanic communities of the Central Valley; and of course arid southern California which is what so many non-Californians think of when they picture the state as a whole. All of these regions and their inhabitants are unique and particular, and in many ways defined by land and weather.

But it would be simplistic to argue that land is the primary force behind the shaping of California. Were this the case, the state would undoubtedly be in better shape today than it is. The other truth is that
California, perhaps more so than any other state in the West, has become what it is by the manipulation of land in profound ways. Huge bays have been created (San Diego has the only natural port in all of southern California), wetlands drained for agriculture, jetties built to create beaches and harbors, huge sections of urban life built on top of landfill.

But none of these compare to the God-like alteration of the state's watershed system. Nothing has shaped California more in the twentieth century than the Bureau of Reclamation and the Army Corp of Engineers. Again, this could be said for other parts of the West, but as in so many other instances, California has taken it to an extreme. I don't know of any other state that would be so desperate (yet) and indefatigable as to pump a river up and over a mountain range, as was done over the Tahachapis in southern California. One can see the huge pipes worming their way up those dry mountains from miles away. California boasts twelve hundred dams and the largest federally irrigated lands in the country, forty percent of which comes from under the ground, water as finite as oil. It's estimated that the pumping of ground water exceeds replenishment by more than a trillion gallons a day.

This sort of manipulation, of course, has only spawned new problems: the water irrigating the Imperial Valley, for instance, is of such high salinity that it kills crops. Thousands of acres have already been taken out of production. On a hot summer day salt crystals glimmer in the sunlight like snow throughout the Central Valley. And this sump water contains not only mineral salts, but selenium, pesticides,
and whatever else we dump into it at various points along its journey. From there it makes its way down to the water table or is carried through the Delta and out to San Francisco Bay.

BEFORE HEADING UP toward Tioga Pass, I ate breakfast in the small town of Lee Vining, the "gateway" to Yosemite. I sat in a huge red vinyled booth and watched a lighting storm sweep across the valley. The east side of the Sierra is broad country and weather moves in unobstructed fashion. No one else was in the cafe, and I had the feeling that would be the case all day. The waitress who had poured coffee in my cup with out looking, sat at the counter playing double solitaire with the cook. He had a large belly and a tattoo of a snake winding around his bicep.

Driving over the Sierra from the east has always been an exciting occasion for me. I'm not sure why exactly but partly it's due to the dramatics of the landscape: from basin straight up and over, nothing subtle about it. The road switchbacks and traverses but there's no question as to where you've been or where you're going. But the thrill also has to do with moving from one world to another in a brief span of time, from the interior West to the Pacific West, two worlds bisected by the Sierra Range. It feels so abrupt to me that I always imagine cresting the pass and seeing the ocean glimmering far off to the west. In a time when most borders are nothing but human contrivances, it's refreshing to have a sense of one that is real and absolute.

There was plenty of snow still at Tioga Pass that summer day, and the aspen seemed especially lime-colored fluttering above the whiteness.
I drove through the granite dome land of Yosemite, then dropped out of the mountains and into the foothills, which were already that soft gold color of full summer in California. In Groveland I took a break at the Iron Door Saloon, a place I'd spent many hours with other river guide types. Groveland is a tiny old gold town situated on a wide sloping ridge with the Tuolomne River drainage on one side and the Merced drainage on the other. James, the bartender who'd been there forever, called me by name, slid a beer my way. We talked about water levels, drought, and wildfires, the usual summertime small talk in the Sierra foothills. I told him about cone picking and that I was heading to San Francisco. He said, "Why the hell you going there?"

"To eat," I said, "and walk around in the fog."

He nodded. I think he understood perfectly.

Highway 120 was empty as I wound down out of the foothills and into the Central Valley. The road straightens out for miles at a time, bordered by huge old almond and walnut groves. Fruit orchards, too, and fields of tomatoes, melons, pepper, corn, and virtually every other kind of produce stretch on either side of the road for as far as one can see. The evening air was soft and just cooled enough after the heat of day to feel like comfort on the skin. I stopped at four or five stands along the way and bought only one or two things each time so that I'd have something to stop for the next time I saw one. Crickets, cicadas, and frogs made rhythm from the irrigation ditches. I remember thinking that it must be these warm, sensual summer evenings that make the deadly hot days and monotonous winters worth living through. But I thought too about the "farmers" who now own so much of that rich
valley--Exxon, Tenneco, Getty oil, and about the wetlands now gone, and the grasses that reached the nape of a person's neck, the animal life hidden within, before us "Americans" showed up.

As I headed over Altamont Pass and up the east side of San Francisco Bay to the Bay Bridge, a huge, dense mass of fog was shoving its way through the gate, creeping over Mount Tamalpais and the south peninsula hills like some slow but inevitable wave. It was just as I had hoped for. There is nothing in the world more characteristic of home to me than fog.

Once in the city I headed directly to the Mission District and ate two tacos at my favorite taqueria, then moved on to an El Salvadoran place farther out, at Mission St. and 29th, for papusas (a little pocket pastry filled with meat and cheese and onions). A bowl of radishes and three kinds of salsas sat at each table. The room is long, rather cavernous, with institution green walls and brown formica floors. One side is lined with posters of buxom Latin women selling beer--Dos Exuis, Tecate, Negra Modelo--and on the other a velvet painting of Jesus and the Virgin Mary. The place was filled with Latino families and couples, the melodious rhythm of Spanish filling the room.

Two doors up is a wonderful Thai restaurant call Menora, a beautifully formal place with dive-joint prices. But I had other cravings so I drove across town for Burmese ginger salad at the All-Star Burma Restaurant on Clement Street. The Clement, as it's called, is like a linear food map of Asia, virtually every country represented along that ten block neighborhood. The owner of the All-Star is a friendly man, small, with smiling eyes who loves to tell patrons about each dish, which
are the most authentically Burmese, which are more influenced by Burma's neighbors—India, Thailand and China. The front window is lined with photographs of enticing dishes, and the place mats are laminated maps of Burma. I examined mine that night, imagining what a remarkably rich place Burma must be, surrounded as it is by such cultural giants. No wonder this man felt the need to educate.

Across the street is a great Vietnamese place about the size of a small moving van, but I didn't have enough room to continue my little food orgy, so I drove to North Beach, the Italian section of the city, and had a glass of wine at Mario's Bohemian Cigar Shop, an old coffeehouse and bar which, back then, had not yet been discovered by the arty, hip set. I sat at the bar and watched his wife make focaccia sandwiches—salami, artichoke, eggplant—for the late night crowd. Mario was still alive then, but I don't remember whether he was working that night or not. Now they sell t-shirts with his old craggy face on the front, a big cigar jutting out of his mouth.

That night I slept on a friend's couch in the Mission District and listened to a couple fight in Spanish across the alley and small community garden from my friend's apartment. In the morning I drove out to the ocean and jumped in.

THAT LITTLE TWO-DAY whirlwind journey was a typical excursion across California; typical, that is, of the variety of people and landscape which make up the state. To my mind, if there's any generalization one can make about the place it's that California, by virtue of its diversity, its contradictions and paradoxes, defies stereotyping.
This is why when I hear Montanans and others here say, "So and so looks like they're from California," or that someone else is a "typical Californian," it makes my blood boil.

What they're really saying, though they don't know it, is that someone fits their stereotype of what they think Californians are like: beachy looking and overly relaxed, I suppose, or something along those lines. Confirming a stereotype has never been a difficult effort (that's what makes them so popular); they're most often formed out of the most glaring, though not necessarily representative, traits of a group of people. I would like to dismiss comments about California as simply those of a few ignorant people, but unfortunately I hear them all too frequently, and in such a confident tone of voice. I've never heard people speak with such authority and presumption about a state which they (typically) have visited only briefly, sometimes not at all.

Not long ago, I found a student in my class at the University of Montana carving into the top of his desk, Fuck Californians. He didn't know his instructor was a member of the villainous group, though I'm not sure it would've mattered. And last month I saw two bumper stickers: Californians Go Home, and The Last thing Montana Needs is More Californians. Aside from indulging in a brief fantasy of bumper bashing, what I really wanted to do in that moment of car rage, as I call it, was pull those people over and yell, "If all the arrivals from the rest of the country and world now in California would 'go home', I'd be happy to as well! Don't talk to me about invasion." Etcetera, etcetera. But then I'd be no different from them.
A friend of mine, a native Montanan who's never lived in California, tried to tell me recently that coming from Vallejo, California is the same as coming from Berkeley. (They're about twenty-five minutes apart.) "Close enough," he said.

"No," I said, "in many ways, they aren't close at all. They're very different places." Vallejo is a tough, working class town, primarily composed of black and hispanic neighborhoods. Its roots, like Oakland and Richmond, are tied to the naval shipping industry that recruited a huge black labor pool from the South during WWII. Berkeley, though also a black and hispanic city in many areas, is foremost a university town with a large affluent white population. The origins and social histories of the two are entirely different. But my friend wasn't really interested in these distinctions.

But non-Californians aren't the only ones to perpetuate or be subject to the derogatory power of the California myth. Recently, I met an intelligent, educated woman, a writer of some renown, who was originally from Yreka (a small town in the northern part of the state). When we discovered we were both from California, she said, "But I'm not really from California, I'm from the northwest." I held my tongue, and tried to imagine exactly where the line was drawn separating her idea of California from the reality. When I told her I was from northern California--San Francisco-- she said, "Oh, no, that's not northern California; that's central." I held my tongue again, though what I really wanted to say was, "So what?" The way she said it somehow implied profound distinction. Both her qualifications about the state allowed for her disassociation from an undesirable image and
lifestyle. In other words, she had bought the story of California as nothing more than the land of excess, palm trees, movie stars, Disneyland, suburbia, sexy beaches, and rich people. California is defiled. And that's not where she's from. This woman from Yreka drew the line where she needed it to be for her identity. I felt bad for her, that a fellow Californian would fall prey to the pressure, would allow the place she came from to be stripped down to such a pathetic and inaccurate image. But this happens a lot. Anything that interferes with the myth isn't really California.

I've often gotten a sense from people not from California that those of us who call it home have somehow lived less authentic, less original lives, as if there is something essentially fake about life in California. Beside the smugness and arrogance of this sort of thinking lies the fact that for many, the state is in a way the original virtual reality, a sort of non-entity outside human imagination.

I used to keep my mouth shut when I heard pat statements about California. Now I often try to reveal some truth about the place, like how huge and complex it is. But I find that many people, particularly in the West, aren't interested in broadening their notions about California. Perhaps they feel they've seen and heard enough and they don't like what they know. This new myth, in its various shapes, suits their purposes just fine. The process of enmity is in full swing. It's as if somehow condominium complexes and "ranchette" subdivisions are the sole enterprise of Californians, and that all those from the East, Midwest, the South and the rest of the West are somehow pure of heart. Never mind that more Montanans have moved to California in the last
five years than the other way around. Americans are on the move and Californians make up a tenth of the population. Of course we're going to show up more often than any other single group of people.

I have frequently referred to present day California as the whore of the West, the place where we all get to do whatever we want--come and go, make money, have fun, go wild, and then go back to wherever we came from, live a regular life (eat fresh California produce in January in Missoula) and talk badly about the place. I remember even back in Bellingham fifteen years ago, people would slander California as if they knew what they were talking about. Some had never even been there. And yet when asked where they were going on vacation, many would say, "Oh, California."

I've lost track of how many people have told me California is not part of the West. If we admitted California into our notions of the region as a whole, this would muck up our narrow romantic vision. The interior West has always bought its own myth of rugged individualism and self-reliance, and that it's the place to hide from all that ugly civilization out there beyond its borders. Boone Caudill not wanting to see the smoke from someone else's chimney, and all that. If the West is the last place to live out those American bedrock dreams of self-determination, and simple, uncluttered space, then California, with its ethnicity, tremendous population, and social and environmental dilemmas, is one big threat to, and a betrayal of, that ideal. Better to negate it, trivialize it, or better yet make it the enemy.

And yet the existence of California, with all its opportunities (real and imagined), has made possible for many a decent life in the interior
West. For instance, when so many fled Montana in the late 1800's and early twentieth century because their dream wasn't working out, many went to California to make it. And many returned to Montana in time with money in their pockets and a future to build with it. This is happening even today. I think the West is afraid to look at itself candidly. Maybe this has to do with its origins as well.

But I think the denial of California as a participant in the make up of this region is ultimately a serious mistake. It's naive and escapist, and I doubt we can afford that kind of thinking anymore. There's just not enough room. We are all invested in keeping California a sort of dream state, forever accessible to either our fantasies, or the brunt of our fears about the way world is going. California is, whether we like it or not, a collective American creation. It has tremendous breadth, perhaps more than many people can tolerate or comprehend, and can be an irritating place for those who need definition, need to categorize. But in diminishing California we not only diminish our complexity as a region, but also deny our complicity in the problems from which California suffers.

AFTER I HAD gotten my little cultural fix in San Francisco that day so long ago, I headed north along the coast. It was a usual June day: northwesterlies blowing hard, heavy, cold fog. I remember I had a Jerry Jeff Walker tape on in the car and had no idea what my destination was. There were a few back roads over the Coast range I'd never been on, so I figured eventually I'd find one and head back to Lassen area. Just north of Pt. Arena I parked and walked across a bluff
and then down to the ocean. On a small beach I climbed up onto a

driftwood pile. The logs were silver colored and smooth. I had sat in

that spot many times watching the ocean after a day of diving. It felt

like home.

Right out from where I was sitting, about fifty yards off shore

and thirty feet below the surface of the ocean, lies a long ledge about

four feet in height. In order to get to it you have to swim through a

huge arched rock which, except for those few perfectly calm days, is

usually too turbulent to make through safely. The ocean funnels

through it and bashes up against its walls. Sharks, too, are known to

linger in this sea tunnel. But if you make it through and you dive along

this ledge, you will see a remarkable variety and richness of life.

Abalone, ten and eleven inches long, are literally crawling on top of one

another. Urchins, star fish, eel, ling cod, every variety of rock fish,

nudibranchs like little neon signs, are all in tremendous abundance. I

used to pull myself along this ledge to feed sea lettuce to abalone. I'd

slip a sheet of it under a shell and watch it slowly disappear, then move

on to the next. People who knew about the spot said the water must be a

little warmer there, or the upwelling of nutrients (which is what makes

much of California's sea life so rich), a little greater. But no one really

knows.

I like to think it has something to do with the ledge's

inaccessibility, the danger of the arch. It comforts me to imagine that

the power of nature has stopped human will, if only in a tiny way. On

that day there were no divers or fishermen out. I could hear the ocean
exploding against the walls of the sea tunnel, each wave letting off a bit of dynamite.

It gives me hope to imagine that ledge still thriving, still in tact. Sometimes I'm both saddened and embarrassed by how small my hopes have become. Of course the likelihood is that the abalone have been picked off, the fish speared and fished out, the urchin harvested for roe. After all, it has been over ten years since I dove there and California is a different place.

Despite what's been done to California, I miss it terribly. It is a captivating spot on the earth, and I can't imagine being completely free of it. I understand people's concerns for the changes occurring here in Montana and elsewhere in the West, and I hope they take care of their home. Sometimes I wish it were mine. Me, I might just have to go back and live with all the tensions and contradictions. Maybe I need to let go of my own myths about freedom and an ideal world, go home and face what I would much rather run away from: the way we piss on the earth and each other. It comes down to faith and hope, I think, and California can be a difficult place to feel either of these. But it deserves my care. Like so many who've grown up there and left, I've turned my back on it, which might be harder to live with than a broken heart.