

The Loose Fish Chronicles



Excerpt From a Memoir in Stories by Beverly A. Jackson

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The Green Dress — 1960

Dig it, Diana says. Marines. She and I sit at our usual end of the bar.

And indeed, five young beauties in uniform with ridiculously short hair saunter into our Village saloon, as saucy as geese. I shrug and light a cigarette, watching them through puffs of smoke. I have my eye on the blond one. He could be a cracker from Oklahoma or a rich boy from Connecticut. Who can tell in that spiffy little soldier suit?

“How much you want to bet that the Dragon Lady hits on them?” Diana says.

At the other end of the bar, old Kitty Polanski sits in her green dress with the low neckline and sure enough, is on those boys in a New York second. Diana sighs and signals to Jim, the bartender by circling a dainty forefinger over our glasses to give us another round.

We call Kitty Dragon Lady because her breath is dank if you get close enough to talk to her. It is a cruel nickname, but apt. She has big spaces between her front teeth giving her an impoverished look in a face that is worn and ruddy from too much booze and too little skin care. We guess—we the young and the fortunate—that she is about forty, her body bellicose with wide hips and sagging breasts. And she often wears that shiny green dress. Each night as it gets later, she gets louder and cruder. But it is early yet, and she is making nice with the new blood.

By closing time, Jim the bartender who has eyes for my roommate, Diana, sets up a private party. He knows somebody on Jane Street with a pad. He invites the Marines along.

Ever wonder why they call them jarheads? Diana teases me, dimpling and tossing her long dark hair.

My blond is named Henry and turns out to be from Indiana. He loves jazz and so do I, and we sway by the jukebox and dance-in-place a little as he feeds quarters into the slot and pushes B5 over and over again for Ella’s “The Nearness of You.” He says they are twenty years old. They look younger to me.

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You will come with me, won't you? Jim says to Diana, pushing another free round our way. Diana says of course she knows a gentleman when she sees one.

After last call, the four of us push out into the snowy morning followed by two of the other Marines and the Dragon Lady. Diana is a little drunk, and her eyes shine up at Jim. Henry and I link arms and stick our tongues out to catch snowflakes. Diana and I exchange smiles. It is wonderful to be twenty-one, to be free, with beautiful men on our arms. The flakes of the wet snow catch on Henry's lashes, and no night has ever felt so light, so right.

The pad is a low-ceilinged one-bedroom in a walkup. The refrigerator is stocked with beer. Diana sniffs. We don't drink beer, she says. Jim disappears into the bedroom and emerges with a bottle of vodka. Never fear, Jim is here, he says. There is a buzz of current in the place. We are nervous. Our hands are cold. Henry turns on the stereo and turns off the overhead. The one lamp in the room casts a yellow pallor on our faces.

The other two Marines come out of the kitchen with beers, and lead the Dragon Lady into the bedroom. They don't close the door. When I glance in, I can see her on the bed, her white thigh exposed under the wrinkled, green clutch of her dress. My stomach lurches and I turn to Diana. We can hear quick breathing and groans and then Kitty screams out "fuck me, you bastards, fuck me."

The living room seems to freeze for a moment, the four of us fossilized in amber light. And then the spell breaks in slivers of sound and action, and I can hear my heart thudding. Diana reaches for her coat in a ballet of slow motion...Jim's stricken face is suddenly old and Mel Torme skats inately on the stereo. Green, I say. That hideous green.

Don't cry, Henry says, Oh, please don't cry.

Fancy Soaps — 1961

It's an unbearably hot New York City summer weekend, and I head for the only water hole bigger than my bath tub. I spot Ed Shelton at the downtown public swimming pool. Ed is a "name" around the Village—always in the bars slouched over a pay phone on the wall, receiver to his ear, gin martini in his hand. We assume he's talking theater business and securing jobs—the pay phone in every saloon is Ed's personal office. He cups the bowl of his martini glass like the head of a tulip, with the stem dangling between his middle fingers. The man is formidable, sophisticated, clearly out of my league. A barrel-chested Broadway stage manager, Ed is hip, older, thirty-two or three, with an aura, a swagger, and a reputation that tantalizes me. Though he's far from handsome, he has a craggy quality I find irresistible.

"Masculine verging on Neanderthal," my friend, Diana says.

He looks hung over, stands dazed in the shallow end while children in goggles undulate underwater in and out of shadow like tadpoles around his legs. Tribes of shrieking children cannonball into three feet of water, raising tsunamis. A quarter-acre of moving flesh covers the rickety chaises, beach towels and blowup floats all around us. My towel lies between two mothers who belittle cautionary threats at their young. I grit my teeth, trying to visualize a rich tan on the city pallor of my skin.

Ed is in a kind of trance, squatting, immersing himself up to the chin, rising, dunking again in a slow, hypnotic rhythm with half-closed eyes fixed on the concrete wall. It's a humid 90 degrees and every ten minutes or so, out of necessity, I stagger to the edge of the pool and dangle my legs into the water to cool off. Not keen on dunking my body in probable child piss, I gingerly pat my shoulders with cupped handfuls of water. Ed notices me. As if the sight of me is sobering, he comes to life. Lizard like, his eyelids lift, and he wades through the throngs of squirmy bathers toward me.

"Don't we know each other?" he begins.

Hitching up the bra of my bikini, I rush into explanations.

“My alleged roommate lives with your buddy, Jim Butcher.”

Diana, my best friend, is spending nights with the bartender of the Bistro, but her belongings are still stored in our walkup, and she thankfully still shares the rent.

Ed dives right into his show biz routine. He does that male thing of fanning his credentials, like a pack of cards—his theater successes, conquests, life’s lessons. He rattles off the names of Broadway stage actors, and directors he’s known. He worked on “Sweet Bird of Youth,” and does equity, non-equity, on and on. But I don’t know theater, and am sure not to admit I have only seen movies. I listen and he likes it that I listen. But I am way too excited to absorb much except my good fortune and the fact that he likes to talk about himself.

“I could use a hair of the dog,” he says, as the sun starts to droop toward the top of the wall. “Care to join me?”

The locker rooms reek of chlorine and are a din of clanging doors. As I change into shorts and a skimpy halter-top, I catch my face in the mirror. My cheeks and shoulders bloom prettily with sunburn, making my platinum blonde hair look even lighter if that is possible. I haven’t had a date in weeks. The poor man’s Marilyn beams back at me in the glass; perhaps I have made the majors at last.

I meet Ed out front and we head for the nearest bar, neat rolls of soggy terrycloth tucked under our arms. A street vendor outside hits him up for roses, and he buys me a long-stemmed, red beauty. I carry it around all night like a badge of honor.

We push on to Chumley’s then Stefan’s bar where Stefan himself buys us a drink. Then we barhop up Hudson Avenue to the White Horse Tavern, and the No-Name. He can put away three drinks to my one, no small feat since I have a hollow leg. The Corner Bistro is our last stop, home base for both of us. Jim Butcher isn’t working, so Diana isn’t there. I’m relieved, unsure of how this would go over with her. She has strong objections to Jim’s drinking buddies, and Ed is a good friend of Jim’s. We get greetings and back slaps as we walk in, and friends wiggle their brows at our new union—for the Village is nothing if not a back fence of gossip and a shared pond of lovers and spouses.

Ed is on the phone at every bar, so I play down our quasi-date as “just friends,” when the curious come over to keep me company and pry. They crow, “oh sure,” winking over my head. Ed’s well

liked, a man’s man, but women take to him too. Secretly I envision an exciting life with him, theater, parties—the envy of all. Ed’s in the fold of Village saloon owners, and it would be lovely to share what Diana already has, the inside track, that private clique of theirs.

We pub crawl back to the East Village along Greenwich Avenue and drunkenly traverse the four flights up to my flat, past the bathtub in the kitchen, through the railroad rooms each painted in different colors, to the living room sofa. The poor droopy rose ends up in a waterless jelly jar, to be pressed later in my scrapbook.

I can hardly believe that right here on Avenue B, sitting on the cheap vinyl sofa of my railroad apartment, is Ed Shelton. The oompah music of the Polish bar downstairs rises like heat—while we breathe on each other like dragons in the dark.

I light a candle, and Ed wastes no time getting my shorts off.

Then things change. His fluid, easy demeanor becomes nervous and urgent. After one small kiss, and in one quick motion, he buries his face between my legs.

“Hey, hold your horses,” I say.

He responds with a few incoherent words that leave me giggling, but as I try to unzip his fly, he manages to push my hand away. I try to pull his shaggy head up to mine, but he resists. When I try to squirm into a sixty-nine position, he holds me in place. There is a rigid, controlling intensity about this that I don’t comprehend.

What’s a poor girl to do? I relax. And he gets more intense than ever. After maybe my third orgasm, he says, “Did you get off?”

“Are you nuts?” I reply, breathing with difficulty. He hasn’t even unzipped his pants.

“Are you sure? Are you okay?” he insists.

“Don’t you want to move up here?” I ask, trying to pull him up and over me.

His body tightens again. He sits up straight and reaches for his smokes. The candlelight plays off his big, rugged face. His forehead scrunches in a frown.

“You’re just a kid,” he says.

“What?” I yell. “I’m almost twenty three!” I put my foot against his shoulder and rock him with a mock kick.

He is serious. He turns and cradles me gently, like a child. “I

can't do this," he whispers.

"What are you talking about? You already did!"

He stands up and stares down at me, smoke curling from his nostrils, Van Heflin in a B movie. I can feel my heart doing doesy-does. Something is going to ruin this.

"I can't remember your name. That's a bad sign."

"Bullshit," I say. He just stares at me. "It's Beverly. Go on, say it ten times, Beverly."

He shakes his head, inhaling deeply on the Camel.

"Well, I remember yours—Ass Hole!" I swing my legs onto the floor, and reach for my shorts.

"You're going to be one hell of a broad," he says before turning and going toward the door. Just like that. Just as cool as an ice cube.

I follow him into the kitchen. "Fuck you!" I yell.

"You should do something about that mouth," he says, reaches over and kisses my forehead like I'm a child before he exits and bounds down the stairs. I want to kill him. I put out the candle and sit in the dark for awhile and cry. Him walking out on me like this feels like some vaguely familiar terror, some horrible pain in the core of me which I can't begin to reach or console. I want him dead. That's how I know it's love.

I show up at the Corner Bistro the following night to meet Diana. Of all the bars in the Village, it's my favorite. It's Diana's too, of course, because her boyfriend is the bartender and new co-owner. The old wood, ceiling fans and sawdust on the floor are no different than any other downtown saloon. But the regulars, the folks who loyally frequent the place tend to be special. Zoot Sims and Al Cohn, local jazz musicians, hold court with swing and bebop fans and the jukebox is full of their 45s. The hamburgers have a secret ingredient, and are the best. The haunting oil paintings on the walls reflect an eerie light that seems to float beneath murky ochre and black figures. I love art and wish I could paint, so I am quick to admire when others do. They are the work of a Village local, Bill Kirkaldy, once a businessman who dropped out and became a formidable painter. He's a close friend of Jim Butcher, Diana's boyfriend. For me, his paintings make the Bistro special, dark and mysterious.

As I come in the door, out of the corner of my eye, I see Ed

standing at one end of the bar with a woman. A tall, very pretty woman. I keep walking heading to the far end of the saloon, near the ladies room, where Diana's already seated on a barstool and has saved one for me.

"Hi," I say glumly. I haven't seen her in days.

"Did you get the rent in?" Diana searches her bag for her checkbook, and hands me a check.

The Catholic Workers crowd, the intelligentsia of the Village, is gathered at Ed's end of the bar playing Botticelli, a guessing game. Once Diana and I foolishly asked to join the game, and the next question was "Were you the Prime Minister during the war in Hungary?" To get it right, you are supposed to say "I am..." and name the famous person. Diana and I looked at each other blankly. Was there a war in Hungary? People picked up on it and laughed. We keep our distance after that, and only eavesdrop on their heated discussions about civil rights, Viet Nam and Communist party political candidates.

I stare at the woman beside Ed at the other end of the bar. She's leaning over to talk to one of the seated Catholic Workers. She's nearly as tall as Ed, with huge breasts and ample hips. She isn't dressed up, but "actress" is written all over her. Her full red mouth is pouty, and her lashes, heavy with mascara, could be a nest for spiders. She's gorgeous and close to his age, I guess.

"Who's the brunette?" I ask Diana.

"Oh, I forget her name. She's in Ed's new show, I think." She shoots me a look. "I heard you were with him last night."

"Which show?" I try to remember in all of Ed's ramblings if he had even mentioned he was working a new show. The night before had evaporated like a dream sequence, and I wouldn't have bet money at that moment that it ever happened.

"He's going on the road with some revival." She nods toward the woman. "Jim says they're just friends."

"On the road?" My stomach does a quick tumble.

"Didn't he tell you? A five city tour. A big deal." Diana puts a Pall Mall into a short cigarette holder. I don't like the smug, "inside story" way she's talking to me. Diana fancies herself the Sophia Loren type, and puts on small airs. She gets drunk with the rest of us, but insists she's merely "tipsy."

"What show?"

"I think it's some off-Broadway thing. I never heard of it." She blows her smoke away from me.

"How long do those tours run anyway?"

"Ah, I see interest here!" She looks at me slyly as she leans on one elbow, the palm of her hand thrown up, dangling the cigarette nonchalantly between two fingers. "Years," she says, grinning, teasing.

Down the bar, Ed's head tips back in a guffaw, and the actress displays perfect big teeth. Like a Vargas girl, she's all pink, creamy skin and curves. Yesterday's sunburn has turned to ruddy splotches on my chest and arms, and scales of skin are already flaking off my nose.

Jim moves down the bar, and puts free drinks in front of us, one of the perks of being Diana's best friend. She leans across the bar and kisses him lightly.

"Bev wants to know how long Ed will be gone," she says, a lilt in her voice.

Jim cocks his head and raises one eyebrow. Embarrassed, I lower my eyes, praying for an answer and afraid to hear it.

"The tour's a few months. But he's going to manage a regional theater in Detroit after that. He got the offer today." Jim shrugs. "Looks like we're losing him." I stare at the Kirkaldy right behind Jim's shoulder. It's a painting called "The Judge," a rendition of a robed monster rising above faces of plebeians whose bodies are depicted in states of disintegration, dripping off the canvas. Sort of like I feel.

Ed walks toward our end of the bar, but goes straight to the pay phone, leaving Miss Ipana in a circle of admiring men. Squinting through the smoke of a Camel, he starts his telephone ritual. His calls are a standing joke since he never divulges who's on the other end of the line. His glance strays over to us as he talks, but I can't tell if he is actually seeing us, or too preoccupied to focus.

The bar begins to fill. Jim keeps bourbon and gingers lined up in front of us. Diana gets more bitchy as she drinks.

"He's never been one to settle down with anyone," she says.

Just as Ed hangs up the receiver, the actress walks out of the Bistro on the arm of one of the regulars. Ed stands by the pay phone and grins at Jim across the expanse of yellow smoke. The expression on his face is a mixture of amusement, irony and a

knowing exchange "between men," as if to say what else would you expect from a woman? I turn to Diana and say, "Oh, fuck him."

Ed saunters out of the Bistro with a little wave. Then he disappears from New York. After a month or so, I get a package postmarked San Francisco containing a box of fancy soaps with a note that says, "For your mouth."

Dreams and Dreads — 1961

“What brings you here?” she says. Her expensive black leather couch has a head rest at one end. I sit upright crossing and uncrossing my legs. Dr. Harriet Strachstein sits in a small chair facing me, a leather bound notebook in her lap. She’s matronly, smartly dressed, with good skin and a fixed gaze. The office smells like fresh lemons.

“A friend told me that I should get some help. Someone passed along your name.”

“I’d like to help. Can you tell me what’s bothering you?” Her voice expresses no emotion, but is gentle and steady.

Feeling like a balloon filled to bursting, I break into tears. I don’t want this—to be bothered, to need help. But there’s relief in it too. Diana is right.

“Everything is bothering me,” I say. “My boyfriend. My mother. My job. I tried to...I thought about ending it.” I am blubbing words in a rush between sobs. I feel foolish.

“Did you make an attempt to end it?” she asks in that same steady voice.

I nod my head. “I turned on the gas but I lost my nerve. I called a boyfriend who came over. It’s humiliating. It’s a stupid story.”

There’s a pause. She doesn’t say anything. I collect myself as she pushes a box of Kleenex across the glass coffee table. “Where shall we start?” she finally says.

I open my hands.

For the rest of the hour she takes a factual family history. She asks short questions trying to keep me talking, while she makes notes. I blab it all. My real father, gone and unknown, my Mama, Pete, Ed Shelton. I give her the works. Finally she glances at her watch.

“Do you ever recall your dreams?” she says.

“Funny that you ask. I have two recurring dreams. The only ones I think I remember.”

“Would you be willing to share them?” She rises to signal that the session is over.

“Sure.”

“Okay, then, let’s pick this up next week.”

As I walk through the elegant foyer to the soundless elevator, I wonder where the money’s going to come from. \$65 per hour. It might as well be a million.

When I get back to my walkup on Avenue B, Peter Coley is prone on one of the vinyl-covered couches, with Bill Kirkaldy stretched out on the other, both watching the Cowboys play football on television. The men appear to have been here a long time, as the empty Heineken bottles are lined up alongside them on the floor.

Weeks before, Diana moved out for good to live with her boyfriend, Jim Butcher, leaving me with the full rent. I felt abandoned and betrayed, but of course I had seen it coming, just a matter of time. I was lonely and a little drunk when Peter hit on me at the Bistro. He’s one of the gang, an old friend of Ed Shelton, and a known entity. Because I’m feeling scared, I didn’t stop him when he almost immediately moved in. I expected him to pick up some of the expenses, but his former career as a Wall Street trader is over, he says, and he hasn’t found his way yet. No job, no money. He has let his hair grow out like a beatnik and wanders around the saloons during the day while I’m doing boring clerical work in the accounting department of the Port Authority Extension. I don’t give him cash, so I have no idea where he gets money for booze. He must cadge drinks from friends and likely borrows cash as well. Villagers are often like that, always helping each other out with a drink and a bit of dosh.

Then he brings Kirkaldy home with him. A former businessman who dropped out and turned painter, Bill Kirkaldy is a free spirit, a drunk, and one of our Corner Bistro gang. His ominous paintings hang on the Bistro walls and are disturbing, but wonderful. He’s older, intimidating. Not easy to talk to.

“He can sleep on one of the couches. He has nowhere to go. He’s bound to sell a painting soon, then he’ll get his own place.” Peter knows I can’t say no. I’m not good at saying no, in spite of all the anger I hold inside. That’s the same couch where Ed Shelton made love to me. Thinking about him still wounds me.

My make-do new romance turns quickly to supporting two unemployed roommates who pay nothing, do nothing. Peter stops sleeping in my bed as well. He doesn’t want to make Kirkaldy feel

bad, he says, and so the two of them sleep in the narrow living room on the plastic couches. I sink deeper into darkness, feeling even more alone with two men in the house.

Mama calls again. I turn on the lamp, seeking the clock. It's midnight and I'm groggy. She and my stepfather are back from Spain and stationed in Michigan. Apparently things are not going as well for them as they did in Madrid. She's drunk and crying, begging me to come and get her, a repeat of last month's call. I can hardly make out her words but I hear Pete yelling in the background, "go ahead, tell your whoring daughter to come and get you, you bitch. You'll get nothing, not a cent, you understand? Get out!"

"Please call the police, Mama," I beg. My stomach clinches, my free hand rolls into a hard fist. God, how I hate him! But her phone drops, and then hangs up before she answers me, leaving me with a dial tone to imagine what he's doing to her. I don't sleep again. The walls of my bedroom are painted a beautiful blush of mango ochre to match the Modigliani print that faces me. It is the exact shade of the skin color of the long necked girl who stares back at me with vacant eyes. Snores waft from the living room. I think I am losing my mind.

"Let's explore the dreams," Harriet says on my next appointment. She smiles. She's a little warmer than my first visit. "Why don't you lie down?"

"Okay," I say, taking a deep breath. "the first dream is most frequent. I have a litter of puppies that I love, but for some reason I must keep them in a shed away from the house. They are fat and adorable. But then the dream changes and I realize that days have gone by and I have forgotten to feed the puppies! I run out to the shed, and they are all thin, ribs sticking out, and lying dead in a heap. I wake up sobbing. It upsets me so, and I dream it again and again." I reach for the Kleenex box.

"What do you think it means?"

"I don't know. That I'm irresponsible?"

"Are you, in real life?"

"No! I'm very responsible. I'm the most responsible person I know." She'd have to live in the Village and know my friends to understand just how responsible I am. I shake my head. "Is that what you think it means?"

"Sometimes the parts of a dream represent parts of yourself.

I think it might mean that the sweet, childish, adorable parts of you are the puppies. And being neglected by the adult you. Are you kind to yourself?"

I inhale. "I never thought about it," I say.

"Well, we'll talk about it. Let's hear the other dream?"

"I don't have this one as often, but every once in awhile. It's the ruins of Pompeii and everything is frozen in black lava. I am walking through this dark foreign city and there is an alcove in an old wall, the kind of thing where a religious statue might sit. But it is my Mama there holding a child, like the Madonna, and I realize that the child is me. We are frozen in lava, dead but lifelike. I always wake up crying. It is so real to me, that dream."

"Do you think your mother is a religious statue?"

I look at Harriet suspiciously. "She's not at all religious."

"But from what you've told me, you believe she's a saint, don't you?"

A saint. I think of Mama putting herself between me and Pete when he raged. I think of the bruises she carried that belonged, by rights, to me. If I made him mad, he always hit her. That's how he controlled me.

"She has had a hard life. Yes, I suppose she is, in many respects."

"The dream says that you think it's a mother's job to look after her child, isn't that true?"

I nod. But I'm just a baby in the dream. Now I'm grown. She can't look after me now. She can't even look after herself.

"Do you think your mother looked after you when you were a child?"

"What do you mean? Of course. It's Pete who I blame." I feel an alarm go off in my chest. What does she mean?

"Don't you think a good mother would take her child away from someone like Pete?"

I explode. "Don't you blame her. She loves me. It's HIM, he's the monster. She's a victim!" I yell. But my voice sounds hollow. There's some thing like an egg breaking inside of me.

"You sound more like the mother than she does," Harriet says patiently. "Aren't you the one trying to take care of her? Who is the child in this relationship?"

Flip cards of the years at home move through my mind. Mama telling me her problems. Mama telling me she hates him. Mama

coming to my room to cry. Mama begging me to be good so we don't upset him. Mama still calling me for help in the middle of the night. Just like a child. I stare at Harriet, as I reach for another tissue.

Harriet nods. "Let's talk now, about your life and your Mama."

After my fifth visit with Harriet, I tell Peter and Kirkaldy to get out.

"Just go home and say, 'I don't want you here any more. Please get your things and leave,'" Harriet says in our session. She only has to tell me once, and I do.

Peter stares at me, incredulous. "Why? What have I done?"

"If I have to explain it to you, then you wouldn't understand anyway. Just get out, okay? And take Kirkaldy with you. No hard feelings, just leave."

And they leave. It takes about twenty minutes, and several curses under their breath and mumblings from the living room.

When the door shuts, I sit down on the bed. The only noise is the loud click-click of the alarm clock. It feels like all the energy has been sucked out of the apartment. But my breath exhales in relief. Harriet has made it so simple. Why can't I do that on my own? Where is the grit I always had? What is the matter with me? Then I cry again. Peter doesn't care about me, that's the bare truth. Good riddance.

Harriet has shown me that my need for a good mother makes me transfer it onto my women friends. Nicely put, she told me my best friend Diana is a mother substitute, psychologically speaking. That's why her move to live with Jim hits me so hard. It's like Mama deserting me for Pete. Harriet calls it "triangularization," a neurotic threesome. I am comforted to know a reason for these feelings of abandonment. It's not Diana's fault. It's my distortion. What a relief.

When Diana and I meet for dinner at Stefan's, we take our usual back booth. I haven't seen her in weeks and she wants to hear about my therapy, since it was her idea that I get some help, so I'm eager to share it with her.

"I have a mother transference on you," I say. I'm hoping it will clear the air of some of my resentments toward her when she moved. She probably doesn't even know I am missing her and feeling hurt and angry. She's all caught up in her own life now and

our years of being roommates are over. "Harriet says it's because I didn't have a good mother, so I try to find substitutes. I was upset about you moving, but you see, it was all me, not your fault at all."

Diana stares at me.

"What?" I ask. What's come out of my mouth that's upset her? Diana's face morphs into a mask of icy anger.

"You've just been using me all these years? You haven't seen me at all, just looking for your fucking mother? I always knew you were crazy. But you're a user too!"

She jams her cigarettes and lighter into her bag.

I'm astonished. "Wait, no, that's not it. Of course I see you. You're my oldest and best friend. That's why I love you, because you are good and not bad to me." That somehow doesn't come out right. How can she see it that way?

"You just stay away from me, you hear?" She rises, storms out of the dining room, past the bar and out the door onto Christopher Street.

Bewildered, I cancel our food order and ask for a martini. I have never been so confused in my life.

At my next session, we sit in silence. I feel hostile and unhappy. Harriet tries to open me up, but I stay evasive. She doesn't push me until the end of the session. I am anguished, knowing what I need to do.

"What are you thinking right now?" she asks. Her stern face looks old to me.

"I can't afford \$65 an hour. I need to stop this."

She exhales. "Well, I've been meaning to talk to you about this. I think you're a good candidate for group therapy. It costs much less than private sessions."

But I shake my head, and drop my final check on the table.

Another mother. A mother I had to pay, no less.

Sleeping With Marilyn — 1961

“Whichever bonehead just touched me, cut it out!” The acoustics of the large moving elevator make my voice sound high-pitched and breathy.

Sniggers ripple through the car as the doors slide open onto the lobby. “Hey, keep your paws off Marilyn,” a voice in the back wisecracks. I feel a flush rise in my face. Over my shoulder, I see a co-worker from my own department, in the back with a smirk on his face. The mostly male herd spills across the marble foyer and out into Fourteenth Street foot traffic.

“Sperm trying to outrun each other,” I mutter.

The first snowfall of 1961 powders the New York City twilight as I step out in suede, high heeled boots. At least I’m not wearing my new ones, I think, pulling my coat collar up.

“I don’t know how you tolerate those animals,” someone behind me says. His voice is low and rich. With his discernible lisp, he sounds like a woman with an interesting past. I turn as he catches up, walking in step, and we keep walking in the cold toward Hudson Avenue.

He is a small man, no taller than I, wearing a camel colored coat with raccoon fur collar and cuffs. He walks in short, prim steps, though there’s a natty cut to his clothes. He looks nothing like the young buttoned-down engineers, in their cheap wool overcoats and heavy Oxfords, at the Port Authority extension where I work.

“Aw, they don’t bother me,” I say. “I’m just in a mood tonight.”

His face is arresting, almost beautiful, with dark olive skin, baby smooth with no five o’clock shadow. Huge almond shaped eyes, moist and chocolate-colored, overpower a large Roman nose. He might have stepped off an El Greco canvas. Under streetlights, he looks older than me, perhaps mid-thirties. His bald head, above his high forehead, is fringed in a neat horseshoe of black hair. “Who are you?” I ask.

“Franco Olivetti, from the sixth floor.”

“No kidding?” I thought I knew the face of every draftsman on Six. They check me out often enough when I walk up the aisles to deliver pay envelopes to the floor managers. “Are you new?”

“No, no,” he says. “I’m part of the furniture by now. But I sit hidden behind that partition in Dan Horton’s office. I’m his secretary. For years and years, and loathe to admit it.”

“Secretary!” My eyes widen. I never knew there were male secretaries.

We reach the corner of Hudson Avenue and wait at the light. Snow falls in lacy flaps that stick to our coats and eyelashes.

“I see them bother you all the time. It’s not right.” Franco sniffs and tilts his chin up.

“It’s not a big deal,” I say. “I guess I’m used to it.”

“They think you look like Marilyn, that’s why.” Franco swipes the top of his head quickly.

The snow falls faster, and the sidewalks, stenciled with footprints, are beginning to puddle with slush. “They’re right, you know, but it’s no excuse for not being gentlemen,” he says.

“I wish! I don’t look at all like her. It’s just the blonde hair.” The catcalls and whistles, and whispers in the halls can be annoying, but if I’m honest I like the attention. And any girl in New York City with the right hairdo can pass for a stand in.

“Well, you’re every bit as glamorous.”

“Thanks.” His compliment pleases me. I want to be glamorous and sophisticated. I hate being a nothing.

“You must live near here,” I say.

“100 Christopher. Been there nine years.”

“Christopher Street? Near Stefan’s? My favorite restaurant.”

“I dine there regularly, it’s next door,” Franco says, smiling.

“Well, I moved from the East Village a few weeks ago—but I spend all my time on the west side anyway. I have a little studio here on Horatio Street.”

We are in front of the No Name bar.

“I sort of hang out here.” I say. “I used to go to the Bistro, but this is fine.” I think better of explaining that my best friend is no longer speaking to me and her boyfriend owns the Bistro. “Would you like to join me for a cocktail?”

“Thanks, but better not.” Franco glances uneasily through the plate glass window at the crowd. Music from the jukebox floats out on the evening air. Billy Holiday purring “Ain’t Nobody’s Business.”

“I think I’ll just go home to my book and my hi-fi,” Franco says. “This music gives me fits.” He shrugs apologetically.

“Oh, you’re a reader? Good, let’s talk books! Nobody I know talks books with me, come on in. You’d be doing me a favor.”

“Sorry. I’m not much for saloons. But thank you. I’d better get going.”

I fake a little grimace. Hesitating in the doorway of the No Name, I watch Franco Olivetti make his way through the snowfall. Queen of the Secretaries. He makes me smile.

Through the glass door I search for Peter, my last brief boyfriend, at the bar. I don’t want to run into him again.

Franco is almost to the corner. I let my gaze follow his jaunty walk. He turns and gives me a wave, and then stops.

“Hey, Marilyn, maybe we can dine together some time,” he calls, his dark eyes dancing in a shaft of blue light from the deli’s neon.

“How about tonight?” I say. I start walking toward him.

The top of Franco’s balding head, furry collar and shoulders are iced with snow. His face breaks into a smile. “Now? How about Stefan’s?” he says.

Seated in a back booth, in the amber candlelight of the restaurant, we share a bottle of house red, and order Steak Diane. We exchange thumbnail biographies. He, Italian, raised in Brooklyn by an elderly aunt and his mother, both now deceased; his overweight father dead of heart failure at an early age. Me, English and French, precocious, father dead in World War II, the only child in a military family, abused by a tyrannical stepfather. We make jokes about the pains of childhood, neuroses and the high cost of shrinks.

“Where’s your family now?” he asks.

“Michigan. They were in Spain before that.”

“Do you see them often?”

“No, but my mother calls when she’s drunk. And Pete called a few months ago in the middle of the night. He said the Base was on full alert and that I needed to get out of New York City NOW.”

“Why?” Franco’s eyes widen.

“Apparently that Bay of Pigs invasion. I guess we were close to war. He couldn’t tell me why at the time, but that’s what Mama said later. It was top secret. I thought he was just talking crazy or possibly drunk.”

“I know nothing of politics,” Franco says.

“Well, me either! I just hung up the phone and laughed. I’m not going anywhere. Even if I had known, I wouldn’t have left. If Cuban missiles hit New York City, I wouldn’t want to live through what was next, anyway.”

“That’s what’s nice about New York. It is the beginning and the end of the world, isn’t it?” He smiles and winks.

“Tell me what you’re reading right now,” Franco says.

“No, you first,” I say. “I bet you’re an egghead, right?”

Franco shakes his head. “No, I read everything. I’m partial to Capote and Durrell, but right now it’s Henderson the Rain King, by Saul Bellow.”

“I haven’t heard of that,” I say. “Goodbye Columbus is a new one I got. It really makes you think. Do you know it?”

“What’s his name? Roth? I haven’t read him, but it got good reviews.”

I shrug. “Yeah, a little too close to reality though.”

“How’s that?” Franco says, putting his fork down.

“Oh, just makes you wonder, that’s all.” I can feel the wine taking hold. “His characters live these mundane lives—sort of like mine. I thought things would be different when you grow up. But we’re all screwed up forever, I guess.” My eyes fill with tears, and I reach quickly for my napkin.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t drink so much vino,” I say.

“If you want to talk, I’m a good listener,” Franco says.

I take a deep breath. “You know what? I think I’d better go home.” I quickly pull some money from my bag. “I’m just tired.”

Franco nods solemnly, pushing the money back at me. “I hope we can do this again.” I’m soothed by his sincerity.

Do I hear a twinge of longing in his voice or am I listening with my own loneliness?

My ruined boots sink into fresh snow and more floats in thick profusion, stronger than before. I want to walk in it. Not that I could find a cab in this weather anyway. I head north, breathing in the cold. The brownstones, the mews, the cobblestones of the Village are so familiar to me that I could traverse its streets in complete darkness. But snow is sticking in thick blankets, heaping over cars and snow laden street lights drop soft yellow haloes on my path, making everything foreign, alien.

I think about heading back to the No Name. I like Village night-life. I enjoy the jazz musicians, writers, and artists who settle here with their easy talk, liberal ideas, and talents. Most are free spirits like myself taking life as it comes. In the beginning I thought we were all special, but now I'm not so sure. I don't feel like a free spirit. I'm a work drone, outside of it all somehow, doubting just what I'm doing here, if anything. Every night small groups of young people make the rounds of the bars going from Chumley's to the White Horse Tavern to the No Name to the Corner Bistro, in merry little packs, laughing and joking youth away. Drinking lives away is closer to the truth.

Last night at the No Name, Peter found me at the bar. I'm avoiding the Bistro because Diana is keeping her distance and I don't want to appear needy. But I am in need, and the No Name is full of the same customers if you sit there long enough. It was the first time I'd seen Peter since I kicked him out of my railroad flat on Avenue B.

"How many times do I have to say I'm sorry?" He lit a Camel and squinted at me, let smoke trail in spirals up his nostrils. It made him look arrogant. His long hair was tied back, framing a gaunt face.

He reached toward me, but I turned on my barstool to face the room.

"You should have been a man." My voice was soft, but icy in my own ears. I knew I could not forgive him. I couldn't express how angry I was at his freeloading, and inviting Kirkaldy to freeload off me too—and worse, how lonely and unhappy I feel with him gone. But Jesus, why has everything spiraled out of my control?

Peter smirked. "You mean like Ed Shelton? You wouldn't kick his ass out into the street, would you?"

I left, shaken. They are all cronies. Damn him anyway. Damn them both.

The snow finally lets up. The tips of my fingers are freezing cold, jammed in the pockets of my long, tweed coat. I suddenly realize I have walked a full circle back to Christopher Street. Deep in thought, meandering through snow, cheeks chapped by frozen tears, I find myself back at Stefan's. I wipe at the frost on the window of the back room so I can see in, but the booth is empty.

He says he lives next door and it is right there, an old brownstone. The door is enameled bright red with brass numerals 1 0 0 and a matching doorknocker to invoke the feel of a private home, when in fact it is cut up into railroad apartments. I check my watch under the street lamp. Nearly midnight. It's hard to read the directory, so I find matches at the bottom of my bag, burning three before I find Olivetti #3, written in a neat script. I back out into the middle of Christopher, empty of traffic except for an occasional off duty cab, and look up. Are those lights on the third floor behind lacy sheers and a moving shadow or is it just my imagination? I yell out "Franco!" But nobody comes to the window. That's no good. I'm going to wake the whole building. The red door swings open when I try it, so I let myself in, and go up the narrow staircase. The interior is clean and shabby like most apartments on the West Side. My hand hesitates before I knock.

As his door opens, loud operatic music fills the hallway. Franco stands in the entrance dressed in a brocade smoking jacket and black silk pajamas. Little embroidered slippers on his feet are jeweled with sequins. His mouth hangs open in surprise when he sees me, the O of his lips seeming to emit the soprano's shrill melody.

"I was in the neighborhood. It's late, I shouldn't have. But I guess I didn't want to go home after all. I'm really sorry to bother you." I wish I could dart back down the stairs.

"No, it's fine," Franco says, furrowing his dark brows. "I'm just surprised to see you here."

"I'll go. I thought maybe we could talk. It's too late." I back away, embarrassed, tears starting to well again. What is the matter with me?

"No, come in," Franco fully opens the door. "I'm not used to company, but you should come in, you're freezing."

"Are you sure?" I ask. Franco backs in, pulling me in by the hand. He helps me off with my coat and hangs it on a hanger in a hall closet.

"Let me get you something. A drink. A hanky." Franco turns the volume down on the record player and offers me a chair. He disappears through a door and comes back with a crisp square of Irish linen. "Tea or coffee?" he says, heading for the kitchenette.

I reach in my bag for a tissue, leaving the beautiful handkerchief folded on my lap. "Whatever's easiest," I say. I focus on the

apartment. It is like nothing I have ever seen. Chiffon curtains at the windows are framed by heavy maroon drapes and a rococo gilded valance. Fringed lampshades top baroque figurines. And everywhere is opera. An assortment of antique opera glasses and delicate little cases sit on shelves. In ornate frames, posters from famous opera houses picturing larger-than-life divas line the walls; walls papered in faux cut velvet. A cross between my notions of an 18th century drawing room and a French whorehouse.

Long-playing records are strewn about the floor. Callas. Sills. Price. I vaguely recognize the names or faces on the album covers. And books. He hadn't been kidding; there are shelves and shelves of books. On top of a bookshelf sit a rough stick and a hard ball. The type one sees on the street in the hands of children.

Franco sets out a silver teapot and china cups on the antique coffee table. "Feeling better?" he says. "How about cookies?" I shake my head, and nod toward the stick.

"Oh, I'm a product of Brooklyn, what else? I love stick ball!"

"I guess you like opera too, huh?" I grin.

"Honey, I'm Italian!" Franco holds his pinkie finger out as he lifts his cup. "That's Tebaldi singing. Do you know her?" The aria finishes, and the apartment is suddenly hushed.

"No. I don't know anything." I begin to cry again. Franco comes to my side, and stands over my chair, his hands fluttering in the air.

"What is it? What's the matter, honey?" His voice is throaty and consoling. He tentatively pats my shoulder.

I look up at him, eyes brimming. His smooth face is full of concern. He's a page out of history, a dandy, a fop, a faggot in a costume right out of some opera. His big dark eyes burrow into my face, and I decide he's my friend. Maybe, right now, my only friend.

"I don't know. I'm losing my mind," I sob, knowing how ridiculous I am. "I feel stupid. I hate being me."

"I might have guessed some jerky boyfriend let you down?"

I nod, "that too. The one I want got away. The one after that was a moocher."

"Now, now. I told you all those boys are beasts." Franco opens the handkerchief and mops my face gently. He kneels down, facing my chair. "They're like subway trains. Another one will be along in a minute, you'll see."

"That's the problem. I've taken too many trains already. I wish

I was dead, if you want to know the truth." The words hang awkwardly in the air for an instant.

"I see," Franco says. His long fingers clasp my hands between his own. "I'm sorry, It'll be okay, you'll see. You want to stay here with me tonight? You're safe, you know." Franco makes a wry smile and squeezes my hand.

I feel better already. "Are you sure I'm not a drag?"

"I should know about that! Believe me, you're not! I'll be able to say Marilyn slept here. The envy of every straight man in New York. I'll even let you sleep in my bed, the actual bed, I want you to know, used in the Met's last production of "Otello."

"I can't take your bed. The couch is fine."

"Come and see it before you decide. I got it for a song. Pardon the pun. From one of Mario Del Monaco's production auctions. Do you know he's sung Otello nearly 200 times?" Franco leads me to the rear of the apartment.

"I never heard of him. I've never seen an opera."

"Well, you've come to the right place. Just you wait."

I follow him through an ornate beaded curtain into a tiny bedroom. An enormous canopied bed dominates the room. It's built so high above the floor that an antique step stool is parked beside it. Yards of gleaming damask formally drape the canopy, with matching pillows and bedspread in a pale yellow color. "It looks like butter," I say. "It's fabulous."

"Well, if it's good enough for Desdemona, it's good enough for me," Franco says proudly, pleased with my response. "Go on, get up there."

I pull off my boots, step on the stool and lift myself onto the oversized mattress. I giggle as I feel my body sink into a sea of down. "You talked me into it," I say. "But my God, there's room here for you and me and the Ninth Fleet."

"Now there's a thought," Franco says. "I love a man in uniform. Now would you like PJ's or a nightshirt?"

"Shirt. Are you sure it's okay?"

Franco's already at the closet. "I'm delighted that you came here tonight, that you trust me. I don't have many friends, you know." He tosses the clothing on the foot of the bed.

"That's hard to believe. Why not?" I sit up, move over to the far side of the bed and pat a vacant spot for Franco. I spot the copy

of “Henderson The Rain King” on a night table. He does all right for a secretary, I think, surveying the photographs on a small dresser against the wall. The frames are elaborate sterling silver. “You have such beautiful things,” I say.

“Oh, all old things from a previous lifetime.” He waves the compliment away.

“Now I can tell everyone I was in bed with Marilyn!” Franco laughs as he steps up, and sits beside me. We nestle into the big pillows, and fold our legs beneath us.

“Well, here we are—the secretary and the beautiful movie star. Would you like me to take a letter, Miss Monroe?”

“I’ve got a better idea. Why don’t you read to me?” I say. “What’s it about?” I nod toward the night table.

Franco reaches for the book. “A rich guy’s having a mid-life crisis. He leaves his family, his home to go to Africa where he lives with this tribe of natives. It’s very bizarre. He’s seeking an answer.”

“An answer to what?”

“Well, it haunts him — this yearning. He keeps saying “I want, I want, I want.”

I waggle my fingers at him. “Oh, do read.”

Franco opens and reads dramatically from a book-marked page. “All you hear from guys is desire, desire, desire, knocking its way out of the breast, fear, striking and striking. Enough already! Time for a word of truth. Time for something notable to be heard. Otherwise, accelerating like stone, you fall from life to death. Exactly like a stone, straight into deafness, and till the last repeating I want I want I want, then striking the earth and entering it forever! As a matter of fact, I thought, out in the African sun from which the hooked wall of thorn temporarily cooled me: It’s a pleasure when harsh objects like thorns do something for you. Under the black barbs that the bushes had crocheted above us, I thought it out and agreed: the grave was relatively shallow.” Franco pauses, lays the book face down on his stomach.

“Isn’t that like poetry?” he says, his face solemn and reverent. “It’s even worse if you’ve found what you want and lose it.”

“I thought guys just wanted sex,” I say. “But that’s too easy. I guess we all yearn for something else, huh?” My eyelids feel leaden and start to flutter.

What do I want? What? Fatigue overtakes me like quicksand.

I sink into the pillow, and Franco closes the book.

“Crawl under,” he says, rolling his body beneath the feather bed. He holds the covers up until I squirm in.

“This is where the curtain comes down, my dear. Nighty night.”

“We’re a fine pair, aren’t we? We want, we want,” I murmur. We fall asleep in our clothes.

Franco and I meet regularly at Stefan’s on Friday nights for dinner, and go up to his place to listen to opera afterwards. He starts me with Carmen and we move through his collection, Aida, Suon Angelica, Otello and more.

“That’s Beverly Sills!” I cry, and hop about the living room. Franco beams as I learn to discern the voices of the divas.

“I know what,” he says, “let’s make a pact to save our money and attend a live performance at the Met.”

“Deal,” I say. “As soon as the season opens, but no Wagner!”

At our dinners, it’s clear to me that Franco has eyes for Rudy, the portly bartender at Stefan’s, who remains oblivious. I think Rudy probably likes women anyway. Franco once catches my sly smile, rolls his eyes, sniffs haughtily. “You are SO wrong. I’m with Marilyn, don’t bother me about that other ‘Mary.’”

On a summer evening at Stefan’s, over Salades Niçoise, Franco announces “I quit my job.”

“Very funny.” I pour a little of his wine into my own empty glass.

“I’m not kidding. I’m taking a vacation, and then I’ll look for something new.” Franco pushes a piece of tuna around on his plate with the tip of a steak knife.

“And what, pray tell, will you use for money? Don’t expect me to buy while you’re loafing around the house, kiddo.” I grin at him, and reach over to his plate for a black olive.

“You should pay! I’d rather dress you than feed you.” Franco laughs and pushes what is left of his dinner across the table.

“What happened at work?” I eye him as I nibble off his plate.

“Nobody gooses me in the elevator! How much can I take?”

“Oh You. Did old Don yell at you again?”

Franco drops his gaze. “No, he’s being transferred to Albany. He offered to get me transferred with him.” His face clouds up. “He knows I’d never leave the city. And of course, there’s no other

position open that would be right for me.”

“You should lodge a complaint. They can’t do that,” I say. I move to his side of the booth, and cradle his face in my hands.

“It’s time,” Franco says. “Forget it, it’s time.” But he rubs his cheek against my fingers, like a dog nuzzling his master’s hand.

In 1962 it’s a glorious spring in New York, but Franco doesn’t find a job. I have trouble reaching him sometimes, and often have to beg him to come to Friday night dinners. The Tebaldi arias trill in the background as I hold the phone, waiting for him to acquiesce. He always does meet me. We are friends. But he’s often aloof, unhappy.

“You’ve got to do something,” I say, holding his hands across the table. “Let me help you find something. I’m worried about you.” His clothes look a little rumpled, not his usual dapper self.

“I’m working it out,” he says. “I have savings.” But his skin’s drab and he looks sad.

In the fall I enroll in an accounting course at N.Y.U. held on Tuesday and Thursday nights. After quitting college at the University of Miami, one of my jobs was as a receptionist for a construction company where my boss taught me to handle accounts receivable. I was good at it, she said. That always stayed with me, that I am good at something. So I decide this might be a way for me to improve my skills.

Diana starts talking to me again when she finds out. I’m not sure why going back to school makes her forgive me. If she misses me, I suspect bettering myself is an excuse in her mind for clemency. Or maybe that I am out of therapy has softened her views. I have certainly missed her. If it wasn’t for Franco, I’d have been in despair. But Diana and I have been friends too many years to stay mad for long. We never discuss our differences, but just pick up where we left off.

I return once again to the Bistro. She points out the new waiter they’ve hired. His name is Tom Hammond. He’s clean cut and good looking, and begins to pay attention to me. I feel a little more balanced, a little more hopeful. I tell Franco about him.

“His father’s a big muckamuck doctor in Detroit. He majored in Philosophy in school. He’s not a Village bohemian. His hair is

really short. And he’s cheerful.”

“You’ll be hearing wedding bells before you know it,” Franco says.

“Don’t be daft. He’s not my type.”

“He must be good for you. You’re radiant.”

“Well, ever since I was a kid, I’ve written little verses. It would be so cool to be a poet someday, but I’m not that good. He likes what I write.”

“Why does it matter what he thinks? He’s not your type.”

“Well, he’s a poet, and he’s got a book deal. It matters because he respects my mind.”

“What mind?” I toss a French roll across the booth. Franco ducks.

“I’ve got an idea. Let’s go down to the river. It’s a beautiful night. And dinner is on me.” Franco makes a face at me.

We walk down to Hudson Avenue under a sky shot with stars, their sparkle blurred by the milky glow of street lamps. The dark, spring air is heavier near the river. I can smell the fishy froth that slaps against the poles beneath the pier. Like children, we hold hands as we walk.

“Level with me. Where are you going to look for a job?”

Franco sighs. “I have no idea.”

“What would you really like to do? Do you want to be a secretary?” It occurs to me that he has never discussed his job. We are always busy talking books and opera and office gossip. “You could do other things, you know.”

“I wasn’t always like this,” Franco says. He stops in a pool of light under one of the pier’s lamp poles and looks into my face. “When I was young, I was really handsome with thick black hair. You should have seen my hair. I even had a little money. I had a very different life then.”

“What did you do? You’ve never mention anything.”

“I was a tenor. I sang professional opera.” His voice drops to almost a whisper. “I don’t usually talk about it.”

“And you never told me?” I say. “An opera singer. Imagine that.” Franco’s eyes are lowered, his gentle mouth turned down.

“Renata Tebaldi is the greatest singer of our time, and I was her protégé. She chose me out of hundreds and hundreds of competitors, and I would have been a very big star. I wanted it

more than anything in the whole world. It was my life. When I did roles in small cities, the local critics raved. Seeing me now, I know it's hard to believe."

"It is not! Why did you give it up? What happened?" I can't imagine Franco doing anything but opera now that I know this. It makes his oddness, his unique ways seem perfectly normal. He is of that world, and belongs in it. Not the tacky offices of the New York Port Authority's Drafting Division. And a secretary at that.

"It wasn't meant to be." Franco shrugs. "Life is complex. I don't think I'll ever understand it." He leans against the railing of the pier. "I was scheduled to make my debut at the Met in the fall of 1950. I moved to Florida for Renata's camp that summer. It was to be a summer of rehearsals and preparation. It was demanding and very important. I was pretty worked up, wanting to do it all perfectly. A really big deal. You can see how a person would be worked up, right?"

"Well, sure," I say. Franco's fingers dance on the weathered wood as he talks, as if they are doing the remembering.

"Anyway, the upshot is I had a nervous breakdown. Right there, on the spot. I was hospitalized for months. My hair fell out. I lost my voice. It dropped like a bomb." Franco's deep voice cracks, his hand flies to his mouth. "I never sang again."

I fling my arms around him, grasping him tightly. I can feel his chest move in silent weeping, his hands clasped over his face.

"No man wants a bald lover. You should have seen my beautiful hair!" His voice is muffled and broken. I hold on until Franco's body finally quiets. He lowers his head to my shoulder and whispers "I'm like Henderson in the book. I want. I want."

I start leaving work at the Port Authority every night at a quarter to five, fifteen minutes early, to avoid the crush in the elevators.

On a late Friday afternoon, my boss, Mr. Stayduhar, calls me into his office and reprimands me for leaving early. Stayduhar's assistant is sitting right there which rankles me. I'm too embarrassed to explain the elevator wolves, especially in front of Finch. Waved off with a warning, like a reprimanded child, I march to my desk and type a resignation letter, and leave it in the typewriter. Then I storm to the elevator. Before five o'clock.

The wind whips my coat as I walk up Christopher Street toward

Stefan's. Elated by my own bravery, I can scarcely wait to tell Franco. He will love the story, love that I stood up to them too.

Now we can job hunt together, support each other. It's going to be a good thing, I vow. Good riddance to the lot of them.

I haven't taken time to call Franco for a date, and hope he'll show up without urging. I look in the front window of Stefan's but Rudy shakes his head and shrugs. No Franco. I head for his apartment, rehearsing my news.

A small group gathers outside the building, along the spiked wrought-iron fence. Neighbors, onlookers.

"What happened here?" I say. Then I see the ambulance parked on the side street of the building. A paramedic gets into the driver's cab.

"Who is it?" I say to no one in particular. I begin to run toward the vehicle, but its engine is already groaning into gear, and it pulls out leaving me standing by.

"There's a cop upstairs," says a woman with a broom in her hand. "On the Third. I'm the manager." Her face is a scowl of disapproval, looking me over. "Are you kin?"

I take the stairs in threes, my heart rattling in my chest. Franco's door stands open, with men moving about inside. One carries a camera. I approach the uniformed policeman. The numbers etched on his NYPD badge refuse to come into focus. It glitters in the thin light falling through the part in Franco's window sheers.

"Please, Officer."

"Who are you?" The cop looks me over carefully. He is staring. Rudely. I can feel my mascara running.

"I'm Franco's best friend. Like a sister," I say. "Please, is he okay?" But I know he's dead. There is no point pretending. "He's dead, isn't he?"

"Yes, Miss, I'm afraid so. Unless you can tell us something we don't know, in all probability it's suicide. Would you be Marilyn?"

I hesitate. My body feels anesthetized, and I collapse on the nearest chair.

"You got some ID, Miss?" I fish my wallet from my handbag and pass it to the cop who studies it carefully. "Your name's not Marilyn."

"No, that's just Franco's nickname for me."

“Sleeping pills, Miss Jackson,” the cop says, producing a little evidence bag containing three empty pill vials. He returns my wallet. “There’s a note. I need to take it in, but you can read it first if you want, and reclaim it in a day or two at the Charles Street station, if that’s okay.” The Sergeant hands me a lilac sheet of paper sheathed in clear plastic..

I take it with numb fingers.

Dear Marilyn,

I want you to promise me you’ll go to the Met without me. Otello is coming this season, and it was my best role, me at my happiest. Think of me that way if you can. Nothing in my life compared to it except sleeping with Marilyn. It’s too late. I want nothing more.

Forgive me. I love you. Franco.

I read the fine script a second time, and hand it back to the policeman. “Did he die in bed?” I whisper.

“Yes,” he says. His eyes are sympathetic. “He had on some Arab getup, his arms crossed over his chest, a turban on his head.”

“And little brocade slippers. That sounds like what he’d do.” I let my tears spill. “I’ll get the note back, right?” I stand on weak legs.

“Sure, sure,” he says, with a funny look on his face. As I head for the door, he adds, “You know, I can see a resemblance.”

The Bermuda Triangle — 1963

The slam of cupboards and loud singing wakes me. I have to get my bearings, the strange bed, the fog in my head. Who is that? Wait, familiar voice. Tom! I can’t remember precisely what my new husband looks like. My temples throb. His loud rendition of “Hit the road, Jack, and don’t cha come back no more, no more...” makes me wince, and the smell of fresh coffee slightly nauseates me. It’s difficult to get the unfamiliar bedroom in focus.

Birdsong wafts from the open floor-to-ceiling louvers on two walls facing a bougainvillea garden. Tropical breezes flutter tall palms. I reach to the foot of the bed for a white peignoir, edged with stiff lace, a gift from Tom’s mother. My cynical friends joked that it was fancier than my wedding dress, a simple pique.

Had we made love last night? I can’t remember.

Tom appears, framed in the doorway, holding a bamboo breakfast tray. He’s clean-cut, handsome in an Eagle Scout, asexual way; a whole-wheat kind of guy. Short, light hair, blue eyes fringed with blond whiskery lashes. Not my type at all.

“Good morning, Beautiful,” he says. “How’ya feeling?”

“They put a Mickey in the champagne, right?”

“I feel terrific,” he says, placing the tray on my lap.

“Bully for you.”

I look down at a mug of coffee and slices of fresh pineapple. The ripe sweet smell convulses my stomach and I push the tray to the other side of the bed.

“They left us a basket of fresh fruit with a card. This place is terrific. You’ll feel better with a swim.”

I stumble to the bathroom and close the door. He’s still talking. I can hear his bright voice jabber on, “We can rent mopeds right here at the cottage office. Wait till you see the beach. Better not forget sunscreen.”

I sit on the toilet and push the handle before I even finish; the flush drowns out his voice. The medicine chest hangs open. It’s empty save for a small tube of toothpaste and three tiny bars of Ivory soap. Tom’s toothbrush rests on the edge of the sink,

otherwise the room is bare. If we had sex on our wedding night, I didn't use my diaphragm. I close the chest and peer into the mirror. My tousled blond hairdo is holding a shape thanks to buckets of hair spray, but the bathroom glare accentuates the dark circles under my eyes. I remember putting aspirin in my travel bag, so I stumble back into the bedroom. Tom is gone. For motor bikes, no doubt.

In the doorway, a huge marmalade-colored cat sits immobile. His tail is arranged in a feathery train about his paws, and his agate eyes peer at me.

I approach slowly, bending down to waggle my fingers at him, but he lurches and runs for the door.

"Yeah, so what else is new?" I say to the thick spray of orange tail that switches then disappears. Parrots shriek in the trees.

We picnic at Spanish Point Park in Pembroke. Tom's plan is to use our cottage-kitchen for all meals, thus affording us a week-long vacation on a scant budget. Mama and Pete didn't attend the wedding ceremony, but instead sent a \$300 check and a card of congratulations, the kind you buy at the corner drugstore. My parents have no idea I met Tom only a few months earlier, and moved in together after a month. Nor do they know he's only a waiter at the Corner Bistro. The fact that he's an about-to-be-published poet isn't going to impress them either. If they knew, my parents would disapprove of all of my saloon society in Greenwich Village, the beatniks, actors, and artists I count as friends. Not attending my wedding is a blessing. But in my heart I badly wanted Mama there.

Tom's father, a wealthy Detroit doctor, offers us a loan when it becomes apparent that my family isn't hosting a wedding, but Tom declines his money. I know he hates his father. Jim Butcher offers the back room of the Bistro for our wedding reception—with folding chairs on floors scattered with sawdust. He even supplies the steaks for the dinner.

Tom revels in this bohemian idea, and knows his elderly parents will feel miserably out of place in the back room of a bar. I am sympathetic to them, but I get their icy indifference for my trouble. They eye my bleached hair and knee-length pique dress with a pained expression that says Tom picked me only to stick

it to them. They might be right, but it assuages my own guilt, because I fear that I don't much love Tom, not really. I just don't know how to refuse a man who proposes marriage. Ed, the one who mattered, is gone. Peter was a knee jerk reaction when I was on the rebound. It's time to settle down. Diana's my maid of honor and Jim walks me down the aisle of The Community Church where we're married by a Unitarian minister. "As long as you both shall love..."

"If you marry Tom," Diana said, "you'll be cherished." In our crowd, Diana is the only true believer. I imagine the others are wagering on how long this marriage will last. I wonder myself. "Besides it'll make you forget Ed. Tom's just adorable and thinks you are beautiful."

"But I'm not beautiful," I said. "So what does that make him?"

But I end up saying yes to Tom. Just like my mother had said yes to my own real father, without loving him. Decisive action is preferable to confused longing. And isn't there always a gamble? After girlish dreams of Ed, chance seems to be all that's left to me.

Many of the Bistro cronies attend the reception. Even Kirkaldy shows up, at Jim's invitation. I ignore him. I figure he's just there for the free steak. Peter does not attend. I certainly didn't invite him, and Diana probably makes sure that Jim didn't.

"Isn't this great?" Tom's enthusiasm for a honeymoon trip won't be dampened by anything as trivial as money. "I packed peanut butter sandwiches," he says, passing me a packet wrapped in wax paper. I shrug. I like peanut butter.

The turquoise ocean shimmers beyond a beach that sparkles with freckles of mica. I sit on a blanket, under a red wide-brimmed hat, watching Tom. The sun beats down on our city-white skin. He stands waist-deep in water, talking to a tall boy. The tanned stranger holds a line to a wafer-thin boat which bobs in the froth of small waves. It's one of the tiny Sunfish rented to tourists up and down the island. Together they examine the bright yellow sail of the boat, then suddenly Tom crouches atop the smooth plastic, and moves the ropes. I stand, alert, and walk toward the water. Tom stands up jerkily, sailing now, up and over a wave he goes, heading out to sea while the boy calls instructions through cupped hands. I see a faint greenish haze that hovers near the

water, like a mist. Tom sails right into it and doesn't look back.

Tom whispers that he's rented his own Sunfish the next morning, kisses me lightly and leaves me in bed. I stare at the ceiling fan for an hour, developing movies of Ed Shelton in my mind. Good riddance. He let me go before he even got a chance to know me. But his craggy face hovers in my mind, an apparition. He probably has his big shaggy head between someone else's legs. His thick fingers are finding the secret, sacred districts of some other woman's pussy. I can smell him on my own fingers and taste him in the spit of my own mouth when I come. Ed is like a huge, nasty bird, beautiful and elusive. Just thinking about him makes me want to tear my heart out to feed the parrots. Their squawks outside the window prevent me from going back to sleep.

Tom sails every honeymoon day. His body browns dark as coconuts, his hair bleaches blond. When he returns from the beach he finds me sitting on the veranda in a big wicker chair with the orange cat on my lap. I have stripes of sunburn across my nose and cheeks from my short forays down to the water; my skin not attuned to the tropics. I wear an incongruous sarong of terrycloth.

"This cat finally gave in," I say.

"Who can resist you?" He has all the right answers.

At night, we eat sandwiches on the veranda and Tom points out the Big Dipper. He tells me stories about his childhood. His physician father kept bottles in the basement of their Detroit home; bottles full of aborted fetuses and severed heads of dead patients. I know he's lying but pretend to believe. His lying is part of his quirky charm. He gives me a childish love poem for which I fake appreciation. He's always sweet to me, and when he drinks, he gets very funny, doing pratfalls and impersonations of Bistro characters. He's even done one of Ed Shelton on the telephone, martini glass in hand.

Under the stars, he soon tires of talk and leaves me sitting, watching the stars. As he heads off to bed, he leans down and brushes my forehead with his lips, whispering "I'll wait for you, Bev." But he falls into a deep sleep, exhausted from sailing. I can't rouse him. When I awake each morning, he's already gone to the bay. I don't mention sex to him. I already realize that the boy is a little crazy.

I amuse myself during the day by motor-biking to far ends of the island. I take my moped to Southampton and at Church Bay, I park and walk up the beach, my sandals hanging off my finger. I spot a park that looks like it might belong to the Reefs Hotel on a hill overlooking the water. Two giant tortoises sleep at the bottom of a shallow pond. The placard says they are hundreds of years old. I kneel, peer through the brackish slime. The flippers of the enormous beasts look like khaki leather, or the skin of aged, weathered hands. I hold up my own hands to the sunlight.

"Wishing they were webbed?" a voice says behind me.

An elderly gentleman with snowy white hair shuffles his way to the bench, aided by a cane. His plaid pants, a muted green and black, are the only colorful aspect to an otherwise drab and unremarkable attire. His white moustache droops untidily beneath a large nose and rheumy colorless eyes. I drop my hands instantly.

"Good morning," I say, rising. "I didn't hear you come up."

"The old boys are holding their own, eh?" he says, nodding at the pond. "A fellow American, are we? My name's Georgy." He smiles at me benignly. His extended hand trembles in a small palsy.

I shake the old man's hand and sit down beside him on the bench.

"Beverly. Yes, from New York. And you?"

The man nods. "Been here since '47. How're you finding our little paradise?"

"I'm too fair for this sun," I say. "But it's pretty."

"Sounds like it's not your cup of tea. Not for everyone." He puts his cane across his lap and absently rocks it back and forth. "You have to love the water."

"This water sometimes has a strange green smoke over it. Do you know what that is?"

The old man's eyes widen. "You've seen it?" he asks.

"The first day, yes, I saw it." I can see the man's face is hungry with curiosity now. "When my husband was sailing."

"It's from the experiments," he says. "It's usually further out to sea. Where's your husband now?"

"He's sailing. What experiments? What do you mean?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Try me." I lean toward him.

The old man tips the cane back to the ground, and folds his

hands over the head of it. “Well, it’s true because I witnessed it. But nobody believes me.”

“What happened?”

“How would you like to have brunch with me, young lady? My treat? They have the traditional codfish spread or good snapper right up there at the hotel.” He beckons to a sprawling building set high, overlooking the water.

I nod. I am sick of sandwiches. I take his arm and walk slowly up the path to the restaurant.

“Why aren’t you sailing with your husband?”

I shrug and avert my eyes. “Tell me about the green fog.”

Georgy’s old face twitches with a tic when he talks. “Well, you asked for it, don’t forget that.” He shakes an index finger at me. “I was a sailor on the USS Eldridge in 1943. Right here in these waters. War time, you know. The Navy was running secret tests trying to make ships invisible.” He stops to rest for a second and register my reaction. I keep my face neutral, nodding.

“It was the government’s first attempts at stealth technology, electronics to fool the Nazis. But we swabbies had no idea what was going on. A scientist named Von Neumann was in charge of the operation.” Georgy waves to the cashier as we enter and sits at a window table. A waitress with an English accent brings coffee and menus.

“So with no warning, one morning, this switch was pulled. I was on deck when there was a blue flash!” George throws his hands in the air. “Suddenly things started to fade in and out. We thought we’d been hit by a submarine at first, but it was just like mirrors in a fun house. The Captain knew something went wrong, and tried to reverse the switch, but it didn’t work.” Georgy’s hands twirl and then he clasps them.

“Sailors were screaming. Everything went nuts. Five men fused to the metal in the ship’s structure. The rest of us started jumping overboard, but the ship was sucked into this green smoke. I can’t tell you how strange and frightening it was.” Georgy pauses and shuts his eyes.

I clear my throat. “Wait a minute. Did you say they ‘fused’ to the ship?”

Georgy’s eyes fly open. “Yes! Everybody panicked and men were badly hurt. and the ship was blinking in and out of reality like an old silent movie clip.”

The waitress appears with a tray. Georgy pauses while she puts bread and butter in front of us. He orders lunch for both of us and I add a Rum Swizzle. My throat is suddenly parched. I look around the restaurant. There are three or four people seated, just an ordinary afternoon.

“So, what was it?” I ask cautiously.

Georgy shrugs. “We jumped ship in 1943 and a few minutes later we were picked up by a rescue boat in Montauk, New York. That Dr. Von Neumann was on board, but he was an old man. He told us it was 1983. He had been waiting forty years into the future for us to turn up”

I throw my head back and let a laugh explode. “Well, you had me there for a minute.”

Georgy doesn’t smile, but picks up his glass of water and sips it slowly. My drink arrives. We sit quietly while a couple pays their bill, and leaves the restaurant. Out the window, I can see them holding hands as they go down the path. We sit, letting the silence stretch between us. The waitress places entrees in front of us. I order another rum.

“You think I’m making this up?” Georgy looks down at his plate. I think he might be going to cry.

“Well, you have to admit that it’s a fantastic story.”

“I told you you wouldn’t believe me. Try me, you said.” Georgy pokes a forkful of food into his little mouth.

“Well, I don’t disbelieve you. Maybe it’s just gotten mixed up over the years?” I say gently.

“No! Exactly as it happened. Von Neumann sent us back to the ship with axes to destroy the equipment. We did and immediately,” Georgy snaps his fingers, “the ship returned to its original point in space with us aboard. About three hours had elapsed. So, an entire ship and crew went to a future distant location and back again, all in a matter of hours! Just by chance, I was there.” Georgy puts down his fork and flings his hand at me. “It doesn’t matter what you think.. I know what I know.” He meets my eyes and his face softens.

“Is that what I saw that morning?” I said.

“You didn’t see a ship evaporate, did you?” Georgy smirks and rolls his eyes.

“No, but I think I might have evaporated.” I say. “That’s possible, right?”

“Anything’s possible. We’re not connected to these points in time and space, you know. It just looks like we are.” He pauses. “Are you honeymooning?”

“How did you know?”

“You just have that foggy look of the newly married.” He smiles and smoothes his moustache.

“I made a mistake,” I say, mashing a piece of fish into pulp with the back of my fork.

“Ah, don’t cry, my dear. Maybe it’s just your perception.” His old face is soft with concern. I can see that he must have been handsome as a youth. Clean cut. “This place is sucking up ships and planes. Who’s to say people don’t have similar warps? Who’s to say you haven’t married the perfect man? It may just take a shift in your certainty. He may be waiting for you.”

I stare into the old man’s face. “The man I really love has disappeared,” I say. “that’s for sure.”

“Sometimes it just takes time for the molecules to sort themselves out,” Georgy says, his eyes narrowing. “It’s hard being young. And you, my lovely girl, are very young.”

“Nobody’s tried to shut you up about all this time-travel?” I ask.

“Nah, folks just think I’m dotty. The Navy covered up so many deaths, so many mutilated bodies. They knew nobody would believe us. Even my wife left me when I got home—so I know how you feel. That was hard. I never married again. Do you know what? You remind me of her a little. You want to be careful what you do from now on.” Georgy’s fingers reached out and touched my hand lightly. “Do you believe my story?”

“I don’t know. It sounds crazy, but I like it. I can see that you believe it. Why do you tell people?”

“People ought to know. Such things are important,” Georgy says firmly. “If I didn’t think I’d frighten you, I could prove it to you.”

“How?” I lean forward in my chair, prepared for another story.

Georgy moves in close to my face. “Take a good look at me.”

“Yes,” I say, studying the pouches and lines around his eyes. It’s a good face, I think. The face of a man capable of great love. I wonder if the old dog is flirting with me.

“Well, all you have to do is think it out. In 1943, I was 20 years old. This is 1963. Twenty years later. That makes me forty. Do I look forty to you?” He removes his wallet, and opens it on the

table, with his driver’s license in its little plastic case facing me.

I read the birthdate. May 17, 1923.

“You see,” Georgy continues rapidly. “I was one of the casualties. I came back with the crew, but some of us came back forty years older.”

My feet are flat against the hardwood floor, but I have a sensation of motion. It’s like seasickness; a giddy weightless nausea.

“I think I need some air,” I say.

Georgy signals for a check, and takes some bills out of his wallet. “I’m sorry, dear girl. I shouldn’t have.”

“No, really, it’s okay.” I grip the table and rise. “It’s just a little crazy, you know?” To go to the trouble of having a license made to defend his story takes the cake. I really do need some air.

Georgy nods. “I know, I know. But I assure you, I’m as sane as you.”

“That’s not saying much,” I say.

From the cottage windows I frequently check the beach. I can always make out Tom’s silhouette on the Sunfish. He and the boat meld into one form like a corporate logo for an exclusive beach club. He’s expert now, leaning far out over the water at a sharp angle, his arms and strong legs taut and tan, defying wind and gravity, the bright sail curving in on itself like a conch shell. I understand and hate the perfection of it because it leaves no room for me to change my mind. Georgy, the wind, the little sail, the orange cat and the sandwiches had somehow conspired to steal my indecision. I look for the green haze on the water, half-expecting it to pick up my husband and carry him into the past or future, but the blue sky meets the aqua water cleanly across a wide horizon.

I return to the tortoise pond once more, but do not find Georgy. I sit on the bench. Ed Shelton is fused to me like those pitiful sailors mutilated in the metal of the Eldridge. But maybe that connection isn’t permanent either. Maybe it is just the past that clings, and not Ed at all. My skin prickles under the hot sun, and I ride the moped back to the cottage.

Tom drags the Sunfish onto the sand. I see him through the kitchen window and pour a finger of rum into each of two jelly jar glasses and split a can of Coca-Cola between them. My hair’s wet and wavy from the shower, and my face has a biscuit tan, at

last. I carry the drinks out to the veranda and wait for him to come up the walk.

He grins when he sees me.

“How was your day?” I ask.

“You wouldn’t believe it,” Tom says, sipping the rum as he lowers himself onto the wicker chair. “It’s like being in heaven out there.”

“You’ll miss it,” I say. “We leave tomorrow.”

Tom wipes at the sand that dries on his feet and ankles. “It went too fast,” he says.

“I’m ready to go home.” I drop onto the string hammock. I see a flash of orange fur in the hibiscus bushes. Above my head, the scold of a cockatiel breaks the air, followed by a flurry in the trees.

“It hasn’t been much fun for you, has it?” Tom says. “I guess I’ve been pretty selfish. Just hard to resist the chance to sail.”

“I don’t begrudge you.” I stare at the foliage, looking for the cat.

“Are you sorry?” Tom asks. His bronzed face turns toward the sea; the taut profile gleams in the dimming light. Striated in a palette of magentas, the sun slips under the dark water line. “Tell me that you’re not sorry.”

“I’m sorry that I burn so easily,” I say, trying to joke. He turns and meets my gaze. I realize that he hasn’t looked directly at me in the entire seven days.

“You know what I mean.”

“Yes, I know,” I say, steadily framing him like a memory as darkness soaks up the sky and sea behind him. “The marriage.”

“I love you.” He tentatively reaches out with one hand and then changes his mind, gets up and goes to the kitchen instead.

The morning of our departure, I find a dead baby parrot on the sidewalk to the cottage office. Its feathers are scattered in a tiny circle beneath a riot of squawking in the trees above me. I pick up a tiny iridescent plume and fold my palm around it. The cat is nowhere in view.

I wear a smart city dress, high-heeled pumps and sunglasses for our trip home. Tom is dressed in Bermuda shorts and a madras shirt, his skin burnished like a new saddle. He snaps pointless photos of airplanes, other peoples’ dogs and children, and lets the camera dangle about his neck while I sit in the tiny waiting

room at the airport and smoke filtered cigarettes. I think about the randomness of possibility and disaster. About the promise of certainty. I calculate my chances. Mine versus those of Mama when she was my age. I figure I come out ahead regardless. She once said “It’s not all it’s cracked up to be.” I think I finally understand. But growing up isn’t just about understanding. My father, sitting in the tail of a B-17 shooting at Nazis, didn’t understand, but he did it anyway. It was the gamble he took. And I’m nothing if not a gambler.

My handsome husband comes toward me, the camera raised to his eye, his finger poised on the button, his white, even teeth gleam in his mouth like dice.

Old Bucks and New Wings — 1964

As newlyweds, we move from Tom's Jane Street studio apartment to a one-bedroom in the same building. My new husband, I discover, has a love for Early American colonial-style furniture and wants to furnish our place with antique pieces which he hunts down around the Village. I know nothing about antiques, so I acquiesce, letting him shop and choose our decor. He converts an authentic narrow rope bed into an uncomfortable sofa. Delivery men unload simple square chests, unadorned bureaus. The oak claw-foot table and chairs and the Tiffany style hanging lamp are the only things I love in an otherwise puritanical tableau. Then he buys an upright piano. He plays. The things I don't know about my new husband are many.

His interests are wide. A philosophy major in college, he recites Ludwig Wittgenstein quotes, like "An inner process stands in need of outward criteria," which is, well, Swahili to me.

Our wedding bands are silver, set with lapis lazuli stones, all because of a poem by Yeats named "Lapis Lazuli" which I do not understand nor can I figure out what it has to do with our marriage, but I'm too intimidated to ask. When I do find the nerve to ask for definitions or explanations, he admonishes me for intellectually "not really trying." He effortlessly quotes poetry from Yeats and Keats, leaving me impressed, feeling inferior and suspicious. I do believe he married me to torture his father, who disapproves of him (and me) in every way.

Tom's about-to-be-published book of poetry is a fabrication. There is no publisher. I answer our phone one day while he's waiting tables at the Bistro, and it's a theatrical agent, telling me that he has an audition set up for Tom.

"An audition for what?" I ask, confused.

"An off-Broadway show."

It takes a few seconds for the truth to sink in.

When I confront my husband with this information, he admits that he's an out-of-work actor slash waiter like everyone else in New York.

"I didn't think you'd marry an actor," he says, looking down. I just shake my head. He's so crazy.

He grins and shrugs. "I've always wanted to publish a book of poetry. It's been a dream of mine."

Shortly after that, he announces he's got an understudy role for the road company of "Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolff." I can't believe he'd actually marry me and leave me behind to go on the road. He's super excited about going, and I sulk.

"Why don't you take a couple of acting lessons, and come with me?" he suggests. "I'll get them to audition you for the understudy of the girl, Honey." I agree, and a young director friend of Tom's comes to our apartment and gives me a few basics. I start to get excited about the trip, and about acting, but oops, the road show is cancelled. Probably another lie. Who knows?

Tom gets an understudy job in a Broadway show, "A Case of Libel," starring Van Heflin, Sidney Blackmur and John Randolph. (It turns out that Heflin is the same hulking type as Ed Shelton and also drinks as much.) The show runs for a few more months, and then closes, leaving Tom unemployed once more. My steady paychecks support us. I change bookkeeping jobs, from small ad agency to jewelry company to import/export company. This is for an infamous old Socialist, a drunk around the Village, named Edward Fitzgerald. In his day, he says he was a newspaperman for the Daily Worker, a close confidante of Walter Winchell, and a force in the Communist Party USA in its glory days. He says the FBI infiltrated the organization and everyone fled. This, even before the McCarthy hearings. Now he runs a small, seedy company that does business with Red China, importing all kinds of small products from satellite regimes, like paprika from Hungary, and exporting all the free government brochures that can be gotten from the State Department. I peruse the literature on chicken farming, chemistry, and animal husbandry. I have no idea if it's legal or not, but it makes me uncomfortable. Also, he's never at work, so I spend long days by myself, in a warehouse near the river, depressed.

I start job hunting again, and with great excitement, land a bookkeeping position with the American Heritage Publishing Company. Their offices are in the Fred F. French building on 45th Street and Fifth Avenue. Uptown, corporate and prestigious. I

pinch myself. Things are taking a turn for the better. I share the accounting with a dour faced woman who resents the work being split up, and soon quits. I am almost immediately promoted to Accounting Department Manager, given a raise in salary and I'm delirious with joy. At last, a job worth doing. And they let me do it all, alone. I learn to live in an uptown world, wearing grown up clothes and honing accounting skills I never knew I had. My old Marilyn Monroe image is no longer appropriate so I begin to tame my hair color with a beige toner, and change the style. Since Marilyn offered herself, she hasn't been as popular. People just see her as sad, and that's not how I want to be seen.

James Parton, the President of American Heritage, spends most of his time behind large ornate wooden doors in the executive offices. He always dresses in three-piece suits and is formal to a fault. We are shocked when, in November, he suddenly pops out of his office without vest or jacket, wearing red suspenders. He strides up and down the halls, tears running down his face, yelling "Go Home, Go Home, Everyone, Go Home!" We look at each other bewildered. My phone rings just as Parton passes my department and it's Tom on the line.

"The President has been shot and killed," he says.

I can't take it in, not all at once. If James Parton hadn't confirmed it, I'd think Tom was making up one of his compulsive fish tales again.

Out on Fifth Avenue, there are throngs of people, a tsunami of humanity with tearful faces, some sobbing openly, all moving toward bus stops and subways, scurrying to get to their television sets.

It is an eerie funereal pandemonium, with bowed heads and hushed voices. I think to myself that everyone will remember where he was on this day. It's unbelievable.

There has been little sex since our courtship, and Tom and I both stray back to the bars, to our own single lives, while sharing the Jane Street apartment, more like roommates than spouses.

I catch Tom in the No Name buying drinks for a woman I never saw before. We have a scene. I am not really jealous, but feeling that I should be.

Tom takes a job in a regional theater somewhere down south. He calls me long distance. "What do you think about getting

unhitched."

I'm not surprised, and a little relieved. We've been married less than a year.

He gets a quickie divorce in Arkansas on the uncontested grounds that I "fuss and nag." We both laugh at that, and I move to a studio apartment on Bedford Street.

Ironically, I start taking proper acting classes with John Lehne. Tom studied with him and thought he was terrific. Once I am good enough to audition, I give up my American Heritage job (where I am told the door is always open to return) and wait tables at night, so I can make rounds during the day. I am tired of being the responsible citizen while everyone around me pretty much drops out and does what they do.

A neighbor gets me an invitation to a party at James Baldwin's. He's a charming man who holds court seated at his dining room table. "Call me Jimmy," he says. They are casting for his production of "Blues for Mr. Charlie," so I tell him, heart beating out of my chest, that I'd like to audition. He cocks his head and agrees that I might be right for the Jo Britten role, and gives me a copy of the script. The next morning, I show up at the ANTA theater with little sleep, but lines committed to memory for my audition scene.

When my turn comes, I set up two chairs to represent the other characters in my scene. I cannot see the audience behind the bright lights, so I ask "Shall I start?" "Yes," someone calls out. I do the scene with the passion of all my training. The house lights come up and a short, jaunty man walks up to the apron, and says "That was quite good. What was your name again?"

"Badge Jackson," I say. (I have taken a childhood nickname as a stage name. Initials on a baby cup "BAJ" quickly became Badgy.) I feel my knees go to jelly as I recognize the giant celebrity before me. Burgess Meredith, in the flesh.

"What have you done?" he asks.

Done? My mind races. What have I done? The world seems to implode. I look out at the audience and see Cheryl Crawford from The Actor's Studio. My God, why didn't Jimmy tell me who was holding the auditions. My voice quakes as I say, "Uh, Mr. Meredith, I've done a lot of scenes in my acting classes and ...". My god, I can't lie to Burgess Meredith. Besides I have no photos, no agent. What have I done? I say, "But otherwise, uh, er, nothing."

He smiles. “Thank you, Madge.”

The thing about acting jobs is that you can’t get them if you haven’t had them. Who knows how you ever get them? But Burgess Meredith said “That was quite good.” Joy!

Tom leaves the Village, or so the gossip goes, and I don’t even get the chance to tell him about my big audition. Ann Wedgeworth is the name of the unknown girl who gets my part.

There’s rumblings about Viet Nam and the possibility of a war coming on. Everyone discusses whether there’ll be a draft. I have no idea why Tom is 4-F, but most of the arty Villagers joke that they will claim everything from flat feet to mental disabilities to keep them out of combat. Nightly, TVs in the corners of dark bars broadcast ominous reports until someone drowns it out with jukebox music. A possible war is the elephant in the corner of every saloon. For me, it’s a daily reminder of my dead war-hero father. The father I try not to think about, who I never got to know. I am furiously anti-war. We all drink hard, feigning apathy, but the political rhetoric gets louder as the nights wear on, and I medicate my own inner wars.

I am doing just that at the Bistro when a voice behind me says, “Hey, you grew up!”

I turn, looking into the face of Ed Shelton. He looks older, or maybe it’s just me. It seems a lifetime has passed since last we met. There’s a jackhammer jabbing from inside my chest, but I assure myself that I’m no longer star-struck or naïve, just happy to see him. I can barely contain my glee, but pretend indifference.

“It had to happen,” I say.

He orders a martini, and tells Jim Butcher to get me a fresh one.

“I hear you got married.”

“Yeah, well, now I’m unmarried.”

“Did you get the soap?”

“Fuck you,” I say grinning. He leans in to kiss my mouth. And just like that, we are together. For real. It’s like some emptiness is instantly filled. This man is my father, friend, lover. It’s just meant to be. It’s in the stars. It’s destiny. Some people never find it. I can’t explain it, or want to. I love him.

He needs to find a show and is close to broke. I let him move into my one-room apartment on Bedford. Ed’s mother lives on

the Lower East Side, and for years he has used her spare room for storage, so he doesn’t need a lot of closet space, and I don’t have much. We get a double bed at the Salvation Army to replace my single.

I have the day shift at the Ninth Circle, an upscale Village steakhouse, waiting tables, making decent money, so I handle the rent and bills while Ed looks for work. He quickly resumes his post at the pay phones. I soon discover the enigma of Ed’s telephone addiction. It’s true that stage managers have to hustle for “the next show” and half of Ed’s phone calls are job searches. I listen as he leans against the booth, the receiver cradled head to shoulder.

“Hey, how are you, man? It’s Ed Shelton, just back from a road gig.” He winks at me. “Oh nothing you’d care about, a non-equity thing for a little cash. What are you up to? What have you got for me?” His voice is strong, urgent, upbeat. And then the heavy sigh as he hangs up the phone, slumps and downs his drink.

But the rest of the calls, at least half of them, I find out, are cross town to East 9th Street where his aged mother, Eunice, lives and whom he seldom visits. He speaks to her several times a day. A widow, she is lonely, he explains. He warns me that it’s no-one’s business. I keep his secret but am mightily amused.

I find new celebrity being Ed’s Woman. Suddenly I am privy to the inner circle of the saloon cliques—included in conversations, let in on jokes, and invited to private parties. Jim owns the Bistro, and Ed is one of his best friends. What Diana has enjoyed for years, with Jim, is now suddenly mine too. I didn’t realize just what a close knit group they are until I am included. Bar and restaurant owners in the Village keep close associations to fend against or cooperate with the forces at their door: Mafiosi, liquor vendors, local police and politicians. It is nice to feel included.

The Corner Bistro customers, our old gang, are gradually morphing from their bohemian roles however. One passes the Bar exam. Another gets a novel published to great reviews. I start to see our crowd taking on grown up problems, bearing children, and leading adult lives. The freewheeling days and drunken nights recede slowly in front of my eyes. Diana announces she and Jim are talking marriage.

However, Ed does not slow down his pace. I can’t keep up with

his drinking, and if I don't, he continues on his nightly rounds without me. He has trouble finding work. His first job after months, a non-equity revival of a vaudeville show, "Old Bucks and New Wings," closes after eight performances. He has even more trouble getting paid for the few days of rehearsal. While I am working, Ed is at the Bistro, regaling anyone who will listen with funny stories of the buck and wing comics, and overweight strippers—doing impressions, and cadging drinks. When I meet him after work, our drinking goes on into the night. We don't eat proper meals. We don't spend much time alone.

A sex life is almost non-existent. He is either too drunk, or incoherent to make love. If I complain about it when we draw sober breaths, he resorts to his ardent performance of cunnilingus.

I finally push him away. "Stop it. I want us both to make love, I say. "You never let me love you."

He sits on the edge of the bed, his body jack-knifed, his head in his hands. He shakes his head but says nothing. What can he say? It is a breakthrough in my self-denial to accept that my super-masculine, charming lover is impotent. Has been so for years. As that truth comes to light, for me, Ed's disposition begins to darken. Drunk, he will lash out in angry sarcasm if I cross him in any way. I seem to bitch constantly about everything but sex. Fuss and nag.

I see him very differently now, but there is still some strong draw to him that I can't stop. It's not what he says or does, but the way that he carries himself, dramatically, proudly, like he owns the world. Like he owns me. Every time I decide to end it, I feel his power over me. He knows how to endear himself, but Diana insists that I just like bad boys. I figure I must be equally bad in her estimation, for she clearly doesn't think much of Ed. She claims he's a bad influence on everyone she loves. She has caught Jim out drinking with him when he's supposed to be working or doing chores. She has seen me falling down drunk too many times.

Peter Coley comes into the Bistro and announces that Bill Kirkaldy (the painter who slept on my couch) went down to Mexico, got drunk and waded into the ocean fully dressed. The customers stare at him blankly. Is this going to be a funny story?

"A fisherman found him floating dead." Peter's voice catches.

Bill's only 36 years old. A tragic waste of extraordinary talent.

The Village goes nuts. Weeks of nightly discussion ensue as to whether it was undertow or suicide. Jim and Ed are both devastated along with all the patrons that knew him over the years. It's surreal. Everything about my life feels surreal. In my acting classes, scenes seem more real than my life.

The serious fighting between Ed and me starts around the holidays. His mother Eunice begs him for a visit. Ed insists I go with him to meet her. I resist but end up going against my better judgment. After a serious argument, I give him money for Eunice's Christmas gift, which he drinks up before he reaches a store. I end up buying a coffeepot, gift-wrap it and entrust it to him only on the day of our visit. I have to work a partial shift, and meet him at the Bistro at three in the afternoon. He is already bombed, and boisterous. The coffeepot has been left behind at one of his many bar stops. We have our very worst fight on the way to his mother's.

At her front door, Eunice looks at me like I am a bug.

"Hello," I say, extending my hand. Eunice scowls, rushes past me and throws her arms around Ed. He stumbles up against the wall under her considerable weight.

"Hey, Ma," he says, his words slurred, pushing her off him. She leads us into the apartment.

The living room is crowded with overstuffed furniture. Every surface in the room is covered with squares of aluminum foil on which sit fat little blobs of dark chocolate. There's no place for us to sit. It looks like little curls of dog shit, hundred and hundreds of them.

"I make candy every year," Eunice explains. "Don't touch, it's drying." Her housedress, draped over her big frame, is streaked with chocolate stains. Her hair's uncombed around the beefy face of a truckdriver. This female version of Ed is almost a caricature.

Ed reels around the house, looking for liquor.

"Where's the booze, Ma?" he says. I stand holding my purse. I've just gotten off work, tired, hungry, and wish desperately I was any place else.

"Did Ed tell you we were coming today?" I ask, ready with an apology.

"Sure, my boy calls me every day. He didn't tell me you was coming though." Her voice is harsh and loud.

"Booze, Ma. Goddamit." Ed is slamming overhead doors in

the kitchen.

“You settle down, Eddie. Got nothing here.” She follows, pushes him away from her cabinets. “Stop it now.” Ed senselessly empties a silverware drawer onto the floor. Metal clatters on the linoleum.

“Stop it,” Eunice roars, pulling his arm to get him out of her kitchen.

Without warning, he cocks his fist, draws his arm back and in a sickening second explodes with a clumsy blow that just glances off the side of Eunice’s shoulder. The old woman topples like a Christmas tree over the kitchen threshold, and grabs at the back of a chair. I scream. Chocolates from the tabletop and chair fly through the air, scattering over her, the linoleum and the dirty carpet.

“Get up, Ma, get up,” Ed says, trying to help her rise. She struggles against him, dazed, a look of bewilderment on her face.

“How could you?” I scream. Out of control, I dance across the carpet. “Your own mother! You filthy drunk!” He kneels, red-faced and belligerent, trying to lift Eunice.

She’s on her knees now. Chocolates fall off her like surprised roaches. Her eyes narrow and rivet meanly on me.

“Get out of my house,” she says. “Don’t you talk to my boy that way. You get out!”

Trembling, I leave. Tears freeze on my face in the cold December air as I walk cross town on Fourteenth Street, going fast, cold and desolate.

I am resolute, ready to demand he leave, but he doesn’t come home for two nights. Then it is with roses, and sober. I see that his only good jacket, one that I bought for him, is now dotted with dropped cigarette burns.

“I’ll change, you’ll see,” he promises. “We’re good together, Bev baby, give it a chance.”

His eyes brim with tears which in turn wrench me with pity.

“I can’t handle the pain, Ed,” I say, shaking my head. But his big bear arms are already around me. His face nestles in my neck, that familiar comfort of his size. I forgive him. At least a little.

We are never really close again, but he staggers home every night, sometimes clasping wilted roses for me in his drunkenness which always hurts my heart. We have two more months together.

But I am busy waitressing, acting lessons every week, and keeping my distance from the bars where Ed drinks. We go about our lives, skating on superficial civility, avoiding the inevitable, but I give him no more cash. I still pay the rent, but he finds his daily sustenance elsewhere. God only knows where. Rumors abound about other women, none of which I doubt.

One spring night he comes home after closing hours, around four a.m., and I am sound asleep. He leaves our bed to go to the bathroom, takes the wrong door and ends up in the hallway. The door locks behind him. I awaken to loud knocking at five a.m. It is the police, with Ed in tow. Apparently he had wandered down the stairs and coming back up, had tried to enter the downstairs apartment by mistake. He’s stark naked. The old woman beneath my flat called New York’s finest who are not too gentle with an uncooperative, unclothed drunk. Ed insists that he lives there. When the neighbor finally puts it together, and the cops are able to stir me from sleep, I come to the door in a bathrobe, confused and exhausted.

“Does this belong to you, Lady?” a Sergeant asks, a sneer on his mouth. Ed, a fleshy travesty, his hands over his genitals, cowers behind him, gripped by another uniformed cop.

He is pale, unshaven and red-eyed. I stand there looking at him for the longest time. Through my tears, his face mutates and dissolves like one of Kirkaldy’s paintings. I think of poor drunk Kirkaldy’s descent into the black undercurrents of the Pacific when all the tequila, *senoritas* and self-deception couldn’t ease his pain. The dark undertow always waiting. I shall not drown. Not even love will bring me down. Ed winces as if he can read my thoughts and drops his head, hangdog.

“No, Officer,” I say. “He lives here—temporarily, but he’s definitely not mine.”



Beverly A. Jackson is a writer, poet and abstract painter whose work can be seen in over 70 literary venues both in print and on the Web. Her work has appeared in *The Journal of Compressed Creative Arts*, *Zoetrope All-Story Extra*, *Eclectica*, *Smokelong Quarterly*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, and *Rattle*, to name a few. She was nominated for Best American Short Stories (BASS) by Vestal Review, and was a finalist in the 08 Per Contra short story contest. Her poetry chapbook *Every Burning Thing* was published by Pudding House Press.

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