

**THE MAN WHO FELL FROM THE SEA
AND OTHER STORIES**

By John Bartkowiak

Edited by Deborah Kaplan

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STORIES

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SHADOWS OF THE EUCALYPTUS

The couple walked across the field that was still damp in spots despite the longer days of sunlight. It was a warm day for February and the grass, following the wet winter, was green already, like the greens of March. The sky was cloudless and the afternoon sun was still high over the eucalyptus trees creating tall shadows over a portion of the field.

The man carried a backpack, weighted heavy with books and bottled water, while folded neatly over the woman's arms was an old white blanket. The man put his free arm around the woman's back. They had been together for a long time and seldom walked together without touching.

The two walked past couples lying on blankets in the sun, others playing frisbee, some dressed in shorts and t-shirts, some eating late lunches on the picnic tables near a circle of young pines. Along the roadside that bordered the curve of the field, cherry blossom trees bloomed white and pink. The man tried to remember if the trees always bloomed the same week each year or whether it was dependent on the weather; but, he couldn't recall.

"How about over there?" the woman suggested nodding to a sunny patch that was on the bottom of a small slope at the end of the field.

The man agreed it was a good spot. He thought momentarily about the growing shadows of the eucalyptus but estimated they were still a great distance away. The woman spread the blanket over the ground, then got down on her knees to flatten the edges. The man stood watching, not helping her when he knew he should, and then laid down and let out a sigh as though the effort of walking through the field had been a forced march.

The woman sat down next to him and removed her gym shoes and socks and rubbed her feet in the sun. It felt good to be barefoot after such a cold, rainy winter. She pulled out her book from the backpack, looked at the front and back cover, but did not open it. She had begun the book the week before but had read only the first few pages. Admittedly, she was a slow reader and it was a thick book.

"Do you want *your* book?" the woman asked.

The man was now laying on his side with his face away from the sun.

"No. Why don't you read me yours."

"I don't think you will like it."

"Don't you like it?"

"I just started but it's not the kind of book you read out loud," the woman said reclining down next to him, then sitting back up to take off her sweatshirt. Underneath her sweatshirt she wore a white tanktop that purposely revealed her stomach, which was flat and lean. She took the sweatshirt and fluffed it into a pillow, then laid back down.

"Why don't you want your book?" she asked rubbing the man's back through his t-shirt.

"I don't know - it seems too nice out to read."

"Are you okay?"

"Yes. I couldn't be better."

The two fell into silence - the kind of silence with which only people who are very close are comfortable. In the time they had been lying in the field many more people had arrived. The man noticed this and was glad they had arrived early to claim such a good spot.

"Oh, your neck is getting burnt. You should put some lotion on. Can I put some on for you?"

She had been eating one of the apples they had carried in their pack.

"Yes, please," the man said without moving.

The woman sat back up to find the suntan lotion from the backpack and after squeezing some into her hand applied it to the man's neck while he lay motionless. He had been watching a father and his young son kicking a soccer ball back and forth. The boy could kick the ball quite far but when he tried to catch his father's kicks like a goaltender, the ball would fall through his hands.

"Get under it and try lowering your arms. Don't wait and let it come to you," the father instructed. And the boy did, and he didn't have a problem catching after that.

"He has hair like yours," the woman, who had also been looking on, said putting her fingers in the man's hair. "It's all curly. He could be your son."

"I'm losing my hair."

"Don't be ridiculous - you have plenty of hair. Is he any good?"

"Who?"

“The boy. Is he a good player?”

“He's a good kicker.”

“He sounds much older than he looks. How old do you think he is?”

“About six or seven.”

“What about the father? He looks young.”

“I don't know. I can never tell how old people are any more.”

The couple fell back into silence. The man continued watching the father and son. It reminded him of playing catch with his own father when he was young and he tried to think of what age his father had stopped playing catch with him. It was the kind of thing, he thought, that ends over night. The woman opened her book but could not get herself to read. The book seemed too long to her, the print too small, and at her current pace it would take her months to complete it.

“Do you think we're too old to have kids?” the woman asked putting down the book and putting an arm around the man.

“What? No. Why do you say that?” the man asked without turning.

“I don't know, sometimes I feel things have passed us by,” she said reaching for and finding his hand.

“That's silly. We're still young,” the man said turning around to face the woman. She gave him a weak smile, which usually made him laugh but this time did not. The sun was directly behind her and had moved a great deal since they first laid down.

The couple lay together like that for a while, hand in hand, his head on her breast, as the sun continued to set and the shadows from the eucalyptus trees slowly inched forward and covered the entire blanket.

THREE KINGS

Imagine this: Three Kings standing around a bus stop across the street from their high school. The first bell has not rung but it will momentarily. The sky is blue and the air is crisp and calm and the Three Kings reign supreme. Their names don't matter but for the record they're Tre, Dylan and Joseph. All three are dressed in sweatshirts -long and extra large - and baggy jeans that fall down beltless below their waists. Their feet are housed with the best gym shoes money can buy. One is wearing a knitcap and two are wearing headphones like necklaces. No one comes near the bus stop where the Three Kings are holding court. Everyone knows better. The Three Kings have a coolness that they carry like a badge. It makes them stand out from everyone else and everyone knows it. One King sits on the bus stop bench staring off into space. His arms are crossed. He can feel the eyes of people driving down the street and he is thinking about how he looks to them. He knows he looks good. He is also thinking about his girlfriend. She is hanging with her friends on the steps below the old front doors. Even she knows better than to approach the Three Kings when they are alone together at the bus stop before school. And this morning, one King is rapping a new rap he wrote the night before, at his mother's house. He taps time on his chest. Rat-a-tat-tat. Rat-a-tat-tat. The one staring off into space is not paying attention. He's jealous of his friend's rapping but would never admit that, especially to himself. When the final bell rings, the Three Kings don't move. It's not good to be early or even on time. What kind of message would that send? No, there's no hurry. One smokes a cigarette. He thinks he looks like a tough kid he saw in a movie - someone that everyone respects. The one rapping starts a new rap. He barely talks normally anymore - it's all rapping but no one seems to notice or care. And the one staring off into space continues staring off into space. He's thinking about his father now, but he would never admit that, especially to his father. He is also thinking of nothing in particular. When they feel enough time has gone by to make them noticeably late, the Three Kings slowly walk across the street. They walk against the light. They enjoy stopping traffic. Let them wait! Let them eat cake! They walk with a distinct rhythm - a slow, patient, groovy rhythm that if it could be heard would sound like da da da dada dum. They walk their slow patient groovy da da sounding rhythm as if they somehow know their reign will end. But they really can't know and they can't see and even if they could see they still would not believe that they will soon go on to lead very dull, unimportant, and quite less than ordinary lives. The Three Kings - they're the bomb! They're the shit! Long Live the Three Kings!

LOST GIRL

Heather had the following ten things:

- 1) Two loving parents;
- 2) A close circle of friends;
- 3) A college degree in Art History from a well respected university;
- 4) A fair paying job at a respected Auction House;
- 5) A one bedroom apartment on an enviable street in the city;
- 6) A boyfriend with a higher paying job;
- 7) A pretty face;
- 8) A reliable Japanese automobile;
- 9) A trust fund inherited from a grandmother she never knew;
- 10) A good sense for fashion.

Still, Heather was not happy. She tried everything. She sought counseling but found it only uncovered more unhappiness. She turned to Christianity but thought it too touchy-feely. It also conflicted with her sleeping in on Sunday. She looked to Buddhism and meditated for long hours in her room but it only made her hungry and therefore found herself gaining weight. She tried recreational drugs but consequently felt guilty. She tried prescription drugs only to feel more hollow than before. She tried running but developed shin splints. She had less sex. She had more sex. She had no sex. She thought about the same sex but liked men too much. She drank more, but quickly saw the emptiness of a bottle. Time passed and she began to fall further into despair.

Soon after, she broke up with her boyfriend claiming she needed "more space." She became estranged from her circle of friends and stopped calling her parents every other Sunday. She stopped caring about how she dressed and began to sleep walk through work. It was all a very sad affair in the middle of a very wet winter. It rained forty five days in a row, and stopped and then rained for another fifteen days, until the sun finally came out for good.

She visited the art museum the day the sun finally came to stay. There was a black and white photo exhibit by a famous European photographer she had been wanting to see. It was all quite melancholy work and she loved it. Upon exiting the museum that day she chanced to stop in a side gallery of abstract works. There in the gallery she saw a giant wall-size canvas painted entirely in white. It was a different shade of white from that of the gallery walls. It was a pure white. A cloud white. She didn't know why the painting attracted her as much as it did. Maybe it was the size or maybe it was the thickness of the paint. Whatever it was she could not pull herself away. She sat down on a bench in front of it and stared at it for what seemed hours. On the bus ride home she jotted down the following words on her museum brochure:

Void
Eternal
Space
Clarity
Lightness
Time
Abyss
Tranquil
Heaven
Power

She later crossed off Time and Power.

She thought about the painting all week and visited it two more times after work and stayed each time until the museum closed. Each time, the white painting seemed to speak to her more, and she added a few more words to her list:

Now
Change
Unlimited

The following day, the day after her last visit to the museum, she quit her job and gave thirty days notice to her landlord. She then called her circle of friends and threw a going away party for herself. She told everyone she had joined a “volunteer organization” and was flying to Albania to work in a school for abandoned children. Everyone was surprised and apprehensive about the venture, especially her parents, but she was determined to go, and she left two weeks later.

Heather only stayed in Albania for one month. It was a dreadful place lost in the Dark Ages. The entire country, not only the school, consisted of abandoned children, which filled her with despair and hopelessness. Additionally, she spent most of her waking hours swatting away the advances of the Albanian men. So, she took the first chance she could to escape, and flew to Italy where she met and quickly fell in love with an Italian law student. The affair lasted two months and ended miserably. Brokenhearted, she spent the remainder of her trust fund traveling through Europe. When the money ran out three months later, her parents wired her a ticket home. When she returned she had the five following things:

- 1) Two loving parents;
- 2) A smaller circle of friends;
- 3) A college degree in Art History from a well respected university;
- 4) A pretty face;
- 5) A good sense for fashion.

THE MAN WHO FELL FROM THE SEA

It seemed so fantastic! One moment he was below the waves, his lungs full of water, sinking and tossing every which way in the undercurrent; and the next, he was falling into the clear blue sky as if the world had been turned upside down.

At the present... finding himself safely on the beach a stone's throw from the steel bridge that connected the mainland to the island, he wondered if what he thought had just happened had indeed just happened. A quick assessment of his soaking wet black business suit and new Italian shoes (purchased on sale a week before), along with the saltwater trickling down his forehead, assured him that yes he had absolutely and unequivocally been completely submerged in water sometime very recently (say within the last ten minutes) and somehow had arrived on the beach where he was now sitting peering out across the waves. All of that, he was willing to concede, was factual. It was the other part, the part about being snatched from the tight clutches of the ocean's grip and shooting into the heavens like a human cannonball, that he was having trouble accepting.

The following were his immediate thoughts on the matter : Was it a freak of nature? A shifting of the earth's plates or some other strange phenomenon? Perhaps it was caused by a rogue wave (he had once seen a television program on the subject - they were tricky dangerous things) or was it the undertow - not a typical undertow but a reverse undertow? He rubbed the saltwater from his forehead and pondered undertows for a moment. He knew nothing about undertows (let alone reverse undertows) except that they were tricky and dangerous things, too. But did they have the strength to release a man, especially one of more than average build, 1,000 feet into the air? Please note that one thousand feet was only a mild estimation. In actuality, he fell high enough to see the entire county from the interstate down south all the way up north to the border.

Now, he was not a religious man nor a spiritual man (although he had tried Zen Meditation for a month when he was a teenager), but having attended the state university where he received two degrees (one in psychology and the other in accounting), he did consider himself an intelligent man, and being such, he was not willing to rule out any possibility even if it should border on the supernatural. Saved by God or a Guardian Angel? The thought made him shiver all the way down to his damp underclothes. No, even if there was a God (and he thought not), why would He choose to save him? There are much more deserving candidates than me, he thought. What about aliens? The Northwest was noted for alien sightings. Everyone has claimed to have seen one. Perhaps he had been abducted? That thought also made him shiver, even more than he had shivered when considering Divine Intervention. But then, why would aliens choose him? Did he have some special genetic make-up that made him special? He *was* double-jointed in the thumbs. No! No! It was all nonsense! God! Aliens! The most likely and

reasonable explanation for him sitting on a beach in a drenched \$400 business suit was the simplest and the most obvious - he had lost consciousness in the water, washed ashore on the beach and had imagined the entire falling or flying thing. Case closed!

Yes, that was it. "Simply my imagination," he said out loud standing up from the sand and brushing off his backside. Both his legs and back were stiff as though he had just woken from a long sleep on a very disagreeable mattress. The water was very cold and must have cramped his muscles. He looked up and down the beach. It was not a large beach like the ones south of town, but it did run from the bridge for a good quarter mile until the coast turned rocky again. With the sun shining as it was, he expected to find the beach crowded. Instead, it was completely deserted, except for a man playing fetch with his dog along the surf.

Looking up towards the bridge, he noticed a small group of people gathered towards the center. One person, a woman, seemed to be frantically explaining something to the rest of the group. She kept pointing towards the water and then throwing her hands up in the air. He was close enough to the bridge to see the woman's lips move but could not hear a word she was saying over the sound of the waves crashing along the shore.

Supernatural? Divine Intervention? Continental Plates? Reverse Undertows? Did it really matter how it all happened? The fact of the matter was that the only thing that mattered was that he was alive - wet from head to foot and drenched down to his underwear - but alive. So, what do I do now? he wondered. Should I go home? Drive to the police? No. What would that do? Perhaps I should call the kids? It had been a while. One week - two weeks? He couldn't remember. No, he didn't want to risk having his ex-wife pick up the phone. He was suddenly feeling very good - too good for a conversation with the ex. Why hadn't he felt this good earlier in the day? Where was his car? He couldn't remember that either. He checked all his pockets. His keys were not there. He felt like half of his memory had been erased. Why couldn't he remember where his car was? Shock? Yes, it was shock. He was experiencing shock. He did know with a good degree of certainty that it had been a very uneventful day - not a god awful day like the ones in the past - but just your average run-of-the-mill ordinary day.

He was distracted from his philosophical pondering by the barking of the dog on the beach. It (it being some sort of retriever) was relentlessly yelping at the waves. The owner (the owner being a man of medium build in his late forties) in turn was yelling for it to get the tennis ball bobbing in the water, but it just stood there defiantly barking at the surf.

Maybe he wouldn't be standing on the beach soaking wet with his head racing full of ideas of God and rogue waves and standing in ruined new Italian shoes if he had taken a different route home after the sales meeting he had attended that afternoon. Yes, he should have gone right through Old Town and then cut over onto Airport Road. No, he thought, that would have put him in downtown traffic, which has been horrific since they

started retrofitting the sewers. Maybe it was fate. Maybe the sewers were the reason for what had happened to him. Maybe if it hadn't rained so much the previous winter there would have been no need for the new sewers. They could have lasted another two years, maybe three, if it hadn't rained so much. Yes, maybe it was the sewers. Oh, God! Maybe I'm crazy. Another shiver raced through his body.

He looked down at his watch as a way to redirect his thought. The watch read 1:23. It must have stopped - water damage. He knew it was much later than that. So much for Timex, he thought, bursting out in a fit of laughter that was accompanied by an invigorating sense of freedom or jubilation (call it what you want) that passed through him like a tidal wave. "I'm alive! I'm alive!" he said again and again and for some reason began swinging his arms in a windmill fashion while simultaneously bending his legs. The combination of the two looked like some mutated army calisthenics. He didn't care how silly he must look to the people on the bridge. He had been to the bottom of the ocean and had been spat out like Jonah from the belly of the whale and he was wet - yes, wet to the bone - but he was alive! How could he have done the thing he had done today? Was it heroic or cowardly? It's a fine line, he figured. He hadn't intended on it, everything was business as usual when he woke up - breakfast of grapefruit, coffee and toast, the slow drive to work listening to the classical station, the morning sales meeting and the sales call over a nice lunch consisting of spinach salad and grilled salmon on a bed of mashed potatoes. It had been a very normal day indeed. Sure there had been the headaches but there were always the headaches. He barely noticed them anymore - they were just part of the dull painful numbness his life had become. So, why did he choose today? It didn't matter now. Nothing mattered now!

Spinning around in the direction of the bridge, still swinging his arms but ceasing with the knee bends, the man who had fallen from the sea and into the sky noticed the crowd on the bridge had grown in number. There now appeared to be about twenty people milling about. Two of them were dressed in all blue and one in all white. The woman, who had been frantically explaining something earlier, was now pointing down towards the beach where the dog continued to bark at the water's edge.

THE OPEN WINDOW

Rueben paced the sidewalk. The sun had completely set. It was cold and he wished he had worn a sweater under his leather coat. He wished he had more coffee. The apartment across the street was silent. Maybe it wasn't going to happen tonight. Maybe it was a bust. It seemed like an unlikely place for the meeting. The paint on the building had faded to gray and the windows on the ground floor were boarded with plywood. It was not a nice or well lighted neighborhood and he was carrying thousands of dollars in equipment. It made him nervous. It was half past eight. He needed to be alert. He needed to stay focused. Maybe Bill was wrong. He would wait another hour. He looked up and down the street. It was empty. His finger played with the coins in his coat pocket. The coat reminded him of Claire and of a broken mirror, a bloody finger and the day she left.

"You're not even listening to what I'm saying."

"That's all I've been doing is listening. I'm a great listener. I just don't know what you want me to do. Do you want me to get a job in some office like everyone else?"

"If it would make you happy – yes."

"Well, it won't. (*Long pause.*) Maybe I should make an appointment with your shrink."

"Don't be a jerk, Rueben."

The window on the second floor of the apartment building remained dark. He was cold. He rubbed his hands together and stomped some life back into his cold feet. He looked at his watch. It was 8:45. No one had entered the building in the past hour. The street was still deserted. The waiting was the hardest part. He loathed the waiting. It allowed too much time for self-flagellation.

"It's ironic that I'm the one seeing the 'shrink' when you're the one with the issues."

"Now you're just trying to be cruel. What issues do I have?"

"Where do I start? Commitment? Trust? Self-loathing? Self esteem? Just to name a few."

"Is that what you pay the guy to talk about - how screwed up I am?"

"Don't flatter yourself."

"Is it? I'd really like to know."

“Of course we talk about you. We talk about us. We talk about a lot of things.”

A car drove down the street but did not stop - another false alarm. He sang a melody in his head and another five minutes passed by. He was tired. He was hungry. And he badly needed to relieve himself. It would be a risk to leave his vigil, even for a second. He cursed the coffee. He thought about the assignment and about the money. He thought about Palm Springs. Palm Springs was a fuck up - and bad luck. He vowed it would never happen again. He thought about Bill and how he would be upset. He was due twenty percent of whatever the shot grossed. He thought about Claire and then about the money again. He wrestled with it all but in the end his bladder won out and he made a dash towards the alley where he had parked his car.

“And what else do you and your psychologist talk about?”

“This has nothing to do with our conversation.”

“Yes, it does! You're paying a complete stranger to talk about me and I want to know.”

“This is exactly what's wrong. I wanted to talk about what you're doing with your life and you just turn it around. Bravo, Rueben.”

“Okay, let's talk about what I'm doing with my life. I'm making money. That's what I'm doing. Isn't that what a good American ought to do? Believe me, these assignments I'm doing have nothing to do with my mental well being.”

“Well, that disturbs me even more.”

When he returned to his spot, there was a light on in the second floor apartment. It was Palm Springs all over again. Trying not to panic, he calmly pulled out his camera, attached the telescopic lens and steadied it the best he could against the trunk of a tree while focusing in on the open window. At first there was nothing, but then he saw movement - a figure walking across his frame. He focused further - tighter. It was a woman in a black coat. She stopped at the window just long enough for Rueben to pick up details. There was no mistaking her blonde curls and her famous high cheekbones. He fired away a couple of shots. Bill had been right. The meeting was on! His adrenaline was racing. But where was the other target? He needed the two of them together.

“That's not how you felt when we first met.”

“Well, I didn't have a car payment and a mortgage when we first met. I don't see you complaining about having a house and car. Would you feel better if I went off and

photographed starving Third World children in refugee camps or... or walked around the city photographing stop signs and street lights?"

"It would be better than what you're doing now."

"Would it? Working for the newspaper wasn't. It was just a more socially accepted type of parasite. At least I'm not doing lousy weddings. Then you'd really have a reason to be ashamed of me."

A yellow cab pulled up along the curb. A man got out of the back and headed towards the apartment's entrance. It was the other target, although he appeared smaller in person than he did on television. "Of course," Rueben mumbled attempting to disappear behind the tree, "they came separately." But how would he get a shot now that they were already in the apartment? There was still the open window and as long as the blinds stayed open there remained hope, but he would need to improve his angle. He quickly considered his options, which were not many. Actually, he knew he had but one. He would have to climb the tree he was leaning against.

"That's what this is really about - you're embarrassed by what I do."

"Stop putting words in my mouth."

"Then you say it!"

"Say what? That I'm ashamed my boyfriend is a paparazzi? Yes! There it is. I said it."

"I'm a photojournalist."

"Photojournalist? Do photojournalists hide in bushes?"

"I don't hide in bushes."

It took him three tries to pull himself up to the first branch by wedging his boot in the crevice of the trunk. From there it was an easy climb up the branches until he found one with a flat groove to use as a seat. Then retrieving his camera from its case, he focused again on the open window. What he now saw through his lens was the equivalent to winning the lottery. The couple was standing in front of the window in a lovers' embrace. Rueben placed his finger on the shutter and began to click. The couple started kissing madly. Rueben continued to click, advance, refocus and reshoot. He could not believe his good fortune. He wished someone was there to share the moment with him. "The Congressman wins the Hollywood Vote!" It was so cliché it was beautiful. By next week everyone in the country would see his photos. Claire would see them, too.

“Why is all the weight on me? Why is it always me that has to change? What if I said I don't want you teaching anymore?”

“Stop trying to twist things around. I hate when you do that. You're so far away from even talking about this that it scares me. Where's my coat?”

“Where you left it. Where are you going?”

“Out!”

“Out where?”

“Rueben, please move away from the door.”

And then she left.

He continued to click as the Congressman dropped his pants and let the movie actress straddle him. For a very brief moment Rueben felt ashamed of himself but it didn't last long. This is what he lived for. He knew the photos would ruin the man's career and probably his marriage too but that was not his concern. He was simply reporting the news. Besides, he had not voted for him. As far as the movie star went, the scandal would only make her a bigger celebrity. Rueben zoomed in on her face. Her expression reflected both pain and pleasure. It made him think of Claire. “Forget her,” he scolded himself. And he did, at least until the Congressman was spent and the movie star was flushed and exhausted.

THE VERANDA

Tony and Sandra sat on the veranda.

“Where's the waiter? I think I'd like another drink.”

“You're going to ruin your dinner.”

“Don't be silly, Honey. I'm just working up my appetite.”

“I was thinking about going for a swim.”

“In the pool?”

“No, the ocean.”

“What about shopping? I thought we were going to look for presents for the kids. And I want to get that rug we saw at the market yesterday.”

“Let's do it tomorrow. I'm feeling too good at the moment to haggle with anyone.”

“You're too passive.”

“I agree one hundred percent. It's just one of my many faults.”

“Yes, it is but I love all your many faults - each and every one of them.”

The couple kisses a kiss that married couples kiss.

“Okay, Honey, but tomorrow - you promise.”

“I promise - manana.”

“Oh, there he is. Waiter, por favor! Shoot, I missed him.”

A table was getting hard to find on the veranda. It was the pre dinner, post siesta crowd. The late afternoon sun was hot even under the shade of the veranda's canopy and the occasional breeze off the ocean was nothing less than a godsend. The beach below was deserted, though less than an hour before it had been covered with umbrellas. Beyond the reef and past the breakers several fishing boats slowly headed out toward the open sea.

“Don't look now but here comes Hemingway and his wife.”

“Don't call him that.”

“Why not? Did they see us?”

“I'm not sure. They stopped at another table.”

“He's such a bore.”

“Oh, Honey, be nice - we're on vacation.”

“All the more reason I shouldn't have to be nice. Just because they're Americans doesn't mean we have to befriend them.”

“Who's talking about befriending? Just be nice.”

“Okay, I'll be nice but if he starts in about his book again I'm leaving.”

“And leave me alone with them?”

“Well, we both can't get up and leave now, can we? That would be rude.”

“I thought you liked books.”

“Of course I like books. I like them a lot. I just don't like him.”

“I think you're jealous.”

“Are you kidding? Jealous of that old windbag?”

“That old windbag is writing a book and you're not.”

“Anyone can write a book.”

“Well, I kinda find him charming. At least he's passionate.”

“And I'm not?”

“I didn't say that you weren't passionate...but you're not writing a book.”

“I don't care. He's a pompous ass. What was he going on about last night? All that esoteric crap.”

"I don't remember, I wasn't listening. I do like his wife. She's sweet."

"Please, now I know you're pulling my leg. She's an idiot."

"Honey, don't be mean. Where is that waiter?"

"I don't know. Careful with the ice. You don't want to get sick."

"Don't worry, Honey, this is a four star hotel."

"It's still Mexico."

"Well, now's your chance to escape. It looks like Hemingway is holding court at another table. Go on, go."

"You sure you don't mind?"

"I do but it doesn't matter."

"I'm a coward I know."

"Yes."

"I'm a baby, too."

"Yes you are, Honey. Give me a kiss. And leave your hat and sunglasses with me."

The couple kisses a kiss that married couples kiss.

"Okay. I'll be right back."

Tony walked down the steps that led to the boardwalk that led to the stairs that led down to the beach. There were a few people swimming in front of him and he decided to head down a little ways to have some room to himself. The tide was low and the waves were weak and the water was warm. As soon as he was waist deep he dove under and when he finally surfaced he began swimming parallel to the shore. In his youth he had been a strong swimmer and had competed in high school and college in both Freestyle and Butterfly. That was almost thirty years ago. Now he swam slow and easy. He liked the feeling of all his muscles working at once and the water was immediately sobering. He swam for a good while and then rested. The water was shallow and he could still touch the bottom. Looking out at the open ocean he saw the fishing boats. They were black now - just silhouettes. They looked to be a quarter of a mile away. He turned around and faced the shore. The hotels up and down the beach glowed; their windows sparkled

golden in the setting sun. He thought about Hemingway up on the veranda talking about his book. He didn't know why he didn't like him. He just didn't. Turning back around he peered out at the fishing boats and wondered how long it would take him to swim a quarter mile.

THE PLAYGROUND

He did not feel the pain immediately. His blood dripped red dots onto the newly fallen snow. He touched his lower lip with the fingers of his glove. It was already swollen. He wondered what his mother would say.

A voice standing above him was shouting. He could see shadows in the snow. They were moving around him.

“Come on you pussy! Get up!”

He didn’t understand why the boy had punched him. He had done nothing wrong. Where was his friend, Tom? Why was he not helping him?

“Look at him – the little redneck – he’s afraid to get up,” the boy said grabbing him by his wool scarf and dragging him across the snow.

“I don’t have a redneck!” he shouted back.

The shadows around him started laughing. It was something he had said.

“I’m not a redneck,” the boy said mimicking him. “Yes, you are. Look at your clothes.”

The shadows laughed again and then laughed louder as the boy, who punched him, shoved him into the snow with his boot. He laid there with his face covered in snow. The seconds seemed like minutes. He could feel someone pull off his hat.

“Look, I got his hat!”

“Toss it here!”

“Come on! Get up and get your hat – you redneck.”

Why was this happening? What had he done? He started to cry and then tried to hold back but it was too late. What would his father say?

“I said get up!” the boy shouted while lifting him to his feet by the collar of his coat.

He stood staring into the face of his attacker. He would never forget or forgive that face. He hated that face. The faces of the other kids were blurry. He was too full of rage to focus further than the face he hated. In the distance, the school bell announced the end of lunch.

“Look at him – he’s crying. What are you going to do, you fat ass?”

Someone pushed him from behind and he fell again.

“No. Let him get up. Let’s see what he does.”

Reluctantly, he got to his feet. The shadows had now formed faces. Some were his classmates. Some were boys from the higher grades. Looking around, he saw Tom, his best friend, trying to hide behind another boy. Tom looked away when their eyes met. He would never forget Tom. He hated Tom, too.

Someone threw a snowball that hit him in the chest. He tried to turn and run back down the hill to the school but two boys grabbed him and held him.

“Drag him in the snow!”

“Push him down the hill!”

“Rub his face in it!”

Twenty five years later the boy on the playground with the fat lip, watery eyes and snow in his hair wrote these words. Nothing from that day was forgotten and no one was forgiven.

5 O'CLOCK CLUB

The conversation at the end of the bar was falling apart. It had begun in earnest of talk of books and travel and other important things before sliding downhill with a speed directly proportional to the alcohol being consumed. Tom was on his third Manhattan and Laura, who since college strictly drank Cape Cods, was half way through her second. They were getting legally drunk. It had been a long week. A bowl of fish crackers sat between them on the bar and a wet umbrella lay between the feet of their stools. Tom loosened his tie. Laura told a bawdy joke. It was sometime after five in the afternoon. It was happy hour. It was time for office gossip.

The following is a bit of their dialogue, which centered mainly around the alleged on again off again affair between their immediate supervisor and one of the senior managers of the firm. (Both names will go unmentioned.)

“She definitely had that ‘I just had sex look’ on her face when she came back.”

“Well, they *are* two mature consenting married adults...”

“I just don't understand why she chose *him* to climb the ladder? He's so...so blah. There are far better candidates.”

“Oh yeah? And whom would you choose to help better your career?”

“Oh, that's easy – Albert. Definitely Albert.”

“Albert. Really? I would have pegged you to be more of a Michael type.”

“Michael? Please, he's too immature. If you're going to have an affair it should at least be with someone mature enough to appreciate it.”

At this point the conversation shifted to a more sympathetic tone as they focused on the rather sad account of the very likeable Linda Carlisle, a legal secretary, whose son was recently sentenced to three years for armed robbery. From there they moved on to the more uplifting Holiday Party rumors that have been circulating around the lunchroom for the past few weeks.

The clock above the door read a little after six. Outside it was still raining on and off. The barroom windows were steamed and reflected the corner streetlight. Pulling a pile of crumpled bills from his pocket and onto the bar, Tom called the bartender over by name and ordered two more drinks. He no longer was pacing himself with the professionalism he usually demonstrated but was too drunk to notice. It was Friday and it had been a long week. He had not made one sale. His heart was not in it and he felt bad about it, but

presently, with two and a half shots of bourbon (Knob Creek to be exact) in his belly, he frankly could care less.

In the bar mirror, Laura adjusted the beret on her head. She wore it slightly tilted with her long brown hair pinned back, leaving only a few bangs showing. Tom thought it made her look much younger, but restrained from saying so. She caught him looking at her reflection and gave him a smile. She was thinking about his face, as someone left the bar allowing a rush of cold air into the room. She thought he had a nice face. Normally she would have thought of a more telling adjective to describe his face (she had been an English major) but she was also preoccupied thinking about her own face in the mirror and how it looked with the beret. She thought it made her look much younger.

The place was empty for a Friday but it was still early and the rain helped not at all. There was a song playing on the jukebox that had been popular a few years ago. Laura started singing along with it. She did not have a good singing voice and she didn't know most of the words but she didn't care. She was happy. She had made three sales that week.

"Do you want to get something to eat?"

"I would but I need to call Jonathan first. I was supposed to meet him."

"Call him on your cell and see if he wants to meet us."

"He won't."

"Why not? Doesn't he like me?"

"Actually, no, I don't think he does. He's jealous of you."

"What? Did he tell you that?"

"No, not in so many words."

"What did he say?"

"I'm not going to tell you. He gets jealous. It's stupid! I know."

"He knows I'm seeing someone, right?"

"He knows. It doesn't matter...I don't think he trusts you."

"What does he think we're doing?"

“It's not that. He just thinks you're too touchy-feely.”

“With you?”

“Yeah, with me.”

“So, I'm Italian. Italian men are touchy-feely.”

“I knew I shouldn't have said anything.”

“Why not? So, you're boyfriend doesn't like me. Maybe I don't like him.”

At this point, the bartender came over and interrupted their conversation. His timing could not have been better because both parties were on the verge of saying things they would have regretted. The bartender's name was Rich. He was a nice guy but a bit long winded and he mumbled. He started telling them about something he heard on the news - something that happened in some country outside the United States. It didn't really matter because neither Tom nor Laura was listening. Tom was thinking about what Laura said and Laura was thinking about what Tom said, while both pretended to listen to what Rich was saying. (Working in sales, they innately understood the importance of maintaining a friendly relationship with the bartender.) When he was through, Laura and Tom commented to the likes of “I can't believe it” and “That's weird. Really?” Rich shook his head and said, “Yep, it's the truth,” and walked away.

“I should be going. Do you think it's still raining?”

“I don't know. Here, take my umbrella.”

“No, I'll catch a cab. I'll be alright.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, I'm sure.”

“Okay. Make sure you tell your boyfriend that I didn't touch you once tonight.”

“Well, maybe you should have.”

“Should have what? Touched you?”

“Yeah.”

“Don't tease me.”

“I'm not teasing you.”

Then the following happened:

- 1) She leaned forward;
- 2) She kissed him;
- 3) She pulled away;
- 4) She looked in his eyes;
- 5) She sought a reaction in his eyes;
- 6) She kissed him again (more passionately);
- 7) Their tongues met;
- 8) His hands found her waist;
- 9) They both pulled away;
- 10) They both began talking like they were in a film.

“This is a mistake.”

“Why is it a mistake?”

“I just think it is.”

“Okay, it never happened.”

“I didn't say that. I wanted it to happen.”

“I should go now.”

“You should go.”

“I'll see you on Monday.”

“Yes. Here, take the umbrella.”

It was raining when Tom left the bar an hour and a half and two more Manhattans later. He walked up Columbus towards Broadway and past the faces dining in the windows. He made eye contact with one woman eating with her date. He continued down the street before cutting through Washington Square. It started raining harder. He didn't care. It felt good to be rained upon. He thought about Laura and next week's Five O'Clock Club.

THE MAN IN THE WHITE CAR

Several children found him in his car - a white Chrysler. A green coat covered him up to his chin like a blanket. His seat was back and his head was tilted to the side and down. "Maybe he's drunk," one of them said. "I think he's dead," another suggested. They had seen plenty of dead people on t.v. but he didn't look dead like the dead people on t.v. He looked asleep. His mouth was half open. They tapped on the driver side window but he didn't move or even open an eye. "Hey Mister!" They tried again, more forcibly using their fists, but with the same result. Bored, the children let the man be and moved down the street. It was summer and they had much better things to do. An hour later, one of the children told his mother about the man asleep in his white car and the woman called the police, who twenty minutes later arrived on the scene to find, underneath the green coat, a hole in the man's heart.

In the third floor window of the apartment building across the street, a man watched as the paramedics placed the dead man into the ambulance and the tow truck towed away the white car. It was all very clean, efficient work and except for the chalk marks left by the police, everything was as before. The man in the window was pleased with himself for adding the green coat. *It's a nice touch – gives a bit of class to the job.* "Well, we won't be seeing that little prick around no more. How 'bout getting something to eat," he said to the person lying on the bed behind him. The person on the bed did not reply. "Did ya hear me? I'm hungry," he said turning. The afternoon sun shined through the window behind him as the bullet disrupted the dust dancing in the cylinder of light above the rug. His first thought was one of disbelief. His second was one of betrayal. And his last thought as he fell to the floor was one of understanding. He hit the floor with a thud.

The woman let the gun drop to the bed half expecting it to make a sound. It was only the second time she had fired a gun in her life and the first time she had hit something. She couldn't believe it took only one bullet to kill him and for a moment thought that he must still be alive and might need another bullet but she knew she couldn't do that. She hated him more than the whole world but she couldn't shoot him again. That was it. No more. *Now what?* She hadn't planned a next move. The gun was there on the dresser and she simply picked it up like she had dreamed of a thousand times before. She rolled him over and looked at his face. His eyes were still open but he was definitely dead. She thought he looked surprised and for a moment she almost felt sorry for what she had done but this did not last. *To hell with him! He was a Grade A asshole ain't nobody gonna argue with that.* She pulled out his wallet, took the bills from the fold, stuffed them in her purse and left the apartment. She felt faces peek behind doors as she ran down the hallway and then down the stairs to the lobby. *Why can't people mind their own business.*

That night she celebrated her freedom by getting drunk and stoned with some friends at a bar a few blocks from the street where the man in the white car had been found. She knew it wasn't smart to be flaunting the money like she was but she was too high to care.

She danced with a man and left with him sometime after midnight. She was pretty sure she had met him before. They drove away in his car. He had a bottle under his seat and a joint hidden in his glove box. The events that followed were not pretty. Suffice to say, her purse with all the money was gone when they found her in an alley the next morning.

He slept most of the next day and when he awoke, he had a terrible headache. There was sound of construction coming from the street below and the baby, his son, was crying in the next room. The night before was a blur. He hadn't intended to kill her, at least that's what he told himself. It was so stupid. It just got out of hand. He knew he was in deep shit. Several people had seen them leave together. *Maybe they won't waste time on her. Why should they? She was nothing.* He needed to think straight. He needed to make up a story. *Why is the baby still crying?* "Can't you shut him up?" he screamed through the door. A woman's voice shouted something back. "I'm trying to sleep!" he yelled in return. Then the woman opened the door to the bedroom and started asking questions: "Where were you last night?" "Who were you with?" "Why're you lyin' to me?" When the man could no longer stand her inquisition, he stood up and hit her across the face with his open hand. Then he left the room to take a piss. She left with the baby while the man was in the shower, and went to her brother's house just down the street. That was at 2:35. At 3:45 the brother returned to his sister's place and found the man on the sofa drinking coffee. He was still in his underwear. The television was on. There was a moment of recognition between the two men but not a word was spoken. It took three shots to the chest to kill him.

The brother had killed before. He found it much easier to do each time around. *Bastard got what he deserved. Did everyone a favor.* He knew he had to tell his sister what he had done but he never got the chance. On his way back home he ran into a friend on a busy street. They started talking, just small talk, when a car sped around the corner and sprayed the street with bullets. The brother's friend saw it coming and was quick to dive behind a car but the brother never knew what hit him. The street was filled with screams and the smell of burnt rubber. A car alarm went off. The brother's friend, who was the intended target, tried to tell him to hang on but it was easier to let go. Two bullets had pierced his stomach. He said a few words, none of which made sense to his friend. His last image was of a fat cloud floating in the blue sky. It reminded him of a giant elephant. *I can't believe it.*

There were four boys in the car. Two of them had fired the guns. They had missed their mark but wouldn't know that until the following day. They drove down the street and down a back alley and ditched the car in a friend's garage. There would be retaliation for their action but for now they were safe. Later that day, exhausted from hours of celebrating with drink and smoke, one of the boys walked home and fell asleep on his mother's new sofa. While he was sleeping his younger brother, one of the boys who had found the man in the white car with the green coat, took the gun he knew his brother kept

in his jacket and pretended to shoot the television, the refrigerator, the windows, and then the sofa.

THE OLD AMERICAN

She walked up the stairs that led to the door of the house of the Old American. It was Tuesday and every Tuesday she came. Her name was Carla, named for her mother's mother.

The sky was gray and it was cold for May and it made her think of the Sundays back home in the mountains. She rang the doorbell and waited. Cars passed up and down the busy boulevard and the wind blew through the boulevard's trees, now in the full bloom of Spring. Somewhere nearby a siren sounded. She wished she had not come. She wished she was back at home with her daughter, but it was Tuesday and every Tuesday she came.

The first time, the first Tuesday, the Old American had said very little and what he did say could not be repeated in any church. With only the slightest hint of an accent, he professed his dislike for almost everything in his adopted country. He disliked the weather, even though it was warm and moderate most of the year. He disliked the food - it was too spicy for his taste and stomach. He loathed the people - the men were sad and lazy and the women were too stout and gossiped too much. But above all he hated the music with its accordions and tubas. Oh, how he hated the music. Carla stood before him then and absorbed each insult. She smelled the alcohol on his breath with every word. She did not have to like the Old American. She would do her job and take his money.

She rang the doorbell again and followed it with a succession of hard knocks. She knew the Old American loved to drink his afternoon coffee and watch Hollywood videos in the study located in the rear of the house, where the doorbell could not be heard. It was his favorite room. It had an enviable view of the historic Spanish church on the hill and of the green mountains that surrounded the city. One time, not long ago, Carla found him in the study asleep on the leather sofa with a pillow propped behind his head. The television was left on and an old movie was playing. She had never seen him without his thick glasses. He looked much younger. She thought he must have at one time been quite handsome.

She peered through the front window that looked in on the parlor of the house of the Old American. It was a simple room. Two leather chairs - each with their own ottoman, a fully stocked wine cabinet, a large bookshelf that covered most of one wall with books mostly about travel and art, a side table made of bamboo, and just left of the fireplace, a large abstract painting of small black and red squares. Of all the Tuesdays she had come to the house, Carla had never once seen the Old American in the parlor. He was not there now.

They had agreed on a fee the first time. It was a little more than her usual going rate. This of course made her happy. He paid her every other visit. Sometimes he paid her more. Sometimes he gave her taxi money. Once he offered her wine, which she thought strange at the time but did not refuse. They sat in the kitchen then and he opened a bottle and poured two glasses and talked more than she had ever heard him talk before. He talked about New York and California and Texas, where he went to school. He loved Texas. He talked too about the other places he had worked around the world - Italy, South Africa, Korea. And he talked about his ex-wives and his four children. They of course were adults now, the four children - four children he had not seen in two years, the two years since he took over managing the factory. One of his children was a doctor and another a teacher. He told her other things, too. Things she did not want to hear, but he was paying her to come every Tuesday so she listened and she drank his wine, which was a very good wine. She thought he was a lonely man.

Carla looked up and down the boulevard and again rang the doorbell and knocked on the door. The wind blew down the boulevard. She thought it felt like rain. There were many people strolling along the wide sidewalk. Some were on their way to the shops in the plaza where the boulevard ends before the park. One lady, dressed in a black coat with a fur collar and carrying a dog no bigger than her purse, stopped briefly in front of the stairs and gave Carla a nasty look. Carla was used to receiving such a looks, especially while working in nice neighborhoods like the Old American's. The traffic continued. The trees blew in the wind. And the siren somewhere close by appeared closer.

She thought about leaving a note and taking the bus back home but she did not have a pen or paper. She wondered if the Old American would pay her for her time. It happened occasionally before with other clients and sometimes they paid and sometimes they didn't. Maybe he was still at the factory or stuck in traffic. He never talked to her about the factory but she knew from photos in his study that he was an important man. One such photo showed him shaking hands with the ex-mayor of the city and in another he was standing next to the President and the President's movie star wife. She did not even know what sort of factory it was or what was produced there. It really wasn't important to her. She didn't have to know the Old American.

Several cars coming from the direction of the plaza were honking their horns. A plane passed over head and the siren that was sounding from somewhere close by appeared in the form of an ambulance speeding down the boulevard. Carla covered her ears to deafen the sound. With its red lights flashing, the ambulance dodged several automobiles and turned sharply before coming to an abrupt stop next to the sidewalk directly in front of her. Startled, Carla picked up her mop and bucket full of cleaning supplies and stepped out of the way. Minutes later, she instinctively made the sign of the cross, as the paramedics carried a stretcher down the stairs that led from the door of the house of the Old American.

SOMETIMES

Everyone was there in the kitchen – Dan and Martha, Helen and Tom and even Johnny. And the Old Man was there, too, looking young and fit and bossing everyone just like in the old days, as if he didn't know. There were moving boxes where the table used to be and the refrigerator and stove were in parts on the floor. More people showed up – Howard and Marianne and the twins Ben and Nancy. Some were playing cards in the corner. Then everyone started singing Happy Birthday to the Old Man and he was smiling more than anyone ever remembered seeing him smile, and he blew out the candles on the cake and everyone clapped and seemed happy, except there was still the stove in parts on the floor. Later, everyone was in the basement with the Old Man watching television. He was sitting up straight on the sofa and everyone was surprised but glad. He said he was looking forward to the move. There were too many memories in the Old House. Then the television was no longer on and it too was in parts on the floor. Martha said it was time to leave just as the snow began to build along the basement windows.

The man awoke. He looked over at his wife asleep next to him. She always slept soundly and he envied her. He looked at the clock next to the glass of water on the stand beside the bed. It read 3:15. Sometimes the night was too long. He stared at the dark blueness of the window. He could hear a train in the distance. It felt good to know someone else was awake. He wondered if it was still snowing. He turned towards the ceiling and clasped his hands. Sometimes at night he prayed. He prayed in silence so his wife would not hear him. She did not know he prayed and she might not understand. He prayed the prayers his father had taught him. He prayed to the Catholic God of his childhood – the all knowing and forgiving God. Sometimes he prayed for things he wanted. Sometimes the prayers came true. Sometimes the prayers went unanswered. He always started with an Our Father and then a Hail Mary followed by...

*Father, forgive me for my sins
If I die tonight let my soul go to heaven
Pray for my son and my wife and for my entire family
Pray for the sick and the poor
Lord, give me strength to carry on
Give me strength to be good
Give me strength to be strong*

He stopped praying and thought about his dream and about the Old Man and about the prayers he had taught him a long time ago in the Old House when he was young and everything was not so hard.

LIFE BEFORE WARTIME

The Story of George and Carol

George met Carol and/or Carol met George at the Anti-War Demonstration on Sunday - the Sunday before the war began. Carol, a very independent very single woman in her late twenties, was working as a volunteer for a non-profit peace organization called Females For Freedom ("The 3Fs"). There was a rumor that The 3Fs was funded by an Academy Award nominated actress (in the supporting actress category), but Carol knew nothing about that. Her job was simply to hand out cardboard signs for people to carry during the march up Market Street. The signs read "PEACE NOT WAR" in big bold letters and "FFF" in much smaller letters below. Few people knew what the FFF stood for, but no matter. Carol stayed up to one in the morning the night before, drinking coffee and smoking half a marijuana cigarette, making the signs herself. She still had magic marker stains on her hands to prove it. She gave the very last sign she had to George, who had stumbled upon the Demonstration quite by accident (if you believe in accidents) and who then subsequently stumbled upon Carol quite by accident, too. He had actually been on his way to workout at the gym before heading over to his office to review sales figures for a presentation on Monday morning. On paper George and Carol are nearly as different as day and night but in person...well, some things cannot be explained. The French surely have a single word for their first encounter as probably do the Italians but we Americans need four: "love at first sight." Some say it's a very rare phenomenon but everyone knows it happens much more than people realize, especially during life before wartime.

To say that George was ignorant of the approaching dark clouds of war would be unfair. Like a good many people of his generation whom had known only a lifetime of peace, he was simply unequivocally completely and hopelessly apathetic. It was an apathy that his skills as a computer software sales engineer helped to hide as he stood listening to Carol talk about The 3Fs' goals and its involvement in the Peace Movement. It was a slight variation of the same speech she gave everyone who would listen. George did not hear a word she was saying, except for when she mentioned something about Ghandi, which he had written a report on when he was in junior high. He was too lost in the amorous spell of Carol's eyes to pay attention. Carol, whose conviction towards the Movement was unwavering (she had been arrested four times, ironically charged each time with disturbing the peace, and once had chained herself to an old Army tank parked permanently on a lawn in the Presidio), wasn't even listening to herself. That's how strong the immediate attraction was between the two. They were two people among a sea of thousands of megaphone shouting, drum beating, slogan chanting, protest songs singing people and yet they felt as though, at least momentarily, they were alone. When something of that magnitude happens to you (and pray it will or has) it's both dumbfounding and all absorbing. Neither George nor Carol could explain it, but both were well aware of it though neither knew what to do about it. Love at first sight. It can be confounding.

Without really knowing how or why, George and Carol found themselves walking together with the estimated crowd of two hundred thousand (later this figure was disputed by the local paper as being closer to sixty thousand, but no matter) up Market Street and towards City Hall. There was much music and chanting and the over all atmosphere was one of solidarity and righteousness. One would have to be a zombie or a Republican not be swept up in the moment - the energy on the street was that uplifting and infectious. Carol screamed anti-war slogans along with the crowd, sometimes with her fist raised defiantly in the air. George tried his best to do the same and made a good showing of it. Physically they were a mismatched pair. She was small and petite and dark haired and he was tall and blond and built like a bear. None of that mattered. It was well beyond the superficial. The connection had been made and by the time they reached City Hall, a half an hour later, where the masses funneled into the plaza to listen to speakers on a makeshift stage, the two were holding hands, only letting go to clap at the end of each speaker. By the time the legendary folk singer got up and sang her very stirring rendition of Bob Dylan's "Chimes of Freedom," George had his arms around Carol.

The rally in the Civic Center continued until dusk when the crowd finally started to dissipate. (Some fringe groups split off to perform random acts of vandalism, but that is another story.) It was Carol who suggested they get something to eat and it was she who suggested an Indian restaurant in the heart of the Tenderloin. While waiting for their curry cauliflower and onion nan, they talked about the beauty and the power and the near zen-like experience of walking with so many people all believing in the same cause. Carol didn't offer much about herself other than that she was from Boston, originally, and did not own a car or eat meat. George too was holding his cards close. When asked, he lied about his work and about the type of car he drove (he actually drove an SUV). He felt bad about lying to her but something inside told him it was for the best. When the food came they ate until they were full, for it had been a long hard day of protesting. George paid when the bill came and left a nice tip. (It was cheap and he made good money.) Karen did not object. She did not make good money and had only enough for her bus ride home.

Outside the restaurant they could not get themselves to say goodbye, so they didn't, and instead walked through Chinatown to Broadway and up Columbus and down Green Street and then left over to Grant where they found a well lighted empty laundromat to kiss their first kiss. It was an electrifying connection of lips on a cosmic level, a binding of two distinct souls if you will. They both knew there was no holding back now. It was written in the stars.

Later that night...Carol did not need to invite George up to her studio apartment located down a dead-end street in the Mission. Nothing was discussed and no discussion was necessary. They would be spending the night together. The apartment was tiny – one room with a corner kitchenette. There was no television and George thought that strange.

On the walls were posters of Malcolm X and Che Guevara and on a small stand in front of the room's only window was an ancient Mac computer. Carol quickly set the scene by putting on some haunting folk music, lighting candles, turning off the lamp, and opening two bottles of Mexican beer before sliding down next to George on the sofa/futon.

Within fifteen minutes they were heavy petting and in twenty they were half naked and in twenty five minutes they were having sex. It was a wild animalistic coupling that had been building since they first met earlier that day. Carol scratched and pounded on George's chest and controlled the force and tempo of their love making with the gentleness of a banshee. She demanded him to bite her and when he didn't do it hard enough she told him so. They rested (after the first time) for half an hour. Then Carol got up and rustled around the closet and brought out a leather whip and ordered George to whip her bottom. George, who had never whipped anyone before, was at first apprehensive but found he actually enjoyed it and whipped her until her bottom was good and red. Later, while Carol was on top of George, she picked up the burning candle from the side table and dripped the hot wax on his chest causing him to scream out in pain. He tried to get up but his hands were cuffed to the futon. Feeling his rage, Carol uncuffed him and seized the opportunity to challenge him to slap her and to his surprise he did and liked that, too. They played these games all night long and in the morning went out for coffee and bagels and agreed to meet later in the week, though they never got the opportunity...

The war began two days later and Carol moved to Washington where she felt her peace efforts would be more effective. George spent the duration of the war selling software which a year later would be completely obsolete.

HALF WAY TO NICE

Half way to Nice, Donald lay stretched out across three seats, using his backpack as a headrest. His boots were off and on the floor and the book he had taken from the hostel in Cologne lay open on his chest. Cologne was two weeks past and Amsterdam, Paris and Spain had come and gone between then and now. Cheryl sat across from him, staring at herself in the window. Beyond her reflection, the country rolled by in a blur of yellows and greens. She had spent most of the way from Barcelona writing in her journal, sleeping (very little) and then writing again. This is the last thing she wrote:

Sept 17th - Barcelona was beautiful, slower than Madrid but just as hot and muggy. We stayed at a great place off La Rambla that Gerard (our French friend from Amsterdam) had told us about. It was run by the cutest old lady, who must have been 100. I spent most of the first day at the Picasso Museum. I went alone - Donald said he needed a museum break. I know it was just an excuse but I didn't mind - honestly. He was still sleeping when I left. I had lunch at a bistro right in the Placa Reial which is in the old part of town (I guess it's all old) and sat at a table with a Danish couple traveling with their young daughter. They were on their way to Rome, too. She was a nurse and he was schoolteacher. The daughter was so cute. She looked like her mother and talked with an English accent, too. They seemed happy. Later, I wanted to see the Church of the Sagrada Familia but I didn't have enough time. Donald wasn't at the hotel when I got back and he didn't come back until much later. I told myself I wasn't going to get mad and I didn't. We went out for some drinks and then dinner at one of the fish restaurants along the beach and Paris wasn't mentioned once. Maybe I overreacted? I don't know anymore. It's funny how fast things can change.

I love eating dinner late and then walking home. I like that a lot...

Well after the border but before Marseilles, the train moved closer to the coastline and then followed the sea through the famous resort towns of St. Tropez, Cannes and Antibes. It was a very pleasant ride as anyone who has been there can tell you, especially in September. When the train finally pulled into Nice's *Gare Central*, Donald sat up and turned to look out the window. The station platform was busy with activity. A conductor stood blowing his whistle. A man in a uniform was pushing a cart full of luggage. An old woman was selling white roses. A couple was embracing. Smoke was rising from beneath the train. Donald turned to look at Cheryl.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know? How can you not know why you're crying?"

"I can't help it."

"Do you want to go home? Is that it?"

"No. I don't know...maybe."

"Well, what is it then? Are you happy or sad?"

Cheryl didn't answer.

"Well, say something."

But she didn't.

"Is it what I said? I told you I was sorry."

"It's not that."

"Then what is it? Tell me what you want me to do and I'll do it."

"Nothing. I don't want you to do anything. Just leave me alone."

Donald stood and sighed. Cheryl turned away.

"Alright, be alone."

Donald left the compartment with the door slamming shut behind him. He walked all the way down three cars to the smoking car, which was empty, and smoked a cigarette. It was a habit he had picked up again while in Paris. Paris was where everything seemed to have changed. *Or was it Madrid?* When he was through, he walked back to the compartment and found Cheryl still crying. She didn't look up at him and didn't stop crying until the train pulled into Monaco.

THE VOLCANO

We danced barefoot in the red clay until the sun broke beneath the clouds to shine above the eucalyptus trees, planted years ago along the base of the volcano. It had been some time coming. Twenty years, maybe more. We needed it now - again. And perhaps the promise of rain, too. The heat of the day was already upon us - and me without my hat. Green sparrows sang in the palm trees and pigeons cooed and moved in ridiculous circles on the path leading to the pond and waterfall. And the sisters...so different, not in looks but in voice and balance. One sang like an angel. The other danced like the devil. Guess which one was the nastier of the two? Oh, they played their parts well. Still, I wonder if they truly understood. Maybe they gave up believing a long time ago.

The old road was made from black lava rocks, for the king by men from the dry side of the island - the side marked by burnt sage and fields of giant stones called the Garden of the Gods. In the village, they still remember. And the sugar factory still remembers. And the missionaries, well, how could they ever let us forget those days under the volcano before the whaling boats and the fruit companies and the shining white houses. The sisters and I were still only children then. Back then, our side of the island was all sugar cane and it swayed like the ocean. Back then, we danced barefoot in the red clay and the winds brought rain just like promised. Back then...before mother worked in the white houses and father walked every day to the sugar factory.

So we danced until the sun rose to meet the peak of the volcano and the clouds moved away, pushed by the trade winds. Up in the trees, the birds had seized singing. Below, the sisters amused themselves by braiding each other's hair and telling stories of boys from the missionary school. The one with the sinful mouth told tales I cannot repeat. I confess for a moment, I thought it had worked. I even closed my eyes, lifted my head up and crossed myself the way the missionaries told us to. We needed it now - again. And perhaps the promise of rain, too. But in the end there was nothing - just footprints in the red clay. I had not the heart to tell the two sisters and so I left them there to their braiding and schoolgirl tales and wandered down the trail through the forest of pines and down past the meteor crater to the beach of the shipwrecked ships and hard black sand. Behind me, the volcano's shadow swooped down like a bat upon the hillside and covered the lightness with its wings. I turned away and never believed in anything so foolishly again.

THE HAWK

Everyone called him The Hawk. He had a large beak of a nose like all the men in his family, but that was not how he got his name. He had "the gift," inherited from his mother's side. He saw things before they happened. He saw his wife before he met her. He saw the birth of his first son and the birth of his twin daughters. And he saw the start and end of the first war. The gift came and went and sometimes the gift was shortsighted. Sometimes the gift was a curse too, but people who do not see things before they happen don't understand that.

2:30 p.m.

He worked the horn with the butt of his fist in quick succession. That is how one drove in the city. That was the only way. It had been a good day so far. Five fares since noon. The sky was blue and cloudless. The streets were crowded, more crowded than a typical non-market day. Some say many people were already headed for the country. There was word they had closed the bridges over both rivers to stop people from leaving, but The Hawk knew this was not true. He had seen the bridges within the past hour. They were still open. He tossed out his cigarette and rolled up the window. Sometimes the traffic fumes were bad, and sometimes in the summer, when the heat lay trapped in the valley of the city and there was no wind, they were very bad. It was not summer but still the fumes lay low and thick.

3:20 p.m.

He ate the lunch his wife had packed for him. It was the same lunch she packed everyday, except for the dried apricots. That was a special treat. He ate in silence along with other drivers on the benches outside the bus station, where the giant statue of The Man stood to commemorate his twenty five years of loyal service to the people. Afterwards, The Hawk smoked a cigarette and drank some tea from his thermos and watched two other drivers play a quick game of chess. No one would play The Hawk because of his gift. He told them it did not work that way or that fast, but they did not believe him. He didn't mind. He liked to watch and play the game in his head. There was much talk about the news. It weighed heavy in the air and was on everyone's lips. The news was not good. The day before, two drivers fought over it and The Hawk and another man had to break them up. The news was like that. It tore people apart.

4:15 p.m.

The Hawk picked up several fares after lunch, mostly government officials going from building to building with thick folders full of paper tucked under their arms. One man, a man who appeared from his fine tailored suit to be of some importance, asked him to turn off the radio. He did not care to hear anymore news. It was growing worse by the hour and hard to listen to. The passenger cursed the news and then said something derogatory about The Man that, if it had been heard by certain ears, would have been punishable by imprisonment or even worse. That's how much things had changed over the past few

weeks. The news had caused that change and people were not acting rationally or normally. The Hawk was glad when he dropped the outspoken man off at another government building (one of the new ones built after the last war) along the Left River. He didn't need any trouble in his cab. Things had not changed that much in The Hawk's world.

5:30 p.m.

The Hawk stopped at a neighborhood café for his afternoon tea. It was a café usually frequented by other drivers. But today it was not. He sat outside and drank his tea and read the newspaper and watched some children playing soccer in the street. One was around the age of his eldest son. When their ball rolled over to the curb by his table, he stood to kick it back to them and that's when he felt it - the familiar dizziness followed by what he could only describe to others as time stopping. Sometimes he fainted from the experience. Twice, when it came over him, he fell into a seizure. It was always a very exhausting and unpleasant experience. But this time nothing happened. The dizziness stopped and there was no fainting and there was no vision. This had never happened to him before. He did not take it to be a good omen and decided it best to drive back home to be with his family. He had made enough money for the day.

6:10 p.m.

He rolled down his window and lit a cigarette and headed towards the main bridge over the Right River. He soon realized that was a mistake. The bridge was completely blocked with cars, bicycles and pushcarts. Some people were running down the street. Something was happening. He tried to turn on the news but found only static. He heard someone scream and then he heard the jets. When he saw them they were big and beautiful, some solo, some in groups, flying over the city. He was filled with a sense of awe and amazement. It was the last thing he saw, though he had not seen it coming, and he did not know why.

E-MAIL BUDDIES

DELIVERY FAILURE

Your message was not delivered

From: AlbertSunny
To: KeithBottoms
Subject: \$\$\$\$!!\$\$\$\$
Date: Mon, 20 Jan, Dec 2003 15:21:31
Sorry, you feel that way. You know you were always like a brother to me.

From: KeithBottoms
To: AlbertSunny
Subject: \$\$\$\$!!\$\$\$\$
Date: Sun, 19 Jan 2003 11:11:36
Blah Blah Blah – Save your breath. Don't ever e-mail me again!!!!!!!!!!!!

From: AlbertSunny
To: KeithBottoms
Subject: Where's the Rest?
Date: Sat, 18 Jan 2003 10:19:01
Dear Paranoid, The car wasn't even running when we found the thing. The mechanic said it had sand in the carburetor (sp?) - probably because SOMEONE left it on the beach. Gee, I wonder what genius did that? Anyway, I know you think we screwed you and I feel bad that you took the fall (really!) so does Marcus- I think Smitty's been feeding you a bunch of bull – Why I don't know – but it didn't go down like that.

From: KeithBottoms
To: AlbertSunny
Subject: Where's the Rest?
Date: Thu, 16 Jan 2002 13:08:06
F*** You! You know it's not so much what you did - it's how you did it –plotting behind my back and telling Angel about the San Jose thing. What was that all about??? She won't even talk to me now. You and Marcus (your little lapdog). I go down for a year - and you two are living high on the fucking hog marrying school teachers buying houses. Where's the car now! Huh? Did you sell that, too? It only had 70 thousand on it plus new tires!!!!!!!! AND STEREO!

From: AlbertSunny
To: KeithBottoms
Subject: Where's the Rest?
Date: Thur, 16 Jan 2003 12:05:28

You're dreaming, Brother. Who was it that scouted the place for two weeks before you stuck your nose in it. We didn't have to cut you in. If you remember correctly it was your brilliant (heavy sarcasm) idea to blow the door instead of simply smashing the window like we had planned. You nearly got us all killed. My eyebrows finally just grew back. You know what its like not to have eyebrows? It sucks. So, get off your highhorse!!!!

From: KeithBottoms
To: AlbertSunny
Subject: Where the Rest?

Date: Mon, 13 Jan 2003 08:24:16

You should have double checked - just like we had planned - 8:00 closing - 8:30 he locks up the place - 9:00 we go in. How much simpler could it have been?!?!? Monkeys could have pulled it off. The entire thing was my idea - there's no way you clowns could have done it on your own. We both know Marcus couldn't bust his way out of a paper bag. Then you make it worse by bringing what's his name into - how much did he get - just for holding a freaking ladder?

From: AlbertSunny
To: KeithBottoms
Subject: Congratulations!

Date: Sun, 12 Jan 2003 15:26:25

You know what happened? God, you have a short memory. Oh yeah and why didn't we just go straight to the police station?!?!?!? What was I supposed to do- hope that you showed up with the car while Marcus and I wait with are asses hanging in the air? Here officer we just found this money lying on the street - please take it away from us. Give me a break.

From: KeithBottoms
To: AlbertSunny
Subject: Congratulations!

Date: Sat, 11 Jan 2003 10:11:31

Don't play coy - you know what I'm talking about - you guys should have met me down by the gas station like we had planned - didn't I say it over and over - gas station gas station GAS STATION! - instead what do you do? You go to the 7Eleven and buy a six pack. What happened there? Huh?

From: AlbertSunny
To: KeithBottoms
Subject: Congratulations!

Date: Fri, 10 Jan 2003 10:35:16

No, not whatever - You know if it wasn't for your action movie explosives - you would have been down in Mexico drinking rum drinks for a year. And I suppose the freaking sprinkler system going off when you dropped the wire cutters was my fault too!!

From: KeithBottoms
To: AlbertSunny
Subject: Congratulations!
Date: Thur, 9 Jan 2003 07:45:41
Whatever!

From: AlbertSunny
To: KeithBottoms
Subject: Welcom Back
Date: Thur, 9 Jan 2003 05:10:21
If you're gonna try and blackmail me – then spare me the beating around the bush crapola.

From: KeithBottoms
To: AlbertSunny
Subject: Welcom Back
Date: Mon, 6 Jan 2003 11:24:07
That's funny cause Smitty tells me Marcus is driving around in a new Beamer – You guys owe me – BIG TIME – I was loyal to both your asses – I didn't squeal (I know Marcus would have - he's a pussy) and this is what I get?

From: AlbertSunny
To: KeithBottoms
Subject: Welcom Back
Date: Sun, 5 Jan 2003 10:14:27
Where did you get 50Gs – Smitty? I told you that when I visited you – why all the negative vibes now?

From: KeithBottoms
To: AlbertSunny
Subject: Welcom Back
Date: Sat, 4 Jan 2003 12:15:15
I'm not drinking anymore – there's no liquor stores in the tank. What do you mean that's it – there was atleast 50,000 in the safe and so unless my math is off – you still owe me a lot.

From: AlbertSunny
To: KeithBottoms
Subject: Welcom Back
Date: Fri, 3 Jan 2003 15:18:16
K-Train, Wow, computers. Who would have thunk - well, you always did seem kinda nerdy - just kidding. Sharon and I just bought a new computer - maybe you can stop by and set it up for us? We could get something to eat or something. The one Thai

Restaurant that you used to love is still there. Maybe stop by Tommy's for a pitcher of margaritas. Sunny

PS The rest of it - that was it my friend - split three ways right down the middle.

From:: KeithBottoms

To: AlbertSunny

Subject: Welcom Back

Date: Fri, 3 Jan 2003 14:12:18

Sunny, Good to hear from you - yeah, I heard you got married. Congratulations! That's great! School teacher - now you can finally learn to read and write - just kidding. Things on this end are pretty crazy - since getting back home (living at my Mom's place for now until I get a job) Anyway, I started going back to school - I'm studying computers - yeah I know pretty nuts - but when I was away I started fooling with them a lot and discovered I liked working with them. It's a one year programming course and I'm really enjoying it. But so far so good. Tried to get ahold of Angel but she doesn't seem to be answering my calls.

PS I got the money - thanx - Now where is the rest of it?

From: AlbertSunny

To:KeithBottoms

Subject: Welcom Back

Date: Thur, 2 Jan 2003 11:31:19

K-Train, how's it going? I heard you were back in town. Smitty gave me your e-mail- I thought I'd drop you a line and see how things are going. As you probably heard I got married last year - no not to Susan (that's along story) her name is Sharon - she's from Sacramento - well originally Cincinnati. I met her at a Sting concert (it was a free ticket) We're living over in the city - she's a teacher - can you believe it - I married a teacher. We're actually thinking about maybe moving to Sactown - her entire family's there. Let's see what else is new - well I went back to work for Henry after you left which is going pretty good considering the economy. Other than that things are going well. Write me and let me know how you are. Sunny

PS Hope you had a great New Years :) :)

PPS You did get the money I sent - right?

THE FACTORY

Steven tells me it's all about waiting. "We're all waiting," he says. Waiting to punch the clock. Waiting for Friday (or even Thursday). Waiting for the crew chief's whistle. Waiting for the afternoon sun to shine through the windows above our heads, above the machines, to tell us it won't be long now. Down on the floor it's hot, eighty degrees, even in the winter. And we in work clothes - canvas pants, cotton shirts, plastic glasses and hardhats. You can get used to it all, everything except the noise. That takes time. At lunch we sit in the break room upstairs and eat and smoke and bitch about the Factory. It's okay, the foreman can't hear us. He spends lunch alone in his office sitting in his swivel chair, feet on the desk, staring out the window. He never eats. His secretary told me so. He has a view of the rooftops of town now all covered in snow, and beyond them barren trees that follow the river into the city. I know because I've seen it. He spends his day counting figures in his books with his pencil and his drink - Canadian Club and coffee. *Two weeks off, television and Chinese food to go.* Where is the love interest? She'll arrive shortly.

We work our shift to the exact minute. The union takes a chunk of our pay to see to that. We strike twice a year. Picket signs and shouting slogans - ask me and I couldn't even tell you what for. The Factory always gives in to our demands, whatever they are, just as long as we agree to call it a compromise. That's the deal. No one wants the machines to stop. That's the truth. We laugh with the night crew as they come onto the floor with dirty jokes rolling off their tongues. They're a rowdy bunch. They make \$2 more an hour to sell their day for night. They can have it. Yesterday, with hat on his head and coat in his arm and ready for home, the foreman nearly fell down the stairs. Everyone knows. He thinks no one knows. "Poor sod," we think. Steven said he was around when they first made the machines...brought them down the river from Ohio. He has a wife. There is a picture of her on his desk. *Two weeks off, television and Chinese food to go.* And outside the Factory doors, our boots leave trails in the snow all the way to the parking lot gate. Where is the love interest? There she is, just like promised, in the soft light of the corner booth of the corner tavern over on 59th and Pulaski - the one with the Old Style sign above the door.

We drink that night in the tavern, for tomorrow is a holiday. It's the same tavern where I saw the man have a heart attack when I was young. He was lying, gray hair and flannel on the tile floor with a fallen bar stool. I had heard he had worked at the Factory, too but I'm not sure if that's right. There're so many. I joke with Paula about her new haircut and she pretends she is mad and we walk home in the snow. Hand in hand, we talk about places we'd like to visit. Italy, Ireland, Paris. On the way I see a man across the street near the theater who looks like the foreman with that big old coat of his. I wave just in case. The foreman is not a bad guy. It's his job to keep the machines going and everyone knows everyone has to answer to someone. That's the truth, too. Paula and I continue on along the river walk, past the Polish Church and then past the Factory with its yellow and

orange lights inside burning like a furnace and the smoke, rising from the stacks on the roof into the night. On hot days you can smell it for miles...that burnt rubber smell. Inside a skeleton crew is getting double time pay for working the holiday. The machines can never stop. When Monday comes, we're all surprised to hear the news about the foreman. Like I said, he's not a bad guy. It's just the pressure. The Factory.

A FRIEND OF THE ARTIST (A LETTER TO THE EDITOR)

Some say he hasn't been the same after the accident - that something inside of him has changed. Can you tell me what that means? I mean who would be the same after spending a month in a coma? And then another five months learning how to eat, drink, talk, walk, and shit again in some lousy hospital, in China to boot. Bullshit, is what that is! I even read somewhere, I don't know where, I think it was the *The New Yorker* or the *The Times*, that he lost his edge after that. More bullshit! Have you seen his new canvases? Have you? They're nothing less than courageous. The man is fearless in his life and in his art - it's right there in front of you in all its undaunted breathless beauty. If they're referring to his personality after the crash then that is a different story but I still say, so fucking what? Who cares about the man's personality! Leave that for the Biographers.

Critics! Parasites! How many of *them* are saints? Were any of them here in New York when he was selling the clothes off his back to the Goodfucking Will to buy paints and brushes? Were they there when he wandered the streets mad out of his mind with drink and the devil and god knows what else? Yes, there was the drinking. And you know what I say to that? I say so fucking what? to that, too. We all treated our livers like sponges back then. We wore it like a badge. Everyone – and not just the Boys in the Village. Of course it was machismo bullshit. The whole world is machismo bullshit, just take a look around. But what I'm saying is that those were different times. I can tell you this in all honesty because I was there and witnessed his weakness, that he never once picked up a brush, unless he was absolutely sober as a cross. He told me it was unclean to paint with drink in you. Unclean! That was his word. You see even back then his art was like some sort of spiritual path for the man.

Yes, I've heard that his daughter is trying to sell some of his work in print form because she's broke. Ah, it makes me sick just thinking about it. To have one of his classic pieces, say *Vanilla #36* or *Autumn Kansas City* hanging above some yuppie's fireplace makes me want to hit something and as you know I am not a violent man. Let me tell you a few things about his daughter since she is the cause of all this. First off, she made all the deals with the publisher while *he* was still in the bleeping coma and then put the pen in his hand right after he came out. “Just sign on the dotted line, father.” And he did but he didn't know what the hell he was signing - it could have been the Magna Carta for all he knew. Second, his daughter is just like her mother - they're both vampires who have been sucking him dry of energy for the past thirty years. They never have nor ever will understand the man or appreciate his worth...(beyond the dollar sign). Well, enough about them. It makes me too mad to discuss it any further.

It's true what they say, that in his new work a spiritual voice has begun to surface. Sometimes it's not obvious but it's there - it's there in his color. Look at his colors.

Everything is lighter. You can feel the lightness. It's like the feeling of the sun shining on the bark of a tree. It's nature itself speaking. Nature the All Powerful. Nature that is so beautiful it makes you weep. He told me that on his recent trip to India, not the one where he was in the accident - that was China, this is before that - anyway, he told me he was sick with what he thought was malaria and thought he was going to die. Every night the fever attacked his body and every night he prayed for death to take him, but come morning the fever broke and he was left with an incredible feeling of rebirth. He said he was reborn every day for a week. It was pure bliss. Quote/unquote. I have seen the beautiful fine line between life and death. Quote/unquote again. See what I mean about courageous? Anyway, imagine him dying of fever in some flea ridden hut in India and take it to an even further extreme of being thrown through the cockpit of a small airplane and ending up in a coma for a month. Now I'm not saying he's suddenly a believer or anything like that. He told me it's too late anyway, even if he was. But what I am saying and what I am trying to get at is that it's in him - the jungle, the fever, the plane crash, the coma, all of it. And he can't help but put it down. The man feels his shit that's for sure. But don't ask me. I'm just a friend. What do I know? I don't know diddlysquat.

A FISH TALE

Wisconsin 1979

The son followed his father down the flat easy trail that led from the cabin to the lake. It was early morning and they walked in silence. The boy carried his own tackle and rod and a backpack with his lunch and water. The lake was visible through the trees and sparkled in hues of blues and grays. In a few hours the colors would change and it would be too hot to fish. The father looked back every now and then to see if his son was keeping up. He could tell he still had sleep in his eyes and felt bad about waking him.

The boy sat in the back of the boat and steadied the sides while his father untied it from the pier and stepped in. They rowed in silence across the center of the lake to the opposite shore where cat-o-nine tails grew tall and the lily pads spread in perfect circles. There was a mist rising off the surface of the lake and birds flew high overhead. The father stopped rowing when they were within a stone's throw of the shore and signaled his son to drop anchor. The boy worked the nylon cord, hand over and hand into the green water, until the anchor found the muddy bottom.

The son pulled a worm from the dirt in the styrofoam cup he kept in his tackle, cut it into fine even pieces, and gave one piece to his father. Concentrating their casts along the pads, they fished in silence as the sun shined further up the pines. There was a breeze blowing from the north rocking their boat and drifting their lines. Once the father had to help the boy when his line snagged on a hidden log. The first bite happened after a few casts but the father wasn't able to hook it. He cursed at the missed opportunity.

They fished all morning in several spots with only five fishes in their basket to show for their efforts. It was not a great outing. Last summer had been much better. The son pulled the anchor up for the last time and they rowed back across the lake toward a small beach. As they approached, the boy knelt on the bench in the bow and waited as his father rowed hard and straight into the sand; then, he jumped out and pulled the boat with all his strength until it was good and secure on the shore. There was a picnic table on the beach where they sat in silence and ate their lunch of sandwiches and chips and apples.

"How is your mother?"

"She's alright."

The father tossed his apple core into the woods behind them.

"I'm sorry about things you know?"

The boy didn't reply.

It's going to be okay - we're all gonna be okay. All of us."

THE CANAL

I was swimming in the canal. Tom was there. He lived there in the city on the canal near the train station where all the buildings are made of bricks. There were other people swimming, too. Everyone was friends again. Even Susan was there and being pleasant. I remember the water was warm – warmer than you'd expect. We were jumping off a stone bridge - the bridge named for a saint. People were selling things on the bridge - all sorts of things. Tom bought an umbrella for his mother. It was the color of the sky. Then we went to a bar and sat on a balcony overlooking the canal and tossed down our fishing nets. We caught buckets full of fish. Tiny silver fish. The sun was hot and it dried our hair and warmed our shoulder blades.

Later but before the sun was setting, a policeman came by and wrote us tickets for swimming and fishing in the canal. His mustache twitched when he wrote. Susan ripped her ticket up into tiny triangles that looked like birds and let them float into the canal. She was handcuffed and taken away. (She married the policeman the very next day. They now live in a cabin not far from the canal.) Feral cats licked the empty circles left by the buckets of fish taken away by the policeman. The waitress from the bar came and brought us more wine and bread and cheese. She was a cute girl and her hair was long and blonde. Tom was in love with her once but his mother did not approve. She was a country girl and Tom was destined for great things.

It was nearly dark now as I walked along the canal hand in hand with the waitress. Tom did not seem to mind. He loved his mother. The waitress was pleasant but quiet and carried a feral cat around her neck like a scarf. Its fur was pure white except for a tuft of black under its chin. We followed the wood fence that followed the canal and found a small boat hidden in the tall reeds near the factory. The waitress rowed and I sat in the bow admiring her muscles and pleasant, quiet way. To pull my weight I sang her an old song of the kind we learned in Catholic school when we were young and in uniform, when Spring flowers of yellow and orange grew proudly along the canal.

ME & DOLORES

Hernandez, Dolores AKA "The Puerto Rican Rocket" - S.F. Examiner, passed away on Friday, August 8, 2003. Dolores was a singer/dancer who arrived in San Francisco in 1960 and performed at the Stagedoor and other venues in the S.F. North Beach District as well as other parts of the world.

Services will be held at Dugan's Mortuary/Reilly Co., 3434 - 17th Street, S.F. Wednesday 7:00 p.m. and the Funeral will be held Thursday morning. Dolores is survived by her loving daughter Abbie, her beloved grandson Anthony and her adoring family and friends.

Darren folds the paper in half and then quarters and places it next to his coffee on the restaurant counter.

Darren: I knew her.

Doug: Who?

Darren: *Pointing to the paper.* Dolores Hernandez.

Doug: *Picking up the paper and raising it to his eyes.* Hmm. Quite the looker.

Darren: Yeah, she was and then some, at least forty years ago when that photo was taken.

Doug: The Puerto Rican Rocket. I like that. She looks like a young Elizabeth Taylor, don't you think? With those eyes and dark hair?

Darren: Yeah, I guess she does. I never thought of that.

Doug: Hmm. Was she any good?

Darren: What do you mean?

Doug: You know, singing and dancing. Was she any good?

Darren: You kidding? It's too bad you never saw her. She was great. She used to do that Cuban jazz stuff. Had this very sexy velvet voice and legs... Well, you should have seen them. My gosh, yeah, she was a good.

Doug: Hmm. How'dja know her?

Darren: What?

Doug: I said how'dja know her?

Darren: I played drums in her band.

Doug: You played drums? I didn't know that.

Darren: Yeah, when I was young. I wasn't their regular drummer. I was just filling in for a while. We actually became an item.

Doug: Really? You and Dolores?

Darren: Yeah, me and Dolores. Well, not really an item. It was more like a fling.

Doug: When was that?

Darren: What's that?

Doug: I asked you when was the last time you saw her?

Darren: Oh, let me think – it had to be about '65 or '66 or thereabouts. Yeah, probably around then because it was before I met Angela and got married.

Doug: Naturally.

Darren: Yeah, but it was after the Army. So, I'd say 1965.

Doug: Jesus, 1965.

Darren: Yeah, ancient history.

Doug: Hmm. I wonder how she died.

Darren: Don't know. It doesn't say, does it?

Darren: Nope. *Raising the paper again.* Boy, she was a looker.

Darren: Yeah, they don't make women like her anymore. She was all natural.

The waitress comes by and asks the two men if they would like more coffee. Doug accepts, asking for “a little warmer,” but Darren declines by covering his cup with his hand.

Darren: I remember she lived up on Pacific right up the hill from where Teddy and Margaret used to live. Remember that place?

Doug: Oh, yeah. Very nice – great view.

Darren: Yeah, and she had this little dog - you know the kind I’m talking about with the little flat faces...

Doug: You mean pugs.

Darren: What’s that?

Doug: Pugs.

Darren: Yeah, well anyway, we’d take the little thing for walks around the block after the shows. I remember it 'cause I always thought it funny that here was this beautiful, gorgeous woman who loved this little ugly flat faced dog.

Doug: Did she speak English?

Darren: What? English? Nah, no. Very little - I think. But it didn’t really matter too much.

Doug: Hmm.

Darren: Yeah, the Puerto Rican Rocket.

Outside the restaurant and left down the street a block to Van Ness, the morning traffic begins to thin. And up above and in the direction opposite the ocean, the fog burns off with the noonday sun. On page A28 of the paper, two pages from the Obituary Section, the forecast predicts patchy fog early, then mostly sunny skies. Highs from 65 to 82. Lows, 52 to 62.