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With a gate, and a tree, and no one near

Sonia Sue Cowen

*The University of Montana*

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WITH A GATE, AND A TREE, AND NO ONE NEAR

By

Sonia Sue Cowen

B.A., Eastern Washington State College, 1973

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

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Approved by:

[Signatures]

Chairman, Board of Examiners

Dean, Graduate School

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Concerning the subjects of your correspondence,
it is good for a man to let a woman alone....

I CORINTHIANS 7
WITH A GATE, AND A TREE, AND NO ONE NEAR

I'm that fervid unicorn, cut in your profile from a broken mirror, hatched like serpents from a cock's egg that Cyclops kept in a cracked locket. I am your cameo, incubating in crystal domes anointed with age. You stole my horn, strung it between your legs like an arrow shot from a saggitar bow. It struck grey mares in Tufts Motel where winos slump, dead flowers on my altar, burn me with their eyes glaring through my casket, assured some love-sick prince will never mount this mythical monster. Your spread wings lift me through their village, bouncing my voice against the sky of a sealed bubble your harlot now wears like a trinket. She fears me, and slips my ashes out from rings of posies grown for children who have no lovers. You ride off with your chain holding no one. If God tells you your daughter is safe in heaven, He is a liar.
TESTIMONY FOR FATHER AND PROPHETS

Your humble buzzless bumble-bee is spun
Wenatchee cascade lace, paraded through
loose-weaved doillies wrapped in broken
eyelash sprigs a florist would not arrange
in a funeral bouquet. You swapped her
stinger for your Pasco orchard hive, built
where Bombus thrives on nosegay orchids, lint
pulled from dry icings of your wedding
plate, drones like spinning motors pumping red
resin through her salivating bed. Your
manipulated dance circles twice inside
her gray paper silo, swarming thick white
buckles your wax shield wedged like opals
in her crown. When mother zooms naked through
crowds of sucking bagpipes, inducing sharp
pricks that puff and breed in the mad drone's thigh,
the unstable soul of a dumb ass knows if
the bumble-bee stings, it vows to die.
MY FATHER MISSING SIX YEARS
CAME HOME TO VISIT FOR ONLY AN HOUR
AND I WAS BUSY

Pass your plate for ham,
Potatoes mashed and peas--
This was a dinner, a party
For Debbie, for Debbie's
Birthday, my fifth-grade
Friend, my only friend
When I was ten, I was ten.

We were eating ham,
Potatoes mashed and peas--
When Debbie's hour came,
Came from bathroom drawers, coming
By Debbie's mommy's
Hand. *Knife cut flesh.*
*Debbie bleed. Please wait.*
Wait, I was scared, my
Friend begging me when ten,
To share her birthday changing.
Press the blade to strands,
Debbie's hair, not mine--
Pluck her brows and wash my hands
For Debbie, for Debbie's
Cleansing, her body change
When she was twelve, I was ten.

We were eating ham,
Potatoes mashed and peas--
When Debbie's phone rang,
Rang off kitchen walls, ringing
Until Debbie's mommy
Answered, hello. Yes,
I'll get her. Please wait.
Wait, it was for me, my
Mother knew I was ten,
At Debbie's birthday party.

Yes, I could use the phone,
Use the phone in Debbie's mommy's
Bedroom, the phone on the stand,
And yes, there would be ice cream
And cake; yes, they would wait
To serve Debbie's treats and mine
When I was ten, I was ten.
Hello Mommy. It's me.
"Come home, Baby," she said,
"Your daddy wants to see you;
He's home to visit, not long.
Come home, if you want."

But I was at Debbie's dinner,
Debbie's Birthday Party and
I was ten, so excited that
Debbie was now twelve
And ready to bleed like mommies
Like doggy mommies in heat,
Or mommies in movies
The nurse showed on Tuesdays
And hello Mommy,
Say hello to daddy
Tell him I'm still ten.
FOR FATHER WITH NO FOND MEMORIES

At night I am the breathless wind
on your burnt match, black squids twisting
laughter through drunk gods. I see you
run hard space through haboo, wet wings
that press onyx from brittle jade,
make shadows in thunder. You point
to an old man painting sunsets
on dried goatskin to seal the roof
of the world. You do better--
circle where the stone makers could not reach,
build brimstone kilns that sputter stars
from spruce, candles to melt your last
standing ovation atop some
thorny glacier. You're no drummer
guarding red tassels on heather,
but a merchant now wealthy
in chamber pots, gold rings that once
came from rims of bees, wedding bands
that thin old fingers make better
knockers on crosslatch doors. I am
sure saints have thick pewter bowels,
pearls that choke her bedstead prince in
course phylacteries. She studies
how you sleep with pregnant mares, wakes
some woodless lumberjack to ax
away those plaster molds from her
wax bras; then lets you scorn from your
harlot mount: if wishes were horses
beggars would ride. For five firkins
apiece and six waterpots
of stone, she will mend each saddle
with scarlet rumpskin cabbage,
solo mid-air in dreams that swarm
ashes of dry paper buzzards.
From a chimney outside of town
she cracks storm from turquoise shells,
claws the clouds into lines that warn
what begot the monster killed the child.
I.

For the vestal bloods of female armies, 
you freed my mother, let her roam the earth; 
then cast me from iron like some hungry 
god suppering flames of white feathered 
mares, maggots sprouting fountains in empty 
seas. You forged a serpent-child so Jesus 
could not lick oils of eggwhites from my feet.

I am that snake shot from your capricorn 
antlers, stuck in the moon's underbelly, 
stick in a tootsie-pop. You pulled us 
from the sky, ate from that side no one sees, 
then put the moon back, and swallowed the night 
until my iridescent scales spread stars through 
your kidneys and teased the dark. You 
heaved me through the heavens again--so I'd 
bend each halo that blankets the sun.
II.

Every daughter's mother is a virgin; but I quit believing legends when I found her splitting the walnut sheets with her Icabod groan, rushing her five wooden hooves down the tweed olive through the hollow chambers of her one-ended bridge. I heard her soprano spit copper pennies through hot skillets of her stomach, stirring her tongue with your broken spoon—until her toes clicked out songs she used to beat with chopsticks on our empty kitchen cupboards.

I stood outside her door, said her bacon was frying, did she want one egg or two? Her screams sent me to the oven, where I sorted eggs, plunged my finger through those shells into dry batter of molting wings.

Father, make me a stickrider who craves the poultry taste of my threadbare flaxen moon.
I came to the east gate nursed
by icy winds that sweep upward
through two flesh moons; between cheeks that
clamp me like threaded pipe in dark
sky, I stretch my arms at right angles
to my feet, propel through air so thin
I cannot find my way out.

Cold hooks dance me above trees where
leaves drop like herring. They form glass
rings on bark fingers. I sway through
night, short clapper in a large bell,
scrape my ankles on mountains. I
bleed the sun that screams through Portland
bus stations at 3AM. Winos
warn me to stake my future in land,
somewhere to fall when this bell cracks.
Free of that grip, I wind the sky's
circular rims, seek one black steed--
a voice that rides the ridge of time.
II.

I courbet him over mountains
that spread their knees, seduce him till
their caps turn white. We ride tomorrow
through the other side of breath.
Here we gather starfish, fold them
into jaws that shipwreck in quiet.

We heap severed skulls in sand,
reap tiaras for children who have
no signs to keep, only liars
who teach liars to preach. We suck
marrow from the bones of a black cat
twice brewed with red weed. We drink
broth to shape us like gods in a dead
man's dream. We pull you from sleep, tell
you to bring knives wet with chicken's
blood; tell you to dig the valleys.

You will feed us the earth; we give
you seed to plant more night. If you
do not come, we'll turn the rainbows
black. We will show you that no one
turns rich if the moon burns out.
You will dream
you can dream no more.
TO MIMIC ROUND ONE

Because I wake I dream to part these drapes,
    unwrap the morning,
will find a new set of dead seals. My hands
    trained to swell limp gloves
cannot drift these limbless fingers downshore
    to sea. Instead I
stand in black muck, naked alabaster
    in a moat of seals.

A nun who never
could hide the sun, will burn the stars. I'm no
    black cap in a pool
of white. I lean with the ash, form braces
    in rivers that laugh
with rot. This time my limbs gnaw storms, dormant
    hides that line a beach.
One shadow yawns a yellow hawk, wings that
arch the heat can stab a skyline deep red
    with thunder. This blood
peals the earth of brown eyes, swollen currants
    that rise in mica.
I swallow black carcus, each broken beak,
    chips of my own bone.
My tongue knows the taste of black teeth;
    snout and fin of seal
    are the cap and roots
of each league that bore a jaw of stiff furs.
    Their chortles gather
like hungry starfish, scratch my name in silt.
    I've heard them whisper
oysters will soon infect the coast like stys.
    Burnt limbs breed like tongues
in the backwash; this delta lid opens
    where I and earth, earth
as eye, weld in a fist of shaking hands.
APPLES OF GOLD IN SETTINGS OF SILVER

I.

What could I say
but your religion scrapes
moons from fertile valleys, drains
the lava from my cardinal night.
Through my gingham robe and blank stares,
your fingers splinter and search
for psalms that embalm my heart with hope.
I will not die.

You abort tongueless children.

Dead seas bob me like an egg
until I scream
hard white caps. A tide of warring
angels have no trees, so thread their toes
through my hair
until each hymn cracks. You pull shell
from frenzied water, and feed
your soul my flesh.
Restoring order between pews
of gnashing teeth, you swallow
demons of the dark and like. You pass
judgement like roasted lamb to serve
a haunted father and numb
son. After the subsequent quarrel,
this is all you have--
your stiff privacy at last.

II.

Because this love can't explode
rainbows like coral cut from dye,
your words blend these
fears to stillness. We glitter the beard
of a dead forest, every branch
the seasonal
angel who cannot rise. Here, in our
magpie garb, we are holy--
faint replies that
gather souls for the maker of wreaths.

I dream we scatter wicker
in the sockets of a blind cat
to entice the coming of tigers.
You are ivy with no root
in the brick. If you fall, skies won't
turn green with grass.

There is no room for nuns who
frolic. I watch your skirt catch wind.

You want to page
blue sheets of a hollow book, and toll
each cloud for some hour of your life.

I tell you there
is time if a wide candle burns north,
but your legs spread into hands
of a bellow
and launch you like a wren from stiff veils.

Naked, you have no nipples
nor delta to entice the hand
that holds the missing rib, a rainbow
rid of black. Moved to climbing
mountains, you look back
and choose the white chalk cliffs.

III.

I bite my tongue
and march past the response,
the child who asks who are you?
I'm motion picture reels rejecting
my forwards, my backs reliving
men who walk away; women
grin and say nothing. I am chiseled
in empty theatres
without popcorn, without ears.

I answer nothing. It comes
who are you? It
comes like a bat that zeros dark.
I say my handkerchief left town. It
slithers back
with souvenirs. I say I'm thick
abalone that studies
glamour girls and
boney hips. I find I cannot
fit the frame. They ask again
who are you? It comes swollen where bones
drove deep and stuck like blue thistles
that farrow in young fingers.
My face centers a black flower
and dries in this delta stillborn.
THE EVE SHE SAT DOWN TO EASE HER PAIN

On the toilet, wet with pangs
She waited, pushed or inhaled
Until I passed
Dead fish throes in the tank
Gone with a flush.

Said Daddy to mama, hush
And made me again.
WHEN WE HAVE NO BEDPANS

To the bathroom we go, we go
To sit Anney upon the seat
A stiff rachis with long awns limp
One over Mary, and one over me.

To the tummy we go, we go
To push Anney upon the rim
Make the scarecrow give
Her rigid spine to the seat.

To the giggles we go, we go
To see Anney upon the seat
Smiling in relief, lets herself go
Like barley softened in the bowl.
CHILDREN OF THE THYRSUS

And every Bacchante who hears him there
Waltzes and frisks like a foal with a mare.

(Euripides/Bacchae)

On high stone cliffs
Above Maenad's Plain,
Small child fingers
Strung garlands of
Queen Anne's Lace--

And racing the ridge
To a pile of rock
Stacked waist high
We whipped the sky
In scent of Anne's ropes--

We chased a wind
In thyrsus-tag
To feldspar altars
Running like wild horses
Set free at last--

And slowing the pace,
Took sombre steps,
In the pace of saints,
Robed bare stone
In garlands grand,
And sang to gods
We did not know.
Childless Hannah draws white chalk stars
twice each day on Fairview's stone markers,
and plants ryegrass near the cairns to keep
her pickaninnies safe from bats, worms, decay--
Or braids her black in silken threads, one milori
the other raisin dark, or oxblood red--
to drain the power of darkness from the earth or
wilt new blooms the grasses yeild and spread.

On windy days, she ties saran between the trees,
and tucks their burlap dollies in sweetpea vines
that grow by the slabs--to shield the hidden, hiding
in their cribs of camus root. From a lay of prophet
gravel, she plucks daisies and mums--sets them down
at the foot of each bed, chants god bless to rid
boilgums and plague. Then, before the wind dies,
she strokes marl heads, tucks clay soils to smooth quilt-spreads,
and locks the iron gate to keep them penned.
I never really thought about me sitting here
In this big brown, hard captain's chair--
Next to Pa's rubberband tied in knots,
Readily stretched tight
In the strike--
P-I-N-G-g-g-g
Hit hard--
Next to the bruise
I bled yesterday.

Long hot-flush nights cradle sleepless, restless
Thoughts 'bout listen'n to Misses Mennay sing
Lordy songs in Church to save my core, 'n revelatin'
Lustful hunger beyond this soul to her bedroom
Lyrics--callin' Jim-me to help her find li'l more
Than handkerchiefs 'n ankles appealin' bare.

Drown'n Mennay's buckram gospels and Lord
Dally talk dealt lies 'bout her twenty years mellow--
Goody white rakehelly fingas claspin'
Tight her bunkum scripture verbalisms,
In Church--addling looks at me and Pa--
And I just kept tasting those naked sips
Of winebib'ry sweetness between her thighs.
Thinking back, the drone of Pappy's voice resounds--
Slapping hard 'cross muck-slow river flux:
"Misses Mennay lies cold dead, found floatin' face down
To Baygall Sound--like she's been raked for spoils!"
Scared-suspicious Church-folk barr'd their doors to
Blackboys--so the Lord could see their goodness,
Purely white.

Pappy left our door wide open--
Lettin' those damn flies buzz 'round the kitchen sink
While visitin' folks from Leaf Lugs Bay was speculatin'
Brother Tim's story 'bout hearin' a man's pace run
Pappy's fields the night Mennay died--
And it seems those damn flies keep buzzin' 'round
The open, decayin' fat piles in the backfield grave
Where Misses Mennay lies stiff as altar psalms.

Nancy split her head on the rocks,
Behind the back porch--
Not a bad slice, but twenty stitches
Times $10.00 a stitch--
Guess that lickin' Pa gave her will teach
A lesson 'bout walkin' and talkin'
--and breathin'.

Some things just don't make true sense to me--
Like times we'd be readin' Lord's words and
Ma would keep sayin' that Miss White couldn't thread
Her damn needles straight--
But then, we folks never did like
Six-guys-and-one-girl families.

Jimmy Walker hacks 'n spits red-leaf backy chaw,
Layin' aims at Sambo Niggas
Bleating Holy Mosses Baptist Glories
Like they's rescuin' themselves from bugbear critters,
Specter ghosts, and Misses Mennay's duffy.

The field ran dry last fall harvest--Pa found
Tobacky piles along side the field road,
Duel with the drought answers the question of
"Where the bread and Jimmy Walker's soul died"
And why Pa slammed the door last time we was
Watchin' him scream at Tim's idiocy.

Not so much Tim's fault 'bout his eyes and
The ways he don't see nothin'--
Guess Pa was wrong about my dying younger than him--
Killin' Pa wasn't half so hard as plottin' fields

Sure wish the bleedin' would stop,
And Misses Mennay would stop yelling in my ears--
I hate those nasty fibs about the devil spitting
Fire at yellar dogs
and me.
FOR RUBY ELITE, WHO IS A WHORE
IN BALTIMORE, AND READS ORDERS
OF VICTORIA ON TUESDAYS

Thackeray keep me gay
In your wisdom. I
Shut your doors to Parliament--
Such deep lament, I do
Aspire with deep desire
To treat you well--
Be your belle in Baltimore--
Keep me gay, Thackeray.
Co-habits flee in the cold
Of March.
The rent is due tomorrow.
YELLOW ROSES

Lover come back
Big Cadillac will
Drive you home to
Me alone with meal
In bed passion fed
We'll trip the ferris
Wheel and steal baby's
Pennies to buy a show
In Harpies Square.
I, debonair and lustful,
Keep me trustful.
Come home.
LEAVING A CAMPUS PARTY

We caught a ride from your students.
My shoulder touching a backseat rider,
you in the front seat singing *Bobby McGee*;
the volkswagen chugged a nice fifty down
Highway 10, passing swigs of rum from backseat
to front, until the emptied jug smashed asphalt.
You surprised your students: you were not stuffy.

We opened rye whiskey, drinking between rounds
of *Row Your Boat*, or some tune from Music First
Year Theory. You in the front seat singing
harmony, my shoulder still riding strangers.

Some student asked if I knew you. No, I said,
my major is Biblical History. You heard me,
reached over the door rest, behind the seat,
for my hand. Off limits, people could see.
I was thirsty for more than swigs of rye and
your hand. Passing signs, I counted the miles,
inch by inch, knowing you are not stuffy.
BARGAIN SPECIAL

I am the prime cut, some supermarket special. You inspect my narrow shoulders, follow delicate splinters to my feet.

Thaw my fibers with warm fingers that knead and hallow out this bloody marrow. Fill these gaps where veins poke out; marinate a home where doors tuck tight but open.

It I puff when done, hold a slender lily between your jaws. I am no bone to gnaw when the cereal box is empty.
THE CATCH

--For my Pisces friends

You garble the breath of dreamers,
your feet treading blanket. You lure
the big splash, another lover
your chest could spawn. Bait her upstream
where the Columbia too opens leg--
such boredom could ripple your breeding.

Their weight not scaled by breeding
sore spots that still kiss your neck, dreamers
name you brother. You have not seen the leg
that stands onshore--so unaware this lure
is the sportsman of your flashback. Upstream
the skillet glows red. He calls a good lover
a better fighter. They dream themselves the lover
and cast their worm. My own breeding
baits the waterbed for bigger Joes. Upstream
triangles of worm, fish and dreamers
spawn thick dorsal fins, gills that lure
small fries from the first leg
in this spring run: your pelvic leg stiffens. Wooden spears are no match for you, lover.
Your teleost build, your pediculate lure
no longer keel my fine horned jaw. Breeding
like mosquitoes above the water, your dreamers
play too much with weighted lines and lose you upstream.

Your lips puff blood and spread the upstream
to a murky lagoon. Off the bar a rainbow's leg
dangles a fresh worm for new dreamers.
I cast the line of my back for the Pisces lover,
throw back the suckers under 12 inches. Breeding
from sheets of algae, your hookers lure
cutthroat in their current affairs. Flies won't lure
them back to meet this year's quota. Down the upstream ladder,
you survive the breeding
of the fit. A line with sinker is leg enough for me. I'm the dish of a new lover
who spins with his worm still intact. Those dreamers

know who got away--whose leg on a rusty lure
is dead weight. But lover, don't swoon the upstream dreamers in the dark: brag of breeding

a new line of bait, trusty lures, and more leg.
In this upstream take of brook from lover,
I taut your sinking need for breeding dreamers.
CALL TO A YELLOW WALRUS,
WITHDRAWN AND GONE

A yellow walrus stares at me;  
with one eye closed, he stares.  
With puffing chyle, he stays the while  
to ride my froathy sea.

Emulous, I mount his tusk,  
encause my neckless sea; rime his tufts  
a windward side, spilling tides  
to flush an emusoidal sea.

Throddle and float, he seals my moat  
with waddles warm and wide;  
walrus-style, he slants his spile  
in me, twixt me, fits me

With taper plug, thrusts and tugs,  
thins his spirant spire higher;  
 crack-flash, wattage spasm  
stirs my rushing ruby sea,

And floats him out with sagging chyle.  
His slanting smile he leaves.  
Come, Spinulose; hold me close,  
Re-ride my froathy sea.
YOU SAY MAKE LOVE
I SHOULD TELL YOU WHY I CAN'T, INSTEAD

I slice my face, paste it flat where
the Cosmopolitan cleavage
is perfect. Here I always fail:
Too fat, too thin. I'm that lone whale
sluiced at birth to dry on the beach.
Sand pokes my flesh. I swell like the
dark mountain, a cushion harpooned
by steelhead lights. Off-shore, a house
tells father I am breathing.
But that skeleton of ribs says wait
no more. My bones are boomerangs
a beach child tosses back to sea.
I ride her dreams, a soft sponge that
soaks away her days, hunchbacked
into mountains winding up
and down like ocean floors. My pins
are buoys my father stows away--
anchors that cannot block his sail
to far off hills. It's father's fore
and aft rigged vessel, one mast
and a single headsail jib I
maroon at night when his clipper
sails to the sound of a wedding
bell. Without goodbye, he turns out
lights so no one will ever come
digging fossils to tag and sell.
THE FIRE SINCE

It could have been your hometown where one year after Black lawyer Calvin Marcey lost the contendership for the county's district attorney that the local newspaper reported Bobbie Jean Lucas's twisted and charred body was found splattered against the cellar floorboards; that her boyfriend's black limbs embedded the ceiling with a smear of flesh. You might have concluded it was homicide; or suicide; or any combination of legal terms to describe their bizarre deaths: someone had to have phoned the twenty-year old, dark complexioned runner-up for Miss State that late December Saturday afternoon, one week after her sometimes recluse Elrod threatened to kill her if she continued to see Brother Wayne, and convinced her Elrod was mighty sorry; someone had to have unlocked his kitchen door and jarred it open; someone had to have strapped their naked bodies together; someone had to have placed that bundle of dynamite between their laps, lit the fuse, known they wouldn't survive the blast. You might have concluded who had the motive, who instigated the plan, who knew the scene, who wanted the cover-up, who made the payoff, who felt rid-of--but you didn't. You knew your hometown would remain litter-free "hard-working, aspiring middle class America" as long as you and every other 190,000 citizens didn't conclude out loud.
At best, you remember that day Bobbie took the front row seat in your social studies class, when it was already March at Clark Junior High. You remember how her fair-skinned but black-haired mother handed her the brown paper sack and buttoned a size 5 pink cardigan around the back of Bobbie's chair. You can still see that tall skinny, red seersucker dress leaning down to a kinky, probably Jewish or Bohemian, top-of-the-head bun to kiss a quiet girl goodbye. You don't remember too much more—or don't want to remember the Fall Bobbie made cheerleader of the first string; or when she was elected to model bikinis for the AS Spring Fashion Show; or how once she openly flirted with your crush-enamored boyfriend in front of God and everybody during fifth period square dancing.

Four years ago you saw her demonstrating a new line of cosmetics in McCormick's Mercantile. She remembered your name and didn't push the product. When she told you she quit school, you agreed the tuition was too high, and no, you didn't like living in the dorm either. When she put the plastic apron under a "still waiting" shopper's wrinkling chin and applied the miracle foundation moisturizer that "guaranteed! . . . .", you went off to buy jeans and speculated all afternoon with the rumors that Bobbie really was dealing caballo.

She didn't know that the last time you saw her was from your dorm-room window when Elrod's Stingray gutted high gear, burned rubber on the student union parking lot and turned towards town; that ten of her BSU leather-jacketed and jean-studded friends opened their cars to follow; that Bimbo, Sasquatch, and Bigger Joe waved at you; that you waved back.
A few months later, you drove the eighteen miles home for spring break; to surprise your little sister, you drove further—to the high school—to pick her up after classes, and saw her wave down a slow-moving yellow cadillac convertible. The driver stopped, reached over the white girl sitting beside him, and opened the passenger's door. Tayah got in and the three drove off. At home, you remember having seen that car before, but for the next two hours you can only draw blanks trying to remember the place and people.

It's Christmas Day when the phone rings for Tayah, and your mother screams for the fifth and sixth time that he has no damn business phoning her daughter; that if he were any type of a man, he'd stop bothering her still-a-senior high school baby; and, no, she wasn't prejudice, but she wasn't going to have her daughter seen with a repulsive Nigger!

It's Christmas Day when Tayah says she won't stand for your mother and father dictating who she can and cannot see; that it's none of their concern why he has no job; and no! he's not getting into her pants! It's past Christmas dinner when your baby sister moves out and slams the door shut.

It's New Year's Eve when the two plainclothed policemen knock on Mr. Lucas's door and ask to speak with Mrs. Lucas also. It's New Year's Eve when the faces from the yellow cadillac stare out at you like steady beams from a lighthouse. This time, without trying, you remember who they are, and where it was you saw them.

Spring passes into summer school and you lose their faces, and when you find them again, Katie Talsee is troubled. She's dissatisfied with the government's put-a-poor-income Black, Indian, or Miserable
White in the schools program, saying you're the only chick who helps any one in the whole damn system with their schedules and battles, and hey, why don't you get together some night for drinks. Yeah, she could introduce you to a lot of her friends at the Red Lion. What was the name again? Tayah? Yeah, she thought she remembered meeting someone with Wayne--but, then, so many girls hung on to Wayne--and, well, yeah, now you mentioned it, she did recall seeing a long-haired beauty with him one night--and was that your sister? Well, she couldn't be more surprised, because you seemed so smart and, well, not that she meant to compare sisters, but Tayah, well, she seemed to think she was Wayne's chick, and everyone knew Wayne had plenty of chicks and he had--uhm--business that wouldn't allow him to keep to one woman, and, oh dear--she'd miss her bus back to town if she didn't leave now--. But from your office window, you watched her turn away from the bus stop and step into the yellow car.

You go back to your apartment, asking your roommate if she remembers Bobbie Jean, and of course she remembers her—they'd been in some local talent group together. And you shouldn't forget that her father was working with the FBI on the case still--and, yeah, she did remember her father talking about maybe Calvin Marcey being mixed up with--no, wait a minute--not mixed up with, but running the traffic, the brothels, the gambling, the press, the whatever--and yeah, he was someone no one touched. And wasn't it true that your professor of Criminology, what was his name?, did his dissertation on call-girl systems in the US, and it was your very home town that ranked tops--over New York and Seattle? Yeah, and why don't you hurry up and get
dressed because John and Steve would be there in a minute, and they'd be angry if the two of you weren't looking great for that movie date—and why don't you ask Steve about the call-girl system if you're so interested, being he worked there for three years as bellhop, and o-o-o-h there they were at the door and you not even half-dressed.

So you did ask Steve about the system and he told you he didn't know too much, that he wasn't supposed to know too much if anything, and that he'd been told to tell the head desk clerk if and when someone wanted company and to continue cleaning ashtrays in the main lobby until the desk clerk motioned he could go back to the floor where the gentleman was rooming and pick up some small token for the manager. But Steve said he really didn't know and he couldn't really say—but he just had—and so you spun those faces from the convertible through your mind like dirty clothes in a dryer, where the faces peek and peer at you from under armpits, from behind sheets, from under blankets; where they start pulling out more faces that you had almost forgotten—one face has a pink scar spreading from the mouth to the far corner of the left eyebrow; five other faces glare like stains from the heels of crew-socks, smiling with a conviction of giving you no mercy, and as you continue to watch, your face beams back at you in the reflection on the glass—coming at you like the photos that used to grin from the trunks of neighborhood trees, shouting Vote for--, and you knew if you voted for-- you'd not only be saved, you'd be dead; but they kept staring, laughing, spinning off in the muffle of Steve's voice asking if you enjoyed the movie.

And who could give a damn about fuckin' buffalos and ten summer camp brats out to save the world from its social pressures, so you say
nothing, remain silent, most of the way home from the reality of the photography and that great music build up, until you've passed the Jog-In Tavern where your next door neighbor used to mix drinks at an outrageous price. You mention something about the building next door being a hideout in the sixties for some darkies caught mixing their own drinks at a more outrageous price—and how they invited the community in for the little fireworks a maltov can make. And it was somewhere out of that display of patriotism to Calvin Marcey that the town started cowering into their trees underground where Peter Pan might tell them they would never have to worry about growing up as the concept didn't exist for anyone as long as every one remained gay and innocent and heartless.

Later, maybe two months later, maybe later than that, you are sitting in your car driving towards K-Mart when Tayah tells you her plans to move, yeah, just up and move out on her two pig-sty roomies for maybe a house by herself—and, of course, she'll still want to live in the poor district--where the "real" people have to live, and pouts when you mention that she doesn't have any real choice about moving out of that district--since her sole income comes from the Avon products she sells to your mother at book price and to her neighbors on credit until their Welfare check comes--and it never comes.

Your mind flashes back to the summer before last when you and your roommate decided to live cheaply in the back of a fraternity house for that quarter, when the Jesus Freaks camped in your living-room, and the Platters came to your midnight party the week R.V. Cassil read from his Pretty Leslie in the pub den, and the haze, and the smack, and the horse shit flew around the back door where the lights couldn't pull you out of
the darkness when you saw your "Patrick-lives-upstairs" frat brother buy his "Purple-will-take-a-people-flight-around-the-whole-damn-world" ticket and you wanted to wave goodbye—and soon did when he took off to find his draftee-dodger brother in Canada—the day after he found out his father was a bonafide, full-breasted and crowing dues-paid John Bircher, and the whole yoyo was rumored to snap in the end before the haze wore off.

Your mind flashes back still further to the New Year's Eve before Bobbie died—when you wouldn't accept a babysitting job that night because you were sick of sitting on New Year's Eve, even if you were too young to go anywhere; when you sat in your girlfriend's rec room staring at Johnny Carson's pointed cardboard hat because Laurel had to sit her sisters; when it was half-past Carson's hit-the-funny man with the big-tie commercial that Hilma knocked on Laurel's front door, whispered that Carol brought some hash, and wasn't it going to be just groovy bringing in the New Year; when you sat paranoid-great-fish-out-of-water in the rocking chair fondling some superstition you've held since your fifth grade *spend a summer in the Rockies* ice skating camp—about the world coming to an end in 1972: and you weren't going to smoke any chunks under foil because you wanted to be totally aware when the world exploded or just plain fizzled out like a cinder butt dipped in cold water when the clock struck twelve and Happy New Year one more time—and then one more time again—and then one more time after that—because it felt so good to be saying it—just to know you could say it— even if you weren't too sure how good it might have felt not to say it—but then, you didn't know about Bobbie Jean, and your sister, and your
conclusions—so, maybe after all, the world was coming to its end in 1972. Whatever, your naive crib was beginning to drop you, heavy baby, into the streets where the real rattle cracks and the twiddle-dee twins run from the Black Shadow that grows between the grins of trees.

But the lips peal back like skins from a cucumber and reveal the inside of an ugly mocking smile. She is telling you that you haven't changed—you're still the big sister sorority-chick that you've always been and that you just don't understand what the outside world is really about and that you should quit school and work with the poor people, for two years maybe, and really find out about the district and--on it goes, later growing into one of her classic push-the-lip forward but maintain-the-silence pouts.

Still quiet when you signal your Newport after-the-war tanker into the parking corrals, lock the doors, and walk away from its crimp-the-aura-in-a-sedan traveling-quoinsit frame towards the billion dollar shopping carts lined single-file like cages transformed into coffins for shelf prisoners held behind the please-enter-here with shoes-and-socks steel-decaled doors, she won't answer when you want to know whose BC pills were sitting like miniture chips of raised porcelain on the tank of her still white slush-after-the-second-use-please toilet. Her gonorrhea-filled roommate Glenna's? Or maybe that slug-in-the-cunt Sibby's? Or the kitty-cat's? Maybe some little precautions her frequent-to-visit pimp neighbors--in their pointed shoes, bunnynose-pink quilted silk carnation-vased lapels, and thick-handled combs like swords stuck in the solidified gravel-oiled hair--insisted she take? You know the answer, but want the question to dig; want her to know your thoughts of
her as a simple niddle-minded and soiled washrag—you being so damn virtuously virgin only because you're afraid to be otherwise.

Later, you drive back to her house and suggest you listen to the albums she's offered to sell you at can't-beat-'em rates. After hearing Roberta Flack and Billie Holiday, an Ink Spot's album drops into the grooves of the last record, and begins to turn under the stereo-phonic needle, filling her worn-much-too-thin crushed-velvet davenoed and tiffany hang-a-missing-pane lamped livingroom with he's got them high-heeled 'gator spats, gamblin' poker jacks, livin' like cool king oats, drivin' 'round them garter snaps and . . . . and talk about your town's famous peerless dentist who's still asking her friend Leslie to paint his face with rouge and blue eyeshadow, and rat his blone long-locked wig before beating him to pulp and orgasm with his green jock-strap—that same famous congressional celebrity who sponsored t.v. wrestling matches from Madison Square Gardens--the same fine upholding citizen with the equally famous last name--yours. For years you've been plagued with an acquaintance's quick-to-blurt, Are you related to--? before you can nod thankfully not.

The more it plays, the more you talk about her having seen Mark DeLust, your girlhood next door schizophrenic interested in rocks and chess only but only available boy in the whole three mile radius and wants to be a damned mortician when he grows up freako-turns-pimpo, standing at the corner of Surf 'n Drift Tavern, flagging down his two girls--one being Leslie, the twenty-year old daughter of your mother's secretarial co-worker.

Tayah laughs at your supposed imitation of Mrs. DeLust, an ex-opera star from kindergarten to high school fame, palms to her lungs,
wasting her last soprano shrill in defining her amazement at Mark's new profession—oh my goodness; o-o-o-h my goodness—it's not the boy, it's the act we must detest!

You deliver the same shrill two months later—this time outside Tayah's new white picket-fenced house, after your mother whiplashes her Continental to a screeching skid, keeping her now vehement-enough-to-kill eyes pasted on the license plate of a yellow cad convertible parked outside Tayah's back door.

You reach across the front seat to grab her wrist, plead something about please, if she'd just calm down and think twice before storming up to Tayah's door, causing a bad scene in front of that tall Negro man standing in the yard with his face half-concealed by the floppy brim of his felt hat. But your words come late, echoing without heed on your form—tuck-knee'd and hunchbacked under the dashboard—hoping to God he can't recognize an innocent passenger.

After telling that bastard a thing or two, she comes back to the car and rummages through the glove compartment for a pen and pad she just knows she put there last week; and when she can't find it, she writes the number of that no-good's license on the palm of her left hand—all the while buzzing something about his being so repulsive, so damned repulsive, and if Tayah preferred that to her own mother—well, that settled everything; she'd have the lawyer change the Will tomorrow, during her lunch hour.

She turns onto the freeway, driving at 80 because she's even madder now—madder that you're asking her questions she doesn't feel obligated to answer: is she more angry that he is married—or more angry that he's Black? She says it's because he's married; you know it's because he's Black, and—
Repulsive. That word screams through your eardrums like a warning not to mention ever that you'd been living with a married man just two weeks before. Perhaps she had suspected; she'd hinted once or twice; but maybe she would have said it was different; you know she would have: yours was white with no scars or floppy hat.

The next scene is in your parent's kitchen: the phone rings and your mother answers. You know by her voice and retorts that the caller is Tayah—probably telling your mother she has no right to be screening her friends when the phone slams down with such a wham that you think maybe this is the last straw. Maybe this is going to be the one time your mother sticks to her threats.

But this time your mother demands more than war. She wants consultation and comfort in this family tragedy; and when you refuse to give it, she calls you disappointing.

You snap back with your self-righteous and unbias argument that you're sick and tired of the whole damned mess. You're sick and tired of telling her Tayah will change. The truth is Tayah won't change. You even remind her of the evidence: What about the time your mother was called to the BX to get Tayah out of a shop-lifting charge—Look here, Bob, I'll pay for this shaving lotion that I'm just sure she forgot to purchase, and yes, it was wise of you not to call the MP's on a commander's daughter, and—Did that reform her? She knew the answer—because it wasn't long after that day that your mother had to get Tayah out of the principal's office at the junior high school for Smoking? My baby a Dragon Lady? Even he reminded her it wasn't the first time she'd been called that and doesn't she remember the night the paperboy felt it was his duty to report he'd seen her blowing
rings right out of her nose and inhaling them back through her mouth on the shuttle bus—with that glue-sniffing punk of a boyfriend, Gary—the clown who only made her laugh again and again when he wore his Red Baron helmet and goggles into the base psychiatrist's office and told the doctor he was flying higher than any John Glenn and she was still laughing when they locked him up in an insane asylum, and—the evidence could have gone on and on—the same speech, the same pat on the head wouldn't change anything. Tayah was different than anything your mother ever wanted a daughter to be.

Worse, she was more different than what you wanted a sister to be: she was incompatible. She was skinny and tall and beautiful—you were the opposite. You had nothing in common to share with each other. You even tried to convince each other that the hospital mixed up the cribs—that one of you belonged to another family—or that one of you had been adopted but your mother wasn't talking.

She only referred to you as her twinky, intolerably older bore. You thought maybe she'd change "at last" so to speak, but now you're never sure which way she's bound.

You think, when she comes to your mother's house two weeks later to apologize, that maybe she's changing after all. When your mother leaves to inspect the progress on the building of her new country house, Tayah even speaks to you—and it's not in some angry voice, either. Could she be changing? The question pokes at you in a teasing fashion. She's asking what mother had to say about Wayne. You tell her that mom and you fought about the issue, and did she know Wayne had other girlfriends? Well, it was true—you found out some time ago from a friend. Well, she wouldn't know the girl, but the name was Katie Talsee, a friend of Wayne's from the Red Lion. She seems to respect you for knowing—maybe it's the first time
you've stood up for her and confided in her--maybe she's right. You can't remember.

You start laughing and talking about her neighborhood--Yeah, did she remember that guy that used to live next door to her? The deaf one?

"Remember? How can I forget George? . . . But he's not deaf now." What did she mean? "His mother was cleaning his ears and found wads of newspaper stuffed down tight against his eardrums--he must've stuck them in there when he was a baby." Wild. "Yeah, and when I took back the nightgown--". What nightgown? She hadn't told you about any--. "He threw a sack over the fence into my yard about two months ago. It had writing on it--saying the sack was for me, and--". And it had a nightgown in it? "Yeah, pink. But it must have been his sister's because it had been worn and washed maybe once or twice, which--". No kiddin'--what did she do? "I took it back and gave it to his mother, and that's when she told me this guy wasn't deaf any more, and that he had some big crush on me and--hey, you hungry?"

At last! Your mind boggles with the notion that maybe your sister at least regards you as human; perhaps this was the break through in her conscience! And hey, maybe she wasn't so bad after all, and why didn't you two get together next weekend because you didn't think you'd have too much trouble getting her into Peugeot's and yeah, you'd forgotten she already had a fake ID--seems she'd had it for ages! Well, anyway, maybe you'd get a chance to know your sister before she went off to marriage, or had babies, or did something drastic.

It's a date and you're excited because you'll now have the chance to flash your new liberated-age card at the Peugeot's bouncer.
You drive the eighteen miles with the radio blasting out good boogie music and you think maybe you'll pick up some wine before you get to her house—but it really doesn't matter that the store was closed, because when you arrive at her house, she's not ready and says she prefers to stay home and more, she's sorry the sweet pot smell offends you like your grandma's stale perfume, but you'd better get used to the idea that your little sister is now eighteen and grown up enough to smoke whatever she damn well pleases and--

Your mind flashes past her getting grounded-for-smoking incident to some summer, two years ago, when your roommate started trying pot and later had a nervous breakdown, and ended up in an asylum--thinking she was Virgin Mary--just because she wanted to smoke pot, even after you warned her about your high school friends having changed after using pot--like the weeks after John and Greg purchased their first joints from the base hobby skin-diving shop in exchange for a few good shell specimens; they changed their attitudes towards respecting your virginity; you warned her that she'd also change her mind--that she'd crave sex if she continued to smoke it. And what about your sorority sister's boyfriend--didn't he go down hill to ruins after he started taking and dealing grass? And what did it always lead to? The physical fitness films said it led to great needs for something much stronger: purple haze, peyote, and horse or cocaine.

You remember what acid did to your high school buddy: made him believe his hands were dropping off; right there in the middle of your government studies: he turned to you and cried that his veins could no longer hold his wrists to his hands; that he'd lose all his blood if--
if he didn't tell the principal right away. Then he ran to her office, you following behind him--screaming for him to stop!--knowing that if he told her about the hands she'd just call the wagon like she'd done for so many of your other classmates, and when the wagon came to tote him off, he'd be nothing but a bag of soiled napkins tucked into a drawstring laundry bag.

It's Sunday when Mervin, the friendly cop of your parents' neighborhood, parks his patrol car in your parents' driveway and wants to know how school's going for you, and didn't he know?--you'd graduated with your BA in August. And hadn't he heard that you were now working full time as a secretary in the Physical Education Department at the college; and you'd start graduate school in January? Of course, he'd just lost track of time, and how was Tayah? Well, sure he understood about the pot when you told him, and he even shook his head to let you know it disgusted him, and what were you two going to have to do about her? And when you think you can't come up with any remedies, he tells you about the prostitutes that live next door to Tayah and how even a respectable pimp moved out of the neighborhood just last week because it's getting so low class. And did you know that Wayne's sister, Terril, lives across the street from Tayah under the pseudonym Smith, in order to collect two welfare checks? And, well, he didn't really want to report them, since he was retiring from the force next week.

After he drives off on a call to stop three teenagers from panhandling park-goers with knives, you ask your mother about the sister and her welfare checks and learn that it's no coincidence that
Terril also lives in your grandmother's housing complex under still another name, and then up ten blocks from the Colonel's Kentucky Chicken kitchen under her married name—and your mother is positive because your grandmother used to work with Terril at the hospital and once or twice overheard Terril talking to Nurse Mat, Glenna's mother.

It's early October when your sister finds a new secretarial job in a company owned by the constructionist who lives one block from your parents. It's late October when Tayah wants the family Laborador to keep her company in her new Austin, and you're elated at thinking perhaps this will mean new income and possible interest in moving to a more suitable neighborhood—but you're wrong. She prefers her neighborhood and you believe her until—until you ask her, right out, if she fears Wayne.

"No, we're friends." Good friends? "Just what are you leading to?" Did he supply her with what she wanted? "Meaning what?" Okay, in plain language, was Wayne a candy man selling hot and cold? "You're crazy. Where'd you learn those terms? You're nothing but a bigot; you're--".

You're typing when Burt, the college football coach on temporary leave from his NFL League, asks if you're available to "talk" that weekend. You think maybe he's being cute, so you play along with this big-muscled Black dude. Yeah, you'll talk if that's what he needs. "I'll leave a note under your telephone tomorrow and see you Friday or Saturday night." Yeah, you tell him, you do that. But the next day, you think to
look under your phone and there's the note--pasted with long strips of wide tape. The note says he'll call you Friday night when he gets back from his business conference.

You think maybe this is the end of the joke, but just to make sure, you tell your sorority sisters that if a man calls, to tell him you're not there--that you're in town with your mother at the hospital because your father's still not out of surgery after his car accident--which is true--but you're still at the sorority house when the phone rings at 10PM and some dumb pledge runs through the house yelling your name and shouting that the call is long distance and it sounds important. You panic, thinking it's your mother calling from a hospital payphone, and yell "I accept" into the receiver, but it's Burt's voice saying, "I'll be out there in half an hour." Click.

So, now you have to play the game to its uncomfortable end. Dress. Get dressed up and tell the sorority sisters that Burt's only your ride to the office party you almost forgot you have to attend, and when he arrives you try to race your Japanese pledge to the door before she screams at the sight of a Black-man in his dark leather coat, and--oh, Karen, this is Burt. I work with him. Goodnight.

In the car, Burt introduces you to the Black operating the wheel, but you don't hear the name and you wish you could forget his ugly facial scar.

When you get to Burt's apartment, you're almost surprised to see no guests, as you almost convinced yourself that the evening would be spent at an office party. The driver sits down in the front room, clicking his fingers to the jazz blurting from the stereo, and Burt goes
to the back of his apartment, where you hear someone else's voice—a woman's—shouting about how long he'd been gone, and what did he take her for and what broad had he brought home this time?

In the next breath, a maze of blonde hair and long legs rushes past you to the front door, with her red slip straps sticking out of her suitcase seams like serpent tongues. The door slams and Burt walks out of the bedroom explaining that he forgot to pick up the vodka in town but would you settle for a beer and, yeah, that's his wife and daughter in the photo next to his trophies.

The doorbell rings maybe ten or twelve times during the next half hour; Burt answers each time with his wait a minute before running to his bedroom and returning with brown paper sacks and a next week to the voice at the front door.

After the driver leaves to check out the campus, Burt suggests you two watch tv from his bed. You play the game of being interested in the late-night concert when he tries to kiss you the first time; but when he tries to kiss you the second time, you wait until he's right near your lips and then ask him if he isn't still married? He says that's right and why are you avoiding him? You explain that talking consists of two parts—body and mind, and so far, you've had too much body and not enough mind, and perhaps it's time he took you home.

It's the first of November when the newspapers tell of Mrs. Lament's death—overdose of gin and tonic—just two days after her house was robbed of all her rings, furs, and family stamps. She didn't know you, but you had thanked her by name just three weeks before, on your way home from the bus stop, when you knocked at her door and asked if she
wouldn't mind phoning the Humane Society because a passing car had just hit a poodle.

You remember the way she spoke of the poor souls that must go through life every day just to get to heaven—even dogs, she said, had to go somewhere. Then, while you were waiting for the dog to stop biting its tongue, she remarked something about the sounds of an approaching siren—how some nearby accident must have just occurred and how it was still more evidence that life is much too short. But you never saw her again to tell her that the ambulance was rushing to your father's bleeding body to pull him from the family car, which he totaled just twelve blocks from your home. You never saw her again to tell her that he hadn't died—that the wailing sound was evidence that life doesn't always end when a siren starts.

It's two weeks later when Tayah tells your parents that she wants your father's rifle for protection against Wayne, because his wife told her some terrible truths about his past—how he lost his temper last week and began beating his spaniel and wouldn't stop until its heart burst; how he got so angry last year with one of his friends that he went out and shot the man—but didn't get booked and tried because he was Marcey's client—Now looky here, Sarge—this here man's a good and powerful citizen in this peaceful community, if you know what I mean; and it wouldn't look too good on your files if you were to charge someone with murder and then change your mind, if you know what I mean--, and now Tayah feared he wasn't kidding when Wayne had said he'd kill her if she told anyone about the drops and the welfare checks and--.

It's the next day when your mother tells you about Tayah's fears and your father having refused to give her the gun; when she relates her
lengthy conversation with the Avon Lady, the mother of Tayah's best girlfriend, Janie, who said Wayne has been peddling drugs at the nearby high school for some time now—maybe two or three years.

It's one hour later when you dial the local NARC line and report the names of his sister; the color, year, and make of his car; and the details of Wayne's occupation and his location—living with your sister. You hang up with the fear that Tayah could go to prison as an accomplice to the main dealer between two states—but if you hadn't called, she might become another Bobbie Jean.

The next day you drive to your dentist's, have five cavities drilled on top of too much novocaine, and ache so much that you decide to sleep at your parents' for the night.

While you're still assuring your mother that everything will be kept under control—the house cleaned, the dog fed, the plants watered—when she's in the hospital next month for her spinal fusion, your father shouts goodbye—he's going out to the country lot to check the builder's progress and feed the police dog, and see you tomorrow for dinner.

You're in bed and asleep when the hall phone rings. You don't know the hour but answer it anyway. A man's voice asks to speak to Tayah. Just a minute, you say, and pass the phone to your mother with a shrug to indicate you don't know who it could be.

Pause; then, "Why are you calling here?" Another pause. "You mean she's drunk? ... I can't believe you'd be worried about anybody." God, she plays it so cool to that voice; then calmly, "Well, I expect her here for the night. Don't call again." Click.

She looks extremely worried. "That was Wayne. He said Tayah's been to an office party and she's drunk, very drunk. He said he's been
out looking for her since eight and he's worried she might be hurt some­where . . . I don't know, I hope he hasn't hurt her; maybe she got away, and--". Mom, you tell her, nobody holds office parties on Wednesdays.

"I'd call her place and see if she's home but I'm afraid to--if he's calling from her house and answers the phone, he'll know I don't expect her here tonight. I don't know what she might have told him to get rid of him."

You tell her that Wayne doesn't know your car, that you'll drive past Tayah's house and check to see if she's home.

"I'm afraid he might be on his way up here, or he might mistake you for Tayah and shoot--".

Okay, you tell her, phone Nana and let her know you're going to pick her up to stay with your mom at the house while you check on Tayah.

"You'd better get Dad to go with you. Wayne carries a gun." But you remind her there's still no phone out at the lot--that it'll take you at least an hour to drive out to wake up Dad; that by the time you get back to town you'll be--

"I'm scared."

Okay, you repeat, you understand.

By the time you get to your Nana's apartment, she's waiting at the curb with her bathrobe and pillow. "Wayne called me too. I told him I didn't know where she might be and he hung up fast." How'd he know her number? "Guess Tayah must have told him."

As you drop your grandmother off, you ask your mother if she's phoned the police yet. "I spoke with a detective. He said he's been watching Wayne for some time now. I told him about Tayah's last name being different from mine, and how mine was different from Nana's, and
how Wayne called Nana and for him to know her number he must be sitting in Tayah's house—going through her phonebook to call people. Then I told him I was a little hesitant to ask for police help since Wayne is Marcey's friend and Marcey has close ties with the force." What did he say to that? "He assured me Wayne's on bad terms with Marcey now—nothing for us to worry about. He said the Law's after Wayne for a number of things. You'd better hurry."

All the way to the lot you keep staring at the needle on the gas gauge as it points to Empty. If it runs out, you think, I'll walk. Any delay could mean Tayah's life.

When you get to the drive of the lot, it takes ten solid minutes of blasting your horn to rouse him from his trailer. "Bring your rifle, Dad! I'll explain in the car." You're not sure if he knows about Wayne, or if you can get him to act without telling him what the whole scene involves; but you deny nothing when he asks if it's that Nigger causing trouble. You nod yes and explain it would be safer to drive your car, since Wayne doesn't know it, but you'll need gas.

With a hose to his mouth, your dad siphons gas from his truck and lets the liquid run into a bucket. Next, he pours it down a sheet of cardboard you funnel near the opening of your gas tank.

One-fourth of a tank. You'll make it to a town pump before you drive past Tayah's—because if there's a chase, you sure don't want to flee on an empty tank!

Your dad curses the God-damned Nixon Administration for closing every damned station during the gas crisis. Well, you'll have to risk the possibility of a chase, and--yeah, you're still holding those extra
shells in your hands and, no, you're not too scared, but didn't he think it would be a good idea to stop off at Safeway and phone your mother to see if the detective found anything out first? No, the thought of driving past Tayah's house first, and then calling would be a better idea.

As you approach her block, you're alarmed at finding it flooded with light streaming from her house.

You convince your dad he'd better call home before going in, and wait in the car outside Safeway while he dials. During this five minutes, a man on an out-moded bicycle approaches your car. As he gets closer, you see that he's an old man dressed in a leather motorcyclist jacket, rubber boots, and English-saddle riding pants.

As he gets even closer, you roll down your window and listen to what he's saying—but you don't hear words; you hear the imitation of a police siren, and it doesn't stop until he parks his bike near the presto-logs display and walks towards your passenger's window.

He's holding a pad in his left hand and a pencil in his right when he asks your name and wants to see your driver's license. When you tell him you don't have one with you, he lifts a transistor radio from his belt, and extends an invisible antenna three feet into the air, and reports, "This is number 208 reporting a drunken driver on Spruce and Nora with no--". Hey, what are you--nuts? "And contempt for the officer."

He pushes the antenna back into its also invisible slot and hands you the paper he's scribbled with unconnecting lines. "Won't give you a ticket this time, young lady; just a warning. Drive safely, now."

When your dad returns, you ask him if he knows you were almost arrested by some maniac on a bike.
"An old man with a thousand mirrors screwed on his handlebars and wearing an old pilot-skullcap?" Yeah, but how'd he know? "He's been patrolling this area for years because he thinks he's on duty every day." And no body stops him? "Why should they? He's a hard worker." But how did he keep himself? "Somebody said he's an old Good Will Vet--used to sew the arms back on broken dolls, and--".

Wait a minute, what about Tayah and Wayne? "Your mom said the police caught Wayne trying to break down Tayah's front door. He had a revolver concealed under his left armpit but he didn't try to use it when the detective told him he was under arrest on suspicion." Suspicion to kill? "Don't know what, but they were putting him into the patrol car just as Tayah drove up." Was she drunk? "Yeah, but not from an office party--she'd been out dousing it with Janie." Were you supposed to pick her up? "No, she told your mother she wants to sleep in her own bed." Was your dad scared? "I'm just tired."
PART II:  LEAVING THE ZOO
The Law says a man can only be held twenty-four hours on suspicion; Wayne was released the next morning with warnings that he leave Tayah and your family alone—after all, it's Christmas Eve.

It's New Year's Day when you kiss your parents goodbye and drive out-of-state to start your future: two years at graduate school. It's two weeks later when your mother writes:

I'm glad you're safe and sound in school because things are kind of bad here--Last Thursday (two days ago) Wayne called Tayah at work and she hung up on him because he said some nasty words. He called back and the girl at the switchboard told him Tayah wasn't there. Three minutes later, he appeared in the office--so Tayah ran into the bathroom and hid while her boss and another fellow told him Tayah wasn't there. He told them he was going to put something in Tayah's yard and call the police and frame her. He also said he was leaving a note on Tayah's car.

When they thought he had gone, Tayah's boss, Bill Lament, told her to take his own car and drive to her car and get the note. She went to the lot, but when she couldn't see any note, she got out of Bill's car to take a closer look--when Wayne grabbed her and said he had a knife at her throat.
She told him to leave her alone and he said—"I'm going to do it my way." She managed to get free and got back in Bill's car, driving back to the office.

In the meantime, Bill had called the police. A detective came down and talked to Tayah. Then she got in her car and went home. But when she got there, Wayne was sitting in her livingroom.

She told him to leave and he said, "Okay, make me." She dialed all but the last number of Crime Check before he hit her with his fists--gave her two black eyes, a fat lip, and a possible concussion. Then he cried and told her how sorry he was and asked her not to call the police. She said she wouldn't--so he left.

Then she called them and had them escort her up here--but before she got here, that Margaret (Wayne's mother-in-law) and her neighbor, Mrs. Dagger, were here and Dad just got home. He asked them what was the matter and they told him before Tayah drove up.

Of course, he got all upset and mad and hollered to me. I didn't know what was going on. Then when Tayah got here, he wouldn't let her put the car in our garage, so she left with Margaret and the neighbor.

She hid her car and spent the night with Margaret and Wayne's wife, Ruth, who she knows from her school--they had typing classes together last year. Anyway, they were armed with guns and Mrs. Dagger's knife when they heard a noise.
outside the kitchen window. Mrs. Dagger went outside with
a gun and Wayne ran.

Then the police were called again. The next day
(yesterday) the detectives took Tayah down to the Prosecu­t­ting Attorney and they took out a warrant for Wayne’s
arrest. They got him and threw him in jail.

Tayah’s left town for this weekend—and we have
been waiting here and watching for Wayne.

Marcey was at the jail trying to get his bail
lowered and to get him out. We figure he’ll be looking
here for Tayah as soon as he gets out.

We’re not sure what Tayah will do next. I’m afraid
for her is she stays here. Maybe she’ll have to leave
town for good and start a new life elsewhere. She’s
trying to decide that this weekend.

I’ll keep you posted. Just stay put; there’s
nothing you can do to help and at least you’re away from
it.

Our fondest love—.
PART III: YET THEY HAVE NO HELL
In the two weeks that followed that letter, Tayah was questioned repeatedly by Sue Moore, a rookie cop on the municipal force. "Tell me again about Wayne's mother."

"How many times do you need to hear it?"

"I want to make sure I've got the story straight."

"You've already recorded it. Do you plan to memorize it?"

Sue gave her a cold stare which meant the hour's getting late; I'm tired; you'd better tell me.

Tayah took a deep sigh, and then one more, just to let Sue know a cop wasn't going to bully her! After all, Tayah had been the victim! She deserved a little more respect, but she saw that Sue wasn't impressed. "It was in my livingroom, the day after Wayne was arrested. She'd knocked at the door and wanted to talk to me; she said it was important. I told her I didn't know who she was and she'd have to tell me before I let her into my house."

"Did she give you her name?"

"You know she did--told me she was Wayne's mother; that she'd driven cross-state just to visit me."

"Do you think she was telling the truth?"

"Why would she lie about a thing like traveling? Of course I believed her. I even let her in and asked her to let me hear what she had to tell."

"What was she wearing? Did she carry anything?"
"I've already told you five times that she was carrying a small package—which she asked me to open."

"What was inside it?"

"Are you recording again? Or haven't you listened to the tapes you've already made?"

"Routine. You know we're only doing our jobs."

"Yeah. But I have the funny notion you love it!"

Sue ignored the last assault. "What was in the package?"

"A watch she said she wanted me to wear."

"And you accepted it?"

Tayah took another deep sigh, "Sure. A lady doesn't drive 400 miles to give you a present if she doesn't want you to keep it."

Sue wrote down the words in her notebook and looked up for Tayah to continue. "She told me it was her watch--some heirloom, maybe--but she wanted me to have it--since she thought I probably loved Wayne at one time."

"Past tense?"

"Don't pull grammar on me. I'm out of high school. I'm just telling you the story you want me to tell--and if you're tired of hearing it, I'll go home. Deal?"

"Go on. Finish."

"It had diamonds in the band; I asked her if she wanted to keep the strap but she said I could keep the whole thing. She thought it looked better on my wrist than hers. Then she said she recognized my furniture--it was what she'd given to Terril as a wedding gift. I told her Wayne had given it to me when he moved in, and if she wanted it back
she could take it. I even told her I could get more furniture to replace it--because I have a friend that works for the Salvation Army--he collects things from people's front porches and then backs up to my door and home delivers a bed, or a coffee table, or whatever I might need at the time. But she thought I'd earned it and that I should keep it.

"Did you keep it?"

"Sure. Why not?" Tayah pushed her pelvic forward on the hard wooden seat of a captain's chair and pulled her shrink top down over her stomach to cover the two white lines above and below the space where her stomach button had once been--before the doctors covered it over with drafts of skin after a double hernia operation she'd undergone at birth. "You need to hear the reason?" Sue shook her head no. "Then she said she'd like a cup of coffee and I boiled the water."

"Okay--tell me about the husband."

"I only know what she told me--Wayne never spoke about him .... He was in partnership with two of Wayne's uncles and jointly owned a number of homes in town--that they rented out under the name of the uncle who lived in Texas--so they could collect the rents but not have to declare the income when they filed for Welfare.

"She said he was just as bad as Wayne when it came to liking lots of women. She said she'd thought many times about killing Wayne's pa, but she never had the nerve. There came a night, though, when she heard a gun fire and felt his bulk quake under the sheets--and then stillness. As the sheets got wet under her, she turned on the lights--well, he'd been shot. And she wasn't one to blame whoever did it."
Tayah touched the watch-face. "You know, I think maybe that's why Wayne told me he wants to do things his way--maybe he feared I was giving him the shaft--kind of the same way his mother had the last laugh over the whole affair."

"Do you think she looks at it that way?"

"I don't know what she thinks and I don't care--the lady's old."

Sue agreed that it was getting too close to five o'clock to finish the story and, yeah, she thought this would be the last time she'd have to ask Tayah questions for a while--and, oh, by the way, the trial was set for the third week in March.

That night Tayah bought a newspaper and began to read the headlines when her eyes stopped on Wayne's name in the third column. The article said he'd been attacked on Riverside the night before by a male reported to be wearing a ski mask and carrying a knife. The stranger had cut up Wayne's arm and then fled. Tayah started laughing--then crying--and then laughing again. Jesus, she thought, where's Batman when you need him?

She answers the phone and relates the humor about the article. "Yeah, I wish I could have paid that guy to cup up more than his arm ... Well, yeah, maybe there really wasn't an attacker; he might have tried to rob a store and cut himself on glass and went down to the hospital to have it stitched." She twisted the cord of the phone into tight little pig curls and then tried to unwind them. "Margaret called you again? Why? ... Oh, yeah, I knew about that some time ago; I thought I told you ... Well, no, I figured she'd come over to collect Ruth's welfare check when she gave me the watch and-- ... Margaret told you that? How'd she know? Ruth? ... Well, why should Margaret care that
he lays Ruth in the front lawn. Well, sure it's pretty risky with the neighbors and all—but then, hell, look at the neighbors! . . . Well, I heard that's why she ended up marrying him anyway—he threatened to ruin her family if she didn't . . . Yeah, I know her sister's married to one of his cousins—hey, Mom, I gotta go. Call me tomorrow."

She'd heard a noise at the back door. "Hey, Lucky, you want in, girl?" She opened the door and reached down to unleash the dog when Wayne jumped around the corner and pushed her back into the kitchen. "We're gonna talk, Baby."

"I hear ya." She still had the pistol, loaded, in the pocket of her robe. She'd bought it just last week and had since rehearsed this opportunity to shoot him—but the more she thought about pulling the trigger, the more she thought about actually watching a human being fall on her tile and maybe not so able to rise again—the more she wanted to ask him if he'd like coffee or something to eat."

"You bes think twice 'bout stickin' to dat charge. Drop it. You be wishin' you do."

"If you hit me again, Wayne, I'll have more evidence."

"I hear tell you be seein' Brudder Junior."

"And I hear tell you'd be in sore spots if I invited him over to watch a little color tv. Seems I hear he's more than a little interested to find who's ripped it off."

"Don't pull that Shit!"

"No threats, Wayne. I be tellin' ya like it is!" She put his cup of coffee on the table with the imitative sound of a stomping foot.

"Now looky here, Babe--" but he hadn't finished when she walked away from the table, through the livingroom, to the knock at the front door.
"Hey, mother--what's happenin'?" It was Junior.

"Something you'd like to witness; come in. Wayne's here to talk about your tv."

"Shit-t-t, you found it?"

"No," said Wayne, walking over to the portable and lifting it up off the stand, "seems it never got ripped off. I hear tell you broke it into tiny l'il pieces." At this, Wayne flung the set over Junior's head and smashed it on the far wall before it hit the floor and exploded the tube.

Junior didn't stop to collect the cabinet, but turned and fled out the still-open door. Wayne broke into rounds of laughter, and Tayah had to agree that Junior was nothin' but chicken-shit scared, and, indeed, Wayne had posed a solution, but now he'd better get a broom and sweep up the mess because she was leaving for the night, and when she came back in the morning, she'd better not find him in the house.

But when Tayah went out to start the car, she couldn't move the gear into first. She turned on her flashlight and looked at the clutch—the cables had been cut. This was the fifth or sixth mysterious breakdown she'd found that week.

"Okay, you cocksucker!", she screamed as she entered the house again. "You're trying to get me fired, aren't you?—figure I'll never make it to work in the mornings, or . . . . You know damned well what I mean. You pissant, you—". She couldn't finish. He'd struck her again—this time between the already blackened eyes. She fell to the floor and didn't get up.

When she woke, her old roommate Glenna was putting a cold washrag to Tayah's bruised forehead. "Thank God you're not gonna die. Jesus,
you really had me scared. I didn't know whether to call your mother, or the police, or a doctor." Tayah didn't say anything. "Wayne phoned me a few hours ago and told me I'd better come down and visit you 'cuz you were upset about something. When I got here you were laid out on the floor and no one was around . . . . What happened?"
PART IV:  *A NAKED PLACE*
"I think it's my tonsils, Mom. I mean, I don't feel at all well. I've made an appointment to see Dr. White tomorrow. I want him to operate . . . I don't care if I have to postpone the trial . . . . Yeah, well don't worry--the landlord's agreed to sit over here to let her out now and then. I don't think Wayne will want to kill her--I mean, Mr. Pottratts has a rifle and he's gonna sit armed-guard in the house . . . . Yeah, he's even made a sign to hang on the door: THESE PREMISES ARE PATROLED BY DOG AND MAN; and he's agreed to let me park my car in his garage . . . yeah. Okay, I'll call you tomorrow and let you know."

She punched the receiver button on the phone down against the plastic and then let it up again before dialing another number. "Yeah, Glenna? Tayah. Leslie called me this afternoon--she's back in town. Yeah, her mother called a priest friend in Las Vegas and had him go to the police and get her out of the whore house; then he put her on the plane . . . . No, the priest made her give all the dresses back--that was part of the deal. The other part was that she go back to her hubby. Sure, he knows she was hanging around pimps--I mean, he's the one that found them up in the hotel room before she left . . . . Sure . . . What about Janie? No, what's the story? Her mother? Subpoena by Marcey? Well, hell, she's crazy to have gone--it's not even legal coming from his office! I mean, it has to be issued by a court! . . . . God, what a dumbshit! I bet she told him a lotta things he'd love to know in order to win the case, too. Hey, call me tomorrow. I'm gonna phone Janie."
The day before Tayah was scheduled to go into the hospital, Mrs. Dagger phoned her and asked if she knew Wayne was back in jail. "Yeah? Is he afraid someone's gonna cut him up again?" Mrs. Dagger tells her Wayne is in jail on a burglary charge and that Tayah's name is signed on the complaint as a witness.

Tayah checked under the hood of her car to look for any sort of ticking device before she turned on the ignition. She was bound for the police station to check the complaint--and if it had been filed with her signature, she was prepared to prove it was a forgery.

As she was waiting at the Sergeant's desk to see the file, Sue Moore approached Tayah and held her right elbow, "You're under arrest."

"For looking at a file?"

"For being Wayne's accomplice to a burglary of Lament's home five months ago."

"My boss's house? You're crazy!"

"You can read the complaint if you'd like--but I'll tell you what it says--Mrs. Dagger came down this morning and filed a report on both you and Wayne. She said you told Wayne when Bill Lament would be out of town and that you waited in the car while he filled up a pillowcase."

"That woman's crazy. She's been in and out of asylums and you're gonna book me on hearsay?"

"We're booking you on a second-degree burglary charge. That means $3500.00 bail. And I'll take that wrist watch for safe keeping."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning you'll be given your own private cell and toilet until you get bail."
"Then give me my rights and my phone call." Sue gave her a look which said she was tired and wasn't in the mood to give her the "rights. First we get your fingerprints and photos made."

"Great. I've always wanted a first-hand tour of the county courthouse."

"We'll show you the works."

"Don't spare any favors--I wouldn't want to be treated like a friend or anything."

Tayah stood behind a pole which looked like the measure device on her doctor's scales. It held a rectangle of black rubber on which her name, in small plastic letters, had been snapped into place. The flash went off and Tayah took the breath she'd been told to hold. The photographer shook his head, "Damn. We'll have to take it again." Then he turned to her and pleaded, "Hey. You know we can't have ya smilin' when we take this here shot."

"Picky, picky, picky!" The flash went off again. "Hey! Picture-taker! Send a copy to my lawyer--tell him you're holding me hostage and ask for a big ransom. Maybe you can pick up a few bucks for the Policeman's Ball." She turned to Sue and added, "or cunt."

Sue pushed her through the door and into the hallway of closely-set doors. "Hey, wad about my phone call?"

"Don't worry, Hussy--you'll get your call."

For three hours and forty-five minutes, Tayah sat on a cement floor--still waiting for permission to phone someone--anyone. She'd gotten bored three hours and forty-four minutes before, and had been kicking the door and screaming for the last three hours. She looked
through the window in the steel frame and watched barefoot women, probably trustees, mop the tiles in front of her cell. Squinting her eyes in the dim light, she could almost make out half of the writings scratched on the inside of her cell door.

It was on the lower corner of the door that someone had written *If you need to write, there's a bobby pin in the toilet.* She searched the back of the tank and then down by the base until she came to a hole in the porcelain where a rusty hairpin peered back at her. She pulled it out and plunged it into a door panel and began to write through the paint down to the rust. She thought of the scrapings as flesh pulled back—like skin a doctor prepares for surgery—or like the ripples a knife can make across the top of a raw chicken breast when pulled at a slow speed. She rehearsed the notion of stabbing someone—maybe that digbat Dagger. It would serve that lady right to die of stab wounds—just the way she'd killed her first husband. Tayah could remember hearing Mrs. Dagger's voice retelling how she'd locked him in the hall closet and fed him cabbage through the door for two weeks until the night she went in with her knife to relieve him of the gas—plunged the blade into his stomach. She said it was hard to push at first—*but then, when you get it in, Honey, it just slides up.*

Tayah squated in the rear corner, pulling the horsehair blanket up around her shoulders. The cell was getting colder and her throat was getting worse with sharp pains. She thought about her operation—it was scheduled for the following morning; she wondered if she'd be out of jail by that time.
Tayah was asleep on the floor when the food tray was pushed under her door. She was still asleep when the door was unlocked and Calvin Marcey entered the cell. He shook her but could not wake her. "Hey, this girl's out cold! How long have you had her in here?"

The matron said she'd find out and left Marcey to bring her around. When she got back, Tayah was standing with the support of Marcey's arms, vomiting blood into the toilet.

"Get that bondsman in here and phone the hospital--this girl's hemorrhaging!"
PART V: MIRACLE PLAY
When you go to your mailbox to check for letters from home, you're surprised to find the envelope addressed in your sister's penmanship— you'd almost forgotten what it looked like—she hadn't even signed a birthday card in years.

Hi, I just got released from the hospital again and Mom had your note for me. I guess she wrote and told you yesterday about my little ordeal Saturday night when I contributed all my blood to the Trinity Hospital's sick pans. (I filled eight of them after choking up blood for well over two hours and my blood pressure dropped to 80 over 40 before they took me up to surgery). I couldn't believe it— they put an IV in me, then stood to watch me bleed for two hours before my doctor arrived.

I swore I was going to die. Nurse Mat tried packing the vessel down in Emergency but the blood forced out all the packing. God it was goory! I just sat there with my mouth open over a pan and the blood poured out, (except when I had to put my fingers in my mouth to stop the blood from clotting around my teeth and lips--to give the blood a free flow so I could breathe and not have it back up on me).

I just couldn't believe the nurses standing there watching me bleed like that! When I could catch my breath, between the gurgling, gushing, and vomiting, I would ask why
in the *#@t** they weren't doing something! Finally, when I couldn't sit up over my pan anymore and they had to hold me up to bleed, some dumb woman came in to take my blood!

I offered her the bowl full, but no--she wanted it out of my arm. So she found one of my beautiful veins and virtually attacked it six times, not once getting any blood. (The dummy! I could have told her there wasn't any left, as I offered her the last I had when I offered her the bowl). Anyway, by now you can imagine that I was in hysteria--so they finally decided to take me up to surgery and tie the vessels off. (Good of them, wasn't it?!) You should have heard Dr. White yell at Nurse Mat and Terril (she was working volunteer on the shift I was first operated on) for not noticing all my veins weren't tied off when the doctor had operated the first time--that's why I was vomiting blood--because the blood was running down into my stomach!

Sis, you know those two little blobs in the back of your throat? Keep them. There're sheer hell to give up! I could tell you more about my exciting vacation, but I think the highlight will suffice for now.

Goodbye.
You remember that it's not safe to draw conclusions about the medical profession operating in your hometown. You had learned that much from your grandmother when she worked for heart surgeons and plastic surgeons: People die when they shouldn't. The doctors stay. No one can successfully sue the profession--they stick together.

You remember how her boss's wife drugged her own children--served them sleeping potion in their warm milk before lining them in their sleeping bags around the pools--she'd set up a regular slumber party. She didn't even serve a sentence--even though the eight year old boy, the youngest of the five children, died. The Court just sent her away for six months to work in the nutrition ward of a nearby nursing home.

You remember the story because you're trying to be unmoved by the news that Terril was volunteer on shifts when Tayah underwent surgery. You see Nurse Mat's face, too--an older rendition of Glenna's large brown eyes and high cheekbones below an RN's cap. Perhaps those two hours of spewing blood had been set up as minor lessons. You try to think otherwise--but your mind keeps flashing the same conclusions.
PART VI: DOMAINS
Tayah entered through the doors of Calvin Marcey, Attorney at Law—and asked the receptionist to announce her arrival for the 10:30 appointment. Five minutes later, she was sitting in front of a large slate desk and was being offered a smoke from the gold-plated cigarette case of the man sitting in a leather high-backed and button-studded chair. She refused and asked if she had to remain in the same office as Wayne. Marcey said she'd better get used to seeing Wayne's face—because the two of them were going to have to be friends for the next couple of months.

"Meaning what? Just because Wayne's mother told you to bail me out of jail? I didn't even tell her to! She found out from Margaret! And now I've got to pay back favors by making friends all of a sudden with her son?"

"It means, young lady, that you're going to have to clean up your act. You're both charged with the same crime. That makes you accomplices and that makes things look bad if you pursue that charge against Wayne. If you do, you'll be making him look even guiltier than he is now, and you'll be pulling yourself down with the same weight.

"You'll undergo the case together and when we prove you didn't do it, we'll take you out of this precinct, write up a case against the police, and sue the force for false arrest.

"Great, Marcey! But I thought you were friends with the force."
"I've got my contacts, Tayah. That's why I'm having you go out of this precinct to make the charge. I won't defend you on it, but I'll find someone in the Civil Liberties Union who will."

Tayah uncrossed her legs and opened her purse—"Let me write this down. This is going to be fun: I'll not only have my attorney to pay, but you to pay, and then some ACLU attorney to pay. I ought to rob someone so I can pay to get off a burglary charge I don't even deserve!"

Wayne laughed and looked at Marcey with a grin, "Don't be worrin' 'bout payin' this man. Shit-t-t, he don't always collect in tens."

Marcey opened the door and said he'd see them both in a week.

But he saw them sooner than that, as Mrs. Dagger had been back down to the police station to file another report—this time it named Tayah as the kidnapper of Ruth's baby.
PART VII: TAKING A BREAK
The phone rang at ten o'clock on Sunday morning. Your mother answered. It was Mrs. Dagger's voice on the other end, "Did you know Ruth has left town with Wayne?"

"Good. I couldn't be more glad. Who is this? . . . . Why are you calling me? Don't you think you've caused this family enough trouble with your lies and fantasies? I thought that last charge you brought against Tayah would have taught you a lesson--I heard the police laughed their heads off at that joke: you reporting Tayah as a kidnapper and the child's with its mother the entire time! I suppose you'll be calling the police next and telling them Wayne's kidnapped his wife and baby!"

"The truth is, she left because she's afraid of you."

"Who?"

"You! She left a note saying she's afraid you're out to kill her so she can't tell people about Tayah."

"I haven't even met the girl! I wouldn't know her if she walked into my house!"

"I'm going down to the station to report you."

"You go to hell and quit calling this house!" Click.

You ask her who it was and when she tells you there is nothing to do but laugh. "I mean, she's crazy! They won't come and pick you up, Mom. They've made that mistake of believing her too many times."
"Do you think I should call Marcey and tell him?" You agree that it would probably make her feel safer to let him know what's going on--but still caution her not to believe too much of anything he might tell her. You still have your suspicions about the whole scheme of his involvement in trying to get Tayah off the same hook he was trying to put her on when he was defending Wayne on the assault charge.

After she's hung up and been told don't worry! Just don't worry!, the phone rings again. This time it's Tayah telling your mother that Ruth's sister phoned and said Ruth left a note saying the three left town because they were afraid Tayah would harm the baby.

Your mother says their timing's a little off--they should have left that note prior to the charge Mrs. Dagger made!

Tayah invites your mother down for breakfast. While she's sitting at the table drinking her second cup of coffee and reviewing her conversation with Mrs. Dagger, the door opens behind her and Bill Lament walks in, without knocking. He wants to know if Tayah's ready to go to the beach--but when he spots your mother he quits pursuing the questions and mumbles something about needing to check his oil, and it was nice seeing your mother again, and how he'd see Tayah at work on Sunday.

"Are you and Bill seeing each other?"

"We're just friends, Mom. Be happy; he's White."
PART VIII:  ONE FOR THE ROAD
This morning you received a letter saying Tayah's trial has been set for next month; that Tayah lost her job; that everything seems to be quiet for the time being—except for the police, who have been trying to persuade Tayah to testify Wayne committed the burglary—in exchange for dropping her charge; and how it would be impossible for her to testify to that in court because she doesn't know who committed the crime. Your mother mentions that she suspects the police force is corrupt; that she's worried Tayah will get so well known down at the courthouse that her reputation will never be untarnished; that the police could find her in a bar some night and book her on the fact of her fake ID; and how glad she will be when the trial is over.

You think you're safe in your new environment—away from the 190,000 citizens who never conclude. You even mentioned in your writing class last week that you'd written a story about your sister and your conclusions—and how good it felt to be out from under the scare of the drug scene and the mysterious murders and o-o-o-h have you blown it—looking square into the sawed-off barrel of a shot-gun, held by the Catholic Chicano botonist student who says he met your sister at a SLU meeting and how she mentioned you'd been pointing him out to some of your classmates as the mainliner from your hometown mesculine factory to here . . . . and Lord bless the children is all you can think to say, is all you can conclude, is all you can remember.

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SECTION THREE
CHAPTER I

Nucleus

That which is common is not only naive and beautiful, but intelligent, gentle, and proud. —Ainos

With the return of Chelan III to the ivory throne of Gregeot Beach, Darlcaster grew to be the wealthiest village in all of South Europe. Being wealthy, however, is no indication of Darlcaster's accessibility to the outside world; for Darlcaster was surrounded by the Lorina Mountains on all sides like lips that surround a mouth. Any particular voyagers seeking to enter Darlcaster must first comprehend the intricacy of that great labyrinth we now call the stars. Only then might such-and-such a voyager solve the entrance to the Lorinas as each peak and valley changed form according to the inhaling of the winds, and the exhaling of sun and sky; changing like fickle dunes of the great desert that slept to the west of them.

Voyagers often told of other voyagers, who upon seeing the constant flux of the mountain forms, sought entry to Darlcaster by the means of swimming under the Lorinas. Some succeeded; most did not. Others bought maps from travelers who turned back from the climb in defeat; others used maps that had flown into their hands in much the same way that clouds float through ports.
But such maps were of little use, for it was true that the constant changing of mountains made map-making a daily chore. This did not matter for Darlcasters, for it provided many jobs—as each day a new chart had to be drawn, and each day a new chart had to be read—so as to keep the task of conquering the Lorinas comparable to the arduous feat of unscrewing a rusty chastity belt with only one peacock's plume as a tool.

This constant changing of relief also made great sport for Darlcasters, for they often made bets on the number of attempts any one voyager might make to cross the Lorinas when using yesterday's maps; some villagers wagered that such-and-such a voyager would give up the map and climb the bluffs as they formed; others wagered that the maps would crumble to ashes before yet another voyager could complete his journey down the salty stream which flowed from the bay and traveled between two legs of mountain, tapering from small ankles near the coast to large thighs, that joined the Lorinas; most likely before he realized the stream led so far inland to these mountains and then no further—for like the man who enters a woman, there comes an early neck that narrows and then halts further penetration into the folds of new gorges; for this is where the Lorinas began to jut out of the land like pelvic bones swelling a taunt abdomen.

It is believed that when the salty stream from the bay was swallowed by the Lorinas, that it was secreted inside the circular mountain chain by a stream which sprung from the spot where a navel might sink in flesh. It flushed the land in such a manner that the waters appeared to flow in a circle. Some called this a moat; wiser
men said it was other than a moat, for the stream disappeared on the side of the village where the thickest trees grew. This was hard to prove because those who swore they sampled the west outlet testified that the water was not salty like the river that fed the moat; however, since the moat never flooded, it was hypothesized, through great thought by the wisest Darlcaster men, that the moat was more like a stomach that churned the heavy particles of salt into layers of white that lined the bottom of such a dark blue pool. This is not a great matter; for, at first, those who voyaged over or under the Lorinas rarely wished to explore beyond the island of Darlcaster that rose like lint from a navel and later grew like rows of teeth in newly formed gums.

What's more, the difficulty of reaching Darlcaster served as an attraction to those who felt amusement and challenge in reaching that which is thought inaccessible, and therefore, novel for its impossibility to conquer. After the voyager arrived, he was still entertained. He was seduced by desire to trap the elusive magic of the town, as children race through meadows with cupped nets to capture the painted wings of a summer's afternoon; to hold such precious colors between two fingertips; to pluck one by one the very rainbows that make it so unique. This is what the voyager missed if he turned back from the Lorinas too soon; if he forgot the seriousness of his own childhood fantasies to someday see Darlcaster's alabaster houses roofed in rock that reflected the sun, thus giving the villagers all but four hours and twenty-three minutes of daylight every ten years.

Darkness was so rare, that when the tenth year did come, the villagers prepared parades, decorated the Square with stuffed goats'
heads, and gave their children rock candies imported from the Lorina caves; it was a sign of a truly great king to be born during such a darkness—but mysteriously none had as yet been delivered. It did not matter. Darlcaster prospered well without one, except it would have been so wonderful to decorate statues of babies rather than peacocks.

In time, the custom of birthdays gave way to the mass celebration of decades; in this way, children were not recognized as whole-living organisms until the darkness came, on which occasion they were baptised as age one their first darkness; "two" years their second decade; and so on until most cemetery slabs in the valley claimed those just buried at nine or ten years of age. This was very confusing for some children were born just after a darkness, and some were born just before the next one so that in reality the children baptised as "one" ranged in physical age from one to ten; on the other hand, it was appropriate to think of many biological ten-year-olds as one-year-olds because so many were that capricious. In addition, no grandparents were accused of going through their "second childhoods" simply because the completion of the first never took form. What's more, stores only had to prepare every ten years for the sales of giftwrap paper, ribbons, and trinkets—so that merchants could turn to the more serious matters of counting their coins, kissing ladies, and polishing brass buttons that were worn on outer-jackets by each villager so commemorating the witness of each dark; thus, one button corresponded to each year of age. In this manner, a Darlcaster passing a neighbor on the street would check to see if the passerby were more earnest than himself. Such buttons eliminated undue embarrassment to many passerby
who, wishing perhaps to greet each other, might first check for buttons
to see if their neighbor be a whole person deserving a hello, or a
fractional person deserving nothing but isolation for the bad luck that
oozes from the pancreas of those unaged.

In short, Darlcaster was not like the other villages in Gregeot,
or perhaps all the world. For this reason, the villagers took it upon
themselves, at fancy, to think up relatives who may have lived in Darl-
caster before the building of the reflecting roofs; thinking up any
relative who may have performed such great feats as shaping the Lorinas
by lying down like dogs, their arms folded over their knees, their heads
tucked on top of all four limbs. For it seemed rational that such
relatives must have been very large indeed to move in their sleep with
such force that the ground shook and the moat sloshed on the shores of
the Lorinas to wash the kneecaps of their young not yet born. For who
else might have cast the sun from the painful sting of bees and placed
it in the sky to look like the yellow cross-section of a bee's stripes?
Then could it not also be possible that if such large people could still
move the mountains to remind the villagers of such all-powerful strength,
that such large people could someday roll over in their sleep and smother
the Darlcasters?

It is for this reason that the villagers first built the special
buildings from the white layers that covered the bottom of the moat;
this is why the buildings were set with colored glass and different
colored candles that were thought harmful to the bodies of any such
large and restless sleeper as the one who wrapped himself under the
grasses and rocks of the Lorinas. Then it became necessary to compose
songs that might wake such a sleeper before he rolled into the moat
and drowned. It was made a law that all villagers learn the songs so they would never be caught off-guard by such restless sleepers. To trap each other into remembering those songs, the words were recited from memory at least once a day; for those younger villagers, a large book was kept to record the songs, and later the chants, so that each defense could be learned by all Darlcaster families.

Other Gregeotians, hearing of such customs, came to Darlcaster to read the book but were turned away by the strange tongue used to record the tales, or by the cryptic use of bells and gestures made during each meeting so that all Darlcasters grew as captives of their own fears.

But far more important is the fact that the strangers could not be absorbed by the belief in such songs, for the words asked that love be given by all, regardless of the buttons, and yet those who conducted the singing of such songs were loved as kings, or greater, but not as neighbors. For this reason, strangers soon stopped voyaging to Darlcaster; and those who came, soon left—so that Darlcaster grew only out of its same seed, all children being its children's children.

One such child is a girl the age of "two" who weaves snow caps for the peaks of Lorina Range so the large people will not freeze into waking up for blankets. She has lived most of her life near Almor River where the moat feeds into the thickest grove of trees in all of Darlcaster; where ten sawmills still carve and upholster the finest tapestry loveseats for the most renown lovers. Her name is Moutonia; she is the great-great-great grandmother of Theone.

No doubt there are still Darlcaster villagers who marvel at her eternal age and her devastating beauty; there are more who seek the
method by which she has attained such youth over so many centuries; but such discussion is closed. She will not speak of the sun or her florescent rooms where she stays when the dark comes. Some think the magic remains in her defiance of the dark; others have forgotten when she last took a birthday; most have never heard of the buttons or the strange ways of singing in times of trouble. It does not matter. For decades she has made plans to make both the heads of England and the world accept her stubborn endurability as a sign of prophecy: she says she will not leave until the wisest baby is born.

The numerous letters I have mailed them make the matter clear; yet the words go unnoticed. It's for such a reason that I call my great-great-great granddaughter, Theone, out of her dreams to record my story in full; why I give birth to granddaughters; why I have planned my life to include the birth of Theone's children. For my children's children will record the story of the soul; they can only tell what Moutonia chooses for them to know; others can only learn what is found in the truth of my daughters' lives.

Because I speak from the clouds that brush against the foreheads of great minds, I hold no doubts about the success of Moutonia's lineage in bearing wisdom; no interest in sudden wealth; no fear of important occasions; no charms to shrug and shake at large crowds who line the gutters of outcome. So as not to forget Moutonia, I shall begin with the story of her birth.

Moutonia was born the year the sky tailored itself over the Lorina Mountains; the year the Almor River began to flow from the moat;
the year the roofs were made of reflecting rocks; the very year, in fact, that her Uncle Chelan III appeased so-and-so, for which he was returned intact to the high throne of Gregeot. But this is known history, and need not be remembered beyond the fact that Moutonia, from the instant of her birth, became Darlcaster's symbol of longevity; the very mistress who flirted with age but never enchained her body or mind to the rigidity of his lines; to the demands of his decrepence; the lonliness of his agony. For this she was honored many times over by those who wore brass buttons.

Some villagers remember her at the age of a fractional person--when she lived in the workhouse of her family, weaving great stories in silk to wave in the wind so that each character might breathe as the living and so take part in the act of dying. When they were dead, she would weave another story so more characters would live to keep her company during the weaving of new cloths. This in itself was not so unusual, for many young girls took to such frivolities; what the villagers find most worthy to remember is that when she invented a story and completed the windy death of the characters, the story came true on the coming of the next dark. (Some say this is why she was locked in the florescent room and has never seen the dark since her second decade).

Other villagers tell of her first "year" when she began to bloom in the chest as a woman; when her hair took on the shine of icicles; when her feet went without shoes so that she might be prepared for bathing at all times of the day. These villagers remember her as the most beautiful of maidens--for she was unique from others with her long black tresses; those wrists more delicate than the slender stems of young violets; such cheeks that made crimson poppies grow pale.
One day a white-robed man, close to His Grace, carried a large package through the town of Darlcaster to Moutonia's door; he told her that such a gift was sent by the Throne to thank her for being so beautiful; to commend her for living without the false actions we now call hypocrisy; to bestow her the extravagance of a clear mind from breath to breath. In giving her the gift, the man three times repeated Nema. Sangh anere kysf ums lythym gan dygf nym nahafu ums thugf ums--which could mean: the idols of the nations are gold and silver, the work of human hands. But such words did not seem so important, for when Moutonia opened the package she discovered nothing but the four sides and the bottom of the box. The gift was invisible to all, including Moutonia. But she did not weep, for she realized, as the bishop himself hinted, that she would someday discover the true secret of such a gift.

A little after the bishop's return over the Lorinas, Moutonia took ill from a great fever. A man who was by no means a novice in medicine, came to the village to cure her of such passions to lay in bed all day; to ignore her familiar chores; to deprive the villagers of the ecstasy they often captured as her beauty followed her to the Square where she dipped her pail in clear water or washed the dry eyes of the goats' heads that hung in the Square from dark to dark. When the doctor arrived, he found that her great beauty drained him of all his strength; so that on the third day of threatening her illness, he gave way to his own death.

The word epoh went out to all the world that Moutonia must be cured. All the doctors in the nearby villages heard the words and came
to help; but they failed to survive her great beauty. All the doctors in the nearby countries had also failed to survive her great beauty; and so it came true that all the doctors on the continent feared they could not cure the fever before she infected their hearts with the passion to love her--the same passion that made their graves.

The villagers could not be consoled. They feared that her beauty would soon turn on those who wore the buttons. It was decided that she must be driven to the mountains to remain until her fever cleared. Many were heartbroken, for they feared she would die; and with her would die the measurement of their prosperity and the legend of the most beautiful woman of all the world. But there were those weighted with many buttons who made the grave decision to remove her body, in the third month of her fever, into the Lorinas. She was given shelter in a large cave and left enough clear water and dried fruits to wet and fill her mouth for many months. Many feared they should never see her again. Others were grateful that some decision had at last been met. At last, the doctors stopped coming, and the gravediggers could rest.

It was three years before Moutonia reappeared on the peaks of the Lorinas. She was said to come out every winter to weave snowcaps for the mountains. Such caps had to be made, for the sun shone so brightly that rain never fell; so that altitude made no distinction between the valley and mountains, for there was no snow. It was necessary to fold the cloth over the peaks so the birds would know where to fly higher; and thus not embed their feathers and bones between the hard bunks of granite.

It was true that Moutonia was not the first to weave such cloths, for she had learned the trade from a memory left to her by earlier white-robed men. In using such knowledge with great skill, she prevented the
needless death of any winged animal—and it is believed that even the flying fish, if they ever thought to leave the ocean, would know where to leap, and where not to leap. So great was her skill in preventing the suicide of birds, and the bruising of mountains, that the villagers came to think of her as the true nursemaid of nature. Some still contribute the changing of mountain forms to her daily whims—perhaps at random, she lowers the clouds like petticoats to cover the ankles of bare hill, and waits for the dark before spreading their knees like mothers to seduce the moon until their caps turn white.

In total, nine hundred altars were built at the base of the Lorinas; each one rooted in the trunk of a chestnut tree to shelter worshippers from the sight of Moutonia, who might on occasion try waving to the older villagers who had once befriended her. To the new ones, she was a legend to be feared yet revered. To those not yet "born", she was a heretic against the dark. It did not matter. She was worshipped as a saint; those not yet "born" would decorate her temples as their fathers and fathers before them had.

Therefore, homage was not paid out of love but from a sense of duty: she would never be a stranger to those who breathe in troubles of superstition to exhale decisions.

Moutonia did not deserve such abuse. She knew if someone was going to get "even" with her enemies—both the sporatic fevers in her blood and those who hid from her sight—it would need to be herself. It is for this reason that Moutonia chose to display one more of her great talents by preaching the verses of old songs down into the valley. Even if the villagers were too far below to hear her words, too fearful to listen, they could not ignore the scorch of her breath sent across their
backyards until the rumor spread through and beyond Darlcaster that there were in fact two suns in the sky—all of which suggested the extra light might erase the dark all together.

For this reason, the heads of Darlcaster held meetings to determine the better of two threats: Moutonia’s fever which nourished death—as opposed to the two suns which meant the loss of dark and thus the loss of gaiety—the result being the same as death.

New discussions built themselves on the tails of old discussions until the entire debate folded onto itself from the weight, leaving the solutions in ruins that tripped the villagers.

There were those merchants among the decisionmakers who thought to make profits from such ruins—to string each into a heavy rock necklace, to be given to Moutonia with instructions to wear it only when swimming in the moat. If she were drowned, they said, she would pose no threat with her fever, and no threat with two suns. There were others who said she must be saved from such a death, for should she witness dark in the deepness of the community bath, her cloths would once again mold Darlcaster histories.

There were men who wisely feared the solution of killing Moutonia. They realized also that true fear believes only in itself, so that fear becomes a vanity more deadly than the absurdity of any potential individual threat. This last argument did not change the minds of those men who sought to kill Moutonia. The division of the buttoned was so great, that those who wished to save Moutonia were driven to the Lorinas to live in caves where she might dwell. The other men who sought to kill Moutonia threatened they would track the hill-seekers in due time, armed perhaps with the greatest of rock and leather weapons. It did not matter.
The hill-seekers meant to protect Moutonia to their deaths; the valley-dwellers meant to give the hill-seekers that choice.

This is how the seed of Darlcaster's one family split from one pod into two vines—one strain clung to the floors of the valley and grew so knit in the agreement to kill Moutonia that the valley came to resemble the body of a black sweater, stitched at the neck so the head could not see the light of merriment. This is how the other strain wound itself through the chestnut trees in such diverse paths, that all valley-dwellers feared to walk, least they step on the ivy and be trapped until they starved.

Let it be remembered that this division was not nourished by money matters or jealousy, but fed from the belief in what is just for Darlcaster's survival. This line was neatly drawn, creeping through the town in view of everyone to draw one meandering line of blood between first families, between old grandparents and new "borns", between wives and husbands, between lovers and those loved— even between the pews in buildings where stained glass windows still reflected Darlcaster's fear of mountains.

All in all, this would be recorded as the year of the Great Divide. This was the year Earth spread her Valley from the Lorina cliffs with such a quaking that many villagers planted dead fish in the soils to make her labor pains less severe; this was the year Earth bore the Almor as a siamese twin, forking the waters through two separate mouths: one opening upstream, the other vomiting downstream through gorges in the Lorinas where it cleansed the coastal beach with its backwash. This was the year Moutonia gave birth to two hearts—
one for the survival of Darlcaster; the other for the survival of her own life so that she might someday come to understand the meaning of the empty box.

It was at this time, after many hours' study of her reflection in mountain pools, that Moutonia made a grave decision: she would sever the Darlcaster tongue and float upon it like a boat into the unknown she had so many times imagined as the perch to where birds fly. Here she planned to build a womb in the clouds, where she could take much time to decide the course of her remaining years. She was not hurried, however—for it has been recorded that she vowed not to die until the wisest of all new borns was delivered into her arms; and she did not fear the birth of such a being would soon take place. It did not matter. Not now.

It was during the making of this great decision that Moutonia had discovered all love is both true and false; sought and fabricated. If the hill-seekers continued to worship her, she could not make them view her weaknesses—for it was true, she was not perfect; for though she thought to escape the character lent to her by Darlcasters as the most beautiful of women, she was not yet capable of sacrificing herself in the clutches of the valley-dwellers; nor in the prayers and worship of the hill-seekers.

She decided she must divide this decision into two schemes: part of her would leave, and part of her would stay. Her body would leave, her child would remain. With this, Moutonia prepared herself to be received by the winds and the sun and the sea and the earth.

First, she shredded her hair into small clumps that blew away in the wind. She wrote the story of her departure on the reeds that grew
outside her parents' home so the winds might carry such news through the ears of sleeping villagers--enter their dreams and give them peace. Such note upon note made a music that followed her as a companion, harmonizing the act of giving with the act of receiving. Second, she worshipped the sun as her mother, and offered it the blood that spilled from the open vein housed between her legs. She asked the sun to accept the red wetness; to blend it with the yellow disk the large people had so long ago cast in the sky: this would give the sun two sides to be marveled by those who stare. Thirdly, she drank of the sea and asked that salts work their ways through her body and take away the impurities when she sweat the sun. Fourthly, she asked that the earth support the daily walks of her child; that it build itself up around the baby to keep it warm; that it wear away into dust when the child sought to leave; for the loved should have roots, but also wings.

That the ceremony had ended meant Moutonia was prepared to fold her body between clouds like sheets that sandwich a sleeper. Her child cried in the Lorina caves. Some villagers said it was the wolves; others said it was the sound of stars skidding across the sky.